

Clare Island to Jamaica:

A Piper who Sailed with Caiptín Ó Máille

- Seán Donnelly

*Agus tá mo lámha stróicthe go síoraí ag tarraingt rópaí,
Is tá an craiceann is an fheoil is í tarraingthe amach ón gcnáimh*

And my hands are torn from ceaselessly hauling ropes,
With the skin and the flesh stripped away from the bone

These lines from the song, ‘Caiptín Ó Máille’, hint at the brutal reality of handling a sailing ship in a bad storm off the west coast of Ireland. The song is attributed to (or at least put into the mouth of) the legendary smuggler, Seoirse Ó Máille (1786–c.1865) – George O’Malley – Caiptín Ó Máille or An Caiptín Máilleach. He was born in Ballynakill, co. Galway, the son of a man also involved in ‘free trade’, and boasted of his descent from Gráinne Ní Mháille – Grace O’Malley (c.1530–1603) – through both parents: *Ach is mise Seoirse Ó Máille, fear maith de bhunadh Ghráinne/*‘But I am George O’Malley, a stout man of the race of Gráinne’.¹ When Ó Máille died in the mid-1860s in the union in Westport, co. Mayo, he left behind him an enormous manuscript autobiography, full of bombast and incredible adventures (many obviously fictional), which has so far defeated all potential editors. The original disappeared in the early 20th century, and its contents are now known from some typed copies, one available (on microfilm) in the National Library of Ireland.²

The cartographer and writer, Tim Robinson, who had access to one of the surviving copies of the autobiography, summarised the early sections in an account of Ó Máille he published in 2009. These parts dealt with Ó Máille’s childhood and youth, his learning seamanship with his father, and later through service on a revenue cutter. He was pressed into the Royal Navy during the Napoleonic wars, was captured and imprisoned by the French, but eventually escaped and underwent various adventures, only to then de-

¹ Louis Cullen, ‘Captain George O’Malley, 1786–c.1865: his manuscript narrative and smuggling career’, *Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society*, lxxvii (2015), p. 103.

² *ibid.*, pp 100–25; NLI, Typescript copy of an autobiography of Capt. George O’Malley, mainly adventures at sea, early 19th c., MF, n. 1415/p. 208–9.

sert from the navy in Scotland. In his smuggling career, which ended in 1829, he first ran cargos from Guernsey in the Channel Islands, and later from Continental ports like Vlissingen [Flushing] in the Netherlands. He also made transatlantic voyages to New York, and to the Caribbean, where he claimed to have turned to piracy and slave-trading, transporting slaves from ports in West Africa to the sugar plantations in the West Indies.³

As well as the song ‘Caíptín Ó Máille’, tales of Ó Máille’s adventures were still current in Galway and Mayo folklore well into the 20th century. He is identified with a number of places along the west coast, including Clare Island, co. Mayo, previously a stronghold of Gráinne Ní Mháille. A further link he had to Clare Island occurs in some brief traditions collected in Achill, co. Mayo, between 1961 and 1964 by Gerard Stockman while researching the Irish dialect of the area. Two items name a piper from Clare Island who sailed with Ó Máille on his voyages, including those across the Atlantic. One appears under the heading ‘Occasional Sayings’:

... tá gaoth is gáladh i málaí Pheatacu -- there is wind and gale in P’s bags. P. was a pirate who sailed with Captain O’Malley, (An Caíptín Máille) and the nickname was given to a local piper. The expression is used when a piper is playing and sometimes when a braggart is talking.⁴

The origin and meaning of ‘Peatacu’ (which also occurs elsewhere as ‘Peatacó’) is not immediately obvious. The context of the saying suggests that ‘Peatacó’ was himself a piper, and while Stockman did not provide the original Irish of the explanation, the term ‘pirate’ sounds slightly odd. Could it have been an error for ‘piper’ – an understandable slip in the maritime context?

The second reference is in a song, ‘Slúipín Vaughan’, in praise of a sloop Ó Máille purchased from a fellow-smuggler, Ned Vaughan.⁵ ‘Peatacó’ is named in the second verse, and in the accompanying anecdote:

³ *Connemara: The Last Pool of Darkness* (London, 2009), pp 109–21; Cullen, ‘Captain George O’Malley’, p. 115.

⁴ Gerard Stockman, *The Irish of Achill, co. Mayo: a miscellaneous collection of linguistic material from the parish of Achill with a phonetic description of the dialect* (Belfast, 1974), p. 32.

⁵ Robinson, *Connemara*, pp 108, 121.

An Sliúipín Mháchan (?) agus Caiftín Máille

...

Ó's a Shliúipín Mháchan (?), dar liom ba laghach thú,
Tráth a bhí tú ag ardú na gcinn (?) aniar;
Ní rabh grian ná gealach ann ach stoirm is báisteach,
Agus gan fios cé'n cearn chuig a rabh do thriall.
Ba gheal le h-eilit í i measc na namhad,
Agus ba luaithe ar snámh í go mór ná'n ghaoth,
Gur sheol sí isteach chugainn ar *River* Ghráinne,
'Gus ar Thón na Reathacha 'sé chaith sé an oidhch'.
'S ag Tón na Reathachaí 'sé chuala mé 'n gháir mhór
Ag mná 's ag páistí mar bheadh an sluagh sídhe,
'Cur tuairisc Pheatacó ná 'n Chaiftín Máille
Ná ar a gcuid *cargo* 'bhí leobhtha aniar ...

Seoirse Ó Máille abhí air – George O'Malley – as Cliara. Bhí sé i *navy* Shasana agus bhíodh siad ag reathaidh ar smuglaierí. Agus bhí sé tógtha go maith, le Béarla. Agus bhí sé suas go maith in *ranke* in-a *phetty officer*.

Agus cheap siad an smuigléaraí seo agus thug siad leobhtha isteach í go *Liverpool* agus cuireadh an Caiftín Máille – sé'n rud abhí sí in-a phriosúnch annsin agus cuireadh solas uirthi.

Agus amach san oidhche, an uair a fuair sé 'ach uile fhear in-a chodladh, chuir sé 'ach uile fhear acu síos faoi'n *hold* agus tarraingigheann sé an t-ancaire and imthigheann leis. Agus chuir sé' chuile fhear dá rabh uirthí amach ar an *Isle o' Man*.

Agus rinne sé ar Chliara agus chuir sé amach an lucht sin i gCliara. Agus thug sé fear as an áit sin leis, de Chlann 'ic Chonfhaola – Peatacó 'ac Chonfhaola – agus bhain siad *Jamaica* amach aríst. Agus sin í an Sliúipín. Ó b'ait an fear é.

Stockman translates as follows:

O and S. M., I think you were pretty,
When you were rounding the headlands (?) from the west;
There was no sun or moon but storm and rain,
And no-one knew which direction you were heading,
And she was faster sailing by far than the wind,
And she sailed towards us on Gráinne's River
And at T. na R. she spent the night.
And at T. na R. I heard the great shout
From women and children, like the fairy host,
Enquiring about Peatacó or Captain O'Malley
Or their cargo they had with them from the west ...

Seoirse Ó Máille was his name – George O'Malley – from Clare Island. He was in the English navy and they used to be running on smugglers. And he was reared well, with English. And he was well up in ranks, a petty officer.

And they caught this smuggler and they brought it in with them to Liverpool and Caiftín Máille was put – there were black people on it, foreigners – Caiftín Máille was put on board when they had her prisoner then and a light was put on it.

And late in the night, when he got every man asleep, he put every man of them down under the hold and he pulled up the anchor and he goes off. And he put every man who was on her out on the Isle of Man. And he made towards Clare Island and put out that cargo in Clare Island.

And he took a man from that place with him, of the Conneely family – Peatacó 'ac Chonfhaola – and they went to Jamaica again. And that's the Slúipín. Oh, he was a great man.⁶

While this story was clearly another of the captain's tall tales, the reference in the translation to the ship he supposedly seized as being full of 'black peo-

⁶ Stockman, *Irish of Achill*, pp 176, 178, 179.

ple’, ‘foreigners’– the original Irish is not given – is intriguing in view of his claim to have been a slave-trader in the Caribbean. Down to the 1830s, the port of Liverpool was a major centre of the transatlantic slave trade, so Ó Máille could have landed there on occasion with a cargo of slaves.⁷

Ó Máille and the *Slúipín* also featured on an edition of *Siúlach Scéalach*, Radio na Gaeltachta, 2 March 2015. The presenter, Iain Lee, stated that traditions of both were still current along the coast of Mayo. He played a recording made by Pádraig Dolan in 1974 (according to the notes on the programme website, though he actually says 1972) of Seán Ó Gallchóir from Curraun, Achill talking about Ó Máille, and Seosamh Ó Gallchóir singing the song. *Slúipín Mhathúin* is what they both call the sloop; the song was to the air of ‘Anach Cuain’, and singer calls the piper ‘Peatacó’.⁸

The accompanying anecdote tells how Ó Máille took refuge in an inlet on the Mayo coast while being pursued by revenue cutters. Late at night, he hoisted lights into the sloop’s rigging, and then transferred them to a ship’s boat that he sent off, drawing the cutters away and allowing him to escape. A version of this story – which seems to be one commonly told of smugglers – was previously collected (in English) in the 1930s.⁹ The place where Ó Máille took refuge, *Tón na Reathachaí* in Stockman’s version of the song, would have been *Tóin na Rátha* – Tonaraha – in the parish of Kilmeena near Westport. Seán Ó Gallchobhair told Pádraig Dolan that it was between Newport and Mulranny. ‘Gráinne’s River’, then, is likely to have been the Carrowbeg, which enters the sea at Westport.

Naturally, Ó Máille is always in the prime of life in folklore, forever outrunning and outwitting pursuers to land fabulous cargos; but a glimpse of him in his impoverished old age occurs in a letter from a Westport man in 1964:

All I know about Captain O’Malley was what my mother often told me, that he would come down every other day to her mother’s house at the

⁷ International Slavery Museum, ‘Liverpool and the transatlantic slave trade’ @<http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/ism/srd/liverpool.aspx> (9 Jan. 2019)

⁸ <https://www.rte.ie/rnag/siulach-scealach/programmes/2015/0302/683954-silach-scalach-d-luain-2-mrta-2015/> (6 Jan. 2019)

⁹ National Folklore Collection, University College Dublin: Pádraig Ó Máille, Baile Uí Fhiacháin, co. Mhuigh Eo, The Schools’ Collection, Vol. 0088, pp 35–6 @<https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4497967/4345149> (10 Jan. 2019)

Quay, Westport, and receive some kindness in the way of a drink or two and tobacco, but she told me that he was always talking about the manuscript he had written all about his life and adventures, and how he would have money and fame when it was published. ... No one paid any attention to the old sailor when he spoke of his adventures and his manuscript.¹⁰

For a man to be ignored in his anecdotage is a common fate; but it would be nice to imagine that in the rambling tales that fell on deaf ears the old smuggler sometimes recalled his faithful shipmate and piper, Peatacó 'ac Confhaola from Clare Island.

¹⁰ Robinson, *Connemara*, p. 122.