

Evidence for Irish language protest song in the nineteenth century

Throughout the nineteenth century Ireland suffered from a near wipe out of native Gaelic speakers. The sudden and rapid spread of English was precipitated by the Great Famine and the death or emigration of more than two million people, mostly from areas in which Gaelic had remained strong. This language shift brought with it significant changes in the way that people responded to current events through song, and the English-language broadside ballad became the primary vehicle for protest and political song in the country.

However, there are fragments of new songs from the period which point to a vibrant culture of song-making in Irish. Within the collections of Patrick Weston Joyce, we find the song *Ráiseanna Bhaile Átha Úla* (The Races of Ballyhooley) written in the aftermath of a massacre which took place during the Tithe War. Despite the local Anglican cleric knowing that the people of the area were eating 'seaweed and nettles' he insisted on collecting taxes (defined by the Composition of Tithes Act 1823) with the aid of a company of soldiers, who promptly shot a group of protestors.

This paper discusses the adaptation of *Ráiseanna Bhaile Átha Úla* as a protest song out of pre-existing piece of music in the locality around Fermoy, Cork. The use of Irish as a language of protest is considered in the context of the imposition of English on rural Ireland throughout the eighteenth century. The paper also examines the evolution of Irish language song as this ancient art form became part of a wider tradition that includes traditional dance music.

Conor Caldwell