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## The Galway Rambler: Anthony Raftery and the Roots of Irish Cultural Identity

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The Galway Rambler:  
Anthony Raftery  
and  
the Roots of  
Irish Cultural Identity

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I first encountered the name “Raftery” while taking a course in Irish literature during my sophomore year at Providence College. Within the “Nineteenth-Century Poetry” section of *An Irish Literature Reader: Poetry, Prose, Drama* were three poems associated with one Anthony Raftery (Murphy 108-113). The first two poems, *Raftery’s Praise of Mary Hynes* and *I am Raftery*, held no particular interest for me aside from being lyrical poems describing the character and interests of a blind poet and musician in 18<sup>th</sup> century Ireland. The third poem, however, was titled *Anach Cuain*—a title that immediately caught my attention. *Anach Cuain* is Raftery’s retelling of a tragic boat accident off the coast of Galway in 1828, resulting in the drowning deaths of nineteen of the thirty-one passengers aboard. As an Irish musician, I had heard this poem sung many times in the Irish language in the *sean-nos* (old style) style of traditional Irish singing; it is one of the more common songs in the Irish repertoire, not to mention one of the most haunting. The melody of *Anach Cuain* was also the second slow air—an air is a melody, usually of an Irish language song, with no set rhythmic meter—I ever learned to play on the tin whistle. With my limited background knowledge of the poem and the melody’s minor key, I had known the song was a tragic one, but for whatever reason had never known its origins. Many Irish songs are difficult to trace to concrete composers due to the nature of oral tradition, yet here was a rare example of authorship.

Throughout this thesis, I will refer to Raftery, his works, and any place names or people by their Anglicized titles unless otherwise noted in italics. I am sure Douglas Hyde at least would throw his hands up in despair at my decision, but I am no scholar of the Irish language. I know just enough to admit I know nothing, and the regional differences and grammatical clauses existing in ‘Raftery’ alone are enough to scare me into English for the time being. I have seen Raftery in Irish spelt *Reachtabraigh*; *Reachtúire*; and my personal favorite *Raifteirí*. Likewise, I have seen *Anach Cuain* spelt *Anach Cuan*; *Anac-cuain*; *Anach-Cuain*; *Eanach Dhúin*; and even in English as variously Annaghdown or Annach Doon. As is the nature of translations, each of Raftery’s poems in English has a slightly different tinge depending on the translator’s interpretation. My main sources for Raftery’s poetry come from Hyde’s original *Songs Ascribed to Raftery* and from the modern Criostoir O’Flynn’s *Blind Raftery*, both bilingual collections of Raftery’s poetry spaced roughly one hundred years apart. O’Flynn’s translations use end-rhyme more frequently than Hyde’s, resulting in more lilting poetry in many instances; however, I will provide the translation I feel best suits my analysis, and have Irish speakers refer to the original Irish texts as they see fit.

In this thesis, I hope to accomplish three goals: to explore the life and writings of Raftery; to revisit the works of scholars such as Douglas Hyde, Lady Augusta Gregory, and W. B. Yeats in relation to Raftery; and to use that information to explore Raftery’s role in Ireland’s cultural history. Raftery is certainly not the first blind, traveling poet within the Irish tradition—Turloch O’Carolan is Ireland’s more

prominent bard, a blind 17<sup>th</sup>-century harpist whose compositions are still played today. There is also the figure of Ossian in Scottish bardic traditions, whose poetry—supposedly collected and translated by James Macpherson in his collection *Poems of Ossian*, but later thought to be the work of Macpherson himself—showed a great pride in Scottish heritage and culture (Trumpener 104). Finally, there is Homer, the original bard standing at the front of a long line of poetic ancestry, a model of poetic language and storytelling for future generations of aspiring bards. Homer's legacy is crucial to understanding why Irish scholars in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century took such a vested interest in Raftery. Yeats, Hyde, and Gregory were all well acquainted with Homer's works and with the Greek epic; as Homer's storytelling represented Greek culture, so they hoped Raftery's poems would represent an Irish culture in danger of being lost.

Anthony Raftery was a blind poet and itinerant fiddle player born in County Mayo, Ireland, around the year 1779. His blindness was the result of a smallpox attack around the age of nine, and was also the driving force behind his eventual occupation of "poet". I say born and afflicted "around" those years because scholarly sources differ as to the exact dates of his birth and early life. It is confirmed, however, that Raftery was at least born in Killedan, a village near Kiltimagh in Mayo, at some point left Mayo for the neighboring County Galway, and died in the village of Killineen near Craughwell in Galway on December 24<sup>th</sup>, 1835 (O'Flynn 27). He was a native, fluent speaker of the Irish language and, although he both played the fiddle and composed poetry, Douglas Hyde tells us: "One thing is certain, he was never

anything else than a bad fiddler, and the violin he had was not good either”(Hyde 13). After leaving his native Mayo due to a purported dispute with his landlord—another tale that, shrouded in legend and oral tradition, is less than certain—Raftery never returned, spending the rest of his life wandering throughout Galway, living on the charity of those he encountered, befriended, and entertained (O’Flynn 27).

Raftery wrote his poetry in his native Irish, not to make a political statement or push Irishmen away from learning the English language, but because it was his only vehicle for expression. As Hyde so succinctly explains, “he had a great mastery over his native tongue, but he understood English. Some people say he did not, but he probably did”(Hyde 41). Many of his poems contain political themes, such as the “Dispute with the Bush” which is a summation of Ireland’s political history or “The National School”, which A common thread between Hyde as one of Raftery’s ‘original’ discoverers and modern translators of his work such as Criostoir O’Flynn is passionate admiration for the Irish language. Speaking Irish was one of the rallying forces behind Hyde and Gregory’s portrayal of Raftery as a symbol of Irish culture and pride. Yeats, although he very much believed that the language should be taught in schools and preserved in Ireland, was not as learned in speaking and writing Irish as those other two scholars. He “suggested that a new effort to create an Irish literature in English might be Ireland’s best hope of preserving a distinctive Irish ‘spirit’ “(Yeats Annual 8), a sentiment echoed throughout his works which contain strongly nationalistic themes and images of an ancient Ireland all written in English.

The second major force central to the three scholars' interest in Raftery was Raftery's status as a poor, wandering bard; a poet of the people, as they saw him. Raftery received his education at a hedge-school in the hills of Mayo—quite literally, a hedge-school was schooling held outside, often among the hedges, where students would learn classical literature, writing, and arithmetic (O'Flynn 46). He lived at an in-between stage of Ireland's political career, during the slow but steady rise of England in Ireland during the early 1800s and before the great famine of 1846. Of special interest to Hyde and Gregory is the fact that Raftery was educated before the Irish National Schools were founded in 1831. In the National Schools, "the Irish language was banned altogether, pupils heard using it were severely punished, and even the very names of the pupils were altered to a compulsory English form" (O'Flynn 46). He holds the combined appeal of an older, truly 'Irish' Ireland and humble, poetic beginnings, a powerful combination that represented exactly what Hyde, Yeats, and Gregory were searching for at the onset of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

This paper explores not only the Homeric connection to Raftery but similar attempts at cultural revival in Scotland and England through literary preservation as well. Sir Walter Scott in his bardic poem *The Lady of the Lake* and his 1801 *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* raises the figure of the bard to the level worthy of scholarly study. *Minstrelsy* is Scott's collection of Scottish songs and ballads from the Highlands and along the border, a collection he hoped would preserve Scottish culture and nationalism through pride in old customs and traditions. Scotland is also home to James Macpherson's *Fragments of Ancient Poetry, collected in the Highlands*

*of Scotland, and translated from the Gaelic or Erse Language* published in 1760 and claiming a poet named Ossian as the source of its materials. The original ballad collection, however, is Thomas Percy's 1765 *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, a remarkable collection that "dramatizes the encounters between literate and oral media, between polite poetry and popular culture, and between scholarship and taste" (Groom 2). Without Percy there would be no *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, no Wordsworth and Coleridge *Lyrical Ballads*, no James Macpherson and his debatable *Ossian* authorship, and no scholarship of substance on 'folk' songs or merit granted to the ancestral line of ballads and their singers. The stampede towards Irish cultural preservation came about a hundred years after the English and Scottish surge, but the connections between scholarship in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries reside in the desire of a few to ignite nationalism of their country in the hearts of many. Hyde, Gregory, and Douglas try to shape Raftery into Ireland's own Ossianic figurehead, hoping he will become a voice for Ireland during its troubles.

## **Section 1**

### **1. Homer and Raftery**

The similarities between Homer and Raftery lie beyond their blindness and their trades as poets. Bernard Knox, in his introduction to *The Odyssey* (transl. Robert Fagles), explains: "This [the language] does not mean that Homer was a poet known only to scholars and schoolboys; on the contrary, the Homeric epics were familiar as household words in the mouths of ordinary Greeks" (Fagles 12). As far as entertainment in late-eighth-century B.C. Greece goes, poetry and music were



essentially it. *The Odyssey* is a long, long epic poem, certainly longer than anything Raftery ever wrote and containing the same metric pattern throughout. While many scholars originally thought that bards like Homer memorized their pieces word for word, especially since those bards would have been illiterate, only preserving their craft through rote memorization. Upon further study, Knox explains the post-nineteenth-century realization that “The oral bard who uses such formulaic language is not, as scholars in the nineteenth century who struggled with the problem of illiterate bards all assumed, a poet reciting from memory a fixed text. He is improvising, along known lines, relying on a huge stock of formulaic phrases, lines, and even whole scenes; but he *is* improvising”(Knox 16). Improvising, those little personal changes a singer or poet makes to his or her piece often unknowingly, lies at the heart of oral tradition and the heart of Raftery and Homer’s works.

Of particular relevance to Homer is Douglas Hyde’s inscription on the title page of *Songs Ascribed to Raftery*. Hyde, before his title page, includes a quote from the *Odyssey*, viii, 479 in the original Greek: “Poets have won the praise and honor of all men/ living on earth because a Goddess has taught them/ the ways of song. She loves the clan of her singers”(McCrorie 114). Here is the starting point, possibly the single most important and relevant quote in this paper. We have Douglas Hyde, a learned man familiar with Homeric works more prominently known for his 1892 nationalistic essay “The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland”, invoking the most famous ancient Greek epic to introduce the poems of Anthony Raftery, a figure

known throughout Galway and Mayo but not world-renowned by any means (Murphy & MacKillop 135). The invocation says that Raftery's work is just as important to Irish culture as Homer's work was, and is, to Greek culture. Homer speaks for and entertains his people with sea journeys and fantastic creatures and gods, so Raftery speaks for the Irish people with descriptions of "The County Mayo" or "The Lament for Anthony Daly".

Homeric connections do not exist in scholarship surrounding the esteemed poet Raftery. The man himself invokes versions of a Homeric muse in many of his poems, appealing to God instead of a Muse. In "Annaghdown", the lament for drowned passengers on a boat off Galway's coast, Raftery in his first stanza says: "Almighty Creator and King of Graces,/ that a few should die would be nothing strange"(O'Flynn 95). Later in his third stanza, he repeats the appeal to God: "O Christ our God, whose suffering saved us,/ the poor and the naked you bought so hard,/ To your holy Paradise take them safely,/ these creatures who perished by fate's command"(O'Flynn 95). The phrase "A Rí na ngrásta" (King of Graces) is repeated often throughout the poem, sometimes as seen above to protect the drowned people in the hereafter and sometimes as an opening line for the next stanza to create dramatic effect. Hyde's translation includes more of the original "O King of Graces" refrains, especially in the sixth stanza: "O King of Graces, who hast created Heaven and Paradise,/ And O God! what were the grief to us, two or three"(Hyde 149). The repetition acts as a memory tool and an invocation to a

higher power, acting as Raftery's way of showing that he, too, is a poet with the power to invoke whichever Muse or God he pleases.

"The God Whose Name was Jupiter" pays direct homage to Homer and Greek poetry—with the added bonus of Raftery using his poetry as an opportunity to show off. Hyde introduces this poem: "This is a short piece that Raftery composed to let the people understand how learned he was, and how great was his knowledge of the gods and of the history of the Greeks and Romans. No doubt there was more in it, but this is all I found of it" (Hyde 133). The poem is not a particularly outstanding piece of poetic beauty, but it does show that Raftery was learned and that he expected his audience to be familiar with Greek mythology and legend. O'Flynn reminds his audience that "Its principal interest for us is that it shows the poet in yet another guise, almost as if he were a hedge schoolmaster taking his class through a refresher course in some aspects of Greek and Roman history and mythology" (O'Flynn 122). Raftery begins the poem: "The God who was called Jupiter/ caused many immortalities,/ He kept a mistress everywhere/ on earth and in the sky" (O'Flynn 125). He keeps up his references to different gods throughout the poem, and includes at least two direct references to the *Odyssey* and to Homer. In stanza three, Raftery tells the abbreviated version of the *Odyssey*: "Many a kingdom far and cold/ was visited by Telemachus/ When searching for his father/ who had gone to distant lands" (O'Flynn 125). And in his final stanza, he takes the opportunity to support his mythological insights by referencing Homer, Virgil, and Horace, and presenting a challenge to any poets who think him wrong:

What I have now related  
 is found in ancient narratives  
 Of Homer, Virgil, Horace  
 and more who tell no lies.  
 Any poet in this province  
 who'd give the lie to Raftery  
 Let him come half-way to meet me  
 and I'll gag him as he tries.  
 O'Flynn, 127.

Raftery also includes a Homeric praise of beauty in the poem "Nancy Walsh", a poem in praise of a girl who "showed great kindness to Raftery in washing his clothes, etc"(Hyde 105). After talking about her beauty in familiar Irish comparisons of gold, curly hair and a neck white as a swan's, he states that "Venus, after everything that Homer has written of her beauty", Io, Cassandra, Juno, and Minerva "would not compare with Nancy Walsh, my desire/ In prettiness, brightness, beauty, or fineness"(Hyde 111). That is a bold assertion, and another chance for Raftery to show his knowledge of the original bard's tales. Given his vested interest in Greek and Roman mythology and his method of boasting about such an interest, it seems Hyde was correct in invoking the Muses with a quote from the *Odyssey* to begin his collection.

## 2. Percy's *Reliques* and Raftery

In the Celtic traditions, the image of a wandering bardic persona carried connotations of a long-forgotten culture, of heroic deeds and the values of a society that had, by the early nineteenth century, largely passed by the wayside. Relatively speaking, the Irish interest in preserving their country's oral tradition of songs and poetry came later than the English and Scottish interest. While Ireland's oral

tradition was thriving throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, scholarly interest in cultural preservation was not as widespread due to a number of factors—the most likely culprit being England’s occupation of Ireland and its staunch insistence upon every Irishman to learn English and forget Irish. Thomas Percy’s *Reliques of English Poetry* “established the ballad as a valid literary form, and influenced writers from Sir Walter Scott and Samuel Taylor Coleridge to Lewis Carroll and Oscar Wilde...It is the seminal, epoch-making work of English Romanticism”(Groom 3). It includes such ballads as “The ancient Ballad of Chevy-chace”; “Sir Patrick Spence”; and “The Legend of King Arthur” in three volumes of work, each volume containing three books (Groom 274-79).

Nick Groom’s work *The Making of Percy’s ‘Relics’* provides important insight into the nature of ballads and their sources as well as the details of Percy’s compilation of *Relics*. Raftery wrote laments, celebrations, and a few pieces that could be classified as ballads, and when Hyde or Gregory went searching for them, they found a direct source: people. Percy, on the other hand, “was coping with a comparably corrupt oral tradition”(Groom 10) and conducted most of his research and collecting through libraries and different written versions of the published works. Although his search mostly circumvented hearing ballads or poems sung from their sources, Percy still pioneered the scholarly preservation of a form of poetry once considered too lowly for serious study. As the 18<sup>th</sup> century unfolded, “the spirit of the age now sought to find works of untutored genius, songs and ballads, the expression of a people’s communal imagination—a contrast to the

artificial culture and literature of the Age of Reason. The Romantic rebellion was at hand”(Knox 7).

A major component of ballads is the narrative aspect—most ballads tell a story, and as Groom says, “The ballad is difficult to define, but easy to recognize”(Groom 21). That being said, a ballad “is characterized today as a verse-narrative recounted through dialogue and action, in formulaic structure and simple style, usually accompanied by music”(Groom 21). Since Raftery accompanied himself on fiddle, it is reasonable to assume he would on occasion play a few bars of introduction, recite his piece, then play the introductory music again at the poem’s close. “The Drinker’s Praise of Whiskey” is one of Raftery’s lighter poems that could be considered a ballad: it contains a steady meter, and narrates Raftery’s travels from house to house, accepting whiskey at place he enters. It begins: “As I was going to Gallagher fair/ Stepping it out quite vigorous,/ They brought me into Lally’s place/ To have a drop medicinal”(O’Flynn 152). He likely wrote this piece to thank one of his many patrons for their hospitality and generosity, a wise move for any poet or traveler who wants to ensure a welcome reception back. Honoring friends and acquaintances in verse is the gift a bard gives in exchange for hot meals and spare beds.

As always with folk traditions, the influences of one researcher often seep into the research of another. Groom proposes: “Percy’s lack of interest in collecting the living tradition may well have been influenced by his response to James

Macpherson's Ossianic epics, which elided and segued oral performances into edited versions"(Groom 29). Ossian is the midway point between Percy's literary research and the relevant Irish scholars' oral tradition findings. Macpherson, who published his first Ossian poems in 1760, was "Percy's predecessor in the mythic construction of a national past, the testimony of authentic voices, and the textual medium of transmission"(Groom 73). Unfortunately, Ossian was a fictitious character, supposedly a third-century bard and "the son of Fingal, the last of the Celts"(Groom 75), a blend of the bits of old Gaelic poetry Macpherson found in his research and the living tradition of song and poetry at the time. Such a fabrication could have been seen as disastrous for the future validity of folk collections, but instead bolstered the emphasis on oral tradition in Celtic cultures. Groom says:

"Macpherson made a crucial contribution to the antiquarian debates of racial origins and historiography by postulating that Celtic society was entirely illiterate: it was an oral culture"(Groom 75). Although Ossian was not a real person, Macpherson succeeded in stressing the importance of oral tradition and, if anything, prompted more scholarly research into ballads and Celtic traditions.

### 3. Scott, Scotland, and Raftery

Sir Walter Scott is one of a host of Romantic-era writers, alongside names such as Robert Burns and Lord Byron, who, upon looking back at ancient Scottish

ballads and researching the traditions of the Scottish bardic culture, set out to essentially modernize and preserve the forgotten arts. Scott wrote three main works dealing in some way with the minstrelsy—*The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*; *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*; and *The Lady of the Lake*. Allan-bane, the characteristic bard and companion to Ellen Douglass in *The Lady of the Lake*, represents for Scott the epitome of bardic culture, and becomes the vehicle with which he attempts to revive the minstrelsy. Allan is not a mere decoration in the poem but a key figure, present at several pivotal points in the work's action and serving to keep the flow of the storyline moving. Both Allan-bane and the ballads and laments suffused throughout the text elevate *The Lady of the Lake* to a new level, allowing Scott to revitalize ancient bardic culture for a new audience to discover.

In speaking of the so-called ancient bardic culture of Scotland, one must take into account the historical context of Scott's bard, realizing the different functions it serves during different periods in history. Because Scott feels that the old ways were dying off, he becomes an antiquary—a preserver of the culture, of first the literal ballads of Scottish folklore in *The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, and eventually fusing the form of the ballad with the storyline of Highland-Lowland dissension in *The Lady of the Lake*. As Kate Trumpener states, "for nationalist antiquaries, the bard is the mouthpiece for a whole society, articulating its values, chronicling its history, and mourning the inconsolable tragedy of its collapse" (Trumpener 6). The bard functions as an Aeolian harp for society, sensing the ebb and flow of the



cultural breeze and relating the motions he feels in the form of song. Scott, although he writes *the Lady of the Lake* between 1806 and 1810, chooses to set the poem not in contemporary times, but in 16<sup>th</sup> century Scotland, a time of great upheaval between the Scottish highland and lowland peoples and, more importantly for the text, a time of immense significance for the bardic culture. Hence Allan-bane turns into the “mouthpiece” for a society long-since forgotten, and the muse of the “Harp of the North” invoked at the opening and closing of the tale.

It is nearly impossible to speak of bardic traditions—and particularly, to describe their function and modernization by those such as Scott, Hyde, and Lady Gregory—without paying attention to the harp. Raftery did not play the harp, and if he did, he would have been hard pressed to compete with the previous musicality of his predecessor Turloch O’Carolan. Most paintings and characterizations of bards portray them traipsing merrily through valleys, harp in hand, or entertaining crowds at banquets or gatherings. The harp is an ancient instrument, the national symbol of Ireland, and the symbol of minstrelsy; but what does it represent beyond that? According to Katie Trumpener, “as a bardic instrument, the cherished vehicle of Irish, Welsh, and Scottish nationalism, and then as the emblem of a nationalist republicanism, the harp stands for an art that honors the organic relationship between a people, their land, and their culture”(Trumpener 19). Being mindful of the strong nationalistic connotations of a harp and its resonance with Scottish culture and history, Scott hoped that presenting a centuries-old tale in ballad form, harp and all, would create a resurgence of interest in preserving the remnants of the

minstrelsy in Scotland. Hyde in his *Songs Ascribed to Raftery*, hoped to produce the same fervor and national pride as Scott.

## **Section 2: The Irish Scholarship**

When researching Douglas Hyde's, Lady Gregory's, and W.B. Yeats' individual interests in Raftery, a noticeable overlap in their findings quickly became apparent.

The three figures were contemporaries connected through a love for literature and a deep-seated desire to restore their Ireland to what they saw as its former glory.

Hyde and Gregory shared a love of the Irish language, and Gregory and Yeats cofounded the Irish Literary theatre and shared a love of the performing arts.

Among the plays the trio produced together was "*Casadh an tSúgáin*" or "The Twisting of the Rope" in 1901. The play revolves around a wandering bard named Hanrahan who arrives at a dance and entrances a girl through his poetry. Hanrahan is based on Raftery, and although the original play was Yeats's creation, the final produced version was Hyde's (Pethica 14).

"Raftery's poetry offered a vibrant expression of and access to the distinctive Irish folk-culture they celebrated as flourishing prior to what Lady Gregory termed the 'two great landslips' that had changed Ireland in the mid-nineteenth century"(Pethica 4), the "landslips" being the Irish famine of 1846 and the overhaul of the Irish language by the forced predominance of English. However, where the Irish language was concerned, the trio's interests diverge. Yeats, as a non-Irish speaker, was interested mainly in Raftery for his role as a bard and the combination

of music and verse; Hyde and Gregory praised Raftery as an example of a bygone era when the Irish language was still spoken fluently throughout Ireland.

### 1. Yeats and Raftery

For Yeats, although he is probably the most famous of the trio to readers with no background in Irish history for his lyrical poems such as the “Song of Wandering Aengus” or “The Stolen Child”, the connection to Raftery was spiritual. Yeats had an affinity for chanting verse—he wanted to revive minstrelsy and the ancient Celtic bardic tradition, and throughout his life strove to do so through his plays and poetry. His poem “The Madness of King Goll” demonstrates his passion for the bardic tradition; it tells the story of a “lost poet-warrior” who finds an ancient Irish stringed instrument called a tympan and plays it to summon a muse. Ronald Schuchard explains in his essay “*The Countess Cathleen* and the Chanting of Verse, 1892-1912”: “For Yeats, the poem was a metaphorical idealization of his own creative life...so closely did his father identify him with Goll that he etched a portrait of his bearded son as Goll tearing the strings out of the tympan in a moment of creative intensity”(Yeats Annual 43). So, while Gregory and Hyde’s interest in Raftery existed outside themselves, Yeats imagined himself as the next generation of Raftery, a new bard for a new generation.

Yeats’ play “The Countess Cathleen” is his attempt to incorporate lyrical chanting into theatre. Originally written with Maude Gonne in mind for the lead role, the play underwent revisions before its staging in 1899 at the Irish Literary Theatre

(Schuchard 36). In the pamphlet distributed before the show, Yeats warns his audience that some verses in the show:

are not sung, but spoken, or rather chanted, to music, as the old poems were probably chanted by bards and rhapsodists. Even when the words of a song, sung in the ordinary way, are heard at all, their own proper rhythm and emphasis are lost...The speaking of words, whether to music or not, is, however, so perfectly among the lost arts that it will take a long time before our actors, no matter how willing, will be able to forget the ordinary methods of the stage or to perfect a new method (Schuchard 39).

The play, to say the least, received less than enthusiastic reviews from theatre critics and audience members alike, most of whom thought Yeats's experimentation with form and verse poetry too bizarre to work on the stage.

Yeats continued his quest to revitalize the bard through his collaboration with Florence Farr. The pair would hold shows or lectures in which Yeats would talk about the theory behind his poetry and bardic influences, and Farr would perform such pieces as the "chanting of Yeats's "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" to the accompaniment of an Irish harp 'played beautifully' by Miss Georgina Macdonald"(Schuchard 46). However, Lady Gregory, Yeats's friend and cofounder of the Irish Literary Theatre, wrote in her diary that Yeats's performances were " 'amusing enough—but only a 'fad' —...Yeats didn't give a regular lecture but warmed up after criticism"(Schuchard 47).

Another difference in Yeats's view of Raftery and the cultural implications surrounding the poet lies in Yeats's personal agenda as a poet striving to leave his mark in literature. Pethica explains: "An English readership was central to his ambitions as a writer, and the cultural separatism implied by Hyde's programme

was deeply threatening”(Pethica 8). Yeats was not an Irish speaker, and, predictably, did not have the same interest in translating Raftery’s poetry into English. Hyde’s belief that only literature written in Irish could truly be called ‘Irish literature’ excluded Yeats’s works and put him in the minority of Nationalists pulling for a total reclamation of Irish. After writing a series of questions in which he explained his viewpoint and called for acceptance of Irish literature written in the English language, “he was repeatedly obliged to defend himself after 1892 against ‘Irish Ireland’ critics”(Pethica 9). Yeats considered himself as invested in the cultural cause of Raftery as Gregory and Hyde,

## 2. Lady Gregory and Raftery

Lady Gregory began her literary career later in life after the age of forty. She saw herself as “a champion of the traditions and culture of the Catholic peasant underclass...recording narratives and beliefs in her own poetic version of folk language, called ‘Kiltarnese’ ”(Murphy & MacKillop 150). Her collection of translated poetry, *The Kiltartan Poetry Book*, contains insight into her views on folk literature and the Irish language. The book contains a variety of well-known and obscure Irish poems, among them seven of Raftery’s poems including his “Lament for O’Daly” and “His Answer When Some Stranger Asked Who He Was”(Gregory 19). The “Answer” poem is known more commonly as “*Raifteirí an File*”, or “The Poet Raftery”, and falls into the same credibility of authorship as the dubious Ossian (O’Flynn 75). The legend that Gregory and most other scholars at the time accepted is that Raftery did,

in fact, compose this poem in response to someone who asked him who he was at a dance hall. More recent scholarship thinks that Seán Ó Ceallaigh, the man who originally submitted this poem to an Irish newspaper in the U.S. in 1882, wrote the poem, based on phrases he had heard Raftery say. In any case, Lady Gregory's version is as follows:

I am Raftery the poet,  
full of hope and love;  
my eyes without light,  
my gentleness without misery.

Going west on my journey  
with the light of my heart;  
weak and tired  
to the end of my road.

I am now, and my back to a wall,  
playing music to empty pockets.  
(Gregory 44).

It is not surprising that Gregory chose to include this poem in her collection because Raftery's 'response' epitomizes her drive to unearth the poetry of the lower classes. In the introduction to the *Kiltartan*, she states: "It was not now in the corners of newspapers I looked for poetic emotion, nor even to the singers in the streets. It was among farmers and potato diggers and old men in workhouses and beggars at my own door that I found what was beyond these" (*Kiltartan* 11).

Douglas Hyde's impact upon Lady Gregory's scholarship affected her research into Raftery and her interest in Irish as well. Hyde founded the Gaelic League, an organization dedicated to the revival of the Irish language, in 1893 (Murphy & MacKillop 135). Gregory writes in her introduction to *Kiltartan* that "Dr.

Douglas Hyde, *An Craoibhin*, had founded the Gaelic League, and through it country people were gathered together in the Irish speaking places to give the songs and poems, old and new, kept in their memory” (Kiltartan 10), and that the Gaelic League had given her hope for the future of Irish. She also authored a play, “The Wedding”, that portrays Raftery as a “healer-figure” and attempts to bridge the gap between higher and lower classes, an idealistic view that characterizes her later writings and scholarship (Pethica 19).

### 3. Hyde and Raftery

Douglas Hyde was Ireland’s first president and one of the foremost proponents of Irish language as a vehicle for nationalism. When reading his *Songs Ascribed to Raftery* (1903), his affection for Raftery quickly becomes apparent; Hyde is quick to praise the poet and to take offense at others’ critiques of either the man or his works. He talks of two other poets in Connacht at the time, a MacSweeney and a Barrett: “some of the old people say that these were better poets than Raftery” (Hyde 15). He goes on, however, to argue in Raftery’s favor, saying “these two were men of learning and knowledge and means; while here we have Raftery, blind from his youth...without house, home, shelter, dwelling, without knowledge of reading or writing, without mastery of any other language than his own Irish, and yet he has left his mark behind him to the present day, more deeply, I think, than they have” (Hyde 15). Raftery presumably thought of himself as a Poet, not a wandering mendicant who sometimes composed poetry or scratched a tune on the fiddle in return for scraps of bread—his opinion of himself is evident in poems like

“The God Whose Name Was Jupiter”. Hyde, like Gregory, values Raftery’s lower-class status as an integral part of his story, and fights for Raftery’s place among the poet’s contemporaries and more modern poets.

*Songs* provides another outlet for Hyde to channel his Irish Nationalist views. His famous essay “The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland” was published in 1892, approximately ten years before the publication of Raftery’s poetry. The essay reads as a fiery exposé on the merits of the Irish language during a time when Irish was seen as the language of the poor, the uneducated, the past. Hyde says, of the current state of the language in Ireland, “many of them read newspapers indeed, but who reads, much less recites, an epic poem or chants an elegiac or even a hymn” (Murphy & MacKillop 145). Luckily for Hyde, Raftery proved in some aspects to be a kindred spirit, at least where changing customs is concerned. Raftery’s poem “The New Schools” is an equally passionate rant against the new national schools that were instituted in Ireland in 1831. O’Flynn tells us that “although the new schools were to be non-denominational, they were objected to on all sides, first by the Presbyterians in the North, later by Protestant and Catholic church authorities alike all over Ireland” (O’Flynn 142). The schools were a serious source of contention for people like Raftery who had lived their whole lives speaking Irish and were now told by their government that their language was essentially illegal.

“The New School” uses Catholic and Protestant imagery to convey the message of laws forced upon Irish citizens. In the second stanza, Raftery proclaims:



“Ancient the court that they hope to destroy/ but I know that in vain they labour,.../But soon vengeance will put Orangemen to flight/ who know not the consecration”(O’Flynn 145). The use of “Orangemen” creates a powerful image at a time when the English presence in Ireland was about to enter a modern era of occupancy. Raftery also refers to the English attempts to Anglicise the Irish through the education system as a scheme devised by Luther in his sixth stanza: “I have heard, unless ‘tis false, that soon we’ll see/ a teacher set up in every corner,/ ‘Tis nothing but a scheme our flock to deceive,/ so reject all these plots of Luther”(O’Flynn 147). Strong words—but matching the fervor of Hyde’s words and sentiments. In *Necessity*, Hyde argues for Irish language to have a place should Home Rule take affect in Ireland, Home Rule being a law that would allow Ireland more say and control in its government rather than solely British rule. He proposes: “we *shall* insist if Home Rule be carried, that the Irish language, which so many foreign scholars of the first caliber find so worthy of study, shall be placed on par with—or even above—Greek, Latin, and modern languages, in all examinations held under the Irish government”(Murphy & MacKillop 148).

### **Conclusion:**

The ultimate question resulting from my research on Raftery and the possible roots of Irish cultural identity is this: do Raftery’s life and works and the scholarship surrounding them have any impact on the preservation of Irish culture in modern society? That question is complex and carries with it a host of equally contentious issues—but, there is hope. The fact that I, a twenty-one year old American girl with an interest in Irish music, have decided to write an

undergraduate thesis based on Raftery is heartening. The fact that I found ample sources—modern and original—to support my research claims is promising as well. Raftery has been anthologized in at least one of the more popular texts used by college-level Irish Literature classes, and I have even found a few acquaintances within the music circle who know about Ireland’s blind poet—they know more about O’Carolan, naturally. When I studied abroad in Spring ’11, I learned from my Irish housemate that Irish is a mandatory course in Irish schools and must be successfully passed in order to apply to Irish universities. While some students complain about the Irish language requirement in solidarity with Yeats, I think Hyde, Gregory, and Raftery would be delighted.

*“Anach Cuain”* has become one of the most commonly learnt airs for singers and musicians within the Irish tradition, and “The Poet Raftery” has become a song which aired on an episode of the Irish music series “Geantraí” in 2009. TG4, the Irish language channel in Ireland, even prepared an hour-long documentary on Raftery entitled “Mise Raiftearaí” that aired in spring 2011. Pockets of Irish-speakers exist around the world, and many universities offer Celtic Studies or language programs, such as Harvard’s Irish Gaelic undergraduate course. That Anthony Raftery’s works have been preserved and continue to invite study is a testament to the scholarly heritage connecting the Romantic Age folk collectors—Thomas Percy, Sir Walter Scott, James McPherson—with the Irish Revivalist scholars Douglas Hyde, Lady Augusta Gregory, and W. B. Yeats. The Irish language has not died out, and Raftery has not been forgotten.

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