Egan O'Rahilly's "Warrant"

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EGAN O'RAHILLY'S "WARRANT"

Of the poetic "warrant" attributed to Egan O'Rahilly three different versions have come down to us. One of these is printed in the Irish Texts Society volume of his poems (p. 258 of 2nd edn.) from the following MSS.: 23 L 38 (1767), Mur. 5 (1818), 23 G 21, 23 M 9, 23 N 32, and Mur. 2,—the four last having been written by Ml. Óg Ó Longáin between 1795 and 1831. In these six MSS. the authorship of the piece is assigned to Egan O'Rahilly, and no indication is afforded that the poet did not issue the warrant in his own name.

I have found a second version of the warrant in four other MSS., viz. 23 L 24, p. 301, dated 1766 (L); H. 6. 21, p. 61, 1774 (H); 23 L 13, p. 93 (P); and Mur. 51, p. 122, 1792 (M). In these MSS. there is no mention of O'Rahilly, and the warrant is ascribed to, or at least written in the name of, Thomas Blennerhassett, high sheriff of Co. Kerry, the heading being: *Contae Chiarraige, le Tomás Hasset, árdshíriam na contae réimhráite*.¹ Besides supplying some variants² to the text printed in the Ir. Texts Soc. volume, this second version gives the following additional eight lines, which it places immediately after l. 20:

*Ná fáguig sagart tuarastail
Dá bhfuil in bhur bhformáil³
Gan sgíos an éin seo d'fhuadachan⁴
D'fhógairt dóibh 'na bpoibleacháin.⁵*

¹ So all four MSS., with trifling differences of spelling. The following subscription is found only in L: *Toirbhertha faoi am láimh, Tomás Hasset.*

² Among them may be mentioned: l. 2 *Criostuighthe*; l. 5 *dá(i)rshleachta*; l. 11 *é go draoidheachtuighthe* (cf. *go draoigheachta é* 23 L 38); l. 16 *i diráth*; l. 17 (*ar om.*) *an fhá(dh)bhar sin*; l. 19 *sáirshlighte* (*sároilte* H; *sáirdlitheach* M); l. 20 *'na dhiaig* (*for is sin*); l. 22 *'na gcluinfáde glór ná gliongaráil* (*gliogarnáil* P); l. 23 *gan dul ar (do P) lorg*; l. 25 *whatsoever cuaschnocán* (al. *cuas cnocáin* etc.); l. 26 *'na bhfaighthidhe é mar* (*na P*) *thórpachán*; l. 27 *tugaidh (tuga L) libh é*; l. 29 *and for (your ins. H) so doing doibreagáil* (cf. *deibriogáil* 23 L 38); l. 31 *faoi sgríobh mo láimh* (*lamh P*).

³ *bhformáil* P; *bhfúarmáil* H (and L); *bhfúramail* M.

⁴ *d'fhuacacáin* P.

⁵ *b'púlacháin* P. In H the concluding stanza of the warrant is wrongly inserted between this line and the next.

*Gluaistear libh le hughdarás
Eibhlín¹ árd Ní² Uallacháin,
Siobhán fhada an sguilleachán,³
Is gach bean dá sórt don tsluagh mhionnán.*

The third version, which I print in its entirety below, I have found in H. 4. 20, p. 223, a MS. written in Dublin by Tadhg Ó Neachtain during the years 1726-29. In this large volume there is very little that has any connection with Munster, and it is all the more remarkable to find the production of a contemporary Kerry poet appearing in its pages. The version of the warrant which it gives is obviously gapped, containing only 22 lines of verse, as compared with 32 and 40 lines in the other versions. On the other hand it is the only version which explains (as it does in an introductory note) the circumstances which gave rise to the warrant. One Father Aonghus, it appears, having purchased a cock at the fair of Dingle, gave it to a certain Séamas Ó Síobharáin,⁴ a neighbour of his and a servant of the high sheriff's, to take home for him. But Séamas did not fulfil his charge, and presumably appropriated the cock; whereupon the priest wrote a jocosely-worded letter of complaint to his employer, the high sheriff, who in reply issued this humorous warrant for the delinquent's arrest.⁵

It will be observed that in this third version the name of the high sheriff is given—more correctly, there can be little doubt—as John (*Eoin*) Blennerhassett.⁶ In the latter portion of the

¹ *a Eibhlín P.*

² *iníghn L.*

³ In P this line changes places with the line following.

⁴ This name helps to clear up l. 23 of the I. T. S. text: *gan dul i ndiaidh an tsíodhchonáin*, where the last word should no doubt read (cf. the text below) *tsíobh(a)ráin*, from *stobhrán*, a derivative from *stobhra* (cf. l. 11), intended as a kind of play upon the servant's name. *tsíochardáin*, an intermediate form, is the reading favoured by the second group of MSS.; while 23 L 38, the oldest MS. of the first group, reads *tsíothcharáin*.

⁵ There is, as I learn from the R.I.A. copy of O'Curry's MS. Catalogue, another copy of this version in a 19th cent. MS. in the British Museum, viz. Eg. 151, p. 74. This I have not had an opportunity of consulting. O'Curry describes it as: "a mock warrant in verse, by John Hasset, High Sheriff of Kerry, issued for the recovery of a cock purchased by Father Aengus at the fair of Dingle, but which was improperly detained by a neighbouring gentleman." It is a coincidence that a cock stolen from another priest occasioned the issuing of a warrant by Seán Ó Tuama in 1764 (v. *Filidhe na Máighe*, 110 sq.).

⁶ The *Tomás Hasset* of the second version must be due to scribal confusion of the sheriff with one of several Thomas Blennerhassetts who flourished about this time. John B., the high sheriff of 1717, had a brother Thomas,—probably the same Thomas B. whose name occurs among the Kerry justices of the peace in 1736; so that it may well be a case of mistaking one brother for the other.

seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century the Blennerhassetts of Ballyseedy, though but a short time planted in the country, showed a certain sympathy with native Irish culture;—a fact which, coupled with their Jacobite leanings in politics, made them unusually popular. In 1685 Eoghan Ó Caoimh, when travelling through Kerry, paid a visit to Arthur Blennerhassett and wrote a poem in his honour.¹ John Blennerhassett, very probably a brother of the latter, was high sheriff of Kerry in 1696, and on his death in 1709 was lamented in an elegy by Egan O'Rahilly.² His eldest son, also called John, was high sheriff of Kerry in 1717. These two were, so far as one can judge, the only sheriffs named John Blennerhassett up to the year 1740³; and it is not unreasonable to conclude accordingly that the warrant was composed either in 1696 or 1717.

Despite the fact that in two of the three MS. versions of the warrant no allusion is made to Egan O'Rahilly's authorship, I think it very unlikely that the testimony of the first group of MSS. on this point is incorrect. Although written in John Blennerhassett's name, it seems obvious that a composition of this kind would have been much beyond the powers of a half-Englishman such as he was. Some trained poet, then, must have written it in his name; and that this poet was O'Rahilly there can be little doubt. O'Rahilly, as we know, was on intimate terms with the Blennerhassett family; and the high sheriff, on receiving the complaint about the stolen fowl, may well have asked him to compose a reply. Or it may be that at the time when the theft occurred O'Rahilly was living in the neighbourhood of Dingle,⁴ and that, on hearing of the priest's complaint, he on his own initiative issued his humorous warrant, not in his own name (as was the custom later on, when bardic 'courts' and 'judges' were common), but in that of his friend the sheriff.

Granted O'Rahilly's authorship, the most probable date for it is 1717, as there is no good evidence to show that any of his existing poems were composed previous to the year 1700. It is to be noted

¹ See *supra* p. 101.

² See O'Rahilly's Poems, 2nd edn., p. 194.

³ I know of no complete list of the high-sheriffs of Kerry of this period, and have had to rely on the two imperfect lists published by Miss Hickson in her 'Old Kerry Records' (i. p. 261; ii. p. 319).

⁴ From one of his poems (no. vii.) we know that he lived for a while near Inch, a little to the east of Aunascaul. It is probably due to his residence in the peninsula that his name and fame are still fresh among the Irish-speakers of Corcaguiny.

that the version in H. 4. 20 gives the date of the warrant (in Irish) as 'November 13th, 1727.'¹ I have unfortunately not been able to discover the name of the high sheriff of Kerry for this year; but, while it is just possible that the sheriff for 1727 may prove to be the same or another John Blennerhassett, I think it more likely that '1727' is merely a scribal slip for '1717,' especially as it does not seem certain that O'Rahilly was alive at the later date.

[BARÁNTAS EÓIN HAISÉAD]²

Ar mbeith do shagart áiridhe (dár bhu ainm Aongus) ar aonach Dhaingin Uí Chóisi a gcontae Chiarraidh ionnar cheannaigh sé coileach, 7 ag dearca 'na thimchioll, do chonairc seirbhíseach áirdshirriam na dútha, dár bhu ainm Séamus Ua Síabharrán, air ar aisg (ar bheith do ag filleadh a bhaile ón aonach) an t-eun d'fhágáil ag a lann-chumhduighe,³ mar bhá a n-árais a ngrod dá chéile. Acht d'éis an aonaidh, ar rochtain a dhúna don tsagart,⁴ mar nach bhfuair an t-eun, scríobhann litir anntlásach gus an áirdshirriam ag gearán na héagcóra d'imir Mac Uí Shíodhbharán air. Ris sin tugann an sirriam a bharántas le gabháil Mhic Uí Shíodhbharáin ar an modh so :

CONTAE	}	<i>Whereas</i> an tAthair Aongus fáidhchliste, An sagart ⁵ cráidhbheach Críostuighthe, Do theacht aniu um láthair-si Le gearán cáis is fírinne ; Go ttug dá dheóin lán mín-sgilling ⁶ Ar éan álluinn cúilchliteach, Is gur sgiubadh ⁷ a eun go síodhbharadh Ó aonach chinn na ⁸ dútha so.
CHIARRUIDH		

¹ So in Eg. 151 the warrant is, according to O'Curry, "dated the 13th day of ninth month, 1727." The date in H. 4. 20 is evidently intended to form part of the warrant, not to indicate the date of transcription; and in any event the portion of the MS. in which it occurs was, so far as one can judge, not written until well on in the year 1728.

² There is no title in the MS. In the text that follows I have silently inserted accents and aspiration-marks, and regulated matters of punctuation. In the case of any other deviations from the MS. I give the MS. reading in the footnotes.

³ lannchumhdaighthe.

⁴ tsagairt.

⁵ sagar.

⁶ bhánscilling.

⁷ sciubhadh.

⁸ an.

Bu gar don ¹ Athair áirmhidneach
 Coileach trátha chum dúisgighthe
 Re bheith ar aire sámhchodhla
 Gach tráth aspuirt urnaighthe.
 M'órdughadh díbh ar an adhbhar-sin,
 A bháilidh stáit mo chúirte-si,
 Ná fáguidh coill, gleanna, cnoc ná cuasachán,
 Dá gcluistidh glór ná gliongarán,
 Gan chuartughadh 'ndeoidh an Tsíodhbharráin
 Rinigh mídhghníomh le plundaráil.
 Ris so do dhéanamh go tapa tráth,
 So díbh bhur n-úghdarrás,
 Faoi ² scríobh mo lámh le cliteachán,
 An ³ lá so do aos an Uachtaráin.

EÓIN HAISÉAD

Áirdshirriam.

Ó mo scríobhchaidhin
 an 13 lá don naodhughadh mí ⁴
 1727.

T. F. O'RAHILLY.

¹ do.

² fuaidh.

³ om.

⁴ "mí" is somewhat doubtful; the MS. has what appears to be q̄t. The meaning of "o mo scríobhchaidhin" is obscure to me.