

Anna John Chiot Nic an Luain

A Singer of Tales

(1884–1953)

One of the most gifted storytellers encountered by the renowned Donegal folklore collector, Seán Ó Heochaidh, was a woman named Anna Nic an Luain, or Anna John Chiot as she was known to friends and relatives in her home in the Blue Stack Mountains. Ó Heochaidh, a native of Teileann, a small fishing village in south Donegal, was appointed a full-time collector in the Irish Folklore Commission in 1935, the Commission's first year of operation.



Anna John Chiot Nic an Luain [Simon Coleman R.H.A., 1949]

Until his retirement in 1983, he collected folklore in many districts of Donegal – initially in his native Teileann then taking in the Gleann Cholm Cille area in the south-west of the county and later the Rosses and north Donegal, including spells in Tory Island, all districts in which Irish was then the dominant language. In 1947 he travelled to a mountainous region north of his native Teileann known as the Blue Stacks – the Croaghs – at the heart of which lies an isolated valley through which the Reelin River flows, from the Finn River east of Stranorlar towards Glenties in the west. The small community occupying the valley had reached a high of over 200 people early in the 20th century but was by now suffering the effects of emigration. He was to spend almost eighteen months there in all, recording many people, chief among them Anna John Chiot.

Ó Heochaidh was struck by the quality of the Irish spoken in the Croaghs. He wrote: "In my opinion this is the only true Gaeltacht left in Donegal. It is a little civilization of its own nested here among the hills, having relatively little contact with the outside world. Irish is the language of every household, and is by no means artificial. It possesses a sweetness and precision that I have not heard elsewhere. They speak in an unhurried, easy and distinct manner."

Ó Heochaidh was not the first folklore collector to have visited this remote district. Twelve years before him the collector Liam Mac Meanman, a native of Gleann Fhinne in Donegal's Gaeltacht Láir, north of the Croaghs, spent a winter there, making a substantial collection of folklore, including from Anna John Chiot. There was thus an awareness and interest in the work of the Commission when Ó Heochaidh visited little more than a decade later, and he was welcomed into the home of Anna John Chiot, a noted storyteller and tradition bearer in the community, and her husband John Eoghain Mac an Luain, among other households.

Anna John Chiot was born in the Croaghs in 1884 at a place called Cruach Thiobraide, and when she married she moved only a short distance to a place that was within sight of her family home. When Ó Heochaidh first visited





Ó Heochaidh (right) likened Anna John Chiot to a well that might seem to dry out on a summer's day only to be full again the next day.

her in 1947 she was aged 62 and had experienced ill health for a number of years, causing her to spend much of her time indoors. She busied herself, however, with carding and spinning wool, and knitting socks and other garments for sale to support the couple's meagre income. Her home was noted for its hospitality and she enjoyed the company of the young folklore collector. Over the next 18 months Ó Heochaidh made repeated visits to Anna, diligently writing down tales, *seanchas* (oral history), songs, laments, riddles and other traditional items. He also made use of the Ediphone, an elementary recording device that facilitated verbatim transcriptions of longer tales, some of which took an entire evening to narrate in full. In that time he recorded more than 120 songs from her, some exceeding 20 stanzas in length, and more than 50 long tales. It had been many years since she sang these songs, but she was happy to recite them slowly and methodically for the collector. Ó Heochaidh told the German travel writer, A.E. Johann Wöllschlager of Anna's unfailing ability to surprise him with a new song or tale at every visit: 'I worked with her for over eighteen months and she never repeated anything twice during that time. Her richness, welling up from unbelievably ancient sources is not yet at an end. A collector of the Commission will come to her this summer (1951) to work with her and make

recordings.' Wöllschlager himself recalled: 'I spent not more than a few days with Anna Nic an Luain but she made on me, during this short time, a much greater impression than other people with whom I worked and lived for years, in what is called the social life of the big cities.' (Ní Dhíoraí xviii-xix)

The Commission did indeed visit Anna in 1951, and Caoimhín Ó Danachair made several good quality sound recordings of her and several of her neighbours. A photograph of Anna from the occasion captures her seated in front of a microphone, gazing into the distance in a seeming mix of surprise and enjoyment, busying herself knitting, just as a professional actor might occupy themselves while awaiting the signal to begin performing.

Anna John Chiot's narrative gifts and remarkable store of songs and tales drew the attention of a number of writers and scholars, among them the Icelandic folklorist Einar Ol. Sveinsson, as well as the renowned Swiss scholar Heinrich Wagner, who interviewed Anna at length and collaborated with Seán Ó Heochaidh on a study of the language of the Croaghs, *Sean-chainnt na gCruach*, published in the influential journal *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* in 1964. A number of her stories appear in Áine Ní Dhíoraí's fine collection *Na Cruacha: Scéalta agus Seanchas* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1985), and in 2012 Pól Ó Seachnasaigh completed a study of the international folktales recorded by Seán Ó Heochaidh in 1947 and 1948 in the Croaghs, in which several of Anna's unpublished tales feature. Ó Seachnasaigh has also edited Anna John Chiot's complete song repertoire – numbering 128 songs and poems – a collection to be published shortly by the Folklore Council of Ireland, a welcome addition to the published work of this exceptional storyteller.



Anna John Chiot Nic an Luain's home in the Blue Stacks. [Simon Coleman R.H.A., 1949]