

Cuaichín Ghleann Néifin
The little cuckoo of Glen Nephin

Cuaichín Ghleann Néifin

Tá féar fada is fásach i ngleanntán álainn i bhfad ó bhaile,
'S tá úllaí agus deallraí a' fás go hard ar bharr crann ann;
Dá mbeinnse 's mo stóirín pósta 's an saol a' góil mar ba cheart
linn,
Bheadh a' t-airgead inár bpócaí 'gus luach an óil ag bean a'
leanna.

Tá smúit ar na réalta, ar an ngréin is ar an ngealaigh,
'S ar amharc mo shúl fhéin is ní léir dhom na bealaigh,
I ndiaidh cuaichín Ghleann Néifin nár fhéad mé riamh a
mhealladh;
'S a stóirín, tabhair ón bpéin mé, ó 's í do mhéin bhreá atá dho
mo lagan.

Dá mba liomsa oileán Éireann tré chéile 'gus a' Bhreatain,
Nó a bhfuil den ór craobhach ag Séarlas Ó Fatha,
Ó is dhuitse fhéin a bhéarfainn as ucht mo chéadsearc a bheith
agam
I ngleanntán Bhinn Néifin nó i mBéal an Átha Fhada.

Tá cailín óg deas ar bharr a' tsléibhe, 's is deas a' féirín i le
mealladh,
Is do chaith mé fhéin an oíche aréir léi le súil 's go bhféadfainn
i thabhairt abhaile;
Gur chúitíos le Seán Seoighe le góil romhamsa ar mo bhealach,
'S gur bhain sé coróin dhíom ar mo lóistín agus sé pingne ar
mo leaba.

Agus fágfaidh mise an áit seo mar tá sí an-uaigneach,
'S rachaidh mé a' tóraíocht mo mhíle stóirín ins gach áit a
bhfuighidh mé a tuairisc;
Ní léir dhom na cros-bhóithrí is tá na deora dho mo dhalladh,
'S é mo léan géar gan teach mo lóistín san áit a gcóiríonn tú do
leaba.

The little cuckoo of Glen Nephin

There is long and luxuriant grass in a little glen far from home, and there are apples and wild plums growing high on the treetops there; if my little treasure and I were married, and life were going right for us, there would be money in our pockets, and the ale-woman would have the price of the drink.

There is a darkness over the stars, over the sun and over the moon, and over the sight of my own eyes, and I cannot see the pathways clearly, on account of the little cuckoo of Glen Nephin, whom I have never managed to coax; and oh, my little treasure, take me out of my pain, for it's your fair appearance is weakening me.

If the whole island of Ireland were mine, and Britain as well, or all of the branching gold that Charles Fahy has, oh, it's to yourself I would give it, in return for having my first love with me in the little valley of Ben Nephin or in Ballinafad.

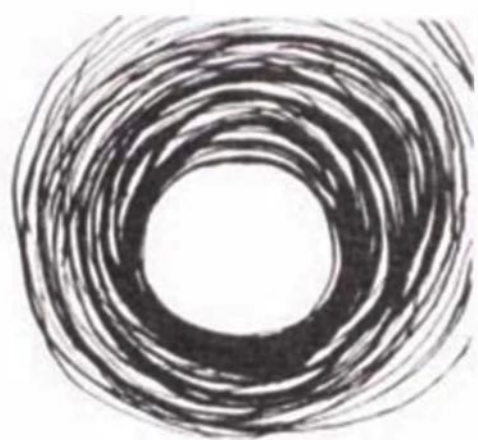
There is a nice young girl on the mountain-top, and she's a nice gift to try to win, and I myself spent last night with her in the hope that I would be able to bring her home; I paid back John Joyce for going before me on my way, and he took a crown from me for my lodgings and sixpence for my bed.

And I will leave this place, for it is very lonely, and I will go seeking my thousand little treasures in every place where I hear news of her; I cannot see the crossroads clearly, and the tears are blinding me, and it's my sharp grief that my lodging-house is not in the place where you make your bed.

This song is perhaps less well known than another one of the same name, which usually begins: 'Éireoidh mé amárach le fáinne an lae ghléghil', and which does not, in fact, in the versions I am familiar with, actually use the attractive pet-name of the title. The present song exists in several versions, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it forms part of a network of verses which has provided a number of more or less separate songs — including also the other one of the same name. The text given here is the same as the one used for the record 'Grand Airs of Connemara' (Topic, 12T 177).

'Cuaichín Ghleann Néifin' incorporates some of the typical features of Irish men's love-songs: the young man is sick with love, would give anything to obtain the girl, and is weeping in grief at not being able to have her. Such elements are to be found in scores of Irish songs, and, as Seán Ó Tuama has shown in his invaluable study, *An Grá in Amhráin na nDaoine* — 'Love in the Folksongs' — (Dublin 1960, 1978), their origins can be traced back to the twelfth-century *chansons d'amour* of Provence in southern France, which gave expression to the exalted notions of 'courtly love' — a new convention which described a man's love for a woman (generally of a higher station) as both an illness (or madness) and an ennobling force. These ideas spread throughout Europe and reached Ireland through the contact with France which followed on the coming of the Normans. What is especially interesting is that while few genuine men's love-songs have survived in the French and English folk tradition — and those which have contain almost nothing of the courtly love ideas — Ireland is particularly rich in this type of song.

However, for me, the appeal of 'Cuaichín Ghleann Néifin' lies less in the occurrence of these typical elements than in their juxtaposition with the detail which gives them 'a local habitation and a name' — the references to Glen Nephin and Ballinafad, to Séarlas Ó Fatha and Seán Seoighe. Who, incidentally, one may wonder, were these men? Doubtless the first audience of the song recognized the names, and took pleasure in witnessing the universal experience anchored in the local milieu, the familiar knowledge transfigured, enshrined in art. Our pleasure is necessarily different, since our knowledge is incomplete; it partakes, I feel, of the joy of contemplating that tantalizing attraction which time can confer on fragments. And if the survival, for perhaps two centuries, of



John F. Brown

a song containing ideas which go back six centuries more, is an impressive testimony to the conservative nature of the folk culture, it is also a tribute to the aesthetic sensibilities of the people who have kept it alive that they could continue to find beauty in relics which, detached from their original moorings, have floated their humble mystery down the years.

In the verse translation, I have altered one of the personal names and one of the placenames, in order to achieve appropriate sound effects.

Glen Nephin

My love lives in a distant valley, and it's the sweetest of
all places,

Every treetop bends down with berries and every
blossom spreads round its fragrance.

Oh, if my darling and I were married and our good
fortune did not fail us,

The golden sovereigns in our pockets would pay the
lady of the alehouse.

But the sunshine is drowned in darkness, the light of
stars and moon is waning,

And the pathways I cannot master, for my own eyesight
is surely fading,

With bitter tears for that sweet lady whose kiss of honey
I've never tasted;

And, O my darling, relieve my hardship, for it's your
charms that have me wasted.

If I owned the whole of Ireland, aye, and England
entirely,

And all the gold and money of Tony O'Reilly,

Oh 'tis smiling I'd sign them over if in my arms I could
entwine her,

In the heather around Glen Nephin or in the town of
Crossmolina.

There's a maiden on yonder mountain, and she has me
broken-hearted;
I failed to make her my life's companion when I dared
last night to ask her.
I got Seán Seoighe to go before me to see if he could
make the bargain;
He charged five shillings for my board and lodging, and
oh, my bed was never harder.

So I will quit now this bitter townland, for it has left
me sick and broken,
And I'll go seeking my only sweetheart in every place
where her name is spoken.
Oh, the teardrops they have me blinded, the clearest
signpost I cannot follow,
And it's my heartache I will not wake where you lay
your dark hair on your pillow.