

## IRISH SCRIBAL CULTURE AS A PURVEYOR OF CHARM TEXTS IN THE EIGHTEENTH AND NINETEENTH CENTURIES

*Nicholas Wolf*

Irish-language scribal culture demonstrated a significant interest in charms in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in part because of the more localized and intimate audience for such texts. Yet when folklorists later made note of the provenance of charms they collected from these scribal sources, they often failed to convey information about how charms came to be copied down and how charms fit into the larger intellectual context of their users. In fact, collectors preferred to highlight the oral aspects of folk practices, as in the example of Douglas Hyde's massive collection of popular religious material, *Abhráin Diadha Chúige Connacht* (1906). It is argued here that the scribal context surrounding eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Irish charm exemplars deserves closer investigation so that the textual practices that surrounded the propagation of charms can be restored to their place alongside the words of the charms themselves.

**Key words:** bilingualism, Brían Ó Fearrachaile, childbirth charms, Douglas Hyde, Irish language, scribes, toothache charms.

While modern scholarship on charming has made clear that the practice straddled both written and oral worlds, collectors of such material in Ireland during the nascent phase of folklore as a discipline were significantly less inclined to highlight the existence of charms in textual form. Even one of the most forward-looking of these early folklorists, Douglas Hyde (1860–1949), exemplified this hesitancy at times. The founder of the Gaelic League (the organization that first made truly significant ground in the revitalization of the Irish language) and later the first president of Ireland, Hyde produced writings that, to the modern eye, conform more closely to today's ethnographic methods than the romantically-tinged antiquarianism of the nineteenth century. Consider Hyde's *Abhráin Diadha Chúige Connacht*, or *The Religious Songs of Connacht*, an extensive bilingual collection of religious material published in 1906 that includes several dozen charms he had collected from the west of Ireland. Although aimed

at a broader audience interested in the life of the west, it was also strikingly academic in tone. Hyde made clear identifications of the persons from whom he had obtained the songs, prayers, hymns, and charms, along with the location and occasionally the date where the items had been found. Rather than silence the Irish language in which he had encountered much of the folk material in order to satisfy Anglophone readers, Hyde presented the entire publication in both languages so that English translations could be compared side by side with Irish originals. Finally, Hyde was knowledgeable about broader religious and national context, prompting him to draw comparisons between the Irish prayers and those of other (usually European) cultures in a way that anticipated the great transnational folklore motif indices of the mid-twentieth century.

Yet when it came to ethnographic observations and analysis of the practice of charming (or of song, devotion, etc.), Hyde's descriptions became sparse or non-existent, revealing his simultaneous roots in the academic world of the nineteenth century. His approach to the presentation of the charms exhibited limitations akin to those of contemporary collectors of the Irish *caointe* (funeral laments, or keens) as described by the scholar Seán Ó Coileáin (1988: 104–108) in his nuanced observation of the way edited publications of the nineteenth- and early-twentieth centuries severed these laments from the context of their delivery by keening women. The results, Ó Coileáin notes, hid the extemporaneous – although thematically and syntactically highly controlled – nature of keening behind a veneer of an authoritative, single-version text. In *Abhráin Diadha Chúige Connacht*, Hyde engaged in a similar process, albeit in reverse: a genre that was often rooted in a set text (in this case, charms collected in the manuscripts of Ireland's Irish-language scribal culture) were extracted from those manuscripts and set alongside other collected material whose oral provenance received strong emphasis. Moreover, although he did not conceal instances in which charms had been found in manuscripts, Hyde was much more likely to play up the orality of the material he had collated in general, noting that “few, indeed, of these things have ever been put upon paper until now” and stressing the existence of charms taken down “from the mouth” (Hyde 1972 [1906]: 1:ix, 2:55). This effectively obscured the manner in which the scribes who produced these manuscripts acquired, used, and distributed the charms that Hyde later published.

None of this is to take away from the importance of Hyde's work as a source for modern researchers. His willingness to suspend narrow definitional boundaries so that a work ostensibly on folk religious customs could include charms at all is itself a notable achievement. Rather, the central point to be made here is that the scribal context surrounding eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Irish charm exemplars deserves closer investigation, so that the textual prac-

tices that surrounded the propagation of charms can be restored to their place alongside the words of the charms themselves. The preliminary examination below of those charms that appeared in Irish-language scribal culture of this period concentrates on three aspects: scribal attitudes toward charms and in particular their relationship to broader religious and medical practices; the intellectual interaction between scribes and the charm texts they copied; and, finally, the impact on charms of what was in fact, the highly bilingual world in which scribes operated.

Charms represented a small portion of the overall output of approximately 4,000 manuscripts produced by Ireland's hundreds of Irish-language scribes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but they were not unknown. No precise count of the number of charms in the Irish-language manuscripts has yet been completed, a process made difficult by the possibility that early cataloguers of Irish manuscripts (*e.g.*, Grady, et al. 1925–53; Abbott and Gwynn 1921) may have overlooked some charms with particularly close affinities with religious prayers. But a conservative count of at least 100 charms can be identified from the material that has been both fully catalogued and indexed (de Brún and Herbert 1986; de Brún 1967; Dillon, et al. 1969; Ó Fiannachta 1978–80; Walsh and Ó Fiannachta 1943–80; O'Rahilly, et al. 1926–70). The scribes who copied these charms were generally from modest, although highly literate, backgrounds in which common occupations included farmer, primary school teacher, tutor, farm laborer, animal herd, stone cutter, tailor, weaver, hosteller, peddler, and shipwright (Ní Shéaghda 1990:569–74). Another common scribal occupation, that of priest, does not appear to be represented among those interested in charms, although there is evidence of sympathy of some members of the early nineteenth-century Irish clergy toward their use (Wolf 2010:133–34). Among the figures who have been identified as taking an interest in charms were the scribes Mícheál Óg Ó Longáin (1766–1837), an intermittent teacher and the most prolific and wide-ranging participants in the Irish literary world of the time, and his son, Seosamh (1817–1880), who was initially a national school teacher but went on to become a member of the Royal Irish Academy. Another notable school teacher-scribe, Peadar Ó Gealacháin (1792–1860), left behind charm texts as well.

Within this scribal world, texts were circulated and recopied that contained a diverse array of genres, secular and religious, and both literary and non-literary. These included medieval adventure tales, formal hero cycles, aristocratic praise poems of the classical Irish period, medical texts, apocryphal histories, saints' lives (of both continental and Irish origin), devotional poetry, and the later political poems of original composition of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This was a literary culture at once conservative, given its preference

for re-copying older favored pieces, and at the same time inventive, changeable, and distinctly modern in its interaction with politics, evolving understandings of national identity, and eighteenth- and nineteenth-century print culture (Ní Úrdail 2000: 204–206; Buttimer 1993:588–603; McQuillan 2004:183–229). The result, as L.M. Cullen has described it, was a corpus of texts constituting the most “remarkable evidence . . . in Europe of the intellectual, social and political recesses of an important and influential layer of society – essentially a middling group – in the rural world” (Cullen 1988:52; see also Ó Donnachadha 1994).

With this public sphere constituted by the exchange and discussion of Irish-language texts necessarily smaller and more intimate, the contents of these manuscripts could more directly reflect the interests of the scribes and their local context. As a minority language set side by side with a wider English-speaking world well represented in print publications, and with declining numbers of Irish speakers during this same period, the producers of Irish-speaking material did not need to ensure that their writings reached a wide – especially a national or international – range of readers. Instead, their work targeted a more localized set of readers consisting of patrons (often themselves of a relatively similar social background to the scribe), fellow scribes, family members, and neighbors, encouraging a subset of scribes with an interest in charms to devote themselves to preserving the incantations in written form. The persistence of the circulation of charms by manuscript contrasted with the predominant trends in the print world and among other languages. As T.M. Smallwood has noted, the serious presentation of charms in print form in a language like English declined noticeably during the early modern period (Smallwood 2004:19–22). Charms did not disappear entirely: counter-examples of interest in charms in English-language print can be found in the texts of the educated classes in, for instance, the seventeenth century (Roper 2005:101). But as a serious subject for discussion, charms experienced a shift in which general-readership publications had, by the nineteenth century, begun to see them as unusual vestiges of popular healing practices. This was as true in sectors of English-language print culture in Ireland as elsewhere, as in this excerpt from an 1825 edition of *The Belfast Magazine and Literary Journal* describing life along the banks of Lough Neagh:

There is a particular charm by which some people in Fervagh pretend to cure the erysipelas. They repeat some words in an inaudible tone, and drive a horse shoe nail, or as they term it ‘stab,’ into the stake to which cows are fastened when in the ‘byre,’ and the cure is completed! (P., “Lough Neagh,” 1825: 494)

Offered under the label “superstitions” (492) and represented as “remnants of the olden time,” (494) such words indicated a clear distancing between the anonymous author and the techniques of folk healing.

By contrast, scribes accorded charms a different status in their texts. Evidence from the way in which scribes integrated them into the running order of their manuscripts suggests that the healing practice were seen as part of a continuum of medical and religious prescriptions for improving health, as well as a constituent part of a broader culture of Irish-language written forms. A single-purpose charm reliquary has not been identified to date; instead, charm exemplars were copied by their owners onto the same pages as poems, prose texts, jottings, and short notes without marking them out as distinct from their surrounding context. Of course, the composite nature of many of the surviving texts, which were often split apart and stitched back together, in many cases with manuscripts of completely different provenances, makes for difficulties in discerning any particular patterns in the way scribes inserted charms at certain points in their writings. But instances in which charms were included among contrasting genres even on a single page helps confirm the finding that scribes considered the practice to be an unmarked feature of their surrounding culture.

An illustration of this tendency can be seen in the manuscripts left by the scribe Brían Ó Fearraghail, born in 1715 in the barony of Athlone and active in the surrounding areas of Counties Roscommon and Galway where he made a living as a cowherd (O’Rahilly, et al. 1926–70: fascicle II, 154). Although active in a region – Connacht – where scribal culture was in a weaker state by this period, Ó Fearraghail could count among his patrons one of the most visible Catholic public intellectuals of the eighteenth century, Charles O’Conor of Belanagare (1710–1791). One of his manuscripts, Royal Irish Academy (hereafter, RIA) Ms 23 O 35, written between the dates of 1772 and 1778, is typical of many other texts of this time. Its contents roamed from religious verse spanning the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries to hagiography, orthodox Catholic litanies, devotional prose, and secular verse such as Seán Ó Conaill’s *Tuireamh na hÉireann*, composed around the year 1657. The entire manuscript, now 372 pages in total, thus reads like a composite miscellany of anything of interest that the scribe (or his patron) wanted to see written down. This included a half-dozen charms that drew Hyde to the manuscript, then in the possession of his close friend Dr. Thomas Bodkin Costello (1864–1956), over a century later when he reproduced them in *Abhráin Diadha Chúige Connacht* (2:385–391). But although Hyde took an interest in the marginalia accompanying Ó Fearraghaile’s charm, he did not name the scribe or provide an indication of the wider textual surroundings provided by the full original manuscript.

A closer look at RIA Ms 23 O 35, however, hints at the status of charming and the integration of the practice into broader religious and secular textual culture. Identified as *orthaí* by Ó Fearrachaile, the charms were placed directly alongside secular prose material, common prayers, and verse on a single page, separated only by a horizontal line. An example of Ó Fearrachaile's approach can be found on the recto of page 195, where two toothache charms (the second of the **Super Petram** type) and a third for farsy follow immediately after a short note describing three early converts to Christianity in Ireland and verses for calculating the Epact. This integration of medical and religious material continues on the verso (p. 196), in which further charms for backache, another for farsy, and a third entitled "Orrta [sic] ar an Ruádh – the Rose" were copied next to an herbal cure for animals and a set of directions for determining whether an ill person will die. Transcriptions of all but the last of these can be found in Hyde's *Abhráin Diadha Chúige Connacht*, while the rose charm, a cure for erysipelas (referred to as "the rose" by Irish speakers; see Dinneen 1996: s.v. *ruaidhe*) consisted of the following to be recited in Irish, accompanied by instructions in English:

Orrta ar an Ruádh – *The Rose*

Ruadh ruaidhe, galar nimhneach atmhur cruaidh, Brighidh agus Brían, solladh Padruig agus Muire mhor, Rígh na Ríoghthe agus Iosa Criosd dá dhíbheirt dhiot, amen.

[Charm for the Rose

Red rose, poisonous sickness, hard swelling, Bridget and Brian, Profit of Patrick and great Mary, King of the Kings and Jesus Christ to banish it from you, Amen.]

*To Repeat this Oration 3 Times over the person infected, with the Sign of ye Cross as often as you repeat it, then get a little Butter & repeat over the Butter as aforesaid; and so close, that yr breath may come on it, and give the person Indisposed to Chaft [sic] himself therewith*

Preceded and succeeded by a variety of content other than charms, the resulting effect is one in which the scribe, whatever his interest in producing the manuscript overall (antiquarian or otherwise), saw charms as a fully integrated part of a wider world of medicinal and religious knowledge being recorded in the text.

A second notable feature that characterizes the scribal recording of charms – and which is especially indicated by the two annotations that occur in the margins of Ó Fearrachaile's manuscript – is the contingent means by which the charms were collected and preserved in the first place. The survival of marginalia commenting on the origin of a charm or their effectiveness serves as a reminder that, alongside the emphasis on diachronic dissemination (rightfully)

placed by scholars on the copying and recopying of scribal texts over decades and centuries – the same can be said by charms scholars for charm transmission over the *longue durée* as well – the sharing of charms also necessarily entailed a distinctly synchronic event when one practitioner made the decision to pass along his or her knowledge to another. Again, the Ó Fearraighaile manuscripts are somewhat rich with regard to this type of contextual evidence. For example, following a charm to cure the bite of a mad dog recorded on the recto of page 117 of RIA Ms 23 E 7, written circa 1781, Ó Fearraighaile wrote “Per Jas. Gyraghty 1781,” very possibly the Seamus Mag Oireachtaigh who copied what is now British Library Ms Egerton 178 in 1782 from material found in RIA Ms 23 O 35 (O’Rahilly, et al. 1926–70: fascicle II, 133, 154). This suggests an ongoing exchange of charm texts between the two, but one in which the transmission occurred more or less spontaneously, enabling Ó Fearraighaile to simply slip the charm text into his manuscript at the point where he had last left off transcribing the previous item – in this case, a prose tract on religious doctrine. Marginalia in this manuscript also reveals the occasional dialogue over efficacy of charms that took place, as in the comments written either by Ó Fearraighaile or, more likely, by a later owner of the text, alongside a charm to transform the gender of a newborn child. Annotated with the words “it’s hard to believe that oration” (RIA Ms 23 E 7:199), this comment reveals a concern on the part of the manuscript owner about the quality of the curated charm collection and an eagerness to warn against those cures that might prove to be ineffective.

A final characteristic of the Irish scribal charms was their insistence on preserving the original language in which the charm was intended to be recited. Charm researchers have long been aware of the sanctity of the spoken (or written) words of the charm, which cannot be arbitrary in the view of their users lest they lose their efficacy. At the same time, international charm motifs would not be possible without some sort of willingness for texts and oral utterances to jump languages and make the translational transition to a new target language. Because scribal culture in Ireland by the end of the eighteenth century was more or less fully bilingual, a fact reflected in the content of their manuscripts which were generally in Irish but included English material as well, the question of how charms were treated linguistically by the Irish scribes holds considerable interest.

As it turns out, both English and Irish were employed in copying the charms texts – but only up to a point. Brían Ó Fearraighail, for instance, mixed both English- and Irish-language titles for his charms, and would add English instructions for how to use them. But the text of the charm itself – that is, the words to be spoken – were not only in Irish, but in a scribal hand that assumed the reader was fully literate in the language and not just able to work out pho-

netic spellings of the language based on English literacy, as was often the case of texts in this period. Instances of translations of charms into one language or the other have, thus far, proven rare, with one of the few examples consisting of British Library Ms Egerton 155, written around the year 1790 by the Meath or Cavan scribe Fearghal Ó Raghallaigh (see item #17, folio 61b). The fact that the charm Ó Raghallaigh translated was an iteration of the **Super Petram** type revolving around the historiola of Peter suffering a toothache, a charm with particularly wide international coverage, may have had a role to play in this exception. By contrast, Ó Raghallaigh did not translate into English an accompanying charm for healing eyes that involved a micro-narrative centering on Mary and Columbcille – that is, a charm with a distinctly Irish content that would have had a much more limited international circulation.

As charm researchers know well, such detailed charm texts from earlier centuries can be frustratingly rare. Nevertheless, it can be hoped that future attempts to fully identify and catalogue Irish charms of the eighteenth and nineteenth century will turn up further evidence of the text and context in which practitioners disseminated them. Such efforts will need to consider closely the linguistic and literary features of that material with an eye to untangling the contextual culture of scribal activity that sustained them. Reconnecting the charms included in Hyde's *Abhráin Diadha Chúige Connacht* with their scribal context is one way this can be achieved – several of the manuscripts from which he took his charms survive in the archives and could easily be traced to fill out our understandings of those texts. Finally, any such research into this area will require close examination of the use of charms in analogous scribal cultures outside of Ireland, a comparative question always in need of attention even where charms are not the central research topic.

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### **About the Author**

Nicholas Wolf is an Assistant Professor/Faculty Fellow at Glucksman Ireland House, New York University. He received his Ph.D. in British and Irish history from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2008, and completed his M.A. (2000) and B.A. (1999) at the College of William and Mary. His scholarly interests are in the cultural history of Ireland in the 19th century, with particular focus on the causes and ramifications of the decline of the Irish language in this period. Contact: [nicholas.wolf@nyu.edu](mailto:nicholas.wolf@nyu.edu)

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[incantatio@folklore.ee](mailto:incantatio@folklore.ee)  
Vanemuise 42, Tartu 51003, Estonia

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