Brian Merriman and his Contemporaries

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In this paper the origin of the surname Merriman is discussed, a new date for the completion of Cúirt an Mhean-Oíche is suggested and evidence evinced to show that Merriman participated in the Ennis school of Gaelic poetry in April 1780. Merriman's knowledge of the work of other eighteenth-century Munster poets is demonstrated while the popular belief that he was illegitimate is shown to have no sound historical basis.

The origin of the surname Merriman has been an issue of controversy for some considerable time. In a previous paper this writer made the suggestion that Merriman was a variant of the West Clare surname Marrinan. Since then a more thorough examination of the surviving documentation has been possible and this article sets out in more detail the evidence in support of the original proposition.

I

In 1839, while working for the Ordnance Survey in the parish of Feakle, John O'Donovan commented that the poem Cúirt an Mhean-Oíche by Brian Merriman, while being facetious, was worthy of preservation. He reported that 'the autograph original is in the possession of his relative Anthony Howard (O'Hionair), who lives near Miltown Malbay in this county.' Many people in the past were sceptical of this claim but it is now generally accepted, thanks to the work of Liam P. Ó Murchú, that Anthony Howard did in fact have in his possession an autograph copy of Merriman's work.

The tithe apportionment books for the parish of Kilfarboy (where Miltown Malbay is located) were compiled in 1825-6. They record the land holders of the parish who were liable to pay tithe for the upkeep of Church of Ireland clergy. A search through the apportionment books revealed that only one Anthony Howard was resident in the parish of Kilfarboy and he lived in the townland of Ballyvaskin just north of Miltown Malbay. Residing also in Ballyvaskin in 1826 were eight families named Howard and seven families named Marrinan. Because John O'Donovan said that Anthony Howard was a relative of Brian Merriman, the question inevitably arose whether there was a connection between the surname Marrinan and Merriman. A further nine Marrinan families were recorded in the adjoining townlands of Fintra, Freaghcastle and Freagavaleen. This is significant because it was precisely in this area in 1765 that Tomás Ó Miocháin convened a court of Gaelic poetry, where the poets and learned authors (eigse agus ollaimh údair) of the district gathered. It should come as no surprise therefore that Gaelic literacy and learning continued to survive in this area up to the years preceding the Great Famine.

Unfortunately, the compilers of the tithe apportionment books standardised the spelling of surnames: thus all Marrinan families in the survey are spelled with one r, i.e., Marrian. It is not until the compilation of Griffith's valuation in 1855, some thirty years later, that we get our next comprehensive view of the families who lived in the parish of Kilfarboy. By then the famine of 1845-50 had done its worst. In Ballyvaskin the number of Marrinan families had been reduced from seven to two and in the rest of the parish from ten to five. However, for

5 Ibid.
6 Diarmaid Ó Muiriithí (ed.), Tomás Ó Miocháin Filiocht (Baile Átha Cliath, 1988) pp 70-1. In the poem Ó Miocháin welcomes Pádraig Ó Conaill to the court of poetry at Malbay.

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our purposes Griffith's valuation has the advantage of not standardising surname spelling but setting them down as the people themselves wrote them. Thus in Kilfarboy in 1855 the modern surname Marrinan was variously spelled Marnane, Marrinen, Marrinan and Merrinan. The latter spelling of the name is of particular interest both because of its similarity to Merriman (differing only in the single consonant, n instead of m) and because the two examples of it occur in the townland of Ballyvaskin - the townland where Anthony Howard resided in 1826. It is thus hard to avoid the conclusion that the names Marrinan and Merriman are connected.

The only known example of the surname Merryman in county Clare occurs in a diary compiled by a Mr Lucas of Ballingaddy, Ennistimon, in 1741. In October of that year Lucas employed several workmen from the neighbouring townlands to transport his hay. One of the men employed on that occasion bore the name Robin Merryman. In order to discover whether this surname had survived into the nineteenth century, the tithe apportionment books for the parish of Kilmanahine (Ennistymon), compiled in 1826, were consulted. While the Lucas family continued to reside in the townland of Ballingaddy in 1826, the surname Merryman was not present. However, in the adjoining townland of Calluragh, there were no less than three recordings of the name Marinan, showing that the surname had indeed continued in the area. Why in a period of some eighty years had the name changed from Merryman to Marinan? What appears to have happened was that Merryman was an early attempt at anglicising the original Gaelic surname Ó Marriamhín. For whatever reason this anglicisation was found to be unsuitable and the majority of people eventually assumed Marrinan, a more phonetically correct rendering of the original.

The evidence as it survives, it has to be said, is circumstantial rather than conclusive; nevertheless it is persuasive and it can be stated with a reasonable degree of confidence that both Merriman and Marrinan are anglicisations of the Irish patronymic Ó Marriamhín.

II

Towards the end of Cúirt an Mheon-Oíche Merriman sets down in the form of a riddle the date on which the women's court gave its verdict.

Réitigh, ceil nó goid de sceimhle,
Céad is deich fó leith as níle,
Dúbhar ceart an freastail feithih,
Is thuirling mac an tseachtain roimhe sin.11

(solve, subtract or steal away, one hundred and ten precisely from a thousand, double correctly the amount remaining, and the son descended the week before that.)

There is no problem with the first three lines, it is generally agreed that the year 1780 is denoted (1000 - 110 = 890 x 2 = 1780). The problem arises with the fourth line. What date is intended by the line Is thuirling mac an tseachtain roimhe sin (And the son descended the week before that)? In the past a number of commentators have suggested that the date in question was New Year's Day. Reasoning that the son, Jesus, descended or was born on Christmas Day (25 December) and one week later, New Year's Day (1 January) the court gave its verdict. The problem with this interpretation is that New Year's Day does not obviously connect with any

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7 Griffith's Valuation, Parish of Kilfarboy 1855. (www.clarelibrary.ie).
8 Diary of Mr Lucas of Drumcavan, 9 Oct., 1741 (N.L.I. Ms. 14,101).
9 Tithe Apportionment Books, Parish of Kilmanahine, 1826; the area is referred to as Ennistymon, Cloneaout West alias Knockanulin called Calluragh Cross, (www.clarelibrary.ie).
10 The standard spelling in Irish is Ó Mairiáin, see Patrick Woulfe, Siste Ghealthead is Gall (Dublin, 1923) p. 613; Woulfe believed that the surname was a corruption of Ó Mairiáin, (descendant of Mairiáin) the name of an ancient Irish sea god! However, almost all historic examples have a slender rather than a broad middle vowel.
12 Risteárd Ó Foghludha (ed.), Cúirt an Mheadhdh Oíchehe (Baile Átha Cliath, 1912) p. 130; Frank O'Connor, The Midnight Court (Dublin, 1945) pp 47-8; Ó Murchú (ed.), Cúirt an Mheon-Oíche, p. 66. Ó Murchú has since changed his mind regarding the date and in his most recent publication provides a different interpretation, see his Merriman: 1 bFíbor Béithe (Baile Átha Cliath, 2005) pp 18-19.
of the themes addressed in the poem. Merriman is generally so precise in his poetry that such a loose reference is wholly uncharacteristic. New Year's Day would have had little significance for Merriman. The day was not endowed with any religious significance and neither was it important in the agricultural calendar. The first of January had only become the official start of the New Year in Ireland in 1752 and its celebration had made little impact on rural communities.

In his paper ‘Cúirt agus múnla lietherta do chuírt Mherriman’ Liam P. Ó Murchú credits his colleague Seán Úa Súilleabáin with the suggestion that the date referred to in ‘thuirling an mac’ may be the feast of the Annunciation, the 25 March, the day when Christians believe the Holy Spirit descended on the Virgin Mary to make her the mother of God. This suggestion, in this writer’s view, has much to recommend it and should be pursued.

The 25 of March was a day of considerable significance in rural Ireland. Up until 1752 the Feast of the Annunciation had always been the first day of the new year. It was also a gale day when the agricultural rents fell due and when the sowing season began. That Merriman intended this day rather than Christmas day is supported by his use of the lower case m in mac; the higher case Mac would have been used, if Jesus the son of God was intended. Counting seven days forward from 25 March one comes to 1 April or All Fools' Day. It is the contention of this writer that 1 April 1780, was the date intended by Merriman as the day the court gave its verdict.

The first day of April has the advantage over the first of January in that it connects directly with the poem. Fools' day was a celebration of love and good humour, two of the principal themes of Cúirt an Mheon-Oiche. According to Amhlaoibh Ó Súilleabáin fools' day originated in ancient Rome where people on that day played tricks on one another in honour of the goddess Venus. The first of April 1780 was also the day on which Tomás Ó Mícháin, issued his call for the poets and learned men of North Munster to come together in Ennis to renew the rules of poetry. That Ó Mícháin issued his call on the same day as Merriman concluded his poem (if the date of 1 April is accepted) is surely more than mere coincidence. Ó Mícháin must have known that Merriman had completed his great work and the call for the court of poetry to meet was to afford him the opportunity of proclaiming his poem to a wider audience. If the first of April was the day Merriman concluded Cúirt an Mheon-Oiche, it clearly has important implications for the reading of the poem and perhaps also for the seriousness with which the poet’s pronouncements should be taken. The first of April 1780 was the first Saturday after Easter, unusually in Ennis it was both a market and a fair day which ensured that the maximum number of country people were present in the town, and an ideal day for the publicising of a forthcoming event. The poets gathered the following Wednesday fortnight (19 April 1780) in the house of Toirdhealchadh Ó Briain under the authority of Uílliam Mac Gearailt.

III

There is no hard evidence directly linking Brian Merriman to Tomás Ó Mícháin. No poem or letter survives that would indicate that both men had ever met. It is just assumed that because they lived in close proximity and engaged in similar activities that they were known to one another. Ó Mícháin came from Assolas near Quin whereas Merriman lived at Feakle about twelve miles distance. Both men were teachers of mathematics, both composed poetry and both wrote Gaelic manuscripts in their spare time. One would expect that they were known to each other.

14 Cheney, Handbook of Dates, pp 4-5.
15 Tomás de Bhaldraithe (ed.), Cín Lae Amhlaoibh (Baile Átha Cliath, 1970) pp 115-16.
16 Brendan Ó Conchuir, ‘Na Cúirtéanna Ílige i gcuige Mhunáin’ in Ríoghair et al (eds), Sabina hÉigse, p 63.
17 Henry Pelham, Grand Jury Map of County Clare (London, 1787, reprint Dublin, 1989) table of fair days.
18 Ó Conchuir, ‘Na Cúirtéanna Ílige i gcuige Mhunáin’, p 63.
Further supporting evidence for a relationship between the two men is contained in the manuscript, written in Merriman's own hand, and now preserved in Cambridge University Library. This manuscript contains four poems by Tomás Ó Móicháin - one relates to the Enniscorthy Volunteers and another, a humorous piece, concerns the relationship of Dominic Burke with the wife of Simon Birmingham, a keeper of a shebeen house on the Malbay coast. Merriman could only have copied these poems in the early 1780s, precisely at the time when Ó Móicháin was at his most active and most prolific in Ennis. So even if Merriman never met Ó Móicháin (a circumstance which is unlikely), he was certainly well aware of his existence. Also found in Merriman's manuscript are poems by individuals who we know had direct contact with Ó Móicháin and the Ennis court of poetry. There are six poems by the Clare poet Séamus Mac Considein. Mac Considein and Tomás Ó Móicháin were close friends. Mac Considein responded in verse, for instance, to the lampoon levelled by Ó Móicháin at the wife of the alehouse keeper, Simon Birmingham. Also contained in Merriman's manuscript are two poems by John Lloyd, a life long associate of Ó Móicháin. The poem 'Seolth e chroí agus mile fáillte' is of particular relevance because it was written by Lloyd welcoming the poets to the court of poetry in Ennis ('chum fáillte roimh an éigse go Inis'). The fact that Merriman copied this poem into his own anthology indicates at the very least that he was well aware that such a gathering had taken place in Ennis.

The burden of the evidence then supports the conclusion that Merriman and Ó Móicháin had met, that they were well acquainted with each other and that Brian Merriman was present at the assembly of poets that gathered at Ennis in April of 1780.

IV

The manuscript volume held by Anthony Howard was reputed to have contained the 'autograph original' of 'Cuirt an Mhoen-Otche'. This is not the case. The manuscript preserved in Cambridge University Library (Add. 6562) is an 'autograph copy', that is a copy of the poem made by Merriman himself. That Merriman copied from an exemplar is evident from a close examination of the text. On folio seventeen, for example, line 725, the phrase 'Comh fada gan chiall le blain ná lá', was mistakenly written in a second time at line 729. The wrong entry was cancelled and the correct line substituted. Similarly on folio fifteen, line 601, a full quatrain is omitted. The four lines are written on the inner margin and a note in English at the bottom of the page informs the reader 'The four lines in the margin ought to be read after that line marked thus *'. It is strange that a native Irish speaker should write the direction to the reader in English. Perhaps Merriman's normal speech was English. The sentence is written in a practised and confident hand and bears the hallmark of an individual who was literate and fluent in the English language. While making this copy Merriman was still endeavouring to improve his composition. At line 306, the sentence 'Ná hagráin cinann an deamhain 'sa bráthar, (that I haven't asked the help of the devil and his brother) the words 'sa bráthar' are half erased and the words go láidir (strongly) are substituted. Clearly Merriman had not yet decided which form of words he preferred and indeed both forms are found in the later versions of the poem.

Establishing the date that the manuscript volume was compiled presents some difficulties. The anthology, written on paper, contains fifty eight poems by twenty two different authors, so that it was clearly put together over a period of time. The paper bears the watermark of

20 Cambridge University Library, Add. Ms. 6562.
21 Ó Muirchú (ed.), Ó Móicháin Filíochta, p. 91.
22 See below where it is argued that Add. Ms. 6562 was compiled 1780-83.
25 O’Donovan and O’Curry, Antiquities of County Clare, p. 184.
26 University Library Cambridge, Ms Add. 6562, f. 15.
the seated Britannia in an oval shield surmounted by the imperial crown; unfortunately this watermark provides only an approximate date of compilation. The Britannia watermark was commonly used by English manufacturers of paper between 1760 and 1800. The first poem in the collection is Merriman’s own Cúirt an Mhéon-Oíche, which must have been transcribed sometime after April 1780. Tomás Ó Miocháin’s poem Tá néalaibh cumhla le seal dom bhuaireáit is of particular relevance in this context because we can date it precisely. The poem concerns an incident in Ennis which occurred on 3 October, 1782 when the Earl of Inchiquin resigned his post as Colonel of the Ennis Volunteers and became commander instead of the Fencible Regiment. Ó Miocháin’s poem, which is highly critical of Inchiquin, must have been written soon after that date. We do not know when Merriman copied the poem into his own collection, but a date towards the end of 1782 is likely. As Ó Miocháin’s poem is number 34 in the anthology, poems 35 to 58 were presumably transcribed at a later date. It seems reasonable to conclude therefore that Merriman’s manuscript collection was put together in the period 1780-83.

The 58 poems can be conveniently divided in two groups, 28 or so are by Clare authors and the rest by poets from the other counties of Munster with the exception of Kerry. It is noticeable that although Merriman resided in Feakle, directly on the Galway boundary, not a single poem of the province of Connacht is present in the anthology. Of the poems by Clare authors six are by Séamus Mac Consaidín, a medical practitioner, whose work Merriman appears to have admired, four are by Tomás Ó Miocháin, two by Seán Lloyd and one each by Uilliam Mac Geralt, Seán Ó Tighearnaigh and Daibhí Ó hEiligh. All these men were writing and composing precisely at the time Merriman was compiling his volume of poems; it is therefore hard to avoid any other conclusion but that Merriman actively participated in the poetic circles of county Clare in the early 1780s.

Of the Munster poems, compositions by the Maigue poets (fílí na Máighe) predominate. Twelve are by An Mangaire Súgach (Aindriáin Mac Craith) and another five are by the convenor of the Croom court of poetry, Seán Ó Tuama. There are five poems by Séan Clarách Mac Domhnaill, two by Tadhg Gaelach Ó Stíleabhaín and two by the Tipperary poet Tadhg Dall Ó Hifearnáin. These are among the best known Munster poets of the eighteenth century. Whether Merriman had any personal contact with any of these men is doubtful; two of them, Seán Clarách Mac Domhnaill and Seán Ó Tuama, were dead well before 1780. It is perhaps too much to claim on the basis of these poems that Merriman travelled in Munster like his colleagues Tomás Ó Miocháin and Seán Lloyd; however, he was certainly well acquainted with the best of the Gaelic poetry produced by the Munster poets of those years.

After Merriman’s death in 1805, his volume of poems did not remain in Limerick city, where he died, or at Feakle, where he is buried, but instead came to his relatives in West Clare. The Merrimans had obviously maintained contact with their relations, although they had left the Ennistymon - Miltown Malbay area for close on fifty years. Anthony Howard had contact with Merriman’s sister from Feakle and it was perhaps through her that the manuscript came into his possession. The manuscript was in Howard’s ownership by 1839 and perhaps much earlier and it remained in his possession until at least 1862, when John O’Daly of Dublin copied from it. Howard always claimed that it was the original autograph of Brian Merriman but few believed him. At a later stage the volume was sold or came into the ownership of James Hayes.

28 W.A. Churchill, Watermarks in paper in Holland, England, France etc. in the XVII and XVIII centuries and their inter connections (Amsterdam, 1935) pp 43, 75-6, nos. 219-32.
29 OLC Ms Add. 6562, f. 55.
32 ibid.
33 For biographical accounts of these poets see Maire Ni Mhurchu agus Diarmuid Breathnach, Beathaisnéis 1560-1783 (Baile Átha Cliath, 2001) pp 77-8, 172-3.
a book dealer of Ennis. Hayes had established a bookshop at Church St. Ennis by 1875. He in turn is reputed to have sold the manuscript to Dr Norman Moore, a medical doctor of St Bartholomew's Hospital, London. Norman Moore was born in Manchester of Irish parents and had a life long interest in the Irish language. He wrote the entry for Brian Merriman in the Dictionary of National Biography published in 1893. However, he made no reference to Merriman’s manuscript in his sources, as perhaps the volume was not yet in his possession in 1893. Moore made frequent visits to Ireland in search of Gaelic manuscripts. After a visit in August of 1896 he wrote ‘bought 3 late but interesting manuscripts by Irish scribes in Co. Clare.’ There is unfortunately no written confirmation of his purchase of Merriman’s manuscript from James Hayes. In any event it is doubtful that either Hayes or Moore would have been aware of its connection with Brian Merriman. On Sir Norman Moore’s death in 1922 (he had obtained a baronetcy in 1919), the manuscript with many others were left to the University of Cambridge, where they are currently preserved.

V

The status of the birth of Brian Merriman has been the subject of much debate. In the twentieth century the belief that he was born out of wedlock gained widespread currency. Despite the many theories and claims, it needs to be emphasised that there is no solid historical evidence of any kind to support the view that the poet was of illegitimate birth. The original belief was based on certain passages in Cúirt an Mheon-Oiche, which could give the reader to understand that the poet was sympathetic to the plight of the illegitimate child, as the following lines might suggest:

The offspring of unions no clergy has blessed,
Have a spring in their step, and a spark, and a zest,
For nature herself recognises no creed,
And she puts no restraint on our impulse to breed,
For the children of impulse are healthy and hale,
With no dimness of sight; rarely sick; never frail;
And they’re quicker more gifted, with far better heads,
Than many conceived in legitimate beds.

While Merriman undoubtedly had, by modern standards, an enlightened view of the child born of the unmarried mother, it hardly needs saying, that expressing such a view, is wholly insufficient for concluding that the poet himself was of illegitimate birth. Brian Merriman had two sisters, are we to conclude that they too were of illegitimate birth? In the three authoritative accounts of Merriman’s life written prior to 1850, the first by Philip Baron in 1836, the second by John O’Donovan in 1839 and the third by Eoghan Ó Comhrai about 1840 there is not the slightest indication that Merriman’s birth was anything but legitimate and that he took the name of his father. However, in an account written prior to 1892 but not published until 1926, Standish Hayes O’Grady, the compiler of the catalogue of Irish manuscripts in the British Museum, states:

His [Brian Merriman’s] scutcheon was brea or breaicthe, i.e. ‘varied’ or ‘adorned’ with the bar sinister (which would account for his having a fancy patronymic) and some annoyance to which this fact had subjected him is said to have called forth ‘the Midnight Court.’

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36William Basset, Directory of Limerick City and County and Principal Towns of Clare, Tipperary and Kerry (Limerick, 1875).
40For O’Donovan and O Comhrai’s accounts see O Murchú (ed.), Cúirt an Mheon-Oiche, pp 11-13.
This is the first and only nineteenth century account to claim that the author of *Cúirt an Mheón-Oiche*, was of illegitimate birth. In heraldic usage the bar sinister denotes or implies the condition of illegitimacy, although apparently not in all cases.\(^{42}\) The claim that Brian Merriman had an escutcheon or family shield appears most unlikely; heraldic shields and coats of arms were generally confined to the aristocracy and the landed gentry. Even if Merriman could boast a family shield, it is scarcely credible that he would advertise the illegitimacy of his own birth to his friends and neighbours given the sensitivity of the subject in rural Ireland. If O'Grady had seen Merriman's seal on a letter or document it is surprising that he did not cite the source of his information. No heraldic device was ever registered for the surname Merriman, or Marrinan for that matter, with the Ulster king of arms, the official responsible for overseeing heraldry in Ireland.

O'Grady's claim that the circumstances of the poet's birth were responsible for his surname is simply not the case. Merriman did not assume or invent the name because the name was already in use in the Ennistymon area by 1741, eight or nine years before the poet's birth.\(^{43}\) Merriman inherited rather than assumed his surname. O'Grady's account was written in London some one hundred years after the poem's composition. It was written at a time when the people who knew Merriman and who were familiar with his family circumstances were long dead. His account was not based on primary historical research but rather on secondary reporting. In the early 1890s the Irish language revival was just beginning, little was known of the Gaelic poets of the eighteenth century. Scholars like Ludwig Christian Stern and Ristéard Ó Foghludha, who would put Merriman research on its feet, had yet to emerge. Bearing these circumstances in mind and in the absence of any evidence subsequently coming to light regarding the Merriman escutcheon or the circumstances of the poet's birth, the account of Standish Hayes O'Grady is best disregarded.

There is still a lot to be learned about Merriman and his era. Sadly much of the Gaelic poetry of the late-eighteenth century remains unpublished. It is only by studying the work of his contemporaries that Merriman's true contribution to Irish literature can be properly appreciated. The poet could never have envisaged the impact his work would have on future generations. In the two hundred years since Merriman's death his poem has enthralled and enraged in equal measure. Merriman's ability to fashion the everyday language of the people to his purpose and to infuse his work with such gaiety, gusto and good humour is a mark of the great genius of the man. The themes he addressed are universal and timeless: the human need for love and companionship, the female imperative of gaining a husband before the passing of child bearing age, the male's reluctance to commit to the matrimonial bond, the young woman locked in a loveless marriage. These are themes as pertinent today as they were in the eighteenth century. It is indeed strange that the utterances of so obscure an individual as Brian Merriman, who lived two centuries ago in one of the wildest and remotest corners of Ireland, should continue to have such relevance for contemporary society.

\(^{42}\) Personal comments by Michael Ó Comáin, herald in Irish Genealogical Office.  
\(^{43}\) Ó Dálaigh, 'Poet of a single poem', p. 107.