

Fall '07: Cúige Uladh (9)

The Travels of Micí Mac Gabhann (Part I)

Micí Mac Gabhann was born in 1865 in Cloich Cheannfhaola (Cloughaneely, see your map), northeast of Gaoth Dobhair. He died near there in 1948, living in Caiseal (Cashel — not the famous one) near Gort an Choirce (Gortahork).

In between those dates, Micí took a little trip — from Ireland to America, where he ended up mining in Montana. And when that got too tame for him, he headed to the Klondike as a prospector. He eventually returned to Donegal, temporarily as he thought, but as will happen, romance intervened, and he never left Ireland again.

His memoir, in Irish, was published as *Rotha Mór an tSaoil* in 1959 by FNT (Foilseacháin Náisiúnta Teoranta), and then finally reissued in 1996 by Cló Iar-Chonnachta (CIC), which has reprinted it several times since. An English translation, titled "The Hard Road to Klondike" came out in 1962.



Micí (seated), with wife and several friends and kids. Standing over Micí's right shoulder, at the end, is Seán Ó hEochaidh

How the Tale was Captured

Seán Ó hEochaidh is well-known as a collector of lore and the oral tradition. He was working for the Irish Folklore Commission (Coimisiún Béaloideasa Éireann) in the early 1940s, in Cloich Cheannfhaola, and happened to meet an old fellow (Micí) in Gort an Choirce at a fair there. One thing led to another, and in 1943, Ó hEocaidh married Micí's daughter Anna Nic Gabhann. In fact, he moved into Micí's house, and spent many an evening by the fire hearing stories from Micí's life.

Eventually, having taken many notes, Ó hEochaidh asked Micí if they could more formally put the whole story down, so they worked through the story of his life. Ó hEocaidh reports that Micí was very interested in the Irish language, and resented people who left the region and came back with "improved" accents. And he was disappointed when he spoke with someone who didn't know Irish (sometimes not noticing that the listener was, say, from England!).

Years later, a fellow by the name of Prionsias Ó Conluain was working for Radio Éireann, and was looking for material for a St. Pat's Day program. Ó hEocaidh told him a story of when Micí spent one St. Pat's in the Klondike. Ó Conluain used hEochaidh's material (with his blessing) in several programs, but then edited the entire manuscript into this book, which won a literary award at An tOireachtas in 1958.

The Great Wheel of Life, a Story from An Lagán

I have mentioned the Lagán, a region east of Letterkenny where most of the boys from the region of Donegal we're studying were sent to work in the fields, and also in the homes of the more affluent. Mac Gabhann was auctioned off into service in the Lagán for the first time when he was nine. We'll learn more about that in a moment.

In his second year on the Lagán, Micí met an old man named Micí Mac Fhloinn:

(1) Ba as ceantar na nGleanntach é agus le cois an eolais a bhí aige ar an Lagán agus ar an tsaol bhí sé ina scoith seanchaí. D'inis sé scéal dúinn an oíche sin a dtug sé 'Rotha Mór an tSaoil' air -- scéal aistíoch nach gcuala mé ariamh roimhe sin ná ó shin. Cha dearn mé dearmad ariamh de agus is minic a smaointigh mé ina dhiaidh sin go rabh cuid mhaith dá rabh ann an-chosúil le mo scéal féin.

The story he told was of an only child who left home and eventually was taken in by a wealthy farmer, who was very devoted to him, although he already had a son that age, and with whom he had many long discussions. One frequent conversation was about how life was like a great wheel going around. The person who was at the top one year was likely to be at the bottom the next, and vice versa.

The farmer sent the boy to college, and he became a priest. There's a long middle episode that Micí doesn't recount, but the priest lived in a mud-hut on top of a hill, and was always very good to the poor.

One day a poor, wretched old man came to the hut. He told the priest how he had once been well-off, but his wife had died, everything fell apart, and it was like that wheel of life that the stranger boy he took in used to talk about. And, of course, this was the formerly wealthy farmer.

(2) B'iontach ar fad an scéal é, dar liom féin, ach chaithfeá Micí Mac Fhloinn a chluinstin á inse ina iomláine sula mbainteá sult as mar ba cheart.

EPISODES FROM *ROTHA MÓR AN TSAOL*

Life in Cloughaneely in the mid-to-late 1800's

(3) Níl sé furast ag an ghlún seo an cineál saoil a bhí ann nuair a bhí mise óg a thuigbheáil. Is minic anois, agus mé ag meabhrú ar an tsaol sin, atá sé mar bheadh brionglóideach agam. Ar ndóigh, bhí saol neamhbhuartha ar nós na réidhe ann agus bhí na daoine ar a sáimhín, siud agus nár shíl siad féin sin san am. Cha rabh torann ná tormán ar muir ná ar tír le cur isteach orthu. Cha rabh leabhar ná páipéar á fháil acu; cha rabh léann ná foghlaim acu agus cha rabh siad róbhuartha ariamh fá ghnoithe an tsaol mhóir. Dá dtigeadh orthu a dhul as baile chaithfeadh siad an turas a dhéanamh de shiúl coise, ach char chuir sin lá braodair ariamh orthu. Cha rabh clog ag beirt sa pharóiste agus nuair a bhíodh an t-am le coimheád -- agus b'annamh sin---chaithfeadh siad eolas a bhaint as gréin nó as gealaigh. Le dhá fhocal a chur in aon fhocal amháin, ba fhíorbheag an bhaint a bhí acu leis an tsaol mórthimpeall, amach ó mur dtigeadh fear siúil an bealach a mbeadh an nuaíocht leis.

Ach bhí taobh eile ar an scéal. Bhí na daoine sa dúiche seo---mo mhuintir féin ina measc -- beo bocht. Cha rabh talamh ar bith acu a mb'fhiú trácht air agus ba doiligh slí bheatha a bhaint amach agus teaghlach mór a thógáil ar na spleoitíní beaga a bhí istigh idir na creagacha.

Bhíodh teaghlaigh ann i m'óige-sa a d'itheadh prátaí ceithre huair sa lá--dhá uair bruite agus dhá uair ina n-arán. Bhí siad trom ar an ghoile, ach san am sin bhí iasc úr comh fairsing le féar--agus comh saor. Bhí troisc agus langaí úra as Toraigh á ndíol ar dhá phingin an ceann.

Learning the Alphabet

Micí's mother wanted the kids to be able to write a bit, because she knew they would have to leave home to work, and she hoped to have news from them. She was sent to a school at M____, taught by a teacher who knew no Irish — and Micí knew no English. He learned very little . . . but he did learn his alphabet, not at school, but from another source. **Focus on the boldfaced text**, go back for the rest later if it interests you.

Mar D'fhoghlaim Mé An Aibítir

(4) Bhí seandúine -- Seán Sheonaidh--sa chomharsain againn a ba ghnách a theacht isteach chugainn a dh'áirneál, agus bhí seal caite aige i seanscoil sciobóil acu seo a bhí sa cheantar fad ó shin. Bhí broscar maith léinn aige agus bhíodh sé ár dteagasc. Is uaidh a d'fhoghlaim mise an aibítir agus b'aistíoch an dóigh a dearn mé sin. Cha rabh teach ar bith i gCloich Cheannfhaola san am udaí nach rabh urlár leacacha ann agus cupla giota 'chlár i gcroí an urláir a gcuirtí cuinneog an bhainne ina suí orthu nuair a bhíodh siad ag maistreadh. Nuair a bhíodh brúitíní á mbrú acu chuirí an pota ina shuí ar an adhmaid sin fosta.

Nuair a thigeadh Seán isteach tigh s'againne bhíodh sinne crochta as, ag iarraidh air scéalta a inse agus cleasanna a dhéanamh dúinn. **Chuireadh sé duine againn amach fá dhéin slat saileoige. Sháitheadh sé a barr sa tinidh agus nuair a bhíodh sí dóite shuíodh sé síos in aice na gcláraí seo a bhí san urlár agus sinne thart fána chosa ag éisteacht. Thosaíodh sé ansin a tharraingt na bpictiúr ar na cláraí. Níodh sé litreacha na haibítire uilig ansin i ndiaidh a chéile agus d'ainmníodh sé dúinn na rudaí a rabh siad cosúil leo : A an cúpla ; B an spéaclóir ; C an ghealach ; D an 'bow an' arrow'; E an geafta ; F an speal, agus ar aghaidh leis mar sin go ndéanadh sé pictiúr d'achan litir agus go dtugadh sé orainn féin a n-ainmniú mar bhí seisean a dhéanamh. Ba ghairid go raibh na litreacha uilig de ghlanmheabhair againn féin agus ba sin rud nach rachadh againn a dhéanamh dá mbeadh máistir na scoile ag gabháil dó ar feadh bliana.** Idir an bheirt ar scor ar bith d'fhoghlaim mé féin scríobadach bheag léinn agus cha rabh mé in áit ar bith ar feadh mo shaoil ó shin nach rabh mé ábalta cuntas a chur chun an bhaile cá rabh mé agus caidé bhí mé a dhéanamh.

Hired to An Lagán

His mother walked him to the hiring fair in Letterkenny (they stayed overnight along the way, and arrived on the second day of walking). This was in May of 1874, which is important when you read the "salary" offered for his services:

(5) Bhí sluaite daoine ansin -- sean agus óg, fir agus mná agus páistí. Bhí mo mhacasamhailsa ansin inár scódráin, go díreach -- chan a gcur i gcomórtas --mar tífeá caoirigh ar aonach. Bhí fir mhóra an Lagáin ag siúl thart frínne agus corruair thigeadh fear acu anall chugainn agus bhuaileadh buille idir an di shlinneán ar dhuine againn agus deireadh rud ínteacht lena chomrádaí fá dtaobh dinn. Tá cuimhne agam go dtí an lá inniu ar an rud a dúirt fear acu fá dtaobh díom féin. Tháinig sé anall chugam, rug greim dhá ghualainn orm agus chroith go maith mé. "He's a sturdy wee fella,' arsa seisean leis an fhear a bhí leis. Cha rabh fhios agamsa san am caidé ba chiall do na focla ach choinnigh mé cuimhne orthu agus cha rabh i bhfad gur thuig mé iad.

Ba é an deireadh a bhí ar an scéal go dtáinig beirt fhear ions' ar mo mháthair agus gur thosaigh siad a dhéanamh margaidh léi. Bhí go leor Gaeilge ag duine acu agus is dóigh liom go dtug an fear eile leis é mar fhear teangtha. Thairg siad punta de thuarastal di ar mo shon féin go Samhain. D'inis siad scéal rada di fán aire a gheobhainn agus fán bhia a gheobhainn agus go n-amharcófai i mo dhiaidh mar dhuine acu féin, agus níl fhios agam caidé nár dhúirt siad. Cha rabh mo mháthair sásta mo ligean leo ar an phunta agus ba é an mín is an réiteach a bhí air go dearnadh an margadh ar an deich agus punta go Samhain.

And Then . . .

After working on An Lagán until he was about fifteen, Micí and a relative, Conall Eibhlíne, snuck off to Scotland to work. That was a natural progression for many men from the region. They spent the next five years in this very hard seasonal work, going back and forth between Scotland and Cloughaneely. Micí was fed up, and told Conall he was thinking of moving on:

(6) Seal maith roimhe sin chuaigh daoine muinteartha domh go Meiriceá agus bhí cuntais ag teacht uathu gurbh fhearr go mór an tir thall ná Albain. Labhair mé le Conall Eibhline aon oíche amháin fá seo agus lig mé mo rún leis--go rabh mé ag smaointiú ar dhul go Meiriceá. 'Bhail, tig leat do chomhairle féin a dhéanamh,' arsa Conall, 'ach níl rún ar bith agamsa a dhul anonn. Is minic ariamh a chuala tú an seanfhocal gur glas na cnoic i bhfad uainn agus b'fhéidir nach molfá d'imirce go rómhór.' 'B'fhéidir go bhfuil an ceart agat,' arsa mise leis, 'ach cibé súisín a iocfas é tá mise, le cuidiú Dé, ag dul a bhaint féachála as.'

We'll learn about that part of his life in the next set of excerpts.