Raiftearaí, Antaine (Ó Reachtabhra, Antoine; Raftery, Anthony)

by Ciarán Ó Coigligh

Raiftearaí, Antaine (Ó Reachtabhra, Antoine; Raftery, Anthony) (1799–1835), poet, was born in Cill Liadáin (Killedan) near Kiltimagh, Co. Mayo, son of a weaver from Co. Sligo; nothing else is known of his parents. Blinded by smallpox in childhood, and illiterate, he was helped by his father’s employer, Frank Taaffe, for whom he was a household entertainer, until they fell out, allegedly because he killed a favourite horse. Raiftearaí became a wandering minstrel, spending most of his time in south Co. Galway in the Kilchreest, Gort, and Kiltartan area, where the strong farmers were his patrons, and where, it is said, he found the prevailing anti-British spirit congenial. Often destitute, his life was free of normal constraint: according to an enemy and poetic rival, Peatsaí Ó Callanáin (qv), he ‘went with’ a woman, Siobhán, and they had two children out of wedlock, one of whom, the boy, joined a travelling circus, while the girl was remembered as a famous drunk. An exact date of death is not known. He is buried in Killeenin near Craughwell, Co. Galway, where Augusta Gregory (qv), his editor, Douglas Hyde (qv), and Edward Martyn (qv) erected a commemorative slab over his grave in 1900.


Included also in the corpus are several hauntingly beautiful laments, which powerfully articulate the tragedy of death at both the personal and the societal level (‘Caoinadh Uí Cheallaigh Chluain Leathain’, ‘Tomás Ó Dálaigh’, ‘Anthony Daly’, ‘Eanach Dhúin’). There is an unusual piece entitled ‘An Dia darbh ainm lúpatar’ which shows enormous familiarity with classical literature. There is a small number of other pieces attributed to Raftery, the authorship of which is doubtful (including a second piece entitled ‘Na Buachaílí Bána’, ‘Amhrán Chill Chluanaigh’, ‘An Fear ar goideadh a Hata Uaidh’, ‘Hyacinth Daly’, and ‘Meáraí’).

‘Seanchas na Sceiche’ is a hugely accomplished and lengthy poem outlining the history of Ireland from Noah and the flood to Patrick Sarsfield (qv) and the treaty of Limerick, using a question-and-answer form. It shows its author’s familiarity with Jacobite poetry, as well as a wide range of sources for Irish historical lore, ranging from ‘The psalter of Cashel’ to Geoffrey Keating’s (qv) Foras Feasa ar Éirinn, and reflects the influence of the prophecies of the catholic evangelist Pastorini. At the outset Raiftearaí seeks shelter from a heavy downpour under a bush near Áth Cinn (Headford, Co. Galway), and there he makes an act of repentance for fear that it is the final deluge. On his return journey the following day, he curses the bush for letting so much water in on him and is taken aback to hear it reply. In response to a question about its age, the shrub recounts the history of Ireland.

The best-known piece associated with him, ‘Mise Raiftearaí’ (‘I am Raftery’), in which the poet laments his condition – blind, his back to the wall, playing music for empty pockets – may be no more than an amalgam of phrases about him from folklore compiled by one Seán Ó Ceallaigh (from Loughrea, Co. Galway, and later resident in Oswego, New York State), submitted to the journal An Gaodhal in 1882. Raiftearaí’s poetry and song deal with contemporary views. He praises the activities of the Whiteboys and Ribbonmen and attacks those who tried to suppress rural agitation. In ‘Na Buachaílí Bána’ he says of Denis (‘the Rope’) Browne (qv) (d. 1828), high sheriff of Mayo, that he would like to stick his spear into his huge stomach. ‘Bua Uí Chonaill’ celebrates Daniel O’Connell’s (qv) victory in the Clare election of 1828, which led to catholic emancipation in 1829. Now, he says, the lion will be down and Henry VIII’s betrayal of catholicism will be avenged. This virulent attitude towards the reformation and the protestant religion was influenced by the writings of Pastorini. In ‘An Cíos Caitliceach’ he asserts that those who do not fast on Fridays, like the Orangemen of Clonmel, will be swept away. ‘Cill Liadáin’ is an evocation of his native place. ‘Máire Ní Eidhin’ develops the tradition of the love-song in which the man goes out on a fine May morning and encounters a beautiful girl: here Raiftearaí is on his way to mass, the day is windy, and Mary Hynes invites him back to her house in Ballylee for a drink. ‘Eanach Dhúin’ is a lament for about twenty people who were drowned in Lough Corrib in 1828, a plank having given way in the old boat in which they were sailing. The song, sonorous and intense, captures the shock of grief. A satirist also, Raiftearaí fell into a vicious contention with the Ó Callanání brothers, Marcas (qv) and Peatsaí, in which Raiftearaí accused Peatsaí’s wife of promiscuity, leading to even more outrageous insults from the other side
against Siobhán, Raiftearaí’s woman, whose rapaciousness is excused to some extent by her man’s alleged impotence.

His verse arises directly from the circumstances of his own life and those of the people among whom he lived. Pre-famine Ireland, densely populated, unruly, dangerous, but energetic, is vividly portrayed. When Lady Gregory and W. B. Yeats (qv) were gathering folk material in Co. Galway in 1897 and thereafter, they encountered many stories about Raiftearaí and found that his poems were still sung and recited. He became, for the literary revival, an example of a poet of the people. ‘An Pósadh’, by Lady Gregory, is a play about the poet, in which he comes back from the dead to transform a young couple’s poverty-stricken wedding breakfast into a feast and celebration. It was first performed with Hyde as Raiftearaí in Galway in 1902.

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