Sean-nós singing and Oireachtas na Gaeilge:


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Abstract
This thesis examines the relationship between a style of Irish vernacular song, commonly known as sean-nós, and the Oireachtas na Gaeilge festival, Ireland’s oldest arts festival. The Oireachtas is essentially an Irish language festival that was established in 1897, at a time when Romanic nationalism was very much the intellectual zeitgeist throughout Western Europe. As such, the Oireachtas tends to be viewed in the literature as a Romantic nationalist movement. Romantic nationalism is often described as a homogenising ideology, and a number of scholars suggest that the Gaelic revival of the late 19th century, which spawned the Oireachtas, has had a standardising influence on various forms of vernacular Irish cultural expression.

Much of the literature that deals with so-called ‘folk-revivalist’ movements, like the Oireachtas festival, frames them as gentrifiers and expropriators of vernacular culture. While this is undoubtedly true in many ways, it is an interpretation that tends to overlook the agency of the so-called ‘folk’ in revival movements. It is also an interpretation that imagines the revival movement and the ‘folk’ as essentially two separate cultural formations. Here I argue that — although initially the Oireachtas exploited and gentrified vernacular Irish language song for its own nationalist agenda — over time vernacular singers increasingly came to have more power within the movement’s membership. In fact, I would argue that the singing competition should be regarded as a discrete musical community made up of individuals from within and from outside the Irish speaking districts of Ireland (Gaeltacht). I suggest that what is considered appropriate musically and aesthetically within this musical community has been informed by a blending of Romantic nationalist ideas — concerning cultural essences — with more idiosyncratic ‘native’ ideas concerning good performance.
Acknowledgements

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Again my words of thanks are pitifully inadequate for my wife Orla. This thesis would never have been completed without your support and encouragement.

Go maire sibh ar fad
Declaration
I hereby declare that this is entirely my own work and that it has not been submitted for the award of any degree at any other University.

Signed________________________________________________
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Introduction

This thesis is concerned with exploring the relationship between the Oireachtaí na Gaeilge festival (the Oireachtas for short) and sean-nós song. Sean-nós is literally the Gaelic/Irish for the old-way (sean meaning old, and nós meaning way/method/style, or approach. The term is most commonly used to describe a style of solo unaccompanied Irish vernacular singing and a style of Irish step dance, respectively (Vallely 2011, pp. 627-628). Here I am concerned primarily with sean-nós singing — although sean-nós dancing is discussed briefly in places. Oireachtas is a resurrection of an old Irish term for a king’s assembly (Ó Laoire 1998, p.163), and Oireachtaí na Gaeilge literally means the Irish language assembly. Established in 1897, the Oireachtas is Ireland’s oldest arts festival and it came into existence due to the widespread influence of Romantic nationalism in Ireland during the late nineteenth century. However, one might argue that the Oireachtas, as it exists today, is no longer primarily a Romantic nationalist organisation — as I do in Chapter VII. Nevertheless, Romantic nationalism has, more than any other ideology, informed the history of this festival, and arguably still plays a part in framing how its members view Irish culture.

The Oireachtas is essentially an Irish language festival, established to promote and extend the use of Irish throughout the island of Ireland. From the very beginning the Oireachtas organisers have used the arts as a vehicle for language revival and promotion (Ó Maolaodha 2014 [personal interview]). Song in particular, because of its language content, has historically played a pivotal role in the Oireachtas. Vernacular song has featured in the festival in various guises from the start, and the label sean-nós came to be used by the Oireachtas membership to refer to traditional singing in the Irish language. One could argue that the category sean-nós song is in fact the creation of the Oireachtas. Singing competitions have been the main format for the presentation of sean-nós at the festival, and these competitions provide the most high-profile and popular outlets for traditional Irish language singers to this day (McCann and Ó Laoire 2003, p.241). Therefore, I would argue that any
ethnomusicological study of sean-nós needs to consider the role the Oireachtas plays in the shaping of this particular genre.

Much of the literature that deals with nationalist movements — Romantic nationalist movements particularly — sees nationalism as a homogenising ideology (see Ó Laoire 2000, p.166; Graham 1997, pp. 198-209; Whelan 1993, p.31). Nationalism is essentially monoglossic because it is based on the premise that all members of the nation are one community, with the same history and culture. This means that it can be seen as an ideology resistant to heteroglossic discourse. Lillis Ó Laoire, arguably the pre-eminent authority in sean-nós studies, argues that, due largely to the influence of Romantic nationalism, the Oireachtas — through the medium of its sean-nós singing competition — reified one regional style of sean-nós (the Conamara Gaeltacht style) above all other styles of Irish singing (Ó Laoire 2000, p.167; McCann and Ó Laoire 2003, p.243). According to Ó Laoire, for various reasons Irish Romantic nationalists imagined the Conamara style of sean-nós to be the most authentically Irish of all regional styles. Singers in the Conamara style have been the most successful at the Oireachtas, and Ó Laoire sees this as evidence of a bias within the organisation favouring that regional style (2000, p.165).

Ó Laoire also believes that competitions can lead to a: “[...] homogenization of personal styles with singers sounding almost identical. In other words, singers interested in prizes tend to sing in ways which they believe will earn the approval of adjudicators” (1998, p.165). It seems that Ó Laoire is suggesting that singers at the Oireachtas who wish to be successful need to sing in the Conamara style. This suggests that Ó Laoire views the Oireachtas adjudicators as the primary authority and author of sean-nós. Generally speaking, ‘folk-revivalist’ movements, like the Oireachtas tend to be viewed in the literature as agents of change and control (see Bendix 1997; Boyes 2010; McCann and Ó Laoire 2003; Ó Laoire 2000; Ó Laoire 1998; Williams and Ó Laoire 2011; Whisnat 2009). While there is often some truth to such analysis, I would argue that it is a position that does not take into consideration the agency of the ‘folk’ within the structure of the folk revival. Ó
Laoire seems to suggest that the Oireachtas singing competition is a hegemonic structure controlled by the adjudicators and the Oireachtas executive committee that selects them. This theory essentially frames the Oireachtas membership and the sean-nós singing community as separate cultural formations.

In this thesis, however, I argue that the sean-nós singers and members of the various Irish speaking districts, collectively known as the Gaeltacht, contribute in numerous ways to the ‘authoring’ of sean-nós within the Oireachtas. I argue that the sean-nós singing competition at the festival should be regarded as a unique musical community, made up of many disparate voices, and I believe that it is a mistake to view the Oireachtas and the sean-nós singing community as separate entities. Instead, I argue that the Oireachtas singing competition should be viewed as a nexus\(^1\) or focal point around which various individuals and groups gather to debate and ‘author’ what is considered musically and aesthetically appropriate in sean-nós singing. I show that the dominance of the Conamara style within the festival is largely due to the fact that the Conamara community—through the medium of a Gaeltacht civil rights movement—essentially appropriated the Oireachtas singing competition during the late 1960s.

That being said I also argue that no single standardised style of sean-nós is promoted by the Oireachtas. Although there are certain ‘key characteristics’ that underpin what is considered to be sean-nós within the Oireachtas, the festival competition actually reinforces regional heteroglossia as opposed to national homogeneity. Arguably, this illustrates that Romantic nationalism is not the dominant ideology of the Oireachtas sean-nós singing community. The Oireachtas singing competition is very much an inter-Gaeltacht competition, where singers represent specific Gaeltacht regions, and this reinforces ideas of ethnic uniqueness as opposed to national homogeneity. This suggests that, although the Oireachtas sean-nós singing competition is a musical culture, it is nonetheless somewhat of a disparate community. I would argue that what is considered musically and aesthetically appropriate in this musical culture is

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\(^1\) From the Latin *nexinctere* meaning ‘a binding together’ (Soanes and Stevenson 2006, p.964).
arrived at through contestation and negotiation between members of various Gaeltacht communities, and between the Gaeltacht community generally and Gaelic revivalists. As I have stated above, I see the Oireachtas singing competition as the nexus point where this ‘authoring’ of sean-nós occurs.
Chapter I: Theoretical Orientation

This thesis is located within the fields of ethnomusicology and Irish music studies. As a discipline, ethnomusicology is founded on the premise that in order to understand music, the significance of its relationship to the rest of culture must be uncovered (see Merriam 1971, pp.17-35; and Nettl 2005, pp.215-231). However, as Kwabena Nketia points out many ethnomusicologists take this to mean that music reflects the total culture of a society or social group (1981, pp. 22-23). One of the dangers of this particular view of music and culture is that it does not easily allow for the existence of a multiplicity of views within the same individual or social group. As a theoretical orientation it almost automatically leads the researcher to assume that views on music reflect views on the ‘total culture’ (ibid). This is problematic when it comes to the issue of ‘authenticity’ and music. As I discuss in Chapter II, cultural authenticity is based on notions of cultural essences and purity (sometimes ethnic purity), however, as I discuss below musical authenticity can be a far more nebulous term used to refer to aesthetic musical boundaries.

1.1 Musical Culture

Drawing on the work of Nketia, I suggest that, in order to understand the relationship between ‘authenticity’ and music, we need to shift our focus from ‘total culture’ to ‘musical culture’.

A musical culture can be described simply as the aggregate of cultural traditions associated with music which become evident at the juncture of the social and the musical, traditions that are learned in the social process or in special learning situations, traditions that are cultivated, practiced and recreated by the members of a society in the different roles they assume as music makers, instrument makers and audiences in different contexts of situation. A musical culture thus embraces more than ‘the tonality of musical “events” within a society or social unit’.

(Kwabena Nketia 1981, pp 31-32)
Nketia acknowledges that because all music is cultivated in a particular social and physical environment, this means that as well as being shaped by ideas generated within its own sphere (musical culture) it is also shaped to a certain degree by:

[...] the response of music makers to the wider environment of their world of reality. A musical culture may respond to for example, to technology and industry, to current political and social tendencies and expressions that music makers share with other members of their society, to variations in social structure or the emergence of subcultures, popular culture or the intellectual and philosophical climate of the wider environment. This is because while music is created and developed as an entity which has to be learnt, the makers of music are members of society and may carry their life experience with them into their music or exert pressure on society through their music. [...] There are thus broader connotations of the juncture of the social and the musical. Responses to the wider environment that are carried into the musical sphere or into the arrangements for music making become a componential feature of a musical culture or its musical expression. So are elements and features adopted from contiguous cultures or through the mass media. A musical culture must, therefore, be regarded as something dynamic and capable of growth or change in relation to the social and the musical or their juncture and as something that develops its own characteristics modes of expression and behaviour.

(Nketia 1981, p. 32)

Nevertheless, while Nketia acknowledges that musical culture may interact or overlap with other spheres of culture, he argues that it maintains a distinct identity not only through the musical but also the social sphere (ibid, p.32). Consequently, there need not be a correspondence between the structural relationship of members of a performing group and their structural relations outside musical contexts, because different social structures can also be created for the purpose of music making (ibid, p.33). To illustrate this point Nketia refers to a number of societies where musicians who have a high status in their own field (musical culture) can have a fairly low status in the ‘total culture’ (ibid). We can also assume, therefore, that a musical culture with very essentialist views with regard to its music does not necessarily have essentialist views with regard to the total culture.
Although he does not use the term musical culture, Thomas Turino also argues for a move away from thinking that music reflects the total culture of a society or social group. Turino suggests that the terms “cultural cohort” or “identity cohort” be used to refer to social groupings that form along the lines of specific constellations of shared habit based in similarities of parts of the self (2008, p.111). He defines the self as the: “composite of the total number of habits that determine the tendencies of everything we think, feel, experience and do” (2008, p.101). Identity, however, for Turino: “involves the partial and variable selection of habits and attributes that we use to represent ourselves to ourselves and to others, as well as aspects that are perceived by ourselves and by others as salient” (ibid, p.102).

Turino uses the term: “cultural formation to refer to a group of people who have in common a majority of habits that constitute most parts of each individual member’s self” (ibid, p.112)— what Nketia calls “total culture”. Membership of cultural cohorts on the other hand is based on certain specific aspects and habits of the self, which are highlighted in order to join (or be joined) with other members (ibid, p.113). An individual can be a member of various cohorts and these can change throughout one’s life; for example, being a fan of a particular sports team, or music group or genre, are all forms of cultural cohort. The idea of choice is central to the concept of cultural cohorts. Throughout this thesis I suggest that those who participate in the Oireachtas sean-nós singing competition are a unique musical culture — the Oireachtas sean-nós singing cohort. Nevertheless, this does not mean it is a homogenous community — ideology or aesthetically. Instead, I argue that the Oireachtas sean-nós cohort is diverse and multifaceted.

**Music Cultures and Authenticity**
Discussing the relationship between authenticity and music, Stokes states that: “‘authenticity’ is a discursive trope used by social actors in specific local situations to erect boundaries, to maintain distinctions between us and them” (1997, p.6). Authenticity focuses a way of talking about music, a way of saying to outsiders and
insiders alike “this is what is really significant about this music” “this is the music that makes us different from other people” (Stokes 1997, p.7). In other words, Stokes is suggesting that authenticity is essentially a device used by members of musical communities to define and argue over what they consider to be aesthetically pleasing and musically appropriate in their musical culture. This interpretation of authenticity allows us to see music less as a fixed essence with certain definable properties and more as a wide field of practices and meanings with few significant or socially relevant points of intersection (ibid). In Chapters VI I draw on this idea of musical authenticity in order to illustrate how members of the Oireachtas sean-nós singing cohort use the idea of authenticity to illustrate what is aesthetically and musically significant in this musical culture.

1.2 Refocusing Ethnography

Historically, ethnomusicologists almost exclusively studied music-cultures other than their own, and for a time ethnomusicology was defined as the study of all of the world’s music, excluding Western art music and western popular music (see Nettl 2005, pp.184-196; Stock and Chiener 2008, pp.108-123). Nowadays however ethnomusicologists have extended the area of research to include all of the world’s music, including Western art and popular music (see Cottrell 2004; Ramnarine 2011, 327-348; Dobson and Pitts 2011, pp.353-374; Bayley 2011, pp. 385-409; Usner 2011, pp. 413-435; Moisala 2011, 443-449; Cooley 2014). Indeed, some ethnomusicologists have called for ethnomusicalogical field-work to be refocused, so that it better reflects some of the more diffuse music communities that exist today, some of which have members spread all over the world, many of them interacting through virtual online communities (Cooley et al 2008, pp. 90-107). Others have highlighted the importance and benefits of researching one’s own culture (Stock and Chiener 2008, pp. 108-124).

Ethnography, in the form of participant-observation combined with in-depth interviews with members of the musical culture being studied, is the standard methodology used by ethnomusicologists. While my method here is primarily centred on ethnographic fieldwork, my approach is somewhat unconventional.
Within ethnomusicology, ethnographic fieldwork normally involves the researcher spending an extended period living in and with a group of people (musical culture) and experiencing the music making, as well as the more general cultural practices, of that group. Sometimes the ethnographer interviews members of the musical community in order to get a clearer view of the inner workings of their community and music (these individuals are often referred to as informants or consultants in the literature). The musical culture that I am concerned with here is what I refer to above as the Oireachtas sean-nós singing cohort\(^2\).

The Oireachtas is an annual week-long festival, and sean-nós singing features primarily during the last three days of the festival. Undertaking participant-observation in such an ephemeral community is extremely problematic, and although I did undertake fieldwork at the Oireachtas in 2010, 2011, and 2012, I decided to supplement this research with an analysis of various Oireachtas archival material (see Chapters IV and V). I argue that much of the data contained in the Oireachtas archives can be read as ethnographic material, especially adjudicator reports from the various sean-nós singing competitions. My research also draws on a number of in-depth interviews I undertook with members of this musical community. My first interview informant is a sean-nós singer from the Kerry Gaeltacht, who I refer to as Informant A throughout, due to the sensitive nature of some of the material discussed. My second and primary informant is Liam Ó Maolaodha, the longstanding director of Oireachtas na Gaeilge. Ó Maolaodha is originally from Clondalkin in Dublin but currently he resides in the Conamara Gaeltacht.

**Insider-Ethnomusicology**

This study falls generally into the school of ethnomusicology that is concerned with the researcher’s own culture, what is sometimes referred to as insider-ethnomusicology. I hold with the new-ethnographies that emerged out of the

\(^2\) Here I am using the term cohort to refer to a “group of people with a shared characteristic” (Soanes and Stevenson 2006, p.278)
anthropological social sciences during the 1980s, in that I see ethnographies largely as works of fiction, in the sense that they are new creations. Ultimately all ethnographic work is greatly influenced by the ethnographer. Our gender, personal background and education, and nationality give us all a unique perspective. Therefore, in the spirit of openness I have written myself into the ethnographic chapters as much as possible, in the hope that this reminds the reader that this ethnography is based on the subjective observations of the author. Before moving on to discuss some of the issues related to ‘insider’ versus ‘outsider’ perspectives, I feel it is necessary to present a brief autobiography, in order to illustrate that my position is not entirely that of an insider or an outsider, but something in between.

**Autobiography**

My position with regards to music in general is best described as being “achieved” rather than “ascribed” (Merriam, cited in Cottrell 2004, p.21). In other words, I was not born into a family of hereditary musicians, and I became a musician largely through my own choice — neither of my parents sing or play an instrument, although both are interested in many forms of music, including Irish traditional music and sean-nós. I am originally from Carraroe in the Conamara Gaeltacht, and I spent the first nineteen years of my life there. With the encouragement of my parents, I began to take lessons on the button accordion and tin whistle at around the age of twelve, when Steve Sweeney, from Cois Pharrain in Conamara, began giving music lessons in primary schools all over South Conamara. Although these lessons were held during school hours they were optional and not part of the school’s curriculum. I abandoned the whistle after a short period, but I continued on the accordion for three years. At fifteen years of age I swapped from the accordion to the guitar.

Although I still had an interest in Irish traditional music I was not sure at the time if the accordion was the instrument for me. I took some basic guitar lessons privately for a year, and I developed a keen interest in rock, blues, and heavy metal. Once I swapped to guitar, I played very little traditional music until my early twenties, when I began to participate in Irish traditional music pub sessions playing on the guitar.
Eventually this led me to take up the accordion again, and after a year or two I abandoned the guitar completely. In my late twenties I purchased a set of uilleann pipes, and I now play both the pipes and the button accordion.

I can recall being present at a number of *sean-nós* performances early in my childhood, and I occasionally listened, with my family, to the *Oireachtas sean-nós* competitions which were broadcast in full at that time on *Raidió na Gaeltachta* (*RnaG*) — the national Irish-language radio station. However, I do not recollect hearing *sean-nós* being performed all that often during my early childhood. Instead, as far as I can recall, the music of my early childhood was, for the most part, a mixture of popular music, Irish traditional instrumental music, and Irish language country and western (see footnote 2), all of which I was hearing through the radio and television.

When I was in my mid to late teens I discovered a number of old vinyl records in my parent’s attic. A number of these records were by *sean-nós* singers from Conamara, such as Joe Heaney, Sean ‘ac Donnacha, and Caitlín Maude (others featured groups from the Irish ballad boom of the 1960s, such as The Johnsons, and there were also a number of albums by American crooners, such as Perry Como and Dean Martin). Over the years I became more aware of singers from other *Gaeltacht* areas, such as Diarmuid Ó Súilleabháin (1947-1991) from Cúil Aodha in the Cork *Gaeltacht*, Gearóidín Breathnach from Rann na Feirste in the Donegal *Gaeltacht*, and Nioclás Tóibín (1890-1966) from Rinn in the Waterford *Gaeltacht* (*ainm.ie* 2015). I developed a keen interest in *sean-nós* from all districts, and I began —largely through osmosis— to learn to sing material from various recordings of singers from all the *Gaeltacht* districts.

However, I see myself primarily as an instrumental player, and my interest in *sean-nós* is primarily that of an avid fan. I rarely sing in public and I have never competed in any *sean-nós* competition. Personally, I have never had any real interest in competing in any kind of music or singing competition; at the same time I do not
object to the idea of musical competitions as a performance practice. My experience of Irish traditional music and song has largely been centred on the traditional pub session.

**Music in Carraroe**

During the early 1990s, when I was still in secondary education, I began frequenting local pubs in Carraroe, which were at that time the main social centre of the area. I have no recollection of ever hearing *sean-nós* being performed in any of the local pubs, although I do recall being present at one or two traditional sessions in one of the pubs in the area during this period. The most popular music performed in the pubs of Carraroe during my adolescence was a form of Irish language country and western\(^3\), performed by local musicians — this remains the most popular music in the area to this day. As well as the country and western bands which performed in the local pubs, cover bands from outside the area also performed in the local parish hall, *Halla Éinne*, every Friday night during my adolescence. Many of these bands evolved out of the show-band tradition, and they performed covers of the popular hits of the day from the Irish, English and American charts (see footnote 2). Popular electronic (disco) music— also from the Irish, English and American charts—was also played by local disc jockeys in the parish hall every Saturday night during this time.

This illustrates that during my childhood and adolescence (1980s and 1990s), *sean-nós* was one of a number of musical cultures that existed in Carraroe. Indeed, apart

\(^{3}\)During the late 1950s the show-bands emerged in Ireland as a popular form of entertainment. These were essentially cover bands that played American and British rock ‘n’ roll, country and western, Dixieland jazz, and songs from the English hit parade (White and Boydell 2013, p.933). Country and western in particular had a huge impact on the Irish populace in general, and many of the show-bands eventually morphed into country bands or, as they are sometimes referred to in Ireland, country and Irish bands (ibid, pp.255-257). It was this popularity with country and western that led one young man from Lettermullen in Conamara, John ‘Beag’ Ó Flatharta, to form in the early 1980s a unique form of country and western duet, Na hAincairí [the Anchor Men] (Ó Cualáin 2009). Ó Flatharta sang and played acoustic guitar and he was joined on button accordion by Padraig Ó Lochlainn from Carraroe. Unlike other country and western groups performing in Ireland at the time Ó Flatharta sang in Irish as well as in English. Na hAincairí also mixed traditional English language ballads with newly composed songs sung in a country and western style (Vallely p.p.513-514).
from the *Oireachtas* radio broadcasts and occasional public performance, *sean-nós* was in fact somewhat of a marginal and niche music within the community. Although the Gaeltacht is central to this thesis, a detailed discussion on why *sean-nós* was such a niche music in Carraroe when I was growing up falls outside the remit of this work. This is because here I am concerned with the agency of members of the Gaeltacht community within the *Oireachtas* membership, and not with the relationship of the Gaeltacht community as a whole with *sean-nós* singing (see Chapter V).

The above discussion illustrates that the community I grew up in was by no means culturally homogenous — at least with respect to musical taste. As far as I can recall most of the *sean-nós* singers I was aware of growing up came from families who were steeped in that tradition, and this led me to believe that in order to sing *sean-nós* one had to be from a long line of singers\(^4\). Therefore, my position as an achieved musician suggests I am somewhat removed from the ‘typical’ *sean-nós* background — at least within the context of Conamara. Also, although I have listened to numerous radio broadcasts from the *Oireachtas* over the years, until I began my research I had never attended the festival in person. Therefore, my experience at the festival during my research was truly that of a neophyte. In addition, I have spent the past twenty years of my life living, working and studying outside of the Gaeltacht. I would argue that all this lends a certain level of distance to my views on the Gaeltacht and the Oireachtas.

### 1.3 Developing an Ethnographic Research Method for analysing the Oireachtas *sean-nós* singing Cohort

Combined with ethnographic fieldwork at the *Oireachtas*, my initial research plan was to interview as wide a group of informants as possible. Specifically I had decided to interview a number of *sean-nós* singers who compete at the festival, *sean-nós* singers who do not compete at the festival, festival adjudicators, *Oireachtas*...
audience members, and members of the Oireachtas staff. My hope was that, my
drawing on this wide pool of informants, I would develop more of an understanding
of what is considered aesthetically and musically appropriate within the context of
the Oireachtas. I also wondered if and how this might differ from other non-
competitive performance contexts for sean-nós singing.

Throughout late 2010 and 2011 I attended a number of sean-nós festivals, and other
sean-nós events in various Gaeltacht areas. I spoke with a number of singers and
audience members at these events. Additionally, throughout my fieldwork at the
Oireachtas I spoke with numerous singers —some of whom were also Oireachtas
adjudicators— and audience members at the festival. Some of these encounters were
very fruitful, and indeed a number of the arguments I make throughout this thesis
draw on my experience speaking informally with different individuals at the
Oireachtas (see Chapter VII). Nevertheless, early on in my research I became
increasingly frustrated with my initial research method.

I found that many of those I spoke with associated me, because of my accent and
because I told them where I was from, with the Conamara Gaeltacht —what is
arguably a privileged group within the Oireachtas (see Chapters V). As a result,
some of those I spoke with from other districts were, to my mind, quite guarded in
expressing how they felt about the Oireachtas competitions. I also found myself at
times either defending or apologising for the dominance of the Conamara style
within the festival. Others were more forthcoming, and I did speak with a number of
singers/adjudicators from a number of Gaeltacht districts. However, even then I
found that although I was new to the Oireachtas, I was nevertheless somewhat of an
‘insider’ in this community in many ways. When I questioned potential informants
on the nature of sean-nós and the role played by the Oireachtas in the shaping of this
tradition, more often than not the answers I got appeared to be tailored to my
perceived position, the party line as it were. Much of what I was being told was not
new to me and this increased my growing sense of frustration, because I genuinely
feared that if I continued with the particular research method I was following, my
research would not contribute anything new to the literature on sean-nós or the Oireachtas.

These initial ethnographic ventures did reveal however the importance of adjudicating in this musical community. Nearly every conversation I had with sean-nós singers at the Oireachtas and elsewhere came back to the issue of adjudicating. I decided therefore to interview as wide a pool of Oireachtas adjudicators as possible. However, I quickly realised that this might not be the best approach to take, for a number of reasons. For one, I worried that adjudicators would be reluctant to speak frankly with me for fear of revealing any underlying biases they might have. I was also concerned that, because I am originally from Conamara, adjudicators might be reluctant to talk openly with me on the issue of Conamara’s dominance within the festival. I do believe that with time I would have been able to develop trusting relationships with potential informants, and indeed this is exactly what did develop between me and Informant A. However, due to the inherent constraints of a PhD thesis—limited resources and time constraints—this was not feasible in this instance.

Additionally, as my thesis progressed and became more refined I came to realise that conventional ethnographic interviews might not be the best method for gaining a detailed insight into the Oireachtas adjudicating. Numerous individuals have adjudicated at the festival over the years from within the various Gaeltacht districts and elsewhere. I toyed with the idea of interviewing four adjudicators from each of the main Gaeltacht districts—Irish speaking districts (see Chapter II for definition and history of the Gaeltacht), and four adjudicators from outside the Gaeltacht. In total this would mean I would have to undertake twenty four interviews. Arguably this would be more suitable to a fully-fledged, confirmatory study than to a modest

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5 My friendship with Informant A was developed over a period of three years. I became acquainted with this individual in 2009 through my work. In Chapter VII, I argue that the Oireachtas sean-nós singing competition is essentially an inter-Gaeltacht competition and my interviews with Informant A contributed greatly to the formation of this hypothesis.
exploratory study such as I have engaged with here. However, even if time and resources were not an issue I question whether this would be the most appropriate method.

For one thing I would query whether twenty four interviewees would be sufficient. I would offer that, generally speaking, most ethnographers would probably consider twenty four informants to be excessive. However, as I have outlined above, this figure represents four potential informants from each district. The question of how to choose these interview informants troubled me. Like any musical community the Oireachtas sean-nós singing cohort is by no means culturally homogenous, and I was concerned that I might inadvertently present the idiosyncratic views of a relatively small group of informants as being representative of each Gaeltacht district and of the adjudicators as a whole. I considered using various forms of survey questionnaires, as a means of increasing my informant base; however, because of my background in ethnomusicology I was wary of relying too much on findings based on quantitative research. I also feared that a survey questionnaire would be too leading and essentialising to be considered ethnographic data.

At this stage I was entering into the second year of my research, and I was still undecided as to how to best tackle the issue of adjudicating at the Oireachtas. To move things along I decided to make contact with the Oireachtas staff. Early in 2012 I emailed the Oireachtas na Gaeilge offices in Dublin. I expressed my interest in sean-nós adjudicating and I asked whether the Oireachtas had any archives. I received a reply the day after I had emailed the Dublin office, and I was directed to contact the current director of the Oireachtas, Liam Ó Maolaodha, in the Oireachtas office in Casla in Conamara — which is conveniently located a short distance from my parent’s home in Carraroe (up until this point I was not aware of the existence of this office). Even though I enquired after an archive I had not formulated a specific research plan at this stage. I felt however that if such an archive existed it might add some historic depth to my ethnographic research.
I emailed Ó Maolaodha in the Conamara offices, asking whether he would be willing to speak with me regarding sean-nós adjudicating at the Oireachtas, and again I asked if an archive of Oireachtas material existed. I promptly received a reply email from Ó Maolaodha, who was very open and willing to speak to me on any topic related to the Oireachtas. The tone of Ó Maolaodha’s email was very positive in general. He stated that he did indeed have an archive of Oireachtas related material and that I was free to research the materials contained in the archive at my earliest convenience. Ó Maolaodha expressed that he was very excited to hear from me because I was the first researcher to inquire after the archive, which he was still in the process of collating and organising at the time. Up until the previous year all the Oireachtas papers had been stored, largely not organised, in cardboard boxes in the Oireachtas Dublin offices. Ó Maolaodha, who is not a trained archivist, took it upon himself to organise this material so that it might serve as a resource for researchers and performers. I arranged with Liam to visit the Oireachtas Offices in Casla in April of 2012 — I was free from work commitments at this time, and Ó Maolaodha had compiled and organised the bulk of the archival material by this time (see Chapter VI).

The Oireachtas Archives: Data Collection Method and Process

The Oireachtas archives contain a wealth of material dating from the 1890s to the present day, including: festival programmes, Gaelic League periodicals, and the Oireachtas secretary remarks concerning the running of the festival. Not knowing where to start, I decided to focus initially on the official festival programmes, and the Oireachtas secretary notes. The Oireachtas produces a festival programme for every festival. These programmes contain a wealth of information related to the schedule of the festival, and the names and addresses of all the entrants in the various competitions. The secretary notes offer insights into the inner-workings of the Oireachtas executive committee. For a period of time, after every festival the acting secretary wrote a review of all the various events that were part of that festival’s programme. The perceived success or failures of the various elements of the festival’s programme are discussed, and suggestions concerning possible improvements are also given.
I began my research in the summer of 2012 by photocopying those parts of the programmes that contain the names and address of all the *sean-nós* competition entrants — there was a photocopier in the office that Ó Maolaodha said I was free to use. The analysis of this data underscores the arguments I make in Chapter IV — I argue that the dominance of the Conamara style is largely due to the fact that more singers from Conamara compete on average than from any other district. After I had finished photocopying the programmes I then moved on to the secretary notes. There was very little material in the secretary notes that predate 1940 and the secretary notes for much of the 1970s onwards are incomplete (the secretary notes informed much of my interview questions with Liam Ó Maolaodha, on the history and structure of the festival’s competitions, and this is dealt with in Chapter VII). Although I did collect valuable material during this initial excursion into the Casla *Oireachtas* archive, in many ways my research of the archives in 2012 was very much a reconnaissance of the archives. That being said, as this initial excursion was coming to a close Ó Maolaodha directed my attention to the *Oireachtas* adjudicator reports.

As I began to survey the adjudicator reports I came to the realisation that these reports were the answer to my methodological issues. Ó Maolaodha informed me that adjudicators receive very little instruction on how to mark the competitions. He said that he selects adjudicators from the world of *sean-nós* singing — either *sean-nós* practitioners or scholars of *sean-nós*, or both, as the case may be (2014 [personal interview]). Ó Maolaodha feels that because the adjudicators are “the experts” they do not need any instruction on how to assess *sean-nós* singing (ibid). He simply asks them to mark the performances out of a hundred, and if possible to write some comments and feedback for the singers.

The sheets the adjudicators are given to write on contain little other than the name and year of the festival; the name and/or competition number of the competitor; the name and number of the particular competition; a section to write a report on the
quality of singer’s performance; and an area for allocating a numerical mark for said performance. Finally there is a section at the bottom of the sheets where the adjudicator can, if they wish, sign their name. However, my analysis of the reports revealed that the only real requirement for the adjudicators is to give an overall mark for each competitor out of a hundred. It is not uncommon to come across sheets that contain nothing other than a numerical mark and the signature of the adjudicator (even the signature is not always included). Some sheets contain very detailed critique, others are written in such a way that suggests the adjudicator in question divided marks based on what they believe are the ‘key’ aesthetic characteristics of sean-nós (see Chapter VI for examples of adjudicator reports).

The structure of the reporting system allows the adjudicator quite a bit of freedom and flexibility. As I have shown above, there are relatively few boxes the adjudicator has to tick, and it is up to the individual adjudicator to comment on what s/he feels is significant and appropriate in this tradition, and then only if they themselves wish to do so. Most of the comments contained in the reports refer to what is considered appropriate and/or inappropriate in this musical culture. This suggests that the reports are in a sense a survey of the aesthetic parameters of sean-nós from the perspective of the adjudicators. However, unlike conventional surveys, the openness of the reporting system means that there is a strong ethnographic feel to the adjudicator reports.

I propose that the Oireachtas sean-nós adjudicator reports can be read as an ethnographic survey of the views of informants drawn from the Oireachtas sean-nós singing cohort. Additionally, as my research progressed I realised that many of the adjudicators who are still spoken of by members of the Oireachtas sean-nós singing cohort are no longer living — individuals such as Seán Ó Tuama, and Sorcha Ní Ghuaírín for example (see Chapter VI for details on adjudicators). The existence of the adjudicator reports allowed me to add a historic ethnographic element to my research.
The comments contained in the reports are the unedited and somewhat spontaneous observations and opinions of key insiders in the *sean-nós* singing world. As I discuss in Chapter VII, adjudicators are required to fill in the reports during the competitions. This means they have little time to reflect on or edit what they are writing. Therefore, one might assume that the views expressed in the reports represent key emic perspectives on *sean-nós* song. This is arguably the most significant aspect of the reports. They are in effect a documentation of communication between cultural ‘insiders’, and not between members of a musical culture and an ethnographer.

All ethnographers have to deal with their own position in relation to the field they are studying. Those that research their own culture can find that they have too many preconceived ideas to overcome in order to arrive at as objective a thesis as possible. Cottrell discusses in detail the advantages and disadvantages of native anthropology (see Cottrell 2004, p. 15-25). He argues that the most obvious advantage is that native anthropologists are already immersed within the cultural system that they wish to explore (ibid, p.16). They possess the: “[…] ability to ‘understand’ (in Wittgenstein’s sense of possessing the ability to use correctly) the language, conventions, customs, symbols and so on which they seek to interpret for anthropological purposes” (ibid). However, Cottrell also warns that familiarity with certain customs rules out the insights that can arise from this learning: “[…] since such learning has generally been left far behind in a time when it was most likely unconscious” (ibid, p.17). Drawing on the work of Mascarenhas-Keyes, Cottrell suggests that the insider anthropologist needs to engage in a process of “professionally induced schizophrenia” between the native self and the professional self in order to see one’s own culture as strange (ibid, p.16).

The existence of the adjudicator reports has nothing to do with me as an ethnographer. This means that — although the analysis of the reports and my findings based on that analysis is undoubtedly my creation — unlike my interview material, my voice is absent from the reports. This automatically gave me a sense of distance and perspective on what was contained within the reports. It also meant that I felt
somewhat removed from the data and by extension the *Oireachtas sean-nós* singing cohort, or the adjudicators at least. As I illustrate in Chapter VI, the actual process of reading and analysing the reports made me focus more deeply on the views expressed, by ‘others’ (the *Oireachtas* adjudicators). This created a sense of space between me and my research subjects, and consequently I naturally found myself gaining a deeper level of distanciation and objectivity from this particular genre. This, I believe would have been more difficult for me to attain if my research method was primarily centred on my own experiences singing in this musical culture, or if I relied on interviews as my principal method.

However, unlike conventional ethnographic material — such as in-depth interviews — researching archives means you are not physically interacting with your ethnographic subjects (the *Oireachtas* adjudicators in this instance). This means you do have to rely more on abductive reasoning (see Chapter I) than you would need to do if you were relying on human subjects, because you do not have the opportunity to check your findings or emerging hypothesis with your informants. Although I was able to check some of my findings on the adjudicating process with Ó Maolaodha, interviews with a number of adjudicators would undoubtedly add some valuable insights and depth to my finding. As I discuss in Chapter VIII, I plan on undertaking confirmatory studies based on this thesis that will address this issue.

**The Oireachtas Report Sheets**

When I returned to the Casla offices in 2013 my experience the previous year meant that I was more familiar with the layout and makeup of the archives, and this meant I had a more developed plan of action. By this stage in my research I had read through, analysed and annotated the data I had collected the previous year in the Casla archives. I had also finished up my *Oireachtas* fieldwork (see Chapter VII). Therefore, my focus this year was on collecting as much data from the *Oireachtas* adjudicator reports as possible. The adjudicator reports are written on single A4 sheets and I felt that a scanner would be the most accurate and efficient way of capturing this data, so before heading into the field I purchased a digital scanner
(Canon LiDe 110 digital scanner). I used this scanner in conjunction with my HP Compaq 670b laptop, which I also brought with me into the field.

Due to sheer volume of material contained in the adjudicating reports I decided that, for the most part, I would focus on the Oireachtas senior sean-nós competition. Although the title of this competition has changed over the years, for the sake of clarity, I refer to it throughout as the senior sean-nós competition (from here on abbreviated to SSNC). I spent approximately a week in the offices in 2013, and in that time I scanned all the relevant material contained within the archives. I came to realise however that the adjudicator reports in Casla were incomplete, and that they only contained material dating from the early 1990s to the present day. There is no catalogue or index of the material contained in Casla, which meant that I only discovered that the archives were incomplete when I had completed scanning all the relevant adjudicator reports.

Further research, however, revealed that the National Library of Ireland has a collection called ‘The Oireachtas na Gaeilge Papers’. The index pertaining to this collection is available to download from the NLI website, and from it I was able to establish that most of the material missing from the Oireachtas archive in Casla was contained in the NLI. For the sake of clarity I will use the term the Oireachtas archives (abbreviated form here to OA) to distinguish between the archives contained in the Oireachtas offices in Conamara and the material contained in National Library, which I will refer to as the National Library Oireachtas Papers (abbreviated to NLOP).

From September 2013 to March 2014 I intermittently visited the NLI in order to research the NLOP. I decided to photograph the archives, using a Nikon Coolpix S6300 digital camera, instead of using a scanner as I had done previously in Casla. Unlike the more modern adjudicator sheets that are held in Casla, much of the material within the NLOP is hand written in pencil on very thin paper. This, combined with the age of some of the material, meant that much of the material was
almost illegible. I experimented with photocopying, digital scanning and photographing, and I found that I got the best results using a digital camera.

The NLOP contain adjudicator reports dating from 1940-1994. There are some gaps in the archives however; there are no sean-nós adjudicating reports whatsoever for the following years: 1947-1957, 1959, 1968-1972, 1974, 1980, 1984, and 1998-2000. Also, the adjudicator reports for the SSNC —the main focus of this study— are missing for the following years: 1940, 1946, and 1990. For these years I substituted the SSNC reports with reports from a number of other senior sean-nós competitions. For example, for 1940 I included the men’s and women’s senior competitions (the winners of these competitions qualify to compete in the SSNC). In other instances, for example 1990, I use the under 35 men’s and women’s competitions adjudicator reports because they are the only ones included in the NLOP for that year (the winners of these competitions qualify to compete in the men’s and women’s senior competitions). I also analysed the under 35 men’s and women’s competition for the 1995 section, because there were only seven competitors at the SSNC in 1995.

The SSNC is the most prestigious competition in the sean-nós calendar. Therefore, one might assume that the level of critique given by the adjudicators for this competition would be more exacting than that given for some of the other Oireachtas competitions, suggesting perhaps that the inclusion of data from competitions such as the under 35 men’s and women’s and the senior men and women’s competitions would thwart my findings. However, my objective here is not to deconstruct a particular competition; instead I am primarily interested in the categories and aesthetic boundaries of this musical culture, and I would argue that these remain the same irrespective of what competition is being discussed. Any issue one might have over the inclusion of reports for competitions, other than the SSNC, is far outweighed by the insights gained from including this material.
1.4 Qualitative Analysis of the Oireachtas na Gaeilge Papers

I finished my ‘data collection’ in late March 2014. The next step in my research was to organise and analyse this material. I decided to use some analytical methods drawn from the field of grounded theory (GT) to help me organise and interpret the adjudicator reports I had copied. GT is an analytical method, initially developed by two American sociologists, Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, in the 1960s, to make sense of qualitative data, such as interviews, ethnographies, surveys etc. (Kenny and Fourie 2014, p. 2). The method devised by Glaser and Strauss, now called ‘Classic GT’, is concerned with generating theoretical ideas or hypotheses from the data, rather than approaching the data with a specified theoretical orientation beforehand. Classic GT (CGT) is not about the verification of a preconceived theory, or thick description; rather it is exclusively concerned with the discovery of an underlying theory arising from the systematic analysis of data (ibid p. 2). In other words, the premise within CGT is that theory is inductively derived from the data.

By the 1990s Strauss built on his earlier work with Glaser and along with Juliet Corbin developed what has become known as “Straussian GT” (SGT) (ibid p.4). Strauss and Corbin revised the basic tenet of Classical GT —that theory would emerge naturally from data to be discovered by the researcher. Instead they devised a highly analytical and prescriptive framework for coding the data, designed to deduce theory from data systematically (ibid p.4). Strauss and Corbin also challenged the principle of CGT of abstaining from literature prior to embarking on study, highlighting the difference between an “open mind” versus an “empty mind” (Jones & Alony cited in Kenny and Fourie 2014, p.4).

A third school of GT was developed by Katy Charmaz in the 1990s and 2000s, known as “Constructivist Grounded Theory”. Charmaz, a former pupil of both Glaser and Strass, rejects Glaser’s belief in the discovering of an implicit theory. Instead she suggests that “neither the data nor the theories are discovered” adding that “we construct our grounded theories through our past and present involvements and
interactions with people, perspectives and research practices” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 10). Charmaz was also critical of the highly systematic coding process advocated in SGT, which she regarded as being overly prescriptive. Charmaz suggests instead flexible guidelines which would: “raise questions and outline strategies to indicate possible routes to take” (Charmaz, 2006, p.xi). Constructivist GT combines both inductive and deductive reasoning. Essentially, it is abductive —abduction here means going back and explaining a surprising finding in the data (ibid).

It is important to point out that although my research method here is informed by GT, I do not rigidly follow all the precepts of any of the GT schools. Although I draw on SGT, I have tailored this method to suit my particular research question, in a manner advocated in the Constructivist GT method. I also follow Charmaz’s position that categories and theory do not emerge from the data but are constructed by the researcher. Essentially my analytic method consisted of coding and memo-writing, both of which are central to all forms of GT methodology.

**Coding and Memo Writing**

Coding can be described as the grouping of data based on certain shared characteristics. Mason suggests that codes can be: literal —words, dialogue used, actions, settings systems etc.; interpretation —implicit norms, values, rules, mores, how people make sense of phenomena; or reflexive —researchers’ role in the process, how intervention generated the data (2002, 154-157). Memo-writing functions as an analytic process that enables the researcher to transform chunks of coded data into theory. The researcher uses memos to explore, explicate and theorize the patterns that emerge through coding the ‘raw’ data (Charmaz 2006); I found Alan Bryman’s four stage method of qualitative analysis helpful as a starting point for my analysis (Gribbs 2010). The four stages are as follows:

**Stage one** —read all the text, make notes at the end, and ask questions: what is it about, unusual issues, events etc., and group cases into types of categories.

**Stage two** —read the text again, but this time mark the text, make annotations, highlight key-words, make note [memos] of any analytic ideas drawn from the text.
**Stage three** — systematically mark the text. Give an indication of what chunks of text are about. Review your initial codes, and eliminate repetition and combine similar codes [axial coding]. Begin the process of grouping codes together.

**Stage four** — relate general theoretical ideas to the text. Coding and analysis go hand and hand, and in this stage you add your interpretation to the analysis. Look for links between the various codes and the relation between codes and research question and the literature (ibid).

A number of software packages have been developed in recent years which make qualitative analysis more manageable. Students at the University of Limerick (UL) have access to one such programme, Nvivo, and I decided to use this programme to help me code my data. Before I was able to import my data into Nvivo I first had to put it in a format that would yield the best returns. There are a number of import options available to the Nvivo user, including pdf, photograph, dataset, word-document, audio/video etc. The adjudicator sheets I had were all hand-written in Irish, a language that Nvivo does not, at the time of writing, recognise. Also, many of the sheets that I copied are written in pencil and in cursive writing (making them very difficult to read). In order that I might make use of the analytic tools available in Nvivo I decided to first translate all the adjudicator sheets into English, and then save them in a format that would allow for analysis. I also feel that English translations of the adjudicator notes will make my research accessible to a wider readership (I do include some Irish terms with English translation throughout).

I decided to save my translations in an excel data set. I chose this option for a number of reasons. Although the adjudicator sheets contain a variety of comments, for the most part these comments are either positive or negative with regard to the performance of *sean-nós*. As such I was able to create a data set where all the characteristics and ‘non-characteristics’ of ‘good’ *sean-nós* singing mentioned in the various adjudicator reports could be grouped in their own respective columns. Column C lists all the characteristics of good *sean-nós* performance, and column D contains a list of what the adjudicators consider inappropriate in *sean-nós* singing.
Column A lists the year of the competition, and column B contains the competition number and a brief description of the competition (see Appendix B). The competition number and the brief description are important because they allow me, and other researchers, to check my findings by referring back to the original adjudicator sheets.

I created a separate data set for every year that I had collected, and another that contained all of the years combined. I used the data-set for all the years combined to analyse the adjudicating process as a whole; the year by year data-sets were useful for focusing in on specific years. I also created separate datasets that covered approximately ten year periods: 1940-1946, 1958-1967, 1973-1979, 1981-1989, 1990-1997, and 2000-2011. These data-sets were particularly helpful in that I was able to note the key characteristics of Oireachtas adjudicating during specific decades, as well as the evolution of the adjudicating process from decade to decade.

I created these data-sets in order to make navigating what amounted to nearly three hundred adjudicator sheets more manageable. However, although I found these data-sets invaluable, they cannot replace the actual adjudicator sheets, and in many ways they are used here as an index to the actual sheets. During the coding stage of my analysis I read through my data-sets, made word-frequency checks and annotations based on my findings. However, throughout my analysis of the data-sets I constantly refer back to the adjudicator sheets. In Chapter VI I quote extensively from these sheets (in Irish with my translation). Citing this material with exactitude is difficult however because the sheets are not numbered. Also, many of the sheets are not signed by the adjudicator. When I cite this material I give the year and competition, and if it is known the name of the adjudicator —for example (OnaG 1946, comp 46). Apart from Joe Heaney — who is mentioned once to illustrate an argument— I keep the identity of the competitors hidden; some of what is contained in the adjudicator
reports could be considered sensitive information — particularly when adjudicators are being very critical of particular performers. As my research progressed I came increasingly interested in issues of power and agency. One might imagine that, because sean-nós at the Oireachtais is performed primarily in a competition context, singers have very little agency in this particular musical culture. However, as I illustrate in Chapters V and VII, this is not the case. Instead I argue that ultimately all those who participate at the Oireachtais sean-nós singing competition, in whatever capacity, contribute in some way to the ‘authoring’ of sean-nós within this musical community. In Chapter VII, I focus in particular on the role of the Oireachtas audience in this process.

1.5 Participant-Observation and the Insider- Outsider Paradigm

Ethnomusicologists tend to use ethnographic fieldwork in the form of participant-observation as their primary research method; in the words of Bruno Nettl it is, “the meat and potatoes” of ethnomusicological study (2005, pp. 232-243). One of the advantages of ethnography is that it has the potential to “transform ethnocentric scholarly analysis of musical structure and meaning into richer, culturally informed interpretations” (Berger 2008, p.64). Very often, the participation aspect of the ethnomusicologist’s research is centred on the researcher’s own experience making music with and in the culture that is being researched. Arguably this method is particularly suited to those researching a music culture that is not their own. Numerous ethnomusicologists have argued that the embodied experience that comes from learning to perform the music of the ‘Other’ is the best way of attaining an insider’s perspective into a given sonic-community’s aesthetics and musical universe.

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This arguments put forward in this thesis do not require this information to be revealed, and although the adjudicator reports are already in the public domain, I still withhold the identity of the singers referred to in the reports, to avoid potentially upsetting or embarrassing these individuals.
The ethnomusicologist, Timothy Rice, using the language of phenomenological hermeneutics, proposes that:

[…] the world — or in our terms, culture or the tradition — exists and the subject/ego is “thrown” into it. According to Heidegger, “being in the world” is the ego’s ontological condition before knowing, understanding, interpreting, and explaining. What the ego/subject comes to understand and manipulate are culturally and historically constructed symbolic forms such as language, dress, social behaviour. In hermeneutic jargon, the unbridgeable gulf between subject and object is mediated as the subject becomes a self through temporal arcs of understanding and experience in the world. The self, whether as a member of a culture or a student of culture, understands the world by placing itself “in front” of cultural works. This sense of understanding a world is rather different from the notion that the outsider as subject must, through the application of ethnoscientific methods, get behind the work to understand another subject’s (the insider’s) intentions in producing the work.

(2008, pp. 55-56)

Rice is suggesting that in order to gain an understanding of the music of the ‘Other’, the researcher must appropriate — through learning to perform — the music of the ‘Other’; appropriate in the sense of: “[…] making one’s own [of] that which was previously alien” (ibid. p57). This does not mean that you become the ‘Other’, instead the act of throwing yourself into the world of the ‘Other’ causes you to become an ‘Other’ you - one which according to Marcia Herndon, is “neither fully insider nor outsider, neither fully emic nor fully etic” (cited in Barz and Cooley 2008 p.57).

Music performance tends to be the method most commonly used by ethnomusicologists to gain understanding of a given music culture, and the wealth of ethnomusicological study based on this form of research is arguably proof enough in itself of its validity; yet, it is a method that tends to privilege the position of the musician over all others.
Participant-Observation from the Perspective of an Audience Member

During my participant-observation at the Oireachtas festival I located myself as an active listener in this musical culture, an audience member. The importance of the listener in music in and as culture has been pointed to for quite some time by ethnomusicologists, as the following from John Blacking illustrates:

[…]

the very existence of a professional performer, as well as his necessary financial support, depends on listeners who in one important respect must be no less musically proficient than he is. They must be able to distinguish and interrelate different patterns of sound.

(1974, p.9)

I would argue that the role of the listener remains somewhat of a neglected issue within the field of ethnomusicology. Blacking’s thesis, that humans are a musical species, depends upon the notion of the critical listener. Elsewhere he states that:

[…]

all [musical] definitions are based on some consensus of opinion about the principles on which the sounds of music should be organised. No such consensus can exist until there is some common ground of experience, and unless different people are able to hear and recognize patterns in the sounds that reach their ears. […] The continuity of music depends as much on the demands of critical listeners as on a supply of performers.

(1974, pp.10-11)

Small’s book, Musicking: The Meanings of Performance and Listening (1998), takes the role and function of the audience in the performance of music — Euro-classical symphonic music in this instance— into consideration, as does Cottrell, to a certain degree, when he discusses the role and function of applause in the performance of Western art music (2004 pp.165-167). T.K Ramnarire’s ethnographic work on the orchestra as civil society is based in part on participant-observation as an audience member observing ensemble interactions (2011, p.334). Dobson and Pitts 2011 study is quite interesting because it focuses primarily on first-time audience members’
experiences at a range of Euro-classical concerts, from chamber music to orchestral (2011, p.353). The above examples suggest a widening of focus within ethnomusicology, from the musician to other actors involved in music performance; yet, I would argue that typically the methodology employed by ethnomusicologists today still privileges the position of the musician within the cultural formation being researched.

The wealth of insights musician centred research has brought to light illustrate the value of musical performance as a primary method for understanding music. However, I suggest that valuable insights can also be arrived at when the researcher assumes the role of the listener/audience member. Drawing on the work of Small (1998, p.13), I offer that the performance of music depends not just on musicians but on a wide variety of ‘actors’, from ticket vendors and cleaning staff to architects and audience members etc. That being said, I am not suggesting that more conventional musician centred research is flawed, but rather that ethnomusicology as a discipline benefits from a wide variety of methodologies and perspectives.

**Musicking**
According to Christopher Small:

> The act of musicking establishes in the place where it is happening a set of relationships, and it is in those relationships that the meaning of the act lies. They are to be found not only between those organized sounds which are conventionally thought of as being the stuff of musical meaning but also between the people who are taking part, in whatever capacity, in the performance; and they model, or stand as metaphor for, ideal relationships as the participants in the performance imagine them to be: relationships between person to person, between individual and society, between humanity and the natural world and perhaps the supernatural world.

(1998, p.13)

Those taking part in a musical performance, what Small calls musicking, use sounds that have been brought into certain kinds of relationships with one another as the focus for a ceremony in which certain values are affirmed. Small states: “[…] the
concepts of what constitute right relationships — of that group are explored, affirmed, and celebrated” (1998, p. 183). In any musical performance desired relationships are brought into virtual existence so that those taking part are enabled to experience them, as if they really exist (ibid):

[Musiking is] an instrument of exploration. In articulating those values it allows those taking part to say, to themselves, to one another and to anyone else who may be paying attention: these are our values, these are our concepts of ideal relationships, and consequently this is who we are. It [musicking] is thus an instrument of affirmation.

(ibid. p183)

What is being affirmed, and in fact created however temporarily, is the sonic community’s idealised world (ibid pp. 42-43). Though, drawing on the works of Stokes, I would argue that this ideal world is not created by performance, but by ‘good’ performance. Stokes proposes that:

What is important is not just musical performance, but good performance, if music and dance are to make a social event ‘happen’. Complex aesthetic vocabularies, or single terms covering a complex semantic terrain point to minute and shifting subtleties of rhythm and texture which make or break the event.

(1997, p.5)

In Chapter IV and VI I suggest that the idealised world created at sean-nós performances at the Oireachtas is a romanticised version of the Gaeltacht. However, I argue that the Gaeltacht being performed on the Oireachtas stage bears little resemblance to contemporary life in the Irish speaking districts. Instead I argue that the Gaeltacht that is performed on the Oireachtas stage is a ‘space of the mind’, based on nostalgia for a pre-modern ‘Celtic’ Gaeltacht. Also, in Chapter VI, I show that certain terms like Gaeltacht have dual meanings within the Oireachtas sean-nós singing competition. Gaeltacht is used by adjudicators to refer to a physical location, for example where a particular singer comes from. But it is also used to describe good performance. In other words Gaeltacht, and other terms like sean-nós, are used
as synonyms for authenticity, where authenticity refers to good performance. This suggests that a component of ‘good performance’ in this musical community is that it should sound as if it were ‘of the past’ and not modern.

The musical culture being researched here is essentially a competition, and a deep inter-Gaeltacht sense of rivalry permeates the Oireachtas sean-nós competition (see Chapter VII). Therefore, one might argue that Small’s musicking theory does not fit with this particular musical culture, because various regional factions participating at the festival would have their own vying ideal world in mind. However, I would offer that musicking does not mean a musical community is necessarily homogenous. Instead, I would suggest that all music communities contend and argue over what is deemed appropriate and aesthetically pleasing in their music. Yet they will still, at some level, have shared ideas and ideals as to what constitutes good performance. The Oireachtas sean-nós cohort is no different, and although various commentators and adjudicators argue over what exactly is appropriate in sean-nós singing, all appear to see authenticity as central — not only in the past (antiquarianism), but also in complexity, although individual members see complexity in different areas (see Chapters III and VI).

**Summary**

I have laid out in this chapter the theoretical and methodological approach that underpins this thesis. I position this thesis in relation to the field of ethnomusicology. In particular I focus on some of the issues that I confronted as an ‘insider-ethnomusicologist’ in order to locate my research within the ethnographic literature. I have addressed the main issues that informed my particular research method, in particular, issues of distanciation and representation. Although I have incorporated two in-depth interviews, the bulk of my findings are drawn from archival Oireachtas adjudicator sheets. I argue that these sheets can be read as an ‘ethnographic survey’, and my analysis of this material has revealed new insights into the world of sean-nós singing at the Oireachtas festival (see Chapter VI) — as does my approach to participant-observation. I engaged in participant-observation at Oireachtas singing
competitions as a member of the audience, and this perspective enabled me to observe this particular music community in a way that more conventional musician based participant-observation would not allow. In summation, my method was informed by and adapted to my specific fieldwork requirements.

Before moving on to discuss sean-nós or the Oireachtas in detail I feel it is prudent to first introduce some of the main concepts and issues that underpin this thesis as a whole. In the following chapter I explore the ideological worldview (Romantic Nationalism) that inspired the formation of the Oireachtas festival. I also discuss how this ideology impacts on certain concepts of ‘Irishness’ and on how sean-nós and the Gaeltacht community are widely perceived.
Chapter II: A History of the Development of Romantic Nationalisms, informing an Ethnomusicological Study of Sean-nós singing at Oireachtas na Gaeilge

In order to understand sean-nós song, the Oireachtas, and their relationship, we need to discuss the political and intellectual tradition which perhaps informed them the most, Romantic nationalism. I introduce the main tenets of Romantic nationalism generally, which are: Romantic historicism; the poetics of transcendence; ethnicity equated with national identity; and the framing of the ‘folk’ as the embodiment of the national character. I also look more closely at the particular features of Irish Romantic nationalism. I show that the main characteristic of Irish Romantic nationalism is that it frames the Irish language as the primary marker of Irish identity. This means that the Irish speaking districts, known collectively as the Gaeltacht, are seen as being the most ‘authentically’ Irish communities in Ireland, by Gaelic revivalist organisations like the Oireachtas. The issue of ‘authenticity’ is central to Romantic nationalism, and it is discussed here from a number of perspectives.

2.1 Locating Romantic Nationalism

Generally speaking there are two basic schools of thought on the origins and basis of nationalism. One is the primordialist view, which sees nationalism as an evolutionary development of humans’ tendency to organise into mutually beneficial groupings based on familial relationships. The other is the modernist view, which sees nationalism as a relatively recent phenomenon that requires the structural conditions of modern society to exist (Motyl 2001, p.251). However, Anderson points out that nation, nationality, nationalism are: “[…] notoriously difficult to define, let alone analyse” (1991, p.3). Citing Hugh Seton-Watson, Anderson suggests that: “no ‘scientific definition’ of the nation can be devised; yet the phenomenon has existed and exists” (ibid).
Andersons’ own working definition of the nation is that it is “an imagined political community” (1991, p.6). Anderson observes four main ways the nation is imagined. Firstly it is imagined in the sense that the members of all nations will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or hear of them, “yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (ibid, p.6). Secondly, the nation is imagined as a limited and finite, if somewhat elastic territory. Thirdly, it is imagined as sovereign “because the concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm” (ibid, p.7). Lastly, it is imagined as a community, because, “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (ibid, p7). Entering into a discussion on the origins of nationalism or the various forms it takes does not really concern us here. Instead this thesis is primarily concerned with how nationalism as an ideology impacts on culture and vernacular culture in particular.

**Culture and Nationalism**

I am using the term culture in the anthropological sense, defined by Taylor as the “complex whole” — the sum total of what an individual acquires from his society (cited in Nettl 2005, p.232). Gellner suggests that cultural nationalism is essentially a vehicle for political nationalism (2008, pp.11-18). Hutchinson on the other hand offers that:

> […] a distinction should be made between cultural nationalism and political nationalism. Cultural nationalism pursued the essentialism of cultural distinctiveness as a moral end in itself; for political nationalists, establishing cultural distinctiveness was often a means to the ends of secession and independent statehood.

(Cited in McCann and Ó Laoire 2003, p.261)

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7 Abizadeh suggests there are numerous ways in which the nation is imagined. For example, ethnic nationalists imagine the nation as a community with a shared culture and common descent. Civic nationalists view the nation as a community of shared culture with a territorial homeland, but not of shared decent. Civic republicans imagine the patria or homeland as a community of shared political territory, institutions, and history, but not a shared national culture. Finally, Abizadeh offers that Neo-Kantians are those who believe in the idea of shared political institutions, which embody rationally defensible principles (2000, p.497).
Leerssen goes even further stating that, although the terms Romantic nationalism and cultural nationalism are often used interchangeably they are distinct, if somewhat related, concepts. According to Leerssen:

Cultural nationalism can refer, not only to Romantic nationalism but also, in a much wider and vaguer sense, to any cultural inflection or expression of nationalism, including phenomena such as Ataturk’s language policies, Canadian enthusiasm for ice hockey or literacy programmes in newly-independent ex-colonies; and, while all forms of cultural nationalism presuppose what I have called a ‘cultivation of culture’ (Leerssen 2006), Romantic Nationalism has a more restrictive and precise focus.

(2014, p.5)

Leerssen is particularly critical of the notion that culture and Romanticism are simply the by-products or context of political nationalism. Instead, he argues that a symbiotic relationship exists between culture (and by implication Romanticism) and politics, and that culture can function as an agent of nationalism (2005, p.6). I am using the term Romantic nationalism in the restricted sense that is proposed by Leerssen, as “the celebration of the nation (defined in its language, history and cultural character) as an inspiring ideal for artistic expression; and the instrumentalization of that expression in political consciousness-raising” (2014, p.5).

Leerssen goes on to state that Romantic nationalism was, like Romanticism, above all a European phenomenon. Although its intellectual, artistic, and philosophical roots can be traced back to earlier periods, Romantic Nationalism emerges first in North-Western Europe during the Napoleonic years (circa 1800) (ibid, p.6). During the nineteenth century Romantic Nationalism spread throughout Europe. It undertook a neo-Romantic modulation towards progressive ideals around 1900, and “a sharp decline around 1914 followed by a long, tapering afterlife, but with occasional resurgences and without an obvious cut-off point” (2014, p.6).
Romanticism and nationalism both evolved out of the Enlightenment and figures such as Napoleon, Rousseau and Herder are important to both movements (Heath and Boreman 2002, pp. 24-36). However, Leerssen argues that the connection between Romanticism and nationalism is more than just a situational one. Instead, he suggests that Romantic nationalism is its own discrete intellectual nexus, and he draws attention to three specific areas that illustrate the interconnection between Romanticism and nationalism during the nineteenth century, namely, the linguistic revolution toward vernacular languages, romantic historicism, and the poetics of transcendence and inspiration (2013, p.12).

Vernacular Languages
The Enlightenment influenced most of the Western world during the late 17th and 18th centuries, and it was largely a movement concerned with developing knowledge and reason as well as dispelling superstition (Heath and Boreman 2002, p.7). However, Romantic thinkers felt that, in its efforts to transcend superstition, the Enlightenment had abandoned feeling and the transcendent. Romantics looked to the works of the Enlightenment philosopher Rousseau, who admitted that while reason was the “inner voice” that instructed the individual to act and so ensured freedom of choice, it was the feelings generated by the shared condition of existence that dictated the instructions to reason (ibid, p.24). In other words, Rousseau felt mankind’s actions were brought about through a combination of reason and feelings (ibid, p.24).

However, Anderson reminds us that nationalism is a plastic ideology open to piracy. It has “undergone a process of modulation and adaptation, according to different eras, political regimes, economics and social structure” (1991, p.157). Anderson also feels nationalism is a particularly persistent ideology. He draws attention to what he refers to as the long-distance nationalisms — or diasporic nationalisms— of migrant communities. For example, Jews in the United States of America who are fighting for a state in the Middle East, or Tamils in Norway working for their own state in Sri Lanka. Migrant communitas use the internet and cheap air-travel to connect with their respective ‘home’ nations, illustrating that ease of travel and the internet can equally be vehicles for these new nationalisms, as they are for cosmopolitanism (University of Ohio 2011).
Rousseau also believed that man in nature was inherently good but that he had been corrupted by society and civilisation. He proposed that the “state of nature” should be used as a model for a less oppressive and equal form of civilisation (ibid, p.25). Rousseau’s theory inspired Romantic artists, musicians, writers, and thinkers to move away from Classical notions of art and culture and to search for meaning and inspiration away from cosmopolitan centres. Eventually this led to the ‘discovery’ and transformation of the Volk (folk) from peasantry to the embodiment of the national character. Inspired by Rousseau’s theories on primitivism, Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803), proposed that every language was the expression of a unique culture, and that a culture could only be understood in terms of its language (Heath and Boreman 2002, p.33). Herder argued that every culture was specific and unique, because every given national culture had been formed by its own particular set of circumstances (ibid, p.34).

Herder developed his linguistic theory in the eighteenth century, a time when there was no united Germany, only a number of small German-speaking states with Prussia being the most influential (ibid.p.32). As such, German Romanticism in the eighteenth century was completely entwined with the search for national identity (ibid, p.32). The inhabitants of these German-speaking states believed that they each shared the same German ethnicity. However, they had no existing artistic tradition that they could all share, and no cultural centre to which they could look for inspiration (ibid.p.32). Herder argued that the German spoken in the rural peripheries was the closest there was to a ‘true’ German language, and therefore the only expression of authentic German culture, because it was untainted by foreign influence and modernity. As I discuss in detail further on in this chapter, Herder’s theory, that every language was the expression of a unique culture, greatly inspired Irish Romantic nationalism, particularly that espoused by the Gaelic League’s membership.

The poetics of transcendence and inspiration
The Romantic poets felt that the classical school of poetry was overly contrived and governed by rules and conventions. The poetry of the Romantic period was meant to
electrify and enrapture its audience, and this meant that it was more experimental, simple and direct than the classical school it sought to replace (Leerssen 2013, p.15). Although they were primarily concerned with the experience of the sublime, many Romantic poets also espoused the values of the ‘national’ tongue, and often Romantic poetry became a consciousness rising medium for nationalism. Many of the poets of this period sought to become the voice of the ‘people’ and as such the transcendent ideal of Romanticism fed into political and constitutional thought through the medium of lyrical poetry (Leerssen 2013, p.17). Poets such as Goethe, Schiller, Arndt, and Korner, not only inspired the imagining of the nation domestically, their fame reverberated across Europe as role models and examples of how poets could trigger the cultural re-awakening of their nation. In Ireland, poets such as Mangan, Davis and Patrick Pearse were hugely inspired by the Romantic nationalist poetry of the likes of Korner, for example (ibid).

Music too became a means of tapping into the soul of the nation. Music was regarded as having uniquely inspiring potential, due to the fact that it was widely seen as being a medium of transcendence and soul stirring glory (Leerssen 2013, p.18). Romantic composers, like their literary fellows, combined vernacular expressions with sublime inspiration which, according to Leerssen: “turned them from mere virtuosi into the inspired mouthpieces and champions of their nation” (ibid p. 18). Like their literary counterparts, Romantic composers sought to create new forms by adopting musical genres, modes and stylistic features from outside the established Euro-classical tradition. The Mazurka, hornpipe, czárdás or jota, gypsy music with augmented seconds, modal folk melodies with drone bass lines and parallel fifths, were experimented with by the Romantic composers (ibid). By 1805 the transcendental essence which poets, artists, composers, and others were trying to “extrapolate from the transient incidents of material reality” had, in the national context, been given a name: it was called Volksgeist (ibid, p 18).

**Romantic historicism**
The term Volksgeist originated in the legal arguments of Hegel and, especially, Fredrich Carl von Savigny (Leerssen 2013, p.18). Savigny was the foremost
proponent of an organicist notion of law that each nation engendered its own legal system, just as it had its own language (ibid, p.9). Savigny essentially established a ‘historical-school’ of jurisprudence, based on the idea that law was an organically evolving moral corpus as much as it was an organically collective one — it developed as the nation developed across the centuries (ibid). For Savigny law was more an historical accumulation than a mere set of rules and guidelines (2013, p.19). By linking national essentialism, organicism, and historicism, Savigny posited an alternative view of the state than that of the Napoleonic model — which viewed the state as technocratic entity — and which was dominant at the time (ibid). Rather than viewing society as a Rousseauensque social contract, Savigny and others such as Edward Burke, viewed society as being a “trans-generational contract not just between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born” (ibid, p.19).

Savigny’s ideas were developed by his most famous student Jacob Grimm (ibid. p.20). Jacob, with his brother Wilhelm would apply Savigy’s Volkgeist theory to vernacular oral forms of cultural expression. The Grimm brothers went on to win international acclaim for publishing collections of old German folk fairy tales (Leerssen 2013, p.21). Up until this time the folk material collected in the likes of the Wunderhorn was meant to appeal to sentimentally inclined readers, who wanted an experience of the naïve (ibid). The work produced by the Grimms however brought vernacular oral cultural expression to the attention of serious academic scholars throughout Europe. The Grimms argued that folk tales constituted the oral survival of an older system of supernatural beliefs and sagas of the German nation (ibid). Jacob Grimm applied Savigny’s legal historicism to cultural topics such as language and expressive culture⁹, which Grimm saw not as closed systems but rather as the products of evolutionary development. This meant that in order to understand culture in the present, Grimm felt, you had to understand it in terms of how it came to be (ibid, p.21).

⁹ Expressive culture here refers to various forms of intangible vernacular culture, such as vernacular languages, poetry, song, and stories.
The historicism of the Grimms inspired scholars throughout Europe to search for the national psyche, and its origins, through the medium of the national epic. Throughout nineteenth-century Europe the ‘national-epic’ became an important source of national identity. Scholars trawled ancient manuscripts in search of national epics, and when ancient manuscripts were unavailable they turned instead to orally transmitted epic works. The epics came to be regarded as national classics and often appeared as the opening chapters of literary histories, as the original starting point of literary traditions (Leerssen 2013, p. 20). It was during this period that such epics as the German Nibelungenlied (1806), the French Chanson de Roland (1836), the Russian Lay of Prince Igor (1800), the Dutch Caerle ende Elegast (1832), Beowulf (1815) and the tale of Deirdre (1808 the first published fragment of the Irish Tàin Bó Cuailgne) were published.

Friedrich Schlegal applied Savigny’s organicism to literature, which he defined as the “collective imagination and memory of a national community, through which it articulates itself into higher states of historical awareness and powers of cultural self-reflection” (ibid). This frames national literature as having grown from primitive origins in a process of continuous development, along with the nation’s historical experiences. The objective of the romantic historicists was to bring the past back to life, an idea which was taken up in the visual arts and in the popular historical fiction of the likes of Sir Walter Scott (ibid). Indeed, as Leerssen points out, romantic historicism moves freely between media and cultural fields; however, irrespective of the medium the function of romantic historicism is to render the nation’s past a “collective point of reference for the modern-day state” (2013, p.25).

2.2 Irish Romantic Cultural Nationalism

Although the intellectual origins of the movement can be traced back to at least the eighteenth century, in particular the antiquarian revival of that period —what Connelly calls the first ‘Celtic Revival’— Irish Romantic nationalism really emerges during the mid-nineteenth century (Connelly 2006, p.409). That being said,
eighteenth-century Irish antiquarianism often fed into the Irish revolutionary republicanism of its own time. For example, ‘The Society of United Irishmen’ established in October 1791, was inspired in part by the bardic tradition of the ‘Old Gaelic order’, which came to an end at the beginning of the seventeenth century (Bartlett 2010).

The United Irishmen took the harp as their symbol and their motto, ‘It is new strung and shall be heard’, suggests that they sought to create a contemporary Irish society modelled on the ‘Old Gaelic order’. The United Irishmen were behind organising cultural gatherings like the Belfast Harp Festival of 1792 (Bartlett 2010). The cult of the bard, and in particular Macpherson’s translations of the Ossianic poems in the 1760s, was seen by Irish republicans as a route back to a hitherto unseen Celtic sensibility (Connelly 2005, p.409). However, unlike the Irish Romantic nationalists of the late nineteenth/early twentieth century, the United Irishmen were not ethno-linguistic nationalists.

As Leerssen points out, after 1830, the Irish language became the primary marker of Irish nationality, and indeed the core argument behind why Ireland could never be fully integrated under English rule (Leerssen 2013, p.13). According to Leerssen:

The tipping point is exemplified in the generational shift from Daniel O’Connell to Thomas Davis’s Young Ireland movement around 1840. O’Connell (who had a native knowledge of the language) attached little or no symbolic importance to it, and saw no need to ensure its survival or cultivation into the future. His nationalism was wholly based on the reasoning of constitutional and religious rights and wholly carried through social agitation and parliamentary activism. Davis and the Young Irelanders (gathered around the periodical tellingly called The Nation) based their calls wholly on arguments of cultural descent and specificity, celebrating Irishness

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10 Inspired by the French and American Revolutions, the Society of United Irishmen was a liberal political organisation that initially sought parliamentary reform, but which evolved into a revolutionary republican movement. With the aid of Revolutionary France it launched the Irish Rebellion of 1798, which was undertaken to end monarchical British rule in Ireland (Connelly 2008).
and propagating their ideology by means of rousing verse and nativist songs such as ‘A Nation Once Again’.

(2013, p.13)

The Young Ireland movement (or the Young Irelanders) was largely a Protestant political, cultural, and social movement that emerged during the mid-nineteenth century. It was centred on Thomas Davis, John Mitchel, Charles Gavan Duffy, William Smith O’Brien, and John Blake Dillon (Bartlett 2010, pp.275-280). Although it was initially part of Daniel O’Connell’s repeal movement, Young Ireland later split from O’Connell because of his insistence that Catholicism remain the defining characteristic of Irishness (ibid). The net result of the colonial conquest of Ireland by the English — in particular the persecution of Irish Catholics that came about due to the Protestant Reformation and the Cromwellian war in Ireland (1649-53) — meant that Éireannach or Irishman, a word coined in the thirteenth century, took on a new meaning in the seventeenth century (Bartlett, 2010, p.142). From this period on, Irish ethnicity was defined by religion. “Henceforth, to be Irish was to be Catholic, and to be Catholic was to be Irish” (ibid).

This meant that Irish Protestants existed in a strange liminal space. In Ireland the Catholic majority viewed them as being English, yet in England Irish Protestants were viewed as being Irish. This would eventually inspire Irish Protestants in particular to search for a pan-Irish identity in Ireland’s pre-Christian past (Ó Torna 2005. p.26). Most of this interest was directed initially toward the study of old-Irish manuscripts (ibid, p.25). But this growing fascination with ancient Gaelic culture eventually led to a growing understanding of the value of the living Gaelic culture (ibid. p.25); which in turn led to the collecting and archiving of vernacular music, folklore etc. Ethno-linguistic nationalism in particular appealed to Irish Protestant nationalists because it suggested that Irish identity could be based on the Irish language, as opposed to Catholicism.
By the mid-1840s, the Young Irelanders were using the knowledge of Gaelic-Irish culture that had been collected at the beginning of the nineteenth century by historians, antiquarians, and archaeologists to construct a political identity that was to become the basis of the Irish nationalist movement (Ó Torna 2005, p.26). Thomas Davis, one of the founders of the Young Irelanders, was clearly influenced by Herder’s theory that every language was the expression of a unique culture. Davis stated that: “The language of a nation’s youth is the only easy and full speech for its manhood and for its age. And when the language of its cradle goes, itself craves a tomb” (ibid p.27). Davis believed that the native-speaking communities were the only true Gaels in Ireland, because he believed they had survived the influence of foreign invaders (ibid. p 27). Davis was one of the first to use metaphors such as the “protective wall” and “the well of culture” in relation to the Irish-speaking communities (ibid. p.27). This view — that native-Irish-speakers were in need of protection— became one of the main concerns of Irish cultural nationalism throughout the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The Gaelic League and the Gaelic Revival

Although it is estimated that there were approximately 700,000 native Irish speakers living in Ireland in 1891, the Irish speaking populace was going through a dramatic language shift from Irish to English during this period (Uí Chollatáin 2004, p.55). The harsh economic climate that existed in Ireland at that time forced many to emigrate, either to England or the United States of America, and pragmatic Irish speakers realised that Irish was of little use to the emigrant. Consequently, Irish speaking parents encouraged their children to abandon Irish in favour of English (Conradh na Gaeilge 2013). The establishment of a universal system of primary education in 1831 (referred to commonly as national schools) also contributed to this language shift. All the subjects taught in the Irish national schools were taught through the medium of English, and teaching Irish was in fact forbidden (ibid). Conradh na Gaeilge (The Gaelic League) was established by Douglas Hyde, Eugene

The League members proclaimed that they had two main objectives: “the preservation of the Irish language as a national language and the extension of its use as a spoken tongue; and the study and publication of existing Gaelic literature and the cultivation of a modern literature in Irish” (Purdon 1999, p.37). The League was formed at a time in Ireland when there was a widespread upsurge of interest in nationality and identity, and as such it had a widespread appeal (Ó Torna 2005, p.61). The loss of an independent legislator due to the 1801 act of Union, which annexed the Irish parliament with that of Westminster; the lack of proper representation of Catholics as political subjects; and the dramatic language shift from Irish to English that the country was experiencing, all contributed to the growing interest in Irish identity and nationalism at that time (Connelly 2006, p.409). Very quickly Gaelic League branches spread throughout Ireland and elsewhere, and the organisation became highly effective at teaching Irish to English speakers. However, the continued decline of the Irish language in the Irish speaking districts was a preoccupying worry for the League (Ó Torna 2005, p.42).

The Gaeltacht

Gaeltacht is the Irish term used to refer to those parts of Ireland where the Irish language is, or was in the recent past, the primary vernacular of a substantial number of the local population (Údarás na Gaeltachta 2014a). The total population of the area, as taken in the 2011 census, is 100,716 (ibid). The Gaeltacht areas are defined by government order and today the Gaeltacht covers extensive parts of Donegal, Mayo, Galway, Kerry, (all along the western seaboard), as well as parts of Cork, Waterford and Meath (see map below). The Meath Gaeltacht is the smallest of the Gaeltacht districts and for the purpose of this thesis it can be regarded as a satellite of the Conamara Gaeltacht. Unlike other Gaeltacht districts, the Meath Gaeltacht was created by the Irish government in 1935, as a part of its language strategy at the time.
Families from Gaeltacht districts in Mayo, Galway and Kerry, were given farms\textsuperscript{11} in Meath in an attempt to spread Irish as the common vernacular throughout the wider populace.

The Meath Gaeltacht consists of two adjacent villages, Rath Cairn and Baile Ghib (ibid). Families and individuals from Mayo, Conamara and Kerry were all settled in Baile Ghib, and, for whatever reason, those who were settled in Rath Chairn all came from Conamara. Both Conamara and Meath Gaeltacht communities now speak the same regional dialect of Irish, and as I discuss in Chapter V, they share the same general repertoire and performance style of sean-nós as well. A detailed discussion on the history of the Meath Gaeltacht falls outside the remit of this particular study. However, I did speak with a young man from Rath Chairn at the Oireachtas in 2011 who stated that for all intents and purposes the Baile Ghib Gaeltacht community became ‘anglicised’ quite rapidly.

The wider community both in Baile Ghib and in Rath Cairn were English speakers. This meant that those who were settled in both villages had to learn English for pragmatic reasons — many of those who were settled not fluent English speakers. The young man I spoke with stated that, the disparate nature of the newly formed Irish speaking community in Baile Ghibb had the added problem of not sharing the same dialect of Irish. This meant that English became their primary code to speak with one another, as well as with the wider monoglottic (English speaking) community. Consequently, Rath Cairn — and by extension Conamara Irish — became the prevailing and most visible representative of the Meath Gaeltacht.

\textsuperscript{11} “The Irish government of the 1930s redistributed the vast estates of absentee landlords as small farm holdings to poor farmers from the Gaeltacht areas of Connemara, Mayo and Kerry. The aim was to redress a centuries old imbalance, where the Irish farmers were forcibly removed from this land by the English under Oliver Cromwell, with the infamous edict to ‘Hell or Connacht’” (Údaras na Gaeltachta 2015b).
Today the term, *Gaeltacht* is synonymous with geographical locations. Up until the beginning of the twentieth century the term *Gaeltacht* however had a more complex meaning. It is defined in Dinneen’s 1904 Irish–English dictionary as: “the state of being Irish or Scotch; Gaeldom, Irishry, the native race of Ireland; *bean de’n Ghaeltacht*, a woman of the Irishry; *G. Alban*, the Highlands of Scotland” (cited in Ó Torna 2005, p.42). Although he did not use the term *Gaeltacht*, the nineteenth-century Connacht poet Antaine Raiftearai was one of the first to conceptualise the Irish-speaking population as the inhabitants of a specific geographic area within the island of Ireland (Ó Torna 2005, p.42). The publication of the works of Raiftearai in 1903 by Douglas Hyde, (a folklorist and founding member of the Gaelic League who was greatly inspired by the writings of Thomas Davis) popularised the image of the *Gaeltacht* as a geographical local (Ó Torna 2005, p.43).
The *Gaeltacht* was officially mapped by a government of Ireland commission in 1926, but its exact boundaries were not defined until it was again mapped and demarcated by a Government of Ireland commission in the early 1950s (Ó Torna 2005, p. 44). Since then, and to the present day, there has been an ongoing debate over the mapping of the boundaries of this area (ibid, p.44). An in-depth discussion on the mapping of the *Gaeltacht* is outside the remit of this work; here what is important is the practical and symbolic significance of the *Gaeltacht*, for Irish Romantic nationalists.

In 1901 the then chief-secretary of the Gaelic League, Pádraig Ó Dálaigh, wrote that:

> While the general advance during the year has been considerable, yet there are certain districts in which the progress has been of a remarkable character. It is the English-speaking districts that have lately displayed the greatest eagerness to assist in the extension of the Gaelic League. While it is a matter for gratification that so many districts with few local opportunities for learning Irish should come to the support of the language movement, still the interests of the organisation must always be fixed primarily upon those localities where Irish is still a living tongue.

(Cited in Ó Torna, 2005, p.63)

The prominent Irish Scholar, Pádraig Ua Duinnín went as far as stating that:

> The wide extension of the League has a tendency to place the mere student, the mere stammerer in Irish – on terms of equality with the native speaker- nay, to give him the preference. The student of Irish – the stammerer in Irish, if I may call him without the slightest depreciation– should get every encouragement in our power, but multiply him a million-fold, and that million of stammering students will be powerless to save from extinction the genuine accents, the native idiom of our vernacular speech. It is the genuine native speaker alone that can spread the genuine language. It is the native speaker alone that can hand on the living torch to the future generations. It is in the native speaker as a single individual and in groups and combinations that the only hope of the language rests.

(Cited in Ó Torna, 2005, p.64)
The importance of the Gaeltacht to Irish Romantic nationalists is further highlighted in the speech given by Douglas Hyde in his address to the inaugural meeting of the League’s Central Branch in 1911. Hyde states that: “Just as Yellowstone Park, the national reservation in America, contains all the noble fauna which have disappeared elsewhere, so does our national reservation of the Irish-speaking districts contain for us the invaluable life and traditions of the past” (cited in Ó Torna 2005). To counter the decline of Irish in the Gaeltacht areas, and to promote the language more generally, the League sent muinteoirí taistil (travelling teachers) and timiri (language promoters/propagandists) to travel around Ireland in order to give classes in spoken Irish and in Irish literacy. Irish traditional music and dancing was also thought by the timiri and muinteoirí taistil in these classes (Foley 2013 p.134).

By 1901 there were 600 branches of the Gaelic League with over 50,000 members (ibid). Initially the travelling teachers and Timiri were volunteers, but in 1904 a teacher training college was established by the League in Béal Átha an Ghaorthaidh in Co. Cork (ibid). Other Irish colleges were also established in other parts of Ireland around this time. The Gaeltacht became, and remains to this day, a pedagogical resource for learners of Irish, who wish to immerse themselves in an Irish-language speaking community. However, the League was also interested in the Gaeltacht because of its symbolic power. Romantic nationalists viewed the Gaeltacht as a reservation of authentic Irishness, a kind of ‘deep Ireland’ – which they felt needed to be preserved (Williams and Ó Laoire 2011, p.38). Therefore, Gaelic revivalist not only saw the Gaeltacht as being a language resource, they travelled to and holidayed in the Gaeltacht because they imagined that by doing so they would immerse themselves in ‘authentic’ Ireland, which they equated with a kind of mythical past.

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12 Later the Irish Free State government, in the early 1920s, would build on this idea of the Gaeltacht as a practical resource for language revival by establishing seven secondary education boarding schools throughout the country. Students from the various Gaeltacht districts qualified to attend these schools by sitting an entrance exam. Those who qualified were offered a full scholarship to attend one or other of these boarding schools, and they also were offered full scholarships to attend a third level teacher training college (Mac Con Iomaire 2007, p.70).
**The Periphery and the Heroic West**

Yi-Fu Tuan proposes that time is experienced differently on the periphery than it is in the centre. ‘Long ago and far away’ is the association of a remote place with a remote past (1977, p.122). According to Tuan, the centre is seen to be in a constant state of flux and change, while the periphery is seen as static and unchanging. I suggest that Irish Romantic nationalists saw the west of Ireland as a periphery where elements of a Gaelic/Celtic golden age had survived, un-changed by modernity and Anglicisation. Yi-Fu Tuan suggests that:

> Mythical space is a response of feeling and imagination to fundamental human needs. It differs from pragmatic and scientifically conceived spaces in that it ignores the logic of exclusion and contradiction. Logically a cosmos can have only one centre; in mythical thought it can have many centres, although one centre may dominate all the others.

*(Tuan 1977, p.99)*

Added to this are ideas concerning the so called ‘myth of the west’, which frames the west generally, as a place of mystery, magic, and danger (Tuan 1977). Many ancient people recognised that the sun was the source of life, and as a result, in many cultures east and west came to be sharply differentiated.

> East, the place of sunrise, was associated with light and sky; west, the place the sun set, with darkness and the earth. The right-hand side was identified with the east and the sun, the left-hand side with the “misty west”.

*(Tuan 1977, p.98)*

The Gaelic League saw the west of Ireland as a periphery where time stood still, and as a mysterious Celtic hinterland. Irish Romantic nationalists also viewed the rough barren rocky landscape of the west of Ireland — Conamara and the Arran Islands in particularly— as being the binary opposite to the stereotypical English landscape, which has long been associated with the rich pastoral rolling farmland of England’s south counties (see Graham 1997; Nash 1993; Hutchinson 1987; Johnson 1997). In other words, the west of Ireland became a ‘spatial metaphor’ for authentic Irishness
(ibid). This particular view in turn frames the Gaeltacht community as being ‘of the land’, formed in a type of natural selection by their harsh environment—presumably tougher and more heroic than their binary opposite, the inhabitants of the rich pastoral farmland of the south counties of England.

This suggests that, for Irish Romantic nationalists, the Gaeltacht became what Yu-Fu Tuan refers to as a “sacred place” (Tuan 1977, p.117). Tuan observes that, “sacred countries” have “sacred places”. These are specific places that symbolise the national spirit, or the national will. They can be war memorials, historic buildings, etc. I propose that, for Irish Romantic nationalists, the Gaeltacht districts were ‘sacred places’ that held the memories and culture of a glorious past. Irish Romantic nationalists were not the only ones who drew inspiration from the idea that the west of Ireland was a survival from a ‘Celtic’ past.

**The Celtic Revival of the 19th Century**

By the 1890s Romanticism had fed into the emerging discipline that was to become known as Celtic studies (Bell 2008, p.9). The idea of an archaic Celtic world inspired European archaeologists, linguists, and historians to visit the west of Ireland to conduct research and fieldwork. The emergence of Celtic studies would also inspire Irish intellectuals, writers and artists to engage with Irish vernacular culture, and the landscape of the west of Ireland. For example, during his time in the Sorbonne in Paris the Irish writer, folklorist and playwright, John Millington Synge was inspired to visit the Aran Islands to study its people and culture (ibid).

The Irish literary revival known also as the Celtic Twilight movement was deeply inspired by the emergence of Celtic studies, and Irish writers like W.B Yeats, Lady Gregory, and George William Russell, sought inspiration from Irish vernacular forms of cultural expression (Foster 2003, pp. 486-662). Irish-Language literature too owes a debt to the emergence of Celtic studies. A Celtic scholar from the British Museum, Robin Flower, undertook extensive research on the Blasket Islands of the coast of Kerry in the early decades of the 20th century (Ó Giolláin 2000, pp. 125-26). During his time there Flower took Irish lessons from an islander, Tomas Ó Criomhthain.
Flower encouraged Ó Críomhthain to write about island life, and one of Ó Críomhthain’s subsequent efforts, *An tOileánach* [the Islander] a memoir of island life published in 1929, is widely regarded as a millstone of Irish-language literature (Nic Eoin and O’Toole 2015).

Although the ‘Celtic Revival’ and the Gaelic revival both drew inspiration from some of the same sources — for example antiquarianism, particularly that of Macpherson’s Ossianic poems of the 1760s, and the Romantic Movement generally — and while there was evidently some exchange between both groups, they are nonetheless somewhat distinct. Unlike the Gaelic revival, ‘Celticism’ was largely a movement within the intelligentsia; it also tended to be more cosmopolitan in its outlook — cosmopolitan in the sense that ‘Celticism’ was imagined as a diffuse pan-European phenomenon (Stokes 2013, p.185). The greatest difference between both groups however, is that, unlike the Gaelic Revivalists, the Celtic Revivalists were not ethno-linguistic nationalists. The Celtic Revivalists did not imagine Irish identity to be centred on the Irish language (ibid).

**Nationalism and Authenticity**

Critics of nationalism often argue that nationalism is an ideology obsessed with cultural essentialism and authenticity (see Bendix 1997; Graham 1997; Whelan 1993). In her highly influential book, *In Search of Authenticity*, Regina Bendix argues that by searching for the authentic in culture we are automatically implying that certain elements within culture are fake and inauthentic, continually upholding the fallacy that cultural purity rather than hybridity is the norm (1997, p.9) Bendix reminds us that the word ‘authentic’ comes from the Greek “*authentes*”, which has a dual meaning: “one who acts with authority” and “made by one’s own hand” (1997 p.14). Citing Trilling, Bendix goes on to state that the meaning of the term can be deepened to: “*Authenteo*: to have full power over, but also, to commit murder. *Authentes*: not only a master and a doer, but also a perpetrator, a murderer, even a self-murderer, a suicide” (Bendix p.14). Bendix acknowledges that such
“etymological layers need not reverberate fully in the present usage of the term” (1997, p.14); however, it is clear that she views authenticity as a highly problematic term because of its association with cultural essences and purity.

The post-colonial theorists, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, coined the phrase ‘strategic essentialism’, to describe a form of temporary solidarity for the purpose of social action. Although Spivak has since retracted the use of the term, others have built on her idea. For example, Katya Gibel Azoulay states that: “[Strategic essentialism] does not preclude alliances between different social groups; nor does it presume that communities are bounded, fixed or that ‘race’ is an essence shared by all members of any group” (McLaughlin and McLoone 2012, p.3). Seamus Deane illustrates this point further when discussing Catholic identity in Northern Ireland, where he challenges what he calls the “promiscuous embrace of pluralism”, as an empty response to imperialism’s essentialising discourse. He states that:

Therefore, while I accept the need for recognition of diversity, I don’t at the same time say that because things are diverse, because things are so infinitely complex or apparently infinitely complex, there can be no supervening position, that you can’t have a political belief or a religious belief.

(Cited in McLaughlin and McLoone 2012, p3)

The above quote from Deane is quite revealing, in that it illustrates how the concept of authenticity can relate to issues of identity and group belonging, as opposed to ideas of cultural purity. This interpretation of authenticity is closer to the idea of ‘musical authenticity’ that I introduce in Chapter I, where I suggest that the concept of authenticity is often used by members of musical communities to erect aesthetic and musical boundaries around their particular style/genre of music. Throughout this thesis I offer that within the Oireachtas singing competition authenticity is used in two ways, depending on the context. It can be used in the cultural essentialist sense noted above, and it can also be used to point out what members of a musical culture consider to be musically and aesthetically important to them.
Conclusion

The objective of this chapter was to introduce a number of key issues that underpin this thesis as a whole, and to illustrate the socio-political context that gave rise to Romantic nationalism in Ireland. Irish Romantic nationalism emerged in the mid-nineteenth century and it framed the Irish language as the primary marker of Irish identity. By the late 1900s the Irish language was increasingly being abandoned as a common vernacular in Ireland. The Gaelic League was established to curtail this language shift. The League imagined the Gaeltacht districts as spatial metaphors for authentic Irishness, and the native inhabitants of the Gaeltacht districts were imagined as being the most authentically Gaelic communities in Ireland. Ideas of cultural purity and the need to protect that purity meant that the League’s membership felt the Gaeltacht had to be protected from change and modernity.

Irish language song —because of its language content— became a powerful vehicle for the language revival movement. As I illustrate in Chapter IV, throughout its history the Oireachtas has utilised various forms of song to promote the revival of the Irish language. However, before delving into the relationship between the Oireachtas festival and song, I feel it is important first to discuss sean-nós singing more generally. The central portion of this thesis —Chapters IV - VII— deals with sean-nós and the Oireachtas, and I would argue that the analysis and interpretation offered in the central portion will be better understood when the reader has a more general understanding of how sean-nós is widely defined. Therefore, in the next chapter, I illustrate how ideas of cultural essentialism and authenticity have impacted on how sean-nós is viewed within the literature.
Chapter III: Essentialist and Non-Essentialist Definitions of sean-nós song

Drawing on the work of O’Flynn (2009, p.4), I argue that, generally speaking, sean-nós scholarship can be divided into two schools of thought: essentialist and non-essentialist\(^{13}\). The essentialist school tends to define sean-nós as a form of traditional unaccompanied solo singing in Irish, and I would argue that this is still the most widely held definition of the idiom (Ó Canainn 1993, p.49, Ó Riada 1982 p.23, Maclomaire 2011, p.268). Earlier writers on sean-nós tended to be essentialist in their outlook, and this is probably due to the influence of Romantic nationalist ideology. Contemporary sean-nós scholars tend to be non-essentialist in their outlook, and a number are quite critical of the essentialism of earlier sean-nós scholars. The non-essentialist school tends to take a more inclusive view of sean-nós song. For example a number of scholars state that certain traditional English-language and macaronic songs might also be defined as sean-nós (Williams 2004, p.122; McCann and Ó Laoire pp.251-257). These are not hard and fast schools of thought however, and many commentators drift between the two, depending on the context.

3.1 Essentialist Definitions of Sean-nós

According to Ó Canainn: “[…] no aspect of Irish music can be fully understood without a deep appreciation of sean-nós singing. It is the key that opens every lock” (1993 [1978], p.49). Ó Canainn’s organicistic view of Irish traditional music is based on a Romantic historicist vision of Irish culture that frames sean-nós song as the source from which all Irish traditional music sprang (the metaphor of the river is in fact somewhat of a cliché of the essentialist school as will become apparent further on in this chapter). Ó Canainn goes on to describe sean-nós as:

> [...] a highly personal vocal art form which has been passed from generation to generation of traditional Irish singers. [...] It must be emphasised that sean-nós singing is a solo art in which words and music

\(^{13}\) O’Flynn argues that —largely because of the widespread prevalence of ‘essentialist’ and ‘purist’ views in earlier Irish music scholarship— most contemporary Irish music scholars are anti-essentialist in their outlook (2009, p.14).
are equally vital. The language is, of course, Irish and the sean-nós is only completely at ease, as it were, in an Irish-speaking situation where the singer and his listener are in real communication.

(1993, p.49)

Here too we see the influence of Romantic historicism, a central tenet of Romantic nationalism (see Chapter I). By emphasising that sean-nós has been “passed from generation to generation”, Ó Canainn is framing sean-nós as a genre that developed organically and collectively in Ireland. In other words it is an autochthonous form of Irish culture. The description of Irish as the language of sean-nós, also suggests an essentialist view of Irish culture centred on the Irish language, a view very much in keeping with Romantic nationalist theory that every culture is unique and that the only way to understand a culture is through its language (ibid).

The essentialist position is that sean-nós is a uniquely Irish genre that evolved organically in the past, therefore it is seen as a way of connecting with the past, another central trope of Romantic nationalism. As well as the Irish language, the essentialists strive to highlight the uniqueness of other aspects of sean-nós singing, such as melody, ornamentation/variation and tone, for example. Sean Ó Riada, arguably the most influential writer on sean-nós and Irish traditional music to date, strove in his writing to highlight the uniqueness and bounded nature of sean-nós singing. However, he was not the first to do so — Oireachtas adjudicator reports from the 1940s suggest that within the Oireachtas competition sean-nós was widely seen as autochthonous to Ireland (see Chapter VI).

**Sean Ó Riada**

Ó Riada (1931-1971) was a composer trained in the Euro-classical tradition. He was appointed assistant director of music at Radió Éireann (the national radio broadcaster at that time) in 1953, a position he resigned from in 1955 (White and Boydell 2013, p.803). Also in 1955, Ó Riada was appointed as the director of music for the Abbey Theatre — the national theatre of Ireland (ibid). Between 1959 and 1960 Ó Riada achieved national and international acclaim for his film scores (ibid, p.804). During
his time at the Abbey Ó Riada became increasingly interested in the Irish language and Irish traditional music. This led him to form his Irish traditional ensemble, Ceoltóirí Chualann, in the early 1960s. Ó Riada’s work with Ceoltóirí Chualann presented an alternative form of traditional ensemble than that of the Céili bands, which had been promoted by the Gaelic League since the late nineteenth century.

By the mid-1960s Ó Riada had all but turned his back on Western art music. By this time he had become one of the most well-known and authoritative figures on Irish traditional music. He presented a series of radio broadcasts in the early 1960s titled Our Musical Heritage — the transcript of which was published posthumously in 1982 (White and Boydell 2013, p.805). These broadcasts deal with various aspects of Irish traditional music, including regional style, instrumentation, ensemble playing, and sean-nós. They were incredibly popular and they reinforced and codified the importance of regional style in Irish traditional music, including in sean-nós singing (White and Boydell 2013, p.803; Keegan 2012, pp. 196-208).

Our Musical Heritage was also significant in that it broadened the view that Irish traditional music was separate and unique from European music, particularly Western art music. Like Hyde before him, Ó Riada also referred to the Gaeltacht as a reservation of ‘authentic’ Irishness (Ó Súilleabháin 2004, p.12). In other words, Ó Riada imagined the Gaeltacht as a marginal survival of an older and more authentic pre-colonial Ireland (see Chapter II). Therefore, his analysis and description of sean-nós is an attempt to argue that sean-nós is completely alien to European art singing— from the point of view of both aesthetics and technique.

Sean-nós Technique
Ó Riada lists five main forms of vocal technique associated with sean-nós singing: intervallic and melismatic variation, glottal stops, rhythmical variation, and nasality (1982, pp. 23-39). He also classifies sean-nós into regional styles. He makes reference to the Conamara, Na Déise (East-Munster), and West-Munster styles respectively. No reference is made by Ó Riada to a Donegal style of sean-nós whatsoever, suggesting that he did not regard traditional singing in Donegal as sean-
Ó Riada states that Conamara singers rely exclusively on melismatic ornamentation, “while Munster singers make use of intervallic and melismatic variations” (ibid p.30). In Chapter V I discuss in detail how Ó Riada positioned the regional style of Na Déise and West Cork above all other regional styles of sean-nós.

Ó Canainn¹⁴, Ó Riada’s biographer, suggests that there are two main types of ornamentation employed in sean-nós singing, melismatic and intervallic (1993, p.71). However, he also notes that nasalisation, rhythmical variation, and glottal stops, grace notes and micro-tonal changes in pitch are all traits of this genre (ibid pp. 73-75). Unlike Ó Riada, Ó Canainn allows for a Donegal style of sean-nós. Ó Canainn argues that: “Not all areas have the same type of ornamentation, one finds a very florid line in Connacht, contrasting with a somewhat less decorated one in the south and, by comparison, a stark simplicity in the northern songs” (ibid p.71). Considering the centrality of complexity to the sean-nós aesthetic, it is seems likely that Ó Canainn is creating here a hierarchy of regional styles with the Conamara style at the top, followed by the Munster style. His description of the Donegal style — characterised as comprising of a “stark simplicity”— suggests that he viewed this region as the least traditional of the regional styles (I discuss this issue in more detail further on in the ‘non-essentialist definitions of sean-nós’ section). Both Ó Riada and Ó Canainn note that some sean-nós singers pitch their songs very high. Ó Canainn offers that this is particularly characteristic of female singers (1993, p.74), while Ó Riada states that this is a stylistic characteristic of Munster singing (1984, p.36).

**Nasalisation**

Ó Canainn suggests that because the sean-nós singer has no instrument other than the voice, s/he has to overcome the issue of maintaining “a feeling of continuity in both music and text” (1993, p.73). He suggests that some sean-nós singers adjust the phrasing of a song to give continuity. This is done, according to Ó Canainn, by not

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¹⁴ Tomás Ó Canainn (1930- 2013) originally from Northern Ireland lived and worked in Cork for much of his adult life. He was an Oireachtas adjudicator, an academic, musician, singer, and writer on Irish traditional music (Ó Canainn 2003).
pausing at the end of a line; instead the phrase is extended by running one line into the middle of the next one. Ó Canainn also argues that nasalisation is another method used by the sean-nós singer “to maintain continuity musically by continuing a note at the end of a line even when there is no text to support it” (ibid p.74). Breathnach also felt that nasality was utilised by sean-nós singers to create a sense of continuity between verses and for aiding in the performance of ornamentation (cited in Williams 2004, p.134). Ó Riada, who describes nasalisation as “probably the most subtle of the sean-nós singer’s range of effects”, suggests that nasalisation should not be employed throughout a performance but employed “to draw special attention to a note or group of notes” (1983, p.38). According to Ó Riada, Munster singers employ more nasalisation than Connacht singers, again pointing to Ó Riada’s bias for that particular regional style.

Williams uses the onomatopoeic term neá to describe the nasal tone employed by sean-nós singers (see also Cowdery 1990, p.36). She suggests that this tone is “[…] an attempt to reproduce the sound of the uilleann pipes”, and that the:

[…] audible manifestations of neá take the form of a slightly nasal hum at the very beginning and sometimes at the end of phrases. The resonant qualities produced in the head of the singer, using the bones of the skull and jaw as resonating bodies, is generally not perceived by the audience as anything but a nasal tone. Often a sean-nós singer will hum the neá pitch for a fraction of a second before actually beginning the song. No word is attached to the neá pitch, but occasionally it is slurred into the first pitch of the song, and a word will arise from humming the sound.

(2004, p.134)

Breathnach too uses the term “nyea” to refer to nasalisation in traditional singing. He states that:

A degree of nasality somewhat greater than that which is normal in speech is permitted. This feature it is which gives rise to the expression to put the nyea in it, when used in relation to the singing of a traditional song.
Ó Canainn also made reference to “a drone accompaniment” in sean-nós singing, which he states, is “most obvious on a vowel sound when the singer closes his lips thereby forming an ‘m’ sound like a kind of drone which is repeated at the end of other lines” (1993, p.74). He offers that: “a sean-nós song, musically rendered, seems to the author to imply a continuous drone throughout, supporting the ornate melody line” (ibid p.74). Nasalisation is by no means unique to sean-nós singing, however, the use of terms such as neá further establishes boundaries around this particular tradition. The association between neá and the uilleann pipes in particular seems to be an attempt at framing sean-nós as a uniquely indigenous Irish idiom. It is also an affirmation of Ó Canainn and Ó Riada’s Romantic historicist thesis that all Irish traditional instrumental music originates in sean-nós song.

A number of essentialist sean-nós studies make reference to the fact that in sean-nós performance ornamentation is more important than resonance (see Bodley 1973, p.46; Williams 2004, p. 135). Williams, drawing on her interviews with sean-nós singer Joe Heaney, states that: “some of the best sean-nós singers have very thin voices […], but have the neá just the same” (2004, p.135). However, my analysis of the Oireachtas adjudicator reports suggests that resonance is just as important as ornamentation; the reports also suggest that pronounced nasalization is in fact considered inappropriate in sean-nós singing because of the effect it has on the resonance and perceived musicality of the singing.

**Vibrato and Dynamics**

Essentialist studies also tend to regard vibrato and the use of dynamics as alien techniques in sean-nós performance (see Breathnach 1971, p.101; Bodley 1973, p.46; Ó Canainn 1993, p.75; Zimmermann 1967, p.114). Describing traditional singing, Breathnach states that: “The use of vibrato, of dynamic and dramatic effects, is absolutely foreign to the traditional manner, a characteristic which is also shared with plainchant” (1971, p.101). Williams states that “vibrato is not a common feature of sean-nós singing” (ibid. p.135). However, more recently Williams, this time with Ó
Laoire, clarifies that indeed many *sean-nós* singers do in fact utilise “a subtle vibrato” (2011, p.57). Ó Riada also states that dynamics are employed occasionally by West Munster singers, in order to: “draw special attention to a phrase or even a single note” (1982, p.38). This is noteworthy because elsewhere in the same publication Ó Riada states that:

> In sean-nós singing, also, the singer does not display emotion in the European style; that is to say, he does not use dynamics, he does not sing loudly and again softly for emotional or dramatic effect.

(ibid p.23)

Williams and Ó Laoire offer that those who argue that vibrato does not belong in *sean-nós* performance are likely referring to the “wide vibrato of classical opera and *bel canto* singing” (ibid p.57). From an essentialist standpoint pronounced vibrato and the extensive use of dynamics are considered inappropriate in *sean-nós* singing, because these techniques are regarded as being an index of the Euro-classical tradition, and the essentialist position is that *sean-nós* is unique and completely separate from the European tradition of singing. As I discuss in more detail in the non-essentialist section of this chapter, essentialists tend to imagine the *sean-nós* and the trained western art singer as binary-opposites, as the following quote from Ó Canáinn illustrates:

> The voice quality of the traditional singer is quite unlike that of the so-called ‘trained’ singer. He does not use vibrato nor does he employ dynamic effects. The song is allowed to speak for itself with the minimum of artificial intrusion or histrionics on the part of the performance.

(1993, pp.74-75)

It has been suggested by McCann and Ó Laoire that techniques associated with western art music are considered inappropriate in *sean-nós* singing, because authentic Irishness is widely framed as being the binary-opposite to Englishness; in other words from a nationalist perspective Irishness means being ‘Not-English’, and Western art music, because of its long association with the former coloniser, is an
index of Englishness for Irish Romantic nationalists (McCann and Ó Laoire 2003, p.233).

However, in Chapter IV, I argue that not only is Western art singing an index of the former English coloniser, it also became an index of a style of Irish language bel canto singing that was promoted by the early Oireachtaí. During the early phase of the Oireachtaí vernacular Irish language song collected in the Gaeltacht was extensively performed at the Oireachtaí by classically trained singers. Eventually traditional singers singing in the ‘traditional style(s)’, what became known as sean-nós, came to be the dominant singing style of the festival. In Chapter IV, I argue that the bel canto style of the early Oireachtaí became an index of the cultural appropriation of the expressive culture of the Gaeltacht by middle-class urban elites. Therefore, techniques associated with Western art singing, like dynamics and pronounced vibrato, were considered inappropriate in sean-nós performance because of their association with the bel canto style of the early Oireachtaí, as well as their association with the former English coloniser (see also Chapter VI).

As well as highlighting the fact that sean-nós is framed as the binary opposite of the Western art tradition, the above quote from Ó Canainn also reveals another central tenet of sean-nós theory, that the sean-nós singer is essentially a ‘natural’ as opposed to a trained or schooled singer. This is further evidence of an organicistic view of sean-nós inspired by Romantic notions of cultural essentialism and Romantic historicism. From this perspective the sean-nós singer is seen as having unconsciously and organically absorbed the tradition from his/her ancestors or indeed from their surrounding environment.

**Sean-nós Music**

Some essentialist studies of sean-nós also draw attention to the supposed uniqueness of the melodies of sean-nós songs. There is in fact a long history of writing that has attempted to isolate the unique distinguishing characteristics of Irish music. Edward Bunting (1773-1843) suggested that “the positive and emphatic presence [of the sixth degree of the scale is] the feature which in truth distinguishes all Irish melody” (cited
in Ó Canainn 1993, p.76) Breathnach states that most Irish music is based on heptatonic modes, namely the Ionian (major), Dorian, Mixolydian, and Aeolian (1971, p.10). He goes on to state that the Ionian mode is the predominant one in Irish music, followed by the Mixolydian, then the Dorian and finally the Aeolian — which he states is the least numerous (ibid pp. 10-11). Breathnach sounds almost surprised when he notes the similarities between the structure of Irish traditional music and English folk music:

It is of interest to note that English folk music, by and large, falls into these same four divisions and the proportion of airs in each division is surprisingly close to the Irish figures.

(ibid p.11)

Breathnach’s surprise suggests that he does not regard English folk music and Irish traditional music as shared or related traditions, but as separate and clearly bounded idioms.

Breathnach notes that modulation occurs sometimes in Irish music. Most Irish traditional music follows an AB structure, and Breathnach noted that in some pieces the A is in one mode and the B part in another — typically a mix of Major and Mixolydian modes. Breathnach also makes reference to two other scales occasionally found in Irish music, the Irish “gapped” pentatonic and hexatonic scales respectively. Both of these closely resemble the Ionian (major) mode — except that the pentatonic scale lacks the fourth and seventh degrees of the major scale, and the hexatonic lacks the seventh (1971, p.12). Breathnach’s research suggests that the scales found in Irish traditional music are not as unique as one might expect and he states that this has been due to the fact that the piano, accordion, radio and gramophone have had a

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15 Breathnach adds that: “by and large, song airs and dance tunes consist of two parts or strains, each containing two phrases of equal length. Unlike dance tunes, which always have at least two parts, there are a few song airs which have only one strain or part. Distinguishing the phrases as A, B, and so on, we may note the various ways in which the phrases are combined, e.g., AAA B, AABA, ABBA, ABCD [...]” (1971, p.15).
levelling effect over the years on the scales and intervals of Irish music\textsuperscript{16} (ibid p.14). Underlying much of Breathnach’s writing is the idea that an ‘original’ older style of Irish music once existed and that proper musicological research would help to excavate this elemental Irish music. This Romantic historicist idea of marginal survival is, as I have shown in Chapter II, a central preoccupation of Romantic nationalism.

Ó Canainn also states that musically Irish songs do not have as many distinguishing features as one might expect. However, he adds that the double repetition of the final note of the verse is quite characteristic of Irish songs (1993, p.75). Ó Canainn disagrees with Bunting in that he does not believe that the presence of either the interval of the sixth or the actual sixth note of the scale itself is a strong indication of the Irishness of the song. But he does believe that the presence of the actual sixth note itself in a prominent position in the melody is a characteristic of Irish music. Ó Canainn proposes that the prominent presence of the sixth note in the note-sequence — tonic, sixth and fifth degrees of the scale — and its inversions is a motivic cliché of Irish music (ibid p.75). Again the motivation here is to suggest that ‘authentic’ Irish music is autochthonous to Ireland.

**The Speculative Origins of Sean-nós Song**

A number of scholars suggest that sean-nós song came into existence as a result of the destruction of the Old Gaelic Order during the beginning of the seventeenth century (Breathnach 1971; Corkery 1924; Ó Riada 1982; Williams 2004). Up until that time an indigenous Gaelic chieftain class ruled much of Ireland (Bartlett 2010, p.p. 79-99), and a number of poetic and musical art forms fell under their patronage. The poets, bards and musicians of this period were kept separate by strict rules connected with patronage and hereditary lineages (Williams 2004, p.124). This meant that there were two main bardic traditions in Ireland; the practitioner of one,

\textsuperscript{16} Breathnach also makes reference to the use of accidentals in Irish music. He states that C sharp and F natural occur in tunes pitched in the ‘G’ series occasionally (1971, p.13). However, Breathnach notes that their use is rare and as such one cannot claim that they are particularly characteristic of Irish music.
the *file* (poet), was accorded high status as a professional in society, while the practitioner of the other, the bard or versifier, had a lower amateur status (ibid).

The *file* received full patronage from the chieftains, while the bards had to depend on what they could earn daily (ibid). Poets underwent a long and rigorous training in bardic schools. These were schools created with the sole purpose of training poets for the Irish court. Within these schools, the poets learned to compose poetry in syllabic verse; that is, in metres which were based on the number and arrangement of the syllables in the line and stanza (Breathnach 1971, p.20). These poems were composed in order to be recited out loud to the accompaniment of harp music (ibid, p.20).

The destruction of what remained of the old-Irish chieftain class by Cromwell’s forces in the middle of the seventeenth century, brought to an end the bardic schools (ibid, p.21; Williams 2004, p.126). It is suggested by both Breathnach (1971, p.21) and Williams (2004, p.126) that the strict syllabic verse of the *file*, the highest caste of bard, died out after the destruction of the system that supported it. Williams suggests that the destruction of the bardic schools meant that bards, harpers, and *fíl* were no longer kept apart by the strict rules of the Old Gaelic system, and that, as a result, a more homogeneous type of verse came into existence (2004, p.126). According to Williams:

> One result of Cromwell's eviction of the Irish from their homelands to the barren rocks of Connacht was that multiple song forms were thrown together, leading to the development of what is now referred to as *sean-nós*.

(ibid)

Breathnach too suggests that *sean-nós* is somehow organically derived from a pre-colonial Gaelic past. According to Breathnach:

> It was not until the destruction of the bardic schools in the middle of the seventeenth century that the metres emerged in which all our songs are composed, although it is certain that these *amhrán* or song metres had been cultivated for a long time before that. Unfortunately, compositions in these song
Breathnach believed that the origins of *sean-nós*, or at least the meters to which it is sung, are in Ireland’s ancient pre-colonial past. Both Williams and Breathnach are essentially creating an ‘origins’ myth for *sean-nós*. They imagine *sean-nós* as the cultural ‘descendant’ of a far older Gaelic song tradition that evolved organically over time. Nevertheless, it is seen as being connected in various ways — such as its song meters — to the ancient Gaelic past. This organicist view of vernacular culture draws very much on Romantic nationalism; particularly the ideas of the *Volksgeist* and its relationship with history and the origin of the national spirit (see Chapter II). In Chapter IV I discuss in more detail how two differing ideas concerning the nature of the origins of *sean-nós* — namely whether it originates from the pre-colonial folk or the old Gaelic aristocracy — impacted on ideas of traditional song within the *Oireachtas* and the Gaelic revival more generally.

**The Gaelicisation of Foreign Bodies**

Analysis of the structure and poetic form of *sean-nós* songs reveals that much of what is widely considered to be ‘authentically’ Irish is in fact the result of transculturation. Sean Ó Tuama’s *An Grá in Amhráin na nDaoine* [Love in the Songs of the People], traces the thematic and structural origins of *sean-nós* back to medieval France. According to Ó Tuama, most of the songs contained within the *sean-nós* repertoire were composed between 1600 and 1850. Most of these are love songs based on models which originated in medieval France, such as the *carole*, *pasteourele*, and the *chanson de la malmarieè* (cited in Vallely 2011, p.p. 631-637). Ó Tuama’s thesis is that this medieval tradition was brought to Ireland by the Anglo-Normans where it was fused with the pre-existing native Irish tradition.

However, although the pluralistic and transcultural origins of Irish culture are obvious, Irish Romantic nationalists’ framed Gaelic culture as a dominant force with
the ability to absorb elements of foreign cultures without being changed in the process, as the following quote from Ó Riada illustrates:

Ireland has had a long and violent history during which she remained individual, retaining all her individual characteristics. Such foreign influences as were felt were quickly absorbed and Gaelicised. Such foreigners as settled here rapidly became, in the hackneyed phrase, ‘more Irish than the Irish themselves’.

(Ó Riada 1982, p.19)

The hackneyed phrase Ó Riada is referring to —“more Irish than the Irish themselves”— is a cliché of Irish nationalist history. Numerous Irish history books posit that over time foreign settlers and invaders to Ireland, particularly the Vikings and their decedents the Normans, became completely acculturated into Irish Gaelic culture and society. These same nationalist historians make little or no reference to the societal and cultural impact the likes of the Vikings and Norman had on Gaelic culture. Essentially, Irish Romantic nationalism has influenced “the seamless integration of virtually all exogenous influences within a supposedly stable and continuous identity” (Graham cited in O’Flynn 2009, p.13). Ó Riada uses the metaphor of the river to illustrate the dominance of Gaelic culture:

Foreign bodies may fall in, or be dropped in, or thrown in, but they do not divert the course of the river, nor do they stop it flowing; it absorbs them, carrying them with it as it flows onwards […]

(1983, p.20)

The ‘Irish music is a river metaphor’ frames Gaelic culture as an organically and natural evolving idiom. Within Irish nationalism Gaelicness came to be equated with nature, the landscape, and the environment, while increasingly Englishness came to be equated with modernity, which is seen as a threat to nature and the environment. This view came about because, unlike Viking and Norman cultures, Gaelicness was seen to be threatened by English culture.
By the beginning of the twentieth century the English language was rapidly becoming the common vernacular of all the Irish people. As I have discussed in Chapter II, Irish nationalists fretted over the ‘Anglicisation’ of Irish society. However, Irish nationalists did not openly suggest that English culture in and of itself was more dominant than Gaelic culture —that would be suggesting that Englishness was more powerful than Gaelicness. Instead, Irish nationalists framed Englishness as an ‘unnatural’ taint or pollutant that threatened the ‘authenticity’ and ‘naturalness’ of Gaelic culture.

The “music is river” metaphor also suggests Irish music comes from a specific ‘source’, and arguably it also suggests that the source is the distant past (for more on the use of the “music is a body of water” metaphor see Keegan 2012, p. 202). Breathnach also makes use of the music as river metaphor when he discusses the ancestry of Irish traditional music. While he acknowledges that in all likelihood most traditional Irish music was composed in the latter half of the eighteenth century and the opening decades of the nineteenth, Breathnach also states that:

> There may be older elements in the national repertory, sustained like particles of matter in a stream, but until the extant material has been indexed, classified, and analysed one may only speculate about the age and origin of our music.

(1971, p.18)

The above quote contains some of the main ingredients of Romantic nationalism, and it could arguably be read as a manifesto for Romantic nationalism. The idea of a national repertory points to the Volksgeist theory of collective national culture (the stream), and the idea of marginal survival (particles of matter) is also evident above, as is Romantic historicism, the belief that through scientific analysis the heart and essence of Irish song can be revealed. As I have discussed in Chapter II, Romantic nationalism is very much based on the idea that the distant past embodies the culture of a people. For Romantic nationalists, the spirit of the nation lives in this imagined past and can be accessed primarily through the language of the folk.
In Ireland this meant that the *Gaeltacht* has been imagined by Romantic nationalists as the ‘source’ of authentic Gaelic identity, because the *Gaeltacht* was seen as a marginal survival of a pre-colonial Gaelic culture. Even though the English language was, by the beginning of the twentieth century, the common vernacular of the majority of the Irish people, it was imagined by Irish Romantic nationalists as a foreign and therefore ‘unnatural’ language for the Irish people. As a result, traditional song sung through the medium of English came to be imagined, by essentialist scholars and others, as separate and distinct from Irish language song (*sean-nós*).

**Two-Tradition Hypothesis**
McCann and Ó Laoire refer to this view as the “two-tradition” hypothesis (2002, p.234). According to Mac Con Iomaire:

> Songs in English are also sung in this style but, while there are similarities between traditional singing in English and traditional singing in Irish, they are two different traditions and are generally celebrated as such. The songs in Irish reflect an outlook on life and a view of the world that is quite different to the songs in English.

(Vallely 1999, p.336)

Breathnach argues that language acts as a barrier between the Gaelic and English language traditions. He proposes that: “One may deduce a rule […], that there is an innate relationship between folk-song and language which inhibits adoption by way of translation” (ibid. p.31). Williams however, argues that certain English-language songs can also be considered to be *sean-nós*.

Ornamentation is central to Williams’ theory of *sean-nós*. While she allows that ornamentation is only: “[…] one of many dimensions of *sean-nós*, […] it is invariably the issue that looms large in aesthetic decisions about a particular performer’s skill” (2004, p.123). According to Williams: “melodic ornamentation is influenced both by syntax and by poetic stress patterns, and depends on the language in which the song is sung” (ibid). Williams notes that songs in Irish tend to be
ornamented on unstressed syllables\textsuperscript{17}, and that: “[…] similarly, songs in English dialect using Irish syntax and stress are ornamented on unstressed syllables whenever possible” (ibid). Conversely, she suggests that English-language songs that do not follow Irish patterns of stress and syntax are more strongly influenced, in terms of ornamentation, by melodic contour rather than by stress and syntax. Williams goes on to state that in Ireland singers and speakers use at least two forms of English. One is Hiberno-English, which follows many of the grammatical rules governing speech in the Irish language, and more or less substitutes an English vocabulary in place of Irish. Secondly, she notes the existence of a more contemporary version of English, which virtually everyone uses outside of the west of Ireland (ibid, p.124). According to Williams songs sung in the ‘contemporary’ version of English are not sean-nós because they follow a separate musical grammar.

Williams is essentially positing a more nuanced version of the “two-tradition” hypothesis. Like other essentialist studies Williams imagines continuity between the present and the past. As I have stated above, Williams argues that sean-nós developed out of the old-bardic tradition. She states that a form of heptasyllabic verse emerged out of this tradition from the seventeenth century onwards and that over time English language songs were absorbed into this tradition. She notes that one of the main differences between Irish and English metric systems is that English folk poetry is often iambic — rhyming pattern based on a two-syllable metric foot, with the emphasis falling on the second syllable. In contrast, Irish folk poetry is primarily trochaic —meaning that the stressed syllable occurs before the unstressed syllable.

Williams proposes that in Irish-speaking areas, songs performed in English underwent alteration so that the songs fit with the local dialect (2004, p.128). She notes a number of ways this occurs - for example, through the use of the verb “to be” at the beginning of a line. “This feature in Irish occurs in the form of the verb tá and

\textsuperscript{17} Williams does add however that the melody of the song is an essential factor in the ornamentation of a song. “If the melody calls for ornamentation of a certain note throughout the course of the song, then the word that corresponds to that note will be ornamented whether it is unstressed or stressed (2004, p.142).
is rendered by “it’s” or “T’is” in Hiberno-English” (ibid). Williams notes two other examples of “Gaelicization” of English-language song. Firstly, metathesis, or the reversal of internal consonants, and secondly, the interjection of supplementary syllables such as “a” between consonants, (ibid). She also makes reference to the fact that Irish poets seem to have imitated the assonantal patterns found in early Gaelic poetry, for example the rhyming of the last word of the first line with the first word of the next (ibid p.129). Lastly, Williams seems to suggest that Irish and English language songs differ in use of metaphor. Quoting her main informant, Joe Heaney, Williams states: “Heaney mentioned that his English-language songs contained only a fraction of the metaphors used in the Gaelic ones, and that the Gaelic ones were clearly more descriptive and rich for this reason” (2004, p.130). Williams’ thesis is essentially an organicistic reading of Irish song, similar to that of Breathnach and Ó Riada. The essentialist school of sean-nós seem to be primarily concerned with authoring a sean-nós ‘grammar’. The underlying ideology of this school of thought is one that assumes that sean-nós has an ‘essence’ and that it is a distinct bounded form of cultural expression. Essentialists argue that this ‘essence’ of sean-nós is to be found in the pre-colonial past.

**Performance Space**

Essentialist studies often make reference to the fact that sean-nós is performed by the fireside in homes in the Irish-speaking districts of Ireland (Ó Canainn 1993, pp.78-80; Williams 2004, p.126). Ó Canainn proposes that: “sean-nós singing depends for complete success in performance on a critical yet sympathetic audience” (1993, p.78). He goes on to describe the lay-out of a typical sean-nós performance, noting that there is no marked separation between performer and audience — the singer tends to be seated amongst the audience. He does however note that the singer can create a sense of detachment by closing his/her eyes or by moving to a corner of the room (ibid p.79).

For Ó Canainn sean-nós singing in rural communities was much more than “mere entertainment” (ibid p.79). Instead, according to Ó Canainn, the sean-nós singer: “was not performing, but giving expression to the shared experiences and hopes of
the audience” (ibid p.80). Essentially Ó Canainn is framing sean-nós as the Volksgeist of the Gaeltacht community. Williams also points to the highly ritualised and transcendent qualities of sean-nós performance in the Gaeltacht. She states that: “In an evening of sean-nós singing, the progression of singers moves counter clockwise. In a 1983 interview, Joe Heaney said, ‘you do this when you want to turn back the clock’” (2004, p.126). Like Ó Canainn, Williams describes how the singer blocks out the outer world by partially concealing his face with his cap. She also describes how the singer sits in an un-dramatic “restrained” posture, limbs kept to their side. Williams also notes that occasionally a member of the audience might take hold of the singer’s “left hand and move it up and down according to the “pulse” or rhythm (ibid p.127).

Ó Canainn (1993, p.78) and Williams (2004, p.127) also make reference to the fact that often the audience gives vocal encouragement to the singer between verses or after particular ornaments. Ó Canainn argues that the sean-nós audience: “does not feel bound to the artificial silence that is so much a part of a performance of classical music” (1993, p.78). He also goes on to describe how the sean-nós singer often speaks the last line of the song instead of singing it, and that by so doing he is “bringing us back down from the heights of our involvement in the sean-nós experience to the hard facts of everyday life” (ibid p.80). These descriptions of the ‘ideal’ sean-nós performance space are likely influenced by Romantic nationalist ideas concerning both the transcendent quality of vernacular song, and the view that folk-song is a vehicle for the expression of collective spirit/character (Volksgeist).

As I have illustrated above, the essentialist school of sean-nós scholarship views the Irish language as the essence of Gaelic identity. The Gaeltacht, because of its association with the Irish language, is equally regarded as the source of Gaelic identity. Because of its association with the Gaeltacht and the Irish language, sean-nós is regarded by essentialists as the ‘source’ of Irish traditional music, Ó Canainn’s key that opens all doors. More recently, sean-nós scholarship has shifted somewhat
from this essentialist perspective, and a number of contemporary sean-nós scholars have criticised the essentialism of the likes of Ó Riada and Ó Canainn.

### 3.2 Non-Essentialist Definitions of Sean-nós

Ó Laoire, arguably the most recognised figure in the field of sean-nós studies, has called for a move away from overly-reductive and generalising studies of Irish traditional song to more particularist based studies that privilege the experiences of actual singers instead of notions of cultural essences and established dichotomies (McCann and Ó Laoire 2003, pp. 234-235). Similarly, Nic Dhonncha argues that: “rather than approaching sean-nós ontologically or trying to address the difficulty of its definition, it may be more beneficial to discuss it in its functional and temporal contexts” (2011, p.159). Like McCann and Ó Laoire, Nic Dhonncha suggests that “local, indigenous criteria, may provide us with a more useful perspective and contribute to the displacement of some of the cliché surrounding traditional singing in Ireland” (ibid).

A number of scholars have problematized the two-tradition hypothesis in particular (see Bourke 2007, pp.43-58; Coleman 1997, pp. 31-50; McCann and Ó Laoire 2002, pp. 233-263). McCann and Ó Laoire argue that the two-tradition hypothesis privileges the Irish language tradition, regarding it as being: “[...] ancient in lineage, personal in character, lyrical in content, more ornamented in delivery, more authentic in essence” (2002, p.234). The English-language song tradition on the other hand is viewed as being: “[...] more recent in origin, more practical in character, more literal in content, more plain in delivery, less Irish in essence (ibid). Ó Laoire and McCann argue that the two-tradition hypothesis:

[…] encourages structuralist and deterministic approaches to songs and texts and foregrounds a reified view of “tradition”, thereby concealing important questions of social context and personal meaning. Second, […] it [the two-tradition hypothesis] leads us to understand the experiences of people who sing in terms of an either/or language choice between distinct, alternative entities.

(2002, p.234)
Their own research, based on ethnographic participant-observation, illustrates that many traditional singers in Ireland perform both Irish and English language songs, and that for many of these singers, the idea that a song should be thought less of simply because it was in English and not Gaelic, is an alien concept (ibid).

One of McCann and Ó Laoire’s informants, Róisín White, subverts the Romantic nationalist view of Irish culture centred on notions of language, which is in turn based on linear temporality, where the past is reified to the exclusion of the present. Instead, White draws attention to the musical commonalities of both English and Irish song performance. White views Irish and English language song as equals in a particular repertoire; she foregrounds the notion that English and Irish language song are both “coexistent contemporary works enacted in performance” (McCann and Ó Laoire 2003, p.255). Further indications that the “two-tradition hypothesis” is overly simplistic and reductive can be found in Steve Coleman’s work on Joe Heaney. Arguably the most famous sean-nós singer in living memory, Heaney, who rarely used the term sean-nós, had a highly developed concept of meaning and style in traditional song, and he valued songs primarily because of the aesthetic response he got from their storyline. Whether the song was sung in Irish or in English seems to have been of secondary importance (see Coleman 1997, p.31).

Bourke also questions essentialist definitions of Irish traditional song. Her fieldwork in Conamara revealed that English-language songs were as much a part of the vernacular tradition there as Irish-language songs. She also noted that, contrary to essentialist definitions, singers in Conamara at times sung in unison — usually amongst family members (2007, pp.43-58). O’Crohan (1951) also noted that family members sometimes sang in unison, to such a degree that they closely modelled each other’s ornaments (cited in Williams and Ó Laoire 2011, p.55). Ó Laoire came across traditional heterophonic group singing on Tory Island (Ó Laoire 2007). As I have stated above, sean-nós singing is widely seen as a solo unaccompanied art, however, as Williams and Ó Laoire point out: “rules cannot be unilaterally applied in sean-nós,
and individual singers use their own idiosyncratic combinations of aesthetic and appropriateness to engage a song’s meaning” (2011, p.58).

That being said, there are a number of issues that non-essentialists tend to overlook when it comes to sean-nós in particular. For example, Williams argues that certain forms of English-language song can be classified as sean-nós songs (2004, p.122). By doing so Williams is overlooking the fact that the category sean-nós song was invented by an Irish-language organisation to refer to a form of Irish language song. In other words, the Irish language is central to what is considered sean-nós in this musical community. I would argue that trying to extend the rubric of what can be considered to be sean-nós only serves to obfuscate the meaning of the term. In my opinion, in order to avoid such confusion, sean-nós scholars need to acknowledge that sean-nós is the music of a discrete musical culture, the Oireachtas singing competition. This does not mean that vernacular Irish Language song, sung solo and unaccompanied, is not performed in other contexts other than the Oireachtas, but rather, I would suggest that, when it is, the musical boundaries of these other contexts are not necessarily that of the Oireachtas sean-nós singing cohort (see Chapter VI).

Like any musical culture the Oireachtas singing community has its own ideas of what is considered musically appropriate and aesthetically pleasing. It should be noted that many traditional singers prefer not to use the term sean-nós. As Liam mac Iomaire points out, many traditional singers prefer the Irish term fonnadóireacht [singing] and fonnadóir [singer] to the term sean-nós (Mac con Iomaire 2007, p.51). I would argue that fonnadóireacht is a more inclusive term, and that a variety of song types can be included in this category, such as Irish and English-language vernacular and macaronic song. However, defining what exactly can be considered fonnadóireacht does not concern us here; instead this thesis is primarily concerned with sean-nós song in the Oireachtas. Purely from an etymological perspective, it may be more useful to view sean-nós as a sub-genre of fonnadóireacht, that refers to the style of song promoted by Oireachtas na Gaeilge.
Although it tends not to be overtly stated, the tacit implication of much of the non-essentialist school of scholarship is that the Oireachtas and the Irish traditional (sean-nós) singing community are separate cultural formations. This view frames the Oireachtas as somewhat of an elitist organisation, that views the traditional singer from an etic position. As I will show in Chapter V, there is significant evidence that illustrates that, during the early decades of its history, the Oireachtas was in fact an elitist organisation that essentially appropriated the expressive culture of the Gaeltacht for its own socio-political agenda. However, this is only part of the story of the festival. In the following chapters I show that the Oireachtas has undergone a number of changes in its long history, and that increasingly from the 1940s on, traditional singers have been central to the ‘authoring’ of what is considered sean-nós song.

**Conclusion**

In this Chapter I suggest that sean-nós scholarship can be generally divided into two schools of thought, one essentialist, and the other non-essentialist. The essentialist position is based on the theory that Irish culture, and therefore sean-nós, is autochthonous. As I have argued above, this view has largely been informed by Romantic nationalist ideas concerning cultural essences, Romantic historicism, and the framing of the ‘folk’ (the Gaeltacht community) as the embodiment of the nation. Because of its language content and its association with the Gaeltacht community — and the idea of Volksgeist— sean-nós song has been framed by essentialists as an authentic musical survival from a pre-colonial Gaelic past.

Non-essentialists, on the other hand, challenge this view of Irish culture. They are critical of what they see as the overly reductive and generalising of essentialist scholarship. Writers such as Ó Laoire highlight the issues that arise when one begins defining music genres based on notions of cultural essences. As Ó Laoire and others point out, singers themselves often have far more nuanced and idiosyncratic ways of defining what they consider to be ‘authentic’ in a performance, than ideas of cultural essences suggest. However, I offer that non-essentialists tend not to regard the
Oireachtas sean-nós singing competition as a unique musical community made up of many disparate voices. Instead, non-essentialists frame the Oireachtas as an elitist organisation that determines what is considered to be sean-nós. I would argue that the Oireachtas has an incredibly complex history and that in many ways it should not be viewed as one continuous homogenous entity. In the next chapter, I discuss the history of the Oireachtas, and the relationship of its membership with sean-nós and the Gaeltacht.
Chapter IV: A History of Irish language Song in Oireachtas na Gaeilge

From its beginnings in 1893, the Gaelic League/Oireachtas used the expressive culture of the Gaeltacht as a template to construct its vision of Irish society (see Chapter II). I have borrowed the terms nativists and progressives from Philip O’Leary (1994, p. 15), who uses them to identify ideological tendencies and stances within the early Gaelic League. Initially a progressivist ideology was to the fore within the Oireachtas, and progressivists believed that Gaelic culture had degenerated into a peasant culture which they felt was unsuitable as a national culture. Progressivists sought to extract from this peasant culture that which they believed was ‘authentically’ Gaelic, and to use that to build a contemporary Gaelic culture. This led to the collecting of traditional song in the Irish speaking districts, and the material collected was subsequently performed at various Oireachtas recitals and singing competitions by singers trained in the western art style.

More nativist members of the Oireachtas/League saw the culture of the Gaeltacht as the ‘authentic’ culture of the Gaels, and they strove to preserve the Gaeltacht and its culture. Nativists argued that the sean-nós style of the Gaeltacht districts was in fact the national style of singing and that as such it needed to be preserved and promoted. After 1939, nativists gained a stronger foothold within the Oireachtas membership, and this led to the inclusion of specific Gaeltacht events in the Oireachtas programme (see Ó Laoire 2000). However, I argue in the following Chapter that the progressivist outlook remained the dominant ideology of the Oireachtas until the early 1970s, and this meant that the expressive culture of the Gaeltacht only marginally featured in the Oireachtas programme during this period.

When traditional singers did feature on the Oireachtas stage they were presented as ‘exotic’ examples of ‘authentic’ Irishness, to be gazed upon by a largely urban middle class. This shows the colonial attitude of the Oireachtas membership toward the Gaeltacht. Both nativists and progressivists, however, were influenced by Romantic nationalism, although they interpreted it in different ways. For example,
both positions were deeply influenced by the Romantic nationalist view that the folk was inherently conservative, which is used to explain how a pre-colonial Celtic culture survived in the Gaeltacht. Consequently both nativists and progressivists felt that the Gaeltacht community needed to be protected from outside influences.

4.1 The Appropriation of the Expressive Culture of the Gaeltacht

In August 1896, the executive committee of the Gaelic League passed a motion to hold a one day festival in celebration of Irish culture (Oireachtas na Gaeilge 2015). The motion stated: “That an Oireachtas, or public assembly, on behalf of the Irish language, be held annually by the Gaelic League, at which prizes would be offered for readings, recitations, song and dramatic sketches in Irish” (Ó Muimhneacháin 1997, p.19). The first Oireachtas took place on the 17th of May, 1897, in the Round Room of the Rotunda, one of the largest halls in Dublin at that time (Mac Aonghusa 1997, p.5). It was a half-day event and the festival was chaired by the lord mayor of Dublin, which added to the sense of pomp and occasion (Bradshaw 2010 p.9). Between 1,000 and 1,200 people attended the festival, and this far exceeded the expectations of the organisers (ibid p.9). The executive committee decided to make the Oireachtas an annual event, held in Dublin until 1913; thereafter it was held outside of the capital in various venues throughout the country until it was disbanded for political reasons and a lack of funding in the 1920s. When the festival was re-established in 1939 it was held annually in Dublin until 1974, when it began to be held again outside the capital (ibid).

The format of the festival was based on the Eisteddfod festival in Wales and the Mòd festival in Scotland (Oireachtas na Gaeilge 2015; Ó Muimhneacháin 1997, p.19). The first Oireachtas consisted mainly of literary competitions. Nine competitions featured on the programme: “two poetry competitions, five prose essay competitions, a competition for poetry compilations, a competition for unpublished songs or stories in Irish, a competition for new song compositions suitable for recitation at Conradh na Gaeilge (Gaelic League) meetings, and a reacaireacht (versifying) competition”
The competitions were open to all comers, Irish and non-Irish alike. There were 102 entrants for the first Oireachtas, 90 of whom entered the literary competitions (Ó Súilleabháin 1984 p.12) illustrating how central literature was to the early festival.

Throughout its history the Oireachtas has striven to promote new writing in the Irish language, the belief being that Irish language literature would aid in promoting the Irish language revival. The rationale for establishing the Oireachtas, and the importance of literature to the movement, is explained succinctly in the following quotation from a Gaelic League manuscript from 1896:

> The Oireachtas will by reason of its character and novelty, tend to fix universal public attention on the Irish language movement; it will make for the creation of a modern Irish Literature; it will encourage and be a band of union, to all workers in the revival of Irish and finally it will rally the Irish Nation for the maintenance of the native tongue.

(Irishleabhar na Gaeilge 1896 cited in Mac Aonghusa 1997, p.19)

In 1901 the Oireachtas established an Irish language drama competition, where new plays were written and performed at the festival, and this became a mainstay of the festival for many years to come. An art exhibition was added to the schedule in 1905 (Oireachtas na Gaeilge 2015). Initially the Oireachtas held only one spoken Irish competition, in recitation, however, a conversational Irish competition was added to the programme in 1900, storytelling in 1901, reading and history in 1906, and a debating competition in 1907 (Ní Mhaolchallann 2009, p. 15).

Irish traditional music featured in the festival’s proceedings from the very beginning (Vallely 1999, p.87). There was an uilleann pipes recital held as part of the celebrations of the first Oireachtas. Harp and uilleann pipes competitions were held from 1901 onwards, and the following year violin and whistle competitions were introduced (Ní Mhaolchallann p.18). However, The League was and is primarily concerned with language revival. Irish language song, because of its language
component, was of particular interest to the Oireachtas, and remains so to this day. As stated in Chapter II, Irish Romantic nationalism, although it has its own idiosyncrasies, was very much influenced by the emergence of Romantic nationalism in late eighteenth-century Europe, in particular the works of Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803) on language and ethnicity. Therefore, it is possible that the special attention given to song at the Oireachtas was due in part to the influence of the writings of Herder, who believed that the expressive culture of the folk or Volk, particularly poetry and folksong, were the most authentic expression of a people/nation (Bendix 1997 p. 37).
Selection from the 1897 Oireachtas Programme

Illustration 4.1 (Gaelic League 1897-reprinted in 1923 by Francis Fahy for Conradha na Gaeilge Festival of Samhain- source (Vaughan Williams Library)
Illustration 4.2 Prominent Members of the 1897 Oireachtas Membership

Standing from Left: Tadhg Ó Donnchadha (‘Torna), Roibéard Mac Gabhráin, Donnchadh Ó Loingsigh, Liam Ó Broin, Seosamh Laoide, Eóin Mac Néill, Séamus Ó Cathasaigh.

Seated from Left: Pádraig Mac Cathmhaoil, Seán Ó hÓigáin, Risteárd Ó Maoilbhréanainn, Stíofán Bairéad, Dónall Ó Conchubhair.

(Ní Mhaolchallann 2009)

Oireachtas Singing Competitions
Notwithstanding the fact that the term sean-nós was being used by the League/Oireachtas from very early on, much of the singing being produced and promoted at the festival, initially, and for many years to come, was Western art choral and solo bel canto\(^{18}\) singing in the Irish language. Two singing competitions, one for men and one for women, were organised for the second Oireachtas festival in 1898, and a mixed choir competition was added to the schedule in 1901 (Ní Mhaolchallann 2009, p.16). During the early days of the festival, the Dublin Musical Society, augmented by Gaelic Leaguers, performed choral songs in Irish at the festival and elsewhere (Vallely 1999, p.87). This choir performed a mixture of Irish

\(^{18}\) Literally the Italian for ‘beautiful singing’ or ‘beautiful song’, bel canto came to be associated with a style of singing in the late 19\(^{th}\) century (Stark 2000). It is somewhat of a vague and ambiguous term, but it is used here to reference a highly florid virtuoso style of operatic Western art song consisting of an array of vocal techniques, such as pronounced vibrato, with oscillations of up to a major third and even a perfect fourth (Williams and Ó Laoire p.34).
traditional song, arranged for choral singing, and newly composed material; it was however disbanded in 1904 because the choral concerts were making a loss (Ní Mhaolchállann 2009, p. 16). A collection of songs, harmonised and arranged for choral singing by Robert Dwyer, was sung and published at the 1902 Oireachtas (ibid. p. 87). The 1902 Oireachtas also led to the compilation of a series of song books, Cláirseach na nGael, under the editorship of Brendan Rodgers and J.H Lloyd, and in consultation with Hardebeck and Gratten Flood (Vallely 1999, p.87). The centrality of Western art choral music to the Oireachtas continued on well into the twentieth century. The following illustration, taken from the 1950 Oireachtas, indicates that choral music at the festival was arranged for SATB. The various parts are written out in tonic sol-fa. The competition in question, competition 17, was titled Gléasadh ar Amhrán Ghaeilge (arrangement of Irish Songs) (Ní Chonalláin 2008, p.99). Both traditional and newly composed material was performed in these competitions (OnaG19 1950, Comp. 17).

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19 Oireachtas na Gaeilge, I am using the abbreviated form, from here.
I propose that the collecting of vernacular Irish song in the Gaeltacht, and the subsequent performance of this material by singers trained in the Western art style, noted above, can be read as a form of cultural appropriation on the part of the Oireachtas membership. Cultural interventionist institutions often fall back on
Romantic nationalist ideology, which imagines the expressive culture of the folk as being the product of the collective genius of the folk, in order to justify this kind of appropriation. The argument is that because folk/vernacular music generally does not belong to one single individual, it is the property of every, and any, body, usually as long as they are from the same nation as the folk in question (Bendix 1997 p.81).

There existed within the early League/Oireachtas a number of competing factions, each with conflicting theories on the nature of ‘authentic’ Gaelic culture. I will discuss a number of these factions further on in this chapter, and in even more detail in Chapter V. However, it is important to point out here that, although the early League/Oireachtas was by no means a homogenous entity, the various factions within the movement’s membership tended to view the culture of the Irish speaking districts as the rightful property of the whole of the Irish nation. This belief in a collective heritage was seen as the justification for the cultural appropriation of the expressive culture of the Gaeltacht. The various factions within the League/Oireachtas also tended to agree that Gaelic culture needed to be protected from Anglicisation, which they believed was contaminating and destroying ‘authentic’ Gaelic culture. The League/Oireachtas membership created categories like sean-nós so that they could distinguish between what they imagined to be authentic Gaelic culture and inauthentic elements, which they felt had been absorbed into Gaelic culture. By creating these types of categories the League/Oireachtas could effectively police what they considered to be ‘authentically’ Irish. The category sean-nós was invented by the League/Oireachtas as a container for ‘authentic Gaelic song’.

**The Invention of the Category know as sean-nós**

According to Aristotle, categories result from lists of defining features. In other words, when we encounter an item we have never encountered before we “assign the item to a category based on an analysis of its properties and a comparison with the category definition” (Levitin 2008, p.140). This theory of category construction is
based on the assumption that categories are a matter of logic, and that objects are either inside or outside of a category (ibid p.141). Ludwig Wittgenstein however argued that not all categories have clear boundaries. Using the category “game” as an example, Wittgenstein was able to illustrate that there are no definitions or set of definitions that can encompass all games:

For example, we might say that a game (a) is done for fun or recreation, (b) is a leisure activity, (c) is an activity most often found among children, (d) has certain rules, (e) is in some way competitive, (f) involves two or more people. Yet, we can generate counterexamples for each of these elements, showing that the definitions break down: (a) In the Olympic Games, are the athletes having fun? (b) Is pro football a leisure activity? (c) Poker is a game, as is jaialai, but not most often found among children. (d) A child throwing a ball against a wall is having fun, but what are the rules? (e) Ring-around-the-rosy isn’t competitive. (f) Solitaire doesn’t involve two or more people.

(Levitin 2008, pp. 140-141)

According to Wittgenstein, category membership is a matter of debate, and often there can be differences of opinion (Levitin 2008 p.143). This means categories are not necessarily fixed - they can be open ended and in flux. Although the category sean-nós was created by the League/Oireachtas as a label for ‘authentic’ Irish language song, from the very beginning there has been no consensus within the movement’s membership as to what exactly is authentic Irish language song. In fact I would argue that when the category sean-nós was being used initially it was in fact empty of category members. Various groups and individuals within the League/Oireachtas — each with their own competing agendas — have attempted to lay claim to this category by redrawing its attributes (see Chapter IV). I propose that the category sean-nós is a ‘contested-space’. I use the term ‘contested space’ here for two reasons: firstly, it points to the uncertainty that exists as to what is and is not sean-nós, and secondly it illustrates how a category, such as sean-nós, can be constructed without any clearly defined, or any, category members. This in turn points to the plastic nature of some categories.
The earliest evidence of the term *sean-nós* being used in reference to a style of singing comes from 1903, when it was decided, at the Gaelic League’s annual conference of that year, to give *sean-nós* singing particular encouragement at the *Oireachtas* (Ó Súilleabháin 1984, p.111). Although it appears that the term was being used to distinguish between vernacular Irish language song and the type of singing being promoted by the *Oireachtas* at the time, namely choral and solo *bel canto* singing, it is not entirely clear what the organisation imagined vernacular Irish language song to be. In 1905 the festival organised a choral *sean-nós* competition, *Cómórtas aon-ghutha ar an sean-nós*. This led to a lively debate in the pages of *An Claidheamh Soluis* (the Gaelic League’s periodical), on whether it was possible for any choir to be performing in the *sean-nós* style (Ni Mhaolchallann 2009, p. 17).

The uncertainty that existed within the festival’s membership as to what constituted *sean-nós* song/singing led Alice Milligan and others to organise what was to become the first ever conference on *sean-nós* in 1910. I was unable to locate any documentary material on this particular conference. However, Nic Dhonncha suggests that *sean-nós* was alien to most of the *Oireachtas* membership during the period that the conference was held (2012, p.160). To illustrate this point, Nic Dhonncha cites a number of articles that appeared in a number of nationalist periodicals during this period. For example, in 1905 the following appeared in *An Claidheamh Soluis*:

> There is a large body of the public who do not for a moment wish to sneer at traditional singing though it be unpleasant to their ears. To these people some kind of authoritative statement from those who know would be a godsend.

(Cited in Nic Dhonnacha 2012 p.160)

A similar situation occurred with Irish step dancing at the festival. Step dancing was included in the *Oireachtas* programme from 1898 onwards, but again there was uncertainty among the organisers as to what constituted ‘authentic’ Irish dance. To deal with this issue, a commission was established by the Gaelic League/*Oireachtas* to determine whether figure dances were Irish or not (Ni Mhaolchallann p. 17). This
anxiety, and one could say obsession, with authenticity is very much a hallmark of cultural nationalist and cultural interventionist movements (Bendix 1997).

As I have pointed out in Chapter II, authenticity in Romantic nationalism tends to be based on notions of cultural purity and essentialism. It could be said that Romantic nationalism fails to recognise that transculturation and plurality are very often the norm as opposed to the exception. The quest for authenticity— in the sense of cultural purity— almost always involves separating the ‘authentic’ from the ‘inauthentic’, and this ironically can lead cultural interventionist movements, like the League/Oireachtas, to ‘author’ their own version of the folk culture they are endeavouring to preserve.

During the nineteenth century, the heyday of cultural revival movements, Romantic revivalists tended to come from the middle-classes. These revivalists often viewed much of the cultural expression of the folk as low brow, bawdy and crass, and this often led to the gentrifying of folk culture, in order to make it more palatable for middle-class tastes and sensibilities (see Boyes 201, pp.27-29). However, revivalists tend not to see themselves as agents of gentrification but instead believe that they are in fact removing ‘inauthentic’ elements from the ‘authentic’ folk culture they are endeavouring to preserve. Aspects of the folk culture that do not fit with the revivalist’s tastes/sensibilities tend to be framed as being either foreign or popular in origin or both, and revivalists offer this as justification for their removal.

4.2 Progressivist and Nativist Revivalists within the early League/Oireachtas

O’Leary argues that while the terms progressivist and nativist can be used to identify ideological tendencies and stances within the Gaelic League, they are, with few exceptions, all but useless for the classification of people because: “individual revivalists shift positions and alliances, with blithe disregard for any consistency” (1994, pp. 14-15). Here I use these terms to describe two vying cohorts centred on progressivist and nativist ideologies, respectively.
Progressivists and nativists alike believed that Irishness was in danger of being destroyed by Anglicisation. Anglicisation for progressivists was equated with the popular English culture of the time, which they viewed as being bawdy and low-brow. Nativists on the other hand equated Anglicisation with modernity; consequently nativists within the League/Oireachtas tended to be wary of any foreign influence. Conversely, the progressives were modernists who viewed the cultural expression of the Gaeltacht as the raw material for constructing a cosmopolitan Gaelic society: “[... ] progressives saw the challenge of the Revival as the restoration to Ireland of her true past, a restoration that would involve her resumption of active intercourse with the Europe she had so long ignored under the yoke of English cultural imperialism” (O’Leary 1994, p.90). O’Leary argues that the single issue distinguishing progressivism from nativism was that progressivists were open to literary and intellectual innovations from the Continent (1994, p.52).

**Progressivists**

The task of the League/Oireachtas, from the progressivist prospective, was to build a new contemporary Gaelic culture from the ruins of the old, which was to be found in the Gaeltacht. Progressivists believed that, in order for Ireland to take her rightful place in the modern world, it needed its own language, literature, and contemporary art and music. However, progressivists believed that Gaelic culture had become regionalised and parochial from its long contact with the ‘peasant’ classes. They argued that the culture of the Gaeltacht was therefore unsuitable as a national culture. Instead, progressivists viewed the expressive culture of the Gaeltacht as raw material to be moulded into a modern, cosmopolitan national culture. Although the progressives wanted to preserve the Irish-speaking districts, they did so because they believed that the native Irish-speaking inhabitants were essentially a resource for a national Gaelic revival (Ó Torna 2005). The following quote from Padraig Pearse (1879-1916) is illustrative of the progressivists’ position with regards the role of the expressive culture of the Gaeltacht in the revival:
The traditional style is not the Irish way of singing or of declaiming but the peasant way; it is not, and has never been, the possession of the nation at large, but only of a class of the nation […] And those who would build up a great national art – an art capable of expressing the soul of the whole nation peasant and non-peasant – must do even as we propose to do with regard to the language: they must take what the peasants have to give and develop it.

(Pearse cited in Ó Laoire 2000, p.p. 162-163)

The progressivist position can be viewed as a continuation of the colonial process, begun in Ireland under British rule. Colonialism is constructed on the notion that a binary polarity exists between the civilised and the savage worlds of the ‘Other’. The civilised individual is considered to be more evolved and superior to the native. This duality allows the civilised to appropriate the land and the natural resources of the ‘Other’ (Said 1993, p. xiii). The coloniser often believes that the native’s resources are going to waste because the native does not understand their true value, and the coloniser feels duty bound to exploit the resources of the ‘Other’, all in the name of the civilising project. By framing the culture of the Gaeltacht as the decaying remnant of an ancient civilisation — another trope of colonialism — progressivists were able to further justify the appropriation of the cultural expressions of the Gaeltacht in order to restore Ireland to, what they imagined was, its former greatness.

The bel canto and choral singing promoted at the Oireachtas was seen, by progressivists, as the national contemporary Gaelic high art music. They wanted Ireland to have its own ‘indigenous’ ‘art’ music, and art music for the progressives was very much informed by a Eurocentric view of music, which placed the Euro-classical tradition above all other kinds of music. Vernacular styles of music, song and dance were essentially seen as ‘peasant’ forms of cultural expression, unsuitable as national ‘art’ forms. The attitude of the progressives within the Oireachtas is summed up in the following speech given by Arthur Darley (1873-1929):

Our country musicians are possessed of the talent of music and have in their minds the idea of the beautiful in it, but they cannot reproduce them, for they
lack the technical means of doing so (applause). Were they reasonably educated they would produce a race of musicians worthy of our history. Again, we had those who believed that Irish music should be rendered in scales of unusual construction. Many scales existed in ancient times but, alas, those who could teach us have gone. Because a singer or player, through lack of technical means, sang or played with a total disregard of any correctness of intonation, that did not qualify them to claim that they were using a scale of unusual construction. The majority of them did not adhere to the accepted musical scale, not that they used any other form of scale, but that their ear being totally untrained, they involuntarily produced a music not in any one scale, but in an infinity of scales of impossible construction (laughter and applause). Mr. Darley then gave his violin recital of Irish airs.

(Cited in Brennan, 2004, p.38)

Darley studied violin at the Royal Irish Academy of Music (RIAM), and he was appointed senior professor there from 1900 to 1903 (White and Boydell 2013, p.281). In 1928 he became the first director of the Dublin Municipal School of Music. He was a keen collector of Irish traditional music, and in 1914, along with P.J. McCall, he published a collection of traditional airs (ibid). He also gave recitals and illustrated lectures on Irish traditional music at various Gaelic League events, and the above quote is an extract from one such lecture/performance (ibid). Darley also founded the Ceol Cumann orchestra, which regularly performed on Raidió Éireann (then Ireland’s national radio broadcaster) between 1926 and 1969 (ibid).

Darley collected and performed Irish traditional tunes; however, as the quote above shows, he had little interest in traditional styles of playing, and his performance aesthetic was informed by Euro-classical ideals. While it is possible that the progressive’s etic view of vernacular culture was partly due to the fact that the Oireachtas members, being urbanites, were physically estranged from the rural Gaeltacht populace on the West coast, it also seems likely that issues of class also contributed to this view. Membership of the League/Oireachtas for much of its history tended to be from the middle classes, and the Gaeltacht populace has historically been one of the poorest in Ireland (Ó Maolaodha 2014 [personal
Whatever the exact reasons for their etic views on vernacular culture were, progressives felt duty bound to take what they could from the Gaeltacht and remould it into a national culture.

**Nativists**

Nativists on the other hand were conservative/preservationist in their outlook. They felt that the Catholic sensibilities of Ireland would be undermined and corrupted by cosmopolitanism, and although British Anglicisation was considered the greatest harbinger of cosmopolitanism, nativists within the League/Oireachtas were almost equally wary of any form of modernity or foreign influence. Nativists saw the Gaeltacht as a ‘treasure’ from the past that needed to be guarded from modernisation/Anglicisation, which they felt was a threat to the ‘purity’ of Gaeltacht culture and life. Nativists used terms such as the “protective wall”, “reservation of authentic Irishness” and “the well of culture” to describe the Gaeltacht (see Chapter II).

Describing vernacular culture as ‘treasure’ is a trope associated with cultural interventionist movements, and indeed with folkloric studies, and it represents a particular form of commodification (Bendix 1997 p.39). When the ‘treasure’ motif is applied to cultural expression the implication is that it is priceless and in need of guarding. Unlike the progressivists, who saw the culture of the Gaeltacht as raw material to be used to build a new national Gaelic culture, nativists within the League/Oireachtas were more concerned with preserving the expressive culture of the Gaeltacht, in the hope that that culture would in turn spill out and ‘Gaelicise’ the rest of the nation.

It is likely that it was the nativist element within the League/Oireachtas that first used the term “the old Irish style” to distinguish the singing style of the Gaeltacht from the newer (bel canto) style which was being championed at the Oireachtas initially. There was a gradual changeover from the term “old Irish style”, used in English to the term “sean-nós”, and by 1911 the term sean-nós was used in a
directive issued for the *Oireachtas* of that year: “*Ni éistfear ach le hamhránaíocht ar an sean-nós*” ["Only sean-nós singing will be listened to"] (Ó Suilleabháin 1984, p.111). The change from the more adjectival “the old Irish style” to the noun *sean-nós* is significant because it is further evidence of the creation of a specific category of song. It is important to point out however that the above directive related to a specific singing competition, and the style of song/singing that was permitted at that particular competition, and not to the festival as a whole. Western art style singing, both choral and solo, was the dominant style of singing promoted by the *Oireachtas* during this period, indicating that the progressivist position was very much to the fore during the early period of the festival’s history.

At first glance it does appear that the nativist element within the festival’s membership looked more favourably on the vernacular style of singing than the progressives; however, the fact that nativists used terms such as “reservation” and “protective wall” in relation to the *Gaeltacht* shows that they viewed the *Gaeltacht* populace as an ‘exotic other’, in need of protection. Rather than appreciating the vernacular singing style from an “insiders” perspective, nativists turned the expressive culture of the *Gaeltacht* into a spectacle of the exotic, more akin to a museum piece than a living culture. I would argue that neither the nativists nor the progressivists within the early League/Oireachtas make any real attempts to gain an understanding of the expressive culture of the *Gaeltacht* from the perspective of a cultural insider (see Chapter I for more on the insider-versus-outsider dichotomy).

### 4.3 The Performance of an Imagined Gaeltacht at the Oireachtas

Notwithstanding the fact that Western art style singing was the dominant singing style promoted by the early League/Oireachtas, vernacular Irish language song still played an important role symbolically in early *Oireachtas* programmes. As I have stated in Chapter II, Irish Romantic nationalists viewed the *Gaeltacht* as a spatial metaphor for authentic Irishness. I offer that Irish Romantic nationalists imagined vernacular Irish language song as an aural metaphor for the *Gaeltacht*; the
The performance of vernacular Irish language song/Sean-nós, although a marginal element within the early festival, functioned to create an ‘imagined’ ideal Gaeltacht on the Oireachtas stage:

Wednesday night’s concert whirled us away to the Gaedhealtacht, [sic] and while Seaghan Ó Cathain and Maire Ni Dhubahthaigh were singing to us we saw in our mind’s eye long country roads threading the recesses of brown hills, with here and there by the roadside the white gable of a house with its homely thatch, and a patch of light shingling [sic] on the road from the half-open door; or again we seemed to sit in a fireside group and to watch the changing faces of the men and women, half revealed in the firelight, and the wondering eyes of the little children as the singer chanted. There were very precious moments, and one almost resented the applause which woke one up from one’s reverie and reminded one that this was not a darkening kitchen on some far hillside of the Gaedhealtacht [sic] but a great public hall in the centre of Baile Atha Cliath [Dublin], brilliantly lit, and thronged with three thousand vociferous Gaels.

(An Claidheamh Soluis 1907 cited in Ó Torna 2005, p.150)

The performance of vernacular Irish language song on stage at events organised by the League/Oireachtas can be read as a performance of a romanticised version of the Gaeltacht, as it was imagined by the League/Oireachtas’ membership. It can equally be read as further evidence of cultural appropriation, whereby the cultural expression of the Gaeltacht populace, an internal ‘Other’, is placed on stage to be gazed upon by largely urban middle class elites. The notion of the ‘colonial gaze’ as a form of appropriation and objectification is central to post-colonial studies and it is useful here to describe the power relationship that was played out when a native Irish speaker from the Gaeltacht preformed on the Oireachtas stage during the early years of the festival. The formal staging of expressive culture tends to create a marked divide between audience and performer. I propose that, particularly during the early years of the Oireachtas, this marked divide reflected, and possibly even reinforced, the cultural and class divide that existed between the Gaeltacht populace and the wider Oireachtas membership.
Bringing the *Gaeltacht*, at it were, to the *Oireachtas* also meant that the festival’s largely middle-class audience was able to experience a sanitised version of *Gaeltacht* culture, without having to deal with any of the realities and contradictions of *Gaeltacht* life at that time, particularly the abject poverty which was a daily reality for many in the various *Gaeltacht* districts (for discussion of poverty in the *Gaeltacht* see Ó Conghaile 1988, pp. 87-108). Instead of addressing this divide, by bringing the *Gaeltacht* populace into the fold of the festival in a meaningful way, the *Oireachtas* instead primarily promoted its own gentrified version of Irish language song.

As I will show in Chapter V, from the mid 1940 onwards the *Gaeltacht* populace gradually attained more of an influence within the *Oireachtas*. Indeed, in many ways the *Gaeltacht* populace, particularly that of the Conamara *Gaeltacht* district, co-opted the *Oireachtas* from its urban base during the 1970s. From then on certain events, which had been part of the *Oireachtas* from the early period, fell out of favour with the festival’s membership because they had become indexes of both the former English colonisers and the appropriating period of the *Oireachtas*’ history. *Bel canto* and choral song, although featured in the *Oireachtas* for many years to come, (indeed *bel canto* still features occasionally to this day in the “unaccompanied Irish singing competition that is not *sean-nós*”), were eventually relegated to the margins of the festival’s programme after 1974 — for reasons which will be explained in Chapter V.

Other events such as the *Oireachtas céilli* and the choral competitions were eventually abandoned outright by the festival’s executive committee because of their overt association with the gentrifying period of the *Oireachtas*’ past. The *Oireachtas céilli* as well as the choral singing competitions were arguably the highlight of the *Oireachtas* up until the beginning of the 1970s (Bradshaw 2010 p.12). I would argue that the *Oireachtas céilli* encapsulates better than any another event in the festival’s programme the aesthetic and ethos of the membership of the festival during the early and middle periods of the festival’s history.
The Oireachtas Céili

The term céili refers to a form of social dance. The first Irish céili was held on 30 October 1897 in Bloomsbury Hall, London. The event was organised by the London branch of the Gaelic League who were inspired by Scottish ceilidh evenings held in London at that time. The League adopted the Irish term céili, meaning gathering or coming together, for the event, and based it on the format of the Scottish evenings (Vallely 2011, p. 116). The first céili included singing and group dancing, consisting of sets, quadrilles and waltzes to Irish music. Admission and song repertoire were strictly controlled, and, as the photograph below illustrates, participants came predominantly from the Irish middle classes living and working, mostly as clerks, in London at the time (White and Boydell 2013, p.415; Carolan 1990).

Illustration 4.4 Irish Céili in London 1902, organised by the the Gaelic League

(History is Made at Night: The Politics of Dancing and Musicking 2010)

The Céili was adopted by the Oireachtas and it became the high point of the early festival. As I have mentioned in Chapter I, Small argues that musical performance, while it lasts, brings into existence relationships that model in metaphoric form those which the participants would like to see in the wider society of their everyday lives (Small 1988 p. 46). In other words the ideal world, according to the particular sonic
community in question, is brought metaphorically into existence. It is clear that the world idealised by the League/Oireachtas at the céilí was the imagined world of a Gaelicised middle-class Ireland, a world safe from the urban rabble and the impoverished rural peasant.

**The End of an Era: The Demise of the Early Oireachtas**

The 1916 Easter Rising sounded the death knell for the original Oireachtas. The Gaelic League/Oireachtas was, from its inception, a beacon for Irish republicans. By 1916 the growing republican/revolutionary nature of the League led Hyde to resign his position as president of the organisation. Due to the upheaval caused by the Easter Rising, the organisers of the Oireachtas decided to cancel the festival planned for Waterford that year, and a two day event was held in Dublin instead. After 1916, the Oireachtas began to wane. Many of the festival’s organisers were members of the Irish republican government, the Dáil, which was established on 21 January 1919, and they were too preoccupied with Dáil work to attend League/Oireachtas meetings (Ní Mhaolchállan 2009, p.19).

The British authorities were eager to disband the Gaelic League, and this undoubtedly affected the popularity of the organisation. In 1921, the secretary of the League since 1919, Seán Ó Tuama, was imprisoned for his part in the republican movement. In 1921, Stiofán Bairéad, the treasurer of the Oireachtas, passed away. The arrest of Ó Tuama and the death of Bairéad, combined with the social upheaval caused by the Irish War of Independence, meant that the 1921 Oireachtas consisted of literary competitions only (ibid). The outbreak of the Irish Civil war in 1922 meant that a full Oireachtas was not held again until 1924, and the festival that year was poorly attended. By the mid-1920s the nationalist movement had split in two over the Anglo-Irish treaty, signed on 6th December 1921, and this also affected League/Oireachtas attendances. By the mid-1920s the festival was in debt and the festival planned for 1925 was abandoned. Efforts were made to revive the festival in

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20 Dáil Éireann or the first Dáil —literally Assembly of Ireland— was the revolutionary parliament established by the Irish republican revolutionaries in 1919 (Bartlett 2010)
the 1930s. A seven day *Oireachtas* was held in 1932 in Dublin, but due to continuing debt problems and the turmoil of the War of Independence and Irish civil war, it was decided to disband the festival after 1932. It was not revived as an annual festival again until 1939 (ibid).

### 4.4 The Middle Years of the Oireachtas 1939-1973

In 1936 Pádraig Ó Siochfhradha and Pádraig Ó Cochláin tabled a motion, at the Dublin *Feis*,\(^{21}\) to revive the *Oireachtas*, and on the 9th October of that year the Gaelic League executive committee passed the motion at a meeting held at the Lord Mayor’s house in Dublin (Mac Aonghusa 1997, p.75). A festival was provisionally scheduled for November 1939. Douglas Hyde, the president of the first *Oireachtas*, was again elected as president of the revived festival. Although the *Oireachtas* still fell under the remit of the Gaelic League, it was decided that the executive committee of the *Oireachtas* should include members from the various ‘Gaelic’ associations, such as The Gaelic Athletic Association, *Clann na hÉireann*, *An Fáinne*, and *An Chomharcha Drámaíochta* (ibid p. 67).

Illustration 4.5 The Welcoming of the 1939 Oireachtas

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\(^{21}\) Meaning feast or session, this was the name given to a competition festival, established in 1899 by the Gaelic League, which featured a varied programme of competitions including, literary, art, sport, dancing, singing and instrumental music (White and Boydell 2013, p371).

Standing from Left: Liam Ó Cearbhaill, Ceallachán Mac Cárthaigh, Pádraig Ó Cochláin, Áine Ní Cheanainn, Seosamh Ó Conchubhar, Máire Ní Dhuinshléiche, Brian Ó Cuív, Ruairí de Valera.

(Ní Mhaolcháin 2009)

The inclusion of representatives from other ‘Gaelic’ associations onto the Oireachtas executive committee marks the beginning of a gradual breaking away of the festival from the Gaelic League22. Although the 1939 Oireachtas received assistance from the other Gaelic revival associations, the festival planned for that year nearly did not happen due to a lack of funds. The proposed festival was widely publicised in the print media of the time but the outbreak of the Second World War almost caused it to be overlooked. Nevertheless, despite these difficulties the festival went ahead as scheduled, and the executive committee at the time decided to revive the festival on an annual basis.

One of the key differences between the early Oireachtas (1897-1925) and the revived period of 1939-1974 was that the membership of the revived festival seemed to place even greater hope in the role Irish language literature would play in bringing about a national language revival, than the membership of the early period. It seems that during the revived period the festival’s membership was waiting on the ‘great book’ that would save the Irish language (Ní Mhaolchallann 2009, p.24). The festival’s literary competitions became increasingly popular during the revived period, and some of Ireland’s most celebrated Irish language writers of that time entered - notable figures include Máirtín Ó Cadhain, Máirtín Ó Direáin, Brendán Ó hEithir, Alan Titley, Seán Ó Riordáin, Siobhán Ní Shúilleabháin and Nollaig Ó Gadhra (Ní Mhaolchallann 2009, p.23). Due to a lack of funds however the Oireachtas was unable to print a great deal of the winning entries in the literary competitions. This of

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22 According to the current director of the Oireachtas, Liam Ó Maolaodha, today the festival is, for the most part, independent of the League (2014 [personal interview]).
course curtailed the wider impact these works might have had on the Irish language reading public.

The *Oireachtas* of 1939-1973 followed much the same programme as the earlier festival, albeit on a smaller scale. Music, song and dance competitions were all featured in the festival schedule. Like the earlier festival, the newly revived festival’s executive committee was adept at moulding the festival’s programme in order to best suit the needs of the organisation at a given time. In 1941 the *Oireachtas* re-established its art exhibition, and for a period the annual *Oireachtas* art exhibition became as renowned as the Royal Hibernian Academy for showcasing new Irish art. However, most of the artists exhibited were Dublin based (Mac Mathúna 1997 cited in Bradshaw 2010, p.12). This is indicative of the *Oireachtas* of this period, in that it largely catered to the urban middle classes, indicating that apart from its reduced membership there was little difference between the *Oireachtas* of the middle period and that of the early years - although the focus on new literature and on art also suggests that the *Oireachtas* of this period also had quite a bohemian membership. From the point of view of this thesis, this period is particularly significant, because it was during this time that the *Oireachtas* executive committee made an effort to include members of the *Gaeltacht* community more in the festival’s programme.

**Sean-nós in the Oireachtas 1939 to circa 1973**

Due largely to the influence of Sean Beaumont, Soracha Ní Ghuirim and others, the importance and significance of the *Gaeltacht* community to the work of the League/*Oireachtas* was brought to the attention of the *Oireachtas* membership during the period 1939-1973 (Ó Maolaodha [personal interview] 2014). Beaumont, who established the weekly newspaper *An tÉireannach* in Dublin in 1934, (Mac Con Iomaire 2007 p.66) was quite vocal in proclaiming that if the League/*Oireachtas* didn’t bring the *Gaeltacht* populace into the fold of the language movement then the movement was doomed to fail (Ó Maolaodha 2014, personal interview). The work of Beaumont and others led to the establishment of inter-*Gaeltacht* and *Gaeltacht* only
competitions and to a Lá na Gaeltachta (the Gaeltacht day) being programmed into the festival schedule.

Although the inter-Gaeltacht competitions and the Gaeltacht only days were established so that the Gaeltacht community would be more involved in the festival, they also, I would argue, contributed to the ‘exoticisation’ of the Gaeltacht community, and to the idea that sean-nós could only be performed by individuals who came from the Gaeltacht. Entry into the various ‘Gaeltacht’ events, such as the sean-nós competition, was restricted to members of the Gaeltacht community. Singers who were native or fluent Irish speakers, but who did not hail from the official Gaeltacht, were not allowed to enter and this fostered, perhaps unintentionally, a widely held belief that only native Irish speakers from the Gaeltacht can be considered ‘authentic’ sean-nós singers. While I might be overstating the point here, I would also argue that the various Gaeltacht events bring to mind the exhibitions of tribal culture — such as the ethnographic tribal villages — that were popular at international exhibitions in Europe and elsewhere during the nineteenth century (for more on the exhibiting of ethnographic villages see Page 2003, p.31). I would offer that the performance of various forms of Gaeltacht expressive culture on stage in front of a largely middle class audience has more than the air of the colonial gaze about it.

Liam Ó Maoladha, the current director of the Oireachtas, feels that the Gaeltacht community remained largely marginalised within the festival for most of the revived period (2014 [personal interview]). The various Gaeltacht competitions organised by the festival, after it was revived in 1939, tended to be held on the same day, usually early in the morning and at the beginning of the week-long festival programme (ibid). Ó Maoladha believes that the attitude within the Oireachtas membership at the time seemed to have been one of “get them in and get them out” so that the real work of the festival, the promotion of new literature, art-exhibitions, choral music and the céilí could be undertaken (ibid). Úna Úi Lachtnáin states that the highlight of the festival in the 1960s and 1970s was the choral nights that were held in the Lord
Mayor’s House (cited in Mac Mathúna 1997, p.2), and Liam Ó Maolaodha believes that the céili was still very much the hallmark of the Oireachtas until the early 1970s. This suggests that up until the early 1970s a progressivist outlook was still to the fore within the Oireachtas membership.

According to Ó Maolaodha, the Oireachtas of the middle period (1939-1973) was somewhat of a small exclusive club that was reluctant to move outside the capital, or to engage with the wider community in any real way (cited in Bradshaw 2010, p.14). It has been argued that after Irish independence most Irish language activists believed that the responsibility for reviving the Irish language now fell predominately on the state, making the League/Oireachtas somewhat of a spent/marginal force (Devlin, 1972 p.87). The Oireachtas of the 1939 to 1973 period might best be understood as a festival centred on a form of nostalgia for the pre-Rising festival, when the festival was the centre of cultural and political nationalism in Ireland. Nevertheless, the opening up of the festival to members of the Gaeltacht community, albeit in a questionable way, afforded this community an opportunity to begin to claim a space for themselves within the festival; from the perspective of this particular thesis, this is the most significant aspect of the middle period of the Oireachtas’ history.

**Conclusion**

The early and middle decades of the Oireachtas can be described as a period of cultural appropriation. A progressivist ideology was to the fore within the early festival, and this led to the collecting of vernacular Irish language song in the Irish speaking districts (Gaeltachtaí). This material was subsequently performed at the festival by singers trained in the Western art tradition, highlighting the fact that Western art music was the urtext that informed the progressivists’ notions of musical aesthetics. Vernacular forms of cultural expression were treated like raw material from which a national Gaelic culture and art music was to be built. This meant that traditional singers from the Gaeltacht only marginally featured at the festival during the early decades.
After 1939 the nativist element within the Oireachtas membership managed to get a number of events programmed into the festival’s schedule that were aimed directly at the Gaeltacht community. Entry into these competitions was restricted to members of the Gaeltacht, and this framed the expressive culture of the Gaeltacht as restricted to members of that community. The Gaeltacht only competitions also represent a form of cultural voyeurism on the part of the Oireachtas membership, and therefore they can be viewed as further evidence of the cultural appropriation of the Gaeltacht by the Oireachtas. As I have stated at the onset of this chapter, both nativist and progressivist alike were influenced by Romantic nationalism. In many ways this chapter illustrates how Romantic nationalism can be interpreted and ‘applied’ in different ways. Although they differed on a number of points, nativist and progressivist elements within the Oireachtas both held the Romantic nationalist view that the ‘folk’ was inherently conservative. Both groups believed that the Gaeltacht community preserved within its culture a survival of the pre-colonial past. Consequently both nativists and progressivists felt that the Gaeltacht community needed to be protected from outside influences.

After 1939 progressivism was on the decline within the Oireachtas membership. However, the Oireachtas from 1939-1970 remained somewhat factious, particularly with regards to sean-nós singing. In the following Chapter I discuss the main issues which underpin the discord that existed within the festival, such as, provincialism, and vying theories on whether sean-nós originated from the folk or whether it was primarily aristocratic in origin. Revolution was in the air in Ireland during the 1970s and it is during this period that singers from Conamara came to dominate the Oireachtas singing competitions. In many ways the festival was co-opted by the Conamara Gaeltacht community during this period, and I propose that this was the main factor leading to the dominance of the Conamara style within the festival. However, as I will illustrate in the following chapter, the seeds for this co-option can be traced back to the 1940s.
Chapter V: The Rise of the Conamara Style within Oireachtas na Gaeilge

Singers from Conamara, or those singing in a style associated with Conamara, have been the most successful at the Oireachtas since the festival was re-established in the 1930s (see Appendix A). Lillis Ó Laoire argues that this success is partly due to the strength of the sean-nós tradition in Conamara, and also to a bias within the Oireachtas membership privileging the Conamara style above all others (Ó Laoire 2000, pp. 163). Ó Laoire argues that, after the Oireachtas was re-formed in the 1930s, a more nativist element came to the fore within the organisation. He adds that this nativist element regarded the Conamara style of sean-nós as the most ‘authentically’ Irish of all the regional styles, because they believed it sounded the least like the singing of Western art music.

Here I question Ó Laoire’s hypothesis, and I argue instead that the dominance of the Conamara style is primarily due to the agency of the Conamara community within the festival. My analysis of the official Oireachtas programmes from circa 1980 to 2012 indicates that the majority of competitors entering both the Corn Uí Riada (CUR), and the over 35 men’s and the over 35 women’s competitions at the festival, come from Conamara. In fact, in that thirty year period more singers from Conamara have entered the CUR than all the other regions combined. Also during that period, 33.81% of those who entered the over 35 men’s and the over 35 women’s competitions came from Conamara; this is more than double the amount that entered from the Cork or Donegal Gaeltacht districts for that same period; nearly three times the number of entrants from the Kerry Gaeltacht; and five times the number that entered from the Waterford Gaeltacht (see Appendix B).

5.1 Vying ideological stances within the Oireachtas

The following section deals with the issue of ‘nativism’ with the Oireachtas after the festival was re-formed in 1939. I will show that far from being a homogenous cohort
that reified the Conamara style above all others, as Ó Laoire suggests, there was no consensus within the movement as to which regional style of sean-nós was the most authentically traditional. I suggest that the theory of binary opposites does not satisfactorily explain how the Conamara style came to dominate the festival song competition. Instead, I offer that within the Oireachtas and Irish Romantic nationalism more generally, authenticity with regards to sean-nós singing is seen in complexity, but that individual revivalists find complexity in different ways. I would argue that valuing art because of its perceived complexity is very much a European phenomenon connected with notions of ‘high-art’.

Ó Laoire argues that because Romantic nationalists imagine Irishness as being the binary opposite of Englishness, sean-nós is widely imagined as being the binary opposite of Western art song—which is according to Ó Laoire an index of Englishness. The theory is that the sean-nós singer uses ornamentation to tell the story of a song, while those trained in the Western art tradition are more concerned with following the melodic contours of the musical line. Ó Laoire states that for Romantic nationalists: “[…] those trained in the Western art tradition foreground the musical, at the expense of the verbal expression, in contrast to traditional song, where the words dictate the expressive needs of the performance” (ibid 165). Other scholars also draw attention to the importance of conveying the story and meaning of the song text within sean-nós singing (see Coleman 1997, p.33; Williams 2004, p.132).

Williams in particular suggests that melismatic ornamentation is used by sean-nós singers to highlight the emotional content of the story of the song (Williams 2004, p.132). Nevertheless, Ó Laoire’s argument—that melismatic ornamentation is seen by Romantic nationalists as a tool for foregrounding verbal expression—is somewhat problematic for the simple reason that melismatic ornamentation is a musical device. One could argue that by foregrounding the musical through ornamentation, the Conamara style is in fact like Western art song philosophically.
Ó Laoire offers that the identification of melodic ornamentation with traditionality meant that the Conamara style, which is widely regarded as being the most ornamented style of sean-nós singing, was reified above all other regional styles at the Oireachtas after 1939 (2000, p.166). Ó Laoire argues that: “It almost came to the point where sean-nós was a term exclusively reserved for the Galway [Conamara] style of singing” (ibid, p.167). To illustrate this point Ó Laoire draws attention to the fact that singers from Conamara have had unprecedented success at the Oireachtas:

In the thirty eight years from 1960-1998, the competition has been won by Galway singers a total of twenty six times. Two more singers of Dublin origin, singing in the Galway style and repertoire make a total of twenty eight. Also from 1971 until 1989, a period of eighteen years, Corn Uí Riada was won each year by Galway singers. This is a testament to the strength and vitality of traditional song in the Galway region during that period. Arguably, however, it also marks the existence of a certain trend of favouring the Galway singing style.

(Ó Laoire 2000, pp. 166-167)

However, closer inspection of competition results reveals that up until the mid-1960s Conamara singers were in fact the least successful of all the Gaeltacht regions (see appendix A). From the period 1950-63 the first prize at the Oireachtas senior sean-nós competition was won by Conamara singers three times, whereas it was won by singers from the various Munster Gaeltachts five times, and by singers from Donegal four times, during the same period. However, from 1971 to 1989 the first prize at the Oireachtas senior sean-nós singing competition, known as Corn Uí Riada after 1972, was won each year by singers in the Conamara style. I propose that the reason for this is primarily due more to the agency of members of the Conamara Gaeltacht within the Oireachtas membership, and not particularly because there was an inherent bias toward the Conamara style within the nativist Oireachtas membership.

My research shows that up until the mid-1960s no single regional style dominated the Oireachtas sean-nós singing competitions. I offer that two distinct theories, concerning the nature and origins of sean-nós, vied for dominance within the
Oireachtas membership at this time. On one side there were those within the membership who posited the theory that sean-nós was the collective creation of the folk. I refer to this here as the folk origins theory. On the other side of the argument were those who claimed sean-nós was the marginal survival of the aristocratic Old Gaelic Order—which I refer to as the nativist aristocratic origins theory.

5.2 Aristocratic Origins of Sean-nós Theory

There are some obvious similarities between the progressives’ stance and that of nativists who believed in the aristocratic origins theory. However, while both groups believed in the aristocratic origins of sean-nós, progressives believed that because of its long contact with the peasant classes, Gaelic expressive culture had become regionalised and parochial; therefore, they argued that a national Gaelic contemporary music needed to be built from what remained in the Gaeltacht. Nativist ‘advocates for the aristocratic origins of sean-nós theory’ (abbreviated here to NAOT) on the other hand, believed that the aristocratic origins theory was proof that sean-nós was unquestionably an indigenous ‘high-art’ music. By pointing to the aristocratic origins of sean-nós, advocates for this theory were essentially pointing to the complexity of sean-nós, which I argue is central to ideas of authenticity within the sean-nós community. Unlike the progressive element within the Oireachtas membership, the proponents of the NAOT theory also believed that the uniqueness of sean-nós needed to be preserved from modernisation, which they saw as a threat to the authenticity of the genre.

Although he does not use the term sean-nós singing directly, Daniel Corkery, in the Hidden Ireland (1941), places the vernacular singing style of Munster at the top of all other regional styles of singing in Ireland. Corkery (1878-1964), a Cork native, was an academic and politician. He wrote a number of novels but today he is best remembered for his non-fiction work. His most influential publication, the Hidden Ireland, is a study of the eighteenth-century literary remnants of an Irish-language literary culture stretching back almost two thousand years (Walsh 2001, p.27).
According to Walsh, Corkery: “[…] attempts to reconstruct the Gaelic worldview which, he argues, was preserved in reduced circumstances by the poets amongst the impoverished, oppressed Catholic peasantry of the Penal Law era” (ibid, p.27). It is difficult to say whether Corkery should be classified as being a progressivist or an advocate for the NAOT. However, it is highly likely that the ideas Corkery espoused in *The Hidden Ireland* inspired advocates of the NAOT theory.

The bardic system, which existed in Ireland up until the fall of the old Gaelic order at the beginning of the seventeenth century, is seen by Corkery as the zenith of the native tradition. Corkery proposes that the Gaelic worldview of the bardic tradition survived into the eighteenth century in the Irish folk ‘Courts of Poetry’ by fusing with the vernacular song of the people.

[…] the looser amhráin (song) metres of the people established themselves in the Courts of Poetry; and all the living verse of the century [eighteenth] was to be written in them. But they underwent a change, for the skill that lingered in the Courts began to play upon them, to transform them; and they soon became inwrought with delicate cadences, with finely modulated assonances, with bewildering alliterative music.

(Corkery 1941 p.102)

The above quotation illustrates that Corkery believed that whatever good was to be found in Irish vernacular song was due to the influence of the bardic tradition. Munster in the eighteenth century is for Corkery the centre for the Courts of Poetry and therefore the Gaelic tradition.

We do not know how many of those Courts of Poetry existed in Ireland in the eighteenth century. They were, of course, far more numerous in Munster than in any other province. In Munster, Gaelic learning was most strongly entrenched; and there most toughly contested the ground against other cultures.

(Corkery 1941 p.120)
Corkery is rather dismissive of the vernacular poetry found in Connacht and in Ulster: “in reading those poets, then, we are to keep in mind, first, that the nature of the poetry depends on the district in which it was written- if in Munster, it is literary in its nature, if in Ulster or Connacht, it has the simple directness of folk-song” (p.158). Corkery claimed he found no evidence of Courts of Poetry having existed in Connacht (ibid p.122). The Hidden Ireland became an influential classic and its version of the past underpinned the traditional nationalist history that was to become, in the 1930s, the educational orthodoxy of the new state (Walsh 200, p.27); it is a version of the past that imagined pre-colonised Ireland as a land of ‘Saints and Scholars’ ruled by a benevolent Gaelic aristocracy. Sean Ó Riada’s writings on sean-nós and on Irish traditional music generally seem to echo the ideas espoused by Corkery.

In his hugely influential work, Our Musical Heritage, Ó Riada places the singing styles of the Muster Gaeltacht districts of Ring and Cúil Aodha above all other areas (see Chapter III). In his discussion on sean-nós Ó Riada is quite critical of the Conamara style:

It is in Connemara that the sean-nós has most strongly survived, and many of the best-known sean-nós singers of the present times are from Connemara: Seosamh Ó hÉanaí, Seán ‘ac Dhonncha, Máire Áine Nic Dhonnchadha, Sorcha Ní Ghuairim, to name just a few. Despite this fact, the tradition is inclined to decadence.

(1982 p.29)

Ó Riada believed that no performance of Irish traditional music was complete unless the performer made use of melodic and intervallic variation. This ‘variation principle’, was for Ó Riada the fundamental component of the Irish tradition (ibid, pp. 24-29). Ó Riada felt that many of the younger Conamara singers did not employ the variation principle at all, and that many of the older Conamara singers tended to make variations instinctively, which he argued sometimes led to slight mistakes (ibid). Ó Riada believed that the chief regional characteristic of the Conamara style
was that singers from this area make variations melismatically, while Munster singers make both intervallic and melismatic variation. In other words, Ó Riada is saying that Munster singers employ a wider palate of variation; therefore, based on his “variation principle” this regional style\(^\text{23}\) is superior to the Connacht (Conamara) style.

Ó Riada also compares the melodic range of some Munster songs to that of the typical Conamara song: “The Munster songs- the big ones, that is- are often spread over nearly two octaves, and use wide intervals which give a feeling of spaciousness. Connemara songs tend to be somewhat compressed and do not usually range wider than the interval of a 9\(^{\text{th}}\), or 10\(^{\text{th}}\), just over an octave […] (1982, p.33). The implication here is that the Munster styles of the Ring and Cúil Aodh Gaeltacht districts are more sophisticated than that of Conamara. There is also evidence in Our Musical Heritage that Ó Riada believed Irish traditional music was essentially a marginal survival from the Old Gaelic Order, which places him in NAOT camp.

**Ceol na nUasal: The Music of the Nobility**

As well as the more conventional jigs, reels and hornpipes more commonly found amongst traditional musicians, Ó Riada incorporated the music of the eighteenth-century blind harper O’Carolan into his traditional ensemble (Ó Canainn 2003 p. 49). O’Carolan (1670-1738) was a composer and harpist and is considered by many to be the last great representative of the old Irish harp tradition (White and Boydell 2013, p.162). According to White and Boydell, O’Carolan was, more or less, only of historical interest until Ó Riada introduced his compositions into mainstream Irish traditional music, during the second half of the twentieth century (ibid p.163). I am not fully convinced that O’ Carolan’s music was quite as removed from the mainstream traditional repertoire as White and Boydell seem to suggest. O’Neill’s *Music of Ireland*, published in 1903 contains 1,850 tunes in all — from airs, various forms of Jigs, reels, hornpipes etc. (O’Neill 1998). This extremely popular collection

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\(^{23}\) Ó Riada did not favour all the regional styles found in Munster however. He claimed that sean-nós had practically died out in Kerry. He was particularly dismissive of the Irish language singing he heard in the Dingle area of Kerry, which he believed had been ‘corrupted’ from contact with the outside world (Ó Riada 1982 p.39).
also contains seventy-five O’Carolan compositions, suggesting perhaps that, although not as popular as other dance tunes, O’Carolan’s music still featured within the traditional repertoire prior to Ó Riada. Nevertheless, Ó Riada did cast O’Carolan in new light through the medium of his traditional ensemble.

In 1967 the Gael Linn label released Ó Riada’s third LP with Ceoltóirí Cualann titled Ceol na nUasal (the music of the nobility) (Gael-Linn 1987 [1967]). This album contains compositions by O’Carolan and Ruaidhri Dall Ó Catháin (1653), another harper and composer from the old harp tradition, (White and Boyell 2013, p.748). The material on the album was sung by Sean Ó Sé, played by the musicians from Ceoltóirí Cualainn and accompanied by Ó Riada on harpsichord (Gael-Linn 1987 [1967]). Arguably, this album, more than any other produced by Ó Riada, illustrates the centrality of the aristocratic origins theory to Ó Riada’s thinking.
Illustration 5.1 Cover and Sleeve Notes for Ceol na nUasal

Irish music of the 18th century European "style galant". But the most remarkable instance of such cross-fertilisation is undoubtedly the celebrated Carolan's Concerto (Side One, Band Two). Carolan (Irish: Cheàrtharbh O'Cearbhalláin, 1670-1738) was the most famous of the Irish harper-composers and a prolific song-writer. The obvious Italian influences which it shows, in form and idiom, are probably responsible for the story - Goldenwell was the first to retail it in print - that it was an extempore composition in response to a challenge by an Italian musician - sometimes stated to have been German.
Ó Riada’s distain for Western (classical) art Music is well documented (see Ó Súilleabháin 2004, p.15). In the opening pages of *Our Musical Heritage* Ó Riada describes Irish traditional music as: “the untouched, unWesternized [sic], orally-transmitted music which is still, to the best of my knowledge, the most popular music in this country” (1982, p.19). He goes on to state that:

> Irish music is not merely European, it is quite removed from it. It is, indeed, closer to some forms of Oriental music. The first thing we must do, if we are to understand it, is to forget about European music. Its standards are not Irish standards, its style is not Irish style; its forms are not Irish forms.  

(Ó Riada 1982, p.20)

Yet the sleeve notes for *Ceol na nUasal* suggest that Ó Riada was more open to European Classical influences than he suggests in *Our Musical Heritage*. The sleeve notes reveal that O’Carolon was very much influenced by his Italian contemporaries (ibid), a fact noted by some of the more hard-line nativists within the Gaelic League, who regarded Carolan’s music as being corrupted by foreign influence, and therefore not ‘authentically’ Gaelic (Ó Laoire 2000, p.161). It is worth noting that Ó Riada himself was highly critical of some forms of foreign influences coming into Irish music. Ó Riada criticised the use of modern jazz instruments such as the ‘jazz drums’, banjo, guitar, and saxophone in Ceilí bands (Ó Riada 1982, pp. 73-74). His views on the button accordion and bag-pipes in particular suggest that he was dismissive of some foreign influences, not because they were foreign in origin, but because they were — in Ó Riada’s mind — associated with the ‘peasantry’.

In his castigation on the use of the button accordion in Irish music Ó Riada states that:

> […] unfortunately this instrument [the button accordion] —designed by foreigners for the use of peasants with neither the time, inclination nor application for a worthier instrument— is gaining vast popularity throughout the country.

(Ó Riada 1982 p.69)
Further evidence of Ó Riada’s disregard for ‘peasant’ music comes in his discussion of the uilleann pipes. Ó Riada mentions that bag-pipes are found all over the world but that:

> Most of these pipes are fairly primitive things, folk-instruments for the use of peasants, to play their simple folk-music. These humble instruments have only their prehistoric origins in common with the Irish uilleann pipes, a complex and sophisticated instrument.

(Ó Riada 1982 p.40)

As I have argued at the onset of this chapter, authenticity in sean-nós singing is often considered to be in its complexity. The above quotes from Ó Riada indicate that, in his case, authenticity in Irish traditional music more generally is also seen in complexity. I would suggest that the tacit implication of Ó Riada’s work is similar to that espoused by Corkery. It is evident that Ó Riada imagined that the complexity found in sean-nós and in traditional music was due to the influence of an older aristocratic Gaelic culture. Ó Súilleabháin points out that Ó Riada wanted to create a:

“[...] ‘classical’ music based on Irish oral tradition[al] music which might bypass Western classical music heritage” (2004, p.2).

However, the concept of ‘high’ art is a particularly European ideal, and it suggests that Ó Riada’s Irish music aesthetic was informed by European standards. Ó Riada’s contradictory views on western art music seems to have been some form of cognitive dissonance (see Festinger 1962, pp.93-107); even though he argued that Classical music had no place in Irish traditional music, whether he was conscious of it or not Ó Riada was open to allowing some elements of western art music into his traditional ensemble, particularly in relation to singing. The inclusion of Sean Ó Sé into his traditional ensemble arguably illustrates this point.
In many ways Ó Sé’s singing is a fusion of elements drawn from traditional and popular performance (White and Boydell 2013, p.810). Ó Sé was born into an Irish speaking family in Cork, and he grew up listening to his father singing traditional songs. However, as a young adult he took ‘Classical’ singing lessons at the Cork School of Music. Ó Sé was introduced to Sean Ó Riada in the early 1960s, and Ó Riada was drawn to the clarity of his high tenor voice, which maintains a nasal quality. He asked Ó Sé to join Ceoltóirí Cualann (ibid). It would be disingenuous to suggest that Ó Sé’s performance of Irish traditional songs was a form of cultural appropriation on his part — similar to that of the bel canto singers of the early Oireachtas. In many ways, Ó Sé drew as much on his traditional background as he did on his classical training. However, in my opinion, his singing, particularly on the Ceoltóirí Cualann records, bears some resemblance to the singing style of the legendary Irish tenor Count John McCormack — particularly with regard to his use of vibrato.

Ó Riada is an incredibly complex character; he is sometimes described as a committed modernist (Ó Laoire 2000 p.165), and arguably his incorporation of a singer like Ó Sé into his traditional ensemble suggests a modernist outlook on his part. However, unlike the progressivists within the Oireachtas, Ó Riada was not comfortable drawing on Western art ideals or forms. It seems likely that when he did draw, however loosely, on the Western art tradition he justified doing so by positing that he was in fact drawing on an indigenous aristocratic Gaelic past, and not on European ideals. As I have shown above, like Corkery before him, Ó Riada felt that the sean-nós of Munster — specifically that of Waterford and the Cork Gaeltachts — were the most authentically Irish, because he believed they were the most complex of all the styles. I propose that Ó Riada believed that the complexity (authenticity) he saw in the Waterford and Cork styles of sean-nós was due to the fact that he believed these styles were the marginal survival of the aristocratic song of the old Gaelic order.
Further evidence of a hierarchical view of *sean-nós* that placed the Munster style above all other regional styles is found in Séamus Ennis’ field diaries. Ennis, an uilleann piper, *sean-nós* singer, broadcaster and folklore collector, was — along with Ó Riada — one of the most significant and influential figures in the Irish traditional music revival of the mid-twentieth century. Ennis worked as a full time music collector for the Irish Folklore Commission from 1942 to 1947, collecting throughout Ireland and in parts of Scotland (White and Boydell 2013, p. 356). When he left the commission in 1947 he went to work for *Radió Éireann*, as an outside broadcaster. He produced a number of documentaries on Irish traditional music and *sean-nós* singing (ibid, p. 357). Later he was to take up a similar position in the BBC (ibid). Although Ennis was highly regarded as a traditional musician amongst his fellow musicians, it was his work as a broadcaster/presenter that made him a household name both in Ireland and throughout Britain. Commenting on a particularly successful day collecting music in Conamara, Ennis wrote in his field diaries:

> Seán Choilm [Mac Donncha] and the Ó hÉanaí family have the best, most authoritative music in Conamara that I have yet encountered, excluding Finis. I collected some music from them that is very old, I’m sure, and in addition I got the most intricate music I have found in Conamara from them—similar to the good music of Munster that Cáit Ní Mhuimhneacháin and Labhrás Ó Cadhla have.

(Uí Ógáin 2010 p.67)

Ennis, like Ó Riada, equates musical complexity/intricacy with authenticity. It is also evident that Ennis valued that which was ‘very old’ in origin. This suggests that within the *sean-nós* community authenticity is seen in the perceived ancientness of a song as well as its complexity (see Chapter VI). While I found no evidence that suggests Ennis was an advocate for the aristocratic origins of *sean-nós* theory, the above quote suggests that he had a hierarchical view of *sean-nós* that placed the “good music of Munster” above all other regional styles. Others, however, sought complexity elsewhere. Advocates of the folk origins of *sean-nós* theory (abbreviated here to FOST) saw complexity and ancientness in vernacular song.
5.3 Folk Origins of Sean-nós Theory

Douglas Hyde, one of the founding fathers of the Gaelic League, was perhaps the most influential advocate for the FOST. Hyde was an academic, a cultural revivalist and a folklorist, and under his direction the Gaelic League fused the scientific collection of folklore with the language movement (Ó Laoire 2000, p 160). Six years after the foundation of the Irish Free State, Hyde and others established the Folklore of Ireland Society in 1927. This became the Irish Folklore Institute in 1930 and the Irish Folklore Commission in 1935 (Ó Giollain, 1996, pp.143-144). Currently located in the Department of Irish Folklore at the National University of Ireland, Dublin, this collection contains over two million pages of material (Ó Laoire 2000 p.160). Hyde did most of his own fieldwork in his native Connacht, and in 1894 he published a collection of traditional Irish language song *The Love Songs of Connacht* (Hyde 1894). Unlike Corkery, Hyde was rather critical of the bardic tradition, which he saw as being overly contrived and stagnating. According to Hyde:

> It has always been the bane of Irish song that the bards lavished upon the form that attention which ought to have been bestowed upon the matter; and while the structure of their verse in melody and smoothness, as well as variety of rhythmic measure, exceeds anything of which an Englishman could form a conception, surpassing by far what we meet in modern literature, the poverty of the matter is unhappily often such as to render pitiable any attempt at translation, which, if at all literal, must only produce a smile of contempt. […] But with the Arcadian verses that live among the peasantry, verses generated from the locality and the issue of direct emotions and natural spontaneous feeling, it is quite otherwise. They are melodious, it is true, and rhythmical enough, but still there is a directness and force about them which we miss in the more educated productions of the last century. Some of them are love-songs, some drinking songs, some caoines24, some dialogues, but the most notable feature about them is the entire absence of that narrative, orderly, faculty which so greatly distinguishes the poetry of Teutonic nations. The Celtic poetic genius is an essentially lyrical one, and has never subjected itself willing to the methodic [sic] and deliberate ballad style.

(Cited in Ó Torna 2005, p.114)

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24 Laments.
As I have discussed in Chapter II, the founders of the Gaelic League and the Oireachtas were influenced by the writings of JG Herder. Indeed, the above quote from Hyde points to that influence. Like a number of earlier philosophers, Herder was essentially concerned with ‘truth’ and ‘authenticity’. Like Rousseau before him, he believed modern society removed mankind from its natural state (ibid). Herder argued against the Enlightenment notion of reason separate from emotion (Bendix 1997, p.36). Instead, he sought language and poetry where “reason and the artificial language of society had [not] dethroned sentiment and the sounds of nature” (ibid, p. 37).

For Herder folk song and poetry combined the use of human reflexive thinking with sentiment and emotion, which meant that he considered them to be essential for the development of a democratic national culture. Hyde’s argument that the Irish rural ‘peasant class’ produced the most authentic Irish verse because they were unconstrained by the restrictions of the rules of bardic syllabic poetry is clearly inspired by Herder’s philosophy. Like Herder, Hyde believed that authenticity was to be found within the expressive culture of the folk, making him an advocate for the FOST. Hyde also saw authenticity in the past. It is clear from the above quote that he imagined that the Gaelic folk-poetry pre-dated the aristocratic poetry of the bardic tradition.

It is clear from the discussion above, that within the Gaelic revival movement of the last century, Munster was perceived as being more closely connected with the old Gaelic aristocracy than any other Irish province. Those who believed in the aristocratic origins of sean-nós tended to endorse the sean-nós of Munster, particularly that of the Waterford and Cork Gaeltachts, while those who believed in the folk origins of sean-nós tended to endorse the sean-nós of Connacht. Nevertheless, both camps saw authenticity in complexity, whether it was musical or lyrical. Both camps also say authenticity in antiquity — the older the song the better.
Provincialism and the Oireachtas

Provincialism within the Irish language movement can be described as when advocates of one or other province/Gaeltacht region vie with those of other regions over the issue of which region has the purest or richest Irish (Ó Gaora 2011, pp. 69-70). In Chapter VII I argue that on a certain level the Oireachtas sean-nós competition is just as much an inter-Gaeltacht competition as it is a competition between individual singers, because singers at the Oireachtas represent the particular Gaeltacht district indexed by their style of singing.

As I have mentioned in Chapter II, one of the objectives behind the establishment of the League and the Oireachtas was to reinstate Irish as the common vernacular throughout the country. However, at that time there was no national dialect of Irish in existence. The Irish language had in fact fragmented into numerous regional dialects—the main dialects are classified by province: Ulster, Connacht, and Munster. The issue within the League/Oireachtas became which dialect, or combination of dialects, was to become the national dialect. Progressives within the early League/Oireachtas sought to create a national ‘middle-dialect’. This eventually led to the establishment of An Caighdeán Oifícíil (the official Irish dialect), formed out of the Connacht and Munster dialects (see Chapter VI). Although it still stands as an official dialect, the Caighdeán never caught on as a spoken vernacular. Instead, within the League/Oireachtas regional factions emerged, each vying to promote their own particular dialect of Irish.

At one stage this inter-provincial rivalry almost destroyed the League. According to Colm Ó Gaora, a Gaelic League timire from Conamara during the early 1920s:

One province wanted their dialect of Irish and their Irish-language writers promoted more than another’s. If the Irish-language groups in one province brought in a new or positive development, for instance, another province would be slow to bring in a similar measure in their region, even if that same development would have bolstered the Irish language in their area. There was hardly any aspect of the Gaelic League at the time that wasn’t
infected with this ‘provincialist’ disease and the annual ard-fheis would see it all come out into the open. It is no exaggeration to say that this provincialism nearly destroyed the Gaelic League.

(Ó Gaora 2011, p.70)

Ó Gaora’s comments suggest that provincialism permeated all aspects of the League. This needs to be taken into consideration when discussing the likes of Corkery, Hyde and Ó Riada. Corkery and Ó Riada had a hierarchical view of sean-nós which placed Munster above all other regional styles, and both were natives of Munster. Hyde on the other hand had a bias for the sean-nós of his own native Connacht. I would argue that provincial bias tends to permeate the world of sean-nós singing. This is because regional styles of sean-nós are aural metaphors for specific Gaeltacht districts, and of the dialects of those districts.

The Oireachtas sean-nós competition is the highlight of the sean-nós singing calendar. This means that inter-Gaeltacht rivalry has become an integral part of sean-nós singing. When a singer is successful at the Oireachtas the meta-narrative of this success is that the Gaeltacht indexed by their singing style is the most ‘authentically’ Gaelic. In the following section I look more closely at the issues which have contributed to the dominance of the Conamara style within the Oireachtas.

5.4 The Rise of the Conamara style within the Oireachtas

Although Conamara singers were initially the least successful at the Oireachtas after it was re-formed in 1939, by the mid-1960s singers in this style came to dominate the festival’s sean-nós competitions. Between 1964 and 1969 first place at the Oireachtas was consistently won by singers from Conamara, except in 1968 when the first prize was withheld, and instead second prize was awarded to two singers, one from Cork the other from Conamara (see Appendix A). I argue that Conamara style came to dominate the festival simply because more singers in this style compete at the festival than any of the other Gaeltacht districts. Contained within the Oireachtas archives are festival programmes dating from circa 1940 up to the present
day. These programmes contain the names and addresses of all those who competed in the various competitions over the years.

However, the Gaeltacht populace has historically been somewhat migratory, and this is reflected in the Oireachtas programmes. Many of the addresses given by competitors are outside the Gaeltacht, and as such it can be difficult to tell at times the singing style of individual competitors. For example in the 1968 women’s open sean-nós competition, one Síle Ní Fhlatharta gave her address as Liverpool. Although Ní Fhlatharta is a surname commonly found in Conamara it is not exclusive to that district, therefore one cannot assume that she was originally from Conamara. Even though I analysed the programme notes from 1940 onwards, I focus on the period from 1980 to 2012. This is because I was able to determine more precisely the identity of individual competitors from this period.

My analysis suggests that the majority of those who enter the CUR and the men and women’s competitions are indeed from Conamara — as the following two spreadsheets show. The first sheet contains information pertaining to those who have entered the CUR over the past thirty years. The second sheet contains information pertaining to those who entered both the men’s and women’s open (over 35 years of age) competition. Competitors are grouped according to the region they come from or the singing style indexed by their style of singing. Singers who come from outside the Gaeltacht, as well as those I was unable to link with specific Gaeltacht districts, are listed under ‘Other’. Since singers from the Meath and Conamara Gaeltachts perform in essentially the same basic style, they are grouped under the same heading (see Chapter II). It should be noted that the numbers below do not refer to the actual figures that competed on a given year. The competition entry lists are completed prior to the actual festival, and it is not uncommon for some of the entrants listed in the programme to be absent from the actual competition. Nevertheless, I would argue that the information contained in the festival programme offers some insight into the makeup of the competition entrants.
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<th>Waterford</th>
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| Total | 524 | 16 | 47 | 28 | 66 | 340 | 27 |

Sheet 5.1 Corn Uí Riada Entrants 1972-2012

There are a number of ways of qualifying for the CUR. Past winners of the competition, with the exception of the previous year’s winner, are qualified for life to enter. Individuals can win the CUR a maximum of three times —after winning the title three times an individual is no longer eligible to compete in the CUR. Those who have placed first and second in the overall senior competition within five years of a particular CUR competition —excluding the year of their initial win—also qualify to
compete in the CUR. For example, the winner of the 1980 senior men and women’s competition qualified to compete in the CUR in 1981, and for the next four years. If an individual who has not previously won the CUR fails to win the competition within five years, they have to re-qualify to compete in the CUR again by coming first or second in the senior competition.

Between 1980 and 2012, the CUR was won by singers from Conamara, or those singing in the Conamara style, a total of twenty six times. In that same period the competition was won a total of five times by singers from Donegal and twice by singers from the Waterford Gaeltacht. Although no singer from Cork or Kerry won during this period, second place was won eight times by singers from Cork and three times by singers from Waterford (see Appendix A). This would seem to suggest that a bias exists within the competition favouring those singing in the Conamara style. However, as the spreadsheet above illustrates, more singers from Conamara competed at the festival during this period than all the other regions combined. Ó Laoire suggests that the high numbers of entrants from Conamara is due to the fact that singers from other districts were less inclined to enter because Oireachtas adjudicators favoured the Conamara style (Ó Laoire 2000, pp.166-167). He does not however, present any ethnographic evidence to back up this argument.

Singers from Donegal won the competition in 1991, 1996, 2004 and 2009. As the sheet above indicates, singers from Conamara far outnumbered singers from Donegal on those occasions. Also in 1990 and again in 1992, a Waterford singer took first prize at the CUR. Again, singers from Conamara far out-numbered those from Waterford on both those occasions. It is worth noting that compared to all the other regions Waterford has produced the least amount of entrants during this period —28 compared to Conamara’s 340. One might argue therefore that the success of Waterford singers within the CUR is disproportionate to the amount of entrants from that district, perhaps suggesting that a bias toward this style existed within the Oireachtas (a bias the reader may notice that Ó Riada had when it came to sean-nós
singing). I would argue that the dominance of the Conamara style during this period is not that unusual, considering the numbers that were competing from this district.

However, as I have noted above, singers need to qualify to compete in the CUR, and it is possible that this qualifying process might privilege singers from Conamara. In order to check this, I also analysed the breakdown of the over 35 open men’s and women’s competitions respectively (see below). These competitions are, since the 1960s, open to anyone over the age of 35. The first and second prize winners of both the men’s and women’s senior competitions qualify to compete in the senior men and women’s *sean-nós* singing competition\(^{25}\), (*comórtais cháilithe amhránaíocht ar an sean-nós*). The first and second place winners of this competition in turn qualify to compete in the CUR.

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\(^{25}\) The Oireachtas holds a number of adult *sean-nós* sing competitions, for example: under 35 men’s, under 35 women’s, over 35s men’s and over 35 women’s). The winners of these various competitions qualify to compete in the senior men and women’s *sean-nós* singing competition which is essentially a qualifying competition for CUR.
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| TOTAL | 1316 | 151 | 204 | 89 | 205 | 445 | 222 |
In the above spreadsheet I combine the number of entrants in both the men’s and women’s competition for each year. I am not particularly focusing on the gender breakdown of the entrants; instead my focus is on their geographic make up. Like the CUR sheet, entrants are grouped according to region. Individuals who come from outside the Gaeltacht, and specifically those I was unable to assign to a specific Gaeltacht district, are grouped under ‘Other’. My attention is primarily on the period 1980-2012, because I am better able to determine the identity and singing style of singers from this period. However, I did research programme notes from earlier periods, such as 1960 to 1970.

My research of the programme notes for the period 1960 to 1970, indicates that most of the competitors entering the Oireachtas men’s and women’s over 35 open sean-nós competitions were indeed from the Conamara Gaeltacht, closely followed by singers from the various Munster regions combined. The area least represented at the festival at this time was Donegal, particularly from the period 1960-1966, when it was not uncommon to have only one or two singers from that district competing in any given year. There was an increase in attendance by Donegal singers from 1966 onwards - for example there were thirteen competitors from Donegal in 1968.

The number of singers from Donegal continued to grow during the 1980s, and as can be seen in the above spreadsheet, a significant number of entrants into the over 35 men’s and women’s competitions for the period 1980-2012 came from Donegal. Nevertheless, here too we see that the vast majority of entrants came from Conamara, over twice as many as those from Donegal and Cork respectively, nearly three times as many as those from Kerry, and five times the number of entrants from Waterford. I would argue that the dominance of the Conamara style was not particularly due to a bias favouring it, but rather to the overwhelming number of entrants that came from
this district. Conamara contains the greater portion of the total *Gaeltacht* population (48%). While this might offer some explanation as to why more entrants come from Conamara than the other *Gaeltacht* districts, it does not fully explain the situation.

In the following section I argue that from the 1970s onwards the Conamara community co-opted a considerable amount of power within the *Oireachtas* movement. This ‘revolution’ within the *Oireachtas* was part of a broader revolution which shifted the Irish language from being a national issue to one of minority rights. It also brought Conamara into the centre of Irish language affairs. The revolution was instigated by *Cearta Shibhialta na Gaeltachta* (the *Gaeltacht* Civil Rights Movement), which was born in the Conamara Gaeltacht.

### 5.5 Revolution within Oireachtas na Gaeilge

The 1960s and 70s in Ireland was a period of great social change. The electrification of rural Ireland began in earnest during this period, and this heralded the dawn of a more modern outward looking and industrialised age in the country. The Republic of Ireland joined the European Union in 1973 and this marks the beginning of a period when Irish politicians left behind the protectionist policies of the past in favour of a more active role in international affairs. The Northern Ireland conflict, known as ‘the troubles’, broke out during the late 1960s. The North American civil rights and the anti-Vietnam war movements inspired Northern Irish Catholics—who were at that time disenfranchised economically, politically and culturally—to establish the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Movement. Indeed the *zeitgeist* of the 1960s and 70s, generally, was one that challenged traditional hierarchal power structures.

The backlash the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Movement received from British loyalists in Northern Ireland, and from members of the Northern Ireland police force, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (the RUC), brought the Northern Ireland troubles to the attention of the world’s media. By doing so, Ireland, which was often seen as being at the periphery of Europe, was drawn into the centre of European and world
affairs. Inspired by the example given by both Northern Ireland and North America civil rights movements, *Cearta Shibhialta na Gaeltachta* — the CSNG for short— (The *Gaeltacht* Civil Rights Movement), was established in the late 1960s by a group of mostly young radicals from the Conamara *Gaeltacht* district (Quinn 2000).

In March 1969 a number of Conamara residents publicly protested against the filming of the English language television quiz show, *Quicksilver*26, in *Teach Furbo* in Cois Fharraghe, Conamara. A small number of these protesters managed to infiltrate the show’s audience and were successful in disrupting the show so that filming was cancelled. This protest was the catalyst behind the formation of CSNG (Quinn 2000). Lack of employment in the area and the draining of the district’s youth because of emigration were the two main concerns of the CSNG (Mac Giolla Chríost 2012, p.404). The organisers had a strong sense of disenfranchisement. Conamara, and the *Gaeltacht* generally, has historically been the poorest and most underdeveloped part of Ireland, and the CSNG were determined to change this by tackling the under-representation of the area by the political classes of the day.

In 1969 Seosamh Ó Cuig, a leading figure in the CSNG, and others established *Saor Radió Chonamara* (Conamara Free Radio). This pirate radio station became the voice of the movement and it brought the CSNG to national attention. A periodical known as *Tuairisc* (story/news) was set up by the movement which further promoted the aims of the CSNG membership. In June 1969 the CSNG members selected Liam Mac Con Iomaire to represent the movement in the general election of that year (Quinn 2000). Mac Con Iomaire secured 1,500 votes in the West-Connacht district, an area that was historically strongly aligned with the dominant political party of the day, *Fianna Fáil* (ibid). The election result, and the other protest work undertaken by the civil rights movement, pressurised the government to give into some of its demands.

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26 *Quicksilver* was filmed and produced by Ireland’s national broadcaster RTÉ. It was hosted by Bunny Carr and it ran from 1965 to 1981. The show was broadcast live every week from a different part of Ireland, and the show’s competitors were selected from the live audience by drawing numbered tickets (RTÉ ten 2012).
The Irish government established Údarás na Gaeltachta, the Gaeltacht authority, in 1980, in an effort to decentralise the governing of the Gaeltacht (Mac Giolla Chríost 2012, p.405). Radió na Gaeltachta, the Gaeltacht radio station, was launched in 1972 (Vallely 2011 p. 560) and the national Irish language television station, Teilifís na Gaeilge (TnaG) (now TG4) was established in 1996 (Vallely 2011, pp. 680-90); all of these state funded enterprises have their headquarters in Conamara. This is largely due to the fact that the Gaeltacht civil rights movement essentially turned Conamara into the centre of Irish language affairs, particularly Irish language broadcasting.

The Gaeltacht civil rights movement also challenged the position and role of the League/Oireachtas in Gaeltacht affairs. In 1970 the CSNG organised an alternative Oireachtas in Ros Muc and Tir an Fhia in the Conamara Gaeltacht, known as Oireachtas na nGael (the Oireachtas of the Gaels [my translation]). This event pressurised the ‘official’ Oireachtas, Oireachtas na Gaeilge, to engage more with the Gaeltacht population (Ó Maolaodha [personal interview]). It also led to the official Oireachtas being moved outside of the capital for the first time since it was re-established in 1939 (Quinn 2000; Bradshaw 2010, p.13). Although allocating causality is difficult when discussing a complex institution like the Oireachtas, I would nevertheless tentatively suggest that the actions of the CSNG contributed significantly to the emergence of the Conamara style as the dominant style within the Oireachtas sean-nós singing competitions.

Oireachtas na nGael 1970-1972

Up until the early 1970s the Oireachtas na Gaeilge festival (the official Oireachtas) was patronised by a member of the government of the day. From the perspective of CSNG members, successive Irish governments were neglectful and apathetic to both the Gaeltacht and to the Irish language movement (Bradshaw 2010 p.13). The existence of an official government patron at the festival symbolised the Oireachtas’ disconnect with the realities of Gaeltacht life, and framed the festival as being part of official Ireland. The CSNG believed that the League/Oireachtas should remain free
from any and all associations with the Irish government until it prioritised the Irish language movement and the dire social/economic situation in the Gaeltacht. Since it was re-established in 1939 Oireachtas na Gaeilge was held annually in Dublin, and members of the CSNG saw this as further evidence of the disconnect that existed between the festival and the native Irish speaking populace (Bradshaw 2010, p.13).

The Gaeltacht civil rights movement held the first of three protest Oireachtas’ in Ros Muc and in Tír an Fhia in the Conamara Gaeltacht on 13-16 of November 1970. On the opening page of their program the organizers of this festival stated that:

_Le blianta bhí priomhfhéile na nGael I mBaile Atha Cliath. Ach is in áit a labhartar an teanga go dóchasach is dual dó a bheith. As seo amach beidh an tOireachtas I gceantar Gaeltachta._

For many years Dublin has been the location of the premier festival of Gaelic culture. However, it is in those areas where Irish is the common vernacular that this festival should be held. From now on the Oireachtas will be held in a Gaeltacht district.

_(Oireachtas na nGael program 1970)_

The festival in Ros Muc/Tír an Fhia consisted of numerous sean-nós and other singing competitions, including one for newly composed sean-nós songs, an Irish language balled competition, and a competition for music groups; various Irish instrumental music and dancing competitions as well as a number of lectures/discussions also featured at the festival (ibid). Sean Ó Riada brought his traditional choir from Cúil Aodha in the Cork Gaeltacht, Cór Chúil Aodha (the Cúil Aodha Choir) to perform at the festival. Ó Riada’s presence at the festival gave it an added significance and sense of occasion (Ó Maolaodha 2014 [personal interview]). The festival proceedings were the first broadcast made by Saor Radió Chonamara (Conamara Free Radio) (Quinn 2000). Not only did this add further to the sense of occasion of the event, it was also an indication of where the future for the Irish language movement and the Gaeltacht lay, one that was bound up with both radio and television broadcasting.
The CSNG held two more alternative *Oireachtas*. The second *Oireachtas na nGael* was held in Corca Dhuibhne in the Kerry Gaeltacht in 1971, and last one was held in Cill Chiaráin, Conamara in 1972 (Quinn 2014). In addition to the three ‘alternative’ festivals, members of the civil rights movement protested the Irish government’s patronage of the festival at the 1972 *Oireachtas*, held in the RDS in Dublin (Mac Máthúna 1997, p.24). According to Ó Maolaodha — who remembers being present at the alternative *Oireachtas* that was held in the Dún an Óir theatre in Ballyferriter in Corca Dhuibhne— *Oireachtas na nGael* pressured the official *Oireachtas, Oireachtas na Gaeilge*, to move out of Dublin, and to give the Gaeltacht community a more active role in the organisation of the festival. *Oireachtas na Gaeilge*’s executive committee was reluctant at first to relocate the festival and a great deal of discussion took place before it was finally agreed to hold the festival in Cois Fharraige in Conamara in 1974 - the first time it was held outside of Dublin since the festival was re-established in 1939 (Mac Mathúna 1997, pp. 24-25).

Ó Maolaodha stated that by creating an alternative festival the Gaeltacht civil rights movement made it clear to the official *Oireachtas* that they were capable of holding a festival to challenge the League/*Oireachtas’s* position as the premier Irish language movement in the country. The agency displayed by the Gaeltacht community points to the fact that institutions such as the *Oireachtas* cannot survive without the co-operation and compliance of traditional singers and communities like the Gaeltacht. This is one of the central arguments of this thesis. Further evidence of this agency by the Gaeltacht community within the *Oireachtas* festival is increasingly evident from 1974 onwards.

**Oireachtas na Gaeilge after 1974**

Up until the early 1970s the expressive cultural of the Gaeltacht was only marginally included in the *Oireachtas* programme (Ó Maolaodha 2014 [personal interview]). According to Ó Maolaodha, throughout the 1960s the Gaeltacht centred events, such as the *sean-nós* competitions, were all held on the same day - early on in the festival
programme, usually on a Monday or Tuesday. The festival at this time was a ten day event, and Ó Maolaodha feels that the fact that all the Gaeltacht events were held on the same day suggests the Gaeltacht community was only marginally tolerated by the festival’s executive committee. Ó Maolaodha states that the attitude of the festival executive committee at the time was one of “get them in and get them out” (2014 [personal interview]). The actions of the CSNG forced the Oireachtas to relinquish some of its power to the Gaeltacht community. Because the civil rights movement emerged from the Conamara Gaeltacht, Conamara became the center of Gaeltacht affairs. I would offer that this explains why so many singers competed in the Oireachtas during the 1970s and 1980s. The CSNG inspired the Conamara community to lay claim to Irishness, and to participate in events centered on the Irish language, such as sean-nós singing. Unfortunately, this has led to a sense of marginalisation amongst sean-nós singers from other areas, as the following interview excerpts illustrate. One of my interviewees, Informant A, from the Kerry Gaeltacht states:

Ach you know, is cuimhneach liom, bhí comórtas beag againne I dTi Kruger ar feadh cúpla bliain, ag an baile i nDún Chaoín, agus bhí cAILín óg agus do chan sí [...], is lèir go raibh sí go mór saghas, go raibh tóinchar an Oireachtas le feiceáil, go raibh sí ag éisteacht le muintir an Oireachtas. Agus bhí sí ag canadh Amhrán Mhuíne agus iad sin go lèir, ag an baile i nDún Chaoín. Agus it was supposed to be saghas comórtas sean-nós like [...] na háite, agus bhí na sean-lads, buail bhí gabhadh orthu now [...] really. Bhi sé ar nós go raibh sí tar héis [...] go raibh sí ag caiteadh anuas, sin a cheapadar sin, ar ár gcuid amhráin féinig, nil is agam. I mean bhí sí óg agus thaitin siad (amháin Chonamara) lèi. Agus bhí siad difriúil agus ní raibh siad ina cluais agus i ag éirigh aníos, so bhí sé saghas spéisiúil di, ach nil really cead agat bheidh ag cuimhneamh mar sin, you know! [...] Nil sè (sean-nós) chomh hoscailtse sin really [...]
Mhuínse [a song from Conamara], at home in Dún Chaoin. And it was a competition celebrating the songs of the area, and the old-lads, well they were fuming […] really. It was like she was after insulting, that’s what they felt, the songs they had themselves. I don’t know. I mean she was young and she liked them [Conamara songs]. And they were different, and she wasn’t used to hearing them, so it kind of interesting for her. But you can’t really be thinking like that you know. It’s [sean-nós] not that open really.

(Personal Interview 2010)

Further discussion with Informant A revealed that his strict notions of a regional bounded repertoire were due mainly to the fact that he sees Conamara as being the dominant Gaeltacht:

[...] is dóigh liom go bhfuil [...] oíche sin [...] ag muintir Gaeltacht Chorca Dhuibhne le muintir Chonamara. [...] agus toisc go raibh an Gaeltacht sin [Chonamara] i uachtar i gcóiní. [...] You know, fiú amháin dhá gcanaíonn amhráin ó Thír Chonaill, ba chumadh. It’s the Conamara thing. Agus toisc go bhfuil siad chomh láidir mar Ghaeltacht agus dár léiriú, tugadh gachrud diobh. Agus ómós, agus TV stations agus i bhfeidhm, fiú amháin dár linne an Caighdeán, is é Gaeilge Chonamara. Now tá a fhios agam nach n-aontaíonn sibh, le bheadh ag caint le muintir Chonamara. Ach nuair a bhí muid ag éirí anois sin a cheap muid.

I think that the people of the Corca Dhuibhne [Kerry Gaeltacht] have some issues with the people from Conamara [...] due to the fact that the Conamara Gaeltacht was always at the top. You know, if I sang a song from Donegal, that would be ok. It’s the Conamara thing. And due to the fact that they [the Conamara community] were so strong as a Gaeltacht, and according to the people at home, everything was given to them. Respect, and TV stations and you know, even in our opinion the official Irish, that’s Conamara Irish. Now I know that ye don’t agree, from my experience speaking to people from Conamara. But when we were growing up that’s what we believed.

(Personal interview 2010)

Informant A’s remarks illustrate that the sean-nós singing competition at the Oireachtas is not only about singing. The sean-nós competition is an arena where
singers become representatives of one or other of the Gaeltacht areas. Even singers from outside of the Gaeltacht perform in one or other of the regional styles associated with sean-nós, thereby aligning themselves with a particular Gaeltacht community. When an individual wins at the Oireachtas, the Gaeltacht that is indexed by the singer’s performance style and repertoire becomes, in the winning, the most authentic Gaeltacht (see Chapter V). This suggests that one can never separate provincialism from sean-nós singing.

**Competition Culture in Irish Vernacular Culture**

I offer that the main thrust of Ó Laoire’s argument is that the Oireachtas competition sows discord and acrimony between members of the various Gaeltacht districts. First, he sees formal competitions, like the Oireachtas, as having a standardising effect on traditional singing, because singers, who wish to be successful at a competition, end up singing in a way that pleases adjudicators. Second, and related to the first point, Ó Laoire argues that the ideology (Romantic nationalism) of the Oireachtas adjudicators is a particularly homogenising one. According to Ó Laoire, because of its Romantic nationalist ideology, the Oireachtas has reified one regional style above all others, and because it is a competition, singers who wish to be successful are therefore forced to sing in the preferred style of the festival adjudicators. This is Ó Laoire’s main criticism of the Oireachtas.

As I show in Chapters VI and VII, while a strong inter-Gaeltacht rivalry does exist at the Oireachtas, no single standardised style of sean-nós is promoted by its adjudicators – it is important to note that adjudicators are drawn from all the Gaeltacht districts (Ó Maolaodha 2014 [personal interview]). In addition, contrary to what Informant A suggests above, at the Oireachtas singers from specific Gaeltacht districts are expected to sing from the repertoire and in the style associated with that particular region. While I admit that the Oireachtas singing competitions can and do reinforce regionalism and inter-Gaeltacht rivalry to a certain extent, I also believe that there is evidence to suggest that inter-regional rivalry in Irish singing predates the Oireachtas competitions (see below).
Ó Madagáin suggests that, historically, Irish traditional song performance was often characterised by an element of competitiveness (OnaG 2005, p.77). He states that this often took the form of personal rivalries between singers, but that it could also be between two communities, such as two town-lands, two parishes, or two islands. Ó Madagáin refers to an account given by the collector Martin Freeman who, after a night collecting songs in Baile Bhúirne in the Cork Gaeltacht prior to World War I, remarked that: “the situation has revealed itself as a rivalry between the two principal singers” (ibid). Ó Madagáin also notes that an account of community rivalry is given in Pádraig Mac Seáin’s (1895-1981) introduction to his book, Ceolta Theilinn (a collection of songs lyrics and musical notation) from Teilinn in Donegal. Mac Seán, himself a native of the area, states that:

[bhí] an méid sin spéise agus suime acu san tseanchéol is go mbíodh comórtaíse eadarbhailteach acu, agus nós ar a dtgtaí ‘ceartú ceoil’ ins na cómórtaíse sin’.

They had so much interest in the old music that they would organise inter-town land competitions, and they were in the habit of calling these competitions ‘correcting/rectifying music’.

(Ó Madagáin 2005, p.77)

Mac Sheáin adds that these competitions were often heated events that could escalate into violence (ibid, p.78). Ó Madagáin notes other forms of singing competitions occurring in Cinn Mhara, in Galway, bordering Co. Clare, when the men who shipped turf from Conamara to the area would meet to sing in the local pubs and where a jug of whiskey was offered as the prize for the best singer (ibid).

Ó Madagáin also mentions the rivalry that existed between some poets, and how this rivalry often influenced creativity. For example, there was a long-lasting professional rivalry between the two nineteenth-century Connacht poets Antaine Raiftearaí (1799-1835) and Marcas Ó Callanáin (c.1789-c.1846) (ainm.ie 2015). Ó Callanáin’s song ‘Sciolladh Mharcais Uí Challánáin’ (Marcas Ó Callanáin’s scolding) is an attack on Raiftearaí and his wife Siobhán (ibid). This rivalry between Raiftearaí and Ó
Callanán inspired both poets to compose; Raiftearaí composed a love song Máire Ní Eidhin [Mary Hynes] which led Ó Callanán to compose Mary Hynes, a song about the same person. Ó Callanán composed the love song Máire Brún [Mary Browne] in praise of a woman of legendary beauty, which led Raiftearaí to compose his own song in praise of a beauty, Máirín Staunton [Maureen Staton] (ibid). In the last line of Máirín Staunton, Raiftearaí makes a reference to his rivalry with Ó Callanán: “Seo bannaí féil daoibh gan focal bréige, go dtug sí an sway léi ó Mháire Brún.” (I give you a bond of words, without a word of a lie, that she took the sway with her from Mary Browne [my translation]) (Ó Madagáin 2005, p.78).

Interestingly enough Liam Mac Con Iomaire, in his biography of Joe Heaney, suggests that according to local folklore in Carna, the first time Heaney performed in public was at a local pattern [saints] day in Roundstone in Conamara —the feast day of Peter and Paul— sometime in the early 1940s (2007, pp. 111-112). Pattern days took place all over Ireland during the eighteenth, nineteenth and into the early twentieth century. They took place out in the open often centred on holy wells, mountains or other areas of local pilgrimage. Pattern days were not official church holidays, and were often frowned upon by church authorities. This is likely due in part to the lack of control the Church had over these events, and also in part due to the carnival and often violent nature of them. Travelling musicians and street traders were all features of pattern days, as was faction fighting. These were brawls between large groups, almost exclusively based around clans, parishes or geographical areas (National Museum of Ireland 2015).

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27 Faction fights were illegal affairs and this meant all sorts of weapons were used, from sticks, stones, to knives and pistols. By the eighteenth century, the Irish developed their own form of stick fighting known as ‘baitaireach’ (battering). Most faction fights began over trivial matters, and because they were between the poorer classes of people they tended to be ignored by the IRC (the police), until, that is, the ‘better classes’ were endangered. Some commentators at the time suggested that the faction fights were a form of recreation, however, this is hard to believe due to level of violence involved. One fight between the Lalors and Coleens at the racecourse of Ballyeagh Strand in Co. Kerry in 1834 ended with the deaths by stoning or drowning of 34 individuals. The Lalor faction had numbered 1,200 strong to the Coleens’ 600. Reports suggest that by 1839 faction fighting had virtually ceased (National Museum of Ireland 2015).
Mac Con Iomaire notes that the Peter and Paul Pattern day in Roundstone attracted people from two neighbouring town-lands near Roundstone, Iorras Aintheach and Iorrais Mhór respectively. A regatta, consisting of rowing and sailing was held at this time, and there was great rivalry between the boating teams from Iorras Aintheach and Iorrais Mhór. At night, after the regatta, a dance took place. At the dance it was the custom for singers from Iorras Aintheach and Iorrais Mhór to compete with one another, continuing the local rivalry, which according to Mac Con Iomaire nearly always ended in a brawl at the end of the night. It seems that Heaney was present at one of these nights, and apparently some man from Iorrais Mhór sang a song, and it was looking like he would be lauded as the best singer of the night. However, Heaney was persuaded by members of his own locality in Iorras Aintheach to sing. He performed the English-language balled O’Brien from Tipperary, and it seems his performance swayed the opinions of all those present including those from Iorrais Mhór. Heaney was lauded as being the best singer in the area, and Mac Con Iomaire suggests that from that day forward his fame began to grow\(^28\) (ibid p.112).

The above examples illustrate that competition and rivalry have been part and parcel of vernacular culture in Ireland, well before organisations such as the arrival of the Gaelic League and the Oireachtas. Indeed, Ó Madagáin seems to suggest that because there is a historical basis for competition within the traditional arts in Ireland, this in and of itself legitimises the competition culture within the Oireachtas. On the other hand, one could also argue that the type of competitive rivalry noted above was much more democratic and unstructured than those which occur within formal structured competitions, like those of the Oireachtas. After all, Oireachtas adjudicators are selected by the Oireachtas committee, they are not elected representatives of the sean-nós singing community. The following quote from Tomás Ó Broin from 1955 describing the competitive nature of vernacular storytelling in Minloch, Co. Galway illustrates the anarchic nature of ‘vernacular communal adjudicating’:

\(^28\) It should be noted that Heaney is on record himself stating that his first public performance took place at a Feis competition in Carna in 1940 (Mac an Iomaire 2007, p.111).
Sometimes, it [competition] was between two towns, or two parts of the same town. [...] Due to the fact that there was no specific adjudicator selected it was often difficult to tell which side won. Everyone in the company was allowed to give their assessment and to express their opinion. It was the measure of these competitions that they could inspire otherwise easy going/meek storytellers to perform at their very best.

(Cited in Ó Madagáin 2005, p.78)

Competitiveness and inter-regionalism has been a traditional characteristic of vernacular singing in Ireland for some time. However, drawing on the work of Whelan, Ó Laoire (2000, pp. 166-168) seems to be suggesting —although he does not state it overtly— that the Oireachtas has, through its singing competitions, sown discord between the various Gaeltacht communities. I offer that this argument is based on the assumption that these communities were in some form of accordance prior to the emergence of the Oireachtas. This view is possibly due to the influence of Platonic thinking, which tends to frame music performance “as an extraterrestrial ‘essence’ that controls, and harmonises social relations” (Stokes 1997, p.10). The idea that music is the social glue that reinforces community bonds is difficult to shirk; however, as I have illustrated in this section the performance of the traditional arts in Ireland has been —at least since the nineteenth century— highly competitive and at times combative.

Indeed as I have illustrated above, competition culture can aid creativity and inspire individuals to new heights, and it can also foster acrimony and lead to violence and inter-regionalism. It is important to note that I am not suggesting here that the
Oireachtas competition culture is a ‘natural’ development or extension of Irish vernacular performance practice from the nineteenth century. Also, I am not arguing that the Conamara community deserve to dominate the Oireachtas competitions, because they essentially appropriated them in the 1970s. On a personal note I question why Conamara singers seem to need the validation of the Oireachtas. However, I also feel people have the right to enter competitions if they so wish. The main argument of this thesis is that the Oireachtas singing competition should be viewed as a unique musical culture with its own rules and ideas concerning what are musically and aesthetically appropriate in sean-nós singing. Like many other cultural formations this musical culture is somewhat nebulous because it is informed by a multiplicity of views. By focusing primarily on the ideology of the revivialist in folk revival movements, like the Oireachtas, there is a danger that one will miss this complexity. There is also the danger of overlooking the role — for good or ill — of the folk in the revival.

Conclusion

Much of the literature that deals with what Whisnant (2009, pp.13-14) calls ‘cultural interventionist movements’ tends to focus primarily on the revivialist. When the so called ‘folk’ or traditional singer/musician is discussed it is usually in order to show how they have been exploited by the revivialists, who are normally described as being from a different social class than the ‘folk’. Revivialists tend also to be described as expropriators and gentrifiers of vernacular culture (see Boyes 2010, pp.47-49; Whisnant 2009, pp. 110-127). While there is frequently some truth in this kind of reading, it is an interpretation that often fails to recognise the agency of the folk in the revival process. There can be no revival without the folk; therefore, although they are often socio-economically less well off than the typical revivialist, they are not without power. The framing of the ‘folk’ as being essentially powerless and open to exploitation seems to suggest that they are in need of protection — a framing of the folk that is, ironically, very much a trope of Romantic nationalist revivialist

29 Obviously a distinction should be made between revivals which are based on a ‘living’ folk culture, and those concerned with reviving a long forgotten form of cultural expression.
movements. It is important to note that my objective here is not to excuse or validate some of the more questionable practices some revivalists have engaged in over the years (see Boyes 2010, p.49). Instead I want to draw attention to some of the traps researchers of vernacular culture and revivalist movements can too easily fall into if they disregard the agency of the ‘folk’ in the revival.

In the chapter above I endeavoured to highlight the role members of the Conamara community have played in making the Conamara style the dominant style of sean-nós within the Oireachtas. Throughout this thesis I argue that the Oireachtas sean-nós singing competition is a unique musical community consisting of many voices, which combine to ‘author’ what is considered musically and aesthetically appropriate in sean-nós singing. In the next chapter, I will explore the dynamics of this phenomenon further, by analysing the sean-nós adjudicator reports for the senior sean-nós singing competition from 1940 to 2011. The data contained within these papers, combined with in-depth interviews with a number of key informants, enables us to see the role adjudicators, the Oireachtas executive committee, the Oireachtas membership, and sean-nós singers have had in moulding sean-nós song, and in creating a sean-nós aesthetic.
Chapter VI: Sean-nós through the gaze of the Competition Adjudicator and the Agency of Competitors

As I have stated in Chapter I, the concept of authenticity (or good performance) is essentially a device used by members of musical communities to define and argue over what they consider to be aesthetically pleasing and musically appropriate in their musical culture. I propose that ‘good’ performance in the Oireachtas sean-nós world is seen in complexity and in the perceived ‘ancientness’ of the song and singing style, and in the ‘naturalness’ of the singer (see Chapter III). That being said, there is no single specific way of singing sean-nós given in the reports; individual adjudicators see complexity and traditionality in different areas and aspects of sean-nós singing. As such, the reports contain a wide spectrum of characteristics/techniques associated with ‘good’ sean-nós singing. The following chapter focuses in particular on the Oireachtas adjudicator reports. However, I also discuss the agency of competitors within the Oireachtas competition, and I draw on my ethnographic interviews in order to supplement and add to the analysis of these reports.

6.1 Oireachtas Adjudicating

As I have shown in Chapters IV and V, the category sean-nós was created by the Oireachtas membership as a label for a style of Irish language song. For much of its history the Oireachtas membership tended to view the Gaeltacht sean-nós singing community from an etic position. This might lead one to assume that ideas concerning traditionality and authenticity in sean-nós were imposed by the Oireachtas members on the Gaeltacht community. However, I offer that the reality of the situation is far more complex, and that members of the Gaeltacht community have in various ways contributed to the ‘creation’ of the sean-nós category. One of the ways members of the Gaeltacht community have done this is through adjudicating at the Oireachtas. Since at least 1940, sean-nós adjudicators have generally been drawn from the various Gaeltacht districts, the academic world of music and Irish language scholarship, and the Irish traditional music world more generally, as the following illustrates:
Examples of Gaeltacht Adjudicators

- *Sean-nós* singers and academic Sorcha Ni Ghuairim (1911-1976) from Conamara (adjudicated during the 1940s) (Ainm.ie 2015).
- Seán Ó Cuirrín (1894-1980) a writer, actor and teacher from the Waterford Gaeltacht (adjudicated during the 1940s) (ibid)
- Áine Ní Laoi (1920-1994) — also known as Áine Ní Ghallchobhair — a *sean-nós* singer from Donegal (adjudicated during the 1960-1980s) (ibid)
- Aodh Ó Domnaill (1913-1977) a school teacher and folklore collector from Donegal (adjudicated during the 1970s) (Ainm.ie 2015).
- Síle Ní Fhlatharta *sean-nós* singer from Conamara (adjudicated during the 1980s) (Cló Iar Chonnachta 2009).
- Tomas Ó Neachtain *sean-nós* singer from Conamara (adjudicated during the 1980s) (Vicipéid 2013b).
- Lillis Ó Laoire, academic, writer and *sean-nós* singer from Donegal (adjudicated during 1990s-2000s).

Examples of Non-Gaeltacht Adjudicators

- Gráinne Ni hEigeartaigh (1925-2013) — also known as Gráinne Yeats — was a Dublin born harpist and singer and historian (adjudicated during the 1950s) (The Irish Times 2013).
- Róisín Uí Thuama (1919-2005) — also known as Róisín Ní Shéaghdha — was a singer and harpist from Dublin (adjudicated during 1980s) (Ainm.ie 2015).
- Gearóid Mac Eoin (1929) a Limerick born Irish scholar (adjudicated during the 1960s) (Vicipéid 2013a).
• Seán Ó Caiside (1907-2003) a teaching inspector, choral arranger and song collector from Longford (adjudicated throughout the 1960s) (Rootsweb 2003).
• Tomás Ó Canainn traditional musician, singer and academic from Derry (adjudicated throughout the 1980s-2000s).
• Breandán Ó Madagáin, academic, Celticist, and singer from Limerick (adjudicated during 1980s-2000s).

Many of the examples of adjudicator views illustrated further on in this chapter are those of the adjudicators listed above. One could argue that, because *Oireachtas* adjudicators come from diverse backgrounds, *Oireachtas* adjudicating is an arena where etic and emic views on *sean-nós* merge. However, throughout this thesis I argue that the *sean-nós* community at the *Oireachtas* is a unique community made up of a multiplicity of disparate voices. Therefore, it seems more accurate to suggest that — rather than classifying adjudicators as being either Gaeilte or non-Gaeilte — it is better to view them simply as members of the *Oireachtas* sean-nós singing cohort. When I began this research in 2010, the *Oireachtas* had a fulltime staff of four. In the last number of years however, it has expanded to eight (Oireachtas na Gaeilge 2015). However, it should be remembered that the *Oireachtas* festival has many branches, and it is essentially an Irish language festival at its heart. This means that most of the responsibility for organising the *sean-nós* competitions falls on Liam Ó Maolaodha, the festival’s director.

Ó Maolaodha informed me that the main thing he looks for in an adjudicator is that they are an honest individual (2014 [personal interview]). He added that he has built up relationships with adjudicators over a period of years, and that in normal circumstances only an adjudicator who had proven him or herself to be fair and honest over a period of years is asked to adjudicate at the most senior level at the *Oireachtas*. I would argue that this illustrates that Ó Maolaodha and the *Oireachtas* are dependent on adjudicators. Once the competition begins, an adjudicator has considerable power. However, these adjudicators are under scrutiny from singers and
the audience members alike. Ó Maolaodha informed me that he occasionally receives complaints from individual audience members about certain results, and it seems very likely that if an adjudicator is widely seen to be biased and unfair, they will not be asked back to adjudicate in the future.

I argue that, by engaging in the adjudicating process, adjudicators contribute to the authoring of the category of song known as *sean-nós*. As I have stated in Chapter IV, category membership is a matter of debate, and often there can be differences of opinion (Levitin 2008 p.143). This means categories, like *sean-nós* song, are not necessarily fixed - they can be open ended and in flux. Particularly from the 1980s onwards, *sean-nós* singers from the various *Gaeltacht* areas — and from all walks of life— have been drawn on to adjudicate at the festival in increasing numbers. Ó Maolaodha tries to use adjudicators from the various *Gaeltacht* districts; many are past competitors and winners at the *Oireachtas* (Ó Maolaodha 2014 [personnel interview]). He is also very conscious of maintaining a gender balance within the adjudicating.

Although it is likely that adjudicators wrote reports from the very beginning (ibid), the earliest reports contained within the archives date from 1940, the period of the revived *Oireachtas* (see Chapter IV). According to Ó Maolaodha, the rationale behind these reports is to offer feedback to the competitors on their performance (ibid). Singers at the *Oireachtas* can, if they request it, get a copy of the adjudicator reports for their own performance. It is not entirely clear why the *Oireachtas* keeps its own copies of the adjudicator reports, but I suspect it is done in the spirit of transparency and openness. Any member of the public can review the reports for any of the *Oireachtas* competitions, and in my experience the *Oireachtas* encourage academics, singers and the wider public to avail of this material.

The *Oireachtas* has experimented with various competition formats over the years. For example, for a period in the 1960s all singers in the senior *sean-nós* competition were required to sing three songs. Later, this was reduced to two songs per
competitor. Other formats were also explored; Gaeltacht adjudicating panels were brought in, in conjunction with the venue adjudicators, for a short period in the 1980s. These regional panels phoned in their results to the Oireachtas live on RnaG. However, the glaoch ar ais’ [call back] system has been the standard system since the 1990s (Ó Maolaodha 2014 [personal interview]. The glaoch ar ais format essentially breaks the SSNC into two ‘heats’. Those who are successful in the first heat qualify to perform in the second (competition structure is also discussed in Chapters V and VII). Today a panel of three adjudicators marks all the senior sean-nós competitions. This system was employed in 1939 and throughout the 1940s (Oireachtas na Gaeilge Programmes 1939, 1940, and 1941). However, for a period in the 1960s, scoring at the SSNC was done by one adjudicator only.

6.2 The Agency of Sean-nós singers within the Adjudicating structure

In 1968, Seán Óg Ó Tuama, the adjudicator for the SSNC that year, withheld the first prize slot, giving a joint second instead (see Appendix A). During this period it was written into the competition rules that the first prize could be withheld if the adjudicator felt that the standard of the competitors was not high enough to merit the awarding of a first prize. The first prize was also withheld earlier at the men’s senior sean-nós competition in 1960, when Darach Ó Catháin, widely regarded as one of the most celebrated sean-nós singers of his time, was awarded second prize instead. It is widely believed that Ó Catháin felt slighted by this result and that he quit competing at the Oireachtas because of it (Ó Maolaodha 2014 [personal interview]). In the following section I explore how Ó Catháin’s boycotting of the festival influenced the Oireachtas committee to make it a requirement for adjudicators to select a first prize winner each year, irrespective of the overall standard of the competitors.

Ó Catháin (1922-87) was a Conamara born singer who, as a child, moved with his family to the newly created Gaeltacht in Meath in the 1930s and later to Leeds where he spent the remainder of his adult life (TG Amhrán 2012). An LP of his singing, Darach Ó Catháin, was issued on the Gael Linn label in 1975, (Vallely 2011, p.503)
and he performed regularly—between 1957 and 1961— with Sean Ó Riada and his traditional ensemble, *Ceoltóirí Cualann* (TG Amhrán 2012). Ó Catháin is the featured singer on the first *Ceoltóirí Cualann* album, *Reacaireacht an Riadaigh* (Ó Riada’s recital) (Ó Riada 1961). To this day his singing is played regularly on *RnaG* and during his lifetime Ó Catháin frequently performed on Irish television. Most recently he was the subject of a *TG4* music documentary, *Cérbh é?* [Who was?] presented by Iarla Ó Lionaird (TG Amhrán 2012).

Darach competed in the men’s open *sean-nós* competition between 1957 and 1961 (OnaG30 1957, p.31; OnaG 1960, p.37; OnaG 1961, p.35). It is not entirely clear who actually adjudicated that competition in 1960, when the first prize was withheld from Ó Catháin. Caitlín Ní Chinnéide is the name given in the festival programme (OnG 1960, p.37); however, I have been informed by a number of individuals that Ó Tuama was the actual adjudicator for that particular competition that year (it is not that unusual to have last-minute adjudicator substitutions for various reasons).

Irrespective of who actually adjudicated, the result is I believe significant because it caused Ó Catháin to quit the *Oireachtas* (Ó Maolaodha 2014, [personal interview]). Ó Catháin’s name does appear however in the list of entrants for the men’s *sean-nós* competition in the 1961 festival programme, which was adjudicated by Ó Tuama; but as I have discussed in Chapter V, these lists are compiled a number of weeks prior to the actual competition, and just because a person’s name is listed in the programme does not guarantee that they actually competed. Also, it is not uncommon for a singer to have their name entered by persons other than themselves, such as friends, relations, or supporters. Ó Catháin’s name does not appear in any of the festival’s programmes from 1961 onwards, and it is widely believed that he never competed at the festival after 1960 (Ó Maolaodha 2014 [personal interview]).

According to Liam Ó Maolaodha the practice of withholding the first prize caused some controversy amongst competitors and *Oireachtas* audience members. This

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30 I am using the abbreviation OnaG here to refer to the *Oireachtas na Gaeilge* programmes.
eventually led to a change in the *sean-nós* competition rules; now adjudicators are required to select an overall winner (or joint winners), as well as second place or joint second place winners, for all the *sean-nós* competitions (2014 [personal interview]). Arguably this is an example of the agency of singers and the wider *Oireachtas* membership at work within the structure of the *Oireachtas*. Ó Catháin’s agency is particularly noteworthy, when one considers the efforts some of the *Oireachtas* members went to in order to encourage singers and members of the wider *Gaeltacht* community to participate in the festival’s events (see Chapter IV).

By not competing in any further *Oireachtas* competition Ó Catháin was in essence undermining the status of the *Oireachtas* *sean-nós* competition in the world of *sean-nós* singing. The *Oireachtas* does not bestow vast monetary prizes on its winners — currently the first prize at the SSNC is €1,500, second is €600, and third prize is €400. Instead the *Oireachtas* relies on the symbolic status of its prizes (Ó Maolaodha 2014 [personal interview]). This status is largely based on the calibre of the competitors who enter the competition. Those who compete in the SSNC do so to have their name inscribed on the winning trophy (the CUR) beside the names of past winners such as Nicholás Tóibín, Joe Heaney, or Seán de hÓra (all of whom are luminaries of the world of *sean-nós* singing). In other words, by winning the SSNC you enter an exclusive club, whose members constitute the very best *sean-nós* practitioners.

Arguably, adjudicators in the past who withheld the first prize were contributing to the high status of the *Oireachtas* singing competitions, because they made entry into the *Oireachtas* ‘winners club’ even more difficult, and therefore more exclusive. However, Ó Catháin’s boycotting of the *Oireachtas* competition after he was awarded second prize instead of first in 1960, also points to the dangers of making the competition too exclusive. The *Oireachtas*’ status within the world of traditional singing is based on the fact that the most highly regarded singers compete at its events. In other words, the *Oireachtas* depends upon their continued participation in the competitions, in order to maintain the prestige of the festival. Therefore, I suggest
that power within this musical culture does not reside with any one group. Instead it
exists with the various individuals who make up this community. Singers compete in
order to gain membership in the exclusive club that constitutes the SSNC winners,
and the festival organisers need the best singers to compete at the festival, in order to
maintain the high status of the competition. The fact that Darach Ó Catháin never
competed in the SSNC, let alone win it, undermines the authority of the organisation
within the world of Irish traditional song.

Ó Catháin’s fame as a sean-nós singer illustrates that a singer does not necessarily
need to win, or even compete in the SSNC, to be a successful sean-nós singer. The
act of not participating can therefore be viewed as form of agency in this instance,
because by boycotting the Oireachtas Ó Catháin was in effect undermining the
position of the festival in the world of traditional singing. If the ‘best’ singers do not
compete, the competition loses its unique status. By requiring adjudicators to pick a
clear winner for every singing competition, the executive committee was in effect
acquiescing to the demands of the wider singing community.

For a time in the early 1990s the Oireachtas again experimented with the
adjudicating process. At the time, the festival was under pressure to shorten the
length of the senior sean-nós competition. During the 1990s, it was not unusual to
have between 25 and 30 entrants in the SSNC (Ó Maolaodha 2014 [personal
interview]). Some sean-nós songs can be up to seven or eight minutes in length,
which meant that the competition could potentially go on for hours. The committee
were under particular pressure from RnaG — who were broadcasting the show live
— to shorten the event so that it would fit better with their broadcasting schedule.
The Oireachtas committee were also eager to make the competition less of an
endurance test for the live audience (ibid).

In order to whittle down the number of competitors the committee instituted a
preliminary qualifying competition, held earlier on the same day as the main SSNC.
This allowed the adjudicators to select between 10 and 12 finalists to compete in the
SSNC (Ó Maolaodha 2014 [personal interview]). However, competitors were unhappy with this structure. According to Ó Maolaodha, he received numerous complaints from singers in the weeks and days coming up to the competition; some went as far as stating that they would not compete under the new system. Ó Maolaodha stated that these singers felt that they had already qualified to compete in the SSNC — for example, by winning either the men’s or women’s senior competition— and in their minds the committee was asking them to qualify for a second time (ibid). The dissatisfaction of singers with this additional qualifying competition meant that it was abandoned after a year or two. In its stead the Oireachtas committee brought in the ‘glaoch ar ais’ [the call-back] which is the model employed today.

Over the years other formats have been tried out by the Oireachtas committee. Usually the committee institutes changes in the competition format in an effort to make the running of the competitions more streamlined and manageable, particularly because of the demands radio and television broadcasting puts on the festival. However, the success or failure of any changes to the structure of the competitions often depends on whether the sean-nós competitors are happy with the changes. In other words, the festival committee has to balance its own practical and logistical needs with those of the competitors and the audience at the festival, illustrating that even within what might appear to be a hegemonic power-structure, power does not necessarily reside in the hands of the organisers per se. Instead it lies between the various parties that make up the Oireachtas membership. In the following section I discuss one particular group of agents within this musical cohort, the Oireachtas adjudicators. I do this through the medium of the adjudicator report sheets, which I am reading as an ‘ethnographic survey’ (see Chapter I). I have preceded this analysis with a discussion on agency in order in frame and contextualise the adjudicating process, in order to illustrate to the reader that the adjudicating does not occur in a vacuum. As I have shown above, although the adjudicators play an important role in framing and ‘authoring’ sean-nós, power does not reside completely in their hands.
6.3 The Oireachtas na Gaeilge Adjudicator Reports

The Oireachtas adjudicator reports cover an extensive period—over seventy years—see Chapter I. This allows us to chart the development of what is considered musically and aesthetically appropriate in sean-nós song over time. According to Bohlman: “For the ethnomusicological fieldworker the boundaries between the past and the present become themselves the “field”, a space allowing one to experience and represent musical practices that are not simply inscriptions of the historical past or aural events of the immediate present” (2008, p.249). I am not primarily concerned with ‘recreating’ past Oireachtas performances by using the archives as a “surrogate” for performance, instead I am using the archives to determine how adjudicators categorise ‘good’ sean-nós performance (see Zeitlyn 2012, p. 469, for more on the use of archives as a surrogate for performance).

Sean-nós, Place and the Irish-Language

English-language and macaronic song does not feature whatsoever at the Oireachtas, and as such we can conclude that, within this festival, sean-nós means Irish-language song (OnaG 2010; OnaG 2011; OnaG 2012). Sean-nós singing competitions at the festival always feature unaccompanied solo singing. According to the rules contained in the Oireachtas programmes, competitors in the sean-nós competitions are required to sing ‘amhráin dúchasach’ [dúchasach can be translated as traditional or native - amhráin translates as songs] (ibid). Therefore, we can say that at the Oireachtas sean-nós means solo unaccompanied singing of traditional Irish-language song.

Irish and Sean-nós

As I have stated in Chapter I, many adjudicators, particularly during the period 1940-1960 sectioned off the sheets under their own headings. The following sheet from 1946 is typical of this period. In it the adjudicator has written three headings in the left [main] column that point to how they divided their marks. At the top the adjudicator has written “Caighdeán Cainte” [level or quality of speech], followed by “Guth agus Mothú agus Ceol” [voice and emotion and music], and lastly, Rogha Amhrán [choice of song]. This particular adjudicator did not sign the sheets;
nevertheless, one can make out the sheets that this particular adjudicator marked, from the handwriting and because they all follow the same template (OnaG 1946, comp 41).

Illustration 6.1 1946 SSNC, Competition 2 -Adjudicator Report Sheet

The fact that this adjudicator writes Caighdeán Cainte at the top of each of his/her report sheets suggests that they regarded Irish as being a central component of sean-nós singing. Also, at the bottom of the sheet this adjudicator has written: “Guth soiléir: Géar ach tarrainingteach? Dul na Gaeilge ar a cuid ceoil, agus sean-nós go maith aici.” [Clear voice: Sharp/harsh but attractive/compelling voice? Her music has the Irish-language feel/shape/flow to it (OnaG 1946, Comp. 2). Throughout the period of investigation (1940-2011) the centrality of the Irish language in sean-nós is referred to by adjudicators. In 1973 one adjudicator, Seamús de Brún, made reference
to the importance of correct and clear Irish in a number of reports: “Gaeilge sóiléir [clear Irish]; “Gaeilge sar-mhaith , soiléir in iomlán aige” [excellent Irish, completely clear] (de Brún 1985, Comp 43). De Brún was again adjudicating in 1988 and in 1990, and here again he makes reference to the importance of “urlabhraíocht, go maith soiléir” [very good articulation of speech] (de Brún 1988, comp 49), and in 1990 “Gaeilge snaite [sic] anseo” [Irish threaded through the performance?] here] (de Brún 1990, Comp 91).

One of the adjudicators at the 1995 competition—who did not sign the reports—wrote in reference to one performer that “Tá dúchas ceoil na Gaeilge agus [an] tsean-nóis go smior san bhfear seo. Molaim é.” [The tradition of the music of the Irish language and sean-nós runs through the marrow of this man. I admire/praise him] (OnaG 1995, comp. 71). Also included in the 1995 adjudicator reports are statements such as “Gaeilge bhreá san amhrán” [Fine/rich/lovely Irish in this song], “Gaeilge deas soiléir” [nice clear/accurate Irish], “Gaeilge binn blasta” [Sweet tasty —sung with the right accent— Irish] (OnaG 1995, comp. 71). In the 2009 reports, reference is made on numerous sheets to the importance of clarity of speech, for example: “Focail ri-shoiléir, agus an scéal is na mothúcháin a bhaineann leis an amhrán a dtabhairt amach” [words very clear, and the story and emotion of the song brought out well], “Tá a cuid focail soiléir, agus is féidir scéal an amhráin a fháil uaithe gan stró” [words clear, and she conveys the story of the song well] (Ni Shuilleabháin 2009, comp.36). The 2011 reports also refer to the importance of Irish in sean-nós singing, for example: “Gaeilge bhreá” [fine/lovely Irish], “Gaeilge mhaith” [good Irish] (Ó Laoire 2011, comp.40).

Lillis Ó Laoire, who was one of the adjudicators in 2011, includes in his reports what appear to be grammatical corrections. On a number of the report sheets he writes out lines or words from the song sung by that particular competitor. On occasion certain words or syllables are underlined, suggesting that they were mispronounced by the competitor. This underlining is often done where a diacritic mark exists in a word or where lenition and eclipses occur. Many other adjudicator reports include
grammatical corrections similar to those by Ó Laoire. For example, in 1963 one of the adjudicators—who did not sign their name—wrote out a number of lines of a song with certain syllables underlined (OnaG 1963, Comp. 53).

Also, quite a number of adjudicator reports make reference to the importance of proper pronunciation (foghraíocht) —foghraíocht translates as phonetics, but is often used in Irish to mean pronunciation. Sorcha Ní Ghualirim, who was one of the adjudicators at the 1945 competition, divided her marks based on the following categories: “binneas ceol, mothú, teilgean cainnte agus foghraíocht, an t-amhrán in a iomlán” [musicality, emotion, projection and pronunciation, the song in its entirety] —see below— (Ní Ghualirim 1945, Comp. 40).

Illustration 6.2 1945 SSNC, Competition 240 -Adjudicator Report Sheet
Also, in the above report, Ní Ghuairim questions where the singer in question learned one of the songs s/he performed: “An chéad amhrán? As leabhar nó de pláta” [The first song? From a book or plate] (Ní Ghuairim 1945, Comp. 40). The term plate here is more than likely being used by Ní Ghuairim to refer to a gramophone record, and I would suggest that, although it is not stated overtly, Ní Ghuairim is implying that ‘good sean-nós’ is that which has been learnt directly from other singers, and not from written or recorded sources. I return to the issues of aurality and literacy later on in this chapter when I discuss repertoire. However, the centrality of aurality to the sean-nós singing aesthetic points to the importance the Gaeltacht dialects play in this community’s idea as to what constitutes ‘good’ sean-nós singing.

**Gaeltacht Irish**

It is important to note that Irish is the first official language in the Irish constitution, and as such all Irish children are required to take Irish as a subject throughout their primary and secondary education. Also, for entry into all degree programmes run by the National University of Ireland, Irish, English and four other subjects in the Leaving Certificate are required, (students not born in the Republic of Ireland or educated for an extended period outside Ireland, and students with specific language related learning difficulties [dyslexia] are eligible for an exemption) (National University of Ireland 2015).

An official dialect of Irish, known as An Caighdeán Oifigiúil[^31] [the official standard] is taught in the Irish education system. However, in practice the Caighdeán is not really used as a spoken language, and most Irish speakers from outside the Gaeltacht tend to lean towards one Gaeltacht dialect or other. Yet, in my experience, many Irish speakers today speak in a sort of middle dialect that blends elements from regional dialects with that of the Caighdeán. Therefore, one might expect that at least

[^31]: The Caighdeán was first published in 1958 by the Irish Government under the title, *Gramadach na Gaeilge agus Litriú na Gaeilge – An Caighdeán Oifigiúil* (‘The Grammar of Irish and the Orthography of Irish – The Official Standard’), and at the time it was largely based on a mixture of Connacht and Munster dialects. The Caighdeán lays out the grammatical and orthography rules for those using the language for official purposes —in legislation, in official State publications, in the educational system, in the media etc. (House of the Oireachtas).
some of the competitors at the *Oireachtas*, particularly those educated outside of the *Gaeltacht*, would use this dialect in the competition. However, the adjudicator reports show that the *sean-nós* singer, irrespective of where s/he is from, is expected to follow the lexical and grammatical rules of one or other of the *Gaeltacht* dialects. In other words, irrespective of where you come from, you are expected to sing as if you are from one or other of the *Gaeltacht* districts. Arguably this indicates that *sean-nós* is framed within the *Oireachtas* as being of the *Gaeltacht*, and the performance of *sean-nós* at the festival can therefore be read as the performance of the *Gaeltacht*.

A number of adjudicator reports allude to the fact that the Irish necessary for ‘good’ *sean-nós* performance is that of the *Gaeltacht* (both in dialect and accent). In 1975 Seán Ó Tuama was adjudicating and he wrote in one report: “*Sean-nós i bhfad níos fearr anseo –gluaiseacht na seiseanna go deas ceolta. Dúchas na cainte ann seachas dúchas na leabhair. Caint go breá soiléir aici.*” [Much better *sean-nós* here —the movement in the verses was sung nicely. It has the quality of the spoken word as opposed to something learnt from a book. She pronounced the words very clearly] (Ó Tuama 1975, Comp. 58). In another report from 1967, another adjudicator remarked that: “*stíl ceart tradisiúnta, ní fhéadfach a nós theacht as áit a bith ach as an nGaeltacht*” [proper traditional style, his style couldn’t come from anywhere other than the *Gaeltacht*] (OnaG 1967, Comp. 53).

Many of the reports also contain the adjectival term ‘*Gaelach*’. *Gaelach* can be translated as Irish or Gaelic — where something is described as being Irish or Gaelic. However, I offer that within the adjudicator reports it is generally used to refer to the *Gaeltacht* — in the sense that something comes from or is found in the *Gaeltacht*. Seán Ó Tuama was adjudicating again in 1978, and throughout his reports for that year he made reference to the *Gaeltacht* and *Gaelach*, for example: “*nós breá Gaeltachta aige air*” [fine *Gaeltacht* style on (his singing)], “*nós breá Gaelach*” [fine Gaelic style], “*glór breá Gaelach*” [fine Gaelic voice]” (Ó Tuama 1978, Comp. 54).
The Oireachtas is primarily concerned with promoting the Irish-language as a spoken and written vernacular (Ó Maolaodha 2014 [personal interview]), therefore, one shouldn’t be that surprised to find that grammar and clarity of speech are central concerns of the Oireachtas sean-nós cohort. However, the adjudicator reports reveal that it is not enough to speak clearly and to follow the grammatical rules of the language; instead, a good sean-nós performance is one where the singer sings in one or other of the Gaeltacht dialects. This is likely due to the fact that sean-nós is widely seen as being an aural metaphor of ‘authentic’ Irishness, where authentic Irishness is imagined as being of the past.

As I have stated in Chapter II, within the Oireachtas, the Gaeltacht has long been imagined as a spatial metaphor for authentic Irishness. The performance of sean-nós on the Oireachtas stage creates, for the length of the performance, a romanticised version of the Gaeltacht, which is framed as being of the past (see Chapter III). This is a particularly Romantic nationalist framing. The Gaeltacht is essentially being imagined as a marginal survival from an ancient past, and the sean-nós singer is essentially being framed as a conduit between the present and that imagined past. This view is likely informed by the idea that the ‘folk’ embodies the ‘authentic’ national spirit and character (Volksgeist). The importance of Gaeltacht dialects of Irish for this musical culture also points to the influence of the Romantic nationalist theory that the native speaker is the ultimate authority on language.

**The Myth of the Native Speaker**

Within linguistics the native speaker has long been seen as the only true and reliable source of language data (Ferguson cited in Davies 2003, p. 2). “The native speaker is like the healthy person in medicine (the state of assumed perfection, they are regarded has having insider-knowledge of language, are the models we appeal to for ‘truth’ about a language, are stakeholders of a language, and know what a language is” (Davies 2003, p.ix). A detailed discussion on the ‘the myth of native speaker’ (see Davies 2003, pp. 1-24) is outside the remit of this thesis. However it is clear from
adjudicator remarks that sean-nós singers at the Oireachtas are expected to have the ‘proper’ blas [tongue/flavour/accent].

While I would acknowledge that it is generally preferred for all Irish speakers to speak with a Gaeltacht accent and dialect, I would argue that it is also perfectly acceptable to converse in Irish in an accent and dialect other than that of the Gaeltacht. However, the adjudicator reports suggest that for sean-nós singing to be considered good it must be performed in one or other of the Gaeltacht dialects. The significance of dialect and accent to good sean-nós performance points to the fact that sean-nós is considered by this community to be of the Gaeltacht. In order to perform the Gaeltacht on the Oireachtas stage it is imperative that the singer sounds convincingly like they too are of the Gaeltacht. In the following section I discuss how certain songs are considered not appropriate in ‘good sean-nós’ performance, perhaps because they are seen by the adjudicators as not native to the Gaeltacht.

6.4 Sean-nós Repertoire

There are a number of factors that determine whether a song is considered appropriate or not for inclusion in the various festival competitions. Songs that are perceived to be musically and poetically complex and ancient in origin are valued more than modern compositions; these songs are often referred to by the adjudicators as ‘amhráin mhóra’ [big songs], for example “Caisleán Uí Néill — Amhrán mór na Gaeilge” [Caisleán Uí Néill — one of the great songs in Irish]; “Dónall Óg — amhrán mór” [Dónall Óg — a big song] (de Brún 1990, Comp.91). The older the song, the more Gaelach [Gaelic] it is assumed to be.

Singers are expected to sing in a regional style and these regional styles have their own distinct repertoires, for example: “Amhrán le Tomás Rudh, file Uibh Rathaigh. Ana nós ar fad aici. Guth breá, focail soiléir. Amhrán óná háit dúchais, é ráite go maith, an sean-nós go hana-mhaith” [A song by Tomás Ruadh, the Iveragh poet. Her style is excellent. Lovely voice, words clear. A song from her own area, told well, the sean-nós very good] (Ó Ciobháin 1982, Comp.37). It is generally frowned upon for a singer to sing a song associated with any region other than his/her own, as the
following extract from the 1965 reports illustrates: “Jimmy Mo Mhile Stór — Ni maith an rogha, an bhfuair tú an tamhrán seo san nGaeltacht” [Jimmy Mo Mhile Stór — Not a good choice, did you get this song in the Gaeltacht?] (Ó Casaide 1965, Comp.55). The importance of choosing material from one’s own district is stated even more overtly in the following extract, from the 1967 festival: “Nós maith aici arís, ach ní thagann an tamhrán so ó dhúiche” [She has a nice style again with this song, but the song does not come from her district] (OnaG 1967, Comp.53).

Competitors are expected to choose material that allows them to demonstrate the full range of their voice. Generally, songs with a wide melodic range are valued more than songs with a narrower melodic range. Adjudicators also value songs that allow the singer to demonstrate the techniques and ornamentation associated with each district (see the section on sean-nós technique in this chapter). This is consistent with the theory I have developed in Chapter III, that ‘good sean-nós’ singing is seen in complexity. However, as one would expect there are divergent voices within this community, and individual adjudicators see complexity in different ways. For example, some adjudicators focus on the poetic structure of the lyrics, others on melodic range, and others still on melodic contour, etc.

Complexity in Song Choice
As I have stated above, some adjudicators — particularly during the early decades of the Oireachtas — seem to suggest that songs learnt from books or from recordings are less ‘authentic’ than songs learnt directly from fellow singers. For example: “An chéad amhrán? As leabhar nó de phláta” [The first song? From a book or plate] (Ní Ghuairim 1945, Comp. 40). Indeed, many of the reports are critical of singers who sing ‘amhráin scoile’ [school songs]. The following quotations relate to one particular performance from the 1973 SSNC.

The singer in question was criticised by all three adjudicators for singing a school song: “amhrán maith — eadromacht [sic] ann, ach é cosúil le amhrán scoile. Niorbh
The song in question is *Fáinne an Lae* [the Dawning of the Day], also known as *Fáinne Geal an Lae* (which literally translates as the bright ring of day). The melodic range of this song is an octave, and it is usually performed as a march in 2/4 time. The melody of *The Dawning of the Day* is often one of the first tunes Irish traditional musicians learn, as it is a relatively simple melody to play. The above quotes suggest that the adjudicators disapproved of the singing of *Fáinne an Lae*, because they felt that the melody was too simple, and that the rhythm was too pronounced to be considered a *sean-nós* song. However, as I discuss further on, other songs that are considered acceptable by adjudicators are melodically not that dissimilar to *Fáinne an Lae*. It is likely that there were a number of possible reasons this song was considered inappropriate by the adjudicators.

The fact that it represents ‘book’ Irish suggests that *Fáinne an Lae* was not viewed as being of the *Gaeltacht*, and that it was imposed on this community by official Ireland through the education system. It is also possible that it was seen as being less authentic because it was not perceived by the adjudicators as part of a *Gaeltacht* aural tradition. Evidence in the reports suggests that the most ‘authentic’ *sean-nós* singers are those who have learned to sing from their fellow singers — from the older generation of *Gaeltacht* singers in particular. There is also evidence in the reports indicating that songs that are considered ancient and rare are the most valued by the adjudicators. The fact that *Fáinne an Lae* was a school song indicates that it was not unique to the *Gaeltacht*. Since *sean-nós* is of the *Gaeltacht* this frames *Fáinne an Lae* as something else. However, it is interesting to note that, generally speaking, the
reports describe ‘school songs’ as being too simple to be considered sean-nós. Indeed, the term ‘school-song’ seems to be used in the reports as a synonym for too-simple. Whether this is the real reason behind the dismissal of so-called school-songs or not, it does indicate that complexity is equated with traditionality by the adjudicators.

The following extracts from the reports demonstrate the significance of the idea of complexity within the Oireachtas. The importance of choosing a song with a wide melodic range is mentioned throughout the reports: “lèirigh sé réim a ghutha in san amhrán seo” [he demonstrated the range of his voice with this song] (OnaG 1963, Comp. 48). From 1965: “deas, ach b’fearr amhrán níos deacair [?] a thógadh” [nice, but a more challenging[?] song should have been picked] (Ó Casaide 1965, Comp. 55). Competitors at the Oireachtas who sing songs that have a wide melodic range are praised by the adjudicators, for example: “Saibhreas na nótaí sa scála ceoil ón aoirde go bun an dréimire” [the wealth of notes in scale from the top to the bottom of the ladder]; “Réim an leathan san amhrán seo [...] amhrán deacair le casadh, ach níor dheacair lei é” [very wide melodic range in this song [...] a difficult song to sing, but she had no difficulty with it] (Uí Thuama 1981, Comp. 26). This quote reveals that while songs with a wide melodic range are preferred it is also important that the singer be able to perform said song comfortably.

The reports suggest that, while it is important to sing difficult songs, it is also important to choose songs that suit one’s voice and range, as the following illustrates: “Ni raibh an ceann seo chomh maith. Leagan strodh [sic] air” [this one [song] was not as good [as the first song]. Caused him some difficulty] (OnaG 1973, Comp.64). The importance of being able to comfortably sing a difficult song is mentioned again in the 1991 reports: “Curtha le cheile go maith, agus ní amhrán é Gaeftaí Bhaile Búi atá fursa [sic] a rá” [put together well, and this song, Gaeftaí Bhaile Búi, is not easy to sing] (Ó Canainn 1991, Comp. 91). Also, the 2004 reports state that: “Ceann deas neamh choitianta. Deacair go leor é a chanadh. Ruinne tú job deas de” [A nice
uncommon one. Difficult enough to perform. You made a nice job of it] (Ó Canainn 2004, Comp. 28).

Throughout the reports mention is also made to “the right sort of fast song”. These are described alternatively as songs that are humorous, upbeat, or with a strong pulse and rhythm. As I have mentioned above, since it was re-established in 1939, the Oireachtas has experimented with a number of competition formats. A staple of the competition has been the up-tempo song, and for many years singers are required to sing two songs, one slow and one up-tempo. Throughout the reports singers are criticised by adjudicators for singing fast songs too slowly. Commenting on the Oireachtas competitions, Nic Dhonncha suggests that: “There was a substantial shortage of songs with a quick tempo in singers’ repertoires and this is often reflected in adjudicators’ comments” (2012, p.163).

Nic Dhonncha adds that singers often sang songs which were traditionally sung with a slow tempo at a faster tempo in order to satisfy the competition requirements. She argues that: “As a result of this, the generations to follow misinterpreted or perhaps reinterpreted some songs as being fast; i.e. songs such as ‘Brid Thomáis Mhurchadha’, ‘Cailleach an Airgid’ or ‘Bean Pháidín’” (ibid). This reframing of certain slow songs can be regarded as an example of one of the ways the Oireachtas, through its singing competitions, has altered vernacular Irish language singing.

**Native and Ancient**

The reports refer to other types of song — other than school songs — that should not be performed at the festival’s competitions. For example in the reports from 1973 all three adjudicators that year criticised one particular singer for singing a song to the air of The Men of the West: “The Men of the West — an fonn, ní maith an rogha” [The Men of the West is the tune — not a good choice] (Ó Domhail 1973, Comp.64). “Malartú maith rithme, ach ní rogha maith “Fir an Iarrthair” – foon” [Nice rhythmical exchanges/variations [?], but Men of the West is not a good song choice — melody] (de Brún 1973, Comp.64). “É nios fearr san amhrán seo, ach ní amhrán
maith é do chomórtas — fonn — men of the west. D’fhéadfadh sé a bheith I bhfad nios fearr” [He [singer] was better with this song, but it is not a good song choice for competition — the melody — men of the west. He could have been a lot better] (Ni Dhonnchadha 1973, Comp.64).

The words to The Men of the West were composed by William Rooney and the sheet music of the song was published by Kearney Brothers of Dublin, sometime in the early twentieth century (Irish Traditional Music Archive 2015). The melody in the manuscript is given as Eóin Cóir [Honest John], and it was: “arranged as solo and quartet with pianoforte accompaniment by J.J Johnson” (ibid)—this suggests that the melody was originally traditional. The music is written in 6/8 time and is notated in the key of F major; the song has an eleven note range, the lowest note being the C below middle A, and the highest the F above middle A (ibid). Rooney was a poet, nationalist, journalist and founding member of the Gaelic Literary Society (McGuire and Quinn 2009, p.608). The melody is relatively simple, as are the lyrics, and this is arguably because the song was written as a vehicle for nationalist propaganda — the song chronicles the failed rebellion of the United Irishmen in 1798, particularly the role played by Napoleon’s forces, under General Humbert, in the fighting. The song consists of eight line verses written in iambic trimeter, and a four line chorus, also in iambic trimeter (ibid).

The above adjudicators do not specify why exactly they felt the melody from The Men of the West was inappropriate for the Oireachtas. It is possible that the strict meter that the song is usually sung in was disliked by the adjudicators, because they felt it was not traditional enough. It is also possible that the melody was considered too simplistic for the competition. I am not convinced however that either of these were the reasons behind the adjudicators disregard for The Men of the West melody. Although the adjudicator reports as a whole indicate that slow sean-nós songs should be sung with a free rhythm, many adjudicators also seem to suggest that the up tempo sean-nós songs can and should be sung with a strong rhythm and pulse (see Appendix B). Also, many up-tempo songs that appear to be unproblematic for the
adjudicators are structurally quite similar to the melody of The Men of the West. For example, the well-known Conamara song, Cailleach an Airgead [the Hag with the Money] — like The Men of the West — is usually sung in 6/8 time and has a melodic range of twelve notes, just one more than The Men of the West.

The adjudicator reports illustrate that adjudicators see sean-nós as primarily a Gaeltacht phenomenon. Consequently, because the Men of the West was written/arranged by someone from outside of the Gaeltacht, it is therefore by definition not sean-nós. The reports also reveal that singers at the festival are often criticised for singing commonly performed songs, and singers who perform rarely heard material are praised, as the following example from the 1973 festival illustrates: “Amhrán nar cloisíú anseo cheanna, fíor sean-nós nádúrach, gan stróbh [sic] ar bith air” [a song never heard here before, true natural sean-nós, effortless performance] (OnaG 1973, Comp. 64). Another example of the importance of singing rare material is alluded to in this report from the 1976 festival: “Amhrán breá nár chualathas cheanna” [fine song that I never heard before] (Nic Dhonnchadha 1976, Comp.58). Even rare versions of more well-known songs are praised by adjudicators, for example: “An Cailín Gaelach — leagann deas neamh-choitianta — ní ionann é agus gnáth leagann R[ann] na Feirste” [An Cailín Gaelach — nice uncommon version — unlike the standard version found in Ranafast [Co. Donegal]] (Ó Canainn 1991, Comp.92).

While it is reasonable to assume that adjudicators criticised the use of ‘commonly’ performed songs because of the obvious difficulties of having to listen to the same song being sung over again by various competitors, the reports suggest that the real reason behind this type of criticism was because the adjudicators had a dislike for music that was popular. The fact that a song is popular suggests it is not unique to the Gaeltacht. The Men of the West was made very popular during the 1960s by the Clancy Brothers. Although the Clancy Brothers mainly sang Irish traditional material, their use of guitars and harmony meant that they were widely regarded as belonging more in the folk music scene of 1960s Greenwich Village than the Irish
traditional music scene. The 1960s folk scene was very much the popular music of its time (Gilsenan 2009). Additionally, in many ways the Clancy Brothers represent a different, and perhaps competing, form of cultural nationalism (one that was more cosmopolitan), to the more essentialist nationalism of the Oireachtas, and this too might have contributed to The Men of the West being considered inappropriate by the adjudicator.

Evidence of the idea that ‘popular’ was anathema to sean-nós can be seen in the adjudicator reports, where numerous references are made to the importance of not singing modern or popular tunes. For example: “An dara amhrán, gan móran slachta —foclaí nua” [the second song, does not have much class/style —new words] (Ní Ghuaírim 1945, Comp. 40). However, while there does appear to be a strong anti-modern theme in the reports there is also evidence showing that certain relatively ‘modern’ songs can be performed, so long as they have been composed by members of the Gaeltacht community. For example, Máirtín Tom Sheáinín Mac Donnacha, from Leitir Caladh in Conamara, won first prize at the Oireachtas in 1983 and again in 1988 (see Appendix A). In 1988 one of the songs Mac Donnacha sang, Amhrán Foirnise, is a late twentieth-century composition, by Maidhcil Bheairtle Ó Donnchú (Clo Iar-Chonnachta 2008). Nan Ghriallais, from Muiceanach Idir Dá Sháile in Conamara, also won first prize at the festival in 1973, and again, one of the songs she performed that night was a twentieth-century composition, Amhrán Pheter Mhicil Báile, composed by Peter Mhicil Béile, from Conamara (ibid).

These relatively modern compositions are considered to be acceptable by adjudicators primarily because they are perceived to be ‘of the Gaeltacht’. These songs are deeply embedded in specific Gaeltacht districts, and many of them are not commonly sung. The existence of these relatively modern Gaeltacht compositions also implies that sean-nós is a living as opposed to a revived tradition, which adds to the perceived ‘authenticity’ of the genre. I offer that, while it is perfectly acceptable to sing certain modern songs, as long as they are composed by members of the Gaeltacht community, these songs are generally not referred to as Amhráin Mhóra.
[big songs], the nomenclature used to refer to the most prized songs in the *sean-nós* repertoire. Therefore, I propose that the songs that are most valued by the adjudicators are those considered to be ancient in origin. Terms such as *Gaelach* [Gaelic] *dúchasach* [native/traditional] and *sean-nósach* [old styled] are used by adjudicators to refer to this kind of material, suggesting that the more ancient the song the more ‘authentic’ it is considered to be. The following extracts from the reports give an indication of the value the adjudicators place on the past: “*Sean amhrán breá anseo*” [a fine old song here]; “*amhrán breá sean-nósach, ar an dul le Anach Cúain*” [a fine old style song, similar to Anach Cúin] (OnaG 1946, Comp. 42).

In the following quote, Sean Ó Tuma critiques the melody of one particular song because he felt it was not Gaelic: “*níl sé seo [an rogha amhrán] chomh hoiriunach leis an dá ceann eile — nil an ceol chomh Gaelaí leis an chéad dá cheann*” [this song was not as appropriate as the first two choices — the music is not as Gaelic as the first two] (Ó Tuama 1962, Comp. 48). Ó Tuama writes out a section of the melody he feels is not Gaelic — see below. The section of melody contains six notes. It begins with two crotchets notes on G below middle A, the melody then moves up in a series of quavers, from G to C natural, following the contour of the major scale.
It is difficult to see exactly from Ó Tuama’s diagram what exactly he feels is un-Gaelic about this movement. He could be suggesting that Gaelic melodies should not move in steps, and that a Gaelic melody should have more leaps. Or perhaps he is suggesting that the contour of Gaelic melodies should be more undulating. From the point of view of this thesis, what is important is that adjudicators see authenticity, and the lack of it, both in the lyrical and musical content of songs. In the following two sections I discuss how authenticity is also seen in technique and in timbre.

6.5 Sean-nós Technique
Throughout the reports some singers are criticised for their poor singing technique. Many of the reports are critical of singers who sing out of key: “Guth binn taitneamheach ar an sean-nós, ach beagán as fonn” [Nice enjoyable musical sean-
nós voice, but slightly out of tune] (Ó Cuirrín 1940, Comp. 29). Others stress the importance of pitching the song in a key suitable for the singer’s voice — something that is not always easy, considering sean-nós singers do not use a reference note: “Chuaigh amach beagánín ar chuid de na notaí. [...] Trua nár thosaigh tú níos isle le haghaidh an amhrán seo”, [You went out [of tune] on some of the notes. [...] It is a pity you did not pitch this song in a lower key] (Ó Casaide 1965, Comp.55).

Ornamentation is mentioned in a majority of the reports; however most of the adjudicators do not describe what they mean by ornamentation. Instead the reports contain terms such as, ornáidaiocht mhaith [good ornamentation] ornáidaiocht féilúnach [appropriate ornamentation], or ornáidaiocht dúchasach/ seanósach/tradisiúnta [native/traditional/sean-nós like ornamentation]. However, from listening to recordings of former Oireachtas winners, I would say that it is likely that when ornáidaiocht is used, it refers to ‘rolls’ — a melismatic device similar to the turn and mordent in western art music — and to grace notes — which are sometimes referred to in the reports as ‘nótai breise’ [extra notes], and possibly glottal stops (see Cló Iar Chonnachta 2008 for examples of past Oireachtas winners).

Other melodic devices such as slides — sliding up or down a note or group of notes, in microtones — are generally referred to specifically. For example: “Faigh [sic] gréim ar an nóta. Na crath ar an nóta. Ni ionann an guth a crathadh agus notai breise a chur isteach” [Grab hold of the note. Shaking on the note is not the same as putting in extra notes] (OnaG 1965, Comp.55). Shaking here could also refer to the use of vibrato which is discussed further on in this chapter. The following quote from the 2011 reports suggests that the slide should only occur occasionally in sean-nós: “Sleamhnú ar na notaí, go deas uaireanta, má dhéanann tú an iomarca de baineann sé den theacht i láthair”, [sliding on some notes, nice sometimes, but if you do it too much it takes from the performance] (Ó Laoire 2011 Comp.40).

As I have discussed in Chapters III and V, it has been suggested by Ó Laoire that a “cult of melisma” existed within the Oireachtas for much of its history (2000, p.166).
Ó Laoire argues that within the festival ‘authenticity’ is seen in melismatic ornamentation, and that this contributed to the success of Conamara singers at the Oireachtas —because the Conamara style tends to feature more melismatic ornamentation than any of the other regional styles. The reports as a whole do suggest that ornamentation (possibly melismatic ornamentation) is important for adjudicators. However, there is also some evidence in the reports that suggests that there is a limit within the Oireachtas when it comes to ornamentation.

The following quote from 1973, describing a singer from Conamara who was, at the time of this particular competition already a CUR champion, shows that using too much ornamentation was frowned upon by adjudicators:

\[\text{Ceuireann \[s\]e\] an iomarca saothair ar \[f\]\[e\]\[i\]n I gcom\[ort]\[as\] den tseort seo — Casaioch\[a\] go leor aige. Tarnaionn \[s\]e\] an t\[a\]mhr\[a\]n amach ro-fh\[a\]\[d\]a. An soil\[e\]ir agus sc\[e\]\[a\]l an amhr\[a\]n go hioml\[a\]n — ceal binneas.}\]

[[He] puts too much pressure on himself for this type of competition — he puts in a lot of turns — he draws out the song too much. Very clear and the story fully there — lacking in sweetness/musicality]

(Ó Domhnaill 1973, Comp.64).

The other two adjudicators that year were equally critical of this Conamara singer. The second adjudicator wrote:

\[\text{Amhr\[a\]n bre\[a\]. Amhr\[a\]n bronach, ach nil \[s\]e cuir an bhr\[o\]\[i\]n sin ann. Focla soil\[e\]ir. An iomarca strobh air. Bheadh \[s\]e nios fearr gan an strobh sin air \[f\]h\[e\]\[i\]n.}\]

[Fine song. A sad song, but he is not conveying the sadness as he should. Words clear. Too much strain on him. He would be a lot better if he did not put that strain on himself.]

(Nic Dhonnachadha 1973, Comp.64).
The third adjudicator for the 1973 competition wrote:

Guth breá briomhar, réimeach. Iomarca saothair san amhránaíocht —fadálach ar chuid de na foclaí— leagann ró-fhorsach— Ni hé is glorai is mó mothú.

[Fine lively voice with plenty of range. Too much effort in the singing —too long on some of the words — performance was overly forceful— loudness does not equate to emotion.]

(de Brún 1973, Comp.64)

There are a number of ways of interpreting the above quotes. It is likely that strobh [pressure] and saothair [effort/work] are being used in relation to issues of pitch, register, or projection. However, fadálach ar chuid de na foclaí [too long on some of the words] suggests that the singer in question was dragging out the words of the song because he was employing, in the opinion of the adjudicators, too much melismatic ornamentation. As I discuss further on, the reports as a whole suggest that the sean-nós singer is expected to perform in an un-contrived way, and many of the reports suggest that excessive ornamentation is seen as one example of how a performance can come across as being overly contrived. Of course individual adjudicators will differ somewhat in their opinion on how much ornamentation they feel is appropriate. In the following section I introduce a number of vocal techniques considered unsuitable in sean-nós singing by the adjudicators.

**Unsuitable Vocal Technique: Vibrato and Dynamics**

As I have discussed in Chapter III, western art singing, because of its association with the early period of the Oireachtas —when the traditional singer was to a large extent marginalised within the festival— and also because of its association with the former coloniser, is seen within the Oireachtas sean-nós singing cohort as being the binary opposite to sean-nós. This view is particularly evident when it comes to certain vocal techniques which are deemed inappropriate in ‘good’ sean-nós singing.

The use of dynamics is very much a feature of western art music and this is possibly the main reason it is viewed as unsuitable in sean-nós, as the following quote illustrates:
Other vocal techniques such as the use of *diminuendo* are also frowned upon, again likely because they are associated with western art song, for example: “*Teicnic mhaith aici, análu an-mhaith. Ach déanann ‘fade-out’ ag deireadh na linte.*” [She has very good technique, excellent breath control. But she fades out at the end of each line] (Ó Madagáin 2004, Comp.28).

Much of the earlier literature pertaining to *sean-nós* singing proposes that vibrato and dynamics are musical devices considered to be unsuitable in *sean-nós* singing (see Chapter I). However, more recently a number of non-essentialist academics point out that in practice numerous *sean-nós* singers “[…] incorporate varieties of vibrato and dynamic change into their singing” (Williams and Ó Laoire 2011, p.33). Williams and Ó Laoire suggest that the vibrato that some *sean-nós* commentators and singers refer to with derision is more than likely the “[…] Italianate opera-influenced vibrato associated with nineteenth-century parlour music, the *bel canto* tradition, and Irish tenors” (ibid, p.34); they add that the oscillation of this type of vibrato can be quite wide, and that intervals of a major third or even a perfect fourth are not uncommon in this style (ibid). The type of vibrato used by *sean-nós* singers, on the other hand, is typically much narrower, around a quarter tone at most (ibid). Therefore, one could argue that there is a specific form of *sean-nós* vibrato, one which has a very narrow range of oscillation.

No mention is made of a ‘*sean-nós* vibrato’ in the adjudicator reports however. Instead when the Italian term ‘vibrato’, and occasionally *creathán* [shaking/tremolo], are used it is likely that the adjudicator in question is referring to the pronounced
vibrato one would associate with the operatic tradition. Throughout the reports a number of adjudicators criticise singers for using this form of musical device. Before the 1970s the Italian term ‘vibrato’ does not appear in the reports. Instead, adjudicators used terms like crith [shake], for example: “Guth Glan, ach go bhfuil crith beag ann, go mór mór ar na nótaí iséal. Focla go glan, scéal go maith agat. Ró-ard agat, rithm deas agus gluaiseacht” [Clean voice, but a little shake, especially on the low notes. Pitched to high, nice rhythm and movement/flow] (Ni hÉigeartaigh 1958, Comp.45).

The Irish word crith can mean to quake/shiver, and it is likely that the crith beag [small] being referred to is some form of vibrato. Another adjudicator, this time at the 1962 festival wrote: “An tsronacht aris. Laige ag teacht ag deire[sic] gach abairt — gluaiseacht deas dúchasach — béarnai ró-mhór idir séiseanna — creathán sa nglór anseo is ansúid”; [Nasalization here again. The end of every sentence is weak — nice traditional movement— gaps between verses too great— tremolo in the voice occasionally (OnaG 1962, Comp.42). The use of the term creathán [tremolo] suggests that this adjudicator was referring to the use of pronounced vibrato. Creathán [tremolo] was used again by an adjudicator at the 1963 festival:

Stíl maith dúchasach , ach creathán ann —iarrachtín de chaolú ins na notai árda. Gan an órnádaiocht sean-nósach aici. Ta sí tugadh den rud ar a glaotar scuabadóireacht ?] scooping— tá soghas nós aici a rugadh [?

[Good traditional style, but with tremolo in it — thinning out on the high notes. She does not have the sean-nós ornamentation. She is fond of using what is referred to as ‘scooping’ — she has a style that was born …]

(OnaG 1963, Comp.53)

The term vibrato first appears in the adjudicator reports in mid 1970s:

Glór breá ach b’fhéidir an iomarca ‘vibrato’. Thug sé faoi ornádaiocht nach raibh ar a thoil aige. De réir mar a bhi sè ag dul ar aghaidh ní raibh le cloisteáil ach cnámha an amhráin;
[Beautiful voice, but perhaps with too much ‘vibrato’. He tried to incorporate ornamentation that he was not able to sing comfortably. As he went on all that could be heard was the bare bones of the song.]

(Mac Suibhne 1976, Comp.58)

The above quote might very well be suggesting that a certain amount of vibrato is acceptable in sean-nós singing. This is also possibly being alluded to in the following extract from the 1983 reports: “Guth binn milis. B’fhéidir an iomarca vibrato, ach deas ceolmhar, agus abalta an guth a láimhsáil go maith” [Sweet musical/soft voice. Perhaps too much vibrato, but very musical, and well able to manage the voice] (OnaG 1983, Comp.39). However, other adjudicators were a lot more forceful in their views on vibrato, for example: “Vibrato – ní bhaineann sé leis an sean-nós measaim”; [Vibrato – does not in my opinion belong in sean-nós] (OnaG 1995, Comp. 71).

On the whole however, most of the adjudicators who make reference to the use of vibrato in sean-nós singing tend to add terms such as, ‘too much’ or ‘strong vibrato’ for example: “Fonnadóireacht mhaith ó chroí, ach ní den sean-nós an critheán láidir (vibrato) atá tríd sios aige; analú lochtach, briste; corr-nóta as tiún (maol). An glór féin ag briseadh uaireanta”; [Good singing from the heart, but the strong vibrato throughout does not belong in sean-nós; breathing flawed, broken; some out of tune notes (flat). The voice itself breaking at times] (Ó Madagáin 2003, Comp.27). The same adjudicator in 2004 wrote: “Critichead (vibrato) láidir ina glór. Bun ós cionn ar fad le teicnic sean-nós. Análú briste, leadránach, go minic ag dul as tiún go mór”; [Strong vibrato in the voice. Upside-down [out of sorts completely] with sean-nós technique. Breath broken, boring, often singing is well out of tune] (Ó Madagáin 2004, Comp.28). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that for the most part adjudicators are objecting to the use of the pronounced vibrato one might associate with operatic singing for example; this suggests that a subtle vibrato is considered quite acceptable in sean-nós by most adjudicators.
Considering that a number of commentators have suggested that vibrato is anathema to authentic sean-nós singing, one would presumably find extensive reference being made to its use or lack of use in the reports. However, my analysis of the reports shows that most adjudicators make no reference to vibrato or related terms, such as tremolo or shaking, whatsoever. In fact the extracts from the reports that I have included above constitute, for the most part, all the references made to vibrato or related terms contained in the reports. As noted above the earliest reference to vibrato in the reports comes from 1958, and the term is used with more frequency by adjudicators from the 1960s onwards (see Appendix B). This might very well be due to the influence of Sean Ó Riada’s seminal radio series, Our Musical Heritage, which was aired in 1962, later published in part in 1982 (Williams and Ó Laoire 2011, p.30).

In Our Musical Heritage Ó Riada argues that vocal techniques such as dynamics and vibrato are not traditional sean-nós techniques, and as such they should not be used in sean-nós singing. Although these ideas did not originate with Ó Riada (see Williams and Ó Laoire 2011, P.34) his radio broadcasts disseminated them widely (ibid), and it seems reasonable to assume that the increased reference to vibrato in the reports, from the 1960s onwards, was at least partly due to the influence of Ó Riada’s radio broadcasts.

Although some adjudicators continue to criticise the use of vibrato in sean-nós singing, not all of them do. This might suggest that vibrato in sean-nós singing is not unanimously considered to be that important an issue. However, many of the reports contain statements such as ‘singing voice/style or ornamentation was not sean-nósach/traditional’ etc., and such statements might very well be referring to the use of vibrato as well as to other vocal devices. However, my reading of the reports, and my experience listening to Oireachtas sean-nós singers —most of whom sing with varying degrees of vibrato— suggests that vibrato is only commented upon by adjudicators when it is quite pronounced, and even then not always (see Cló Iar Chonnachta 2008). This suggests that a subtle vibrato is quite acceptable within the
Oireachtas. In the next two sections I discuss two of the issues that are commented most upon in the reports: breaking the poetic or musical line, and timbre.

6.6 Sean-nós as a Vehicle for Narrative

As I have stated above, the reports suggest that it is a universally held view within the Oireachtas that sean-nós singers need to sing in one or other of the regional dialects of Irish. It is also almost universally believed that sean-nós is a vehicle for narrative. Numerous adjudicator reports refer to the importance of articulating the words clearly, and audibly. Others make mention of the fact that the story was conveyed well. Others use terms like ‘brí’ [understanding] and mothú [emotion] and the importance of using the appropriate emotion in order to convey the story of the song, for example: “Gluaiseacht deas agat. Ní na focal go ró-sholéir agat, agus mar sin nior chuala muid an scéal. Na bris na bhfocla”, [Nice movement. Words not all that clear, and therefore we were not able to hear the story. Do not break the words] (Ni hÉigeartaigh 1958, Comp.45).

The phrase ‘ná bris an line/na habairtí’ [do not break the line/sentences] is one that pops up again and again in the reports. For example in 1976 one adjudicator wrote: “An sean-nós go fíor aige. Briseann na n-abairtí go minic. Easba brí aige sna bhéarsaí. Amhrán breá tofa aige”, [He has the real sean-nós. Breaks the line a lot. Lack of expression in the verses. A very good song choice] (Nic Dhonnchadha 1976, Comp.58). Another adjudicator, this time at the 1986 festival wrote: “Na línte briste beagán nios mó aici ná bhí sa chéad amhrán” [She broke the line here more so than in the first song] (Ó Neachtain 1986, Comp.44). Many of the reports also mention breath and breathing issues and this also seems to refer to breaking the musical and poetic line: “analú lochtach, briste” [breathing flawed, broken] (Ó Madagáin 2004, Comp.28). Throughout the reports singers are criticised for stopping mid-sentence in order to take a breath.

Phrasing and Narrative

Singers who are able to sing long ‘unbroken’ phrases are praised in the reports; for example: “An-mhaith. A chroí go mór ann ma ba chún féin é. Sár-análú agus
ornáidiocht an-mhaith. Locht beag amhain iarracht beag de dhinimic anseo is ansúid”, [Very good. His heart very much in the performance even if he was very quiet. Excellent breath and ornamentation. One small flaw tends to use dynamics here and there] (Ó Madagáin 2004, Comp. 28). Many of the reports speak of little else apart from the issues of breaking the line, for example:


[You have a nice traditional voice, but why the un-natural breaks? ‘A Róisín’ – break. This really takes from the performance. Poetry is the foundation of the song. Do not lose the poetic meaning by breaking after every few words.]

(Ní Laoi 1986, Comp.44)

The sentiment expressed in the above quote is shared by many other adjudicators, that is that the poetics or story of the song is of central importance. The reports indicate that the adjudicators imagine that breaking the line or the phrase is one of the worst mistakes the sean-nós singer can make, because the meaning of the sentence is also broken. In other words, the line has no meaning if a singer breaks it for a breath. Interestingly, Williams and Ó Laoire note that outside of formal competitions: “[…] many singers simply break phrases as they run out of breath, though some attention is paid to continuity of phrasing” (2011, p.33). Arguably, this is further evidence that the Oireachtas singing competition is its own unique musical culture with its own ideas of what is musically and aesthetically appropriate, as I have been arguing throughout this thesis.

The fact that nearly every report sheet makes some reference to the importance of not breaking the line/phrase illustrates that conveying the poetic narrative is central to good sean-nós singing. However, the importance of the line, and not breaking it, also points to the importance of the musical dimension of sean-nós. Although it is often
used in the reports to refer to the narrative component of *sean-nós* song, phrasing is equally a musical device. This is quite significant because it is widely held that: “[…] the words precede music in importance” in this singing tradition (Ó Cearbhaill cited in Williams and Ó Laoire 2011, p.33). Although it does relate to issues of narrative, breath and breath control are also fundamental to issues of timbre, melodic range and vocal register (these are discussed further on in this thesis). As I have stated throughout this thesis, within the *Oireachtas* ‘good’ *sean-nós* is seen in complexity, and controlling the breath is another way a singer can illustrate the complexity and sophistication of their singing.

**Emotion and Meaning**

Many of the reports are critical of singers who perform with a lack of emotion, because emotion is seen as a way of conveying *brí* [the meaning] of the song. Yet many other adjudicators are equally critical of the use of histrionics by certain singers, often referred to in the reports as ‘*mothú bréige*’ [false/untrue emotion]. For example:

*Tá eolas mhaith aige ar an tsean-nós ach tá nós na ‘croonála’ aige. Ba choir dhó srain a choinnéail ar a ghlór. Tá ornáidíocht dheas aige, ach iarraithe den mhothú bréige ag baint leis go háirithe sa chéad amhrán.*

[He has very good knowledge of *sean-nós*, but he has a crooning style. He should control his voice. He uses nice ornamentation, but his emotion is somewhat contrived.]

(Mac Suibhne 1976, Comp.58)

It is argued in the literature that the *sean-nós* singer should live the song s/he is singing, in the sense of completely identifying with the protagonist of the song (Coleman 1997, p.33). During the 1940s and 1950s in particular singers were criticised for lack of emotion in their singing. Joe Heaney, one of the legends of *sean-nós* singing, was criticised at the 1940 *Oireachtas* for singing with a lack of emotion: “*Ciall d’abairtí ceoil sean-nós le feiceáil go soiléir. Guth an ceann ar iarraidh agus baineann sé seo as binneas an píosa. Focail soiléir, ní raibh mothú ar*
bith le féicéal’ [The understanding of the sean-nós musical sentences clearly evident here. Head voice is missing and this takes from the musicality of the piece. Words clear, but no emotion whatsoever was conveyed] (Ó Caoíndealbain 1940, Comp. 29).

Although a majority of adjudicators make reference to the importance of conveying emotion correctly, they do not describe how this is done. Heaney himself is on record stating that in order to sing sean-nós one had to live the song (ibid). He argued that ornamentation was the primary vehicle for expressing the emotion and meaning contained in the song’s narrative. However, it is possible that when he first competed at the festival in the 1940s, his style of performance was too understated emotionally for the adjudicators. Perhaps singers like Heaney from the Gaeltacht, who were used to singing in more intimate surroundings, were somewhat intimidated by having to perform on the Oireachtas stage in front of an audience of strangers and adjudicators. Or perhaps, prior to competing at the Oireachtas, singers from the Gaeltacht like Heaney, communicated emotion through the use of various gestures, in a more subtle manner that was lost when it was transferred onto a larger stage. If this is the case then perhaps these singers had to add an ‘emotional’ element to their singing in order to please the adjudicators.

However, the reports suggest that the sean-nós singer at the Oireachtas was expected not to sound like s/he was ‘crooning’ or using false emotion. It is possible that false emotion or ‘acting’ was identified by some adjudicators as being part of the operatic tradition, and that because of this association, the sean-nós singer at the festival was required not to convey emotion in any way that pointed to the operatic tradition. This suggests that the sean-nós singer at the Oireachtas has to convincingly convey emotion and meaning without appearing like they are acting; rather they should be ‘living the song’ —one of the ways Joe Heaney frequently described sean-nós singing (see Chapter I).

Perhaps there are particular ways and techniques of conveying emotion in sean-nós, and others that are considered not authentic or appropriate to this tradition. If they
exist they are not described in the reports. There is also a strong possibility that there are conflicting aesthetics for the expression of emotion at play here also. As I have stated above it is widely held that narrative takes precedence over music within this tradition. While emotion and meaning are deeply connected with the lyrical narrative of sean-nós song, this does not necessarily mean that the melodic narrative is viewed as being of less emotional significance. In the next section I explore how musicality and timbre are discussed in the reports.

6.7 Sean-nós Timbre and Register

It is clear from the adjudicator reports that tonal quality and the voice production process generally are important to this musical culture. But it is not always clear what quality of voice is considered the most suitable for singing sean-nós. My study of the reports suggests that voice — in the sense of timbre and vocal register — is one of the most subjective issues in the reports. Throughout the reports adjudicators use terms such as binn and binneas to describe the desirable voice for sean-nós singing. For example: “Béal ró-dhúnta, guth binn, ach an béal ré-dhúnta” [mouth too closed, musical voice but the mouth was too closed] (Ó Cuirrín 1940, Comp. 29). Also in 1982 one adjudicator wrote: “Guth an bhinn, ach gan an stil tradisiúnta ar fad” [Very sweet voice, but style not that traditional] (OnaG 1982, Comp.37).

*Binn* can be translated as sweet or musical, and it is likely that binn and binneas [sweetness] are used in the reports to describe voices considered to be aesthetically pleasing. *Ceolmhairacht* is the Irish for musicality, and it is rarely used in the reports; instead the term ceolmhar [musical or musically] and glór ceolmhar [musical voice] are used frequently by adjudicators. For example: “Guth glan gléineach binn ceolmhar, beaigin strain ar an gcéad nota ard, ach thairis sin, chan go hálainn” [Clean bright musical voice, a little strained on the first high note, but apart from that she sang beautifully] (OnaG 2008, Comp.32). Throughout the reports adjudicators use terms such as binn and binneas to describe the desirable voice for sean-nós singing. For example: “Guth breá láidir, stil maith sean-nósach, easba binneas”
[Fine strong voice, very good and old styled, lacking in sweetness/musicality] (1997 Ní Fhlaitherta, Comp.75).

Because it can mean sweet, it is tempting to assume that *binn* is used by adjudicators to refer to a soft, open, perhaps breathy singing voice. Also, the term *garbh* [rough or harsh] is used throughout the reports to refer to aesthetically unpleasing voices. For example: “*Focal go maith agat ach bionn do ghlór garbh agat*” [You have the words good, but your voice is rough/harsh] (Ní hÉigeartaigh 1958, Comp.45). However, closer inspection of the reports, combined with listening to recordings of some of the singers described both as having *binn* and *garbh* voices respectively, reveals that the term *binn* does not refer to a specific type of vocal timbre or register (see Clo Iar Chonnachta 2008). Instead, I would argue that *binn* is used by adjudicators to describe voices that are aesthetically pleasing and that what this is differs from adjudicator to adjudicator.

**Nasalisation**

The reports suggest that there is no archetypical voice for singing *sean-nós*, yet there are certain voice production practices which are considered more desirable than others. Throughout the reports adjudicators criticise the use of nasalisation by competitors. For example:

*Gan smacht ar bith guth aige an iomathóir. Ní thugtar cad is ciall le guth an tannaí. Ní cheart feidhm do bhaint as an tsrón I gceol tire ar bith. Garbhachas ag baint leis ar fad. Gan aoírde na íseal san amhrán seo. Focail go cruinn ach beagánin múchta tri [?] asba anáilú [?]*

[This competitor is completely lacking in skill/control. It is impossible to understand [the words] when the voice is so thin. The nose [nasalisation] is not part of any traditional music. Rough in every way. The music of the song does not go up or down. Words clearly articulated but somewhat smothered by poor breath control [?]]

(Ó Caoidealbain 1940, Comp. 29)
Another example, this time from the 1962 festival: “An tsronacht arís. Laige ag teacht ag deire[sic] gach abairt” [Nasalization here again. The end of every sentence is weak] (OnaG 1962, Comp.42), and again, this time from the 1982 Oireachtas: “Amhráin maith é leis, srónáil agus é ag canadh” [A good singer as well, but nasalisation while singing] (Ó Ciobhain 1982, Comp.37).

The fact that so many adjudicators appear to be critical of the use of nasalisation is quite extraordinary. For one thing many of the most successful Oireachtas sean-nós singers of the past have sung with varying degrees of nasalisation; singers such as Seán de hÓra and Joe Heaney for example. Also, as I have discussed in Chapter III, numerous traditional music scholars suggest that nasalisation is a characteristic of sean-nós singing. Seán Ó Riada went as far as to state that nasalisation was “probably the most subtle of the sean-nós singer’s range of effects […] , [used by the sean-nós singer] to draw special attention to a note or group of notes” (1983, p.38). Joe Heaney used the onomatopoeic term neá to describe the nasal tone employed by sean-nós singers, which he felt was at the heart of sean-nós singing (2004, p.134). In an interview with James Cowdery Heaney stated that:

The drone, you know, is similar to the human voice, because—‘nature’s accompaniment’ they call it, you know. This is the way they handed it down, you see, this is the way they used to do it—through the nose mostly, you know, and humming—the slaves working in the fields and all that […].

(Cowdery 1990, pp. 36-37)

I would argue that there is a danger, when one reads of nasalisation in the reports, of assuming that the ideal vocal register for this community is the binary opposite of a nasal head voice, an open chest voice. However, by listening to sean-nós singers, particularly those who have been successful at the Oireachtas, and comparing their voices with the comments contained in the reports, it becomes clear that like vibrato, nasalisation often features in their singing. For example Óamonn Ó Donnchadha —
originally from Dublin but now living in the Meath Gaeltacht — won the CUR three times in 1997, 2003 and in 2005 (see Appendix A). Ó Donnchadhá, a baritone, sings with quite a pronounced amount of nasalisation, particularly on higher notes, and his singing might best be described as a blending of chest and head voice (Cló Iar Chonnachta 2008). Gearóidín Breathnach, from Rann na Feirste in the Donegal Gaeltacht, who has the won the CUR twice, in 1996 and again in 2004 (see Appendix A), on the other hand, sings with a more breathy voice, yet she too makes use of some nasalization on high notes, albeit somewhat less so than Ó Donnchadhá (ibid).

While it is quite possible that some Oireachtas adjudicators dislike/d the use of nasalisation altogether, the widespread use of nasalisation by sean-nós singers suggests that, like the issue of vibrato, the majority of adjudicators are quite happy to listen to sean-nós being performed with an element of nasalisation, as long at is it not too pronounced. The fact that some of the most celebrated sean-nós singers make use of nasalisation also suggests that a degree of nasalisation, and therefore a head voice, is perhaps desirable in sean-nós singing. As I have mentioned, the term garbh, meaning rough or harsh, is frequently used in the reports. As I have discussed above, garbh is used in the reports to refer to the tonal quality of voice — specifically to timbre/s considered aesthetically inappropriate. In the following section however, I discuss how garbh [rough/harsh] is used, along with the term brú [pressure/force] in relation to issues of inflection, tuning, and pitch selection.

**Brú**
Many of the reports criticise singers for singing with too much force or with too harsh a voice, for example: “[…] guth álainn milte ag brú ón scrónach” [beautiful voice ruined by being forced from the throat] (OnaG 1946, Comp.41). The above adjudicator informs us that while the singer here had a beautiful voice; they are forcing it, or putting too much pressure on the voice, because they are singing too much from the throat. One might assume therefore that this means that the reports are suggesting that a ‘stressed’ or perhaps projected voice production process is
aesthetically unpleasing in *sean-nós* singing. However, like nasalisation and vibrato, many *sean-nós* singers sing at the top of their range, blending head and chest voices; many also sing with a somewhat restricted or closed embouchure. Some *sean-nós* singers even tilt their head, either to the side or up or down, and this also narrows the pharynx.

Singing with a restricted embouchure and constricted pharynx and with nasalisation gives the voice a certain strained tension. This tension relates to the tonal quality of the voice and not to pitch per se. It is analogous to pinching the end of a garden hose that is connected to a tap, which is opened fully. The volume of water coming through the hose is the same whether the hose is being pinched or not, but pinching the end of the hose increases the pressure of the water coming out, so that it comes out with a lot more force. In a similar way, the act of closing down the pharynx and mouth affects the tone of the voice while the pitch remains unchanged. While it is clear that there exists within the reports varying and at times conflicting views on the issue of timbre and register in *sean-nós* singing, there is also evidence that suggests that *brú* is used by adjudicators to refer to issues of tuning and bad pitch selection as well as to tone or voice register, as the following extract illustrates:

> *Focla go maith —*dinis tú an scéal go breá dúinn. Ná *brú* ar do ghuth nuair a theigheann tú i n-aoirdeas. 2. *Gluaiseacht* deas, ach do thosaigh tú ro-ard. *Aris* ná *brú* do ghuth, tagann nóta garbh isteach ann.*

[Words good —you told the story beautifully to us. Do not force your voice on the high notes. Nice movement, but started on too high a pitch. Again do not force your voice on the high notes, it makes the notes harsh.]

(Ní hÉigeartaigh 1958, Comp.57)

There are a number of ways of interpreting the above text. It is possible that the singer in question was following the melodic shape of the song dynamically. It is also possible that Ní hÉigeartaigh felt the voice was being projected too much, on the high notes particularly. However, it is more likely that Ní hÉigeartaigh is referring to a performance where the singer pitched the song too high for his/her voice, and to the effect this had on certain notes that were beyond, or at the upper limit, of that singer’s
range. The following extract, this time from the 1996 festival, also suggests that — as well as being a way of defining voices with aesthetically unsuitable timbre(s) for sean-nós singing — garbh [harshness] can also refer to pitch issues:

Rogha maith. An glór beagán garbh. Cheap mé nach raibh sí ar a compóird, agus go raibh cinéal deachracht aici ar na notaí árd.

[Excellent choice. The voice a little harsh. I felt she was not comfortable/relaxed, and that she had some difficulty with the high notes.]

(Mac Donncha 1996, Comp.75)

As I have stated above in the section pertaining to repertoire, songs with a wide melodic range are valued at the Oireachtas more than songs with a more limited melodic range. However, sean-nós singers at the festival are not allowed to make use of a reference pitch on stage from devices such as tuners or pitch pipes etc.; this means there is always the risk of beginning a song either too high or too low. During the course of my Oireachtas fieldwork, I witnessed first-hand a number of singers who had difficulty with their song choice because they pitched it in a key unsuitable for their voice. In some cases singers would stop and begin again in a more suitable key, on other occasions the singer in question would soldier on, and this often meant that certain notes would cause the singer some difficulty.

For example, at the 2012 festival in Donegal, I witnessed one male singer at the CUR, whose voice broke every time on the lowest note of the song. The singer was more than comfortable on the rest of the song however. On other occasions I witnessed singers speaking lower notes, I also came across singers ‘shouting’ high notes that were out of their melodic comfort zone. This ‘shouting’ dramatically affected the tonal quality and tuning of certain notes. A number of the reports make reference to ‘shouting’, for example: “Amhráini maith, guth breá aige, sean-nós iontach, An tamhrán go rá go breá. Cheapas go raibh sé go maith ach an screacha ró mhór” [Good singer, very fine voice, excellent sean-nós. Song said beautifully. I thought he was very good, but screeching too much] (Ó Ciobháin 1982, Comp.37). In
the above extract, Ó Ciobháin is rather complementary with regards to the singer’s ‘voice’, therefore is it likely that he is using the term *screacha* [screeching] to describe issues related to the singer pitching the song in a key unsuitable for his voice, more than to the singer’s tone and voice production process. Admittedly, one cannot really separate vocal range from timbre, because the key a person sings in influences the voice production process. Therefore, it is possible that the meaning of terms like *brú* vary from one adjudicator to another. It appears to refer both to the overall timbre and voice production process, and to tuning issues, related to pitch selection.

It is possible that a stressed voice production process is perfectly acceptable, and even desirable, at the *Oireachtas*, suggesting perhaps that a ‘stressed’ voice production is a characteristic of *sean-nós* singing. From my own experience listening to *sean-nós* singers many of them, particularly female *sean-nós* singers from Conamara, sing at the top of their range and with a ‘stressed’ voice; for example Nóra ‘Ghriallais’ Bean Mhic Dhonncha who won the CUR in: 1987, 1989, and 1993. Mhic Dhonnacha is the only woman to have won the CUR the maximum three times. This would suggest that her style of singing is considered musically and aesthetically appropriate, perhaps even characteristic of *sean-nós* singing (or at least a characteristic of the Conamara style). However, when I was discussing register and timbre with Informant A, he said that he found the ‘stressed’ voice, characteristic of many Conamara singers, to be unmusical and harsh. This suggests perhaps that opinions vary significantly as to what constitutes musicality — the sense of beautiful sounds — in this musical culture. It is also likely that, like vibrato and nasalisation, that pronounced ‘stress’ is not considered to be aesthetically pleasing here. Again, it is likely that opinions vary considerably as to what constitutes pronounce *brú*.

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32 According to Liam Ó Maolaodha, the Oireachtas brought in the three time max rule, specifically because of the success of Nioclás Tóibín at the Oireachtas. Tóibín won the first prize at the senior *sean-nós* competition three years consecutively, in 1961, 1962, 1963. Ó Maolaodha stated that the Oireachtas committee feared that Tóibín would continue to dominate the competition for many years to come and that this might discourage other singers from competing (2014 [personal interview])
The Natural Singer

The term nádúrtha or nádúrach [natural] is used throughout the reports (see Appendix B). The term is used in relation to the quality of the voice, for example: “Sean-nós deamanta, lán nádúrithe, timbre etc. Analú ró-ghearr. Glór breá sean-nóis, a chroi ann”. [Excellent sean-nós, fully natural, timbre etc. Breath too-short. Fine sean-nós voice, his heart in it] (Ó Madagáin 2008, Comp.32). It is also used to refer to the style of singing “Amhrán nar cloisiú anseo cheana, fíor sean-nós nádúrach, gan stró ar bith air […]” [A song that has not been heard here before now, true natural sean-nós, effortless] ( Nic Dhonnchadha 1973, Comp.64); and it is used in relation to ornamentation:

Glór an-mhaith sean-nóis, a croí go maith ann, analú an-mhaith, togha ornáidiochta go lán-nádúrtha. Thosaigh sí ró-íseal, sa chaoi nach raibh crioch iséal na linte go maith. Botún ab é sin níos mó ná easpa teicnic. Bhain me marc amhain did é bharr.

[Lovely sean-nós voice, sung with heart, excellent breathing, and fine natural ornamentation. She pitched the song too low, and therefore the end of the lines which are low were not good. This was a mistake as opposed to a lack of technique. I docked her one mark for this.]

(Ó Madagáin 2004, Comp.28)

The idea of the natural musician, in the sense of being born with an innate musical ability, is not unique to sean-nós singing; indeed it is a trope of many musical cultures including western concepts of music, which frame musicality—the sense of musical ability—on notions of genius, ‘God-given talent’, and ‘gifted’ ability (see Cottrell 2004, pp. 123-144). Paradoxically, although it is sometimes described as being the binary opposite of Western art singing, the manner in which sean-nós is assessed at the Oireachtas, particularly with regard to the ideal of the natural singer, suggests perhaps that this music culture has been influenced more by western concepts of art and music than its members might like to admit. One of the most obvious ways that adjudicators distinguish between sean-nós singing and other styles
and genres is by using the term *sean-nós*, either as a noun, or adjectively in the form of *sean-nósach* [old-styled].

**Sean-nós as a Synonym for Authenticity**

Small’s musicking theory assumes that musical performance creates, while it lasts, the ideal world as it is imagined by the particular sonic community in question (1998, p.p. 42–43). However, drawing on the work of Stokes, I offer that this ideal world is not created by performance, but by ‘good’ performance (1994, p.4). As Stokes argues, in order for music to function so that a social event can happen, the performance has to be considered to be good by the participants, and authenticity and related terms are used to define ‘good performance’ by members of musical communities (see Chapter I). I propose that as well as being a label for a particular genre of singing, *sean-nós*, or the more adjectival ‘*sean-nósach*’ are terms that are used by *Oireachtas* adjudicators to describe ‘good performance’. As many of the extracts from the reports included above illustrate, the terms *sean-nós* and *sean-nósach* are used extensively by adjudicators to describe what type of songs are considered appropriate for the *Oireachtas sean-nós* competition (see also Appendix B). The adjudicator reports suggest that repertoire that is perceived to be: ancient, musically and lyrically complex, and ‘of the Gaeltacht’ is considered to be *sean-nósach*, or ‘authentic’. On the other hand, repertoire that is perceived to be modern, popular, musically and lyrically simplistic, and ‘not of the Gaeltacht’ is described in the reports as being inauthentic and unsuitable for the competition.

**Conclusion**

My analysis of the adjudicator reports and the *Oireachtas* more generally, suggests that, ‘good performance’ in this musical culture exists along an aesthetic spectrum. In other words, while there are certain characteristic that are considered essential in *sean-nós* singing, no single precise list, composite of features or definition for an ideal *sean-nós* performance can be ascertained from the reports. As in any musical culture, what is ‘good performance’ is subjective and is always being contested and argued over, and therefore it is to a certain degree in a state of flux. This does not mean, however, that *sean-nós* performance has no definable characteristics, quite the
reverse; instead the reports indicate that, within the aesthetic spectrum of good sean-nós performance, there are certain key pillars underpinning a good sean-nós performance, complexity being one of the main ones.

The reports suggest that good sean-nós singing has certain qualities, and the term sean-nósach is often used in the reports to describe these qualities. The reports suggest that generally speaking, the use of vibrato and dynamics are perfectly acceptable in sean-nós, as long as they are not overly pronounced. Quite obviously individual adjudicators differ on what they consider to be ‘too much’ of either technique. The fact that vibrato and dynamics are not commented on very much in the reports as a whole, combined with the fact that the vast majority of Oireachtas sean-nós singers that I have listened to utilise varying levels of both techniques, suggests that the use of these vocal techniques is acceptable, or at least not that important when it comes to what is considered ‘good’ sean-nós singing in the context of the Oireachtas.

The wide use of the term nádúrtha [natural] [Organistic view of culture] in the reports suggests that the ‘natural’ voice is the ideal in sean-nós singing. It is likely that the use of pronounced vibrato in a sean-nós performance marks the singer as being trained, and therefore not a ‘natural’ singer. Like vibrato and dynamics, nasalization appears to be acceptable, and perhaps even desirable, in sean-nós singing, again as long as it is not overly pronounced. Although some adjudicators, particularly in the earlier period of the reports (1940-1950s), seem to favour a head voice, the chest voice and a blending of head and chest voices seems to be perfectly acceptable at the Oireachtas.

Many sean-nós singers perform with a ‘stressed’ timbre, and while this might be deemed a characteristic of sean-nós singing, the reports show that there seems to be a threshold beyond which a singer should not go — again, individual adjudicators differ on what is considered too much tension. It seems likely that if the voice sounds overly stretched and tense it does not sound ‘natural’. The ideal of the natural singer
also influences how variation and ornamentation are viewed in this community. While individual adjudicators might differ on how much ornamentation should ideally feature in a sean-nós song, most seem to expect that whatever ornamentation occurs should be natural and uncontrived.

The reports reveal, as one might expect, that individual adjudicators have their own personal preferences and biases. Yet all of the adjudicators seem to agree that “breaking the musical/poetic line” is one of the worst mistakes a sean-nós singer can make. I would argue that breaking the line is considered inappropriate in sean-nós because again it suggests that the singer is not a natural singer — natural in the sense that the singer is expected to embody the spirit, the sentiment of the song’s narrative. The reports suggest that if a singer breaks the poetic line, the meaning or brí of the song is lost; therefore the singer is not embodying the story of the song, as s/he should. Singers who ‘over-act’ are also criticised because they are seen as acting as opposed to ‘living’ the song. The ability to sing long unbroken phrases is also seen, by adjudicators, as another way of adding complexity to the performance.

All of the reports make reference, in one way or another, to the centrality of the Gaeltacht in sean-nós singing. According to the reports, in order to sing sean-nós, one has to sing in one or other of the Gaeltacht dialects. Singers are expected to perform from the repertoire of the Gaeltacht associated with their dialect, and although it is not commented on very much, I would suggest that the reports expect singers to perform in the style associated with their dialect of Irish. Generally speaking, the older and rarer a song and style of singing is the more ‘authentic’ it is perceived to be.

As I discuss in Chapter I, Small suggests that musicking is an instrument of affirmation, and that what is being affirmed is a sonic community’s idealised world (Small 1994, p. 183). I would suggest that the idealised world being performed at the Oireachtas is one based on the Gaeltacht. However, the Gaeltacht imagined here is not the modern contemporary Gaeltacht that exists today, but a Gaeltacht of the
mind, that is pre-modern, ancient and above all Gaelic. While the Oireachtas has unquestionably created a space and a platform for what is essentially a marginalised and intangible part of Irish heritage, the tacit ‘rules’ that emerge through the competition culture of the festival have had a restraining effect on the sean-nós singing community.

Informant A, who performs with a number of traditional ensembles, stated that he felt somewhat reluctant singing sean-nós in an ensemble context. Indeed over the years I have met others who have expressed similar sentiments. It is likely that there are many factors that contribute to the resistance of engagements between sean-nós singers and the ensemble. However, it seems more than probable that the main contributing factor to this situation is the ‘rule’ that sean-nós is unaccompanied singing. Informant A provides evidence for this, stating that a number of years ago he decided that when he sings solo unaccompanied song in Irish, he is singing sean-nós, but when he sings the same material in an ensemble context it is no longer sean-nós. This suggests that sean-nós means traditional Irish language unaccompanied singing. While Informant A was able to explore new musical avenues, others might not be as adventurous, and it does feel that the genre is constrained somewhat by its musical grammar.

As I have shown above, during the 1940s and 1950s, some singers from the Gaeltacht performed ‘school-songs’ or songs with ‘modern’ words or music at the festival. The singing of this type of material was criticised heavily by some adjudicators and it is interesting to note that as the decades progressed this material was performed less and less at the festival, suggesting that competitors had learned through competing what was expected of them, and what was therefore ‘good sean-nós’. Also the rule that a singer has to restrict him or herself to the repertoire and style of one Gaeltacht district only, suggests perhaps that the old idea of the Gaeltacht as a reservation of Irishness (see Chapter II), in need of protection, persists at some level within this organisation.
However, it is too convenient to regard the *Oireachtas* as some form of external agent that enforces control over the *sean-nós* singing community. As I have stated above, *sean-nós* singers from the *Gaeltacht* have been adjudicating at the *Oireachtas* since at least the 1940s, and this trend has only increased as the decades have progressed. Traditional singers from all walks of life adjudicate next to music academics at the festival. Therefore, one can argue that the *Gaeltacht sean-nós* community has, through its participation at the *Oireachtas* as adjudicators, contributed to creating the ‘rules’ of *sean-nós* singing, as outlined above. As I have shown with the example of Darach Ó Catháin, singers too are not without agency. In the next chapter I discuss the agency of the *Oireachtas* audience and the wider singing community within the *Oireachtas*. 
Chapter VII: Ethnography of the Oireachtas na Gaeilge Festival

Much of the literature concerned with sean-nós at the Oireachtas suggests that the festival has somewhat of a hegemonic power structure (see Chapter III). Graham defines hegemony as: “[…] a dominant cultural form accepted as legitimate in that it embodies the aspirations of a society” (1997b, p.195). A hegemonic power structure/organisation can be regarded as any institution whose ideology and authority comes from elites within that institution/organisation. The tacit implication of much of the sean-nós literature is that elites (adjudicators, staff and the executive committee) within the Oireachtas membership have created a standardised style of sean-nós song. I offer that this interpretation is overly simplistic. One of the main arguments of this chapter is that Oireachtas na Gaeilge should be regarded as an umbrella festival bringing together a number of cohorts, each with their own - sometimes vying - unique agenda and ideology.

Through participant-observation at the festival over a three year period I came to the conclusion that the Oireachtas sean-nós competitions are essentially inter-Gaeltacht competitions. The inter-Gaeltacht nature of the Oireachtas competitions reinforces the idea that the various Gaeltacht regions are ethnically33 distinct from one another. This means that the competitions foster heterogeneity in the sense of regional uniqueness. This in turn suggests that the OSSC is more communitarian in its outlook than Romantic nationalist, because Romantic nationalism typically has a standardising or homogenising effect on culture. As I illustrate in this chapter, the inter-Gaeltacht rivalry within the Oireachtas competitions is something the Oireachtas director is keen to play down. I believe that this is because the executive committee prefers to view the festival as a whole as a gathering of like-minded individuals. This suggests that the inter-Gaeltacht nature of the singing competitions

33 Derived from the Greek word ‘ethnos’, ethnicity has historically connoted: “[…] group claims of commonality based on shared historical experiences, geographical origins, cultural practices, and/or kinship Unlike the concept of ‘race’, which is based on physical characteristics and which historically has been imposed externally to denote the ‘Other’, ethnicity is generally concerned with group ‘self-identification’, for identifying ‘us’ (Ansell 2013, p.64).
is not ideologically coming from the top (director or the executive committee) of the festival, but is due to the agency of the OSSC as a whole.

7.1 The Oireachtas na Gaeilge Festival

This chapter is based on my participant-observation located from the perspective of a member of the audience, at a variety of competitions at the Oireachtas festival in 2010, 2011, and 2012. My ethnographic data consists of notes taken during and immediately after the various events I attended, and of video recordings I made of Oireachtas singing competitions. Recordings were made on a Sony Handycam DCR1534. My own insights and observations are supplemented here with quotes from fellow audience members as well as from my two primary informants — Liam Ó Maolaodha and Informant A. Some of what is included comes from snippets of conversations I overheard, or parts of general conversations that I had with individuals I encountered at the festival. These vignettes were not acquired through a formal interview process, yet in some ways they are just as revealing as my in-depth interviews. They were also acquired through my participation and observation at the Oireachtas, and as such are, in my opinion, important ethnographic data worthy of inclusion. As well as the various sean-nós competitions that I attended I took in as many other Oireachtas events as I possibly could, in order to get a flavour of the festival as a whole — such as book launches, sean-nós dancing competitions, uilleann pipes competitions, concerts, etc.

Romantic Nationalism and the Present-day Oireachtas

Oireachtas na Gaeilge is a six day festival which is held annually in different parts of the country in a rotating venue system. It begins on a Tuesday and finishes on the following Sunday, and it is held over the last week in October, or the first in November. The sean-nós singing competitions are held on the last three days of the festival, beginning with the qualifying competitions on Thursday, and finishing up with the senior sean-nós competition, Corn Uí Riada, on the following Saturday. The festival finishes every year with a mass in Irish on the Sunday morning in one or other of the local Roman Catholic churches, or the cathedral, of the town in which

34 I used my video recording as a means of cross referencing my field notes.
the festival is being hosted. For the duration of the three festivals that I attended, I stayed in hotels adjacent to the festival venues.

The Irish National Events Centre (INEC), located in the Glen Eagle Hotel in Killarney was the main venue for the 2010 and 2011 festivals. The INEC —which is located approximately one kilometre from the centre of Killarney town— is the largest indoor entertainment centre outside of the capital, and it is one of Ireland’s premier venues for concerts, conferences and other corporate events (INEC, 2015). For the two years that the Oireachtas was in Killarney most of the various events that make up the festival were held either in the Glen Eagle or in its neighbouring sister hotel, The Brehon. The Glen Eagle has six rooms and halls that can be used for conferences or concerts, ranging in size from the Torc Suite, which accommodates 40, to the ballroom, which accommodates up to 800. A number of competitions were held in the Torc Suite, and in the ballroom. The main conference centre/auditorium spans over 4,500 square meters, and it can accommodate between 200 and 2,500 people in tiered retractable seating, or 3,500 people standing —this was the venue for the senior sean-nós singing and sean-nós dancing competitions (the Glen Eagle 2015). All the Oireachtas competitions were seated.

The festival in Letterkenny in 2012 was a lot more dispersed throughout the town than the previous two festivals in Killarney. The 2012 festival was centred on the Mount Errigal Hotel in the centre of the town. Other events such as the official launch and various competitions were held in the Letterkenny Institute of Technology, which is within a short walking distance from the Mount Errigal Hotel. A number of concerts and events, catering to the younger generation, were held in the Institute of Technology, and in the Clanree Hotel, which lies westward on the outskirts of Letterkenny town. The main events of the festival, the senior sean-nós singing and the senior sean-nós dancing competitions were held in the Aura Arena which lies southward on the outskirts of the town. The Aura Arena is the largest entertainment venue in the northwest with the capacity to accommodate 3,000 people (Auraleisure 2015). Because of the dispersed nature of the 2012 festival the
Oireachtas executive committee organised coaches to run between the various venues free of charge to Oireachtas patrons.

The first thing I did at each of the festivals I attended was locate the festival office. In 2010 and 2011 this was to be found in the Glen Eagle, and in 2012 the office was situated in the Mount Errigal Hotel in Letterkenny. Then I purchased a festival programme as well as tickets for all the main sean-nós singing events — the under 35 men’s and women’s competition on the Thursday of each festival, the senior men’s and women’s on the Friday, and the CUR, the final main event in the Oireachtas festival on the Saturday. The Oireachtas holds thirty seven competitions in all, from underage to adult, that run from morning until late into the evening — apart from the senior competitions most of the Oireachtas events are free of charge for audience members (OnaG 2010).

Most of the daytime competitions cater to young people, from under twelve years up to eighteen years. These include competitions in recitation, story-telling, agallamh beirte [comical duet in rhyme form], and lúibíní [duets of newly composed humorous songs], and sean-nós singing and dancing (OnaG 2010, pp. 11-13). A number of Irish traditional music instrument competitions are also included: uilleann pipes, fiddle, harp, and duet playing (ibid). Details concerning other non-competition events, such as the official launch of the festival, CD and book launches, and seminars are also included.

Ógras holds its national assembly at the Oireachtas every year, and every year the Oireachtas programme from the Tuesday to Wednesday is dedicated, for the most part, to Ógras events. Ógras is an organisation dedicated to promoting the Irish language as a community language amongst young people. It was established by the Gaelic League in 1969, and it provides numerous services for young people throughout the country through the medium of Irish. Ógras holds a number of national events annually, including an Ógras Olympics, debates, summer camps — it also participates in a number of international events (Ógras 2014). The Oireachtas
typically begins on a Tuesday with a meeting of and Céili for all the various Ógras clubs from around Ireland. The schedule for Wednesday varies somewhat from year to year but typically consists of events such as debates, workshops, youth parades, and concerts and discos (OnaG 2010, p.9; OnaG 2011, p.9; OnaG 2012, p.7). Ógras events are also held on Thursday, but unlike Tuesday and Wednesday, other non-Ógras events are also held simultaneously, albeit in separate venues.

The Oireachtas is generally described as being a Romantic nationalist or cultural nationalist institution, primarily concerned with promoting the Irish language as the common vernacular in Ireland (see Chapters II, IV and V). Therefore, it is not surprising that the festival committee should make a concentrated effort to encourage young people to speak Irish, as the young are the future of any language. Indeed, my first impression of the festival was that it was primarily a Romantic nationalist organisation. At every Oireachtas I attended, the main stage at the festival was dominated by a large animated backdrop which was being projected throughout the festival (see below). This backdrop contains the Oireachtas crest, a torch of light surrounded by a leaf wreath.

![Illustration 7.1 The Oireachtas na Gaeilge Crest](© Clive Wasson (Facebook 2012))
The crest—which has changed little from the foundation of the festival in 1897—seems to embody the spirit of Romantic nationalism succinctly. The torch in the crest would seem to suggest that the *Oireachtas* is a beacon that will guide the Irish nation back to the Irish language. Written underneath the crest is the *Oireachtas* motto—‘*tír agus teanga*’ (language and country). By linking nation with language, the festival’s motto in particular suggests a form of ethno-linguistic nationalism. This would seem to suggest that the rationale of the festival membership is to promote Irish as a national vernacular by using the arts as a vehicle for language revival. As I have shown in Chapter II, Romantic nationalism is an ideology that sees language as the primary marker of national identity. However, even though the Irish language is central to the *Oireachtas*’ mission today, as my research progressed I began to question whether Romantic nationalism is still its dominant ideology.

When I suggested to Liam Ó Maolaodh that the heart of the festival was the Irish language he agreed with me.

ÉC: So croí-lár, mar atá a fhios agaimne uilig é, croí lár an Oireachtas, an Gaeilge. An bhfuil tú ag iarraidh tada eile a rá faoi sin?
LÓM: No, sin é. Bunaíodh Oireachtas na Gaeilge. 1893 bunaíodh Conradh na Gaeilge agus in 1897 bunaíodh an Oireachtas chun tacú le obair an Chonradh, an Ghaeilge a chuir chun cinn agús úsáid as na healain ginearálta ag an am. Agus tá saolta éagsúla tar héis a bheadh ag an Oireachtas ag díriú ar caite, nó cíarsaí drámaiochta, cíarsaí ceoil, cíarsaí amhránaiocht agus eile mar mhílanta. Agus tá an formula airithe atá ann faoi láthair atá sásúil.

ÉC: So as we all know, the heart of *Oireachtas* is the Irish language. Do you want to say anything about that?
LÓM: No, that’s it. The *Oireachtas* was established. In 1893 the Gaelic League was established, and in 1897 the *Oireachtas* was established to help with promoting the work of the League and to use the, at the time, the arts generally [to promote its work]. And the festival has gone through many phases, from focusing on literature, or drama, music, singing, etc. over the years. And the formula that we have at the moment seems to be reasonably satisfactory.
Ó Maolaodha’s sentiments arguably suggest that the *Oireachtas* is in fact a Romantic nationalist, or at least a cultural nationalist, organisation. However, as my research progressed, I came to realise that even though much of the rhetoric of the *Oireachtas* membership draws on Romantic nationalist cliché, in actual fact its central members are primarily concerned with promoting and giving a voice to a marginalised community, namely the Irish-speaking community both within and without the *Gaeltacht*.

The following extract, from my interview with Ó Maolaodha, deals primarily with issues concerning standards and quality within the *Oireachtas*. At the time I was interested in determining how standards were set in competitions. In particular I wanted to ascertain what, if any, instruction is given to *Oireachtas* adjudicators by the executive committee. However, Ó Maolaodha’s answer takes a broader view of the issue of quality, and the importance of producing a quality product — in this case the *Oireachtas* festival. Although Ó Maolaodha did not address ‘standards’ in the sense that I would have at the time wished him to, his answer reveals a great deal concerning the rationale of the *Oireachtas* today.

**ÉC:** Cén tábhacht atá le caighdeánú? Tá a fhios agam go labhair tú liom anuraidh faoi chaighdeánú, dul anonn go Oireachtas Cheanada, déanamh cínnte go bhfuil caighdeánú, tá a fhios agam go le teanga is mů a bhí tú ag caint, ach céanna tábhalt atá le caighdeán, nó an féidir leat rud éigin a rá faoi chaighdeán?

**LÓM:** Creidim go bhfuil sê fior thábhachtach. Tá muid fós ag déileáil le táirge atá aitheanta in measc mionlach. Cínnte iad siúd go bhfuil Gaeilge acu, agus atá ina cónai san nGaeilge, spéis san nGaeilge. Ach tá pobal mór millteanach eile sa t̊ir seo agus I n-áiteanna eile ar a bhféidir an táirge seo a chuair òs a geomhair, tri teilifís, tri dlúthdhiosca, tri radio agus eile. So mura mbeadh caighdeán ann, [...] agus rachadh m é aris ar ais ag CUR.
There are a number of ways of interpreting Ó Maolaodha’s comments. One could argue that by stating that there is potentially a huge national audience for what the Oireachtas produces, Ó Maolaodha is culturally nationalistic in his outlook. However, as I have discussed in Chapter II, nationalism is founded on the idea of a more or less bounded territory. Romantic and cultural nationalist movements tend to be concerned primarily with the culture and population living within this territory — the nation state or soon to be nation state as the case may be. When Ó Maolaodha mentions that “there is a huge population in the country and elsewhere who are receptive to this product” he points to the fact that the Oireachtas is somewhat cosmopolitan in its outlook.

In 2007 the then Irish Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, Éamonn Ó Cuív, officially sanctioned an area in the town of Tamworth, Ontario as an official
Gaeltacht (Wikipedia 2015a). This was the first time the Irish Government has taken such a step. The Canadian Gaeltacht, known as Gaeltacht Thuaisceart an Oileán Úir [the North American Gaeltacht], has no resident native Irish speakers, but instead is a regular meeting spot for Irish speakers and learners of Irish from North America and elsewhere (ibid). In other words, it is centred on an affinity group - those with an interest in the Irish language. The Canadian Gaeltacht came about due to the work of an avid group of Irish language enthusiasts in North America, and beginning in 2011 this affinity group organised the first of what has now become the annual Canadian Oireachtas. The Oireachtas back in Ireland in closely linked with the Canadian Oireachtas, and Irish adjudicators, musicians, dancers and singers have travelled to Canada to participate in the festival from the very beginning (Ó Maolaodha 2014 [personal interview]). It might be argued that the Canadian Gaeltacht community should be read as a form of diasporic nationalism. However, I do not think nationalism, Romantic or otherwise, fully explains the complex identity construction that occurs within the Canadian Oireachtas.

A detailed discussion of the Canadian Oireachtas falls outside the remit of this particular thesis, and I mention it here in order to illustrate a point. The primary objective of the Oireachtas central members (the national committee and staff) is the promotion and celebration of the Irish language. While the Irish language is deeply connected with issues of Irish identity within the Oireachtas, I offer that the basis for identity has shifted from being primarily nationally (ethno-linguistically) based to one which is primarily linguistically based. This might not seem that significant at first; however, it means that rather than being an organisation concerned with promoting a national cultural identity centred on the Irish language, the Oireachtas now supports an Irish-language cohort, which has both local and international offshoots.

It should be noted that these changes I am referring to above are subtle and therefore not immediately apparent. Part of the reason for this is because much of the rhetoric and symbolism one finds at the Oireachtas harks back to its Romantic nationalist
roots — for example the *Oireachtas* crest. Throughout my fieldwork I spoke with *Oireachtas* patrons on the subject of the Irish language and Irish identity. Some of the individuals I spoke with were proudly nationalistic in their outlook. Nearly everyone I spoke with mentioned that Irish was part of their heritage, or that “a land without its own language was a land without a soul”, or similar nationalistic clichés.

**The Oireachtas Irish Language Cohort**

However, I also came across quite a number of individuals who initially used nationalistic language and cliché to justify their enthusiasm for the Irish language, but who in the course of our conversation showed that their views on the Irish language and Irish identity were based primarily on being part of an Irish-language affinity group. Many of the people I spoke with were in their twenties, and quite a few stated that their involvement with Irish and the *Oireachtas* was due to the time they spent in Irish-language summer camps in the *Gaeltacht* during their teenage years. Some of these individuals stated that they made life-long friendships in these summer camps, and that the *Oireachtas* was one of the ways that they all remained in contact with one another. For many of these individuals the sense of connection and belonging that they felt with their fellow *Gaelgóirí* [Irish speakers], was paramount.

The following description of a conversation I had at the 2010 *Oireachtas* illustrates the non-nationalistic ideology of many of those I spoke with. On Saturday night, the 30 October 2010, after the CUR, I went into in the Glen Eagle function room. The CUR audience was streaming out of the main auditorium, which is adjacent to the function room. Some of the CUR audience was leaving the venue altogether, but most came into the function room to see out the remainder of the night. At this stage it was around 10pm and the function room was very busy with people milling around looking for their friends or a free table. A band of Irish traditional musicians was setting up to play.

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35 Since the establishment of the Gaelic League, Irish language summer schools have been held in various Gaeltacht districts throughout Ireland, where individuals from outside the Gaeltacht spend time perfecting their Irish (see Chapter II). A number of national organisations such as Gael Linn currently run these courses, although many locally based independent schools have been established over the years (see Gael Linn 2015; Coláiste Chiarán 2010)
This band was performing in the festival club. The festival club is essentially a collection of music performances that take place at the *Oireachtas* after the various competitions have finished up every day. Entry is free of charge to competition ticket holders and these events are very relaxed, celebratory and informal. Performers at the festival club range from traditional acts to rap artists. Many of these festival club acts performed simultaneously in separate rooms throughout the festival. The more traditional acts tend to attract a somewhat older crowd, while more contemporary acts tend to attract a predominately younger audience. As I was walking through the bar I came across an acquaintance of mine Michael (not his real name), an Irish-language scholar.

While we were catching up, Michael mentioned that he had overheard something very interesting as he was walking into the function room. He explained that he saw a group of middle-aged men up at the bar, all of whom were speaking Irish together (indeed Irish is the ‘*lingua franca*’ of the festival and staff at the INEC are given basic lessons in Irish in the run-up to the festival (Liam Ó Maolaoadh [personal interview]). It seems one of the group was ordering a round of drinks in Irish, and apparently the young woman who was serving him was struggling to understand what the man was saying to her. Understandably she was a little overwhelmed by the whole experience. As this stage — in what was likely to have been an attempt to lighten the situation — the man ordering the drinks said to her, in English: “don’t worry; you’ll be back in Ireland tomorrow”. Michael told me that he knew the man in question personally, and that this individual was a regular patron of the *Oireachtas*, as were most of the group he was with.

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36 The Rubber Bandits performed at the Oireachtas festival club in 2011 — rapping Irish-language versions of their material. The Rubber Bandits describe themselves as “hardcore gangster rappers from Limerick city in Ireland” (the rubberbandits 2015). Essentially a musical comedy duo the bandits have over 297,000 likes on Facebook and their song ‘Horse Outside’ reached number two in the Irish Christmas charts in 2010. The video for the song has received, as of February 2015, over 12.7 million views on YouTube (Wikipedia 2015b).
Initially I did not see the significance of this statement. However, Michael was particularly moved by what he had overheard. He told me, ‘Sin é, nach é? Ní é seo Éireann!’ [That’s it, isn’t it? This isn’t Ireland!]. I questioned Michael further on what he meant by this, and by the end of our conversation, it was clear that Michael was suggesting that the Oireachtas was not Ireland in miniature, but rather the coming together of the Gael. In her thesis on the creation of the Gaeltacht, Ó Torna (2005) suggests that the term Gael and fíor-Ghael [true-Gael] were historically used by Irish Romantic nationalists to refer to individuals considered to be ‘authentically Irish’. However, I believe that since Michael stated that the Oireachtas was not ‘Ireland’; this suggests that he was using the term Gael simply to refer to Irish-language speakers. Over the course of my fieldwork I heard others using the term Gael and Gaelgóir [Irish speaker] interchangeably, all of which suggests that Gael is widely used at the festival to refer to Irish speakers, and not to Romantic nationalist notions of cultural authenticity.

When I first began my research I was under the impression that the Oireachtas membership was primarily concerned with promoting and preserving the Irish language. All the literature I had read suggested that the dominant ideology of the festival was Romantic nationalism and that although individual members might have different views as to how to implement this ideology, they were all united in their belief that the Irish language was the main marker of Irish identity (see Chapter III). You hear Irish being spoken everywhere at the Oireachtas, and this does suggest that for a large portion of its patrons, the Irish language is the main reason they attend the festival. However, as I have argued above, this does not necessarily mean these individuals are Romantic nationalists. Furthermore, during the course of my fieldwork, I was surprised to meet many Oireachtas patrons who were not primarily concerned with the Irish language.

**7.3 The Oireachtas as a Collection of Cultural Cohorts**

In the following section I discuss a number of affinity or cultural cohorts that I believe exist within the wider Oireachtas membership. These groups are centred on the uilleann-pipes competition and the sean-nós dance competition — I discuss the
‘Oireachtas sean-nós singing cohort’ in section 7.4. This list should not be viewed as being exhaustive — it is likely that many more groups exist within the general membership. Also I am not suggesting that individual cohorts are exclusive and bounded. It is likely that individuals within the wider Oireachtas membership move between, and can be members of multiple cohorts at the same time. Yet it was also clear that people attend the festival for specific reasons — for example the sean-nós dancing competitions.

It should be noted that the cohorts that I am referring to are my invention, in the sense that they are abstract constructions. No-one I spoke to at the festival mentioned that they belonged to any particular cohort; nevertheless, it was clear that individuals within the Oireachtas membership merged at a social level based on temporary mutual interests, aesthetic, geography, kinship etc. The existence of the various cohorts I have listed can be read as a form of agency on the part of the general Oireachtas membership, because to varying degrees the rationale of these cohorts differs ideologically from the stance of the central Oireachtas members.

The Uilleann Pipes Cohort
On Saturday 30 October 2010 I attended the Oireachtas uilleann pipes competition which was being held next door to the Glen Eagle, in the large function room of the Brehon Hotel. The competition was scheduled to begin at 10am. However, it was nearly 11am before it got underway. There was a small portable stage set up at the top of one side of the room and a table and two chairs were placed in front of the stage for the two adjudicators. Chairs were laid out in neat rows behind the adjudicators, and while the room could easily accommodate three hundred people, there were no more than twenty people in the room. I arrived at the Brehon Hotel at approximately 9:30am. Because the competition did not begin on time I had ample time to walk around and observe the audience and the competitors, all of whom were either in the function room or walking around the corridor outside.

I immediately noticed that many of those competing were not speaking Irish. This was unusual, as Irish is obviously the language de rigour of the festival. I recognised
some of the competitors - some of them are avid Gaelgóirí [Irish speakers] and even some of these individuals were conversing with their fellow pipers in English. I also heard members of the audience speaking English to one another, and during the competition one of the adjudicators spoke a few words in English to one of the competitors who evidently did not understand Irish. Also, I am acquainted with some past winners of this event, some of whom speak Irish and some who do not. Unlike other events at the Oireachtas, the Irish language, while present (the adjudicators for the most part spoke Irish), was arguably not central to this particular event.

Those who were attending the piping competition were primarily concerned with the uilleann pipes, and with who would win first, second and third prize at the competition. The Oireachtas uilleann piping competition is highly regarded in piping circles, partly because of the long history of the event — uilleann piping has been part of the Oireachtas from the very beginning. One man I spoke with, who is in his mid-fifties, stated that he was only attending the festival for the piping competition, and that he was planning on leaving the festival once it was finished. Also, I spoke briefly with one of the pipers who competed at the 2011 festival and he mentioned that he was planning on leaving shortly after the competition. Some of the pipers who compete in this competition do engage more fully in the festival as a whole, however. For example, I saw Éanna Ó Cróinín, a past first prize competition winner in 2005 and 2007, attending numerous events at the Oireachtas in 2011 and 2012.

Nevertheless, it appears that there exists within the wider Oireachtas membership an uilleann pipes cohort. This particular cohort is relatively small. During the three years that I attended the festival only five pipers entered the competition in 2010, seven in 2011, and five again in 2012 (OnG 2010, p.57; OnG 2011, p.63; OnG 2012, p.59). One might argue that the influence of such a small group within the overall scheme of the Oireachtas would be negligible. However, I mention the ‘uilleann pipe
cohort here specifically because this group, irrespective of its size, further illustrates that the Oireachtas is not a homogenous organisation. It also illustrates that even within an organisation with a clearly defined rationale, individuals and groups of individuals can emerge within the wider membership with different and sometimes even subversive rationales, to that of the central members. The most significant subversive cohort to have emerged within the Oireachtas membership in recent years is the sean-nós dance cohort. The sean-nós dancing cohort within the Oireachtas membership is significantly larger than the festival’s uilleann piping cohort. However, similar to the uilleann pipes cohort, the Irish language is not as central to this event as it is to other Oireachtas events such as the sean-nós singing competitions or the various Ógras events mentioned above.

The Oireachtas Sean-nós Dancing Cohort
Sean-nós dance was first performed at the Oireachtas in 1974, due mainly to the efforts of an RnaG presenter called Máirtín Jamsie Ó Flatharta, from the Aran Islands, who argued for its inclusion in the festival’s programme. It is likely that Jamsie was the first person to use the term sean-nós dancing to refer to a style of vernacular dance. Jamsie used the term to describe a style of step dance that was primarily being performed by only a few older men in Conamara at that time — dancers themselves used terms such as caper or stéip [step] (NPU 2010). In recent years, due mainly to the impact of the TG4 broadcasts of the Oireachtas sean-nós dancing competitions, the popularity of this genre has greatly increased. Unlike sean-nós singing, sean-nós dancing does not require the performer to be fluent in Irish, and this has in recent years led to an increase in non-Irish speakers attending the Oireachtas in order to compete in the sean-nós dancing competitions.

Sean-nós dance is widely seen as having escaped the standardisation that other forms of Irish vernacular dance underwent within the early Gaelic League (see Brennan 2004, pp.29-43). It is generally regarded as being a freer, un-proscribed form than the

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It is possible that a similar situation exists at the other Oireachtas instrumental competitions; however, I was unable to attend these competitions due to the fact that many of the Oireachtas events are run concurrently.
modern competition Irish dancing that developed out of the League (Vallely 2011, p.190). Sean-nós dancers perform in everyday clothes, stepping is closer to the floor, and it is a lot less gymnastic. It is performed by all ages and both sexes, not just athletic youths.

Illustration 7.2 Marian Ní Chonghaile Competing at the Oireachtas Sean-nós Dancing Competition accompanied by Johnny Óg Connolly
(Marian Ni Chonghaile 2012)

Like sean-nós singing, sean-nós dancing is closely associated with the Gaeltacht, particularly the Conamara Gaeltacht. In fact, arguably sean-nós dancing is another, more inclusive and embodied metaphor for the Gaeltacht. Sean-nós dancing does not require having to learn a language. Also, sean-nós dancing is widely viewed as being un-proscribed and ‘free’, and —although they are hotly contested—there is a very relaxed and somewhat playful atmosphere present at the various Oireachtas dancing competitions. Compared to sean-nós singing, which involves not only language acquisition, but also immersion in a Gaeltacht community, sean-nós dance is easier
to learn. I am not suggesting that this means sean-nós song is artistically more important or valuable than sean-nós dance, value depends on meaning and meaning is subjective. Instead, I feel that the lack of a language barrier makes sean-nós dance more inviting and inclusive than sean-nós song. The net result of this is that non-Irish speakers, or those with only a passing competency in Irish, have come to compete in the various Oireachtas sean-nós dance competitions.

I have included a fairly long passage from my interview with Liam Ó Maoladha on sean-nós dance below. The extract begins with Liam describing the history of the event within the festival; the second portion of the extract deals with the language issue that the popularity of sean-nós dance has given rise to within the Oireachtas. I offer that this interview extract illustrates the fact that the Oireachtas executive committee’s power to determine the structure of the festival is limited and dependent upon the wider Oireachtas membership.

‘74. Agus [...] cé bhí ag moltóireacht, Albert Mac Bride agus nil a fhios agam cé eile. [...] Agus bhí an damhsa ar an sean-nós ar ais ar an saol, sin 2000. 2001 agus 2002 bhí sé thar barr ar fad, bhuach Labhrás Sonny Cholm Larry sa Daingean, 2001 agus Roisín Ni Mhaínnín ó thuaidh. Then i 2003 tháinig [...] i Trá Li, bhuaigh Seosamh Ó Neachtain. I Siamsa Tire, standing room only. The walls lined a leithid go atmosphere. Tháinig Devaney [James] amach ar an stáitse, ní raibh sé fiú sa gcomórtas, ach ar deireadh tháinig sé, agus na damhsóirí eile thart timpeall air. Agus dúirt TG4 we have to get this. Spectacle. Agus 2004 chraola siad beo é don chead uair. I mean sroicheann sé figiúr do 400,000. [...] agus athchraola Lá Nollaig agus comórtas na gasúir anois agus a thart that goes with it you know. [...] Da mbeadh mo bhealach féin uilig agam bheadh se caite don clár.

LÓM: Well even there Éamonn, it became part of the festival at that time [mid 1970s], but then [interest in] it dipped badly after a period. I mentioned the ‘99 Oireachtas earlier, in Dungarvan [Co. Waterford]. There was no sean-nós dancing competition at that Oireachtas. There was a demonstration instead. A few people were brought, Ainne Devaney O’Brien, a sister of James Devaney [well-known dancer from Conamara], there was a local lad, McCarty or something like that, was his name, from na Déise [Waterford Gaeltacht]. A few other people. And then the following January Máirín Ní Dhonncha, came to work for the Oireachtas. She had been working for the Gaelic League before that, and they were organising the programme for the upcoming year ‘s [festival], and at that stage I was saying, get rid of it [the dancing competition], no one is taking part in the competition, the numbers of entrants kept falling, and everything else. And she said, no, the only prizes are the gold medal and the silver medal I think. She said the singers are getting a few hundred pounds, why aren’t the dancers? In the end anyway, she said ‘I’ll organise it’, and she did in Castlebar [Co. Mayo], in the Welcome Inn Hotel, there was sean-nós dancing. She called around and she promoted the event etc. We put up a prize of, I don’t know, £400 or £500, I can’t remember. It was to be on the Saturday afternoon of the festival. The place was packed, standing room only. We had gotten Máirtín Jamsie [RnaG presenter] to compère the event, because of ‘74 [Máirtín had canvassed the Oireachtas to include dancing in its programme] [...] Now [...] who was
adjudicating? Albert Mac Bride and I can’t remember who else. And the sean-nós dancing was back in the Oireachtas, that was in 2000. In 2001 and 2002 it was really excellent, Labhrás Sonny Cholm Larry [from Conamara] won in Dingle in 2001, and Róisín Ní Mhainnin won [the USA and Conamara] up North [2001]. Then in 2003 it came to Tralee [Kerry]. Seosamh Ó Neachtain [Conamara] won there in the Siamsa Tire theatre, standing room only. The walls were lined, such an atmosphere. James Devaney came out on the stage, he wasn’t in the competition, but he came all the same, and all the other dancers around him. TG4 said, we have to get this [the dancing] Spectacle, and in 2004 it was broadcast live for the first time. I mean 400,000 people tune in to watch it broadcast on Christmas day, and now with the children’s competition, and all that growing, you know. If I had had my way it would have been thrown of the programme.

(Liam Ó Maolaodha 2014 [personal interview])

The above interview extract highlights the impact the efforts of one person, Máirín Ní Dhonnacha, can have on an organisation. Máirín works for the Oireachtas and therefore we can regard the popularity of sean-nós dancing within the festival as being largely determined by the central Oireachtas membership. However, it is also clear that the popularity of the event was increased by an outside agent, TG4. By broadcasting the sean-nós dancing events the popularity of sean-nós dancing was spread amongst the wider Irish public. The following extract from the same interview illustrates how the Oireachtas has lost some of its control of the sean-nós dancing competition, and that the very popularity of the event has challenged the special position the Irish language holds within the festival. I began my line of questioning by asking Ó Maolaodha about the increase in English speakers the sean-nós dancing competitions brought to the Oireachtas.

ÉC: Chúla me duine nó dhó agus Béarla a bhí acu, ach ní mórán é. [...] Meas tú an maith an rud é, má tá siad thimpeall ar an nGaeilge meas tú an mbeadh síol [...] nil a fhios agat? [...] Cén dearca a bheadh agat féin air?

LÓM: Well d’éirigh me an-buarth faoi ar feadh píosa. [...] Mar a dúirt me chaigh muid ar teilifís i 2004. So bhí 2005 agus 2006 measartha maith you know. [...] Bhí go leor go phobal na Gaeilachta ag cuir isteach air,
spéis acu ann agus ní raibh aon bhaol don teanga. Agus ansin de réir mar [d’aithin] daoine bualt tá sé seo ar an teitifis agus eile, is seo deis Mary nó Johnny a chuair ar teitifis. Agus an bhliain go raibh muid i gCathair na Mart chuaigh dream áitiúil as sin agus bhí siad ag iarraidh rud ollmhór a dhéanamh don rud. Chuireadar daoine amach ag na scoileanna ag múnadh damhsa ar an sean-nós. Mar bhí se i bhfad nós éasca é sin a dhéanamh ná iad a chuair ag fóghlaim amhráin Ghaeilge, ar stíl an tseannáos, agus tuigeann tú. [...]. So bhí réamh-bhotáí, bhí orainn réamh-bhotáí a bheidh ag anainne. Agus an comórtas faoi deich, nil a fhios agam nach raibh leathchéad istigh air. Agus muidhe ag iarraidh b'hfeidir deichniúr le dhul ar aghaidh. An maidin Aoine sin istigh sa Castle Court, beagnach chaill mé mo mhisneach, mar is éard a bhi ag tarlú ná an rud is measa a d’fhéadadh a tharlú, bhí na mammies ag tiocht suas ag an dorais agus fur-coats agus jeeps agus [iad ag rá?] ‘My Johnny has to dance by twelve because we have an appointment and we have too blah blah blah’. O lads tá botún deanta anseo ag anainn. Agus go deimhin iad siúd nach eirigh leo dul tríd cheannaigh siad na ticéid le haghaidh an crobh agus a leithid sin. Dúirt muid ok, seasadh muid siar uaidh, ní féidir linn dul an bealach seo. Thug fiú amhain an coise áitiúil sin. So nil aon bhac ar aon duine, agus ní féidir. Mar mura bhféadadh an [...] seo dul isteach [...] racism a bheadh ann.

ÉC: Sea yeah, bheadh siad ag tabhairt Talibán, green shirt Talibán urbh, agus an ceart acu.

LÓM: Yeah, [...] anois dhá dtiocfaidh cèad acu isteach [...] b’hfeidir go gcathfheadh muid breathnú ar sin. [...] But mura bhfuil muid muintir an Oireachtais, agus muintir na Gaeltachta agus muintir na Gaeilge, i ná cápla abairt Béarla a labhairt le corr dhúine ar mhaithe le béasa agus eile, agus iad sin a shí isteach seachas iad a bhrú amach, ba bocht an seáin é. [...] É sin ráite is ceann e go mbionn mise uafásach i gceol faoi. Gearradh na comórtais ceol uirlis amach ón mór Oireachtais ar feadh píosa, anois tá siad dhá thabhairt ar ais go deas mall réidh, tá cheithre cinn againne faoi láthair. agus má bhreathnaitheóin ná b'fhéidir gheall i gceol tagt. Gearradh na comórtais ceol uirlis amach ón mór Oireachtais ar feadh píosa, anois tá siad dhá thabhairt ar ais go deas mall réidh, tá cheithre cinn againne faoi láthair. agus má bhreathnaitheóin ná b'fhéidir gheall i gceol tagt. Gearradh na comórtais ceol uirlis amach ón mór Oireachtais ar feadh píosa, anois tá siad dhá thabhairt ar ais go deas mall réidh, tá cheithre cinn againne faoi láthair. agus má bhreathnaitheóin ná b'fhéidir gheall i gceol tagt. Gearradh na comórtais ceol uirlis amach ón mór Oireachtais ar feadh píosa, anois tá siad dhá thabhairt ar ais go deas mall réidh, tá cheithre cinn againne faoi láthair. agus má bhreathnaitheóin ná b'fhéidir gheall i gceol tagt. Gearradh na comórtais ceol uirlis amach ón mór Oireachtais ar feadh píosa, anois tá siad dhá thabhairt ar ais go deas mall réidh, tá cheithre cinn againne faoi láthair. agus má bhreathnaitheóin ná b'fhéidir gheall i gceol tagt. Gearradh na comórtais ceol uirlis amach ón mór Oireachtais ar feadh píosa, anois tá siad dhá thabhairt ar ais go deas mall réidh, tá cheithre cinn againne faoi láthair. agus má bhreathnaitheóin ná b'fhéidir gheall i gceol tagt. Gearradh na comórtais ceol uirlis amach ón mór Oireachtais ar feadh píosa, anois tá siad dhá thabhairt ar ais go deas mall réidh, tá cheithre cinn againne faoi láthair. agus má bhreathnaitheóin ná b'fhéidir gheall i gceol tagt. Gearradh na comórtais ceol uirlis amach ón mór Oireachtais ar feadh píosa, anois tá siad dhá thabhairt ar ais go deas mall réidh, tá cheithre cinn againne faoi láthair. agus má bhreathnaitheóin ná b'fhéidir gheall i gceol tagt. Gearradh na comórtais ceol uirlis amach ón mór Oireachtais ar feadh píosa, anois tá siad dhá thabhairt ar ais go deas mall réidh, tá cheithre cinn againne faoi láthair. agus má bhreathnaitheóin ná b'fhéidir gheall i gceol tagt. Gearradh na comórtais ceol uirlis amach ón mór Oireachtais ar feadh píosa, anois tá siad dhá thabhairt ar ais go deas mall réidh, tá cheithre cinn againne faoi láthair. agus má bhreathnaitheóin ná b'fhéidir gheall i gceol tagt. Gearradh na comórtais ceol uirlis amach ón mór Oireachtais ar feadh píosa, anois tá siad dhá thabhairt ar ais go deas mall réidh, tá cheithre cinn againne faoi láthair. agus má bhreathnaitheóin ná b'fhéidir gheall i gceol tagt. Gearradh na comórtais ceol uirlis amach ón mór Oireachtais ar feadh píosa, anois tá siad dhá thabhairt ar ais go deas mall réidh, tá cheithre cinn againne faoi láthair. agus má bhreathnaitheóin ná b'fhéidir gheall i gceol tagt. Gearradh na comórtas ceol beirte, dúirt sé go raibh na deora leis, bhí scoth an cheol you know. Agus go Gaeilgeoiri iad freisin.
[...] Ó thaobh an damhsa de fós tá cúpla duine a chuireann isteach ar as ceantair nach ceantair Gaeltachta iad. Go deimhin daoine nach bhfuil aon Ghaeilge acu. Tá caillín mar shampla [...] thuas ansin i [...] ag déanadh éachtaí oibre, ní amháin i gcúiseáin damhsa ar an sean-nós, tá si i scannán, bhí si i [...] you know. Déanann si an oiread don ceantar. Agus bhí sise ag cur go leor leor isteach. So chuaigh muid aici agus labhair muid leithé agus d'íarr muid go mbeadh na hainmneacha ar fad i nGaeilge agus go mbeadh tuiscint acu go láithreach. Siad an oiread Gaeilge agus a d'fhéadfadh siad agus go mbeadh chomh rannpháirtí is a d'fhéadfadh siad. Tá ladin aici [...], nil a fhios agam cén Béarla atá air [...] is dócha. [...] ach tá a rannóg buacha aige trí bhliaín a thionchar. [...] agus is damhsóir den scoth é. [...] Nach mór an feall dhá mbeadh se bérálta. [...] Bhuaigh Brian Cunningham bhí a chosadh is dóigh liom. Nil aon Ghaeilge ag Brian, tháinig sé as Sasana? [...] Ach, an oíche a bhuaigh seisean tháinig sé go dtí mité, agus d'fheadfadh sí ‘Liam what am I going to do what am I going to say, I can't give an interview’. Ok well just waffle away and he did you know. Ach thig sé [...] 

ÉC: I heard one or two people speaking English [at the sean-nós dance comps] not too many [...] Do you think that’s a good thing, if they are around Irish, do you think would the seed [be sown] [...] do you know? What opinion would you have on that? 

LÓM: Well I was very upset about it for a while. [...] As I said, we went on television in 2004 [with the dancing]. So 2005 and 2006 were reasonably good you know. [...] A lot of the Gaeltacht community were entering, they had an interest in it, and there was no fear for the language. And then as people began to notice, well this is on television etc., this is an opportunity to get Mary or Johnny on TV. And the year we were in Westport [Co. Mayo] locals from the area [...] and they [local Oireachtas committee] wanted to make a huge thing out of it [sean-nós dancing]. They sent people out to all the schools teaching sean-nós dancing. Because it was a lot easier to do that than teaching them to sing a song in Irish, in the sean-nós style, do you know. [...] So the qualifying heats were on, we had to have qualifying heats [so many entered]. The under ten competition I don’t know I think there were fifty entrants for it, and us trying to pick ten to go on [for the final]. On the Friday morning, there inside the Castle Court
hotel, I nearly lost faith, because what was happening was the worst thing that could possibly happen, the mammys and the daddies up at the door with their fur-coats and their jeeps [and they were saying in English] ‘My Johnny has to dance by twelve because we have an appointment and we have to blah blah blah blah’. And some of those who didn’t qualify they had tickets bought for the final and the likes of that. So we said OK, we’ll stand back from this, we can’t go this way. Even the local committee understood you know. So no one is restricted from entering the competition, and you can’t. If this [...] couldn’t enter [...] it would be racist.

ÉC: Yeah they’d be calling you the green jacket Taliban, and they’d be right.

LÓM: Yeah, [...] now if let say a hundred entered [...] maybe then we would have to look at things. But if the Oireachtas members and the Gaeltacht community, and the Irish language community can’t speak a few words of English to a few people for the sake of politeness, and to encourage them into the thing, instead of pushing them out, it would be sorry situation. That being said it is something I worry an awful lot about. The instrumental music competitions were cut from the main Oireachtas for a while, now we are bringing them back nice and steadily, we have four instrument competitions at the moment, and if you look at the programme I think you’ll see that it is mostly Irish speakers who enter. There is no rule there and no one is blocked from entering you know. It’s a great advantage having them present, because we get top class musicians entering. Marcas Ó Murchú was adjudicating a few years ago for the [Irish traditional music] duet competition; he said that he had tears in his eyes, the music was of such a high standard, and that they are Irish speakers as well. [...] With regards to the dancing, there are a few people who enter who are not from the Gaeltacht. Indeed some enter who don’t speak any Irish. There is a young woman [...] from [...] who is doing great work. Not only with regards to sean-nós dancing, but she is in a movie, she was in the [...] you know. She does so much for her area. And she was sending a lot [of her students in for the sean-nós dance competitions]. So we went to her and we spoke to her, and we asked that all the names be in Irish, and that they would have an understanding that they would speak as much Irish as they
were able to, and that they would take part as much as they were able to [in the *Oireachtas*] as a whole. She has one young lad, […] I don’t know what the English for that is […] I suppose, but he has won his division three years in a row […] and he is a wonderful dancer. Wouldn’t it be an awful thing if he was barred to compete [because he isn’t an Irish speaker]. Brian Cunningham won down in Cork in 2005, I think. Brian doesn’t speak Irish, he came from England. […] But the night he won he came to me, and he said ‘Liam what am I going to say, I can’t give an interview’. Ok we’ll just waffle away and he did know […]

ÉC: The importance?

LÓM: He understood that it was important for us too, the impression as well.

(Liam Ó Maolaodha 2014 [personal interview])

There is much that could be extrapolated from the comments above, but here I am particularly interested in issues of determinism and agency. It is clear from the above interview extract that the central *Oireachtas* membership saw themselves as being in danger of losing control of the future of the festival due to the popularity of the *sean-nós* dancing competitions. In other words their ability to determine a particular kind of future, one centred on the Irish language, was being undermined by the popularity of the *sean-nós* dancing competition at the festival amongst English-language speakers.

Ultimately the national committee compromised, while the dancing competition continues to grow in popularity — which potentially draws more English language as well as Irish language speakers to the festival. The national committee deals with this by encouraging English speakers to use as much Irish as they can at the festival. This obviously illustrates the central rationale of the national committee, which is that the function of the *Oireachtas* is to promote the Irish language through the medium of the traditional arts (Ó Maolaodha 2014, [personal interview]). But it also points to the fact that the *Oireachtas* cannot afford to get rid of the various *sean-nós* dance competitions because they are just too popular. Cancelling them would likely
bring about a huge loss in attendance and revenue. In order to stay true to their ideals the national committee encourages English language competitors to make use of the Irish form of their names, to use as much Irish as they can at the festival, and more importantly to participate and be a part of the festival as a whole, and not just the competition. This can be read as a form of enculturation, whereby the cultural ‘outsider’, the English speaker, is being taught the mores and rationale of the festival.

The existence of English language speakers at the festival — both in the sean-nós dance competitions and the uilleann pipes competition — indicates that the Oireachtas is more than a festival of Irish language. Despite the best efforts made by the executive committee the sean-nós dance cohort is not primarily centred on the Irish language. If it were we would not expect to see non-Irish speakers achieve success at the sean-nós dance competitions, and this is not the case. Therefore, we can conclude that the dominant ideology of the sean-nós dance cohort differs somewhat from that of that of the executive committee’s — another example of agency within the Oireachtas membership. Even though the Irish language is central to what is considered good sean-nós singing, in the following section, I show that in many ways the Irish language is not the dominant ideology of the Oireachtas sean-nós singing competition either. This further illustrates that the Oireachtas is not a homogenous organisation but a collection of cohorts. The largest cohort is the Oireachtas Irish language cohort; however, I offer that it should be regarded as just one of a number of cohorts within the Oireachtas membership.

7.4 The Sean-nós singing competition as an Inter-Gaeltacht Competition

The 2010 and 2011 CUR competitions were held in the main auditorium in the Glen Eagle (INEC). I estimate that there were approximately 800 to 1,000 people in the auditorium, all seated on tiered seating. Entry to the CUR is by ticket only. I arrived early to the 2010 competition, at 18:45, and placed myself at the very back of the tiered seating — close to where the house soundman was set up. The area I was sitting in was in shadow and this meant that I was almost invisible to most of the people in
the hall. Yet due to the design of the venue I could still observe the stage and those
on it very clearly. The stage contained the Oireachtas set with its projected crest.
There was a podium situated on stage left, for the compère, and there was an ornate
pedestal-type table on stage right. The CUR and the various prizes were placed on
this table for the duration of the competition, until the president\textsuperscript{38} of the Oireachtas
awards them, along with the prize money to the winners at the end of the evening.

There were two microphones set up on stands centre stage. Singers at the Oireachtas
have the option of singing either standing or seated, as they prefer. One microphone
is placed in front of a chair for singers who wish to perform seated, the other is set up
a few feet toward stage right, and this is for singers who wish to perform standing up.
In front of this microphone a chair is also placed, however, this chair is not for sitting
on. Instead it is placed with the back toward the singer — between the singer and the
microphone stand (see photo below) — and singers who want to stand can if they
wish rest their hands on the back of the seat\textsuperscript{39}. The stage set up for the CUR
competition was the exact same the following two years.

\textsuperscript{38} The Oireachtas presidency is largely an honorary title that is awarded to a different individual each
year.
\textsuperscript{39} I have been told on a number of occasions, by individuals from the Conamara Gaeltacht, that Joe
Heaney was the first to do this at the Oireachtas. Apparently Heaney — who preferred singing
standing up—did this in order to give his hands something to do while he sang.
Although the demographic of the audience at the CUR was of all age groups from teenagers up to the elderly, the vast majority appeared to be middle aged, as can be seen in the photo below).
Most of the audience were casually dressed. Indeed there was little difference between the attire of the audience and the performers. Most male performers wore a shirt and pants, and leather shoes. Female performers tended to be a little more formally dressed - most wore dresses as opposed to gowns, others were dressed in a combination of skirt and blouse, and some wore dress suits. The compère for all three CURs that I attended was Máirtín Tom Shéanín Mac Donnchadha, a *sean-nós* singer from Conamara, past winner of the CUR in 1983 and 1988, and an RNG and TG4 presenter; he has been the compère at the *Oireachtas* for a number of years. Mac Donnchadha was dressed in a suit and tie. Generally speaking, the *Oireachtas* staff and presenters at the CUR, like Mac Donnchadha, are more formally dressed than either the audience or the performers.

Between ten and fifteen minutes before the first competitor came on stage the adjudicators took their seats. The adjudicators for the 2010 CUR were Seosaimhín Ni Bheaglaioch from Kerry, Tomás Ó Canainn from Derry, and Nan Tom Taimín de Burca from Conamara. The adjudicators for the 2011 CUR were Lillis Ó Laoire from Donegal, Eilís Ní Shúilleabháin from Cork, and Séamus Ó Dubhthaigh from Mayo. The adjudicators for the 2012 CUR were Eilís Ní Shúilleabháin from Cork, Seosaimhin Ni Bheaglaioch from Kerry — who stepped in for Séamus Ó Dubhthaigh from Mayo who was forced to cancel due to a family bereavement — and Nan Tom Taimín de Burca from Conamara. The adjudicators were dressed much the same as the competitors.
The atmosphere at the CUR is different from that of any of the other sean-nós events held by the Oireachtas. The venue is larger; the stage is elaborately decorated with the Oireachtas set, and lit with elaborate spot lights. The event is filmed, to be broadcast later, by TG4. It is also recorded live on RnaG. As such, a number of camera personnel are set up throughout the venue, one of whom uses a boom camera, to film wide sweeping shots of the audience and the stage. As I mentioned in Chapter VI, three tables and chairs are placed in between the audience and the stage for the adjudicators (see image above). Another table is set up to the side of the stage in front of the audience, where the adjudicator marks are tallied. At all three CURs I attended the audience arrived early and in great numbers for this event. As Máirtín Tom Shéanín came on stage to begin the proceedings an excited murmur rose from the audience.

At this stage in the proceedings the stage lights and the projected Oireachtas banners were on. The house lights were also on, and remained on throughout the event, due to the fact that it was being filmed. The cameras, the lights, and the mood from the audience all added to an atmosphere of growing excitement and anticipation. This
level of excitement was not as palpable at the other events I attended at the festival, with the exception of the senior sean-nós dancing competition, which takes place the night before the CUR in the same venue. Nevertheless, for all the reasons listed above, and because it is the last main event of the festival programme, the CUR feels particularly momentous.

As the show began Máirtín Tom Shéanín introduced the singers one by one, by giving their name and where they were from, while they were making their way onto the stage from the green room. Between individual performances, Máirtín would also read out texts of support from RnaG listeners, and generally regale the audience at home and in the auditorium with tales from the Oireachtas past and present. All this was done of course through the medium of Irish. There were seventeen competitors scheduled to perform at the CUR in 2010, eighteen in 2011, and nineteen in 2012. Interestingly, during my fieldwork more women than men competed in the competition. Twelve women to five men competed in 2010; eleven women to seven men competed in 2011, and twelve women to seven men in 2012. The competitors ranged in age from mid-twenties to late-sixties. The age and gender make-up of the competitors is not a main focus for me here.

Each competitor came on stage and sang one slow song of his/her own choice. When a singer finished s/he would return to the green room, and the next singer would make his/her way on stage, through the same side of the stage. The adjudicators wrote notes during and in between performances. Adjudicators are not allowed to confer with one another at any time during the competition (Ó Maolaodha 2014 [personal interview]). At the end of each individual performance a member of the Oireachtas staff visits each of the adjudicators to collect their mark for that particular performance. Each adjudicator writes his/her mark for each performance on a small business card sized sticker. These stickers are then brought, by the Oireachtas staff member, to the ‘tallying’ table at the side of the venue, where s/he adds up the marks given by all three adjudicators for that particular singer (using a calculator) —this process is witnessed by an independent witness, usually a member of Irish-language
related board such as Údarás na Gaeltachta (ibid). The individual stickers are then stuck onto a page, and each singer competing has their own page (Ó Maolaodha 2014 [personal interview]). Although somewhat tedious to describe, in reality this process is very efficient. Each adjudicator has their own record of each mark given, and the tallying table also has their record of each of the adjudicators’ marks, written in the adjudicator’s hand. Interestingly enough, I also observed that many of the audience members made notes in their festival programmes throughout the performances.

One of the most notable things about all three CURs was the quality and musicianship of the competitors. Many of the Oireachtas singing competitions are open to anyone willing to pay the small entry fee. This means that one can expect to see a wide range of abilities demonstrated at these events. However, all the singers that appear at the CUR have qualified by winning or placing in some other Oireachtas singing competition. This means that one gets to see a very high standard of sean-nós performed at the CUR. It also means that the CUR competitors tend to be experienced at performing on stage. Because I have already discussed the aesthetic and stylistic characteristics of sean-nós in Chapter VI in some detail, I focus here more on the overall event, rather than on a detailed stylistic analysis of the competitors’ singing styles.

That being said, it is worth noting that all the competitors followed the ‘standard’ practice of singing songs associated with their specific Gaeltacht district, and in styles associated with these districts. There is wealth of different song types in the traditional repertoire, from lullabies to love songs, and laments. Some of these are only a few verses in length, while others are far longer and melodically complex. It was noteworthy that at all of the CURs I attended nearly all the singers sang very long slow laments. Some of the songs performed were eight to ten minutes in length and many had a melodic range of up to an octave and a half. One or two performers sang songs that had melodies that modulated in places, and many sang songs that I had never heard before. Even some of the songs that I was familiar with, were unusual and often longer than the versions I was familiar with.
The audience reacted differently depending on the performance. Some of the older competitors and regular Oireachtas competitors seemed to receive more applause and shouts of encouragement from the audience as a whole. This highlights the fact that the Oireachtas sean-nós competition is a community. I overheard a number of audience members mention that they were attending the festival for so many years. For example, I heard one woman in her early fifties mention that she had not missed an Oireachtas in twenty years. I also overheard another woman in her sixties mention to her male companion of roughly the same age that a particular singer “always makes a good job of that song”. This would suggest that the audience becomes familiar with singers who compete regularly at the festival.

Possibly because the songs were so long, a number of songs seemed to drag on somewhat, and I got the sense that the audience was bored during these particular performances. I noticed individuals in the audience shuffling their feet and shifting in their seat at times. The applause these performers received was somewhat less enthusiastic than that received by performers who managed to maintain the interest of the audience. Interestingly, many of the adjudicator reports criticise performances for being boring (see Appendix B). I discuss audience applause in detail in the analysis section of this chapter. The CUR competition can go on for three and sometimes four hours, and possibly because of this members of the audience tend to come and go throughout the performance, this is always done in between individual performance however.

This first portion of the CUR typically takes roughly an hour and a half to complete. At this stage, all the singers are back in the green room, waiting to hear the results. The adjudicators finish up their note taking, since most of the report writing occurs during the actual performances, this usually only takes a minute or two. It does however, take anywhere between five and ten minutes for all the marks for this portion of the competition to be tallied. Occasionally one of the Oireachtas staff who
is located at the ‘tallying’ table will visit one or other of the adjudicators in order to check that the mark they have is correct.

Once the ‘counters’ are happy, a list of singers’ names is handed up to Máirtín Tom Shéáinín. This is all done in full view of the audience. Máirtín takes a minute to read through this list, before announcing the names of the singers who have received the *glaoch ar ais* [the call back] to perform a second song of their choice, this time a fast song. The number of competitors who are called back to perform a second song can vary from year to year, depending on the overall number of entrants and the perceived quality of the performances. For example, in 2011 only five singers were called back to sing that year. Ó Maolaodha later informed me that even getting the call back is considered enough validation for many of the *Oireachtas* singers, indicating the esteem the competition is held in.

A short interval follows the announcement of the contestants for the second portion of the competition. This follows the same format as the first portion, noted above. Once the final singer has finished singing, all the marks for each individual singer are added together and added up with their marks from the first portion of the competition. The singer with the highest overall mark out of a hundred wins, second and third place is awarded in the same way.

The tallying of the marks takes approximately eight to ten minutes. It is clear that the ‘counters’ are keen to avoid any mistakes. From my vantage point in the audience it appeared that the addition of the marks was checked and double-checked before the sheet with the winners’ names was again handed up to Máirtín Tom Sheáinín. By this stage Máirtín was joined on stage by the *Oireachtas* president, and other dignitaries and representatives from the festival’s sponsors. Before the announcement of the CUR winners, a number of other general announcements are made by Máirtín Tom Sheáinín and others. The *Oireachtas Gradam Saoil* [lifetime award] is given out at this stage, and details of the location for the next *Oireachtas* festival are also shared.
When all this is done, Máirtín Tom Sheáinín announces the CUR third place winner. S/he comes on stage and is awarded their medal and cheque for €400 by the Oireachtas president. Next, the second prize winner is announced; s/he comes on stage and is awarded their medal and cheque for €600. The second prize winner and the third prize winner remain on stage to await the announcement of the first prize winner. S/he then makes his/her way on to the stage from the green room and is awarded the Corn Úi Riada, a gold medal, and a cheque for €1,500 by the Oireachtas president. After a number of official photographs are taken, all leave the stage except for the first prize winner who sings a song of their choice, before departing to celebrate their success.

7.5 Analysis

One of the things that I noticed about the CUR was that singers often did not follow the running order of the festival programme. I ascertained later from Ó Maolaodha that singers often arrange amongst themselves the running order. This is usually done to accommodate a singer who might not be feeling well due to nervousness or illness. While this can be read as another example of agency it also suggests that a sense of camaraderie exists among Oireachtas competitors. Indeed, Ó Maolaodha invited me on a number of occasions to witness the scene in the green room prior to and during the competition, in order to see first-hand the communal atmosphere that exists amongst the competitors, as the following interview extract illustrates:

**LÓM:** b’fhéidir má bhíonn tú i gCill Áirne i mbliana go mo chomhar duit dul agus sui san green room leis na hiomaitheoirí le tuiscint a fháil ar chomh compordach is atá siad leana chéile, chomh cuidiodh leana chéile. Ag moladh chuile duine sula dtéann duine suas nó nuair a thagann siad anuas nó eile. Bhí bliain amháin bhí duine amháin uafáisach tinn. Ní raibh sé i ann dul amach. Bhí sé ceaptha a bheidh uimhir a ceithre, abair. Agus chuaigh duine [I ndiaidh duine] ós a chomhair ag rá tá tú ceart go leor, fán, tá tú ceart, beidh tú all right. Tuigeann siad féin.

**LÓM:** Maybe if you are in Killarney this year [2014] you should go and sit in the green room with the competitors, to get an understanding of how comfortable they all are in each other’s company, how supportive they are
to one another. Praising each singer before they go on stage, or after they have finished singing or whatever. There was one year, one person was very sick, and wasn’t able to compete. He was supposed to be the fourth person to sing, let’s say. But one after the other all the other competitors went to him and said, you’re ok, wait, you’ll be alright. They [competitors] understand the situation.

(Liam Ó Maolaodha 2014 [personal interview])

I am personally acquainted with a number of singers who have competed at the CUR and they all agree with Ó Maolaodha, that a communal atmosphere exists in the green room between individual competitors. This would suggest that the Oireachtas competitions are a ritual — in the sense of a rite of passage — for the competitors (see Schechner 2006, pp. 70-72).

Typically rituals are divided into two main types, the sacred and the secular (ibid, p.53). Sacred rituals are those practices and actions associated with expressing or enacting religious beliefs, and secular rituals are those associated with everyday life, such as sports events, state ceremonies etc. (ibid), although Schechner adds that many if not most rituals are both secular and sacred. Rappaport suggests that “rituals tend to be stylized, repetitive, stereotypical, often but not always decorous, and they tend to occur at special places and at times fixed by the clock, calendar, or specified circumstances” (Cited in Schechner 2006, p.53).

Schechner seems happy to read almost all human activity (performance) as ritual. He states that: “[…] performances —whether in the performing arts, sports, popular music, or everyday life — consist of ritualized gestures and sounds” (Schechner 2006, p.52). Schechner adds: “Rituals are collective memories encoded into actions” (ibid). In other words, ritual consists of “restored behaviour” (ibid, p.101). As I have discussed above, the Oireachtas competitions follows the same basic format every year, which might lead some commentators to conclude that the festival is therefore a ritual, due to the fact that it consists of restored behaviour. However, as Cottrell
points out, determining whether a particular performance (human activity) is a ritual or not can be tricky, and the universal application of ritual to all forms of human behaviour only serves to obfuscate the meaning of the term (Cottrell 2004, p.43).

The Oireachtas Competition as a Rite of Passage
Here I am not particularly interested in deconstructing the concept of ritual. Nor am I interested in participating in a discussion on the merits or demerits of reading all performance, or indeed all music events, as ritual. However, I do believe that reading the Oireachtas singing competition as a rite of passage helps to explain some of what occurs at this particular event. A key characteristic of ritual is that it functions to bring about some form of change, usually some reordering of the pre-existing social system (Cottrell 2004, p.154). Rites of passage are particular rituals associated with progress through the human life, such as birth, circumcision, marriage and death (ibid, p.152). This type of ritual consists of three essential stages: rites of separation (preliminal), transition rites (liminal), and rites of incorporation (postliminal) (ibid).

The first phase of a rite of passage, the preliminal stage, sees the participants in the rite of passage being separated — symbolically and usually physically — from the structure of society. Arguably the back-stage green room at the Oireachtas, before the competition begins, represents such a separation. The audience and the competitors are kept separate at the Oireachtas; they enter and exit the auditorium from different spaces. The second stage, the liminal stage, is more ambiguous:

Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions.

(Turner 1969, p.95)

Turner adds that the liminal phase or state is often likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to bisexuality, to darkness, to the wilderness etc. (ibid). Turner
offers that the break from the normal structure of society that liminal entities undergo represents a form of anti-structure (cited in Schechner 2006, p.70). Those who are in a liminal phase are freed from the demands of daily life, they feel at one with their fellow liminal entities, are uplifted, swept away, taken over. Turner referred to this experience of ritual camaraderie as communitas (ibid, p.70). As Schechner points out, communitas, as it is defined by Turner, is a complex term that comes in several varieties, including “the normative” and the “spontaneous”. Normative communitas is official, ordained, imposed; it is the type of communitas that occurs during communion in a Roman Catholic service. Although the congregation is united in Christ by the Eucharist, not every congregant may feel “in Christ” at that moment (ibid). Spontaneous communitas on the other hand is the egalitarian bond that individuals within the liminal phase share, a state that abolishes status, albeit temporarily (ibid).

In his study of Western art music, Cottrell reads the orchestral concert as a *rite of passage*. He offers that the liminal phase of the ritual occurs while the musicians are on stage performing. However, the liminal phase is harder to pinpoint at the *Oireachtas*. This is because individual competitors move back and forth between the green room and the stage. For example, a singer is called to compete, s/he goes on stage, sings one song and when s/he has finished singing s/he returns to the green-room. I would argue that the liminal phase at the *Oireachtas* begins when the competition begins, and it continues until a winner is picked. Spatially, therefore, one can say that once the *sean-nós* singing competition begins the green room and the stage both become liminal spaces. When the competition is complete, the singers at the *Oireachtas* move into the post-liminal phase. The ritual is complete and a new social order has been brought about —a new CUR champion is crowned. The sense of camaraderie that was fostered during the liminal phase continues however, and it this sense of communitas that is arguably the most significant aspect of *rites of passage*. 
During the 2011 festival I spoke with one regular CUR competitor, Sean (not his real name) who spoke to me of the friendships he had made through the competition. Although Sean admitted to being highly competitive and extremely aware of the fact that he is representing his district on the Oireachtas stage, he also indicated that he felt a kinship with those he competed against at the festival. In fact the only thing he was critical of was individuals who remained aloof from their fellow competitors. He stated that in the green room singers advised one another and helped each other with reference notes or the words to songs etc. He added that if a particular performance went badly for a singer, on their return to the green room they were consoled and supported by their fellow competitors. Sean mentioned that occasionally a competitor might not mix with the rest of the group and he felt that this was a serious transgression of the green room etiquette. I would offer that remaining aloof from one’s fellow competitors is a breach of etiquette because it means the individual in question is not entering into the spirit of the rite of passage that is the Oireachtas sean-nós singing competition.

It is argued by scholars such as Cottrell that audience members, as well as onstage performers, can enter into a liminal space where social status is temporarily disregarded, and where “an ecstatic state and sense of union” (spontaneous communitas) is experienced, albeit briefly, by all the participants (2004, p.161). However, I am disinclined to think that this occurs at the Oireachtas audience. By focusing largely on the use of applause at the CUR competition I came to the conclusion that rather than entering into a liminal space where social status is temporarily disregarded, social difference—regional Gaeltacht difference in particular—is heightened during the competition. This indicates that, notwithstanding the sense of communitas experienced by competitors, at its heart the Oireachtas is an inter-Gaeltacht competition.

The Function of Applause at the Oireachtas
During the 2010 CUR I noted that certain sections of the audience would become very vocal in their applause for singers from specific Gaeltacht districts. When
singers for other Gaeltacht areas sang they still applauded but with less enthusiasm, after a while I could almost tell where certain audience members came from by the pattern of their applause. One middle aged gentleman, in his mid-fifties, was seated two rows in front of me, and I noticed that he would only applaud singers from one particular Gaeltacht — when a singer from other districts finished singing he remained silent. During my time at the festival in 2011 I sat in a number of different sections of the audience, at the back, close to the front, and right in the middle. Interestingly enough I never came across anyone at the 2011 or 2012 festival who did not clap for singers from certain districts. I did notice however that certain sections of the audience would become more vocal in their applause for singers from specific Gaeltacht areas, indicating that they were supporting that region. I also saw, as I had in 2010, groups and individual audience members leaving the venue after a particular singer had performed, suggesting that they were not supporting the competition as a whole, or necessarily a Gaeltacht region for that matter, but rather a particular singer. Nevertheless, I would argue that applause at the Oireachtas is used primarily to mark regional boundaries and to show support for singers from within those boundaries.

That being said, I found that certain singers, irrespective of where they were from, received extended applause from all sections of the audience. There are many possible reasons for this: the audience might be familiar with a singer having seen them perform many times; the singer might have a likable personality, etc. However, it seems more likely that this occurs primarily when the audience feels the performance in question is particularly good. This suggests that certain singers who are regarded by the audience as being exceptionally talented have the ability to transcend regional biases somewhat (although I would argue that regional bias is never fully absent from the competition).

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40 During the competition audience members are expected to remain quiet and in their seats. However, between individual performers the audience is free to come and go as they please. Stewards are positioned at the venue doors and they allow people in and out between singers, and they close the doors during performances.
One singer who stands out as an exemplar of these phenomena is Nell Ni Chrónín, a young woman from Ballygerry in the Cork Gaeltacht. I heard Nell perform on a number of television and radio programmes before I saw her compete at the 2010 Oireachtas, where she won both the under 35 women’s and the overall women’s sean-nós competition that year. This qualified her to compete in the CUR for the next five years — Nell went on to win the CUR in 2014 when it returned to Killarney. During the 2010 Oireachtas I got the sense that Nell received a more energetic and extended applause than most of the other competitors. Initially I felt that this was due to her having a strong following in the audience. Killarney is, compared to the other Gaeltacht districts quite close to Nell’s home area in the Cork Gaeltacht. However, I noticed that other Cork and Kerry singers did not necessarily receive the same level of applause as Nell, suggesting that the applause she received was due to something other than regional support.

I noticed similar displays at the CUR in Letterkenny at the 2012 festival. For example Pól Ó Ceannabháín, from Conamara, seemed to receive an extended applause from the audience as a whole that year — Ó Ceannabháín went on to win the overall prize in 2012. Cottrell offers that applause acts as a means of communication that functions to unify musicians and the audience in a shared environment, contributing to the creation of communitas (2004 p.166). While I accept that audience participation at music events can be a deeply moving experience, shared inter-subjectively with fellow concert goers, I question whether this experience should be called communitas, in the sense that the pre-existing status of all participants is temporarily abandoned. I am not convinced either that audience

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41 Apart from previous CUR winners, the first prize and second prize winners in the men and women’s senior competition qualify to compete in the CUR for five years after their initial win. If they do not win the CUR within that timeframe, they must re-qualify again by winning either the men or women’s senior competition again. If you wish to compete in the CUR you cannot compete in any other Oireachtas sean-nós competition that same year. This system creates a sense of momentum and continuity. Singers know that if they only have a short window to achieve success in the CUR, and this adds to the sense of prestige and excitement of the competition (Ó Maolaodha 2014 [personal interview]).
members at the *Oireachtas* are transformed permanently by their experience, another central tenet of *rites of passage* (see Cottrell 2004, pp.154-155).

If communitas does occur at the *Oireachtas* it is during those moments when a singer’s performance is powerful enough to break down regional rivalries among the audience. As I have mentioned, during my fieldwork certain performances at the CUR received more applause from the audience as a whole than was typical. It is possible that in these cases applause functions to unite the wider audience together based on an aesthetic response to the individual performance, in a manner similar to that suggested by Cottrell. Irrespective of whether this phenomenon can be described as communitas or not, there is arguably always some element of inter-*Gaeltacht* rivalry being enacted at the various *Oireachtas sean-nós* competitions.

**Inter-*Gaeltacht* Rivalry and Irish Identity**

Romantic nationalism is an ideology based largely on notions of national cultural homogeny (see also Chapter II). The idea is that all those within the imagined community that is the nation, are the same people with a shared culture and heritage. Regional diversity can be read as a form of heterogeneity, which undermines the idea that all citizens within the nation have the same cultural heritage. Technically, if the *Oireachtas sean-nós* singing cohort was truly Romantic nationalist in its outlook, one should expect to see a standardised form of *sean-nós* being performed on the *Oireachtas* stage. However, as I have argued in Chapter VI, singers at the *Oireachtas* competitions are expected to sing in regional *Gaeltacht* dialects and in the style and repertoire associated with those specific regions. If the *Oireachtas* competition was truly Romantic nationalist in its outlook, the adjudicators would presumably be happy to hear singers all singing the same basic style and with the same dialect, and this simply is not the case. The fact of the matter is that, because singers index specific regional communities, the *Oireachtas sean-nós* competition is essentially an inter-*Gaeltacht* competition. Therefore, rather than create a ‘standard’ *sean-nós* style, the OSSC actually reinforces the idea of regional stylistic boundaries.
I would argue that this indicates that the ideology of the OSSC is a form of communitarianism. Although there are a number of ways communitarianism can be interpreted, here I use the term to mean a loyalty to particularistic, sub-national communities. From this perspective communitarianism and nationalism are seen as two fundamentally opposed projects, because nationalism can be understood as an attempt to transcend loyalty to particularism, by creating an overarching national identity for all citizens within the nation-state (Abizadeh 2002, p.497). The 1960s and 1970s saw the Irish language shift from being a nationalist to a minority rights issue. As I have outlined in Chapter V, this change had a huge impact on the *Oireachtas*, and arguably communitarianism, in the sense of the celebration of local diversity, became the new ideology of the festival at this time. If this is in fact the case then this ideological shift was largely due to the agency of the *Gaeltacht* community, through the medium of the *Gaeltacht* civil rights movement.

However, it might be retorted that the intense sense of regionalism that is enacted at the *Oireachtas sean-nós* competitions is paradoxically the result of the essentialising ideology of Romantic nationalism. Romantic nationalism’s obsession with cultural authenticity created a situation within the *Oireachtas* where members of the various *Gaeltacht* districts fought to have their regional style of *sean-nós* — and other expressive culture — recognised as being the most authentically Irish, and therefore the standard Irish style. The fact that no single dialect of Irish or regional style of *sean-nós* emerged as the Irish style, might suggest that, notwithstanding the fact that it failed ideologically, in the sense that no single standardised style of *sean-nós* emerged, the OSSC is nevertheless ideologically Romantic nationalist. Whatever the underlying ideological motive may be, the inter-*Gaeltacht* quality of the *Oireachtas* competitions reinforces notions of regional and ethnic separateness as opposed to national homogeny. This suggests that whether it was intentional or accidental the dominant ideology of OSSC is arguably more communitarianism than nationalistic.

As I have stated above, the basic goal of the *Oireachtas* central members (the national committee and staff) is the promotion and celebration of the Irish language.
While the Irish language is deeply connected with issues of Irish identity within the Oireachtas central membership, I offer that the basis of identity has shifted from being primarily nationally (ethno-linguistically) based, to one which is linguistically based. This suggests that the Oireachtas is more of a language affinity group than a nationalist movement. Although Ó Maolaodha did try to play down the inter-Gaeltacht component of the Oireachtas singing competitions, this does not necessarily mean that the executive committee is Romantic nationalist.

I found no evidence in my interviews with Ó Maolaodha that indicated that he believed in a homogenous national culture. Instead I feel that Ó Maolaodha sees the Oireachtas membership as a community of Irish speakers that is both local and global, but not necessarily nationalistic. Even if one wants to persist with the idea that the Oireachtas remains at its heart a nationalistic organisation – due to the centrality of the Irish language in the movement – one has to admit that the contemporary nationalism of the Oireachtas is some form of civic or liberal nationalism based on cultural autonomy as opposed to the ethnic-nationalism of Romantic nationalism (for more on civic nationalism see Nielsen 1999; Tamir 1993).

An in-depth and detailed analysis on the nature of nationalism does not concern us here. What is important however is to show that Oireachtas is a complex festival that consists of many voices, and as I have outlined above, sean-nós within the festival is not quite as narrowly defined as it might first appear to be. Moreover, the Gaeltacht populace has played an instrumental role within the Oireachtas in defining the parameters of this genre. In particular, the Gaeltacht community has insured that the diversity of regional identities, existing within the Gaeltacht as a whole, is central to ideas of good sean-nós singing within the Oireachtas.

Kevin Whelan convincingly illustrates the deeply local nature of Irish culture and identity, both historically, and down to the present day (1993, pp. 5-6). Whelan imagines Irish identity to be like ‘a set of Chinese boxes’, progressively extending outwards. This begins with the family farm, next is the town-land which constitutes
the primary centre of local identity, all the way out to the nation. Indeed as Graham points out:

Thus Whelan (1992, 1993) questions the whole myth of homogeneity, arguing that Ireland was and remains an island comprised of localised regions, an interpretation which demands the deconstruction of the potentially divisive nature of island-wide generalisation and state-sponsored ideology.

(1997b, p.198)

Graham also draws attention to the fact that contemporary historiography argues against the essentialism of ‘Gaelic nationalist historiography’, by “depicting a heterogeneous Ireland of many local places” (1997b, p.210). In fact Graham believes that:

The Irish state is in the process of discarding time-worn representations of place that served to help unify the twenty-six county state (not least by its exploitation of partition) in favour of a sense of place that, while encapsulating the unique qualities of Irishness, is also heterogeneous, outward-oriented, markedly less Catholic and intensely localised.

( ibid, p. 209)

The celebration of heterogeneity in an Irish context is the celebration of the local, and this idea of local diversity has become central to contemporary ideas concerning Irish identity. From the perspective of this thesis, ideas of Irish identity, even within Gaelic nationalist organisations like the Oireachtas, now seem also to be based more on ideas of local diversity rather than on national homogeneity. I would suggest that this is further evidence that the Oireachtas today is no longer a Romantic nationalist organisation.

**Conclusion**

This chapter draws on my ethnographic field work of the Oireachtas festival from 2010 to 2012 and on my in-depth interview with Liam Ó Maolaodha. I have argued
that although the *Oireachtas* was originally formed because of the influence of Romantic nationalism, in its current form it is best described as an umbrella festival made up of many cohorts. The central membership, the national committee and the *Oireachtas* staff, see the *Oireachtas* as a vehicle for promoting and celebrating the Irish language. However, I have argued that although Romantic nationalist terminology is sometimes used to explain this particular cohort’s rationale, in reality the Irish language movement cohort within the *Oireachtas* is more akin to a language affinity group than an ethno-linguistic nationalist movement.

I also made reference to two other cohorts that exist within the *Oireachtas* membership that are not centred on the Irish language, namely the uilleann pipe cohort and the *sean-nós* dancing cohort. I have outlined how both the uilleann pipes and the *sean-nós* dancing competitions draw individuals to the *Oireachtas* who are not necessarily Irish speakers, or particularly interested in the Irish language. The *sean-nós* dance competition in particular has grown in popularity since the early 2000s and this event more than any other has at times challenged the centrality of the Irish language within the festival. The existence of these cohorts within the wider *Oireachtas* membership has not been engineered by the central members, instead they have emerged due to the agency of the wider membership, illustrating that the *Oireachtas* is not a homogenous organisation, but a much more complex social organism.

Further evidence of agency can be observed at the *Oireachtas sean-nós* singing competitions. I have argued that these events are essentially inter-*Gaeltacht* competitions, where the singing style of the competitor indexes specific *Gaeltacht* regions. The inter-*Gaeltacht* rivalry that occurs at the various *sean-nós* singing competitions however is not determined by the central membership. Indeed when I questioned Ó Maolaodha on this issue I found that he tried to play down the issue of regionalism. As I have stated above, Ó Maolaodha directed me towards the camaraderie that existed between the CUR competitors, in part to show that the competition transcended regionalism. Ó Maolaodha was adamant that regionalism
was not that significant a factor at the singing competitions. He stated that the real singing community came together after the competitions at the festival singing club. While it is very possible that regionalism is not a factor within the more relaxed atmosphere of the singing club — where anyone present is welcome to sing any song as long as it is in Irish — it is very much in evidence at the various sean-nós singing competitions.

The existence of regionalism is another example of agency on the part of the wider Oireachtas membership. It also highlights the significance of the Gaeltacht within the festival. As I have stated above the inter-Gaeltacht nature of the Oireachtas sean-nós cohort is arguably more communitarian in its outlook than nationalistic. Therefore, even if we accept that the outlook of the executive committee is some form of neo-cultural nationalism, its ideology and that of the OSSC are arguably not the same. This illustrates that a festival like the Oireachtas can consist of numerous sub-groups who can, through their own agency, manipulate the festival into what they themselves imagine it to be, even when that ideal differs from the ideal of the festival organisers.

The communitarianism of the OSSC is not without issue however. In many ways it is a communitarianism of conformity. As I have illustrated in Chapter V, singers who compete at the Oireachtas have to restrict themselves to specific regional repertoires/styles. Singing songs from other districts is frowned upon. This is somewhat ironic due to the fact that some of the oldest songs in the tradition are sung in all the districts, albeit in regional variants. This shows that in the past vernacular singers did not necessarily restrict themselves to regional bounded repertoires, as sean-nós singers at the Oireachtas do today. In some ways the framing of the various Gaeltacht communities as separate ethnicities harks back to the Romantic nationalism of the early League and Oireachtas. Suggesting perhaps that aesthetics and ideology of the Oireachtas sean-nós singing cohort is informed by a blend of essentialist Romantic nationalism and more idiosyncratic ideas concerning good
sean-nós singing coming from the Gaeltacht community, as I have suggested in Chapter VI.

As I discuss in Chapter II, the founding members of these organisations viewed the Gaeltacht as ‘reservations’ or ‘national parks’ of authentic Irishness that needed to be protected from modernity and change. Some might read the inter-Gaeltacht regionalism that is enacted during various Oireachtas singing competitions as the performance of this Romantic nationalist framing. Be that as it may, as I have argued throughout, the Gaeltacht community plays a significant role in the ‘authoring’ of sean-nós within the Oireachtas sean-nós singing cohort; arguably it is up to this musical community as a whole to challenge and question the parameters and aesthetic rules of sean-nós — if they wish to do so.
Chapter VIII: Conclusion - Complicating the idea of Cultural Intervention

Sean-nós is widely considered to be a form of traditional Irish language song from the Gaeltacht, sung solo and unaccompanied, and this view has largely been authored by the Oireachtas membership. The objective of this thesis is to highlight the role played by the Gaeltacht community within various Oireachtas na Gaeilge sean-nós singing competitions. I have argued that the Oireachtas sean-nós singing cohort is made up of individuals from both within and without the Gaeltacht, and that the movement as a whole has helped to shape how sean-nós singing is widely perceived and performed. In the introduction to this thesis I suggest that the Oireachtas sean-nós singing competition is a nexus point were various ideological views and disparate voices come together to ‘author’ this particular category of song.

As I have stated in Chapter IV, much of the literature that deals with folk revival movements tends to focus primarily on the role played by the reviver in this process. The reviver is usually portrayed either as a ‘purist’ obsessed with preserving the culture of the folk, or as a progressivist engaged in a process of gentrification (see Whisnett 1983, pp. 13-14; Boyes 2010, p.47). When the so called folk or traditional singer/musician is discussed in the literature, it is usually in order to show how s/he has been exploited by the reviver. While there is often some truth to this kind of interpretation, ultimately it is overly simplistic. As I have stated throughout this thesis, there can be no revival without the folk; therefore, even if they are sometimes socio-economically less well off than the typical reviver they are not without power. Yet, much of the literature that deals with revival movements disregards the power and agency of the folk in the revival; instead revivalist movements —what Whisnett refers to as “cultural interventionist movements”— tend to be framed as having hegemonic and deterministic structures. Here I argue against this type of reading.

42 As stated in Chapter I, a distinction should be made between revivals which are based on a ‘living’ folk culture, and those concerned with reviving a long forgotten form of cultural expression.
The ‘Folk’ As Cultural Interventionist

Admittedly, the *Oireachtas sean-nós* competition appears initially to be a hegemonic institution, because power and ideology seems to be under the control of an elite group within the organisation — the *Oireachtas* adjudicators and the *Oireachtas* staff who select them. This would suggest that the singers and audience are a subordinate group within this cohort. There are two factors that illustrate that this is not true however. First, the *Oireachtas* needs the best and most highly regarded singers to compete in its competitions, in order to maintain the sense of prestige that the festival has developed over the years. If singers stay away from the *Oireachtas*, because they are unhappy with the competition structure or format, then — as I have shown in Chapter VI — the *Oireachtas* changes the format or structure of the competition to suit the *sean-nós* singers, so that they keep coming back to the festival year after year. This clearly indicates that *sean-nós* singers are agents that can effect change within this movement (for a detailed discussion on agency and determinism see Dennett 2007).

Second, the idea that the *Oireachtas sean-nós* competition is a hegemonic institution is based on the assumption that the *Oireachtas* adjudicators and the *sean-nós* singing community are two separate cultural formations. As I have shown in Chapter VI, from 1939 onwards singers from the *Gaeltacht* were adjudicating at various *Oireachtas sean-nós* competitions - individuals such as Conamara’s Máire Áine Ni Dhonnacha, Seán Ó Cuirrín from Waterford, and Donegal’s Áine Ní Ghallchobhair for example. Therefore, although they existed on the margins of the *Oireachtas* for much of the early decades of the twentieth century, members of the *Gaeltacht* community had a certain level of agency within the *Oireachtas sean-nós* singing competition during this period.

Irish music academics and scholars, many of them Romantic nationalists, adjudicated beside *sean-nós* singers from the *Gaeltacht* districts. I suggest that this situation created a space where Romantic nationalist ideas concerning cultural essences blended with vernacular (*Gaeltacht*) ideas concerning ‘good’ performance. In other
words, what is considered musically and aesthetically appropriate in this musical culture has been arrived at through a process of negotiation, exchange and discourse, between members of the various Gaeltacht districts, and between members of the Gaeltacht and Irish Romantic nationalists (the revivalists).

Admittedly, this depiction is somewhat crude and reductive, glossing over, for the sake of clarity, what was in fact a much more complex situation. Many of the Gaeltacht sean-nós singers that adjudicated during this time were equally as Romantic nationalist as any adjudicator from outside the Gaeltacht. Sorcha Ní Ghuaire, a sean-nós singer from the Conamara Gaeltacht who adjudicated throughout the 1940s, for example, was an outspoken nationalist and member of the Gaelic League and the Oireachtas (Mac Con Iomaire 2007 p.53). Nevertheless, while many sean-nós singers from the Gaeltacht might very well have internalised the Romantic nationalism of the revival, I would suggest that they also brought with them ideas and aesthetics from the Gaeltacht, as the following extract from a lecture given by Ni Ghuaire at an Oireachtas symposium on sean-nós in 1943 suggests:

*An ó dhream a tógadh le Béarla nó le Gaedhilge – a ghlacfas muid treoir?*

Tá ceol na ndaoine i n-íochtar faoi láthair ach dá dtugadh duine de na h-uaíse Gallda amaireach, a toshchadh a’ cur spéis sa rud duthchasach, b’fhéidir go mbeadh dúil mhór again ann. Sa lá atá indiu ann ní chleachtann ceol na ndaoine ach muinntir na Gaeltachta, agus nil lord ná lady orthu siúd, cé go m’fhéidir go bhfuil an fhuil mhór ó dhuthchas iomtu.

Should we seek direction from those who were raised with English or those raised with Irish? The music of the people [sean-nós] is of little interest at the moment, but if some English/foreign nobleman began to take interest in it perhaps we would develop a deep interest in it. Today the music of the people is practiced only by the people from the Gaeltacht, and there are no lords or ladies among them, though perhaps it is noble blood that flows through their veins.

(Mac Con Iomaire 2007 p.54)
There are a number of ways the above extract can be interpreted. The framing of the Gaeltacht community and the English as binary opposites, and as descendants of a noble past, suggests Romantic nationalism was influencing Ní Ghualairim here. However, it is also clear that Ní Ghualairim was arguing that sean-nós expertise was to be found nowhere other than in the Gaeltacht. As Ó Laoire argues, traditional singers have complex idiosyncratic ideas concerning what is traditional and authentic, and this is often far more complex than ideas of cultural essences (2000).

I offer that it is highly likely that singers/adjudicators from the various Gaeltacht districts brought their own idiosyncratic views on sean-nós with them to the adjudicating table. I suggest that Oireachtas adjudicating represents an interesting nexus where aesthetic ideas from the Gaeltacht districts combine together, with ideas drawn from Romantic nationalism, to create the category sean-nós song. From the 1970s onwards sean-nós singers have been adjudicating at the Oireachtas in even greater numbers, and it is not uncommon nowadays to have all three adjudicators who are also sean-nós singers. This suggests that rather than being an institution with hegemonic structures, power here is in fact shared between the various actors who participate in the competitions.

**Authenticity seen in Complexity and Naturalness**

Ó Laoire, arguably the most critical commentator of the Oireachtas sean-nós singing competitions, sees the Oireachtas as having a standardising influence on sean-nós song. While there is some truth to this, my research suggests that the Oireachtas is not as essentialist as Ó Laoire suggests. He argues that after 1939 the Oireachtas became more nativist in its outlook, and that nativists imagined Irishness as being the “binary-opposite” of Englishness. Therefore, they believed that sean-nós song was the binary opposite of western art song — which, according to Ó Laoire, was seen as an index of the former English coloniser. Ó Laoire adds that nativists imagined that the sean-nós singer was primarily concerned with “telling the story of a song”, while those trained in the western art tradition were more concerned with following the
melodic contour of the musical line (2000, p.165). Ó Laoire argues that nativists saw melismatic ornamentation as a tool for foregrounding verbal expression. Essentially Ó Laoire suggests that nativists within the *Oireachtas* equated authenticity and traditionality with melismatic ornamentation. He adds that nativists favoured the Conamara style because singers of this style tend to employ the most melismatic ornamentation: “It almost came to the point where *sean-nós* was a term exclusively reserved for the Galway [Conamara] style of singing” (2000, p.167).

Although I would agree that after 1939 the nativist position within the *Oireachtas* gained some ground, ultimately I argue that progressivism remained the prevailing ideology of the *Oireachtas* until the early 1970s, when the organisation was essentially co-opted by the *Gaeltacht* Civil rights movement (see Chapter V). Also, my analysis of *Oireachtas* adjudicator reports suggests that — in this musical community— traditionality is seen in complexity, antiquity, and the naturalness of the singer. While melismatic ornamentation is seen by members of this community as an important device for illustrating the complexity of a song, it is only one of many ways this is exhibited. Therefore, while the *Oireachtas* might well have had somewhat of a standardising effect on *sean-nós* singing, as is suggested by Ó Laoire, there is no single standardised or ‘ideal’ style that will guarantee success at the festival. Also, contrary to what Ó Laoire suggests, the reports indicate that music and narrative in *sean-nós* singing are equally important. This suggests that the dominance of the Conamara style within the *Oireachtas sean-nós* singing competitions is due to something other than adjudicator bias. It also points to the limitations of the binary-opposites theory.

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43 The term tradition implies a transmission process, “a chain joining the past to the present, as well as that which is transmitted (*tradtum*); in other words, it refers to a specific inheritance of a collective phenomenon. If one considers this double meaning, one can say that tradition is culture” (Aubert 2007 p.16).
I argue that, like many musical cultures, what is considered ‘good performance’ is subjective and is always being contested and argued over. Therefore, it is always, to a certain degree, in a state of flux. This does not mean however that sean-nós performance has no definable characteristics, quite the reverse; instead the Oireachtas adjudicator reports indicate that, within the aesthetic spectrum of ‘good’ sean-nós performance, there are certain key pillars that underpin good sean-nós singing. I propose that these key pillars are informed both by ideas drawn from Romantic nationalism and ideas originating in the Gaeltacht community. The ideas merge in the nexus that is the Oireachtas sean-nós singing competition.

The reports suggest that sean-nós is ‘of the Gaeltacht’. This means singers at the Oireachtas need to sing in one or other of the Gaeltacht dialects. They also have to sing songs from within specific Gaeltacht repertoires, and in the style associated with that district. Sean-nós singers are also framed as ‘natural’ singers, whether this idea is based on a binary opposition to the trained — therefore ‘unnatural’ — Euro-classical singer or whether it is informed by indigenous ideas concerning what is considered good singing is difficult to say. The idea of the ‘natural’ singer means that great emphasis is placed on the singer’s control and command of singing. The sean-nós singer is expected to sing with ease, use ornamentation in an un-contrived way, and not lose control of the breath, ideas one would presumably find in many European and other singing traditions. The reports are somewhat vague on the issue of timbre and voice production process. It seems that a variety of vocal registers are considered appropriate in this tradition; however, there is some evidence to suggest that a blend of head and chest registers is preferred by the majority of adjudicators.

Opinions differ also on the use of nasalisation, vibrato and dynamics. Generally speaking the use of these vocal techniques seems to be acceptable, perhaps even desirable, within this tradition as long as they are not overly pronounced. The pronounced use of any of these techniques points to the ‘unnaturalness’ of the performance. Of course opinions as to what is considered “overly pronounced” will
vary from adjudicators to adjudicator, and ultimately *sean-nós* cannot be reduced to its constituent parts (see Chapter VI).

**The Colonisation of the Oireachtas by the Conamara Community**

Nevertheless, as Ó Laoire points out, Conamara singers do generally employ more melismatic ornamentation than singers of other regional styles, and singers from Conamara have been the most successful at the *Oireachtas*. However, this does not necessarily mean that there is a causal relationship between the use of melismatic ornamentation and the success of Conamara singers at the festival. Ó Laoire’s argument is based on the assumption that the *Oireachtas* after 1939 was more nativist in its outlook, and that the nativists favoured the Conamara style of *sean-nós* singing. However, I have shown that nativists were not a homogenous group. For example, there were nativists within the movement who favoured the Munster styles of the *Gaeltacht* districts (see Chapter III).

Yet, in many ways this thesis builds on the work of Ó Laoire, who was arguably the first *sean-nós* scholar to draw attention to the colonisation of the *Oireachtas* *sean-nós* singing competition by Conamara singers (although he does not use the word colonisation). However, I differ from Ó Laoire on issues of causality. He sees the dominance of the Conamara style being due to a bias the adjudicators, whereas I believe that the dominance of the Conamara style is due to the fact that members of the Conamara community co-opted the *Oireachtas* singing competition during this period.

Singers from Conamara have always attended the *Oireachtas* in great numbers, and during the late 1960s early 1970s, singers from this area participated in the *Oireachtas* *sean-nós* singing competitions in far greater numbers that those from other districts (see Chapter IV). It is difficult to say exactly why the Conamara community was so enthralled with the *Oireachtas’* singing competitions. But it does appear to be closely linked with the emergence of a *Gaeltacht* civil rights movement in Conamara during this time. The actions of the civil rights movement had a
profound effect on the Gaeltacht and on the relationship of the state to the Irish language.

The Gaeltacht civil rights movement led to the founding of RnaG in 1972, and to the establishment of Údarás na Gaeltachta, the Gaeltacht authority in 1980. The movement also led to the establishment of Ireland’s only national Irish language television station, TG4, in 1996 (see Chapter V). I would offer that it is no mere coincidence that the headquarters for the Údarás, RnaG and TG4 are all based in the Conamara Gaeltacht. The Gaeltacht civil rights movement was most active in Conamara and the actions of the movement effectively made Conamara the centre of Gaeltacht, and, to a certain degree, Irish language affairs. It is difficult to say why exactly Conamara emerged as the focal point of the Gaeltacht civil rights movement; although the fact that Conamara has the largest of all the Gaeltacht populations probably has something to do with it. What is significant about this, from the point of view of this thesis, is that there appears to be a causal relationship between the dominance of the Conamara community within Gaeltacht affairs and the dominance of the Conamara sean-nós style within the Oireachtas.

Members of the Gaeltacht civil rights movement held a number of protest Oireachtais in the Gaeltacht during the early 1970s. They also protested at the official Oireachtas during this time. The civil rights movement felt that ‘official’ Ireland was neglecting the Gaeltacht and the Irish language and they saw Oireachtas na Gaeilge as being part of official Ireland (see Chapter IV). By holding alternative festivals in the Gaeltacht, the civil rights movement undermined the authority of the official Oireachtas, and the festival’s executive committee realised that there was a real chance that their position as Ireland’s premier Irish language festival would be usurped permanently by the civil rights membership. This led to the official Oireachtas being held in Cois Fharraige in Conamara in 1974, the first time it was held outside of the capital since it was re-established in 1939.
The *Oireachtas* has hardly been held in Dublin ever since, and from this period on members of the *Gaeltacht* have played a far greater role in all aspects of the festival than they ever did previously. Members of the Conamara *Gaeltacht* appear to have effectively taken ownership of the *sean-nós* singing competitions at this time. I suggest that the actions of the *Gaeltacht* civil rights movement inspired the Conamara community to lay claim to Irishness, and to participate in events centered on the Irish language, such as *sean-nós* singing (see Chapter IV). This led Conamara singers to compete in the festival’s *sean-nós* competitions in far greater numbers than members of any other *Gaeltacht* district.

I offer that this is one of the main reasons that the Conamara style was so dominant during this period — from 1974 until 1990, first prize at the *Oireachtas* was awarded every year to those who sang in the Conamara style. This is significant because it suggests that the dominance of the Conamara style within the *Oireachtas* had more to do with the agency of members of the Conamara community within Irish language affairs and the structures of the *Oireachtas*, than it had with an ideological/ aesthetic bias on the part of *Oireachtas* adjudicators. It should be remembered that from 1939 onwards adjudicators were drawn from all over the *Gaeltacht*. Therefore, if the “reification of the Conamara style theory” is correct, we have to assume that members of all the other *Gaeltacht* districts valued the Conamara style above that of their own districts.

**Inter-Gaeltacht Competition**

Regionalism and inter-*Gaeltacht* rivalry has been a characteristic of the *Oireachtas* from the very beginning (see Chapter III). According to Whelan, nationalism tends to have a standardising effect on culture, and he suggests this fosters inter-regional rivalry between groups within the nation, who seek to have their particular regional culture become the standard national culture (1993, pp. 5-6). As I have shown in Chapter V, there is evidence to suggest that during the early period of the *Oireachtas*, members of the various *Gaeltacht* districts fought to have the Irish dialect, and other expressive culture of their particular area recognised as the embodiment of the national ‘Gaelic’ culture. After 1939 the *Oireachtas*, in an attempt to encourage
members of the Gaeltacht community to participate more at Oireachtas events, established various inter-Gaeltacht competitions, including an inter-Gaeltacht sean-nós singing competition. These events undoubtedly reinforced regionalism between the Gaeltacht communities (ibid).

Some might feel that the dominance of the Conamara style within the Oireachtas, particularly throughout the 1970s and 1990s, indicates that the Conamara style won the regional battle to become the sean-nós standard. I do not fully agree with this reading however. Strictly speaking cultural heterogeneity undermines the central tenet of nationalism: that all members of the nation are the same people with the same national culture. Nationalist movements therefore tend to reinforce and promote the idea of a shared ‘standardised’ national culture. However, as I have illustrated throughout this thesis, singers at the Oireachtas are expected to remain within the confines of specific regional styles, dialects and repertoire (see Chapter VI).

If anything, this suggests that the ideology of the Oireachtas sean-nós singing cohort is communitarian, because it promotes loyalty to particularistic, sub-national communities, what Ó Laoire calls ethnicity (2000). Communitarianism and nationalism are often seen as two fundamentally opposed projects, because nationalism can be understood as an attempt to transcend loyalty to particularism, by creating an overarching national identity for all citizens within the nation-state (Abizadeh 2002, p.497). This is significant here because if communitarianism is the ideology of the Oireachtas sean-nós community then it suggests that the dominance of the Conamara style is not due to the standardising that one normally witnesses in Romantic nationalist organisations.

Further Research
This thesis contributes to the literature on sean-nós, and on revivalist movements generally. By drawing attention to the agency of the so-called ‘folk’ within a revivalist movement I have illustrated how complex and contradictory cultural intervention and the politics of culture can be. Here I focus primarily on one portion of the Oireachtas sean-nós cohort, the adjudicators —accessed through the medium
of the adjudicating reports. Further research would benefit greatly from extensive in-depth interviews with *Oireachta* adjudicators, in order to tease out and further clarify the findings of this thesis. Future research in this area would also benefit from interviews with *sean-nós* singers who compete at the festival, and others who do not. Indeed it would be beneficial to compare other performance contexts of *sean-nós*/traditional singing with the *Oireachta* singing competitions, such as singing clubs, sessions and other festivals for example.

Future ethnographic research in the various *Gaeltacht* regions and more historical ethnography would also add to our understanding of the relationship and history of *sean-nós* song and the *Oireachta* festival. This current work raises a number of interesting questions concerning the role local *Gaeltacht* activists and *timiri* have had in promoting the *Oireachta* singing competitions in the various *Gaeltacht* districts from 1939 onwards. Further research on the role of promoting the *Oireachta* in the *Gaeltacht* districts would complicate and add to the ideas of agency and determinism raised in this thesis. Additionally, *sean-nós* song studies would benefit from an examination focused on the early *Oireachta* (1897-1925). A detailed survey of all the various singing competitions that took place during this period, as well as information pertaining to the background of competitors and adjudicators at these events would add greatly to the current literature on *sean-nós* and the *Oireachta*; in particular it would help to further clarify what the term *sean-nós* meant during this particular period.

The inter-*Gaeltacht* rivalry that is central to the *Oireachta* *sean-nós* singing competition reflects some of the issues that affect the *Gaeltacht* generally. Although the *Gaeltacht* as a whole can be described as a minority community within the Irish state, within the *Gaeltacht* Conamara has arguably become the centre. This means that other *Gaeltacht* communities have to a certain extent been pushed further into the margins. Informant A, who is from the Kerry *Gaeltacht*, stated that many there feel somewhat resentful of Conamara’s position. He stated that many in Kerry feel that the majority of Irish language Government initiatives are situated in Conamara,
and that this is unfair. He went on to state that the dominance of the Conamara style is seen, by some in the Kerry Gaeltacht, as another example of this privileging of Conamara by the Irish state.

The Oireachtas has undergone numerous changes throughout its long history. There was a period when traditional singers did not feature to any real degree at the festival; now the various sean-nós singing competitions are one of the highlights of the festival. The ethos of the festival has also changed over time, as it has gone from being primarily nationalistic to being concerned with promoting a marginal community—the Gaeltacht community and Irish speakers generally—and the intangible cultural heritage of that community, the Irish language primarily. While singers who perform in the Conamara style at the festival continue to be the most successful, as Ó Laoire points out, from the mid-1990s onwards the dominance of this style has been challenged by singers from other areas (2000, p.167). No one can predict the future of sean-nós within the Oireachtas. However, whatever that future will be, I am sure the Gaeltacht community will play their part in shaping it.
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**A Selected Discography of Regional styles of sean-nós song**

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**Cork**


**Donegal**


**Kerry**

Waterford


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