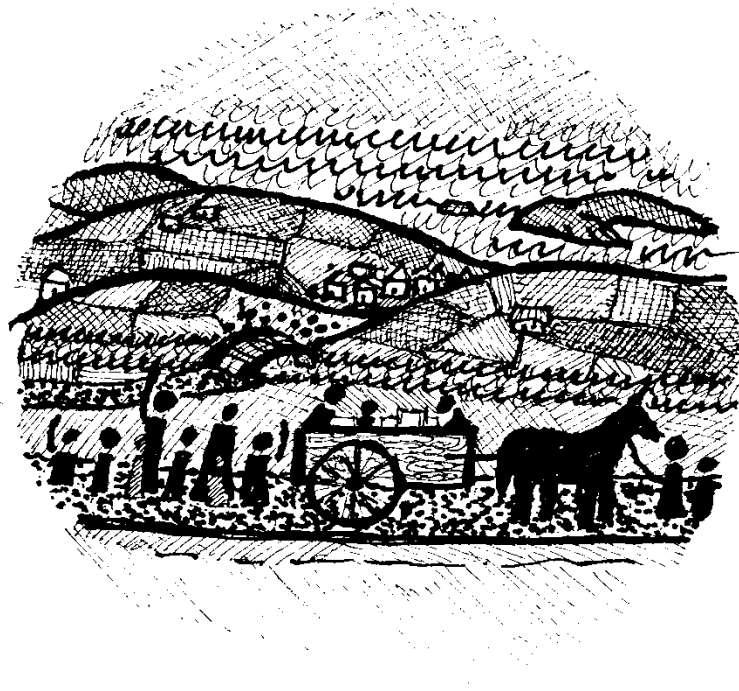


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PEIG SAYERS

Peig: A Scéal Féin



Peig Sayers
1873-1958

Life and Literary Status

Peig Sayers is broadly regarded as one of Ireland's foremost traditional storytellers. Her son transcribed her life story as she dictated it to him. This life story, published in 1929, and Peig's prodigious knowledge of folklore and local stories, attracted many international folklore scholars and collectors to her Blasket Island home, including Séamus Ennis, Seosamh Ó Dálaigh, and Kenneth Jackson. Peig's story gained canonical status in the newly formed Irish state, and her recounting of a way of life that was disappearing was viewed by many as an emblem of a true, Gaelic, Ireland.

Peig's early life was marred by tragedy and hardship, as only she and three siblings survived out of thirteen children born to her parents, Thomás and Peig. Raised in the poor, West Kerry Gaeltacht area, Peig was sent out 'hiring' to families and farmers to earn her way. Like many of her contemporaries, she imagined that passage to America was her only hope of a fulfilling life, a hint of which we can see in the passage below. This never came to pass, however, and Peig spent her life in Ireland, her works being forevermore framed by the West Kerry landscape of Fionntrá (Ventry), Dún Chaoin (Dunquin) and an Blascaod Mór (the Great Blasket Island). Peig's life, as told in her autobiography, highlights the customs, culture, habits, and way of life of the people from these areas, and especially in the passage below, underlines the crippling emigration from her local area, which would later go on to render The Great Blasket, the large island off the coast of West Kerry, where Peig made her marital and familial home, uninhabitable.

More information can be found on Peig Sayers, and her work, in Margaret Kelleher and Philip O'Leary (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature: Volume II, 1890-2000*, (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 258-259.

See also, *The Dictionary of Irish Biography* at <https://dib.cambridge.org>

For information in Irish, see www.ainm.ie/Bio.aspx?ID=676

A note on this excerpt

The emigration of Muiris, a cherished neighbour of the family and valued member of the community, is shown to be a tragic, yet expected event for the people of Dún Chaoin village in the excerpt of Peig's tale. The 'American Wake', in which the emigrant was mourned and celebrated by the local people, forms a central part of this story. The idea behind the 'wake' was that the finality of the journey was such that the emigrant was unlikely to ever return home to Ireland or his people, so the rituals associated with the wake were performed prior to their departure. The sadness of the village community at the loss of its members is described honestly by Peig. As current times in our world highlight the struggles of refugees fleeing both economic hardship and dangerous conditions in their home countries, we might reflect on Peig's anguish upon seeing her childhood friend depart for a better life in America. The camaraderie between women is strong here, however, and the reader is aware of the promise Peig's friend, Cáit, makes to her: that soon she will send money home so that Peig can also depart and join them in America. This economic and social transaction was the foundation of many networks of immigrants in America; one person would leave, earn money, and pay for the next person to follow them, and so on. Peig's excerpt highlights the importance of this female solidarity, quite often overlooked in many contemporaneous texts on mostly male-centred emigration.

Language and translation

The language here is conversational in tone, as one would expect from a storyteller, but rich in descriptive language, paraphrases and proverbial sayings. It is influenced by the Kerry vernacular which is a hallmark of Peig's work.

The English translation remains very close to the original text, in many cases translating word-for-word Peig's statements. The translated text is very accessible and captures much of the energy of Peig's original prose, although some of the Irish turns of phrase, translated directly to English, appear excessive or overwritten to a contemporary reader of English. Translating an oral art form for readers in another language poses very specific

challenges and Bryan MacMahon's translation does not seek to fully domesticate the text.

Excerpts from *Peig: A Scéal Féin* (An Sagart, 1998) are reprinted with the kind permission of An Sagart. Excerpts from *Peig: The Autobiography of*

Peig Sayers of the Great Blasket Island (Edco: 2003), translated by Bryan MacMahon, are reprinted with the kind permission of publishers, Edco.

Peig: A Scéal Féin

Cóisir is Tionlacan is Slán go Deo

An rud is annamh is iontach. Bé sin an dálda céanna ag muintir Dhún Chaoin é. Ní mór acu a chonaic ceaint riamh, is ní raibh i mbéal ná i mbráid éinne acu ach lá na ceainte. Bhí talamh Mhuiris le bheith ar ceaint Dé Máirt is bheadh ana-lá spóirt againn.

Ar maidin Dé Máirt tháinig an reiceadóir is ní raibh fear ná garsún sa pharóiste ná raibh bailithe ann. Bhí a lán daoine ag cur isteach ar an dtalamh ach, de dheascaibh gur baile an-iargúlta é, ní raibh éinne thar paróiste ag cur isteach air. Do thóg Pádraig Ó Scanláin, deartháir Mhuiris, é mar ráinig an t-airgead aige, rud na raibh aigena lán eile acu san am san.

Is é Muiris a bhí go sásta tar éis an lae. Bhí a aigne déanta suas aige chun dul go Meiriceá i gcónaí, ach níor éirigh leis go dtí seo. Nuair a tháinig an oíche bhí cuireadh tabhartha aige Muiris dos na seanachomharsain go léir chun oíche chuideachtan a bheith acu i bhfochair a chéile. Bhí barraille leanna agus galún uisce beatha aige agus deirimse leat go raibh pósadh beag againn maidir le hamhráin agus le cleachta. Bhí rince ages na daoine óga leis, tamall den oíche.

Ní bheadh Muiris sásta gan glaoch ar mo mháthair. Comharsain bhéal dorais ab ea iad is ní raibh focal searbh eatarthu raimh, is dá bhrí sin is mór an léan a bhí ar mo mháthair ina dhiaidh.

‘Imigh,’ ar seisean, ‘agus glaoigh isteach ar do mháthair. Beidh cuideachta na hoíche anocht againn ach go háirithe.’

Seo liom amach, agus dar ndóigh, is uirthi a bhí na sceitimíní, an bhean bhocht. Bean ana-chleachtúil ab ea í féin, beannacht Dé lena hanam is le anamnaibh na marbh!

Nuair a tháinig sí d’fháiltigh Muiris roimpi agus do chuir sé ina suí cois na tine ar chathaoir í, is thug sé leis an crúsca uisce beatha agus do líon sé suas gloine chúichi.

‘Seo,’ ar seisean, ‘ól mo shláinte! Is í an ghloine dhéanach go deo aríst ar an dtaobh so í.’

Rug sí ar an ngloine.

‘Sid í bhur slainte go léir,’ ar sise, ‘agus go mórmhór sláinte Mhuiris, mo sheanachomharsa mhín mhacánta, nár chuir leanbh a chomharsan riamh ag gol, is ní lú ná thainig go dtí an doras riamh le feirg chúm.’

Nuair a ghaibh Muiris timpeall arís, agus an crúsca ina lámh, níor dhearmhad sé an tseanabhean. Ach, ‘om baisce, nach fada go raibh a caint ag teacht di is gur róghearr gur thóg sí suas Na Bearta Crua, is do bhí fuaim aici dá bhaint as bhuaic an tí. Is mó duine a deireadh ná raibh a sárú d’amhránaí i gCiarraí lena linn.

‘Ar mh’anam, a Mhuiris,’ arsa mise, ‘go raibh an ceart ag an bhfile nuair a dúirt sé –

An tseanabhean a bheadh gafa ag an ngúta,
Is í caite sa chúinne le péin,
Nuair ólfadh sí gline thoistiúin do
Go rinneadh gach úill léi go réidh.

Féach mo mháthair anois is gur dhóigh le duine ná fuil má gáinne sa tsaol uirthi!’

‘Ó, sin mar a bhíonn, a chailín,’ arsa Muiris. ‘Do bhí croí mór aici mara mbeadh ceal na sláinte.’

Ansan do thosnaigh an rince fé íochtar an tí is bhí rírú agus bualadh bas againn gur gheal sé anoir ar maidin. Bhí se in am ag gach éinne a bheith ag baint a thí féin amach an uair sin. Rugas féin ar laimh ar mo mháthair, agus thógas liom í, agus do bhí smut maith den lá caite san am gur dhúisigh sé lá arna mháireach.

Fé dheireadh thainig an lá go raibh Muiris agus a mhuintir chun an slán déanach a fhágaint ag muintir an bhaile. Be nós a bhí ann san am san, gach duine beag agus mór de mhuintir an pharóiste ar fad do dhul ag tionlacan an té a bheadh ag imeacht go dtí Meiriceá. Sé an gheoin agus an fothram a dhúisigh mé ar maidin. Do bhí dul trí cheile agus fuirseadh ar gach éinne. Bhí a lán daoine muinteartha ag teacht go tigh Mhuiris an mhaidean san chun slán a ligint leis.

D’éiríos go tapaidh, mar bhí a lán nithe beaga agam féin le cur i bhfearas. Bhí m’aigne déanta suas agam anois, ón uair go raibh mo shláinte casta orm, dul in aimsir arís, dá bhfaighinn aon áit oiriúnach. Ní raibh einní le fáil age baile. Dá fhaid a fhanfainn ann ní raibh le fáil agam sa deireadh ach an bóthar. Dá bhrí sin do tuigeadh dom gurbh fhearr dhom a bheith ag tuilleamh dom fhéin ná a bheith ag brath ar éinne eile, agus rud eile a bhí sa treis, do bhí Cáit Jim ag dul go Meiriceá cois Mhuiris, agus do bhí geallta aici dhom go gcuirfeadh sí an costas chum chomh luath agus ab fhéidir léi é; is ba mhaith an rud dom féin a bheith ag tuilleamh chun cúnaimh an chostais a bheith agam nuair a thiocfadh an lá.

Níor thugas fios d’einne cad a bhí ar m’aigne, ach do bhíos ullamh chun a bheith le cois Mhuiris ‘on Daingean. Bhí gleotháil an domhain ar siúl acu i rith na maidne, duine ag gol agus duine ag gáirí. Is brónach an rud é duine a bheith ag dul go dtí Meiriceá. Is cosúil le bás é, mar is duine as an míle a fhilleann ar an dtír seo go deo. Dá bhrí sin, ní haon ionadh buairt agus míshásamh a bheith ar a muintir ina ndiaidh.

Ní raibh capall ná cóiste againn ach amháin capall agus cairt a bhí ag Jim is do bhí sí sin lan de ghiúirléidí, ach go raibh slí age Muiris, pé scéal é. Is ag siúl a bhí an chuid eile go léir.

San am go rabhamair Bóthar an Tobair suas ba dhóigh le duine gur sochraid a bhí ann. Nós é sin a bhí ag muintir Dhún Chaoin san am san – pé duine a bheadh ag dul do Meiriceá, do théidís á thionlacan go dtí an Leacht. Bhogamair linn an bóthair, cuid againn brónach agus cuid againn suáilceach, nó gur shroicheamair Mullach an Chlásaigh. Ansan a bhí an cibeal acu! Ba bhrónach an radharc é scarúint na gcarad le chéile.

Bhíodar chomh scartha le chéile feasta is dá mba in uaigh a bheidís curtha, mar níor tharlaigh éinne acu ar a chéile riamh ina dhiaidh sin. An chuid acu na raibh ag dul 'on Daingean, d'fhágadar slán ag an muintir a bhí ag imeacht is thugadar a ndrom le chéile. Thug dream acu a n-aghaidh ar an dtigh agus dream eile a n-aghaidh ar bhóthar an Daingin.

Do bhí siúl fada le déanamh againn, ach má bhí féin do bhí gasra againn le cois a chéile is níor bhraitheamair a bheith ag cur an bhóthair dinn riamh is choíche nó gur shroicheadamair an Daingean. Níor dheineamair aon stad nó gur tháingamar go dtí tigh an Ghealbhánaigh, mar is é a bhí ina fhear ionaid loingis tráchtála go Meiriceá san am san ann. Do bhí mórán le déanamh acu – boscaí bóthair is gach gleotháil le cur i dtreo acu fé chomhair an lae amáirigh.

D'fhanas féin ina dtreo i gcónaí is nuair a tháinig an oíche bhí a lán daoine bailithe sa tigh. Is ann a bhíodar chun fanúint go maidean. Deirimse leat go raibh cuideachta sa tigh an oíche sin. Fear deas tí dob ea an Gealbhánach is do bhí ceol agus rince agus amhráin ar siúl ann go dtí meánoíche is níor bhraitheamar an t-am ag imeacht, ach sa deireadh dúirt fear an tí go raibh sé in am dul a chodladh, mar go mbeidís ag éirí go moch ar maidin. Ansan go stopadh an ceol agus do chuaigh gach éinne i bhfeighil suain.

Ar a seacht a chlog ar maidin arna mháireach do bhí fothram ag an gcloigín dá bhualadh. Bhí gach éinne ar a dhícheall á bhfáscadh féin suas chun a bheith ullamh do bhéile na maidne; ach go deimhin ní mór a bhí ar a gcumas d'ithe ná d'ól, mar bhíodar róbhronach.

Timpeall a deich a chlog bhíodar ullamh chun bóthair is d'fhágamair slán agena chéile. Bhí uaigneas mór orm i ndiaidh Chait Jim. Canathaobh ná beadh, mo pháirtí d'fílís ó bhíos im leanbh? Bhíos ag gol gan dabht, ach dúirt sí liom:

'Na bíodh aon eagla ort, a chailín,' ar sise, 'má fhágann Dia mo shláinte agamsa, ní fada go gcuirfeadsa chútsa an costas. Slán leat anois,' ar sise, agus do chrom sí féin ar ghol.

Sara raibh am agam na deora a ghlanadh óm shúile bhíodar sciobtha chun siúil as mo radharc. Dob é sin an radharc déanach a fuair amair ar a chéile.

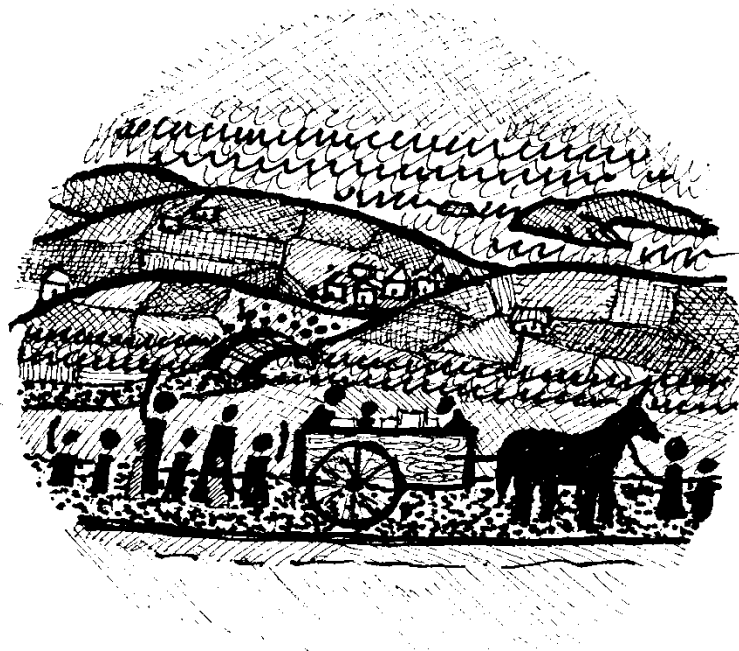
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BRYAN MACMAHON

Peig: The Autobiography of Peig Sayers of the Great Basket Island



Translated from
Peig: A Scéal Féin
by Peig Sayers

Peig: The Autobiography of Peig Sayers of the Great Blasket Island

A Feast, an Escort, and a Farewell Forever

A neighbouring family leaves for America – An ‘American wake’ – The convoy –

‘It won’t be long until I send you the fare’

What’s seldom seen is much admired: this statement could be applied to the people of Dunquin. Not very many of them had ever seen an auction and now the only topic of conversation was the auction day, for Muiris’s land was to be put up for sale on Tuesday and we’d have a great day’s entertainment.

On Tuesday morning the auctioneers arrived and every man and boy in the parish had gathered at the place where the auction was to be held. A large number of people were interested in buying the land but because it was in a very remote townland no one from outside the parish was bidding. Pádraig Scanlon, Muiris’s brother, bought the place, for he happened to have the cash – a thing very few people had at that time.

Muiris was thoroughly satisfied with the day’s work. Ever and always he was bent on going to America but he didn’t realize his dream until now. By the time it was dark, Muiris had sent out invitations to all the old neighbours to come and have a social night together. He had a barrel of porter and a gallon of whiskey and you can take it from me that with songs and good company we had what amounted to a minor wedding. For part of the night too, the young people held a dance.

Nothing would satisfy Muiris except to invite my mother. They were next-door neighbours and there never had been a cross word between them so that my mother was very very sorry to see him go.

‘Off with you!’ he told me, ‘and call in your mother. We’ll have tonight’s company together whatever comes or goes.’

Off I went, and of course, the poor woman was delighted. She was a person who revelled in company – may she and all the holy souls be at peace.

When she arrived, Muiris welcomed her and put her sitting on a chair beside the fire. He brought along a jug of whiskey and filled out a glass for her.

‘Here’s a health to you all!’ she cried, ‘and especially a health to Muiris, my gentle honest neighbour of old who never caused a neighbour’s child to cry not to mind coming to my door in anger.’

When Muiris made the rounds a second time with the jug he didn’t forget the old lady. But I swear to you that she soon got her speech and before very long she had started to sing Na Bearta Cruadha and she was bringing vibrations from the ridging of the house! Many a person said that in her day there wasn’t a finer singer in Kerry than my mother.

'My soul, Muiris,' said I, 'the poet was right when he said:

The old crone crippled with gout
Thrown in the corner in pain,
If she drained a fourpenny glass
Her joints would dance once again.

'Will you look at my mother now,' I went on, 'you couldn't imagine that there was a thing in the world wrong with her.'

'That's the way life goes, my girl,' Muiris said. 'She had a great heart if it wasn't for her lack of health.'

Then the dancing started at the other end of the house and we had revelry and applause till day brightened in the east. Time then for everyone to be making for his own home. I took my mother by the hand and led her away with me. A good part of the day had slipped by when she woke the following day.

At last the day dawned when Muiris and his family were bidding their last good-bye to the neighbours. We had a custom at that time for everyone in the parish, great and small, to 'convey' the person who was going to America. The excitement and noise wakened me in the morning. Such running and racing! A large number of his relations were calling at Muiris's house that morning to bid him farewell.

I got up quickly because I had a number of small jobs to see after. I had my mind now made up that from the moment my health improved I'd go into service again – that is if I got a suitable place. There was nothing to be gained by remaining at home, for however long I stayed there, all I'd get in the end was the road. So I realized that it would be better for me to turn a penny for myself and not to depend on anyone else. And another thing that forced me to a decision was this: Cáit-Jim was going to America with Muiris and she had promised me that she'd send me the passage-money as soon as she possibly could, and it would be advantageous for myself too if I had something put aside towards the fare when my own day would arrive.

I told no one what was going on in my mind but I was ready to accompany Muiris to Dingle. All the morning there was great activity; some people were crying and others were laughing. It's a sad occasion when a person leaves for America; it's like a death for only one out of a thousand ever again returns to Ireland. Is it any wonder then that the emigrants' relations are troubled and upset when their own folks are leaving?

We had neither horse nor side-car; all we had was Jim's horse and common car and that was full of luggage. But whether or no, there was room for Muiris – the rest of us walked.

By the time we moved up the Well Road one would think that it was a funeral procession. The Dunquin people had the custom in those days of 'conveying' whoever was going to America as far as the stone heap known as the Leacht. We moved along the road, some of us downhearted and others in good spirits until we reached the top of the Clasach. Then or never there was a right scene; the parting of friends was a sorrowful sight, for parted they were from that day forward as surely as if they were buried in a grave, for none of them ever again met the other. Those who were not going to Dingle said good-bye to those who were leaving and then they turned their backs on one another; one band of people faced for home and the other for the Dingle Road.

We had a long walk before us but it made no matter since there was a crowd of us together and we never felt the journey until we reached Dingle. We made straight for Galvin's for he was the Booking Agent for America at that time. Those who were travelling had to see after a lot of things – travelling cases and various odds and ends for the following day. I remained with them all the while and when night fell a great crowd of people had gathered into the house for those who were going away were to stay there until morning. There was plenty of company in the house that night for Mr. Galvin was a sociable man on his own floor and we had music and dancing and song until midnight so we never felt the time passing until at last the man of the house said that it was time to go to bed as we'd have to be up early in the morning. There the music came to an end and everyone began to think about sleep.

At seven o' clock the following morning the little bell on the alarm clock rang and everyone did his best to get dressed so as to be ready for the breakfast. But not many of them felt like eating or drinking as they were too overcome with sorrow.

About ten o'clock they were ready to leave and we said good-bye to one another. I was very lonely after Cáit-Jim. Why wouldn't I be, for she was my loyal comrade ever since I was a child! Needless to say, I was crying but this is what she said to me:

'Don't fret one bit, girl, for if God leaves me my health it won't be long until I send you the fare. Good-bye now', she said, and then she herself began to cry.

Before I had time to wipe the tears from my eyes they were all swept out of my sight. That was the last time we laid eyes on one another.