

## ABSTRACT

### Oral Storytelling and Irish Identity

Margaret Caroline McGlothlin

Director: Dr. Richard Rankin Russell, Ph.D.

Oral storytelling is an integral part of Irish culture. For centuries, storytelling was a common practice in Irish society, fulfilling a wide range of functions ranging from entertainment and the creation of emotional bonds to the conveyance of history from a unique perspective. Despite its adaptation to the passage of time and its adoption of new themes, storytelling has continued to have an impact on the formation of individual and collective identities within Irish society. Today, society has less of a practical need for storytelling as is reflected in the shifting Irish identity. This thesis explores the role that the oral tradition has played in the formation of Irish identity and what the present decline of traditional storytelling means for “Irishness.”

APPROVED BY DIRECTOR OF HONORS THESIS:

---

Dr. Richard Rankin Russell, Graduate Program Director

APPROVED BY THE HONORS PROGRAM:

---

Dr. Elizabeth Corey, Director

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

ORAL STORYTELLING  
AND IRISH IDENTITY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
Baylor University  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Honors Program

By  
Margaret Caroline McGlothlin

Waco, Texas

May 2017

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures .....	iv
Acknowledgments .....	v
Preface.....	vi
Chapter One: Irishness .....	1
Introduction to Irishness .....	1
The Irish Storyteller .....	2
Irish Values and Construction of a Worldview.....	4
Oral Tradition and the Irish Attitude .....	6
Identity Through Oppression .....	8
Fairy Narratives .....	14
Chapter Two: The Utility of Irish Storytelling .....	17
Passing the Time .....	18
History of Land, People, and Places .....	21
Chapter Three: The Artistry of Storytelling.....	30
Technique of the Storyteller.....	30
Movement of Stories.....	32
Creative Imagination of Storytellers.....	36
Chapter Four: Modernization of the Oral Tradition .....	42
Impact of the Great Famine .....	42
Perpetuation of Oral Tradition .....	44
Contributions of Douglas Hyde .....	45
Storytelling and the Irish Language.....	50

Chapter Five: Irish Literary Revival .....	54
W.B. Yeats and the Oral Tradition .....	56
Lady Gregory and the Oral Tradition .....	64
John Millington Synge and the Oral Tradition .....	66
Influence of Blasket Island Literature.....	73
Influence of the Aran Islands .....	77
Conclusion .....	84
Modernization .....	84
References .....	90

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Literacy in Ireland, 1850 .....	16
Figure 2: Irish Speakers, pre-Famine.....	82
Figure 3: Irish Speakers, 1911 .....	83

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Richard Russell for dedicating the time to mentor me as I wrote this thesis. Your guidance was invaluable. Few people share my passion for Irish culture, and you are one of them. I will always treasure our many discussions over all things Irish.

I would also like to thank Dr. Liam Ó hAisibéil of the National University of Ireland, Galway, for mentoring me during my time abroad. You provided me with a sense of direction as I began my thesis journey, and your teachings demonstrated to me the beauty that is inherent in the Irish language.

## PREFACE

Oral storytelling has long been a notable aspect of Irish culture. It intimately parallels aspects of both the public and the private spheres of life in a way that unites individuals under a collective sense of kinship. While the purpose of oral storytelling has evolved through the centuries, the artistry of the practice has remained largely the same. People continue to find beauty in the artful arrangement of words used to convey a tale. Storytelling predominated among the rural Irish but also adapted to fit the various values and beliefs of the upper classes. Oral storytelling in the traditional sense, however, began to decline at the turn of the twentieth century. The decline of such a celebrated element of Irish culture also has implications for the meaning of Irishness and the future of Irish identity.

The first chapter explores common notions of Irishness and how the traditional storyteller fits into this identity. The storyteller played a vital role in defining qualities that were both desirable and undesirable within a community and formed a sense of cohesiveness among its members. In this chapter, I will mainly be drawing from Henry Glassie's *Passing the Time in Ballymenone*, Ray Cashman's *Storytelling on the Northern Irish Border*, Angela Bourke's *The Burning of Bridget Cleary*, and George Zimmerman's *The Irish Storyteller*. Glassie recounts his time living among the members of a community in rural Ireland and portrays the people from an insider's perspective, giving traditions and insight he gathered from the community members themselves. Additionally, he provides an in-depth description of the metrical style of Irish stories and how the English-speaking storytellers have adapted their prose from the stories of their



Irish-speaking predecessors. Cashman studies storytelling as it was practiced in a community on the border of Northern Ireland. More specifically, he examines how storytelling shaped individual and collective identities in a way that transcends religious and political affiliations. In *The Burning of Bridget Cleary*, Bourke follows the real-life story of a community and a nation as they struggled to make sense of one woman who was burned alive by her husband, who believed she had been taken by fairies. Bourke uses concrete examples to show the extent of storytelling's impact on the minds and actions of the rural Irish and how this single event perpetuated English notions of Irish barbarism at the turn of the twentieth century. Zimmerman provides a comprehensive account of the Irish storyteller through the ages and how the storyteller's image and purpose have adapted over time. He investigates the many links between folklore and national identity, then explores the characteristics and techniques of Irish storytellers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Chapter two examines the utility of oral storytelling within Irish communities. This chapter draws from a number of sources such as Irene Lucchitti's *The Islandman: The Hidden Life of Tomás O'Crohan* and James H. Delargy's *The Gaelic Storyteller* in addition to the works of Glassie and Cashman. Lucchitti discusses the life of Tomás O'Crohan, a prominent storyteller on the Blasket Islands. She elevates O'Crohan's work and stories as authentic ethnographic material that demonstrates the beauty of the oral tradition on an island that was somewhat removed from the influence of trends on mainland Ireland. Delargy, a folklorist, discusses his encounters with various storytellers in the first half of the twentieth century and his impressions of their work and defining

characteristics. He describes the setting in which traditional storytelling is a key feature and the possible reasons for storytelling's popularity among specific classes.

Chapters three and four analyze the artistry of Irish storytelling and the role that the upper class played in the perpetuation of the oral tradition. References for these chapters include John W. Foster's *Fictions of the Irish Literary Revival*, Mary Thunete's *W.B. Yeats and Irish Folklore*, John M. Synge's *The Aran Islands*, and Diarmuid O'Giolláin's *Locating Irish Folklore: Tradition, Modernity, Identity*. Foster discusses the variability of writings produced in the Irish Literary Revival from the late-nineteenth through early-twentieth centuries by figures such as W.B. Yeats, John M. Synge, and Lady Gregory. He studies the impact that each writer had on the revival and the actions that each took to preserve the oral tradition in modern society. Thunete traces Yeats's interests in rural Irish beliefs and culture in the 1880s and 1890s and argues that Yeats found legitimate value in the folklore of the rural Irish. Thunete also touches on Yeats's interest in the storytellers themselves and the affinity he had for demonstrating the positive qualities of the Irish peasantry and their associated traditions to a distant upper class. *The Aran Islands* is a record of the time Synge spent living on the Aran Islands. He spent four years living with the inhabitants of the Aran Islands and learning of their beliefs and customs, believing the Aran Islands to be some of the last "uncorrupted" repositories of Irish culture. His records are an excellent example of the influence of modern culture on the ancient practices of a small island community. O'Giolláin explains the role of folklore in society and theorizes about the importance of folklore in the identity formation, especially as it pertains to Ireland. The theories posited by O'Giolláin

create a groundwork for examining the interest figureheads such as Lady Gregory, W.B. Yeats, and Synge all had with Irish folklore and its utility in modern society.

Finally, chapter five discusses the factors contributing to the perpetuation and decline of the oral tradition from writers such as David Lloyd, Douglas Hyde, and Patrick Drudy. Lloyd's *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity 1800-2000: The Transformation of Oral Space* explores the transformation of areas where Irish oral culture previously flourished as the nation began to modernize. Lloyd attempts to shed light on the qualities of the oral tradition that made it so resistant to modernization and how it has adapted and survived over the past century. "The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland" is a speech delivered by Douglas Hyde in 1892 that attempted to draw attention to what he perceived was a declining Irish culture in favor of English ways and customs. Hyde especially argued for the preservation of the Irish language in areas where it was still spoken, believing the Irish language to be the foundation of Irish identity. Patrick Drudy's "Ireland: From Boom to Austerity" studies Ireland's remarkable economic turnaround in the late twentieth century. Drudy focuses on modern Ireland and the specific factors that contributed to Ireland's economic success following its financial difficulties in its first forty years as an independent nation. His observations allow speculation on the impact that modernization may have had on the oral tradition.

This thesis aims to refine our understanding of the bond between the oral storytelling tradition and Irish identity. In refining our understanding of the factors that contributed to the formation of an identity by means of the perpetuation of oral storytelling, this thesis will explore the elements that make Irish storytelling unique as well as examine the effects that the decline of traditional storytelling has had on Irish

identity. I will begin by exploring how traditional storytelling shaped the individual and collective identities of the Irish, both in the lower and the upper classes. I will then discuss the utility of storytelling and how it is vital to the transmission of Ireland's unique history, followed by an examination of the artistry of the Irish language and the emphasis the Irish have placed on the power of the word. Next, I will explore the factors that contributed to the perpetuation of oral storytelling despite modernization. Finally, I will examine the factors leading to the obvious decline of oral storytelling in Ireland, discuss the consequences as it pertains to Irish identity, and speculate on what the future holds for traditional storytelling in Ireland. I will be focusing primarily on legends and fairy narratives to make my points. The assertions I make here, like any statement surrounding a people group, cannot be generalized to all the Irish. I am choosing to mainly dwell on the "traditional" Irish as is seen through the eyes of an outsider – the stereotypical farmer who lives outside urban areas.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Irishness

#### *Introduction to Irishness*

Long after the rest of Europe made a transition to a print culture, Ireland remained largely an oral culture (Lloyd 3). Because many in the rural classes were illiterate until later in the nineteenth century (Figure 1), much of Irish history and identity came from oral tradition. Storytelling in particular reflects this anachronistic identity of the Gaeltacht – a region of Ireland in which Irish Gaelic is still recognized as the predominant language. Oral storytelling provided a means for Irish speakers to confer their history, enact community, and forge an identity. Often viewed as barbaric to outsiders, these people were unknown geniuses in the ways that they utilized the musicality and Homeric beauty of their language, “always on the point of bursting into poetry” (Kiberd 337). With Anglicization and pressures to conform to the English way of life and away from the “shame” of their Irishness, much of that identity was lost. Their very dialect and syntax reflected a lifestyle that is now obsolete. The simplicity and reality harnessed in the oral tradition was lost in translation, and with it, the identity of a people that cannot be recreated. For better or worse, the old identity has passed and a new has been formed.

## *The Irish Storyteller*

The best place to begin is by explaining what is meant by the term “traditional” as it refers to Irish storytelling and the storyteller himself. Until about the time of the Great Famine (1845-1852), the Irish people spoke mostly Irish Gaelic (commonly referred to as “Irish”). Irish as both a written and spoken language was on the decline because English was used for formal and political matters and literacy was low among the rural Irish (Background on the Irish Language). Therefore, much of Irish history was transmitted verbally in these rural areas. In a given community, this was the responsibility of one man: the *seanchaí*. The *seanchaí* was a well-respected male whose job was to memorize the information and tales that were pertinent to a community. The role of the *seanchaí* in a community was to “preserve its wisdom, settle its disputes, create its entertainment, speak its culture. Without them, local people would have no way to discover themselves” (Glassie 63). He was known for his incredible memory, with learned tales sometimes lasting hours at a time. The way that the *seanchaí* recited his poems and stories is often perceived as an art form because of its fluidity and the various devices and methods the storyteller would use to help him remember a tale (McKendry).

The *seanchaí* was often, but not always, a member of the community. Some were wanderers, traveling from town to town to trade a good story for a night of food and lodging. Few would ever turn down a *seanchaí* who offered up this transaction for fear of the power of his words. The Irish are known for placing great value on the power of the word; therefore, a word-weaver such as a *seanchaí* had the power to help or hurt the reputation of an individual as he carried his tales from town to town. His tales could be real or fictitious, but both genres conveyed the values and beliefs of the Irish people of

the time. Traditional storytelling often took place in a home with a familiar group of people. Everyone would gather around and observe the mastery of a *seanchaí* in action. Muiris Ó Súilleabháin, an Irish poet and folklorist, describes his memories of a night of storytelling:

“The main venue for storytelling was the fireside during the long winter nights ... The good storyteller, who had a large repertoire stored in his memory, seated by his own fireside, in an honoured place in the house of a neighbour or at a wake, was assured of an attentive audience on winter nights. Nor was it only adults who wished to hear tales. My father described to me how himself and other children of eight years of age would spend hours, night after night, listening to an old woman storyteller in South Kerry; and an old man in the same area told me that, as a youth, he and his companions used to do all the household chores for an elderly neighbour each winter evening in order that he might be free to spend the night telling them long folktales” (Súilleabháin 10-11)

As time passed, *seanchaithe* (plural of *seanchaí*) would get older and die; however, the tales themselves lived on. Another *seanchaí* would take his place and continue the tradition. Although the term *seanchaí* is not as commonly used in the present day, the tradition of gathering in an intimate group to hear a tale from a storyteller continues: “within the microcosm of his own local community the role of the nineteenth-century Gaelic storyteller as entertainer and tradition-bearer does not seem to have differed radically from that of his forerunner of a thousand years earlier” (Mac Cana 7). Although the image of the Gaelic storyteller has changed yet again in the twenty-first century in conjunction with the modernization of the nation, the storyteller’s role of

entertainer and tradition-bearer has not. Times change and society progresses, yet storytelling endures in one form or another.

### *Irish Values and Construction of a Worldview*

Local character anecdotes demonstrated human nature and provided “a conceptual stage upon which people may consider ... the range of possibilities for how one may act in response to the persons, events, and conditions that constitute one’s environment” (Cashman 219). Anecdotes captured the essence of a member of the community following his or her death. It was a creative way for the community to perpetuate the most memorable qualities, good or bad, of someone who played a role in establishing the dynamic of a given people group. The traits on which the community focused not only allowed for generalization of those traits within the community, but they also represented the deceased (Cashman 219). An individual’s traits represented more than the individual person; they represented the ideologies and orientations of the community as a whole. Many small Irish communities, for example, chose to focus on wit and insubordination – two qualities that were applicable to the Irish in their struggle against English oppression. Qualities that were emphasized in stories shaped the perception of a collective identity based on several identities that comprised an array of varying traits and behaviors (Cashman 221). Over time, a sense of continuity could be established among individuals due to the shared value placed on specific traits, thereby adding an element of coherence to the community.

While both good and bad individual traits were added to the collective memory bank of the population, the good traits helped establish a community’s idea of excellence



(Cashman 229). Individuals could use anecdotes as a reference to establish their own ideas of excellence as it was conventionally understood. Such anecdotes provided a vantage point with which to view the past, present, and future: “By taking stock of themselves through storytelling – and particularly through anecdotes – they define who they have been, who they are, and who they can be” (Cashman 255). A storyteller’s audience subconsciously picked up on attitudes and behaviors that were deemed either acceptable or deviant in the eyes of the community. While images of the witty, kind, and humble farmer were embraced, images of “rough bachelors” and “uneducated blunderers” received reactions ranging from pity to disgust to renunciation, reflecting the community’s collective sanction of behaviors deemed unacceptable. While the community’s reactions demonstrated its renunciation of specific qualities, it also demonstrated the effort of the rural Irish (in this instance) to distance themselves from the poverty and barbarism that outsiders often attributed to the Irish (Cashman 181). By exposing their own character flaws, the Irish essentially prevented outsiders from doing the same and gave themselves the awareness of issues that needed to be fixed. Through storytelling, the Irish were able to identify themselves using certain traditions and qualities as well as establish a sense of identity to adopt and display to outsiders.

Likewise, there were negative repercussions to the construction of a worldview by means of oral tradition. Oral tradition was a piece of antiquity in a rapidly modernizing world. Legends circulating around a specific area perpetuated superstitious beliefs because of their geographical plausibility. Specific hills, landmarks, or geographic abnormalities may be marked in oral tradition as “a place apart from normal human habitation and legitimate interests” (Bourke *The Burning* 20) and inspire tales of the

otherworld. Because these landmarks are widely recognizable, legends regarding their significance were much more believable among nearby communities. *The Burning of Bridget Cleary*, a historical narrative written by Angela Bourke, exemplifies the importance of natural landmarks in daily life. *The Burning of Bridget Cleary* tells the story of a woman who caught a cold. Her husband, believing her illness was a sign that his wife had been snatched by the fairies, burned her alive in an attempt at fairy exorcism. This work illustrates the deeply-rooted influence of legend and superstition in Irish culture as well as the underlying cultural tension between rural and developed Ireland in the late nineteenth century. In the narrative, a specific plot of land was rumored to be the trade-off point – a sort of liminal space – between fairies and humans. Belief in the power of this spot caused a man to murder his wife in order to free her from her otherworldly captors. While some level of belief in fairy narratives is necessary to achieve the storyteller’s desired effect, genuine belief in these types of stories resulted in behavior that would be deemed unacceptable or obsolete by the rest of society, thereby perpetuating negative perceptions of the rural Irish.

#### *Oral Tradition and the Irish Attitude*

The classic Irish tales that people tend to think of are humorous – usually a witty Irishman, a leprechaun-type fellow, making some sort of mischief. While these are not at all reflective of the true Irish identity, the humor demonstrated is accurate of what seems to be the people’s overall attitude towards life. It is dark and solemn, yet hopeful. They recognized that “life is sad enough,” and “making a joke of the trials of this life puts wit in service to courage . . . it encourages people, keeping them ‘tellin,’ talking and alive”

(Glassie 54). Storytelling itself characterizes the unique way the Irish approach life's hardships and is characteristic of the somewhat morbid Irish humor. It is a bright spot in hard times. They realize that hardship is inevitable, but it teaches them courage and allows them to carry on, keeping their eyes on the "pinpricks of light that shine through darkness" (Glassie 613) that allow them to evade the grip of despair. Some stories may satirize circumstances that other cultures would approach with great solemnity, but that is the way the Irish cope. They laugh at life and put it in stories so as to not be run down by its inevitable sadness. Hugh Nolan confirms this perspective in *Passing the Time in Balleymenone*:

"The world is not a happy place. But people are not here to be happy. You have to take the rough with the smooth ... the person that's always complainin – that's a poor way to be. If that got in on a person, it could do a lot of harm. The best way to do is to take everything that comes" (Glassie 448)

Oral storytelling was both created by and created deep-seated beliefs in addition to a unique sense of humor. Until the nation began to modernize in the twentieth century, the lower classes existed in limbo between the superstitious behaviors of the past and the more rational and acceptable behaviors of the present, as is evidenced in *The Burning of Bridget Cleary*. Although this tragedy occurred in the late nineteenth century, it illustrates how deeply attitudes and superstition in stories permeated Irish culture and shaped the people's worldview and attitudes. The language of the stories had not yet adapted to new societal norms, and the content dictated the interactions among individuals within communities and provided a reference point for how one lived his or her life. Situations such as Bridget Cleary's serve to demonstrate the dissonance felt between older norms

and the more acceptable, newer norms at the turn of the twentieth century. Behaviors and beliefs that would have been acceptable at one point in time were perpetuated in stories and adopted by the listeners, whose subsequent actions became evidence for the barbarism attributed to the Irish by other nations.

### *Identity Through Oppression*

The characters depicted in stories helped identify a unified “we” among the Irish people. Even the deviants represented a vital part of the Irish identity. Those who expressed qualities that seemed contrary to the values of a given community may have served as antagonistic elements to the forces of change that were sweeping through Ireland, such as capitalism and the ever-present English threat. Such characters were often remembered as having blatantly opposed these forces; they “embodied the autonomy from outside authority and general nonconformity that many ... valued as part of their locally inflected personal identities” (Cashman 182). Their lack of adherence to accepted values reflected the Irish resistance to what other nations deemed to be appropriate behaviors. The Irish were constantly under pressure from England to conform to their ways; strong and somewhat deviant characters represented “virtuous underdogs” to their peers who sought to preserve a collective identity. According to a small Irish community on the northern border, these characters were “our’ social deviants who play a significant role in defining who ‘we’ are” (Cashman 182). Surpassing the interior skirmishes of religious differences between Protestants and Catholics, these “troublemakers” united Ireland in spite of their differences and were partially responsible for reinforcing the image of “Irishness” that is perceived by outsiders.

The difference in character types helped to establish a hierarchy that included both the community insiders and outsiders. Values perpetuated in stories assigned individuals to a particular status according to wit and other intellectual and creative talents, for example. Hugh Nolan saw his community's place in the world as "a territory of wits" (Glassie). Acuteness of speech and a subtle wit are things that are perceived as essential to the Irish identity. Clever wordplay and verbal skill are celebrated among Irish communities and demonstrate qualities that the Irish could band around and claim as their own. The prevalence of stories with characters possessing these qualities and contests of wit among locals not only entertain, but also demonstrate the emphasis the Irish placed on the artful use of language. As such, characters established in stories are "transferable from the past and revisable in the present" (Cashman 231), which helps paint the portrait of Irish history from a unique perspective many years down the road. The collective identity that was shaped from the celebration of specific values unified a given community and allowed them to stand tall against life's hardships.

Pressures such as the English threat and oppressive aspects from the self-denial characteristic of Irish Catholicism both contributed to societal turmoil. Irish opposition to these forces is demonstrated in the form, setting, and underlying meaning of traditional storytelling. Stories were used as "a vehicle through which people use the past in order to make sense of the present and guide each other into the future" (Cashman 232). Told in a familiar environment with friends, storytelling inspired self-examination and allowed one to consider his or her place in a community. It reinforced the identity of a given group and provided almost a community self-portrait: "anecdotes established a dialogue about the excellence that may characterize the community as a whole and about what criteria

may be used to evaluate personal excellence within the community” (Cashman 229). In defining what they liked about themselves, the Irish could determine what they found unsatisfactory about outside influences. Stories told in the traditional manner unified a community against forces that threatened their usual way of life and provided an outlet for self-expression.

Rigid adherence to Catholicism did not allow much room for self-expression; therefore, storytelling provided an outlet “for cultural expression, as well as an important vehicle for education” that the Irish might not have felt free to embrace under the heavy hand of the Church. Catholicism reflected an identity that was vastly different than the one that had previously existed in Ireland prior to the Devotional Revolution of the 1850s. Before 1850, church attendance was low and the church lacked the human resources to tend to the needs of the swollen Irish population. Catholicism was largely reserved for the affluent upper classes of Eastern Ireland. Following the emotional and economic devastation of the Great Famine, the population of Ireland dramatically decreased and reforms were instituted within the church. Catholicism became “modern minded, outward looking, literate, and essentially middle class. It sternly opposed attendance at wakes, and had no time whatever for stories about fairies” (Bourke *The Burning* 11). Essentially, the Church opposed the “folk religion” that shaped the image of the lower classes and provided a form of relief and self-expression. Strict Catholics gave no credence to tales of “the good people,” as fairies were called, further contributing to the tension felt among the Irish (Bourke *The Burning* 25). Not all who partook in traditional storytelling truly believed the tales. Otherworldly tales provided a creative outlet for the Irish to reinforce their values and create feelings of solidarity. The rigidity

of Catholicism in everyday life and its lack of appreciation for Celtic mythology and history required that the Irish engage in storytelling as a form of remembrance and a way to establish solidarity as a people.

Legends do more than depict an obsolete worldview; they “richly reflect the imaginative, emotional, and erotic dimensions of human life” (Bourke *The Burning* 32), all things that Catholicism worked to subdue. Many aspects of traditional Irish stories conflicted with the convictions of Catholicism and seemed to gravitate more towards paganism. For example, fairies were believed to be fallen angels, banished from Heaven but not fallen completely to Hell. Therefore, they despise the Christian religion and torment its adherents (Bourke *The Burning* 31). Competing beliefs between the newer Catholicism of the “civilized” and the folklore of old caused a further rift among the Irish – between those who strove to hold onto the past, the “traditional” Irishness, and those who marched to the beat of ever-encroaching modernization. Storytelling allowed the Irish to embrace their past and express feelings that were not welcome in the Church. Furthermore, stories were directly tied to the landscape and represented something uniquely Irish. Legends and tales arose from real places, people, and geographical structures. These stories, while highly mythologized, are likely exaggerated renditions of things that actually existed or occurred. The rural Irish rigidly adhered to the superstitions that circulated around specific landscapes and structures as both a celebration of the past and a celebration of identity. The circulation of these legends contributed to tension between the Irish and the influence of the Church (Bourke *The Burning* 11).

Many stories betray hints of rebelliousness towards all things English in addition to the Church. Throughout the repertoires of many well-known storytellers “runs a theme

of resistance to the dominant culture, along with a skepticism that belies the credulity often ascribed to those who talk of fairies” (Bourke *The Burning* 67). They captured history and the identity that came with it, thereby making conformation to a more modern society very difficult, believing that the Irish and their unique traditions and worldviews “are better in the sight of God than any Englishmen” (Glassie 641). The Irish spent many years staving off English oppression – a theme that is prominent in many Irish stories. Stories reflect the Irish’s perceived identity as “virtuous underdogs” (Cashman 182). The English repeatedly tried to “civilize” the Irish, mistaking their gentle simplicity for barbarism. Many Irish “still detest and strive to shake off, after centuries, the yoke which superior power has imposed upon them. Such is the Irish nation” (Zimmermann 201). Part of the Irish identity is characterized by courageous resilience and stubbornness, which Zimmerman believes to stem in part from opposition to English rule: “Many strokes in their character are evidently to be ascribed to the extreme oppression under which they live” (128).

Stories also emphasized the values of wit and independence as well as the burning desire to be free from oppression. Tales containing scenes and people that were unmistakably Irish were a way for the Irish to assert their individuality and significance. They established traditions that were “valued as a search for the roots distinguishing one collectivity from the others: the existence of ‘traditions’ of one’s own would justify demands for political autonomy” (Zimmerman 199). Poetry and tales of an Irishman besting an outsider fostered a sense of community among the members of the entire nation that resulted in the formation of the “us versus them” mentality. It further defined an Irish identity that would band them together as a nation and distinguish them from



outsiders. Not only the stories, but also the poetry provided an outlet for Irish expression: “It allowed the chanting of wrongs suffered by its people, thereby ensuring a continued memory of the events complained of” (Lucchitti 62). History was collected through the use of creative speech. In this way the oral tradition served to lighten the burden of oppression and turn sorrow and self-pity into contentment and pride in the identity of the nation.

Meaning in many stories is found not in their content but in their underlying messages. To the upper classes of Ireland, the oral tradition and fairy narratives represented something uniquely Irish. The stories and methods of storytelling seemed to be a link to the past - a link to a time of pure Irishness. During a time when the English threat was very real, everyone was searching for an identity to cling to. Stories may have merely passed the time for rural groups, but they were strong forces of anti-colonialism for others. They provided a distinct Irish identity that the nation could rally behind and support. The oral tradition also provided encouragement for the rest of the nation in the more industrial areas because these were the people who faced the greatest threat from Anglicization. By banding together around these stories, they established for themselves a sense of Irishness. They infused meaning into fairy narratives as well as the oral tradition and adopted a self-image to present to outsiders, saying, “This is Irishness. This is who *we* are.” Adopting the tales of the lower classes allowed the Irish to form a strong Nationalist identity in opposition to the pressures of Anglicization as is evidenced in the writings of Yeats, Joyce, and Douglas Hyde, among others.

### *Fairy Narratives*

The very art of storytelling reflects the love of learning in the Irish culture. More specifically, it reflects a love of learning about people and human nature. The Irish are often remarked upon as being an inquisitive bunch (Zimmerman 134), and telling stories about people, places, and events is a creative way to “gratify a powerful curiosity.” Fairy narratives are one mode in which the Irish oral tradition gratified curiosity.

Irish fairies are not benevolent sprites intended for a cute children’s tale; rather, they are a cause for concern. Their shapeshifting abilities and occupation of liminal spaces allowed them to cause much grief to mortals. Respect “the good folk” and they will likely respect you. Provoke them, and you will surely be punished. More than just tales of caution against magical forces, fairy narratives reflect the Irish identity and rally the Irish around a common theme. They establish a sense of something familiar and uniquely Irish – fairies present in real places in Ireland – and reflect the way in which the Irish saw themselves: a marginalized group that retaliates when provoked and will not tolerate being brushed under the rug, so to speak. Fairy narratives may not have been factual, but they were distinctly Irish in their origins. Therefore, they contributed to the sense of Irishness that unified Ireland as a nation. They represented something the Irish could claim as their own in a time when modernization threatened to erase all hints of traditional Irishness.

The reception of fairy narratives also reflects a shift in the Irish identity. More common in the older days, tales involving the otherworld and other superstitious topics dwindled out when belief in them declined. Zimmerman expresses the difficulty in

finding a local who will tell a real fairy narrative – not just one geared towards entertaining foreigners. People in areas where fairy narratives were typically told are apprehensive about the opinions of outsiders. In the shift from ancient to modern Ireland, belief in such tales became absurd, and to recite one in full confidence to an outsider would only perpetuate beliefs in the “backwardness” of the Irish (Zimmerman 139). Legends surrounding “the good people” only emphasized a part of Irish history that unmistakably distinguished them from the rest of the modern world. Thornbury recalls the experience of hearing a fairy story for the first time: “at once a great mist rolls away, and you see the centuries that roll between the Protestant and Catholic, the Saxon and the Celt. You feel that you are in a twilight country, where faith is still unreasoning and supreme” (Zimmerman 138). Therefore, while fairy narratives are an integral part of Irish history and helped shape the identity of the nation, they also reflect a time in the distant past – a time that most would be ashamed to fully embrace due to the possible inferences of backwardness.

Oral storytelling reflected and reinforced a sense of identity for the Irish. Themes of wit, national pride, and the history of Ireland and its people provided a common ground for listeners to band around and claim as their own. The oral tradition itself as well as the values reflected within create an identity that is unique to the Irish people and unlike the oral traditions of other nations.

# Ireland

## The Famine Years

% of Population:

\* % lowest class housing

\* % literate

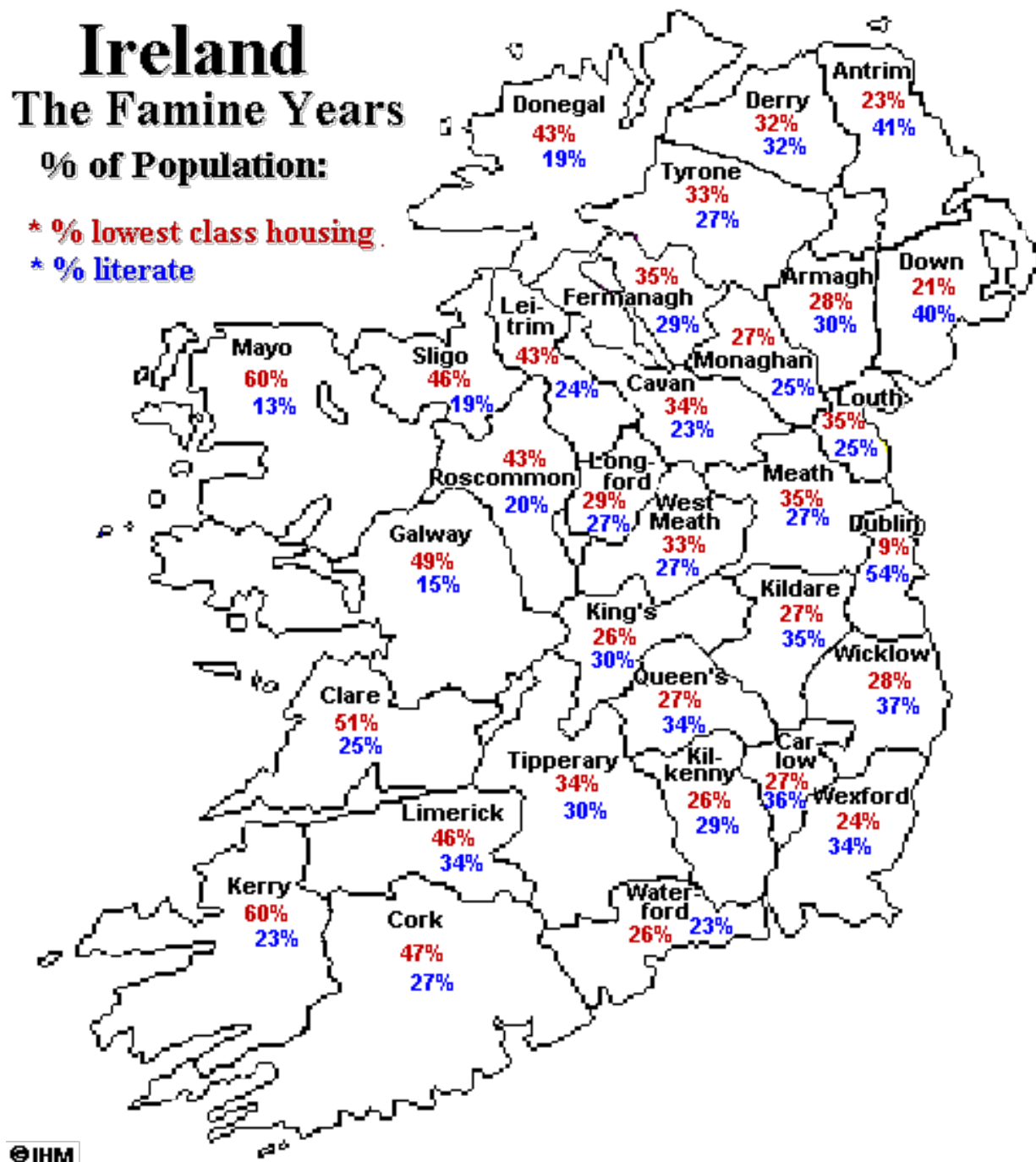


Figure 1 (Walsh): Literacy rates in Ireland, 1850

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Utility of Irish Storytelling

Despite the content of a story and its manifest function, Irish storytelling always fostered a sense of community by establishing an emotional connection among individuals. Storytelling may have been used to convey history, to describe an important person, or simply to pass the time, but was always practiced with the intent of preserving a tradition or a common thread among a group of people. In *The Gaelic Storyteller*, James H. Delargy describes a traditional storytelling setting. Even before the story began, each member of the audience could be found contributing to the whole. Listeners assisted the storyteller in some way, from supplying turf for a fire or fetching fresh water for others. A pipe would be passed around the circle, each having a smoke as the teller prepared himself for his tale – a physical representation of the unity that is fortified in the storytelling practice. The depth of expression characteristic of a storyteller, powerful in his mastery of speech, was enough to engage even the most obstinate of listeners. For an evening, the focus that listeners normally place on themselves was removed and transposed onto interests shared by the whole. Delargy describes an account of a storyteller given by an Irishman in the 1930s: “forgetful of all else, he puts his very soul into the telling. Obviously much affected by his narrative, he uses a great deal of gesticulation, and by the movement of his body, hand, and head, tries to convey hate and anger, fear and humour, like an actor in a play” (Kiberd 16). Listeners seem to feed off

the teller's energy in a way that establishes a common bond. They have all experienced an emotional event together and are more closely knit as a community.

### *Passing the Time*

While not desirable in its typical poverty, the teller's environment fostered the growth of what many would imagine as "traditional" Irish storytelling: a group of people sitting in a circle in front of a fire, laughing, drinking, and swapping experiences, both real and fabled. This may seem like a whimsical moment, but storytelling also served as a light-hearted counterbalance to the harsh realities of Irish life; something to "pass the time," as described by author Henry Glassie:

"Passing the time is what the people who live there say they are doing when they work by day – following the cows up the grassy damp slopes, sweeping their kitchens clean – and it is what they say they are doing when they fill the night's length with stories that hold the mind away from danger" (Glassie xiii)

"Passing the time" seemed to be the attitude of the majority of Irish farmers towards life when traditional storytelling was a common practice before the twentieth century. "In the midst of unremitting work, shifting gracefully from task to task ... [the working man] finds neither pain nor pleasure. His work passes the time, and he is not exactly unhappy while at it" (Glassie 467). Neither relishing nor despising the day's harsh labor, the typical Irish farmer accepted his work and the hard reality of what he must do to make ends meet. The day's toils not only took a physical toll, but also a mental one. Stories spun after nightfall prevented any more work in the fields and provided the mind a welcome recompense from the day's labor. Furthermore, storytelling was driven by a

lack of alternative forms of entertainment following nightfall. Without radio or television, people would gather in small cottage and rely on the entertainment of skillful wordplay to refresh their minds and spirits. The simple pleasure of companionship elicited by storytelling allowed the community to pass the time and have a few hours of enjoyment to carry them into the next day (Glassie 466). Storytelling not only provided relief from the land but also reflected it. Zimmermann describes recitations of true Irish poems and stories as being “simple, unadorned and undeclamatory,” much like Ireland itself. The beauty of rural Ireland – its grassy hills, cloudy skies, and rugged lure – is reflected in its oral tradition. Stories and poems are often remarked upon for their simplicity: they capture the raw emotion felt by a nation in a way that feels ruggedly open and vulnerable, much like the stark landscape of Ireland, off which people based their livelihoods.

The work done on the land shaped the feel of the stories, so although men would be away from their work, it never truly left their lives. Day after day was spent in the dirt, endlessly plowing, always searching for the next perfect “center” – an area of rich potential for both crops and livestock. Farmers would make full use of this center, using it for everything it was worth, before moving onto the next (Glassie 437). Likewise, the same trend extended to storytelling. Easy conversation would flow until it came to a sensitive topic that seemed to have great potential and interest for everyone involved. Recognizing this, the storyteller would latch onto this idea and drive through it, “riding it out to the limit” (Glassie 437). That is how the story is formed. It is nothing planned, nothing premeditated. It merely develops as the storyteller recognizes a conversationally fertile topic and nourishes it into a tale. The story fills and satisfies a group of people, much like the crops from a good harvest. Both food and stories share a similar trait: their

“art and toil blend to serve society” (Glassie 469). Both can be used to bring people together and foster community. As such, storytelling is “an epitome of connectivity,” (Glassie 472) both reflecting the land and providing relief from it if only for an evening.

While it may sound melancholy that the utility of storytelling is that it merely “passes the time,” this phrase is actually infused with a sprinkling of hope as well as a healthy dose of realism. According to Glassie, the traditional Irish farmer saw happiness as “an endless struggle against the nature of things, overwhelmingly rough, dirty, stale, and sad” (Glassie 472), accepting the harsh realities of existence and knowing that aging and death were inevitable. Storytelling provided more than a night’s entertainment: it provided relationships with which one could more easily realize the goodness and life and bolster the courage to get up and work the fields day after day. Like a break in the clouds on a rainy day, storytelling was rejuvenating. It drew the Irish away from their difficulties and “is both accurate and encouraging enough to give [the people] a reason to continue while waiting” (Glassie 472) – waiting for that inevitable day when they would work no more. The typical Irish attitude seemed to be one of almost subdued acceptance. It is as if they realized that life would forever be hard and it was of no use to try to fight it. As Blasket Island storyteller Peig Sayers said, “happiness to someone and sadness to another, and then it would escape just as the tide escapes from the sand on the strand.” Sayers perfectly captures the Irish ideal: work is an inevitable part of life. Everyone must take life in stride until their dying breath. Storytelling did pass the time, but it was also much more than that. It was a welcome recompense from the possible existential turmoil to which one could easily succumb on lonely, laborious days.



### *History of Land, People, and Places*

The subjects and settings of traditional stories have done more than pass the time and influence the individual and collective identities of a nation. They also convey a history that is singular to Ireland from the perspective of one individual. Like folktales, histories rely on belief. Because the past is passed, an audience must trust in the honesty of the speaker, thereby strengthening the bond among individuals while also retelling the history of the nation. Storytelling has archived Irish heroes, common men, and specific geographical features in the memory of the people. As a whole, each of these oral collections represents the growth of a nation retold in a way that captures the Irish spirit.

The content of a story assumes a different identity according to the background of the storyteller. His humor, beliefs, and occupation permeate the tale to create the perception of a personalized history that may be more relatable to a specific population. Because of their seemingly endless repertoire of details of events, storytellers are described as “walking libraries” (Lucchitti 63). They have a wide array of various types of tales that have been passed down through the generations, and they have the ability to “synchronize and harmonize all the data valued by their society, to weave an attractive cloth from the many disparate threads of the nation’s past” (Lucchitti 71). A good storyteller wove history in such a way that it flowed seamlessly into the present. A particular subject of a historical event can be seen as a series of dots that are connected in various ways in order to form a complete picture. Each storyteller interprets the facts differently, thereby creating a personalized account of history that can be taken as more than just a generalized series of facts (Bourke *The Burning* 238). Therefore, as a story of an event is passed down through the generations within a community, one is likely to be

able to infer the people group from which the story originated. James H. Delargy, a folklorist during the decline of the oral tradition, noted this highly personalized aspect of storytelling. Delargy concluded that a person's occupation colored his retelling of a given story; that is, "the oral tradition expressed by a fisherman was different from the oral tradition of a farmer" (Lucchitti 63). Despite obvious variances in retellings of a story due to the storyteller's personal flavor, the purpose remains unchanged:

"[The story] envisions the universal (human nature) through the particular (a real act of a known neighbor). It connects the immediate situation ... to the culture. That connection is the stories' axis of meaning. On it they turn, gathering meaning to themselves and spinning it back through existence" (Glassie 42)

A story pertaining to the past of a specific place unites individuals to each other. "The self and the places it came from and inhabits are bound; biography is indistinguishable from geography, place from genealogy" (Foster 15). The places spoken of in all genres, from saga literature to common anecdotes, contribute to the formation of a distinctly Irish identity. In anecdotes, mentioning a specific landmark or town arouses feelings of familiarity in listeners and can create a common bond. In saga literature, this bond is much deeper. Places referenced in stories about Cu Chulainn or Fionn Mac Cumhaill create a real bond in present day listeners and forge for them an imagined bond with their ancestors who came from the same lands. This is partially reflected by the sheer outlandishness of some of the place names. For example, an examination of the name "Tara," a ridge in County Meath, reveals that the name is deeply tied to a story about the place. The Irish word for Tara is *Temair*, which is supposedly a derivative of the mythological woman, Tea, who is said to have died there. The story itself lacks

substantial linguistic and factual basis, yet it has been continually passed down from the poets of old to through the storytellers of today (Mac Giolla Easpaig 80).

Oral storytelling plays a large part in perpetuating the history (factual or fictional) associated with a place. Studies on the western seaboard of Ireland, particularly Gaeltacht areas, show evidence of innumerable Irish names that have been ascribed to each place, from lakes and rivers to churches and bridges. Irish place names seem to have taken less of a hold in other parts of the nation due to the decline of Irish as a regularly-spoken language. Without a means to communicate effectively with the older generations, stories that existed only in the minds of Irish speakers were never transcribed and were eventually lost, as is gradually happening now, even in the West (Mac Giolla Easpaig 81).

Even though a particular recounting of an event may sound different depending on the storyteller, the history is the same. The “desire to tell a good tale is not allowed to overcome the wish to present the facts clearly and accurately. Art is subordinate to truth” (Glassie 118). Truth is first and foremost when relating a historical tale. The artistry is evident when the storyteller adopts it to make it his own in the context of his community. As art, rather than solely historical fact, stories entertain the listener. Variances in word choice and sentence composition reflect each teller’s verbal dexterity and provide a refreshingly entertaining medium for the transmission of information. Each story is a unique product of the speaker’s craft, and each one “connects the transitory to the immutable through the fragile self” (Glassie 48). The speaker finds only the best sources to create the truest vision of the past and expertly blends them to create an entertaining, yet relevant story to “build the future out of the past he holds within” (Glassie 147).

Through the personalized telling of a tale, members of a community became more closely tied to each other because of the perception of a shared emotional experience. It connects a relatable, personal experience to the history of the community.

As stories are conveyed from the past through the present, they become collective links with a time that once was, provide reflection for the time that is, and allow speculation for the time that will be. They give meaning to life in that they are “instances of verbal skill and intellectual labor wrought to link past events with the present situation in an attempt to sustain us into the future” (Cashman 70). Stories bring history into the present largely by the avoidance of particular dates. According to Glassie, history is the essence of a place rather than a time; it focuses on things that still exist so as to avoid alienating the audience and to better allow them to reflect on the present (Glassie 664). The historical event is the topic of interest, not the specific time period in which it occurred. Time is secondary. Each place is home to its own collection of events, and each place varies slightly in its storytelling tradition, thereby providing insight into its inhabitants and their lifestyle.

The culture of the Blasket Islands, captured memorably by Peig Sayers and other storytellers, demonstrates the importance of the oral tradition in preserving a people’s unique culture. The Blasket Islands are a collection of six islands off the western coast of Ireland. They were inhabited until 1953 when the government evacuated its people to the mainland because of dangerous living conditions and low accessibility. The Blasket Islanders’ unique mode of living was studied extensively by anthropologists and linguists. The weather was not friendly and people survived by fishing and subsistence farming. The inhabitants of the Islands were exclusively Irish-speaking until shortly

before their forced evacuation. Their daily conversations and the tales they told were all spoken in the native tongue. The islanders did not conform to the English language; therefore, stories and histories passed down through the generations were not diluted or distorted in translation. Because of this, much of their unique history and traditions were preserved due to the lack of pressure from outside influences.

Tomás Ó Criomhthain, a Blasket Island native, storyteller, and author, epitomizes life in his primitive community through his work, *The Islandman*. A personal account of Ó Criomhthain's life, it was written in Irish and translated into English in such a way that very little of Ó Criomhthain's original humor and intent were lost. *The Islandman* is one of the more well-known pieces of Blasket Island literature because it was authored by an Island native rather than a visiting folklorist. Ó Criomhthain tells the story of his people and the hardships they faced, well aware that they were the remnants of a dying culture. In his own words, Ó Criomhthain told his story "to set down the character of the people about me so that some record of us might live after us, for the like of us will never be again." Likewise, Tomás's son, Seán, recorded an extensive account of the history of the Blaskets dating back several generations – all of which was committed to memory. His chronology began with the Island's colonization seven hundred years prior and ended with an account of the families on the Island in his day. Accurate chronologies such as the ones preserved orally by the Islanders "expressed a sense of place that encouraged the development of a consciousness of self that was marked by its own uniqueness" (Lucchitti 78). Storytelling in the oral tradition was not merely a record-keeping device; it was the unique way in which the Irish intertwined their very identity and culture into an expressive form of spoken art and united people around a common place.

Storytelling conveyed history not only through living individuals, but also through the dead. After an individual died, his defining characteristics were transcribed into the collective memory in a way that further promoted community solidarity. Alan Titley, translator of Máirtín Ó Cadhain's *Cré na Cille*, describes the importance of chatter in revealing the character of a person or community – living or dead. It is “a living conversation among the dead,” where the characters are perpetually occupied with keeping up with the latest gossip from the world of the living. Even beyond the grave, stories and chatter remain at the forefront of Irish interest (Titley). Stories regarding specific people allow the community to examine which attitudes and behaviors they admire and which they abhor. These types of tales were told specifically at wakes: unique social gatherings that celebrate the life of the deceased and usher him into the next. They were a time for “simultaneously evoking the presence of the deceased and bidding the deceased farewell” (Cashman 86). Shortly after the passing of an individual, family and friends would have a gathering at the home of the deceased, lasting all day and all night. Those closest to the deceased were expected to stay for the duration to “see him off” into the next life. As the hours dwindled away (and with the help of a little food and a lot of drink), condolences became conversation, and conversation became storytelling (Cashman 83). At the wake, the storyteller delves into the unexplainable events of life, thereby uniting the community and helping them to stave off loneliness and sadness. Storytellers exercise their power over the word and help address the nature of reality during a harsh time. John Milton Synge demonstrates the appropriateness of storytelling at wakes in many of his plays. His characters are found passing the time around the body of the deceased the day and night preceding the burial. They fervently believed that the

deceased “should be made the center of many activities, honored with company before his long journey of the soul” (Synge 170). Storytelling transformed a difficult circumstance into an opportunity for community growth by paying respect to a deceased individual through sharing tales of his life and character.

In typical Irish fashion, the tone of wakes when they were still prominent was celebratory yet solemn and accepting. An extreme example of this mentality is evidenced from an account of a wake on the Blasket Islands: “There is no point in grieving excessively for those who have died, because such grief can never feed the living” (Kiberd). Rather than lament an individual’s death, the Irish would use wakes as an opportunity to recognize the life of the deceased and integrate him into the story of a community. The particular characteristics that were memorialized reflect the history of a community. Some behaviors may be highly revered at one point in time and less so many years down the road. For example, stories of a man who outwitted high-ranking English military officers depict an era of English oppression of the Irish people. Such stories, formulated at wakes and perpetuated through the years, reflect the history of a given time and essentially give a voice to the dead, allowing them to demonstrate the values and concerns of an era, even long after their deaths. These stories represented the development of a community over time, and their retelling provided a window to the past through which the community could analyze the present and shape the future (Cashman 85).

Legends surrounding real or fictitious historical figures memorialize a particular individual for his acts, famous or infamous. Typically, these tales are set in the distant past and relate the deeds and battles of a great warrior. The figures on which the people

choose to dwell reflect particular qualities that the people wished to claim for themselves and can therefore track their development over time. Cu Chulainn of the Ulster cycle and Fionn Mac Cumhaill of the Fenian cycle demonstrate this theory. The Ulster cycle preceded the Fenian cycle by approximately two hundred years, and is more focused on wars and battles than on the quests and adventures characteristic of the Fenian cycle (Mac Cana 104). Cu Chulainn is fiery, strong, and hungry for glory whereas Fionn is incredibly wise in addition to being strong and fierce (Mac Cana 107). Stories told about each of these men reflect the values for the time period during which they supposedly lived – Cu Chulainn’s culture likely placed great emphasis on strength and warrior-like qualities, whereas the later Fenian cycle seemed to realize the value of the intellect in addition to classic heroic qualities. The utility of heroic sagas lies in their ability to draw people together by providing a parallel to connect the ordinary with the extraordinary. Through the actions and speeches of heroic men, fiction and reality intertwine to give common people a supernatural – yet human – standard with which to measure their own lives.

Although Cu Chulainn and Fionn Mac Cumhaill may not have actually existed, other Irish heroes existed at one point in time but became highly mythologized by the people. St. Patrick, for instance, was a real man whose feats may have been great but were also rather exaggerated by his Irish admirers. Patrick is said to have brought Christianity to Ireland, adopted the shamrock as a sign of the Trinity, driven the snakes out of Ireland, and communicated with God on Crough Patrick, to name a few feats. In reality, Patrick was born British, abducted by Irish pirates, sold into slavery in County Mayo, and found refuge in a deep faith in God which he imparted to the Irish (who had actually already been emancipated from their pagan beliefs). Patrick and his incredible



achievements provide a cornerstone for the Irish to stand behind and establish a history that is unique to the island. He gives people a hero after whom they may model their own lives in addition to mixing the imagined with the real and providing the Irish with an explanation for their present state using a character they can claim as their own.

Whether it is used for entertainment, education, or to create a deeper level of emotional connectivity, storytelling can give significance to a person, place, or event as it is perceived in the mind of the storyteller. The audience learns more about themselves and gains insight into the surrounding world when participating in a storytelling session, thereby playing a part in the perpetuation of history and creating a shared emotional experience in the process.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Artistry of Storytelling

The Irish oral tradition is known for its expressivity. The mode and the content of storytelling reflect an artfulness that is characteristic of Irish speech. Spoken by a gifted storyteller, a story becomes a release of emotions coherently woven together in a way that is relatable to each member of the audience and seems even to manipulate the boundaries of reality, creating an intensely personal yet simultaneously universal experience. At times, storytelling seems to slip into the form of a song, weaving together groups of words and images to create an elevated form of spoken language. It is a language teeming with “features as rhythmic speech, repetition of key words, parallel grammatical constructions, and the use of alliteration, assonance, and rhyme,” thereby distinguishing it from everyday speech with its verbal embellishments (Henigan). Words become a form of social currency: they were given, taken, swapped, and traded to create a collective bond around a story’s theme.

#### *Technique of the Storyteller*

Storytelling is often referred to as an art form. Not just anyone could be a storyteller; he must have a natural gift. Aside from an incredible memory and amiability within the community, he must know how to twist and weave his words to make something beautiful. “More than simply an entertainer, the skilled storyteller was valued as outstandingly wise, thoughtful, and knowledgeable” (Bourke *Virtual Reality*). At the

surface, a good story might appear to be simply a collection of events and thoughts manipulated into an entertaining fashion; however, it is much more than that. A given story and the way in which it is told is taken into account in order to truly resonate with an audience. As audience engagement increases, the eloquence and verbal dexterity seems to increase proportionally. The audience is taken into account to such an extent that it is said to “co-author” a story (Cashman 224) to make a story that is the product of collective authorship. Therefore, it is difficult to experience a genuine storytelling session as an outsider. For instance, the scientist is an intruder. He or she is not part of the delicate community in which the storyteller lives. The storyteller’s knowledge and wisdom mean little to the personal life of the scientist, putting the storyteller at a disadvantage. The same effect cannot be achieved because he does not know how to weave his words in a way that will pertain to the life of the visitor. The depth of the oral tradition is “beyond the reach of mere travelers” (Zimmerman 165). Hugh Nolan makes clear the importance of the storyteller knowing his community: in choosing a particular story, the storyteller must think, “would this go well for the listener, would I be fit for to make this that it would carry away the listener or that there’d be a joke in it for them” (Glassie 38).

Storytelling is an art form in that a good story does not depend on the education of the teller. Anyone can make a good story given that they have the artistry and the vision to see which words to use and how to order them. Glassie observes, “Deciding what to say and how to say it, artists are guided by the intention to entertain, to amuse their listeners or carry them away. Stories are composed by gifted people who give their gift to others” (Glassie 38). Merely by recognizing words that can be combined to affect the

listener, a story can be formed. The beauty of the story, however, does not come from the content, which is secondary. The beauty comes from the unique spin an artist places on a story by his word order and choice. For that reason, tales were not learned by heart. The storyteller knew the overall plot, but gave the story a personal spin by clothing it to suit his audience (Thuente 125). “The art of the folk-tale is in its telling; it was never meant to be written nor to be read. It draws the breath of life from the lips of men and from the applause of the appreciative fireside audience” (Delargy 1). That is the storyteller’s liberty: to breathe life into diction and syntax in a way that both reflects a piece of himself and also resonates with the audience.

### *Movement of Stories*

The expression depicted in Irish oral tradition often went unnoticed by outsiders. Speaking of the Blasket Islanders, Lucchitti observes, “functionally ‘illiterate’ they may once have been, ... the people of the Blasket Islands were never simply the ‘illiterate natives of a wet rock’, living ‘almost within earshot of civilization’ that so many literate observers imagined them to be” (Lucchitti 78). To foreign historians, the nineteenth century Irish were no longer the lawless savages of the past, but they lacked any real traces of civilization (Thuente 8). The Irish language was seen as primitive and those who chose to use it as a form of expression were necessarily ignorant peasants. They were perceived as “a nation of demi-savages ... the good-natured, generous, quick-witted and imaginative Irish peasant made to appear as a mean, ignorant, cowardly barbarian” (Zimmerman 196).

A story, like a desirable good, is “the conjunction of proper quiet with proper noise ... stories are given, taken, and traded” (Glassie 41). A storyteller must know when to pause, when to laugh, and when to speak. He must read the audience and flow with their reactions in a way that will generate the greatest effect. Henry Glassie aptly demonstrates the storyteller’s skill in *Passing the Time in Ballymenone*. Glassie transcribes stories directly as he hears them: blank space on a page indicates silence, and a diamond shape indicates a smile or a chuckle. Silence and intonation is key at specific points in a story in order to properly convey the unmistakable harmony between the eye and the ear (Glassie 40). The Irish storyteller knew when to use certain techniques to use in order to captivate his audience and provide a coherent and lyrical quality to his tale. For example, the storyteller may use a repetitive device to clearly express dialogue to an audience, finishing statements with “says he” or “says she” in order to re-identify the speakers in the absence of vocal inflection (Zimmermann 228). Zimmerman cites an example of this technique in an excerpt from a short story: “And what’s all that black swamp out yonder, Sir Kit?” says she. ‘My bog, my dear,’ says he, and went on whistling. ‘It’s a very ugly prospect, my dear,’ says she. ‘You don’t see it, my dear” (228). The dialogue continues in this manner for some time, with the storyteller clearly reiterating the speaker after each statement. Additionally, the storyteller would incorporate key words into his tale that seemed to elicit an artful ebb and flow in the tale. An example of this is portrayed in the following excerpt by Glassie:

“So.

“There used to gather crowds in the evenins,

and one party used to stand on the road,

and there was another party went into a field,  
and the party in the road used to get ahold of him,  
and they used to kick him across to the party in the field,  
and the party in the field kicked him back again.

“So that went for – ah, it went on for about six weeks, or two months.

“So.

“The hay came in,

and a lot of work,

and the people quit comin,

and he was lyin there in the field

and nobody botherin about him” (Glassie 701)

In this example, Glassie has transcribed a tale told by a storyteller. At the beginning of a new topic within the story, this particular storyteller would say “so” in order to guide the audience as the story progresses. Within each topic, he continued the flow of the story by inserting “and,” as if to add on subsections to each topic. The storyteller could speak them slowly or quickly, thereby hurrying the lines together to create feelings of earnestness or isolating the lines to distinguish the individual power of words and phrases (Glassie 40). These additions are the devices that give storytelling a lyrical nature and ultimately unite phrases into a coherent whole.

Delargy argues that “no Irish storyteller, no matter how gifted he may be, can hope to do justice in a foreign idiom to a Gaelic wonder- or hero-tale, with its characteristic ‘runs’ or tricks of narrative” (Synge 158). “Runs’ are characterized by a bombastic series of alliterating adjectives, which are often made deliberately

incomprehensible in order to mystify and impress a credulous and illiterate audience” (Synge 158). They connect stories with an “ancient epic oral style” (Zimmerman 484) characteristic of early Irish manuscripts. For example:

“They found the path and I found the puddle.  
They were drowned and I was found.  
If it’s all one to me to-night,  
It wasn’t all one to them the next night.  
Yet, if it wasn’t itself, not a thing did they lose  
But an old black tooth” (Kiberd 158)

The content of the run does not necessarily make sense, but the technique is used for effect. Runs make stories more lyrical and memorable. They provide the storyteller with a creative liberty to twist his story and his words as he pleases. However, runs fall disappointingly short when transcribed into English. They no longer carry the same effect as they did in Irish because some Irish words are simply untranslatable. While they may have been impressive to an illiterate audience who cultivated a deep respect for oral culture, a more literate audience focuses on the nonsensical content; all effect is lost. According to Delargy, “A good story is very movement-dependent, and its effect is also lessened upon translation to English” (9). The tale loses its rhyme and meter that served also as a sort of mnemonic device to help tellers remember so many tales (Field Interview with Liam Aspell). Runs and other insensibilities unfamiliar to the literate mind appear ridiculous and reflective of an ignorant people; however, many of these characteristics were brilliant techniques that had stood the test of time. They were “knots in a rope of memory, put there to save the stories from forgetfulness” (Bourke *Virtual Reality* 4).

English influence in the recording of stories contorted the language into something that would be more coherent to a larger number of people. Translation into English, while it did preserve stories that would have been lost with the decline of the language, eliminated many of the qualities that made stories uniquely Irish.

Rab Fulton, a Galway storyteller whom I interviewed, exhibits many of the traditional techniques that make storytelling so captivating. He knows when to repeat words and phrases, when to be silent, when to be expressive, and when to involve the audience. Fulton tells a story about a man who becomes lost in a forest. As the story builds and the climax approaches, Fulton becomes more vocally expressive. He runs his lines together, creating feelings of urgency in the audience. During the buildup, Fulton begins many lines with parataxis. The story seems to tumble out of his mouth and his mind as the climax approaches, gaining speed, with one line streaming into the next marked only by the hurried “and then.” Following the climax, Fulton slows. His phrases seem to become more composed, silences become more pronounced and more frequent, and he becomes more monotone yet again. The combination of these techniques guided the audience through an emotional experience created by the mind of Fulton. Fulton’s telling of his tale united his audience around the fictitious event, uniting us in a way that is only possible through the sharing of an experience (Field Interview with Rab Fulton).

### *Creative Imagination of Storytellers*

Because it is spoken narrative, a story can easily be classified as prose. However, this is not entirely accurate. A story told by a talented individual is too melodic, too expressive, to be classified as merely a collection of words strewn together without



foresight. Yet stories are not wholly classifiable as poetry either. Rather, they seem to walk a tightrope between prose and poetry, conveying meaning in a conversational manner yet always tottering on the fence, threatening to slip into lyrical and expressive poetic form. Although stories begin and end with conversation, the words themselves are an artfully-arranged dance. Rather than punctuate his sentences with a key word or phrase as is characteristic of common chatter, a storyteller may opt for stillness of a moment, adding gravity to a sentence and allowing his listeners time to absorb the meaning. Repetition and the conjunction between silence and sound transform stories into much more than works of prose. Stories are “a fusion of the beautiful and the useful” (Glassie 148), products of the language over which the storyteller has mastery. They serve a purpose to society while doing it in a creative manner that reflects an identity that is uniquely Irish. The rural class, according to Kiberd, “had poetry in their souls, so their language was beautiful ... [the imagination] is fiery and magnificent and tender” (Synge 203). Stories were an overflow of poetic expression, reflecting a delicate perception of human emotion from the perspective of the teller.

Observers of the renowned Blasket storytellers recognized that “it was as though Homer had come alive. Its [storytelling’s] vitality was inexhaustible, yet it was rhythmical, alliterative, formal, artificial, always on the point of bursting into poetry” (Kiberd 337). The narrative techniques used in Irish oral tradition unconsciously emulate those used by Homer: “Each seems more concerned with preparing the foundations for action than with action itself. Preliminaries and human reaction are more important to story than is the event under discussion” (Lucchitti 59). Furthermore, they both evidence a comparable use of similes, nature passages, the love of gossip, and of course the

dialogue itself. The dialogue is “sharp, witty, spirited and often testy and competitive” (Lucchitti 58). Homer recognized the power of artfully crafted speech. The techniques used to support memory that are evidenced in *The Odyssey*, for example, predated and are reflective of similar techniques recognized in the Irish storytelling tradition. Like the works of Homer, Irish stories were not intended for pen and ink; rather, the mind and the mouth of the teller shaped them, and each story echoed the teller’s particular style. As the stories have been transcribed and distributed, remnants of storytelling’s ancient past become evident: many traditional tales, though they may be prose, can just as easily slip into poetic form in the hands of an artful storyteller. Although this form of oral expression may seem unsophisticated compared to that of more modernized parts of the world, it exhibits a primitive genius that is not often reproduced in modern-day society.

The creative imagination and artistic qualities of storytelling were exemplified on the stage, a place where human situations and emotions are dramatized. For John M. Synge, Irish characters were the perfect subjects for the theater. Their lives could be easily translated to the stage because, according to Synge, the Irish “had suffered from far too much real drama in their lives to feel the need to create a theatre of fictional tragedy” (Synge 102). The tragedy was real. Synge drew upon the customs and beliefs of Ireland to create “contemporary dramas that integrated elements of both the Irish oral and literary traditions,” thereby creating an “artistic history” for Ireland that enabled it to stand out and attract attention from the rest of the world (Henigan). Exhibiting a distinctively Irish flavor, Synge was able to demonstrate the relationship that the Irish felt with their surroundings and establish for outsiders a sense of the personal identity felt by the Irish. Synge demonstrated a mastery over the art of storytelling and used the stories and

experiences of others to tell their stories and create a beautiful, tragic, and realistic form of drama. His focus on the verbal arts gave a voice to the storyteller and cultivated appreciation for his craft during a time when his voice could no longer be heard. The heightened reality of stage actors captured the qualities that stood out to Synge as being beautifully and uniquely Irish.

Synge remarks on the singularity of the Irish language and what sets Irish oral tradition apart from that same tradition translated into English: “The song and story of primitive men were full of human and artistic suggestion, that the official arts were losing themselves in mere technical experiments while the peasant music and poetry were full of exquisitely delicate emotions” (Synge 160). The Irish language, being relatively separate from the literate world, conserved a depth of expression unique to each storyteller. He could manipulate the language as he pleased without having been exposed to accepted rules for expressing originality in literature. Furthermore, the Irish language seemed to have a connection to an ancient, simplistic people. It had “a certain brusqueness of attack” (Synge 160) – a certain “primitive” feel that connected with human nature itself, uncluttered by modern day frivolities. Although the English may have been partially correct in believing the Irish to be a barbaric people, the very brutality that they condemned actually was more demonstrative of human nature than many of the English works at the time, which were comparatively cluttered by needless rules and attempts at artful language. Douglas Hyde, too, worked for the preservation of the native language, believing it to be the seat of Irish identity. He founded the Gaelic League in 1893 in order to push for the preservation of “old” Ireland: its traditions, its stories, and its language. Hyde’s influence made compulsory the instruction of the native tongue in schools.

The Irish language seems less to convey meaning through words themselves, but uses the sound of the words to convey feelings through its music. It is a “grammar of ideas,” says Bourke, to intimately parallel various aspects of daily life with specific attention to bodily sensation and collective feeling. Musicality radiated from the language, as is demonstrated in storytelling’s natural progression into song at ceilis. Ceilis are small social gatherings that usually involve singing, storytelling, and dancing. As the night progresses, common speech turns into storytelling which turns into song. Storytelling is therefore an intermediate of true artistry, filling the natural hole between speech and song. The speech of the Islanders, for example, exhibited a “delicate exotic intonation that was full of charm ... the speeches had a musical lilt” (Synge 212). The language can potentially be used to reflect human nature on a deeper level because of its focus on flow and beauty rather than on concrete meaning. According to Synge, the Irish storytelling tradition “delights in the composition of nonsense words, difficult phrases, and even outright gibberish” (Synge 201). It was this freedom from linguistic standards ascribed to more modern languages that allowed the Irish to possess creative freedom for invention – originality in storytelling and songs.

Storytelling permeated the very music of the Irish. Songs and ballads were vessels for the transmission of a story that would be well known to the nation as a whole. Liam Clancy, for example, was a twentieth century folk singer famous for his expressive ballads. One song in particular, “Anach Cuain,” is a musical rendition of a poem written by Raftery in the nineteenth century that depicts the tragedy of a shipwreck that drowned eleven men and eight women. Through the medium of music, Clancy relates the story of the ship and the young lives that were prematurely ended. Just two miles off the Galway

coast near a parish called Annaghdown, a ship full of sheep and young men and women sprung a leak. Clancy briefly tells the story of the tragedy and laments the lost youth of the deceased, effectively capturing the feelings of the distraught community. It was an event that could easily be related in the form of a traditional story, yet it easily flows into song and is able to express a greater depth of emotion because of it.

Use of Irish Gaelic rapidly declined in the aftermath of the Famine for many reasons, some of which I will explain in the following chapters. English became the language of business and provided economic mobility. Irish, still the predominant language of the rural West, became associated with poverty and deprivation (“About the Irish Language”). In an effort to increase survival, the Irish were becoming educated through the lens of the English, and members of the upper class felt as though their distinctly Irish identity was being threatened. Stories were told in or translated into English, thereby eliminating a major factor that set the Irish oral tradition apart from that of other nations: the language. The Irish seemed to understand something that had been lost to the English language. They understood that words were merely colors with which to create a masterpiece, not the masterpiece themselves. Rather, the masterpiece is created by the artist’s unique construction and blending of words; it is “a fusion of the beautiful and the useful” (Glassie 148). The story is enhanced with proper use of silence and sound. Without the vigor and style of the Irish language, stories translated into English would soon be forgotten (Zimmerman 483). As is discussed in the next chapter, writers of the upper class did much to preserve the oral tradition and its stories. However, this preservation was not achieved without notable losses in the artistry that had previously been attributed to the Irish storyteller.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Modernization of the Oral Tradition

#### *Impact of the Great Famine*

The Famine was a major contributor to the decline of oral tradition in Ireland. The Famine was a series of successive potato blights that contributed to the death and emigration of millions of Irish. Almost half of the Irish population (the rural class) depended very heavily on the potato for their diet. Before the Great Famine in 1845, the population of Ireland was approaching 8 million. By 1851, the population had fallen to roughly 6.6 million. Ireland was slow to recover and the population continued to fall, reaching about 4 million by the time the nation gained independence in 1921 (Mokyr).

The decline of the oral tradition from the Great Famine was because of the death and emigration of its tradition bearers. Emigration had been fairly continuous in the years preceding 1845, but sharply increased following the widespread devastation of the Great Famine. The greatest increase in emigration occurred in the western and southwestern counties. These were the rural areas containing people whose livelihood depended greatly on the success of the potato crop (Zimmerman 274). Those who claimed the role of storyteller in the characteristic rural cottage were forced to flee their homes in order to survive. Those who were unable to flee perished from starvation or sickness resulting from nutritional deficiencies (Mokyr).

According to historians, the British are partially to blame for the utter decimation of the Irish population. The British provided little relief and continued to rely heavily on Irish resources, placing insurmountable pressure on the Irish to yield crops that simply would not grow. Without a good yield of crops, the members of the Irish rural class were unable to pay rent and were consequently evicted from their homes. Starvation and emigration were inevitable and resentment towards the British increased (Mokyr). Lucchitti believes that the Great Famine was “the event that had finally crushed Ireland’s sense of itself as a distinct nation” (Lucchitti 80). The combination of persecution from the British, the ravages of the Great Famine, and mass emigrations from the island all contributed to a diminished sense of Ireland’s own significance.

Death, emigration, and the loss of the Irish language resulting from the Great Famine created a perception that the nation had gone silent: the mouths that were once a source of entertainment, laughter, and storytelling were starving, speechless, and dead. The mouth had to adapt to new foods and a new language; naturally, the oral tradition also changed and declined in the wake of devastation. “The terrible silence that was registered as that catastrophe’s [the Great Famine’s] cultural consequence was the all too apposite metaphor for the destruction of Irish oral culture and the social spaces that sustained it” (Lloyd 59). The places where storytelling once flourished were abandoned and silent, and the very foundations of social intercourse were broken (Zimmerman 208). Misery, worse than the misery of daily toils, broke the connection to folklore. For an oral tradition based on folklore to exist, a folk community must also exist. As emigration and death increased and the population decreased, those who remained were hemmed into a

time of despair, thereby discouraging the spread of traditional stories and limiting the population who used to eagerly receive them.

The Great Famine also resulted in an abandonment of familiarity. This caused a shift in the sense of place that was vital to the believability of any story. The land, the people, the history – everything that was comfortable to the rural Irish – vanished with the crop. Stories lacked a relatable subject in the post-famine age and were not as applicable as they once were. Food, drink, speech, and song were all intimately related in that one went with the other both in times of grief and sadness (Lloyd 59). Because of the famine, food was scarce, drink eased the pain, and speech and song became lament. The oral tradition had passed a point of no return and needed either to adapt or die.

### *Perpetuation of Oral Tradition*

The Irish oral tradition endured far longer and shaped Irish identity far more than would have been expected for a nation in a similar stage of development. Ireland became a highly literate nation while still being transfixed by the oral culture. Many other nations have had a prominent collection of folktales and hero sagas much like the Irish. However, the oral traditions of these nations succumbed to modernization and became collected and transcribed. Few have continued to place as high a value on the power of the word as do the Irish. There are many factors that have contributed to the perpetuation of the Irish oral tradition, including the influence of the Blasket Islands, the Aran Islands, and the literati; the need for an established identity amidst political turmoil; and the depth of connection between the oral tradition and the people's sense of place. The combination of these



factors is the dominant characteristic of the Irish oral storytelling tradition that sets it apart from the oral traditions of other nations. Zimmerman notes the words of Charles Maturin, a Dublin writer of the early nineteenth century: "... I believe it [Ireland] the only country on earth, where, for the strange existing opposition of religion, politics, and manners, the extremes of refinement and barbarism are united, and the most wild and incredible situations of romantic story are hourly passing before modern eyes" (234). Maturin is a firm believer in the "spirit of eloquence" exhibited by Irishmen over the course of history and incorporates it into his work. The unusual (yet successful) combination of factors unique to Ireland are responsible for the singularity exhibited by Irish storytellers and are what allowed the tradition to endure over the centuries.

#### *Contributions of Douglas Hyde*

The Gaelic League was an organization that was founded in 1893 by Eoin MacNéill with the intent of preserving the use of Irish as a spoken language (The Gaelic League). Although it did not necessarily achieve this goal, it did succeed in increasing awareness of an endangered Irish culture and inspiring its people. Douglas Hyde became an important figurehead in the Gaelic League, further increasing awareness of the shifting Irish identity. Gaelic League meetings entail a variety of activities and conversations, ranging from discussions on history and politics to singing and dancing. It published literature and news in Irish Gaelic and advocated the instruction of Irish in schools and universities. Writings in Irish helped preserve the language as it became less widely

spoken, and may have therefore been instrumental in enabling the telling of tales that would have otherwise been forgotten.

Hyde's main goal within the Gaelic League was not to reinstitute Gaelic as the main language of the nation. Rather Hyde's aim was "to keep the Irish language alive where it was still spoken" which was the most he believed the Irish could aspire to at the time (Synge 216). He hoped the preservation of the language – especially in the more rural areas of Ireland – would contribute to the preservation of the other aspects of traditional Irish culture that had been forgotten in more modernized areas. Unlike Yeats and Lady Gregory, Hyde (as well as Synge) abandoned the ethnocentric attitude toward collecting folklore (Foster 222). Hyde's greater familiarity with the Irish language perhaps broke down barriers that prevented Yeats and Lady Gregory from achieving the same level of trust with native Irish speakers. His folktales were, according to literary critics, more genuine and less touched-up than those of other revivalists, thereby setting them apart from the literary culture of his time. The attention that Hyde drew to the decline of the Irish language demonstrated the urgency behind the preservation of other aspects of oral culture, such as the oral storytelling tradition. Folklorists rushed to collect and transcribe tales from native Irish speakers before their window of opportunity was shut. Through his efforts, Hyde played a profound role in preserving the storytelling tradition as it was on the decline.

The Gaelic League came even to the Aran Islands, as secluded as they were in the Atlantic. The desperate need to preserve a rapidly fading culture took hold of the islanders, who would hold regular meetings in a sort of reverence for the older Gaelic

ways. However, as is evidenced by Synge, even the older generation saw the utility of bilingualism on the island. Their children and grandchildren would have no hope of economic or social mobility without the ability to effectively communicate with English speakers. Children on the islands became educated in English more and more frequently, but the practice of speaking Irish did not completely fade. Women often had no need for an extensive knowledge of the English language and continued to speak it amongst themselves and to their children. Irish was spoken in the home and reserved for conversational purposes, but children often spoke to visitors in English. Their knowledge of a foreign tongue helped alleviate perceptions of backwardness of the island's inhabitants.

Hyde lamented the visible shift toward the English language and customs. In *The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland*, Hyde argues that the Irish should strive to reclaim their Celtic past because it would be impossible to produce anything original and beautiful amongst themselves if they are living in the shadow of another nation (Hyde 3).

“We must teach ourselves not to be ashamed of ourselves, because the Gaelic people can never produce its best before the world as long as it remains tied to the apron-strings of another race and another island, waiting for it to move before it will venture to take any step itself” (Hyde 7)

Hyde characterized Irishness as a product of the old Ireland's styles, literature, music, and ideas. To quietly accept the English's influence would be to lose all Gaelic identity, including its artistic oral tradition, and become “a nation of imitators” (Hyde 6). Stories native to Ireland would be lost with the influx of English history and influence. Fewer

people spoke Irish on a regular basis and those who were able to speak it often did not, as speaking in Irish made one conscious of being an “object of ridicule” (Zimmerman 160). For that reason, fluent Irish speakers were hesitant to impart the subjects of oral tradition to its collectors for fear of being perceived as backwards, ignorant, and uneducated. Without the rural folks’ willingness to share, many of the stories and the artistic skill were lost. Irish-speaking storytellers believed that the story and its style would be ruined if their stories were translated into English. Therefore, many able storytellers lost command of their art through lack of practice with an Irish-speaking audience (Zimmerman 482). According to Ó Súilleabháin in 1969, “had Irish remained the normal everyday language of our people, it is probable that storytelling in that language would have survived ... even up to this age of mass-communications” (Zimmerman 481).

Hyde lamented the decline of the Irish language in part because it declined out of peoples’ shame in their own nation and culture. They crawled away from their own culture and towards that of another nation – namely, England. According to Hyde, the Irish used to be termed “the finest peasantry in Europe” (Hyde 7). However, that was also the problem: the people were peasants. To limit them to the tongue of their ancestors was essentially to limit them to a life of solitude, agriculture, and misconceptions of backwardness. In order to modernize and adapt to the ever-changing world, the Irish themselves had to change. They needed to adopt the English language in order to prove to the world that they were not obsolete and could begin to rebuild what the Famine had destroyed. Older generations were not influenced by the language preservation movement

and did not seem to have any particular affection for their native tongue. Rather, they saw the utility of English and spoke it to their children if they were able (Synge 124).

Whereas Hyde advocated the use of the language as it was spoken among the peasantry, Synge presented bits of the Irish language in a way that would be comprehensible to a more sophisticated audience. He heightened the Irish language and showed that it was possible to adapt the language to a modern, English-speaking society without fully losing Irishness (Synge 218). His aim was to express a life, a people, and an art that had largely evaded expression. Much of Synge's success is attributed to his immersion among Irish speakers. Synge spent several months at a time on the Aran Islands in the 1890s. It was here that he was taught Irish Gaelic by the locals. By learning it through immersion within the communities of each of the three islands, Synge gained a mastery over the language that he would not have obtained on the mainland, allowing him to shape and mold it as he pleased.

Within the Gaelic League, Synge's opinions on the Irish language were held in low regard. He promoted its preservation in the Gaeltacht but believed that some English speaking ability is necessary in order to prevent Ireland from becoming completely isolated by the outside world. Rather than bring the Irish language to the forefront and restore it to dominance, Synge wanted to maintain the division between the English and the Irish, the present and the past. He failed to see the potential for political or economic significance in the reinstatement of Irish as the national language and did not want the beauty of the Irish language to become stained with the ink of the modern world (Synge 96-97). Rather, Synge perpetuated the unique qualities of the language by bringing it to

the stage and incorporating it into his dramas. He translated many Irish works into English in order to make them widely accessible, yet he managed to retain a style of speech that felt characteristic of Irish. What made Synge's contribution especially impactful was that he provided a literal translation of the original Irish, very closely mimicking actual Irish conversational styles. Rather than depict tales with action and a plot, Synge often depicted chatter for chatter's sake: it was an end in itself rather than a story with a particular goal in mind. Because of this, Synge was able to tell his own story: the story of the daily life of the storytelling Irishman (Synge 10).

Although Synge's work translating Irish into English while maintaining its grammatical form was beneficial for its preservation, much was still lost in translation. As with any language, some phrases in Irish either did not have an English equivalent or carried multiple meanings that could not be conveyed properly in English. Synge greatly admired his sources' skill with words and the obvious value they attached to storytelling, but he recognized the obvious disconnect between those who were native storytellers and himself. His privileged Anglo-Irish upbringing unmistakably separated him from the type of community with which he was attempting to identify (Zimmerman 337). Both Hyde and Synge contributed to the preservation of the oral tradition through the emphasis they placed on the value of the Irish language.

### *Storytelling and the Irish Language*

Use of Irish Gaelic was already beginning to decline in the late eighteenth century and its decline was further accelerated by the devastation of the Great Famine in the

nineteenth century (Figures 2 and 3). In 1841, there were 4 million Irish speakers in the country. By 1891, the number had fallen to 680,000. English became the language of business and provided economic mobility following the aftermath of the Great Famine. Irish, still the predominant language of the rural West, became associated with poverty and deprivation (“About the Irish Language”). Parents began to see the ability to speak English as vital to the survival of their children. Those who emigrated required the ability to speak English if they wanted a chance to gain employment in either England or America. With a disconnect in language between the older and younger generations, the possibility of transmitting the stories of the oral tradition diminished. Folklorists remarked that ignorance in the Irish language shut them out from communication with the lower orders, thereby limiting their ability to form a judgment regarding the character of the nation. The lack of a common language caused the lower orders to be suspicious of the true intentions of the folklorists (Zimmerman 159). Therefore, it is likely that many stories were not transcribed due to language and cultural barriers among members of different regions of the same island.

Ironically, printing stories to preserve tradition simultaneously contributed to storytelling’s decline. According to Hyde, “the very act of [storytelling’s] rescue is another nail in its coffin” (Foster 224). Outside its natural environment, lore dies. The collecting and publishing of folklore committed to memory the grandeur of traditional storytelling by effectively transcribing it into the history books. The preservation of the oral narrative was necessary in that it was the remnant of a dying class, but the stories we hear now are a far cry from their predecessors. “For when a folk form, such as the Gaelic

folktale, dies, it can only be commemorated if it persists in an enduring medium; but it then becomes a different thing. In comparison with the living tale in its natural habitat, the printed tale is like a cast or discarded cocoon: it has the form, but it no longer has the living substance of the tale” (Foster 225).

With a decrease in the number of native Irish speakers, the stories that survived and were translated into English experienced a decrease in the artistic and lyrical feel that made storytelling beautiful. Runs, for example, did not evoke the same effect and were largely ignored when translated to English and read off a page. Runs were supposed to be “set passages of florid description which are introduced by storytellers into any hero-tale ... where the appropriate action comes in” (Foster 17), but they were usually edited out of stories in English, as translator believed them to be unnecessary filler. Runs, however, reflect the oral nature of stories in that they “sweep away the hearer in a sonorous wash of verbiage whose actual meaning was of little importance” (Foster 17):

“The two went to battle on board the ship. They began young like two little boys (and fought) until they were two old men. They fought from being two young pups until they were two old dogs’ from being two young bulls until they were two old bulls; from being two young stallions till they were two old stallions. Then they began a battle in the shape of birds; and they were fighting as two hawks, and one of them killed the other” (Larminie 82)

Irish speakers admired the sounds of the runs rather than critiqued their lack of sense; English speakers, on the other hand, often dwelled on the content of the sentences and held little appreciation for the art form. The decline of the Irish language and its



associated oral tradition were heavily affected by the anglicization of the nation as a whole. Essentially, Ireland was recolonized. English sports, language, and behaviors began to be emulated in Ireland. The paradox among the Irish, according to Hyde, was that “they hate the country [England] which at every hand’s turn they rush to imitate” (Hyde 2).

## CHAPTER FIVE

### The Irish Literary Revival

Until this point I have only discussed storytelling among the lower classes. Ireland's oral tradition branched out and permeated all of Ireland, from the roots to the leaves. However, the ruggedness of the "real" Ireland that captured the hearts and minds of many was also greatly romanticized by the upper class who fought for its preservation during a period known as the Irish Literary Revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The Irish Literary Revival created awareness for the rapidly declining Irish oral culture. The revival was a rekindling of interest for traditional Irish culture and legends in an attempt to reverse negative Irish stereotypes after many failed attempts at political reconstruction. During this time, the nationalist movement in Ireland was swelling and calling for independence from its English oppressors. The rural, Western Irish were fairly removed from English influence. Because of this, most of the struggle for identity formation took place in the more industrialized cities and towns. Literature became a major cornerstone of the search for an identity that would effectively capture what it means to be Irish. The storytelling society of the rural class was chosen as a subject because they were "spiritually superior creature shielded from the bad influences of modern mediocrity and the debilitating mercantile way of life associated with England" (Zimmerman 325).

With the Irish literary revival came a revival of oral storytelling. The proponents of the revival sought a rural, rudimentary Ireland – an Ireland that was most readily accessed through storytelling, with names and places being preserved as stories were handed down through the generations. Storytelling among the upper classes did more than unite a people around a common theme. It united them around common places. Places referenced in chapter two with an extensive history of Irish names meant just as much to the literary classes as it did to the lower classes, but for different reasons. Stories referencing Irish names reminded them of their history. Irish place names gave the upper classes a place to proclaim as their own, while the themes of storytelling gave them an identity and a voice. According to Foster, “The wild and shaggy landscape through which they roam and which we glimpse appealed to the peculiar pastoralism of the Irish literary revival” (Foster 15). Placelore gave them a tangible anchor with which to attach their daydreams of rudimentary Ireland and the romantic ideals around which they formed a national identity. Love of Ireland blossomed from a love of locality. Descriptions of places as seen through the eyes of their ancestors provided fuel for their nationalist fire.

The leaders of the Revival included W.B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, John Millington Synge, and Douglas Hyde (among others), and was important in that it gave oral narratives a new medium within which to be transmitted. The writers’ romantic appreciation for Irish culture helped perpetuate the form of traditional storytelling when it may have otherwise been neglected and forgotten. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, literacy in Ireland began to increase. Major figures in the Revival transcribed large numbers of stories and folktales from the peasantry and published them, thereby

making traditional stories and legends more accessible to the literate public. Although the artistry and effect of the conventionally oral narrative was lost on paper, the stories and beliefs associated with the peasantry were salvaged.

*W.B. Yeats and the Oral Tradition*

William Butler Yeats was extremely influential in promoting notions of Irishness through his literary works. The depth of expression in Yeats's poetry depicts the beauty and struggles of the Irish rural classes. Yeats paints the landscape and its inhabitants in a way that makes them appear to be from another time. He describes a fisherman by the water:

Although I can see him still—  
The freckled man who goes  
To a gray place on a hill  
In gray Connemara clothes  
At dawn to cast his flies—  
It's long since I began  
To call up to the eyes  
This wise and simple man.  
All day I'd looked in the face  
What I had hoped it would be  
To write for my own race  
And the reality:

The living men that I hate,  
The dead man that I loved,  
The craven man in his seat,  
The insolent unreprieved—  
And no knave brought to book  
Who has won a drunken cheer—  
The witty man and his joke  
Aimed at the commonest ear,  
The clever man who cries  
The catch cries of the clown,  
The beating down of the wise  
And great Art beaten down.

Maybe a twelve-month since  
Suddenly I began,  
In scorn of this audience,  
Imagining a man,  
And his sun-freckled face  
And gray Connemara cloth,  
Climbing up to a place  
Where stone is dark with froth,  
And the down turn of his wrist

When the flies drop in the stream—

A man who does not exist,

A man who is but a dream;

And cried, “Before I am old

I shall have written him one

Poem maybe as cold

And passionate as the dawn”

It is a bucolic and romantic scene, to be sure, but not reflective of the lifestyle of most Irish at the time. Yeats uses the medium of poetry to relate his discontent with the Irish society of his day. The simple fisherman is the ideal Irishman in Yeats’s mind, unstained by the colors of modernization. Yeats believes that the ideal Irishman is simple, wise, and unadorned by frivolities; his desire to return to a simpler and purer time permeates much of his work and actions.

Yeats is partially responsible for showing the world the beauty and simple sophistication of the Irish. He believed the “country people” possessed remnants of early civilization where myths gave way to wisdom (Zimmerman 325). His audience necessarily consisted of the literate folk of the upper classes. The people of the West were quite underrepresented among his readers due to a lack of literacy in the Gaeltacht. The literate minority in the West lacked respect for Yeats. They did not see him as a genuine Irishman. He was too Anglicized, too English. Although he could appreciate their lifestyle and traditions, he did not know what it meant to live in the conditions of the West. Yeats had never truly experienced the hardships and triumphs that he seemed to

hold so dear. The English, too, lacked appreciation for Yeats. From the English perspective, he was too Irish. He valued the things they sought to oppress and heightened feelings of nationalism and rebelliousness towards all things English.

Yeats rejected negative perceptions of Ireland as a land composed of rural peasants and demonstrated that it is, in fact, possible for the Irish to create art – even if that art is verbal rather than visual. His written poetry is evidence of the oral culture of the west. Yeats especially succeeded in conveying the superstitious beliefs and legends from the rural classes in a way that could be admired by the upper classes. “The Stolen Child,” for example, depicts the guile of the fairies as they attempt to lure a child away from human habitation:

*Where the wandering water gushes*

*From the hills above Glen-Car,*

*In pools among the rushes*

*That scarce could bathe a star,*

*We seek for slumbering trout*

*And whispering in their ears*

*Give them unquiet dreams;*

*Leaning softly out*

*From ferns that drop their tears*

*Over the young streams.*

Come away, O human child!

To the waters and the wild

With a faery, hand in hand,

For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand.

This particular stanza from Yeats's poem reflects in the fairy culture that was perpetuated through Irish oral tradition. He illustrates the countryside itself: the very thing that stimulated belief in fairy legends. The water, the trout, and the soft and soothing language all have a mystical feel. One can see the landscape through Yeats's eyes and hear the seduction of the fairies in a tone much more romantic than that of *The Burning of Bridget Cleary*. Yeats accomplishes much more than describing the landscape in a mystical way. He illuminates legitimate beliefs in fairy legends. Fairies were known for being crafty and beguiling. According to the stories, they would often take a child and replace him with one of their own. To depict the fairies enticing a young human boy to follow them into the wilderness would not have been unheard of in the stories of the oral tradition.

Yeats helped preserve oral storytelling by describing the subjects of stories in a creative way that would be more respected among members of the upper classes. The content of his poems displays the rural Irish and their traditions in a positive light. Like the stories themselves, Yeats's poems were lyrical. That he wrote in both poetry and prose demonstrates the ease with which the oral tradition could adopt a lyrical tone. His fervent appreciation for the Irishness of the past was responsible for increasing awareness for the declining oral tradition. He portrayed that lifestyle in a way that inspired other members of the upper class to take action to conserve an endangered culture. In Yeats's words, he painted a picture of what it meant to be Irish: "something of the face of Ireland



to any of my own people who would look where I bid them” (Yeats 1). Upon realizing the value of this rapidly declining culture, folklorists, academics, and tourists alike flocked to the western coast to experience living history. Yeats’s efforts helped increase awareness for the value of traditional Irish culture and inspired preservation efforts before it became too late.

Yeats conveyed not only the content of traditional stories, but also the belief. He did not merely recite the fairy legends as he heard them, but he genuinely tried to believe them (Thuente 123). A sense of genuine belief as is evidenced in Yeats’ work added an element of reality that gave stories their effect. An element of believability, according to Eddie Lenihan, is what makes a story worthwhile. Without even a shred of belief in the story, the effect is lost both to the storyteller and the audience (Field interview with Eddie Lenihan). Conveying a sense of genuine belief allowed Yeats to reflect the storytelling tradition as he perceived it among the peasantry (Thuente 123). By doing this he made it more accessible to upper classes while also retaining some of its original style and characteristics. However, Yeats had difficulty in collecting his folktales due to diminishing belief and hesitancy to share from the peasantry (Thuente 136). He believed that the folktales themselves reflected the peoples’ character when it was more likely that legends pertaining to daily life rather than fairy belief reflected the mind of the people more accurately.

The extent to which genuine belief in superstition existed within the rural culture is debatable. Folklorists collecting stories naturally became enamored with tales of the supernatural, believing the peasantry to be permeated with belief in these occurrences.

Although some storytellers may have believed what they told, others may have taken advantage of the earnestness of the outsider and exaggerated the community's involvement in such topics when relating them to folklorists and collectors (Foster 211). However, this does not detract from the story that was transcribed. The characteristic Irish trickery and wit is evident in the ways in which storytellers emphasized supernatural themes for dramatic effect. Although they may not have fully believed their own words, the audience did, and the storyteller was satisfied. "It would appear that Yeats, like Lady Gregory, thought the Irish countryman believed in the supernatural the way all of us believe in the law of gravity, and that Yeats considered himself a fellow-believer, belief resting not just on the received wisdom of tradition and on theory, but on actual experience" (Foster 211).

Yeats did much more than illuminate perceived belief in the supernatural among the lower classes. Yeats's words and descriptions inspired a renewed love for all things Irish, as is depicted in his poem "Into the Twilight":

OUT-WORN heart, in a time out-worn,  
Come clear of the nets of wrong and right;  
Laugh, heart, again in the grey twilight,  
Sigh, heart, again in the dew of the morn.

Your mother Eire is aways young,  
Dew ever shining and twilight grey;

Though hope fall from you and love decay,  
Burning in fires of a slanderous tongue.

Come, heart, where hill is heaped upon hill:  
For there the mystical brotherhood  
Of sun and moon and hollow and wood  
And river and stream work out their will;

And God stands winding His lonely horn,  
And time and the world are ever in flight;  
And love is less kind than the grey twilight,  
And hope is less dear than the dew of the morn.

This poem inspired the term “Celtic Twilight” as a nickname for the Irish Literary Revival. It demonstrated the ancient beauty of Ireland and inspired the nation to band around what is theirs: to recognize the beauty of Eire and fiercely protect both the land and its culture. Poems like this rekindled nationalistic feelings among the Irish by creating an emotional bond between the audience and their surroundings, prompting them to awaken and realize the threat that modernization posed to Irishness.

Yeats, although he successfully affected feelings of Irish nationalism, romanticized the rural Irish. He upheld them as the standard for Irishness that the nation could adopt, but aside from a freshness demonstrated in his work *The Celtic Twilight*, he

failed to recognize the debilitating poverty that stimulated the oral tradition. What he did recognize, he romanticized. Yeats portrayed the rural Irish as the heroes of the nation: they fought off English attacks, farmed the land, spoke their own language, and survived in a brutally harsh environment. There is no doubt that this picture is heroic. However, Yeats's idealization of such a simple mode of living may have been misplaced. A critic of many Anglo-Irish writers verbalized what many historians thought: "Their [writers'] view of Ireland, the inheritor of a colorful paganism illustrated in epic poems and tales, a rural, spiritual bastion in an industrial, materialistic world, had little relationship to an economically and culturally underdeveloped island on the fringes of Western Europe" (Thuente 155). Making the West the locus of the Revival neglected its obvious cultural and economic marginalization (Lucchitti 90). Prominent collectors of Irish folklore and stories were prone to seeing only the mystical and ancient beauty of Ireland while failing to account for the conditions that continued to oppress these people.

### *Lady Gregory and the Oral Tradition*

Lady Gregory preceded Synge as revolutionary and preservationist with regard to Irish stories. Whereas Yeats largely transcribed folktales, Lady Gregory also recorded legends and hero sagas. She worked in conjunction with Yeats to collect folklore from the mouth of the storytelling rural classes (Zimmerman 331). As a folklorist, Lady Gregory differed from Yeats in that she recorded stories much more faithfully, in the way they were spoken by the peasant. She either personally knew her informants or she recorded their occupations or statuses in great detail (Foster 209). Having learned quite a

bit more Irish than Yeats, Lady Gregory was admired for hearing and translating stories firsthand, often without an intermediate translator. She increased familiarity with traditionally oral tales by adapting them to English in a way that the *seanchaí* would have done had they spoken English rather than Irish (Foster 22). To Lady Gregory, it was possible that Irish oral narratives could be adapted to modern day standards without losing the qualities that make them Irish. Stories could be “reshaped according to modern fictional criteria and expectations” while still reflecting the glory that inspired the storytellers of the upper class (Foster 23). Her prose was a compromise between the Irish dialect and the English literary thought.

However, the stories that Lady Gregory was mainly interested in had been all but abandoned by storytellers. Cu Chulainn and Fionn Mac Cumhaill, the legendary heroes of ancient Ireland, carried little weight with the rural classes but were excellent subjects for the creation of new fiction. Notably, hero sagas transitioned to the stage – an area of life much more familiar to the upper class. Lady Gregory hoped to dramatize and popularize these characters using her own Anglo-Irish dialectal peculiarities in books and plays (Zimmerman 332). For the upper class, Cuchulainn embodied “a pre-Christian age of national independence and passion on whom could be centered a wish that such a golden age might return” (Foster 21). Cuchulainn embodied the ideals of self-sacrifice and nationalism that the upper class wished to adopt in its creation of a collective Irish identity. Lady Gregory transformed traditionally oral narratives in a way that was much more relevant to the public.

Unlike Yeats, Lady Gregory recognized the stark poverty that was all too familiar to her oral informants. She was “moved by the strange contrast between the poverty of the tellers and the splendors of the tales” and saw that richly imaginative stories were valued in place of dreams of prosperity and wealth. Possession of wealth was not recognized as a possibility; mythical and visionary happenings, on the other hand, at least inspired some sort of hope in escape from the realities of life and death. More aptly put, “It is from a deep narrow well the stars can be seen at noonday” (Zimmerman 332-3).

#### *John Millington Synge and the Oral Tradition*

Similarly to Yeats and Lady Gregory, John Millington Synge played a major role in joining the Irish oral tradition with the more widespread literary tradition. He “exploited his own role as mediator between the ‘literary’ and ‘folk’ cultures of his fellow-Irishmen, dramatizing the oral lore of the west for a sophisticated Dublin theatre” (Synge 162). In combining the folk and the literary traditions, he essentially revitalized both. Irish received a new breath of life, and English expanded to adopt a new dialect that reflects a unique identity found in a speaker’s sense of place – in this case, the western coast of Ireland. Synge heightened the Irish language to a level that could be deemed respectable. The peasantry, however, did not usually speak with the same artfulness employed by Synge except in storytelling and song. Synge emphasized the parts of Irish speech and syntax that were uniquely Gaelic and transcribed them into English works, thereby creating “an English as Irish as it is possible for English to be” (Synge 199). This new dialect reflected the artistry of the language that was revered among gifted

storytellers. It possessed the same cadence, syntax, and idiom as Irish speech but used English vocabulary (Synge 209). This may have contributed to the preservation of the oral tradition in that the style of the language could be maintained despite translation.

In his stories, Synge retells events that either happened directly to him or that were told to him by the inhabitants of the Aran Islands during his years spent there. The raw emotion and passionate power of Synge's recollections demonstrate the voice and attitudes of the islanders. Synge captured their stories from the perspective of a deeply-invested outsider. One of Synge's most powerful works is *Riders to the Sea* (1904). It is a short play set in a cottage on Inishmaan, the middle island where Synge spent most his time. In the play, Synge relates a conversation among a mother (Maurya) and her daughters regarding a man who was found washed onto the shores of Donegal. He is believed to be Maurya's son, Michael, who has been missing at sea for several days. In the scenes that follow, the reader learns that Maurya's husband and other sons were also claimed by the sea. Her last son, Bartley, comes to ask for Maurya's blessing before he sails to Connemara. Maurya refuses to give it to him, but later regrets her decision and goes to meet Bartley on the path. However, she is unable to give her blessing because she is struck speechless by the sight of Michael's ghost following behind Bartley – an unlucky sign that comes to symbolize the end of Bartley's life.

Although the play is written in English, Synge captures the rhythm of Irish speech in a way that detracts as little as possible from the scene at hand. In taking his art to the stage, Synge sought to imitate reality as closely as possible, both in language and in actions. The English Synge uses is distinct from the English spoken in the rest of Ireland

at the time of publication. Unusual syntax demonstrates the distinct use of the Irish language on the Aran Islands in a way that would be comprehensible to English speakers. For instance, the way in which the daughter spoke to Maurya is representative of the distinct beauty and rhythm of the Irish language: “Let you go down now to the spring well and give him this and he passing. You’ll see him then and the dark word will be broken, and you can say “God speed you,” the way he’ll be easy in his mind” (Synge *Riders to the Sea*). Synge’s extensive time spent with the locals, studying their language and customs, allowed him to tell their stories in a way that most closely resembled the vernacular of the islanders.

Synge’s story also demonstrates themes that were present in the daily lives of the inhabitants of the Aran Islands but that had become the substance of legends on mainland Ireland. The setting itself reflects the type of environment that bred storytelling in Ireland. Synge tells the story of an all-too-common tragedy on the Aran Islands exactly the way as it happened. He captures the small details surrounding the plot so as the accurately depict a people and a way of life from which stories naturally blossomed – a people distinct from the rest of Ireland. In the span of the short play, the reader perceives the distinct attitude of a people group, the deeply-rooted presence of superstitious beliefs, the sheer force of nature, and the emphasis on the power of the word.

The characteristic attitude among the Aran Islanders is also the attitude of the groups from which traditional oral storytelling seemed to flourish. In “*Riders to the Sea*,” it is most clearly evidenced in Maurya at the end of the play when she speaks of her sons’ burials: “Michael has a clean burial in the far north, by the grace of the Almighty God.



Bartley will have a fine coffin out of the white boards, and a deep grave surely. What more can we want than that? No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied” (Synge, *Riders to the Sea*). Maurya accepts that death is a necessary part of life and realizes that to dwell on the death of her sons would be counterproductive to her own survival. Additionally, Maurya expresses satisfaction because no more real harm can be done to her in this life. She has already lost all the male members of her family to the sea; there is nobody left to lose.

The reverence for the fickle forces of nature are as much emphasized in *Riders to the Sea* as they are in traditional stories from mainland Ireland centuries before. The sea dictates the lives of the island’s inhabitants. When the sea is calm, fish are abundant, and life flourishes. When the sea becomes rough, it relentlessly takes the lives of the locals who dare to challenge it. Even in the beginning of the play, the door to the cottage is blown open by a gust of wind. The home, a safe place, is not able to withstand the powerful forces of nature that batter the island. Additionally, Bartley discusses his travel plans and the audience is made aware of the extent to which his schedule is contingent upon the shifting of the wind. At times, nature seems to be a malicious force rather than a part of life. The sea was involved in each of the eight deaths in Maurya’s dwindling family. No amount of prayers or kind words were able to save her family from the ravages of the ocean.

Synge’s retelling of the event is so accurate and filled with emotion that the audience is led to believe that Michael was actually there. Synge perpetuates belief in the truth of tales that was necessary to produce a quality and effective story. He did not tell it

in a way that it would be perceived as a fairy tale; rather, he spun his tale in a way that conveyed the superstitious beliefs of his characters, thereby making it much more believable to a modern audience. Traditional symbolism is still evident in *Riders to the Sea*. The fire, for example, is archetypal of life. Maurya stokes the fire, thereby reflecting her desire to rekindle life back into her sons. Additionally, Maurya must make a journey to receive her vision. She leaves her home and travels to the well. Only then can she receive a premonition of the future. Lastly, the three women in the play – Maurya and her two daughters – represent the Sisters of Fate, ever-weaving their web of destiny. The play is riddled with symbolism amidst the reality of tragedy.

Maurya's vision is demonstrative of the superstition that was still prevalent on the Aran Islands during Synge's time. After refusing to give Bartley her blessing as he leaves, Maurya cries, "he's gone now, God spare us, and we'll not see him again" (Synge, *Riders to the Sea*). Her lack of blessing on his journey was as good as a curse. Maurya's silence sealed the fate of her last son. Later in the story, Maurya believes she saw Michael, drowned days before, riding behind Bartley as he headed toward the sea. It was this image which so badly shook Maurya, manifesting a common superstitious belief that the deceased can return from the dead to claim the lives of the living (Kiberd 164). Superstitious belief pervaded the minds of the next generation as well. It is Cathleen, one of Maurya's daughters, who remarks upon hearing the news, "it's destroyed we are from this day. It's destroyed, surely" (Synge *Riders to the Sea*). She, too, lives by a staunch belief in the influence of the supernatural in daily affairs and takes Maurya's premonition to heart.

Synge's use of this dialect demonstrated the search for a language that would reflect the shifting Irish identity. The peasantry and their culture were gradually diminishing, and Synge recognized the need to maintain a sense of the unique Irish identity while also adapting it to be applicable to a more modernized Ireland. Therefore, Synge adopted the use of English as it was spoken by the peasantry – a form of English that still exhibited newness and vitality. It was “a direct translation from the Irish of Aran, rather than a representation of the English spoken by the peasantry” (Kiberd 205-06). Synge successfully expressed the flavor of the Irish peasantry and their culture in a way that could be appreciated by a wider audience.

Although Synge's work translating Irish into English while maintaining its grammatical form was beneficial for its preservation, much was still lost in translation. As with any language, some phrases in Irish either did not have an English equivalent or carried multiple meanings that could not be conveyed properly in English. Therefore, although Synge greatly admired his sources' skill with words and the obvious value they attached to storytelling, he recognized the obvious disconnect between those who were native storytellers and himself. His privileged Anglo-Irish upbringing unmistakably separated him from the type of community with which he was attempting to identify (Zimmerman 337).

As is evidenced by the popularity of both Synge's *Riders of the Sea* and of Lady Gregory's work, storytelling naturally came to the stage in more modernized parts of Ireland. Assisted heavily by Synge and Lady Gregory, it became a place for the upper classes to perpetuate the oral tradition of the Irish while seeing it in a new light. The

setting and audience may have changed, but the basic values ascribed to Irish oral tradition remained. Words, rather than actions, carried the power; the same could be said for the oral storytelling tradition. According to Yeats, “the stage must become still that words might keep all their vividness” (quoted in Russell 151). Focusing on the power of words rather than actions on stage, a sense of traditional Irishness was maintained. Bringing Irish values and the expression of the Irish language to the stage made it authentic and reflective of Ireland’s history. For that reason, Synge’s use of Irish dialect as drama was successful: he saw that “on the stage, one must have reality, and one must have joy, and that is why the intellectual modern drama failed” (Synge 202). On the stage, Irish stories and characters were infused with drama and expression characteristic of a people who lived a socially and politically tumultuous life. People like Lady Gregory were responsible for transcribing the expressive Irish oral tradition onto the stage, thereby elevating its natural beauty into something that could be appreciated by people of all walks of life. However, due to there being only a small number of educated Irish who were fluent in the language and a very limited literate Irish public, there was much pressure to conform traditional stories and folktales into English (Synge 198). Therefore, the formation of the Irish National Theatre in English was somewhat of a contradiction but still demonstrated the value that members of the upper classes placed on the preservation of oral tradition.

### *Influence of Blasket Island Literature*

Both the Aran Islands and the Blasket Islands contributed heavily to the perpetuation of oral storytelling. Foster notes, “The truer west of Ireland, particularly western islands such as the Blaskets and the Aran Islands, focused the place of impending awakening, providing a symbolic and, it was hoped, actual site where Ireland would be born again” (Foster 95). Popular belief at the time was that the western islanders had descended from an early race of Irishmen, thereby providing modern-day Ireland with an invaluable link to the past (Foster 96). In reality, the inhabitants of the Blasket and Aran Islands descended from mainland immigrants in the not-too-distant past. Despite its historical inconsistencies, this theory provided a tangible symbol for the upper class to gather around in the recreation of Irishness. With the celebration of the western islands came the celebration of the oral narrative tradition that pervaded the islands.

As the rest of the nation began to modernize and lose touch with its traditional culture and practices, the islands remained far enough removed that they existed in a state that was somewhat unaffected by the troubles experienced on the mainland. That is not to say they did not have troubles – the lives of the islanders were typically much more rugged and unforgiving than those of the mainland. The hardships of life, however, can create beauty. As I mentioned in chapter two, storytelling naturally arises from stress and sorrow. The islanders were no strangers to either of these. Folklorists recognize this and have elevated their stories to serve as a centerpiece for Ireland’s oral tradition.

Tomás Ó Criomhthain was the first from Great Blasket to publish his autobiography and account of life on the island (1926). Ó Criomhthain’s book

demonstrated a mastery of Gaeltacht literature, but lacked the emphasis on storytelling that was adopted by Peig Sayers, another Great Blasket native. Sayers recited her memories to her son in a way that more closely resembled traditional stories than did the letters of Ó Criomhthain. Both works demonstrate life in “hidden Ireland” as it was experienced by the locals and reflect a “purity” that was believed to be lacking in the works of the literati. Rather than adopt the literary Irish form of the upper class, Ó Criomhthain maintained an ordinary Irish form that could be intelligible even to those Irish speakers who lacked a formal education (Foster 328). He connected his readers with the islanders in a way that could not be emulated without much difficulty among the upper class. In addition to a personal account of his life, Ó Criomhthain related pieces of legends, folklore, and songs. He was a known storyteller on Great Blasket, and a close reading of Ó Criomhthain’s work offers a taste of his true talent reminiscent of the Homeric style characteristic of storytellers centuries before. Ó Criomhthain’s wit, elegance, and accepting (yet not submissive) view of the hardships of life breathe life into the type of oral narrative that was on the decline on mainland Ireland.

Ó Criomhthain’s description of life on Great Blasket reveals the upper class’s romanticization of the lifestyle associated with “true” Irishness. The characteristics that the upper class celebrated were pieces of a living past, admired more for their historical value than their practical value. Obsolete customs, beliefs, and a startling ignorance to the innovations of the Western world ensnared the Islanders in the past. Ironically, the increased focus on the Islands that resulted from the revival accelerated the death of its traditions and customs. The influx of ethnographers in the early twentieth century stifled

the individuality of the Islanders in a way that closed the cultural gap created by geographic isolation.

Many of the Irish began to realize the value of the oral tradition too late. It could not be resuscitated in many areas without forcing the people back into crippling poverty and misery. For this reason, the Blasket Islands gained much attention from folklorists and others interested in the oral tradition. The islands “seemed to breathe life into the imagery on which they [the Gaelic League] based their construction and promotion of a Gaelic history and Gaelic mentality necessary to the creation of a new Ireland” (Lucchitti 84). The west of Ireland, and the Blasket Islands in particular, provided the revivalists with an image to attach to their ideal of Irishness. The peasant and his folklore represented a romanticized heroism that was adopted as a reflection of the nation’s character. Revivalists saw the west as a representation of cultural resistance against anglicization, the home of a “pure, authentic, and uncontaminated Irish language” and lore (Lucchitti 85). Additionally, its resistance to change maintained the sense of place and familiarity that seemed to be vital to a proper storytelling environment. The Blaskets were the westernmost points of Ireland, the sites of a potentially heroic final stand against the modernization that was perpetually flooding westward. Therefore, revivalists upheld the culture and traditions of the west as something noble and worth fighting for. The oral tradition, particularly in its native Irish language, was central to their resistance. Unfortunately, many of the oral compositions of the Blasket and Aran Islands never found their way into print. Created and preserved in the native language, these stories were completely “of the people.” For that reason, folklore was perpetuated among the

lower classes. In being preserved orally, it snowballed into the unique form of a community from a distinct place, and thus held meaning for the population among which it circulated (O’Giollain 152). According to Glassie, “Artistic traditions do not persist because they exist. They persist because they serve social and personal purpose” (Glassie 145). With an influx of foreign media in twentieth century Ireland, storytelling had less of a purpose than it had had previously. However, the Blasket Islands were far enough removed from outside influence that the oral tradition continued to serve a purpose among their people for a while longer.

Stories may have been born out of misery, but misery appeared differently to different social classes. To the rural Irish, the typical tradition bearers, misery stemmed from poverty. They were very much aware of the harsh reality in which they lived and storytelling was a means to relieve some of the stress of the day. To the writers of the literary revival, however, misery was romantic. It was a state that was prone to transforming itself into a “rich tapestry” (O’Giollain 145). Because they never had to endure this type of misery, they romanticized it into a rugged beauty. The writers were repulsed by the materialism of Europe and latched onto the traditions of marginalized western Ireland, embracing their oral tradition and the poverty from which it stemmed. To them, the oral tradition represented a collective identity that could be adopted by the nation: a piece of Irishness that could not be washed away. In part this was beneficial: intellectuals and academics preserved the oral tradition and many of its stories before they could be completely eradicated by modernization. However, the true picture of storytelling could not be recreated without consequences: “to save folklore was the



preserve underdevelopment” (O’Giollain 144). The mode of Irishness that was revered by some writers necessitated poverty and poor living conditions in order to be maintained. As the traditional Irish agrarian society declined, so did its oral tradition: development killed folklore.

### *Influence of the Aran Islands*

Like the Blasket Islands, the Aran Islands played a role in the perpetuation of traditional oral storytelling. As I mentioned in the first chapter, beliefs that were long dissolved in the mainland remained fairly common on the Islands. The islands’ geographical location allowed them to be far enough removed from mainland influence that they remained largely unaltered by outside influence even as mainland Ireland modernized and gravitated towards the English ways and customs. Superstitions and talk of fairies were not uncommon. Although genuine belief on the part of the islanders was questionable, such talk remained a common theme on the Aran Islands. Synge recounts an old man telling of his child that was taken by the fairies:

*“One day a neighbor was passing, and she said, when she saw it on the road,  
‘That’s a fine child.’*

*Its mother tried to say ‘God bless it,’ but something choked the words in her  
throat.*

*A while later they found a wound on its neck, and for three nights the house was  
filled with noises.*

*'I never wear a shirt at night,' he said, 'but I got up out of my bed, all naked as I was, when I heard the noises in the house, and lighted a light, but there was nothing in it.'*

*Then a dummy came and made signs of hammering nails in a coffin.*

*The next day the seed potatoes were full of blood, and the child told his mother that he was going to America.*

*That night it died, and 'Believe me,' said the old man, 'the fairies were in it'*

(Synge 24)

This tale from the Aran Islands reflects the superstition that was preserved off the mainland, where there was less exposure to English history and customs. Similarly to *The Burning of Bridget Cleary*, this tale demonstrates how deeply rooted pagan beliefs were in Irish culture into the late nineteenth century. Fairies were blamed for all kinds of mischief, especially when no other reasonable explanation was to be had. Synge recorded many other similar stories as he lived among the inhabitants of the Aran Islands and gained their trust. He had a fantastic recounting of his time on the Aran islands because he recorded conversations exactly as they were – literal translations of Irish, or of broken English. He took stories and songs from these men and transcribed them into a peculiar form of English that is admirably reflective of the original Irish speech (Synge).

The Aran Islanders themselves were optimistic about the future of their language and customs. Synge recalls the words of an elderly man from the Aran Islands regarding the Irish language:

“It can never die out,’ said he ‘because there’s no family in the place can live without a bit of a field for potatoes, and they have only the Irish words for all that they do in the fields. They sail their new boats – their hookers – in English, but they sail a curagh oftener in Irish, and in the fields they have the Irish alone. It can never die out, and when the people begin to see it fallen very low, it will rise up again like the phoenix from its own ashes” (Synge 182)

As the Aran Islands become subject to increasing amounts of outside influence, the demeanor of the people changed. Synge notes the difference between the Inis Meáin and Inis Oírr as compared to Inis Mór, saying that increased prosperity came hand in hand with discouragement. The people were discontent. They lost the anachronistic and unusual qualities that were typically only evidenced in old poetry and legend. Men and women alike became hungry for growth as opportunities presented themselves, and ambition gave way to anxiety. Faces began to evidence “an indefinable modern quality that is absent from the men of Inishmaan” (Synge 125), and the vitality of the oral tradition began to decline.

For the upper classes, storytelling still permeated the culture. However, its utility was different than that of the lower classes. The commonality among storytelling-enthusiasts of the upper class was their admiration of the spoken word. Although they may have largely disregarded the mode of traditional storytelling, they maintained the same reverence for the quality of words, much like oral cultures had done in the past. Those like Yeats, Lady Gregory, and Synge perceived storytelling as a means of identity construction and adopted forms other than traditional stories – namely, plays and poetry.

Members of the revivalist movement adapted storytelling to a more appropriate cultural context. They knew that their audiences lacked the belief that would make legends, for instance, worthwhile. Instead, they saw the need for entertainment among the upper classes. Legends of old were adapted for the stage and were reconstructed, just as the ever-shifting Irish identity was reconstructed with each new period in time.



MAP 1  
 PRE-FAMINE IRISH-SPEAKING BY DISPENSARY DISTRICTS  
 (Based on 1911 population aged 60 and over)

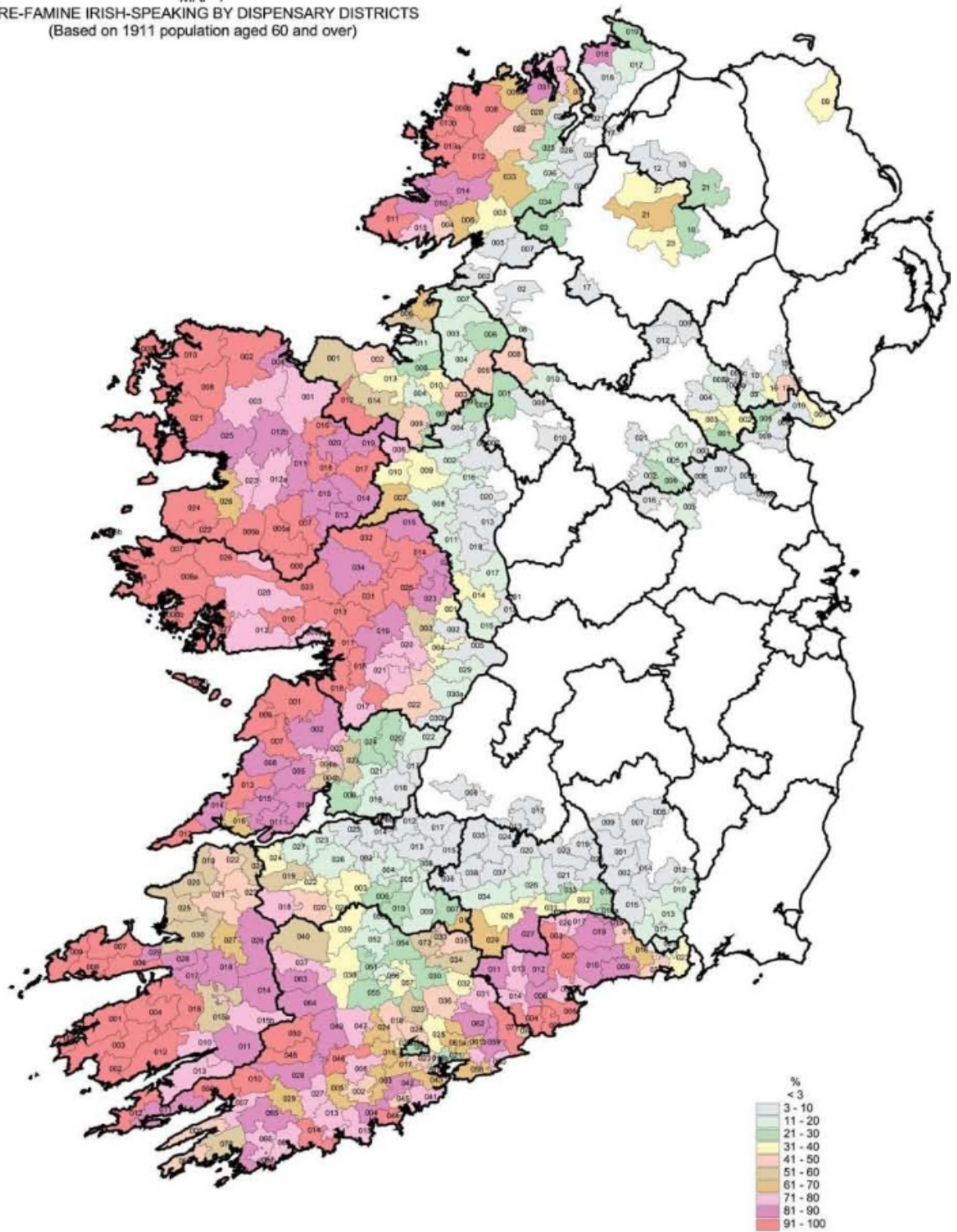


Figure 2 (Fitzgerald): Density of Irish speakers before the Great Famine

MAP 3  
 MONOGLOT IRISH-SPEAKERS IN 1911  
 (Over 60 age cohort)

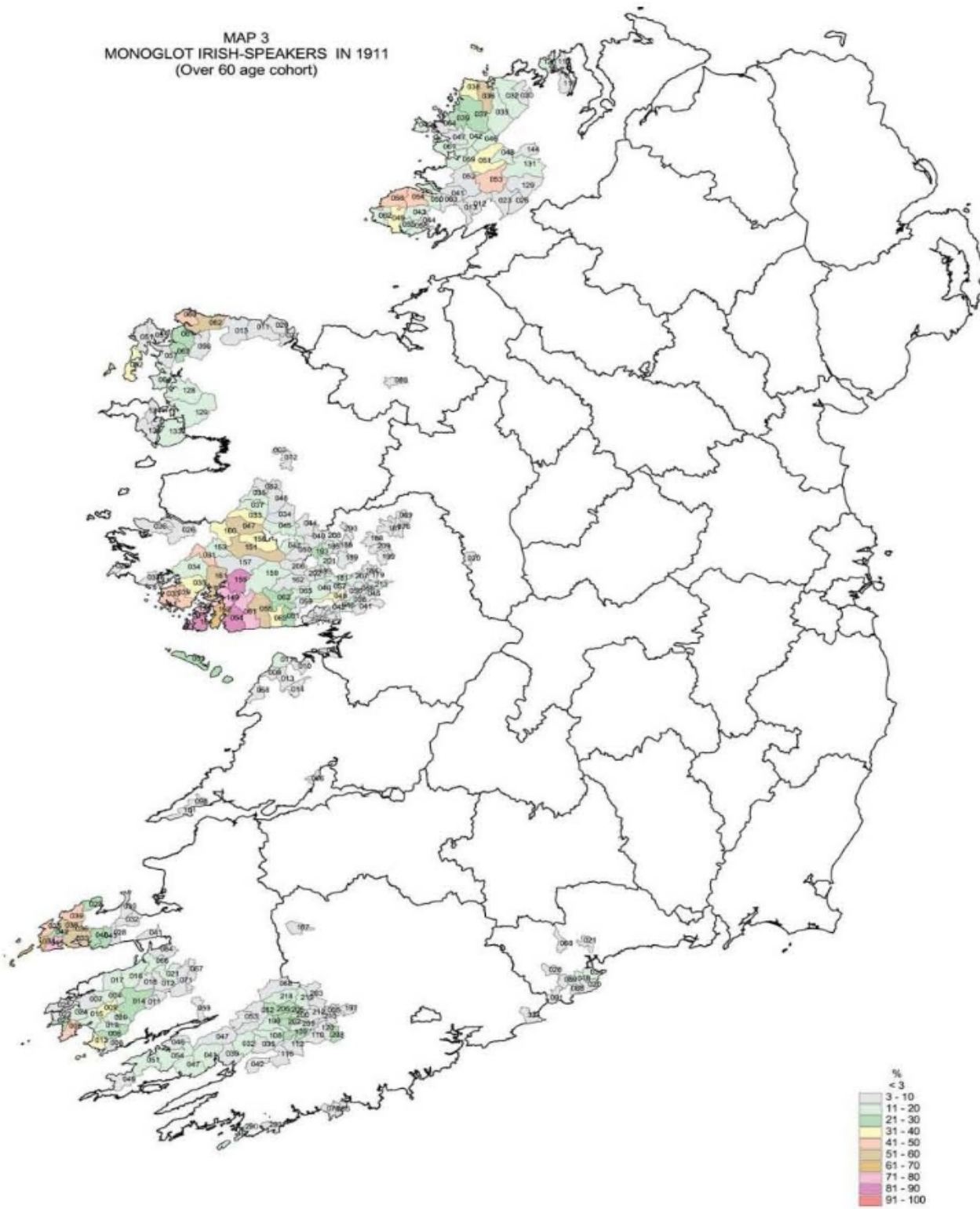


Figure 3 (Fitzgerald): Density of Irish speakers in 1911

## CONCLUSION

### *Modernization*

Identity, always existing in a state of flux, has been shaped by Ireland's long-winded storytelling tradition. Throughout the generations, Irish identity has changed, yet the presence of storytelling within that identity remains undisputed. It was a characteristic of Irishness when bards were the tradition-bearers, and it remains a characteristic of Irishness today. Today, it merely differs in that it caters to a global market and lacks the authenticity that was present before storytelling was recognized as a valuable cultural commodity. Truly, traditional storytelling in the spontaneous sense is dead. It is a casualty of Ireland's necessary shift towards modernization: "The end of tradition is based on the ideal notions of a past completely dominated by tradition and of a present and future completely antithetical to it" (O'Giollain 173). Younger generations experienced a shift in beliefs and values that could not be felt by older generations – by the people who served as reservoirs for countless stories and legends. The link with the past has been broken irreparably. Although traditional storytelling has fallen away, a semblance of it remains within a new ideal of Irishness. Oral storytelling's cultural value and the significance it held in the past has been embraced as part of Ireland's new identity. The modern value of storytelling merely occupies a place different than the one it occupied in the past: storytelling has been incorporated into Ireland's identity by taking a place in Ireland's history. The decline of traditional storytelling did not result in the



destruction of identity; rather, it contributed to the formation of a modern Irishness – an Irishness that respects and values the past while moving into the future, appreciating what was while using it as a stepping stone for what is to come.

The modernization of Ireland entailed adaptation to the cultural and economic standards of the rest of the world. There appears to be a connection between the oral tradition and underdeveloped society in that the oral traditions of most nations nearly vanish once the nation becomes developed – education increases, transportation becomes more easily accessible, and communication with neighboring communities and countries becomes easier. Ireland is an island: it is culturally and geographically isolated from the rest of the world, which is a major contributor to its delayed development. The modernization of Ireland was relatively rapid in the twentieth century, putting Ireland in the unique position of recognizing its cultural singularity while also adapting to a more globalized and industrialized way of life. Anthropologist Roger Bastide notes, “It is curious ... that Folklore became a science just at the moment when it began to disappear ... and to disappear exactly after the transformations in the economic structure” (O’Giollain 144). The idiosyncrasies of Ireland’s storytelling tradition have been perpetuated in part because of the unique timing of cultural change noted by Bastide. However, in order for the nation to evolve and adapt to the world’s economic and educational standards, Ireland and its traditions needed to change. Irish was “the language of a people, and not the language of professors” (O’Giollain 150). Ireland could not forever be a nation of the people. Although its oral tradition is not something to be undervalued, Ireland could not be stunted in a unique developmental stage purely for the purposes of study and preservation, as one would look at a specimen on a microscope

slide. If the nation were not evolving, if it were merely stagnant in its traditions and culture, it would die. If a nation is not developing and progressing, it is dying.

The decline of the oral tradition is correlated with the shift in economic assets. For much of its history, Ireland relied heavily on a farming economy. In 1958, holds on foreign businesses in Ireland were lifted and international companies were allowed to stake a claim on the Irish market. Ireland essentially began to rebuild itself in the 1960s. The average annual growth of GDP and GNP was 4.2%, and emigration rates began to slowly level out (Drudy). Greater access to foreign markets allowed Ireland to emancipate itself from its dependence on goods from the U.K. By the 1970s, Ireland's population began to steadily increase for the first time since the late 1840s – over 100 years following the devastation of the Great Famine. Additionally, education received increased support in the 1960s. In 1967, the state began to pay for secondary schooling and transportation to schools. An increase in education resulted in an increased number of children who were both becoming literate and increasing their proficiency in the English language (Dorgan). The 1960s also saw the arrival of the first televisions in Ireland, further reducing the isolation felt by geographic barriers. People were exposed to other traditions and ways of thinking which may have resulted in a drift away from traditionally Irish values and beliefs, including storytelling.

The 1980s saw a time of economic hardship for Ireland. The plans that seemed so promising 25 years before had miserably failed, and national morale hit a low. In 1987, Fianna Fail won control of the government and instated policies that supported smaller government. It cut back on national spending, supported Irish businesses, and decreased the exorbitant inflation rate. This resulted in the “Celtic Tiger,” a period of rapid

economic growth in Ireland from the 1990s to the mid-2000s, which quickly catapulted Ireland to the top of the list of the richest countries in Europe (Dorgan). During this time, the average growth rate of the GDP was a booming 8.1% (Drudy).

As globalization crept into Ireland in the mid-twentieth century, the driving forces that gave Ireland its nationalist and Catholic identities began to decline. Following the lead of other countries, Ireland began to create more of a division between church and state. Removal from daily politics caused the Catholic church to lose much of its power over the Irish. Furthermore, foreign media infiltrated the country and culturally diluted Ireland's people. Emigration stole away many of the Irish after the Great Famine, and the country has yet to regain its former numbers. Because the Irish began to spread out all over the world, it became difficult to define what is truly "Irishness." Storytelling became kitsch. It lost its original utility and became a show – something to show tourists who wanted a taste of "real Ireland." In that sense, storytelling is fairly accessible to visitors in a way that it never was in the past. They are able to have a glimpse of the importance of oral storytelling in establishing Irishness. On the other hand, the picture they are receiving is not entirely accurate. Storytellers are paid for their services and lack the same "power over the word" as their predecessors. However, a handful of known storytellers retain some of the characteristic prowess as those of old. Pat Ryan and Eddie Lenihan, for instance, are able to offer their services for a fee and share the traditional aspects of storytelling with a new generation. Both men studied and collected the traditional form of the oral narrative and are able to imitate it to an astounding degree, thereby providing new generations with a glimpse of the oral tradition of the past.

Although the Irish oral tradition is extraordinary in its own right, it is not the only thing that defines Irishness. There are different modes of cultural identity. To confine Ireland and its people to an image that is heavily contingent on the existence of a thriving oral tradition would be to neglect the other cultural facets that contribute to Irishness and restrict them to oppressive poverty. As Ireland progressed and modernized, so must have its identity, including the oral tradition. Identity is continually subject to reconstruction. Reconstruction is a necessary part of growth. As values shift, a nation's cultural identity shifts. In Ireland, personal and collective identities used to center around farming and the agricultural industry. When Ireland became a free state in 1921, its anti-English sentiments permeated its façade. Transnational values – values that originate and extend beyond the borders of Ireland – informed the identity in the 1960s, and Irish identity on a global scale became a concern in the 1990s (Drudy). Riverdance, U2, and clovers may be kitsche and not representative of what Ireland once was, but they are representative of what Ireland now is: a nation that has adapted to the times and has adopted certain cultural symbols in order to assert its singularity in the global market.

Traditions are not eternal:

“Inherited modes of storytelling, for instance, may survive socio-economic transformations, but provided certain basic conditions remain: the habit of gathering to swap news and to share entertainment; the coexistence of several generations to maintain transmission through time; accepted conventions controlling the permanence, and allowing the adaptability, of narrative techniques as well as of story plots and stylized expression” (Zimmerman 359)

Such traditions could still be observed in Ireland throughout the twentieth century, but they were few and far between as social life evolved to adapt to new forms of entertainment and transmission of information. The continuity between generations diminished. For that reason, the storytelling itself may remain, but it lacks the 'personal' factor ascribed to traditional Irishness. The difference between modern storytelling and the storytelling of pre-twentieth century Ireland lies in its utility: stories will still be told, but they lack the purpose they had in the past. Storytelling has become a cultural symbol to exhibit to the rest of the world, but it is a tradition that has become hollow in its newfound fame.

## REFERENCES

- "About the Irish Language." *About the Irish Language*. Conradh Na Gaeilge Shasana Nua, n.d. Web.
- "Background on the Irish Language." *Údarás Na Gaeltachta*. Údarás Na Gaeltachta, n.d. Web.
- Bourke, Angela. *The Burning of Bridget Cleary: A True Story*. New York: Viking, 2000. Print.
- . "The Virtual Reality of Irish Fairy Legend." *Theorizing Ireland*, ed. Claire Connolly. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. Print.
- Cashman, Ray. *Storytelling on the Northern Irish Border: Characters and Community*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2008. Print.
- Delargy, James H. *The Gaelic Storyteller*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1945. Print.
- Dorgan, Sean. "How Ireland Became the Celtic Tiger." *Heritage*. The Heritage Foundation, n.d. Web.
- Drudy, Patrick J. and Collins, Micheál L. "Ireland: from boom to austerity." *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy, and Society* 4(2011): 339-54. 02 Sept. 2011. Web.
- Fitzgerald, Garret. "Irish-Speaking in the Pre-Famine Period: A Study Based on the 1911 Census Data for People Born Before 1851 and Still Alive in 1911." *Royal Irish Academy* 103.5(2003): 191-283. 31 Dec. 2003.
- Foster, John W. *Fictions of the Irish Literary Revival*. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1993. Print.
- Glassie, Henry. *Passing the Time in Ballymenone: Culture and History of an Ulster Community*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania, 1982. Print.
- Gregory. *Gods and Fighting Men: The Story of the Tuatha De Danaan and of the Fianna of Ireland*. New York: Oxford UP, 1970. Print.
- The Gale Group. "Gaelic Revivalism: The Gaelic League." *Encyclopedia of Irish History and Culture*. Encyclopedia.com, 2004. Web.

- Henigan, Julie. "The Power of a Lie: Irish Storytelling Tradition in *The Playboy of the Western World*." *New Hibernia Review* 6.3(2002): 92-112. 2002. Web.
- Hyde, Douglas. "The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland." *Conradh Na Gaeilge Shasana Nua*, n.d. Web.
- Joyce, James. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. New York: Viking, 1964. Print.
- Kiberd, Declan. "Blasket Autobiographies." *Irish Classics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2001. 320-42. Print.
- . *Synge and the Irish Language*. Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1979. Print.
- Larminie, William. *West Irish Folk-Tales and Romances*. Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1973. Print.
- Lloyd, David. *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity 1800-2000: The Transformation of Oral Space*. Cambridge University Press, 2011. Print.
- Lucchitti, Irene. *The Islandman: The Hidden Life of Tomás O'Crohan*. N.p.: Peter Lang Group, 2009. Print.
- Mac Cana, Proinsias. *The Learned Tales of Medieval Ireland*. Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1980. Print.
- Mac Giolla Easpaig, Dónall. "Ireland's history of geographical names." *Wiener Schriften zur Geographie und Kartographie* 18(2009): 79-85.
- McGlothlin, Margaret. "Storytelling: The Perspective of Eddie Lenihan." Personal interview. Crusheen, Ireland, 22 July 2015.
- . "Storytelling: The Perspective of Rab Fulton." Personal interview. Galway, Ireland, 30 June 2015.
- McKendry, Eugene. "An Introduction to Storytelling, Myths and Legends." *BBC Northern Ireland*. BBC, n.d. Web.
- Mokyr, Joel. "Great Famine." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 28 Jan. 2016. Web.

- Béaloideas Éireann/Folklore of Ireland Society, 1971. 233-50. Print.
- Ó Giolláin, Diarmuid. *Locating Irish Folklore: Tradition, Modernity, Identity*. N.p.: n.p., n.d. *Google Books*. Cork University Press. Web. 15 June 2016.
- Ó Súilleabháin, Muiris, Moya Llewelyn Davies, and George Derwent Thomson. *Twenty Years A-Growing*. New York: Viking, 1933. Print.
- Russell, Richard Rankin. "Comparative Drama." *Talking with Ghosts of Irish Playwrights Past: Marina Carr's By the Bog of Cats* 40.2 (2006): 149-168. Print.
- Súilleabháin, Seán Ó. *Storytelling in Irish Tradition*. Cork: Mercier, 1973. Print.
- Synge, John M. and Yeats, Jack B. *The Aran Islands*. Boston: J.W. Luce, 1911. Print.
- . *Riders To The Sea*. N.p.: Project Gutenberg ; NetLibrary, 2000. Print.
- Titley, Alan. "Cré Na Cille: Ó Cadhain's Squabbling Corpses Revived in English." *The Irish Times*. The Irish Times, 29 Mar. 2015. Web.
- Thuente, Mary Helen. *W.B. Yeats and Irish Folklore*. Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble, 1981. Print.
- Walsh, Dennis. "Ireland's History in Maps (1841 AD)." *Ireland's History in Maps (1841 AD)*. RootsWeb, 2007. Web.
- Yeats, W. B. *The Celtic Twilight*. Gerrards Cross, Buckinghamshire: Smythe, 1981. Print.
- Zimmermann, George D. *The Irish Storyteller*. Dublin: Four Courts, 2001. Print.