The poetry of Eoghan Rua Ó Suilleabháin (1748-1784)—regarded as one of Ireland’s great eighteenth century poets—has endured because of its extraordinary metrical virtuosity and its lyrical attachment to many of the classical Irish airs. Ó Suilleabháin spent much of his short life in humble and unskilled occupations but he was a well educated man who had inherited the wealth of scholarship, traditions and literary sophistication that had evolved from the Bardic order system.

The Bardic order and tradition existed in Ireland from prehistoric times. According to Daniel Crokery’s masterly study, The Hidden Ireland, “They were ancient when Saint Patrick came among us,” secular institutions “officered by laymen.”¹ The Bardic schools existed side by side with the monastic schools, but it is not clear whether formal connections were maintained between the two. However, both depended upon patronage, and it is reasonable to assume that in many cases Bardic schools and monastic schools shared the patronage of local chieftains. It is likely that abbots and bishops met with chief poets at the households of the shared patrons. They were perhaps analogous to professors from different faculties, meeting and exerting mutual influences within a modern, endowed university. The Bardic schools and the monastic schools were the universities of their day; they bestowed privileges and status on their students and teachers, much as the modern university awards degrees and titles to recipients to practice certain professions.

There are few descriptions of the structure and operation of the Bardic schools, but an account contained in the early eighteenth century Memoirs of the Marquis of Clanricarde claims that admission to Bardic schools was confined to those who were descended from poets and had within their tribe “The Reputation” for poetic learning and talent. “The qualifications first required (sic) were reading well, writing the Mother-tongue, and a strong memory,” according to Clanricarde. With regard to the location of the schools, he asserts that it was necessary that the place should “be in the solitary access of a garden” or “within a set or enclosure far out of the reach of any noise.” The structure containing the Bardic school, we are told, “was snug, low, hot and beds in it at convenient distances, each within a small apartment without much furniture of any kind, save only a table, some seats and a conveniency for cloaths (sic) to hang upon. No windows to let in the day, nor any light at all used but that of candles” according to Clanricarde,² whose account is given credence by Bergin³ and Corkery.

The regime in the Bardic schools was rigorous and exacting. Students were tested by examination and divided into classes in accordance with attainment levels. Study routines were regulated and development of skills and scholarship were monitored through regular and formal assessment of performance. Aspiring bards had to acquire a thorough knowledge of the rules governing quantum, concord, correspondence, termination and union – the structural elements of verse.⁴

The career pinnacle of the professional bard was to become the chief poet of a prince or great lord and, among his peers, to be elevated to the status of chief poet and Bardic school professor. The patronage system bound him “to record in good meter” a

³ For examples, see Irish Bardic Poetry at http://www.ucc.ie/celt/bardic.html

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record of marriages, births, deaths, exploits and achievements of his patron and family. The decline and extinction of the Gaelic tribal system was inevitably followed or accompanied by the collapse, decline, and eventual disappearance of the endowed Bardic school system. The disappearance of the Gaelic chieftains followed from the series of plantations—a form of ethnic cleansing—starting with King's County (Laois) and Queen's County (Offaly) in 1556 and followed by the plantation of Munster in 1595, the plantation of Ulster in 1609, and Cromwell's plantation in 1654.

Naturally, the demise and disappearance of the Bardic schools, in spite of the radical changes imposed by the plantations, were not abrupt. Being well-established and highly respected institutions, they were sustained in a less-institutionalized format for several generations. Corkery writes, “The bardic schools shut their doors about the middle of the seventeenth century... Here and there the poets who presided over them maintained, as best they could, though, of course, in an informal and irregular way, the real business of the school, the teaching of history and the craft of poetry.” It is indeed arguable that they did not disappear, but instead went through a process of metamorphosis which accommodated their existence within a new order. They, of necessity, shed much of their formal institutionalism and assumed the character of voluntary associations.

Those voluntary associations met regularly to discuss and recite poetry. For these meetings the poets used the word Cúirt, a court where a poet’s peers sat in judgement of an individual’s composition. Cúirt was presided over by a “sheriff” or “high sheriff” who summoned his fellow poets to the Cúirtteanna. As the patronage of the Gaelic chieftains declined and became more intermittent, the venues for the Cúirtteanna became more humble, and eventually were generally taverns. Clearly, these occasional gatherings did not maintain the rigor of scholarship and learning at its former standards. The poets’ insights and knowledge of history and the humanities remained impressive, but the regulated structure of verse gave way to a greater dependence on musical rhyme and rhythm. Corkery comments that, “the meters in the songs, as well as the meters in the songs, as well as the

matter in them, shrunk under the hard fortunes that had overtaken the schools. The famous classical meters, needing more training than was now to be had... For meters to take their place the poets now went to the songs of the people; from being despised of the poets, those amhráin, or song meters were now to become their glory.”

The great treasury of eighteenth century Irish poetry, of which the aisling is the pre-eminent example, was forged against this background. Poets like Aodán Ó Rathaille, Eoghan Rua Ó Suilleabhas, Brian Merriman, Cathal Bui Mac Giolla Ghunna, Art Mac Cumhaigh, and many others emerged to enrich us with the beautiful lyrical poetry that is still, to this day, hugely popular in the repertoire of Irish folk singing. The poetry of the eighteenth century is accentual, ornate and highly wrought. The poems are frequently a direct response to the social and political upheavals of the time. A recurrent theme of the aisling, in particular, is the desire for the return to the old order. Prince Charles Stuart (1720–1788) was seen as the great hope for the restoration of Catholic hegemony. After the battle of Culloden in 1745, and the defeat of Bonnie Prince Charlie, there’s an oft-recurring vision of Ireland, in the form of a beautiful girl, discoursing with the poet her desire to experience the return of Catholic Prince Charlie. This reveals a naiveté where emotionalism dominates over the reality that the old Gaelic order has been finally destroyed and was gone forever.

The rich literary legacy of the eighteenth century poets was bequeathed by an increasingly impoverished group of poets. From a tradition of privilege and patronage, the poets had become “isolated within a political and social system, which was both alien and repressive.” Some of the more prominent poets, notably, Eoghan Rua Ó Suilleabhas and Cathal Bui Mac Giolla Ghunna, died in abject poverty and isolation.

Eoghan Rua Ó Suilleabhas was a native of North Kerry—the Sliabh Luachra area—and descended from people evicted from the Kenmare area. There was “a classical school” in the Sliabh Luachra locality at Faha and Eoghan Rua was educated at that hedge school along with students who “would later enter continental universities and become priests, while others would obtain commissions in

\footnote{Clannricarde, Memoirs.}
\footnote{In Ireland, plantation with, or colonization by, people from England or Scotland was in retribution for rebellion.}
\footnote{Corkery, The Hidden Ireland, 100.}
\footnote{Sean Ó Tuama and Thomas Kinsella, eds., An Duanaire, 1600–1900: Poems of the Dispossessed (Buckinghamshire: Colin Smythe Ltd., 1981), xxiii.}
the armies of France, Austria or Spain.” 10 There was intense local rivalry between the families of the O’Rahilys, the O’Scannells and the O’Sullivans, centred on the sport of hunting and the intellectual pursuit of poetry. Eoghan’s family would have had a high regard for poetry, treating it as riches that would provide a stay against misfortune and hardship. Eoghan attended his local hedge school until he was eighteen years old, then opened his own at Gneeveguilla some miles north of his native townland. He was, by all accounts, a bit of a wastrel, who was fond of wine, women and song. After two years at Gneeveguilla, “an instance occurred, nothing to his credit, which led to the breakup of his establishment.” 11 Corkery states that “such incidents, it may be as well to say it, were afterwards to occur frequently; and because of them, we may be certain that priest behind him, he scarcely afterwards ever knew what peace was, however much he laughed or sang.” 12 The schoolmaster became a “spalpin,” a wandering farm labourer, working throughout Limerick and Cork. Being gregarious and witty, he undoubtedly was popular company. He was fond of drink; on his frequent visits to taverns, he came upon Courts of Poetry – Cúirtanna Filíochta – and in them showed his talent for poetic composition and expression.

From 1770 to 1780, Eoghan Rua was at his most prolific, although his penchant for getting into trouble then caused him to be out of circulation in Munster until 1784. He worked as a travelling labourer during the earlier part of this period, but when one of his employers, a Mr. Nagle from near Fermoy in County Cork, discovered his fluency and learning in Gaelic, English, Latin and Greek, he engaged him as tutor to his family. In 1780, Eoghan was guilty of some indiscretion and had to flee the employment of Mr. Nagle and find refuge in the British Navy. Although Catholics were officially not allowed to serve in the armed forces, this stricture was not always enforced. Eoghan saw action against the French in the West Indies, where its fleet under Admiral de Grasso was routed, five of their ships were taken, and one was sunk. The British were ecstatic with delight. Admiral Rodney was entirely flattered with Eoghan who wrote a note

in his praise, “Rodney’s Glory.” Eoghan was offered a promotion but he declined it and sought discharge from the navy instead. He was refused but eventually transferred to the army. He was deeply unhappy and resorted to self-mutilation to force his discharge. This was eventually granted in 1784 and he returned in haste to his native Kerry where he opened a school at Knocknagarry Cross, teaching (according to his own promotional poems in Gaelic and English):

…bookkeeping and mensuration, 
Euclid’s elements and navigation, 
With Trigonometry and sound gauging, 
And English Grammar with rhyme and reason, 
…such are the tractable genius 
With compass and rule I will teach them 
Bills bonds and information, 
Summons, warrants, superseded, 
Judgement tickets good, 
Leases, receipts in full, 
And releases, short accounts, 
With rhyme and reason, 
And sweet love letters for the ladies.

The school did not last long, and within a short time, Ó Suilleabháin was seeking sponsorship from Colonel Daniel Cronin of Killarney. He presented Cronin with a complimentary poem but, when it was not acknowledged by Cronin, Ó Suilleabháin, in a fit of pique, wrote a scathing satire (aor) about him. This embittered Cronin and his friends and servants. On an encounter between Eoghan and some of Cronin’s servants in an alehouse in Killarney, a fight erupted and Eoghan was struck in the head with a tongs by one of Cronin’s men. The blow proved fatal, as Eoghan Rua fell into a fever from which he never recovered. He made his way to Knocknagarry, where he died in the local fever hut. As was the custom with Irish poets, he set about composing an aithrí (poem of repentance) before he died. He had composed only two lines when the pen slipped from him and he died:

Sin é an File go fann.
Nuair thuaitteann an peann as an láimh.
Weak indeed is the poet
When the pen falls from his hand

He died at the age of 36. His poems were collected over fifty years later by Father Pádraig Ó Duinín. In the book, which runs to 121 pages, there are aislings, songs, a confession (a convention among poets), satires, a poem to a lovechild, an elegy, poems in praise of women, and several “warrants.” His poems are passionate and unrestrained. In a satire about Kate O’Leary, a lady who took his socks because he owed her four pence, he wrote:

Go bhfeiceadsa gárlach gránna id chlúid agat.
Is gan a athair le faghbháil go bráth ná cúntas air

May I see you with an ugly child in your lap.
And neither father nor tidings of the father to be had forever

Undoubtedly, his aislings, of which there are nineteen in his collected poems, are his most enduring legacy. Eoghan Rua specialized in the aising, which means vision, is written in stressed meters. These meters had replaced the syllabic meters of the bards, who had been trained in the Bardic schools. The vision the poet invariably sees in an aising is Ireland in the form of a beautiful, majestic, radiant maiden. The maiden tells the poet of her distress at the exile of the Pretender, Bonnie Prince Charlie. It is a particularly Jacobite poem. In a typical example the poet is weak and thinking of the misfortune that has overtaken the Gael. He falls into a deep sleep, and in his dreams, a beautiful, radiant maiden approaches him. Her beauty is so exquisite that she is assumed by the poet to be a goddess or immortal beauty such as Venus, Helen of Troy, or Deirdre of the Sorrows. He questions her and learns that she is Erin, and that her mate, her true love (Bonnie Prince Charlie), is an exile beyond the seas.

Eoghan Rua’s most famous aising, Ceo Draíochta, was probably written during his time in the armed forces. It is beautifully lyrical, and rich in imagery. The poet says he was enveloped in the magical mist, through which he wandered aimlessly and alone until exhausted. Then he lay down in the forest, sad and tearful, praying to God. A young lady approached him: he describes her complexion and countenance as a mixture of roses and white and her figure as divine. He describes her beauty in considerable detail—thick curling golden hair down to her shoes, unflawed brow and luring eye, whose beauty could bring death it was so stunning. Each word from her mouth was sweet and musical. Her breasts were rounded. Her presence banished the sadness and filled him with pleasure. He asks her if she is the fair one, for whom hordes were slaughtered at the battle of Troy, or the lady whose beauty caused the Prince of Howth to pursue her. She answers him—in sweet, delicious and tender tones—that she is none of those women but a bride who had one year of happiness until “mo phríonsa gur seoladh i gcéin” (my prince was banished overseas). She goes on to state that she is sad, mournful, and oppressed. He responds that he is aware of her oppression by blackguards and of why she is sad and joyless and under a pall. He tells her that they both would be full of joy if:

Ár Stíobhard dá dtiodh chugann thar sáile
Go críoch inis Áilge faoi réim

Le fleet d’hearaibh Laoisigh ‘s an Spáinnigh
Is fior le corp áthais go mbéim

Ar fhior-each mhear thapa cheáfrach
Ag storchadadh m’intinn ‘na dheáidh sin

Chun lui ar sheasamh garda lem ré.

If our Stuart returned o’er the ocean
To the lands of Inis Ailge in full course
With a fleet of Louis’ men, and the Spaniard’s
By dint of joy truly I’d be
On a prancing pure steed of swift mettle
Ever sluicing them out with much shot
After which I’d not injure my spirit
Standing guard for the rest of my life.14

13 An tAth Pádraig Ua Duinnín, Amhráin Eoghain Ruaidh Ui Shuilleabháin (Gaelic League 1901; rep. 1902, 1923).

14 Translated by Thomas Kinsella in An Duanaire, 1600-1900: Poems of the Dispossessed.
The sense, the intention, feeling and tone of Eoghan Rua’s composition is in full conformity with the convention of the Aisling. This, in the view of the pedantic literary critic, diminishes its uniqueness and its literary merit. However, if the Aisling is treated as a “genre” in itself, the measure of Eoghan Rua’s literary skill should not be based on his adhering to convention, but upon his power of expression and the quality of his vision and imagery within that convention. His language is rich, musical and evocative, and the real testimony of its appeal and impact is its enduring popularity with people. Eoghan Rua was a poet with an academic mind. He used the Aisling format as a mould in which he cast his commentary on the political situation of his time. The enduring popularity of his verse is eloquent testament to his poetic virtuosity and his acknowledged status as a true exponent of true Bardic legacy.