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AN IRISH CHARM AMONG THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY FOLKLORE COLLECTINGS OF J. J. LYONS

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Abstract: Newspapers, along with other periodical forms of media, played an important role in the distribution of folklore collected in the nineteenth century. One such publication within the Irish and Irish American context that contributed to this periodical-based interest in disseminating folklore was the Brooklyn newspaper *An Gaodhal*, among the earliest newspapers produced predominantly in the Irish language. Included in its contributors was the Philadelphia-based Irish speaker J. J. Lyons, who published over a hundred songs, prayers, and other folk collectings that he acquired through talking to Irish informants in the United States. These efforts include a charm for the Evil Eye contributed to an 1890 issue of *An Gaodhal*. This and other instances of published folklore collecting are significant in that the format of nineteenth-century newspapers, with their emphasis on identifying informants to demonstrate authenticity and accuracy of the contribution, contributed to a growing ethnographic and professionalized approach to folklore that would subsequently dominate the field.

Keywords: Newspapers, Irish folklore, Irish language, Evil Eye charm

A revealing example of the continued popularity of charms among nineteenth-century communities can be found in the earliest newspaper to feature a significant portion of its content in the Irish language, the Brooklyn-based *An Gaodhal*.[1] Founded in 1881 by a Galway-born immigrant to the United States, Mícheál Ó Lócháin (1836–99), the newspaper presented political updates, current events, and material for learning how to read the Irish language, as well as reader-contributed songs, folk tales, and poetry meant to draw its Irish American readers into a broader Irish-language culture that its editor believed need bolstering amid the declining numbers of speakers of the language in the second half of the nineteenth century. The newspaper was very

much a contributor to the unfolding Gaelic Revival, a movement built on the financial and literary contributions of the Irish on both sides of the Atlantic with an aim of de-Anglicizing Irish culture and drawing more heavily on its Gaelic past (O'Leary 1994; McMahon 2008). A monthly publication set at a subscription rate of less than a dollar, *An Gaodhal*'s subscriber lists contain names from hundreds of men and women around the United States who took an interest in reading and circulating the newspaper as an expression of their affinity for the Irish language and for a publication that overtly celebrated the country's history and culture.

Although *An Gaodhal* lasted nearly two decades under the editorship of Ó Lócháin, its monthly format and inclusion of English-language content as well as items in Irish means that it represented only a small corpus within the larger context of publishing in the United States in the late nineteenth century. The total extent of its initial run in the nineteenth century was less than 2,500 pages. And yet, tellingly, even within this small window onto the Irish-speaking community a charm text makes its appearance, demonstrating the prevalence of charms in popular culture in this time period. In this case the charm in question is a protective incantation against the evil eye, collected by a Philadelphia-based Irish speaker named J. J. Lyons. Lyons reported that he had taken down the charm, which he described as a "prayer to be said by a person supposed to be overlooked, or as they say, a bad eye made of," from a Mrs. Mulhearn of Clonghaneely, County Donegal. It was titled "Ortha n-aghaidh Droch-Amharc" (A Charm against the Evil Eye):

> Ortha chuir Mac Dé air each [*sic*] neach
> Paidir na bhfeart air a dhá ghlún,
> Sileadh fola as a chneadha
> A Mhic gan locht, is maith do rún
>
> 'Nuair a chonairc Muire a Mac fhéin
> Air a' chroith le n-a dhá súil,
> Shil sí trí spreasa fola
> Agus í fá h-ucht ann Righ na n-dúl
>
> A shúil údaigh, a rinne mo lot,
> A bhain díom mo dhreach 's mo shnuadh,
> Guidhim-se Muire 'agus Mac
> Agus Righ na bh-flaithis a toghbháil uaim

[A charm that the Son of God placed on every person
An almighty *pater* to say on two knees
A dripping of blood from his wound
Son without fault, your mystery is great
When Mary saw her own Son
On the cross with her own eyes
She shed three showers of blood
While at the lap of the Lord of Creation
Oh Evil Eye that made my injury
That took from me my appearance and my complexion
I pray to Mary and her Son
And the Lord of the Heavens to take it from me][2]

No further information about the charm is given, though it evidently drew notice: Douglas Hyde reprinted the charm in his two-volume *Abhráin Diadha Chúige Connacht* (The Religious Songs of Connacht; 1906), in which he noted that the Irish-language revivalist Eoghan Ó Gramhnaigh (1863–99) had found the same charm on the Aran Islands; Hyde erroneously reported that Lyons had learned the charm from a man (Hyde 1972: 2:55–57).

A larger importance can be ascribed to the appearance of this charm and to the folklore-collecting efforts of Lyons more broadly in this particularly newspaper format, however. While the charm reaffirms that even a relatively brief corpus of folklore collectings as that presented in *An Gaodhal* surfaced this genre of folk practice, it is the growing use of newspapers as a medium—effectively used by Lyons as well as his contemporaries—that is most significant. With their emphasis on accurate capture of folk beliefs and decision (in line with newspaper practice in general) to present attribution for the informants, the contributions of Lyons and others in Ireland contributed to a wider use of newspapers in other national and linguistic contexts to present folklore in this particular print format. This in turn helped shape the evolution of folklore study as a science.

J. J. LYONS AND THE ORIGINS OF FOLKLORE STUDY IN IRELAND

There is frustratingly little information known about Lyons, and while Cloghaneely (in Irish, Cloich Chionnaola) is well-known as a place with

strong Irish-language connections, to date the Mrs. Mulhearn referenced by Lyons cannot be traced. Lyons appears not to have mentioned Mulhearn as a source in his other contributions to the newspaper, and further searching will be needed to see if she appears in any other contemporary archival documents or newspapers. Cloghaneely, located in the far northwest of Ireland, was the birthplace of the famous Micí Mac Gabhann (1865–1948), the memoirist whose Irish-language account of his time in mining in the Alaskan Klondike is a compelling account of nineteenth-century global migration (Breathnach and Ní Mhurchú "Mac Gabhann"; Mac Gowan 2003). In the twentieth century Cloghaneely became known as the site of Coláiste Uladh, one of the many Irish-language colleges founded to train teachers and enthusiasts for the language and yet another feature of the Gaelic Revival of the time (Ó Ceallaigh 2017; McCafferty 2025). It therefore makes sense that Lyons would encounter an individual in the United States with strong knowledge of Irish-language folklore whose origins had been Cloghaneely.

As for Lyons himself, what can be said is that he was a prolific collector with strong interest in the subject of folklore. His contributions appear more than one hundred times over the course of the seventeen-year run of *An Gaodhal* 1881 to 1894, with Lyons's first mention appearing in 1884. To that we can add nearly fifty contributions between 1888 and 1894 to another Irish American newspaper, the *Irish-American*, to which Lyons sent songs, poems, and prose for inclusion in its "Gaelic Department" column (Knight 2021: 316–423). Large numbers of his contributions also show up in the Irish-based newspaper *Tuam News*, whose publisher John Glynne corresponded with Lyons regularly. Deirdre Ní Chonghaile has tracked down some additional biographical information. Lyons was from Glenamaddy (Gleann na Madadh), County Galway, birth date unknown, and had spent time at a school run by Luke Comer, a known Irish-language scholar. The region was also known for the influence of the Irish-language advocate Archbishop John MacHale, whose opposition to the English-language curriculum of the state's National Schools must have prompted at least some of Lyons's enthusiasm for the language (Ní Chonghaile 2015:198–201). Moving to Philadelphia at some point by the early 1880s, Lyons became active in the city's Philo-Celtic Society, and his name appears among those making addresses to its meetings in Irish.

Lyons was one of a handful of Irish-born individuals based in Philadelphia and the eastern Pennsylvania area who became active in seeking songs, stories, and prayers from Irish immigrants in the surrounding

area, including most notably the Rev. Daniel J. Murphy (1858–1935), whose manuscripts (now at the University of Galway) contain thousands of collected items (Ní Chonghaile 2015:205). Lyons's efforts earned him a strong reputation among his colleagues. Hyde extolled his accuracy, writing that

> Mr. Lyons has laid all the Irish scholars of the world under debt and obligation to him for the songs and poems and other things which he has written down punctually and exactly from the mouth of our poor people whom he met in America, without altering or doctoring anything, but giving them exactly as he heard them. (Hyde 1972: 1:389)

Ó Lócháin, whose newspaper was the beneficiary of so many of Lyons's contributions, praised him in similar terms:

> Mr. Lyons deserves great credit for his unceasing exertions in preserving the old songs and literature of his native land. We have many so-called Irishmen, but when we of the present generation shall be numbered with our fore-fathers, the impartial historian will record from the columns of *An Gaodhal* the names of those who are really and earnestly laboring in the cause of Irish nationality."[3]

Coming from two such active participants in the Gaelic Revival movement of this period, this praise is notable.

While the approach used by Lyons was not the same as modern frameworks based on methodical collecting of folklore with extensive documentation of informants and context, he stands out for his time period given the carefulness of his approach. In many ways, he can be considered a proto-folklorist of the type that could be found in this era in Ireland and elsewhere, and which include noted contemporaries such as Hyde and the Americans Jeremiah and Alma Curtin, who produced well-regarded collections of Irish folk material at the time. Several aspects of Lyons's work stand out. First, because he was operating out of the United States, where he had easier access to Irish immigrants coming from diverse regions within Ireland, his collecting encompasses a wider geographic swath of the home country than contemporaries who sought folk material from targeted locations. Operating out of Philadelphia, he visited Irish who had been born in counties Clare, Derry, Donegal, Galway, Kilkenny, Limerick, Mayo, Sligo, Tipperary, and Tyrone. Not only did this ensure a greater variety of tales, but it also bridged what

was often a divide within Irish-language revival circles of the time, the differences in dialects of the Irish language between north, south, and west locations. His catholicity in collecting extended to genres of folk material as well. His biggest interest appears to have been songs, which predominate in the material submitted to *An Gaodhal* and to the *Irish American*, but not exclusively. Indeed, even in this interest in song, Lyons stands apart from many of his contemporaries like the Curtins, who were often focused on extended-length tales. Lyons on the other hand contributed poems and tales, as well as more ephemeral items such as prayers and, of course, the charm reproduced above.

Hyde's observation about Lyons's care in recording folklore accurately can be supplemented by another key feature of his work, which is his efforts to record the name and background information of his informants. A far cry from the anonymously presented folk tales, often worked up to evoke a literary aesthetic, so typical of his nineteenth-century folklorist predecessors, Lyons reliably added informant names and locational origins for his material with the exception, as he states in one instance, of a respondent who "does not wish to see her name in print."[4] The relative modernity of Lyons's approach is all the more noteworthy if we consider his earliest antecedents as well as his immediate precursors of mid-nineteenth-century Ireland. Interest in collecting and publishing vernacular oral culture of a Celtic type could be said to start with the Ossianic interests of James Macpherson, whose publications—later subject to controversy over their authenticity—drew on the shared Scottish Gaelic and Irish Ulster epic Fenian-cycle traditions (O'Halloran 1989:74). Perhaps more impactful as a step in the evolution of Irish proto-folklorists, as Angela Bourke has shown in an overview of the creation of the folklore field in Ireland, was Thomas Crofton Croker's *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland*, published in 1825 in the wake of the influence of the Grimm brothers (Bourke 2009:144).

Whereas MacPherson's Ossianic publication had been concerned with finding a kind of Celtic epic poetry in the vein of Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, Crofton Croker's presentation was literary but with an early nineteenth-century novelistic turn, concerned with uncovering residual "superstitions" of the peasantry and presenting them in tidy readable forms. The means by which Crofton Croker obtained the tales and his informants, of course, were obscured, and he favored long-form tales over the short oral accounts that might have been more prevalent. Elements of this literary approach to folklore continued in Ireland at mid-

century. William Wilde's *Irish Popular Superstitions* (1852), explicitly stated the need for that book to uncover popular tales, especially those related to fairies, that could serve as inspirational material in the way that English vernacular tales had inspired Shakespeare (Wilde 1973:v). Wilde, a doctor, did however expand the type of material included so that his publication presented herbal cures, ceremonial practices, and most importantly, charms. His work and that of his wife, Lady Wilde, also known as Speranza, in her *Ancient Legends, Mystic Charms, and Superstitions of Ireland* (1887) together clearly represented development toward a more comprehensive survey of beliefs rather than simply cherry-picking items most likely to sound like what could be found in contemporary literary works.

Still, as Bourke has noted, the pre-1880s generation shared a common view of their work as uncovering vestiges of a primitive culture in Ireland, and often exhibited a tendency to use manuscript sources as well as oral informants in their publications. Like their amateur antiquary compatriots who followed suit in scouring bogs and fields for Bronze Age artifacts, the Wildes felt that they were recording the distinct features of a lost culture that could also, if shaped and redeployed, provide a foundation for a new modern Irish nation (Bourke 2009:144–45). This folk content, as Lady Wilde referred to it, was "the mythology, or the fantastic creed of the Irish respecting the invisible world—strange and mystical superstitions, brought thousands of years ago from their Aryan home, but which still, even in the present time, affect all the modes of thinking and acting in the daily life of the people" (Wilde 1887:1:vi). This mid-century ideology gave way slowly, starting in the 1880s, when those like Hyde and the Curtins turned to exclusively oral sources to explain the foundations of the songs, poems, tales, and charms that they found when traveling among the people they sought to document. Tellingly, this new cohort was interested in conducting this work as far as possible in the Irish language, bringing greater accuracy in capturing folk material in its original form. Hyde, who had learned Irish when growing up on his father's estate in Roscommon, provided both Irish originals and English translations of the items he found. The Curtins, who were Americans, relied on local Irish speakers like Patrick Ferriter, who later went on in the twentieth century to become an active folklore and manuscript collector in his own right (Bourke 2009:159).

This interest in accuracy, proximity to the original informants, and transparency in source material all bring Lyons into alignment with this late nineteenth-century generation of proto-folklorists. But one

last notable aspect of Lyons's work also linked him to Hyde and the Curtins, and this was the use of newspapers and periodicals as a publishing outlet. The Curtins, for instance, published their material in the New York *Sun*, a newspaper that had even contributed financially to their trip to the west of Ireland in 1891–93 (Bourke 2009:158). Hyde's *Religious Songs of Connacht* originally appeared in the *New Ireland Review* in serialized form between 1985 and 1905, and he had been publishing in places like the *Weekly Freeman* and the *Dublin University Review* since 1885 (Daly 1972:ix). This contrasted with the practices of their predecessors, who often preferred to publish their material in book volumes, in keeping with the literary feel that they were driving for in their presentation of the folklore.

NEWSPAPERS AND FOLKLORE

The impact of newspapers and periodicals on folklore itself and in its collecting and presentation has been the topic of some scholarly investigation, but in evaluating this history such studies have appeared only intermittently across various national and linguistic contexts. There are a number of studies, for example, that have argued for what could be called the folkloristic aspects of regular newspaper content—in short, the ways in which newspaper served as a medium for expressing folklore directly (Dorson 1965; Flanagan 1958; Valk 2012). In these cases, moralistic stories, local accounts, and other narratives purporting to be a part of the fabric of the newspaper share elements such as motifs with the larger body of worldwide folklore.

More salient, however, are scholarly studies of early contributors to newspapers (as well as periodicals) who, starting in the first decades of the nineteenth century, submitted for publication folklore that was consciously identified as folklore. These contributors, in other words, saw themselves as documenting folklore encountered in the field. The place of periodicals and newspapers in the fledgling science of folklore was strong and immediate, certainly in the English-language context— tellingly, it was in a contribution to the *Athenaeum* periodical in 1846 that the term "folklore," as is well known, was coined by William John Thoms (Markey 2006:21). Studies on the English-language contexts of Britain and the United States show that newspapers and periodical were in fact very popular as a destination for collected folklore in the nineteenth century, especially in terms of local publications, with contributors especially eager to represent content faithfully based on

what had been found out in the field. Amateur linguists, local historians, dialectologists, and antiquarians were especially active in this endeavor, building an often-overlooked corpus that was nevertheless far more scientific and systematic in comparison to what was being produced by the proto-folklorists active at the time (Ashton 1997; Carey 1968; Dorson 1949; Miller 2011; Tebutt 1969; Upton 1982).

That nineteenth-century newspapers helped mold the discipline and practice of folklore collecting, and would therefore play their part in the Irish folklore and charms identified by Lyons, Hyde, and others, makes sense on further reflection. Contemporaries would have been very aware of the large and immediate audience provided by a newspaper readership, bolstering their decision to use newspapers as a vehicle to present such material. Newspapers also imparted a sense of prestige and importance to their content. Contributors to Irish American newspapers such as Lyons, especially those publishing in Irish, were engaged in an endeavor to build the respectability of Irish culture and the Irish language in the eyes of the general public. This made contributing and publishing folklore in that venue attractive, since those newspapers placed an emphasis on the antiquity and authenticity of its Irish-language content, playing up the esteemed nature of an aspect of national identity that its contributors sought to build.

The newspaper as a format in turn put its stamp on the approach used in presenting folklore. Just as a letter to the editor acquired strength of argument through the inclusion of the author's identity, the decision by Lyons and others to include the names of informants added an air of accuracy and legitimacy to the transcription of folk content; it also pointed toward providing context and deanonymization of sources in anticipation of the more ethnographically minded scholars of the twentieth century. Local informants, too, would have been excited in most cases to see their names as attributions in the newspaper (the exception mentioned by Lyons above notwithstanding), further encouraging the transparency of the folklore presented in newspapers in a way not appropriate to a venue like the novelistic and literary creations of Crofton Croker or the Wildes. Finally, the more limited space available for folk contributions in a newspaper favored shorter pieces. Lyons and other contributors to *An Gaodhal* were on occasion afforded multiple columns, but a partial single column afforded for folk content was much more typical of many of these brief contributions. Again, this shorter-form approach contrasted with the extended epic tales favored by the full-book formats of the great nineteenth-century

collections—Crofton Croker, for example, dedicated an entire chapter of approximately ten pages to each of his collected pieces—likely encouraging briefer and perhaps more representative folkloristic content to appear in the newspapers. Charms such as the one presented by Lyons in the July 1890 issue, with their relative brevity, would have also fallen nicely into this category, benefitting from the short format of newspapers and periodicals.

And yet newspapers and periodicals also had a downside in that they plucked charms and other folklore material from their natural context, positioning them as a specimens for study rather than as integrated parts of the fabric of nineteenth-century culture. An example from Hyde's presentation of charms can illustrate this. "Charms," Hyde wrote, "are common enough, and there is on some of them the trace of paganism, and there are in some of them words in which there is now no sense. Some of the people themselves scoffed at them, but in spite of that they have come down to us to the present day." As evidence of this half-serious view of charms, Hyde presents a "mock tooth-ache charm" that he had heard, and which presented humorous twists on well-worn motifs in the *super petram* type:

> A charm which Seumas sent to Diarmuid
> A charm with requesting, without asking,
> The pain that is in your front-tooth,
> To be in the furthest-back tooth in your gum! (Hyde 1972: 2:61)

Skepticism of charms presented in nineteenth-century Irish-language manuscripts was not unknown, of course, but when presented in a mass-readership medium such as a newspaper, it would have reinforced the sense of "otherness" perceived in the world of charming in the contemporary world of Lyons and Hyde.

Indeed, the treatment of charms elsewhere in *An Gaodhal* indicates an antiquarian interest as much as a proto-ethnographic one. Two other mentions of charms can be found in this twenty-year run: a reference to the medieval charms contained in St. Gall MS 1395 and first edited by Johann Kaspar Zuess, and an anticipatory notice that the forthcoming *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* of 1892 will include Gaelic-language charms.[5] In both cases the interest is purely scholarly, with the reference to the St. Gall charm occurring in a reprint of Eugene O'Curry's lectures to the Catholic University in Dublin on early Irish history, and the reference to the *Transactions* in a list of academic

publication notices culled from the Irish-based newspaper *Irisleabhar na Gaeilge*. These references show interest in charms on the part of the newspaper's readers, but in a tenuous, indirect, and static fashion in comparison to the Lyons contribution.

CONCLUSION

The voluminous contributions of Lyons deserved the attention they received from his contemporaries, preserving as they did a slice of Irish folk culture that had been transplanted to the United States but being nevertheless broadly representative of the beliefs and practices of the country in the second half of the nineteenth century. More information about Lyons will likely be gleaned in coming years as his contributions to other newspapers come to light, and further archival investigations turn up information about his origins in Galway. Other aspects of his collecting, such as the disproportionately large number of female informants that he relied on (at least in *An Goadhal*) and his work in Philadelphia on behalf of Irish-language classes are among the aspects of his career beyond his charm-collecting that deserve notice in future appraisals of his work. For now, his annotation of sources and origins of his informants suffice to demonstrate his place in the history of Irish folklore study.

But attention should be directed to Lyons's choice of venue for presenting his folk material as much as his own prolificacy. Newspapers had grown significantly, owing to mass production and growing mass literacy, as a presence in the everyday life of the nineteenth century, and the choice to present folk material through this medium widened its audience even as the format of that form of communication placed its stamp on the contributions by Lyons and his contemporaries. The tendency to present attributions for newspaper content encouraged collectors to provide the names of sources, as did a growing emphasis by the late nineteenth century on the accurate—and thus "authentic"—recording of folk content directly from informants. Lyons was not alone in this approach, as the original periodical formats of the folk collections of his fellow enthusiasts Douglas Hyde and the Curtins suggest. In this sense for all of the uniqueness of *An Gaodhal* as an early entrant of the Irish-language publishing of the Gaelic Revival, it was very much representative of other trends in folklore presentation and newspaper developments of the time.

NOTES

[1] Earlier versions of this essay were presented at the annual meetings of the Committee on Charms, Charmers and Charming in Helsinki in 2024 and at Bucharest in 2025. The author is grateful for the comments and feedback provided at these two venues in shaping its direction and for the suggestions made in the editorial process by its anonymous readers.

[2] *An Gaodhal*, July 1890, 980. Translation by author. In line 1 Hyde presents *gach* rather than *each* although the latter is the word presented in the newspaper version. In this context *gach* makes more sense: "every person." In line 9, second word, the newspaper has clearly printed *fhúil*, mistakenly supplying an F when a lenited S makes sense: *súil*, eye, rather than *fuil*, blood. Hyde also presumes the word to be *súil*.

[3] *An Gaodhal*, July 1889, 876.

[4] *An Gaodhal*, June 1890, 960.

[5] *An Gaodhal*, Dec. 1889, 844, and May 1892, 284. On the St. Gall (or Sankt Gallen) charms, see Tuomi 2019: 54–56.

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