

Anthony Raftery

I am Raftery and County Mayo

Translated from Gaelic by Anonymous

The following two poems are from a book called Songs Ascribed to Raftery, compiled in 1903 by Ireland's first President and scholar, Douglas Hyde. Anthony Raftery (Antoine ó Reachtabhra), (1784-1835), was born in County Mayo, in the West of Ireland. When he was nine years old he was struck blind by smallpox. He learned to play the fiddle and spent most of his life going up and down the West Coast making his livelihood with songs and music. A homeless wanderer with no formal education, he spoke about the pain that was in his heart, simply and directly in his own words.

I am Raftery

I am Raftery the poet
Full of hope and love,
With eyes that have no light,
With silence unmoved.

Going west on my journey
By the light of my heart,
Feeble and tired
To the end of my road.

Look at me now
With my face to Balla,
Playing music
Unto empty pockets.

County Mayo

Now comes the spring and length of days,
after St. Bridget's feast I'll raise my sails,
for I know I will never feel at home
'til I stand in the middle of County Mayo.
In Claremorris town I'll spend my first night
and in Balla below it I'll start to drink.
In old Kiltimagh I'll stay for a month
two miles from my home in Ballinamore.

I solemnly swear, my heart rises up
as the winds arise and the mists disperse
when I think about Carra and Gallen below it,
on the Mile Bush or the plains of Mayo.
Killeaden's the village where everything grows,
raspberries, blackberries, respect for all kinds.
If only I stood among my own people
old age would leave me and my youth I'd find.

There's barley and oats there, flax and wheat,
shafts of gold rye, bread-flour and meat,
poteen is distilled and sold without license
and the country nobles play and drink.
There's planting, plowing, top-dressing of land
and many things I have yet to mention,
kilns and mills that work without ceasing
devil-the-talk of rent, nothing of the kind.

There's each sort of timber that's fit to be there
the sycamore, beech, ash, hazel and fir,
the birch, rowan-berry, the holly and yew
and green oak to make every boat, ship and mast:
log-wood, mahogany, costly wood of all sorts,
and fine wood to make musical instruments.
Bright hawthorn bushes are cut and hewn,
and rods to make baskets, creels and lods.

The cuckoo and thrush, they answer each other
the blackbird and robin are nesting nearby,
the goldfinch, the woodcock, the linnet are singing

the long-billed snipe and the white-breasted swan,
the eagle from Achill, the Kesh Corran raven
the Loch Erne falcon, the lark from the bog.
If you're there before sunrise
You'll hear them sing in the dawn.

The mare and the foal are beside one another
the plowman with six horses, the plow and the seed.
Lambs play in the morning, they are bounteous, bleating
there are sheep and herds, and a woman and child,
the goat has kids, the sow has bonhams
and the cow is lowing as she goes to the woman.
There's no sickness, disease, and no death or plague,
but priests and clerics who pray to the saints.

The lake is brimming, the rivers are filled
the weirs are built, and the nets in good order,
the pike, the trout and the eel lie here
the crab, periwinkle, the mackerel and seal.
The salmon, the bass are resting at dusk
the lamprey voyages from the great sea,
the tortoise, the lobster, and the gray turbot
the gurnets and fish are plentiful as turf.

There are deer with fawns, and game of all kinds
the fox, the badger and the yellow hare,
hunt-horns are blowing, there's the music of hounds,
the sunrise would lift up your heart in the dawn.
There are gentry on steeds and horsemen being tried,
they hunt till the light of the day is all gone.
The cellar, 'til morning again it is rended
there's drink for the hundreds, and beds to lie down on.

The orphan and widow get help and redemption
food and clothing and land without rent.
Poor scholars get writing and schooling and learning
and those who seek alms to Killeaden all journey.
Its goodness and kindness defeated the world
and Raftery gives it the highest award.
Here ends my story: long life to Frank Taafe,
good Lynch's descendent, who spared not the hunt.