



**Book Review — *Glór ón Sceilg*, by Mícheál Ua Ciarmhaic,  
edited by Máirín Nic Eoin and Mary Shine Thompson.**

**Cork University Press, 2025. 216 pp. €25.00 (Hardcover)**

ISBN: 9781782050179

 **Luke Ó Donnchadha**

*University College Cork*

---

A timely revival of a worthy author, in *Glór ón Sceilg* the editors attempt, and largely succeed in the daunting task of summarising Mícheál Ua Ciarmhaic's (1906–2005) Irish language oeuvre, spanning nine books and almost thirty years of writing in a comparatively slender volume. Ua Ciarmhaic became a Renaissance man later in life, turning his hand to writing in Irish and later also in English as 'Michael Kirby', as well as painting, in his sixties. A selection of Ua Ciarmhaic's work in English was republished in *Skelligs Haul* in 2019, but the more prolific part of his body of work, composed in Irish, had fallen entirely out of print until the publication of *Glór ón Sceilg*. Unfortunately, the book's title may cause confusion for those who seek out the author's work in library catalogues, as *Glór ón Sceilg* is remarkably similar to Ua Ciarmhaic's *Guth ón Sceilg* (2000). The editors might have been wiser to select a more distinct title, especially given that "glór" and "guth" can be synonymous with each other.

The book is laid out thematically rather than chronologically, meaning that material from the earlier book *Cliathán na Sceilge* (1984) appears next to a later work, such as *Guth ón Sceilg* (2000) and so on. There is a danger that the individual context and focus of each book, and indeed Ua Ciarmhaic's development as a writer over such a lengthy period, might be obscured by this approach. However, the results are highly readable, and the source book and date of composition are clearly marked at the beginning of each excerpt and in the index. The pieces are also deftly arranged in a way that contributes to the flow of the book. For example, the essays placed directly before the book's selection of Ua Ciarmhaic's poems themselves quote poetry extensively, giving the impression of a gradual transition between the book's prose and poetry sections. The editors could possibly have gone even further with this process of

arranging. For example, the phrase “iascach ó thóin” (‘Fishing from the bottom’, i.e. the seafloor) is explained by Ua Ciarmhaic in the section ‘Iascach traimilí’ (p. 110), however the term appears regularly earlier in the book where that explanation might have proved useful to a reader unfamiliar with fishing terms.

Prose material makes up most of the volume and Ua Ciarmhaic proves to be a clear and engaging stylist. At a glance the autobiographical pieces that begin the book recall the Gaeltacht memoirs that have proven so influential in modern Irish language literature, particularly those taken from Ua Ciarmhaic’s *Ríocht na dTonn* (1989); it is easy to think about Tomás Ó Criomhthain’s (1856–1937) *An tOileánach* (1929), another work by an author who came to writing late in life, as Ua Ciarmhaic recalls his early experiences on the ocean. The editors make special reference in the introduction to the lesser-read *Seanchas Chléire* (1940)<sup>1</sup> by Conchúr Ó Síocháin (1866–1941), who shares Ua Ciarmhaic’s interest in detail when describing sailing and fishing. Comparison can be made between Ua Ciarmhaic’s ‘Na báid saighne’ (pp. 103–109) with the chapter on ‘Iascach na mbád mór’ in Ó Síocháin’s book (1970, pp. 32–42), both of which discuss similar subjects in granular detail.

Like Ó Síocháin, Ua Ciarmhaic can also communicate this type of detail while recounting short engaging stories. ‘Eachtra Raice’ is an excellent example of this, describing the illicit salvaging of ship wreckage alongside his father. The minutiae of sailing and salvaging is recounted alongside the tension of the ‘peelers’ seeking to catch them. Over the course of the narrative the author provides insights into his relationship with his father, which is characterised by admiration. The account culminates in a wonderfully atmospheric episode where a young Ua Ciarmhaic hauls a salvaged board out of an otherworldly sea cave. There are many other prose gems to be found in the book, of particular interest is a passage on an arrogant visitor to Skellig Michael (pp. 32–35) that blurs the line between memoir and folk-tale and an episode where an older Ua Ciarmhaic helps Pól, a young boy, build a small bridge and harbour for paper boats in a stream only for them to be destroyed in a storm (pp. 42–44). This second piece demonstrates a disarming tenderness that is one of Ua Ciarmhaic’s most impressive traits as an author.

---

<sup>1</sup> Page numbers referenced derive from the modernised edition, published 1970.

Samples of Ua Ciarmhaic's poetry are represented in a smaller section towards the end of the book. Of interest here is the large difference between the early poems selected from *Íochtar Trá* (1985) and his later work, which has a more modern character. Although Ua Ciarmhaic quotes folk poetry extensively in his prose, it does not seem to have served as a model for his compositions. The samples of Ua Ciarmhaic's paintings are a welcome aesthetic addition to the book as well.

While *Glór ón Sceilg*'s index and endnotes are welcome, the addition of a glossary is the most obvious improvement that could be made to the book, particularly in those sections that have an abundance of terminology to do with fishing, farming, etc. The editors describe the variety of sources they used to engage with Ua Ciarmhaic's dialect, including unpublished material from the folklore archives, out-of-print dictionaries and academic texts. More of this work could have been shared with the reader who will quickly encounter words and spellings that cannot be checked in available dictionaries. The glossary found in the modernised edition of *Scéal mo Bheatha* (Ó Céileachair, 2008, pp. 199–218) would have served as an excellent model for this work. Even reprinting the brief glossary of birds and fish already included in *Ríocht na dTonn* (Ua Ciarmhaic, 1989, pp. 115–116) would have greatly improved the text's accessibility, especially as the glosses in *Ríocht na dTonn* do not always reflect those found in Ó Dónaill's dictionary (the most commonly available Irish-English dictionary). For example, "cánóg" is glossed as "puffin" in *Ríocht na dTonn* (Ua Ciarmhaic, 1989, p. 115) but refers to different birds in Ó Dónaill meaning that a reader is likely to misinterpret Ua Ciarmhaic's use of the word in this book. The lack of a glossary causes small problems in other areas also, for example the word spelled "barraois" (p. 103) in the text, meaning 'phosphorescence', is particularly awkward. The form "baraois" is listed in Ó Dónaill and indicates the same pronunciation, but the additional 'r' will lead a reader seeking an explanation of this obscure term astray in the dictionary. It is admirable that the editors have sought to preserve Ua Ciarmhaic's dialect; replacing his words whole-sale with ones found in the dictionary would certainly have marred the work stylistically, but a glossary would have provided vital help to the average reader as well as useful information to those with a particular interest in the dialect. All in all, these are only minor problems that hamper an otherwise well-arranged

survey of an author who is well worth reading. This work is also an important step towards reviving interest in the literature of the Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht; as demonstrated in the book's list of sources, Ua Ciarmhaic is just one of many regional authors whose works have fallen out of print. The book should have a broad appeal to scholars of Gaeltacht literature and enthusiasts of Irish language writing in general. For dialectical scholars Ua Ciarmhaic's work is valuable as a more recent source of a dialect that faced a sharp decline throughout the twentieth century.

**LUKE Ó DONNCHADHA** is a doctoral student in Modern Irish at University College Cork (UCC) focusing on eighteenth and nineteenth century Irish-language manuscripts from Co. Cork. He was awarded a Fulbright Foreign Language Teaching Assistant scholarship and taught Irish in the University of Montana Missoula for the academic year 2024–2025. He received his master's degree from UCC in 2024 with a dissertation focusing on stories of the Fianna from the collection *Fionn agus Lorcán* (1901).

#### **Works Cited**

- Ó Céileachair, D. (2008) *Scéal mo Bheatha*. New edn. revised by Ua Súilleabháin, S. Baile Mhic Íre: Coiste Litríochta Mhúscraí.
- Ó Síocháin, C. (1970) *Seanchas Chléire*. Eagrán Nua. Baile Átha Cliath: Oifig an tSoláthair.
- Ua Ciarmhaic, M. (1989) *Ríocht na dTonn*. Baile Átha Cliath: Coiscéim.