Trees, Woods and Literature – 44

The Ruin that Befell the Great Families of Ireland

Aodhagán Ó Rathaille

(…)

Land that produces nothing of sweetness,
land so sunless, so starless and so streamless;
land stripped naked, left leafless and treeless,
land stripped naked by the English bleaters.
Land in anguish—and drained of its heroes,
land for its children forever weeping;
a widow wounded, crying and keening,
humbled, degraded, and torn to pieces.

(…)

Red pools are filled by her poor heart's bleeding
and dogs from Bristol lap it up greedily—
her body is being pulled to pieces
by Saxon curs with their bloody teeth full.
Her branches rotten, her forests leafless,
the frosts of Heaven have killed her streams now;
the sunlight shines on her lands but weakly,
the fog of the forge is on her peaks now.
Her quarries, her mines, are exploited freely,
the rape of her trees is pointless, greedy;
her growing plants are all scattered seawards
to foreign countries to seek for freedom.

These extracts from Aodhagán Ó Rathaille's poem "The Ruin that Befell the Great Families of Ireland" (c. 1720), were translated by Michael Hartnett from the original *An Milleadh D'imigh ar Mhór-shleachtaibh na hÉireann*.

Ó Rathaille (c. 1670 – c. 1729) was born in *Screathan an Mhil* or Scrahanaveele, 16 km east of Killarney in the Sliabh Luachra area of Co. Kerry. By all accounts, he

received a good formal education, which included history, Irish literature, Latin and English – still a minority language but growing in usage during his life. His parents were reasonably prosperous and leased land from Sir Nicholas Browne, according to Sean Ó Tuama and Thomas Kinsella (1981).

This prosperity came to an end during Ó Rathaille's early life, when Browne's estate was confiscated in 1691 after the Jacobites were defeated in the Williamite Wars. Ó Rathaille was forced to leave Scrahanaveele and lived in various locations throughout the county including Stagmount, Lisaby, Killarney and Castlemaine. His landscape, for the most part, was Munster, mainly Kerry but he also traversed counties Cork, Waterford and Limerick, where he made a copy of Geoffrey Keating's history of Ireland – *Forus Feasa ar Éirinn* – in Dromcollogher (Figure 1).

Ó Rathaille's poetry juxtaposes his own dislocation and Munster's political upheaval that began with the Flight of the Earls and spelled the end of the Gaelic – and Bardic – Order. His expectations of a return of both land and patronage went unrealised throughout his life, especially during the period when John Asgill mismanaged the estate. There was a period of hope for Ó Rathaille when Sir Valentine Browne returned to take over the debt-ridden estate. But the fortunes of the Brownes were also in decline and restoration of status for the beleaguered poet failed to materialise. As a result, his early praise poems turned malicious, especially those directed at Sir Valentine Browne or "Sir Val" as he disparagingly referred to him. "[Ó Rathaille] would have considered 'Valentine' a ridiculous name for anyone calling himself a gentleman," maintained Frank O'Connor.

While his early portrayal of the Brownes is positive, his real allegiance lay with the earlier Gaelic McCarthymore family, according to Ó Tuama and Kinsella (1981):

> For all his close links with the Brownes, Ó Rathaille was more emotionally involved with the McCarthys, whom the Brownes supplanted (and thereafter often supported). This twin – and sometimes contradictory – allegiance caused a tension in his poetry which he does not seem to have resolved until the end of life.

Ó Rathaille tried in vain to keep the Bardic tradition alive but he was cut adrift without land, patronage or privilege. His hankering for the world of the McCarthys was also a yearning for a lost Gaelic way of life. Unlike most poets who lived during this period, Ó Rathaille was not averse to commenting on woodland decline and the people who caused the destruction.

He portrayed a landscape and a forest ecosystem without hope of recovery at a time when woodland cover in Ireland had fallen to 2.5% of the land area by the middle of the 17th century, as estimated by Oliver Rackham (1986). He is merciless in apportioning

blame for this ecological and political disaster. While the "English bleaters" top the list, some of his most vitriolic poetry is reserved for local exploiters. These included Timothy Cronin and Murtagh Griffin – two agents of John Asgill – who "got what they could by the destruction of the woods, or by the extortion of hearth-money [fireplace tax]", wrote Fr. Patrick Dineen, the compiler of *The Poems of Egan O'Rahilly* in 1900.

The landscape depicted in "The Ruin" contrasts with Ó Rathaille's aisling or dream poems. These depict Ireland as a beautiful woman, but in "The Ruin", "[H]er body is being pulled to pieces / by Saxon curs with their bloody teeth" and elsewhere "Her limbs are shrunken, bound and bleeding".

Ó Rathaille, unlike the later anonymous composer of *Cill Chais*, lived through the late 17th and early 18th century decline of Irish language, Bardic tradition and woodland cover. He actually did see the forest in decline, and more importantly, depicted this destruction as both a physical reality and a metaphor for Ireland's overall degeneration – including his own fall from grace – as portrayed in "The Wounds of Ireland":

> A sharp grief to me the woundings of Ireland
> oppressed under clouds and her people all heart-sick;
> the trees that were strongest at giving them shelter,
> their branches are lopped, their roots withered and rotten.

In "The Ruin" he maintained the theme of relentless despair throughout the 72 lines of each four-lined stanza in the original Irish. It is a social and political lament, but it is also an environmental dirge for a forest and its habitat in the face of over exploitation and possible climatic stress, as Ireland was in the middle of the "Little Ice Age". The temperature of the Northern Hemisphere was one degree centigrade less than it is today during this period of 1550 to 1850. The freezing conditions are captured in the poet's journeys through "cold towns" and countryside where the young and beautiful woman aisling image is now replaced by a tortured "widow wounded" with:

> Her branches rotten, her forests leafless,
> the frosts of Heaven have killed her streams now.

For all its desolation and despair, Ó Rathaille's poetry finds temporary respite in his aisling vision poems such as "The Dream" where trees are associated with past abundance:

> A magical haze they'd arranged where no darkness appeared,
> from Galway of bright-coloured stones to Cork of the quays,
> nut-clusters and fruit grew forever on trees,
> acorns eternal in woods and honey on stones could be seen.

As in his other aisling poems, he awakes to the harsh reality of Jacobite defeat and his own desolation. Ó Rathaille wasn't to know it but woodland decline and exploitation would last for another two centuries before a new woodland culture and an original poetic voice would emerge.

He did eventually receive a plot of land in his Sliabh Luachra homeland according to an entry in the *Kenmare manuscripts* (August 1727) but it amounted only "to a few fields of his native area in a condition not better than penury: he possessed only one cow". Most histories of Ó Rathaille are uncertain about his date of death and burial place. It is believed he died in late 1728 or early 1729 and was probably buried in the grounds of Muckross Abbey, Killarney.

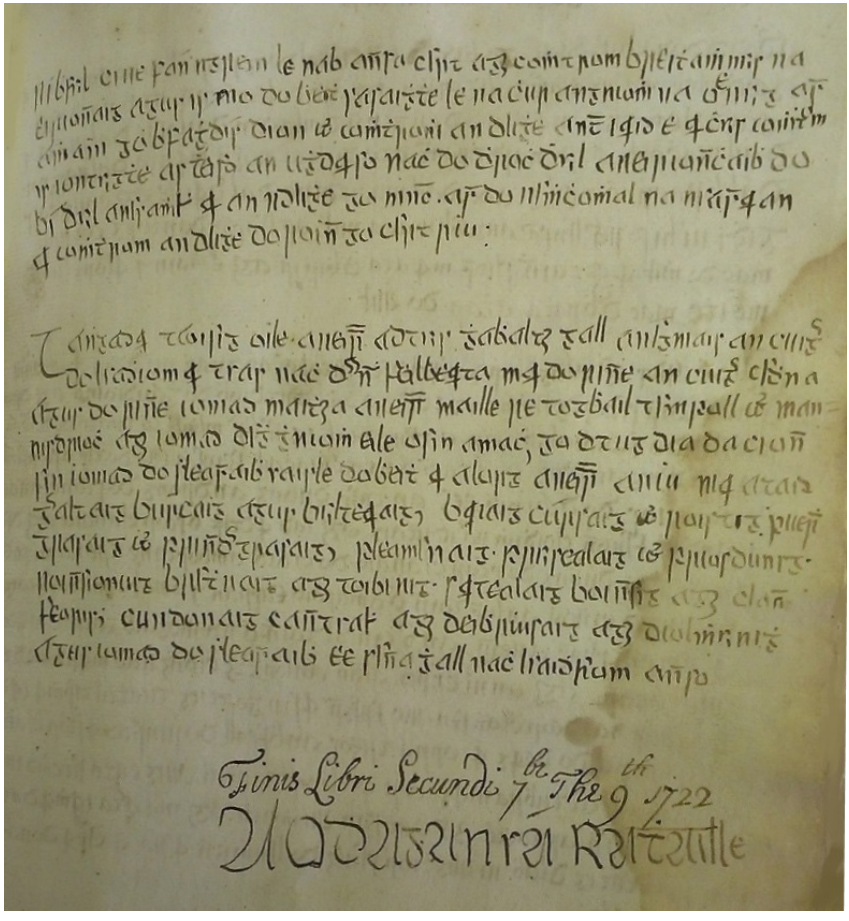
Finis Libri Secundi 7br The 9th 1722
Aodhagán Ó Rathaille

Figure 1: *Ó Rathaille's signature appears twice on the copied manuscript of Foras Feasa ar Éirinn by Geoffrey Keating (Seathrún Céitinn). Here the signature is dated 9th September 1722. Image reproduced courtesy of the National Library of Ireland and Mark Humphrys.*

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