

Keening of the Dead

*Fear bruine, bean chaointe ná garbhmhuilleoir,
Ni bhf aighidh sna Flaithis aon leaba go deo.*

Three persons who will get no bed in Heaven: A quarrelsome man, a keening woman and a crude miller.- O Siúilleabhaín, Irish Wake Amusements., p.142

The dead could only be keened once the soul had a chance to leave the body. Early keening could wake the Devil's dogs which lay in wait for passing souls and might be awakened by the keening. The keening begins only when the body has been properly prepared and laid out at the wake. While many have interpreted keening as selfish lament the relationship seen by the Irish themselves to the spirits of the dead may indicate that it is more communication than lamentation. The special sounds, tones and structures of keening may relate to an earlier "spiritual language" thought to be appropriate for such communication.

Most keening is impromptu and of the oral tradition. Relatives may mention the name of the dead one and ask: "Why did you die?". Men were more restrained than women in their crying. After keening had gone on for a while relatives helped the immediate family from the coffin and the wake proceeded. Crying and keening began again once the body was placed in the coffin and this kept up until the coffin was in the grave and was covered with earth. Sometimes local speakers were arranged to speak of the dead. Often poetry and genealogy were recited along with praise of the deceased lamenting the death. Virtues of and interests of the deceased are noted. These recitations are punctuated by loud and piercing yet beautiful wails. At times professional keeners are hired. (Eugene O'Curry noted that the customary number of hired keeners was a minimum of four:

One stood near the head of the bed or table on which the corpse was laid, one at the feet, who was charged with the care of the candles, and one or more at each side; the family and immediate friends of the deceased sat around near the table. The mourner at the head opened the dirge with the first note or part of the cry; she was followed by the one at the foot with a note or part of equal length, then the long or double part was sung by the two side mourners, after which the members of the family and friends of the deceased joined in the common chorus at the end of each stanza of the funeral ode or dirge, following as closely as they could the air or tune adopted by the professional mourners. Sometimes one or more, or even all the principal singers, were men.-sometimes harpers were employed- O Siúilleabhaín, Irish Wake Amusements., p.136.

The paid keeners were given food and drink and it is said that the performance which was better when louder was improved after the first glass of whisky. Professional keeners would strive to better their professional standing by trying to outdo the competition of other keeners at the wake. This lead to fighting and clerical disapproval

Synod of Tuam (1631): Statute 3 ordered that thenceforth exaggerated crying and keening at wakes of the dead should cease

Synod of Tuam 1660- The people were advised to discontinue the practice of employing female keeners at wakes and funerals.

Synod of Armagh 1660- This Synod forbade wailing's and crying at funerals as an unchristian practice.

Synod of Dublin June 1670-0 This was a meeting of the archbishops and bishops of Ireland. Statute 5 ordered each priest in the country to make every effort in his power to bring to an end the wailing's and screams of female keeners who accompanied the dead to the graveyard.

Synod of Armagh (August 1670): This Synod adopted the regulations laid down by the Dublin Synod two months before. It further announced that no priest would attend a wake or funeral at which female keeners cried and screamed. Any priest who neglected to endeavor to end such unseemly behavior would be removed from his parish.

Synod of Meath (1686): The bishops first condemned dancing, other amusements and drinking at wakes, and then went on to order the parish priests in their jurisdiction to continue their efforts to put an end to the customary keening at funerals.

Diocese of Leighlin (1748): Among the diocesan regulations adopted at a meeting presided over by Most Rev. Dr. Gallagher, was the following:

"Whereas likewise the heathenish customs of loud cries and howlings at wakes and burials are practiced amongst us, contrary to the express commandment of St. Paul in his Epist. to the Thess. forbidding such cries and immoderate grief for the dead, as if they were not to rise again, and to the great shame of our nation, since no such practice is found in any other Christian country; and Whereas in some parts of this Diocese some have the deplorable vanity in the very time of their humiliation and that God had visited them with the loss of a friend, not only to glory in the number of cries, but in order the more to feed their vanity and add fuel to their pride, do even send far and near to hire men and women to cry and compose vain fulsome rhymes in praise of their deceased friends. It is therefore (ordained) all Parish Priests and religious laymen of this Diocese are hereby strictly charged and commanded, in virtue of holy obedience, to use all possible means to banish from Christian burials such anti-christian practices, by imposing arbitrary punishment of prayers, fasting, alms and such like wholesome injunctions on as many men and women as will loudly cry or howl at burials. But as to such men and women as we decree and declare that for the first crime of this kind they shall not be absolved by any but by the Ordinary or his representatives, and in case of a relapse (sic), the aforesaid criers or rhymes are to be excluded from Mass and the Sacraments, and in case of perseverance in this detestable practice, they are to be excommunicated and denounced."

The practice of keening: *"all unnatural screams and shrieks, and fictitious tuneful cries and elegies"* was condemned as late as 1800 by Dr. Thomas Bray, Archbishop of Cashel.

-O Súilleabhaín, Irish Wake Amusements., p.138-40

The practice of keening is described by a traveler in Kildare in 1683: *"as soon as the bearers have taken up the body, they begin their shrill cries and hideous hootings...and if there be not enough to make out a good cry they hire the best and deepest mouthed in all the country and so they proceed towards the church; this now may be heard two miles or more. When they come at the church-yard on this occasion, (and at other times also) perhaps 5, 10 or 20 years after their husband, friend or relation has been buried, they repair to their graves where they kneel over them, knocking and beating upon the grave and praising the party, repeating the former kindnesses have passed between them intreating that they would attend and give ear to them, then in an odd tone sorrowing and lamenting their loss and complain and tell them how they are misused and by whom injured and thereon pray their help to right them; and thus they continue commonly until some compassionating friend or neighbour come and lift them from the ground with expostulating language, so they return satisfied as having given an account to one that in time may redress their injuries, revenge or relieve them. The women are mostly inclined and observed to practice these things, and many the like a more anxious eye might discover amongst them"- O Súilleabhaín, Irish Wake Amusements., p.135.*

James Farewell in *The Irish Hudibras*. in 1689 wrote of keening women:

*They raise the cry, and so they fount him
Into a crate to howl about him;
Where, in one end, the parted brother
Was laid to rest, the cows in t'other
With all his followers and kin,*

*Who, far and near, come crowding in,
With hub-bub-boos, beside what cryers
For greater state his highness (sic) hires.- O Suilleabháin, Irish Wake Amusements., p.135.*

W. King wrote in the *Art of Cookery*, in 1776:

*So at an Irish funeral appears
A train of drabs with mercenary tears;
Who, wringing of their hands with hideous moan,
Know not his name for whom they seem to groan,
While real grief with silent steps proceeds,
And love unfeigned with inward passion bleeds- O Suilleabháin, Irish Wake Amusements., p.136.*

Keening is a pan-celtic tradition also quite important in Scotland.

Some Folk Laments from Ireland:

From Kerry:

Mo thaisce's mo ghamhain tu,
Mar bhuaachaillín ceann-dubh,
Gur ghile liom thu ná an leamhnacht
'S ná uisce lae an tsamhraidh!

My treasure and myu love,
My little dark-headed boy,
Whom I thought whiter than new milk
Or than water on a summer day!

From the Decies:

Érigh suas id' sheasamh,
A's gaibh do sheisreach capall!
Tóg fód chúig n-órdla ar treasnacht;
Féach ormsa, a thaisce,
'S gan tada 'gam mar thaca,
Ag dul ag baint ná ag gearradh!
Cé dhéanfaidh gnó an mharga?
Cé raghaidh go Cnoc an Aifrinn,
A's tusa sínte feasta? Och, ochón!

Rise and stand up,
And tackle your ploughing-team!
Plough a five-inch furrow;
Look at me, my treasure,
With nobody to help me
When I go reaping or cutting!
Who will do my business at the market?

Who will go to the Hill of the Mass,
As you lie stretched from now on? Och, ochón!

Literary Laments:

Lament written by Patrick Hegarty for his son:

Ochón, a Dhoncha, mo mhíle cogarthach, fén bhföd so sinte.
Fód an doichill 'na luí ar do cholainn bhig, mo lomasceimhle!
Dá mbeadh an codla so í gcill na Dromad ort nó i nuaigh san iarhar,
Mo bhrón do bhogfadh, cé gur mhór mo dhochar, 's ní bheinn id' dhiadh air.

Is feoidhte caithte tá na blátha scalpeadh ar do leaba chaoil-se;
Ba bhreá iad tamall, ach thréig a dtaitneamh; ní snas ná bri ionnta.
Tá an bláth bh ghile liom dár fhás in ithr riabh, ná d'fhásfaidh choíche,
Ag dreó sa talamh, a's go deó ní thacfaidh, ag cur éiri croí orm!

Ochón, my Donagh, my thousand loves, stretched under this sod-
This inhospitable sod which lies on your little breast, my bitter torture!
If you were thus asleep in Dromad churchyard or in some western grave,
My sorrow would soften, great though be my loss, and I would not grudge it!

Withered and spent are the blossoms which were laid on your narrow bed;
Fine they were once, but they faded; now they have neither colour nor life.
My own blossom, brighter than any that has ever grown or will grow,
Rotting away in the earth never again to return to raise my heart!

Irish Literature contains a wealth of laments in this style from all periods.

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