25.

Poets of the Maigue

By

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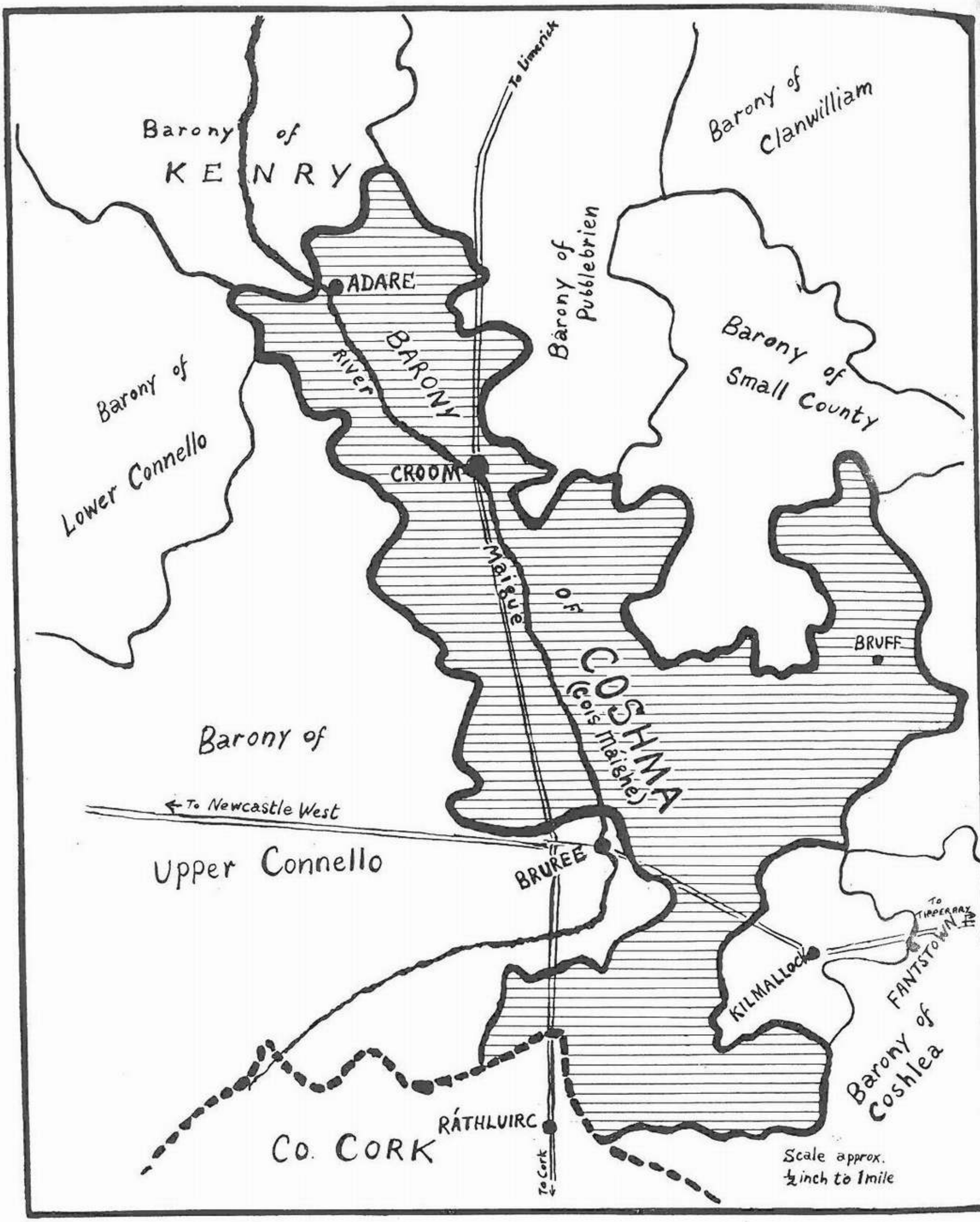
ABOUT nine miles north of Ráthluirc, the traveller, who is on his way to Limerick, comes, almost suddenly, on a patch of sylvan loveliness. On his right are undulating lawns, and little groves that reach down to the bank of a broad, silver stream that comes curving in a wide sweep towards the road. The stream is the Maigue. For the next quarter of a mile it flows beside the road, its banks more densely wooded here than farther back where the traveller caught the first hint of brightness through the trees. Now there are trees on both sides of the road; and they form an arched, leafy ceiling, under which heavy traffic daily passes; for this is the main Cork-Limerick highway.

Anybody seeing this part of the Maigue country cannot but be impressed by its lovely blending of wood and water. In summer, one is struck by the contrasts and infinite variety of the woodland scene; the greyness of the gaunt ash, the red piping of the broad-leaved sycamore, the lady-like rustling of the poplar, the nobility of the venerable oak, the weathered roughness of the elm, the sickly softness of the elder, the bright green of the beech, and the darker hue of the horse-chestnut. But it is later in the year, when the alchemy of autumn has turned the foliage to gold, that the real beauty of this stretch of the Maigue reveals itself. This is indeed:

Cois Máighe na gcaor na gcraobh na gcruach



COIS MAIGHE — COSHMA

—"the Maigueside of berries and shrubs and ricks" for which Aindrias Mac Craith sighed in the long ago. And it is the southern gateway to *Croma an tSúghachais* —"Croom of the Jubilations."

Some years ago, a lady, giving a broadcast talk about Croom, remarked that if, as Wordsworth would have it, poetry is emotion recollected in tranquillity, then it was no wonder that the village nursed a nest of poets, for one could imagine few spots more tranquil than Croom. The fertile soil, the slow-flowing river, the balm-like air, these ingredients could not help producing a happy, peaceful, easy-going people; and, in certain circumstances, such people, it seems, just cannot avoid breaking into poetry. Whether life in the district was all that tranquil, however, when poetry was being produced in abundance there, is a very debatable point.

If you had come into Croom from Limerick any day about the mid-years of the eighteenth century, and continued up what is now Bridewell or Maxwell Lane, and what was then a main highway, you would shortly have noticed on your right, an inn, with a notice in verse outside it. And the words of that unusual notice would surely have attracted your attention, for this is what they said:

Níl fánaí ná sárfhear d'uaisle Gaoil,
Bráthair den dáimh ghlic ná suaircfhear groí,
I gcás a bheadh láithreach gan luach na dí
Ná beadh fáilte ag Seán geal Ó Tuama
roimhe.

(The word *roimhe* in the final line, it might be remarked, is pronounced "ree.")

The stanza has been rendered into English:—

"Should any of the stock of the noble
Gael,
A brother bard who is fond of good
cheer,
Be short of the price of a tankard of ale,
He is welcome to Ó Tuama a thousand
times here."

Who, you may ask, was the man who made this generous offer of free drinks to all poets who might find themselves financially embarrassed, as poets often do. To his contemporaries he was known as *Seán Ó Tuama an Ghrinn* —"Seán Ó Tuomy of the Gaiety" — and he was one of the two chief poets of the Maigue School.

The eighteenth-century School or Court of Poetry that flourished by the Maigue was the continuation of something very old, something very distinctive, in Irish life. Even before Saint Patrick came amongst us the *filí* of Ireland were a long-established and powerful institution; and their schools of poetry were to continue in existence after the coming of Christianity, and after the establishment of the famous monastic schools which for long were to overshadow them. Re-established in the reign of Brian Boru, the schools of the *filí* were later to blossom forth as those great bardic schools that were to survive right down to the seventeenth century, when the final overthrow of the princely Gaelic families brought the immemorial Gaelic world tumbling down in ruins.

Though, in the seventeenth century, the bardic schools were disbanded and the poets reduced to poverty, we find the tradition they represented being kept alive in the eighteenth century in Munster and in a small corner of south-east Ulster along the Louth-Armagh border. We find that tradition being lovingly preserved in Croom, in that inn with the poetic welcoming notice that was kept by Seán Ó Tuama; here the poets of Limerick and north Cork frequently met to discuss poetry and to read aloud new poems of their own composition. So, in the sessions which the Maigue poets held at Croom and Bruree, we see the continuation of a great literary tradition that stretched back for well over a thousand years into Irish history.

The Ireland into which the Maigue poets were born and in which they sang

their songs, was broken, Penal Ireland; an Ireland voiceless, leaderless, impoverished and tormented; an Ireland in which religion and education groaned under iniquitous laws, with Mass rock replacing church and hedge-school replacing academy; an Ireland of Irish speakers, who possessed nothing but their religion, a great literary tradition and a fierce pride in the past. It was, to use Professor Daniel Corkery's memorable description, the "Hidden Ireland" of the eighteenth century. And it was this Hidden Ireland — so far removed from the anglicised and much-publicised Ireland of Swift and Goldsmith — that produced the band of sweet-voiced singers, who met so frequently at Croom, and who called themselves *Filí na Máighe* —"the Poets of the Maigue."

Seán Ó Tuama has already been mentioned as being one of the two chief poets of the Maigue. The other was Aindrias Mac Craith, equally well-known to fame as *An Mangaire Súgach* —"the Merry Pedlar." Ó Tuama was born in 1706. Father Ó Duinnín, in his collection of the poetry of the Maigue — *Filidhe na Máighe* — gave Seán's birthplace as Croom. Fiachra Éilgeach, however, in a new and larger collection of Maigueside poetry, *Éigse na Máighe,* gave it as his opinion that Ó Tuama was born at Fantstown, about two miles east of Kilmallock, and that Aindrias Mac Craith came from the same locality. Both certainly had some strong connection with the countryside just east of Kilmallock.

It would seem, according to Fiachra Éilgeach, that both attended a classical school of some kind that was at Kilmallock, and that in this school they learned English and Latin, and probably some Greek. Irish each had from his mother's knee, and any study of it that either made at school was probably confined to grammar and orthography and the rules of Irish poetry.

There were very few openings when they left school for young men of intelligence like Mac Craith and Ó Tuama. Because they were Catholics all the professions were closed to them, and they could hold no office of trust. What the two future poets did as soon as they had completed their own educational course was to open up schools of their own. This, in itself, violated the penal code, which stipulated that no Catholic could teach school. However, this particular enactment was one towards which the authorities had for some time being turning a blind eye, a laxness soon perceived by the people and fully availed of.

School-mastering in those days was poorly rewarded, the usual fee being sixpence per pupil per quarter. Schools were kept open for about six months of the year, closing during the summer. A master not getting sufficient pupils might be compelled to disband his school and move on to some other place. Aindrias Mac Craith would appear to have opened a number of schools in the first years of his teaching career: Seán Ó Tuama, on the other hand, established his first and only school at Croom.

It should, perhaps, be made clear that Aindrias, though he described himself as a *mangaire,* never was, in fact, a pedlar. It seems that on one occasion at a fair in Croom he was seen going around the fairfield, carrying, under his arm, a large piece of frieze, the "makings" of a coat. The roll of material, tucked under his arm, gave him all the appearances of a pedlar. Later in the day he imbibed rather deeply, and lost his piece of frieze. Seán Ó Tuama, kind man that he was, took him home, and kept him for the night, and next morning poured a jug of whiskey over his head, jocosely "christening" him *An Mangaire Súgach.*

Seán Ó Tuama did not continue teaching for very long, for we soon hear of him as the owner of an inn at Croom. It may be that he was a *cliamhain isteach,* having married into the place. In all probability it was due to his presence in Croom that Courts or Sessions of Poetry came to be

held there. Earlier, they had been held outside Ráthluirc, at Kiltuohig, the native place of the famous north Cork poet, Seán Clárach Mac Domhnaill. Half-yearly sessions had also been held in Bruree, down to about the year 1746.

The eighteenth-century *Cúirt Éigse* or Court of Poetry, as stated, was really the continuation of the tradition of the great bardic schools which had flourished in previous centuries. The term *Breitheamh* — Judge — was applied to the person who presided at the Court; and *barrántais* — warrants — to attend were issued to the poets a month or so in advance.

In Croom, the Court of Poetry met in the inn kept by Seán Ó Tuama. Outside, there were few educational facilities available to the Gael; but here in this inn with the welcoming sign the old learning still flourished. The Fenian tales would be told and the Fenian lays recited. Genealogies would be traced, and the age-old lore of the district recounted. Dáibhidh Ó Bruadair would be quoted, and Keating cited as an authority. Words would be played with, and strange idioms tendered as the currency of conversation; phrase would be polished on phrase, and wit sharpened on wit. And all the time laughter would ascend to the blackened rafters. For the *Mangaire* was *súgach* and Seán Ó Tuama was *Seán Ó Tuama an Ghrinn* — and Croom itself was *Croma an tSúgachais*. But chiefly they would talk about poetry, the poetry that was in their heart and mind, that was in the very marrow of their bones. What nights there must have been in that thatched inn at Croom, when the poets met to read aloud their latest songs! What intellectual entertainment!

Seán Ó Tuama would, of course, be there, as host; and Aindrias Mac Craith almost certainly, sipping his quart and cracking his jokes — and bitter enough some of them would be! And there might be any or all of a host of others present: Liam Ó Nialláin from Droichead Bhoinn Bhriste; Father Seán Ó Ceallaigh, P.P. of Ráthluirc; Séamus Ó Dálaigh, the tailor from Loughmore; Muiris Ó Gríofa from Ballingaddy, and Séamus Mac Cinnéide, his near neighbour from Kilmallock; Tomás Ó Tuama from Adare; Brian Ó Flatharta, the stone mason from Bruff; and from Glin, the steward of the Knight of Glin, Micheál Ó Longáin, father of that very fine poet of the '98 Rising, Micheál Óg Ó Longáin.

And the poets always felt specially honoured whenever Ó Tuama's door opened to admit the great Seán Clárach Mac Domhnaill himself, down from his home near Ráthluirc. On his way to the *Cúirt* the poet, most likely, would have paid a visit to the home of his sister, who was married at Rockhill, west of Bruree, to a man of the Cussens, and whose descendants still live in the district. Though, strictly speaking, not one of the Maigue poets, Seán Clárach had many contacts with them, and was the most learned of all in the art of poetry weaving of those who met in Croom. One of his most popular songs, *Bímse buan ar buairt gach ló* was written to the air of *An Cnóta Bán* or "The White Cockade," the fine marching song of the Stuarts.

Seán Clárach was a man of culture, of refinement, and a man of the highest character. "Above all," wrote Aodh de Blácam in *Gaelic Literature Surveyed*, "he was chief Jacobite poet of Ireland; and his verses, better than those of any other of the eighteenth-century singers, bring home to us the passionate hopes, the gallant dreams, the wild loyalty to the White Cockade that rose and fell in that age."

A clattering of hooves on the road outside Ó Tuama's inn might announce the coming, on his horse, Preabaire, of Brother Bonaventure, as was the name in religion of Father Nicholas O'Donnell. the Guardian of the broken Franciscan friary of Adare. The poets were particularly proud to number this cultured Franciscan among

their company; and to show their esteem they frequently appointed him Judge of their Bardic Court.

"He was," wrote Father Ó Duinnín of him in his preface to *Filidhe na Máighe*, "a man of good education, varied attainments and great administrative ability. He had a distinguished career at home and abroad. He was appointed Professor of Philosophy in Louvain in January, 1705, and continued to fill the post for several years. On October 13, 1717, he was appointed President of the Franciscan College at Louvain, holding concurrently the position of professor of Theology. He continued to teach up to 1720, in which year he was declared *Lector Jubilatus*. Soon after this date he seems to have returned to Ireland. From 1733 to 1736 he was Guardian of the Franciscan convent of Adare. He filled the same position from 1739 to 1742 and from 1748 to 1751. He held the office again during the years 1753 and 1754, and also from 1757 to February, 1759. In the year 1745 he was appointed Definitor of the Irish Province of the Franciscan Order.

"His labours in the missionary field were crowned with the title of *Missionarius Emeritus*. Father O'Donnell was thus for a long period living in the very centre of the intellectual activity of Coshma. He lived on terms of close intimacy with the poets and wits of the Maigue, in whose company he took keen delight, and in whose poetical contests he took no mean part. The few poems of his that have been preserved, prove him to have possessed in an intense degree, the spirit of kindliness, of devotedness to Irish customs and manners, of enthusiasm for Irish literature and civilisation, which distinguished the Irish branch of the great Franciscan Order throughout every period of its history."

Such then were the Irish-speaking men whom the call of poetry brought together under Seán Ó Tuama's hospitable roof at Croom. Well, indeed, might Father Ó Duinnín say that "any country in Christendom might be proud of such a galaxy of poets."

The field that lies between Croom's Catholic church and the main Cork-Limerick road is part of the old fair-green of Croom. Here fairs were held on May 3, June 22, July 18, September 1 and December 9. It was of the July fair that Seán Ó Tuama sang in his poem, *Aonach aerach Chroma an tSúghachais* —"the airy Fair of Croom of the Jubilations." In ten of the most pleasing stanzas ever, perhaps, to be written about an Irish fair, he enumerates for us some of the qualities of the animals and produce of the surrounding countryside that would be seen at this fair of Croom; and through the song we catch echoes of the Maigue, which flows by on its way northward, a few yards from the eastern edge of the fair-green—

Tá'n Mháigh gheal bhraonach, céim do
mholaid údair,
Le fána ag téacht go slaodach stoirm-
ghnúiseach,
Is árd 'sis tréan a géim go gclos don dúiche,
Ag snámh fát dhéinse, a Aonaigh Chroma
an tSúghachais.

"— the bright sparkling Maigue, a feature praised by authors, is coming down the slope with great volume and stormy aspect. Loud and great is its roar in the hearing of the district, as it flows towards you, O Fair of Croom of the Jubilations."

In one stanza he breaks out into warm praise of the district and its people —

Níl áit in Éirinn éachtaigh oirir úrghlain
Is fearr ná é 'sis féile pobal dlúth-dhil,
Bíonn gáir ag éanlaith an aeir ag moladh
an dúilimh,
Le gáirdeas cléibh ag Aonach Chroma an
tSúghachais.

In the lines that follow I have attempted a more or less literal translation of the

stanza just quoted and, at the same time, have been at pains to reproduce in the translation an echo of the assonance and word music that occur in the original, such assonance and word music being characteristics of most of the Gaelic poetry written in the eighteenth century —

No part of Éire brave and fresh and
fruitful
Is half so fair with neighbours more
"flahooluk,"
The birds of air sing praise to Nature's
beauty,
With hearts most gay at the fair of jolly
Croom here.

Aindrias Mac Craith, the *Mangaire Súgach*, of whom little has so far been said, was what might be called "an airy card," a wild rake of a man, with a weakness for the old combination of wine, women and song. A restless genius, he travelled much, plying his twin trades of school-mastering and song-writing, now in Bruff, now in Croom, now in Bruree, or Fantstown, or Knockfierna. In the jovial, witty company that frequented tavern and inn in Coshma there was none more jovial or more quick-witted than he. And when it came to charging a poem with melody he had few equals in all that land of song.

At one time he pretended he had leanings towards Protestantism, but the minister very soon saw through the insincerity of his "convert." This episode drew from Aindrias the poem, *Protestan nó Pápaire*, which he addressed to Seán Ó Tuama, saying: *A Dhalta dhil, an daithnid libh mo chás anois?* —"O friend, are you distressed to find me cast out, a wanderer, neither Protestant nor Papist?" Since neither parish priest nor minister now wanted him, he declared there was no course open to him but to become an Arian or a Calvinist.

A chara dhil cá rachadsa chun fáin anois,
Os feasach mé ar dearmad gan fáth gan fios?
Caithfead bheith im Chailbhinist nó im
Arian uilc,
O scaras bheith im Phrotestan nó im Phápaire.

Seán Ó Tuama replied in another poem, declaring that his friendship towards him would last whether he was a pedlar, a Protestant or Papist. These two poems are, of course, not to be taken too seriously; but for all their exaggeration and humour they give us an insight into that penal Ireland in which the question of religion loomed so large.

Aindrias, because of the not-always model life that he led, got into scrapes with the clergy from time to time. The climax came in 1738, when Father O'Higgins, parish priest of Croom, banished him from the parish. Broken-hearted, he removed to Ballyneety, near Limerick (not Sarsfield's Ballyneety), only to find that his reputation had preceded him and that the people would hardly speak to him. It was then he addressed to Seán Ó Tuama his greatest poem, *Slán le Máigh*, a poem that, in the words of Father Ó Duinnín, will always distinguish him as a lyric poet of a fine order.

Through his friend, Seán Ó Tuama, he said one hundred and one good-byes to the Maigue country with its berries and branching shrubs and ricks; to its craftsmen; to its brave men without ill humour; to its comely maids; above all, to its poets and stories and songs —

Slán is céad ón dtaobh so uaim
Cois Máighe na gcaor na gcraobh na
gcruach,
Na stát na séad na saor na slua,
Na ndán na ndréacht na dtréan gan ghruaim.
Uch, uchón, is breoite mise,
Gan chuid gan chóir gan chóip gan chiste,
Gan sult gan seod gan spórt gan spionnadh
Ó seoladh mé chun uaignis.

"A hundred and one good-byes from me
To Coshma of the berries, the boughs,
the ricks,

Of the estates, the jewels, the craftsmen,
the hosts,
Of the poems, the stories, the brave
men without ill-humour.
O woe! O woe! sick am I,
Without portion, without justice,
without company, without money,
Without merriment, without
substance, without sport, without vigour,
Since I was sent away to loneliness".

Ó seoladh mé chun uaignis — since I was sent away to loneliness. That surely is a line full to overflowing with the concentrated heart-break of the banished one. And as he remembered Merry Croom and the happy hours spent in the inn kept by Seán O Tuama, the Gay, and contrasted it all with his unhappy present, he cried aloud in sad and sweet complaint:

Is fánach faon mé is fraochmhar fuar,
Is támh-lag tréith 'sis taomach trua,
I mbarr an tsléibhe gan aon, monuar,
Im pháirt, ach fraoch is gaoth aduaidh.

—"A wanderer and languid am I, furious and cold; weak, prostrate and disease-smitten; wretched on the mountain top, and nobody, alas, with me only heather and the north wind."

And he goes on, voicing his complaint—

"When as a bird in its questing I enter the village, there's no welcome for me; they are cold to my jesting; and the women gathered together question one another: 'Where is he from? Who is he? Why did he have to come?' "

Don tsráid nuair théim mar éan ar cuaird,
Ní háil leo mé is ní réid lem chluain,
Bíd mná le chéile ag plé dá lua,
Cá háit, cé hé, cá taobh 'nar ghluais?

From his inn at Croom Seán Ó Tuama sent a poetic reply to his banished friend. He tells him how much they miss him by the Maigue; and at the end of the poem he sends his blessing. He says he is sick with loneliness after him; tells him that the Court of Poetry no longer sits; that men and maids are mournful; and that nobody ever again expects to be happy until he returns —

Gan tnúth le haiteas go dtagairse chughainn arís.

In 1739 Mac Craith addressed another poem from Ballyneety, *Is aindhis Atáim* — "Miserable am I."

But Aindrias, as we shall see, was not the only one who was to pine for Croom and Coshma. Seán Ó Tuama, although an inn keeper, a butter broker and water bailiff, found himself in straitened circumstances about this time, a fact which does not surprise us when we think of his unbounded generosity, so well exemplified in the poetic invitation to thirsty bards which he displayed outside his inn. His wife, Muireann, who was a practical woman, with a head for business, soon realised that things were going against them, and began to complain about the wild extravagance that provided so many free drinks. But as for her husband — there are no narrow-hearted regrets when

"The bungs are out from Seán Ó
Tuama's barrels,
And Seán sees port like Homer's
'wine-dark seas'
Go pouring down the poets' open
hatches,
And roll the poets round like wrecked
triremes."

Poor generous Seán Ó Tuama! It couldn't last. And so he eventually found himself in Quinsboro in Clare, in the service of a Mrs. Quinn, "a herder of hens for the dame of the slendre wattle" or, to use his own words, *im reachtaire cearc ag bean na cleithe caoile*. To this lowly

task he applied himself for a while, looked down upon and scorned by his wealthy employer. But he had his revenge when he lampooned her in his poem, *Bean na Cleithe Caoile*—

Aicim an Mac do cheap na ceithre soilse,
Flaitheas is fearann, fearta is deilbh daoine,
Go ngabhaidh lem anam feasta i seilbh dhílis
Is mé scartha fá bhlas le Bean na Cleithe
Caoile.

These lines read well in Mangan's translation —

Oh! I pray the Lord, Whose powerful
Word set the elements first in motion,
And formed from nought the race of
Man, with Heaven and Earth and Ocean,
To lift my spirit above the world, and all
its clangour and brattle,
And give me a speedy release from you,
O Dame of the Slender Wattle.

To the parish priest of Croom he sent a poem sorrowing for Croom and Coshma with their poets and songs. He sent another to his friend, Séamus Mac Cinnéide of Kilmallock—

Beidh an brón ar fad dom chloí-se
Go deo go rachad taoibh libh,
Ag ól 's ag caithimh aoibhnis
Arís i gCois Máighe.

However, Seán's absence was not too prolonged; and soon we find him back again in Croom, beside his loved river Maigue.

In 1740, Father O'Higgins, parish priest of Croom, died, and was replaced by Father Leo, a very kindly man with a great love for poetry. Aindrias Mac Craith and himself had frequently exchanged humorous verses; so we are not surprised to learn that very shortly after the change of parish priests, the erring one was back home in Croom from Ballyneety. Father Leo was parish priest of Croom for eighteen years, and when he died Aindrias wrote a lament for him.

From about 1740 onwards the political and patriotic note becomes very noticeable in the songs of the Maigue Poets. There were many happenings in those years to stir and inspire them. There was the uprising in Scotland of the Stuarts, those Stuarts upon whom penal Ireland had pinned its hopes; and there was the drowning of those hopes in the torrents of blood that rained on Culloden Moor in 1745; and the following year there was the resurgence of hope that thrilled the heart of old Ireland when news came of the ringing victory her sons had won at Fontenoy.

Seán Ó Tuama speaks oftener in his poems of the plight of the nation than does his boon companion, Aindrias. He composed some stirring pieces, like the fine *'Sé do léig mé i milleadh i gCeas,* which breathes love of race and tongue and country, and goes to the popular Jacobite air, *An Cnóta Bán.* In this poem he says that what has hurt him deeply and broken his heart is that the noble race of the Gael should be held in bondage by the dark brood of the English-speaking Saxons. In very much of what Seán Ó Tuama wrote we perceive clearly the war between two cultures, between the age-old culture of the Gael and the new, alien culture of the Gall. In a well-known couplet he says:

Le gliogarnach Gall táim dall 's do chailleas
m'éifeacht,
Is do milleadh mo cheann le glam an Ghalla-
Bhéarla.

"— With the prating of the foreigners I'm
stupefied and have lost my strength,
And my mind has been destroyed by
the yelping of the foreign English
speech."

Aindrias Mac Craith gives expression to the hopes of the broken nation in poems

like *A Bhile den Fhoirinn nach Gann* and *A Dhalta nár dalladh le Dlaoithe*. But mostly he wrote love songs and drinking songs that were to have perennial appeal.

In 1754, Seán Clárach Mac Domhnaill, one of the foremost of the Munster poets, and a frequent visitor at the bardic sessions at Croom, died at his home near Ráthluirc, and was buried in the nearby churchyard of Ballysally, where one may still read the noble Latin tribute that his friends had inserted on his headstone:

I.H.S.
Johannes Mac Donald cogno
minatus Clárach vir vere
Catholicus et tribus linguis
ornatus nempe Graeca Latina
et Hybernica non vulgaris
ingenii poeta tumulator
ad hunc cippum obiit aetatis
Anno 63 Salutis 1754
Requiescat in pace.

A truly Catholic man, adorned with three languages, Greek, Latin and Irish, and a poet of no common order — that was Seán Clárach Mac Domhnaill, the cherished friend of the poets of the Maigue. Seán Ó Tuama, as would be expected, wrote a lament for him. In it he tells how, by the Maigueside, he heard the Nine Muses weeping for the dead poet — "Nine Brightnesses with nine lanterns in their hands" he calls them — *Naoi Soilse is naoi lóchrann 'na lámha.*

The place occupied by Seán Ó Tuama in his native district, both as a poet and a Catholic layman, must have been an important one. Father Ó Duinnín tells us that men looked up to him as one who represented Irish and Catholic sentiment at its best. When a Dominican friar named Hedderman, from Kilmallock, turned Protestant, three poets, one from as far away as Castlelyons, addressed poetical epistles to the inn-keeper at Croom, expressing grief and indignation at what had happened. These poets were so completely Catholic and Gaelic in tradition, upbringing, feeling and outlook that in this defection of a priest of their own flock they saw, as one commentator recently put it, *ionsaí fé bhunchloch a saoil féin* —"an attack on the very foundations of their world." This same commentator spoke of the Irish poetry of the Maigue as having been produced by a group of men who, obviously, held common views on a wide variety of subjects, including religion, nationality, poetry and the Irish language.

As they stood by the old religion, so, too, did the Maigue poets stand by the Gaelic way of life, regarding the English language as the symbol of the alien forces that sought to destroy everything that the poets and people held dear. Their solicitude for the welfare of the Irish language is seen in that summons sent out by them shortly after the death of Seán Clárach, inviting to a session or meeting, in the home of Seán Ó Tuama at Croom, on October 21, 1754, *gach aon ler mian athnuadhadh na sean-nós nÉireannach* —"all who would wish the revival of the old Irish traditions." The warrant emphasised the need there was to make every effort to preserve and keep from being submerged what was still spoken of their wise-worded Irish tongue — *dár dteangain ghaois-bhriathraigh Gaeilge*. That was the chief reason of their learned gathering or convocation — *Ag sin bunús cúise an tsuaithionóil nó na scolgharma so.*

Critics have given it as their opinion that the high literary standard of the Irish of the Maigue poets, and the correctness and variety of their metres were not merely accidental or, at least, not without purpose. Rather, would it seem, did the poets deliberately set out to demonstrate to the people the beauty and richness and antiquity of their own language, hoping by such means to meet the challenge of the new English speech that had already spread across much of the country. They thus

took upon themselves the rôle of preservers of the Gaelic way of life in all its many aspects. They might truly be described as a kind of eighteenth-century Gaelic League.

On one occasion Seán Ó Tuama wrote some verses about himself as inn-keeper:

Is duine mé dhíolas leann lá,
Is do chuireas mo bhuíon chun ranncáis.
Mura mbeidh duine im chuideachta dhíolfas,
Mise bheas thíos leis in antráth.

—"I sell the best brandy and sherry
To make my good customers merry,
But at times their finances
Run short, as it chances,
And then I feel very sad, very!"

Aindrias took exception to the poem, perhaps because he thought Seán was alluding to debts unpaid by him, and he bitterly attacked its author in another set of verses, in which he belittled his friend's poetic gifts and the quality of his drinks:

"O Tuomy! You boast yourself handy
At selling good ale and bright brandy,
But the fact is your liquor
Makes every one sicker,
I tell you that, I, your friend Andy.

Both your poems and pints by favour,
Are alike wholly wanting in flavour;
Because it's your pleasure
You give us short measure,
And your ale has a ditch water flavour."

These particular stanzas of the Maigue poets and, of course, the rather free English translations by Mangan are, as will have been observed, in limerick form. It has been claimed that in these Irish poems from Croom we have the origin of the limerick form of verse, and that it was so named for the very simple, but very good reason that it had its beginnings in County Limerick.

Seán Ó Tuama did not reply to Aindrias, who wrote further insulting verses about him. Then one day Seán passed him by on the road and did not speak to him. This annoyed the *Mangaire* very much, and he wrote another poem in which he declared:

Níor dhíolas caraid mhaith ar bhurdúnaibh,
Ar fee ná ar bhreab níor chailleas m'urlabhra.

"I didn't sell a good friend for gossip,
For fee or bribe I didn't lose my speech."

Seán ignored all the attacks, but various others of the poets took his part in verses they directed against Aindrias. We do not know how long the friends remained estranged; but, in all probability, a reconciliation was eventually effected.

The years were now swiftly passing, and great changes were taking place. The poets were aging. Seán Clárach was dead; and so, too, was Father Nicholas O'Donnell, the singing friar. The Courts of Poetry were no longer sitting, and Anglicisation was striking hard at the old Gaelic life of Coshma. Then, in 1769, Seán Ó Tuama left Croom and went to live in Mungret Street, Limerick. The inn by the Maigue in Croom would house no more the makers of song. Six years later, on August 30, 1775, he died. He was brought back to his beloved Croom, and laid to rest within sound of the Maigue river, of which he had so often sung, and close beside the field in which had been held "the airy fair of Croom of the Jubilations"—*Aonach aerach Chroma an tSúghachais.*

To stand at his grave to lament him sorely came the *Mangaire*, all past differences now forgotten. His best friend was gone and, henceforth he'd be solitary and alone, with no one to pity him —

Gan duine ler trua mé im uath is im' aonar.

And he cried aloud his grief —

Mo charaid gan cháim gan chás gan chruas
'na chroí,
Gan mhairg 'na cháil sé Seán Ó Tuama
an Ghrinn.

"—My friend without fault, without
gloom, without hardness in his heart,
Without a flaw in his reputation, Seán
Ó Tuama of the Gaiety."

Four other poets of the district besides Aindrias laid their wreaths of song on the grave of Seán Ó Tuama an Ghrinn. His final resting place in Croom is marked by a stone bearing this inscription:

I.H.S.
John Welsh erecte
d This stone in Mem
ory of his grandfather
John Toomy departed
This life August the 30th, 1775
Aged 67 years

Aindrias Mac Craith was to outlive all the poets who used to hold their sessions in Croom. He lingered after them an *Oisín i ndiaidh na Féinne* — an "Oisin after the Fianna." In 1785 he is mentioned in a letter written by Edward de Lacy of Clare Street, Limerick, to Sir Thomas O'Gorman, de Lacy saying that he intends sending his brother William to Trinity College, but that first he is going to send him to that celebrated teacher, Andrew Mac Grath.

In 1793 we hear of him again. At this time he was living with his daughter at Fantstown, east of Kilmallock. One day in that year he sent a young lad of nine years to the village for snuff. The young lad was Eoghan Caomhánach, who was later to translate many of Moore's melodies into Irish, as well as Doctor Richard Challoner's *Think Well On't.* One of his proudest memories in after life was of the day he ran an errand for Aindrias Mac Craith.

At last, Aindrias sensed that death was approaching. True poet to the end, he takes pen to paper and writes a brief poem to Father Fant in Kilmallock. It is a pathetic composition:

Os cráite mise is go bhfuilim go breoite tréith,
Gan cháil gan chiste gan chruinneas gan
chóir gan chéim;
O táim ar mire is gur fiosach mé leointe i
mbaol,
Ní foláir go gcuirfir mé 'om chlipeadh don
ospidéal.

"Since I am tormented, sick and weak,
Without fame, money, understanding,
influence or position,
With my mind going and I knowing I
am stricken and in danger,
You must have me taken speedily to
hospital."

Something went wrong: either the priest didn't receive the note in time, or the Kilmallock Hospital Committee wasn't sitting; and when day followed day and no one came for him, Aindrias set out himself to walk to hospital. He was then eighty-five years of age, a weak and pitiful figure, bent and broken by suffering and sickness. Did many of those who were on the road that day and saw the old feeble man tottering slowly by realise who he was and what loveliness of song he once had created?

When he reached the bridge over the Loobagh, beside Kilmallock's ruined Dominican abbey, his strength failed, and he staggered into the first house on the left-hand side of the street — it is still standing at the very end of Wolfe Tone Street. And there, seated in a chair beside the fire, he died; Aindrias Mac Craith, sweet singer of Gaelic songs; the wild, amorous youth who, long, long before, was banished from Croom, and poured out his grief of heart in *Slán le Máigh;* the friend of Seán Clárach and Father Nicholas O'Donnell and Seán Ó Tuama; the very last of the poets of the Maigue.

Hawthorne was the name of the family in whose house Aindrias breathed his last. And as he had been their guest in the last moments of his life, so was he to be their guest forever in death, for they had him buried in their own grave in Kilmallock churchyard. It was just what one would expect of a family who, ever since they

came to Kilmallock from the north of Ireland, with the Gilbersons and Baileys, in the mid-eighteenth century, to attempt establish a linen industry in the town, had played an honourable part in Irish affairs. The Hawthornes hailed from Portadown; and it is of interest to recall that it was from the same district the forebears of Nathaniel Hawthorne, the famous American novelist, emigrated.

Both the Gilbersons and Hawthornes became Catholics some short time after they had settled in Kilmallock. The Hawthornes, who were Irish speakers, held very strong national views. Descendants of theirs were in the United Irishmen, the Fenians, the Gaelic League and the I.R.A. It is with the ashes of these charitable and patriotic Hawthornes, the ashes of Aindrias Mac Craith mingle in Kilmallock. His grave is now for the first time, about to be suitably marked. And what would be more suitable above it than his own prayer:

Féach an t-apstal do pheacaigh fá thrí ar dtúis,
Ag séanadh a Charad, gur glacadh arís go humhal.
A Dhé dhil, aicim cé scaras le dlí na n-Urd,
Maraon le Peadar an Mangaire scaoil it dhún.

"Behold the apostle who sinned thrice at the beginning, Denying his Friend, how he, submissive, was accepted back. O sweet God, I beseech, though I gave up the rules of the Orders (Church), In company with Peter the Mangaire admit me to your mansion."

No matter how much we of to-day may read or discover about the Gaelic poets, who used to foregather in Croom, we shall never know them as did the frieze-coated men and the barefooted women who met them every day on the roads of Coshma. But this we do know about them: that they were among the most eloquent spokesmen of the Hidden Ireland, members of that remarkable fraternity of singers that was the only institution left us in the black eighteenth century. They poured out their songs in the last great flowering of Gaelic culture by the Maigue, songs that brought a ray of hope into the darkness of the teeming, mud-walled cabins. They made the best of their times. Perhaps some of them drank too deeply and parted too readily with the few pence they could call their own. But their faults were largely the faults of the age in which they lived; and not even the greatest rake among them was half as black as he liked to paint himself.

They are all gone now, and even the language in which they sang — that, too, is gone from Coshma. The poetic sign that hung outside Seán Ó Tuama's tavern extends its generous welcome to thirsty bards no more. The last quart has long since been emptied, the last *deoch a' dorais* drunk. The tavern itself is but a mound of earth and stones. All signs of life and gaiety have gone from it, for the Gaelic poets have taken their final leave, and the singing mouths are silent in the clay.