

Classic Poetry Series

Antoine O Raifteiri
- poems -

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Antoine O Raifteiri(30 May 1779 - 25 December 1835)

Antoine Ó Raifteirí (also Antoine Ó Reachtabhra, English: Anthony Raftery) was an Irish language poet who is often called the last of the wandering bards.

Anthony Raftery was born in Killedan, near Kiltimagh in County Mayo. His father was a weaver. He had come to Killedan from County Sligo to work for the local landlord, Frank Taaffe. Raftery's mother was a Brennan from the Kiltimagh area. She and her husband had nine children. Anthony was an intelligent and inquisitive child. Some time between 1785 and 1788, Anthony Raftery's life took a huge turn after he and his siblings had contracted smallpox. Within three weeks, eight of the nine children had died. One of the last things young Raftery saw before going blind was his eight siblings laid out dead on the floor.

As Raftery's father was a weaver, he had not experienced the worst of that era's poverty, but it would be much more difficult for his son to escape hardship. He lived by playing his fiddle and performing his songs and poems in the mansions of the Anglo-Irish gentry. His work draws on the forms and idiom of Irish poetry, and although it is conventionally regarded as marking the end of the old literary tradition, Raftery and his fellow poets did not see themselves in this way.

In common with earlier poets, Raftery had a patron in Taffe. One night Frank sent a servant to get more drink for the house. The servant took Raftery with him, both of them on one of Franks' good horses. Whatever the cause (said to be speeding) Raftery's horse left the road and ended up in the bog, drowned or with a broken neck. Frank banished Raftery and he commenced the life of an itinerant. According to *An Craoibhín* (Douglas Hyde) one version of the story is that Raftery wrote *Cill Aodáin* (as DH Kileadan, County Mayo, his most famous work apart from *Anach Cuan*, to get back in Frank Taffe's good books. Taffe however was displeased at the awkward way Raftery worked his name into the poem, and then only at the end. Another version has it that Raftery wrote this poem in competition to win a bet as to who could praise their own place best. When he finished reciting the poem his competitor is reported to have said "Bad luck to you Raftery, you have left nothing at all for the people of Galway" and refused to recite his own poem.

None of his poems were written down during the poet's lifetime, but they were collected from those he taught them to by Douglas Hyde, Lady Gregory and others, who later published them. Raftery was lithe and spare in build and not very tall but he was very strong and considered a good wrestler. He always wore

a long frieze coat and corduroy breeches.

Ó Ráifteiri died at the house of Diarmuid Cloonan of Kileeneen, near Craughwell, County Galway, and was buried in nearby Kileeneen Cemetery. In 1900, Lady Gregory, Edward Martyn, and W.B. Yeats erected a memorial stone over his grave, bearing the inscription "RAFTERY". A statue of him stands in the village green, Craughwell, opposite Cawley's pub.

Poetry

Ó Ráifteiri's most enduring poems include Eanach Dhuin and Cill Aodain which are still learned by Irish schoolchildren.

"Eanach Dhúin"□

Má fhaighimse sláinte is fada bheidh trácht
Ar an méid a bádh as Eanach Cuain.
'S mo thrua 'márach gach athair 's máthair
Bean is páiste 'tá á sileadh sú!
A Rí na nGrást a cheap neamh is párthas,
Nar bheag an tábhacht dúinn beirt no triúr,
Ach lá chomh breá leis gan gaoth ná báisteach
Lán a bháid acu scuab ar shiúl.
Nár mhór an t-íonadh ós comhair na ndaoine
Á bhfeicáil sínte ar chúl a gcinn,
Screadadh 'gus caoineadh a scanródh daoine,
Gruaig á cíoradh 's an chreach á roinnt.
Bhí buachaillí óg ann tíocht an fhómhair,
Á síneadh chrochar, is a dtabhairt go cill.
'S gurb é gléas a bpósta a bhí dá dtoramh
'S a Rí na Glóire nár mhór an feall.

English Translation

If my health is spared I'll be long relating
Of that boat that sailed out of Anach Cuain.
And the keening after of mother and father
And child by the harbour, the mournful croon!
King of Graces, who died to save us,
T'were a small affair but for one or two,
But a boat-load bravely in calm day sailing
Without storm or rain to be swept to doom.

What wild despair was on all the faces
To see them there in the light of day,
In every place there was lamentation,
And tearing of hair as the wreck was shared.
And boys there lying when crops were ripening,
From the strength of life they were borne to clay
In their wedding clothes for their wake they robed them
O King of Glory, man's hope is in vain.

Legacy

In tribute Seán Ó Ceallaigh wrote the poem "Mise Raifteirí an File" in America toward the end of the 19th century. The first four lines of "Mise Raifteirí an File" appeared on the reverse of the Series C Irish five pound note.

"Mise Raifteirí an File" □

Mise Raifteirí, an file,
lán dóchais is grá
le súile gan solas,
ciúineas gan crá
Dul siar ar m'aistear,
le solas mo chroí
Fann agus tuirseach,
go deireadh mo shlí
Feach anois mé
m'aghaidh le bhalla,
Ag seinm ceoil
do phocaí folamh,

English Translation

I am Raftery the poet,
full of hope and love
Having eyes without sight,
lonely I rove.

Going on my journeying
by my heart's light
Weary and tired
of unending night.

Take a look at me now
with my back to a wall
Singing and playing
for nothing at all

The author James Stephens published English translations of poems attributed to Ó Raifteirí in his book *Reincarnations*. The American composer Samuel Barber wrote a composition for mixed chorus - also entitled *Reincarnations* - based on three of the poems translated by Stephens.

An annual festival, Féile Raifteirí, is held in Loughrea, Co. Galway each year on the last weekend in March. Raftery spent most of his later years in townlands close to the town. The festival features a contemporary Irish language poet and promotes the native arts of Ireland. The festival ends with a visit to Raifteirí's grave in neighbouring Craughwell.

Kiltimagh town square features a granite memorial in honour of Anthony Raftery erected in 1985, in that same year Kiltimagh twinned with Craughwell, the final resting place of the blind Gaelic poet.

Scoil Raifteirí, an All-Irish Primary School in Castlebar, County Mayo is named in honour of the poet.

The Raftery Room Restaurant is located in Kiltimagh Main Street.

Raftery's Rest Public House is located in Kilcolgan, County Galway near his resting place.

Raftery is mentioned in passing by Irish freedom fighter Liam Devlin in Jack Higgins's 1975 novel *The Eagle Has Landed*.

In 2011 a feature film documenting the life of Raftery was produced by Sonta Teo for TG4, and featured Irish actor Aindrias de Staic in the lead role as Raftery.

A street on the Ballymagroarty estate in Derry, Raftery Close, is named after Anthony Raftery. All the streets in the estate are named after Irish writers.

Cill Aodáin

Now coming of the Spring

the day will be lengthening,
and after St. Bridget's Day
I shall raise my sail.

Since I put it into my head

I shall never stay put
until I shall stand down
in the center of County Mayo.

In Claremorris' family

I will be the first night,
and in Balla below it
I will begin to drink.

to Kiltimagh (Magh's Woods) I shall go

until I shall make a month's visit there
two miles close
to Aghamore.

Antoine O Raifteiri

Eanach Dhúin

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Mise Raifteirí An File

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