Eileen O’Connell, The Lament for Art O’Leary

“the greatest poem written in these islands in the whole eighteenth century.”

-Peter Levi, Professor of Poetry at Oxford, 1984

Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill (c.1743-c.1800): “Dark Eileen” O’Connell (“Dubh” means dark or black; it is pronounced “dove”). Eileen was a member of the O’Connell family of county Kerry (in Southern Ireland) and the aunt of Daniel O’Connell “The Liberator.”

In her introduction to the poem, Vona Groarke writes that “Eileen’s was an important Irish family….Her mother kept up one of the few big Gaelic houses to survive under English rule and, though the family’s first language was Irish (Eileen’s mother was herself a noted poet), the children were tutored in Latin, French and English….it seems likely that a large-scale smuggling operation between south Kerry and the European mainland allowed them to maintain considerable wealth” (15).

Eileen was married once before, when she was 15 years old, to a much older man who died shortly after their marriage. Art was her second husband.

Art Ó Laoghaire (1746-1773). Educated on the European continent. Due to restrictions on Irish Catholics at home, he had become a soldier in the Hungarian army, the Hungarian Hussars.

Background: after the Irish army was defeated by the British in 1691 (in what are known as the
Williamite wars, since they were fought against the British king William of Orange, a custom developed that Irish men would serve as mercenaries in the armies of Catholic European countries (those who did so were called “Wild Geese”).

When Eileen first spotted Art at the market in Macroom, he was on leave from his duties and was visiting his home town. He was wearing his sword in public, something that Catholics were forbidden to do.

Art and Eileen were married in December 19, 1767. Her family disapproved of the match. During the marriage, he returned for periods of service in Hungary.

Abraham Morris: the High Sheriff of Macroom (Protestant)

The events of the narrative: From Vona Groarke: “the High Sheriff of Macroom, Abraham Morris has a falling-out with him [Art]. To put Art in his place, Morris invokes the Penal Law against a Catholic owning a horse worth more than five pounds and demands that Art sell him the valuable mare for this amount. Art duly refuses and one of Morris’s servants fires at him. In anger, O’Leary seizes Morris’s gun, an act which puts him firmly on the wrong side of the law. He is declared ‘notoriously infamous’ by Morris who, in 1771, offers a reward for his arrest.

Their ongoing feud comes to a head on May 4, 1773. Art, tired of a fugitive life, determines to kill Morris. A local farmer called Cooney relays his intention to Morris who instead gathers a company of soldiers to run him down. Art escapes them and is resting in a field at Carriginima when he is shot dead. His beloved mare gallops the seven miles home to Eileen. Eileen mounts the horse which takes her to where her husband lies bleeding by the side of the road. She cups her hand in his blood and begins to intone the first part of her keen” (17).

Macroom: a town in Southern Ireland near Cork.

"Caoineadh" (to cry, to weep, to lament, to mourn): pronounced “Queen-ay,” also known as “keening.” “Traditionally, the lament was intoned by several, professional keening women over the body of the deceased….Eileen’s is not a typical keen in that it has an identified author rather than an anonymous or even collective source….it wasn’t made as most poems are, with a degree of forethought: rather, it was extemporized for performance, in the tradition of the public lament. And it wasn’t written down until thirty years after it was composed, and then not by Dark Eileen herself” (Vona Groarke, 13).

“The keen was a public act. One, or several, of the group of mourners (keeners) memorized Eileen’s lament and thus preserved it in oral form. Twice it was written down from recitations by a professional keening woman, Norrie Singleton: once around 1800 and again, shortly before her death at a great age, around 1870” (Groarke 17).

The Penal Laws: The Penal Laws were a set of laws restricting the civil, political and property rights of Catholics in Ireland starting at the end of the 1690s. The laws were designed to promote The Church of Ireland (Anglican Protestantism) and to discourage Catholicism and Dissenting versions of Protestantism.
By the end of the eighteenth century, when these events took place, some of the Penal Laws had been repealed and hopes were high that Catholics would continue to gain rights in Ireland. However, the Act of Union did not deliver the hoped-for and promised Catholic Emancipation. It did not come until the Catholic Relief Act of 1829 (thanks largely to the efforts of Eileen’s nephew, Daniel O’Connell).

Edmund Burke called the penal laws “a machine of wise and elaborate contrivance, as well fitted for the oppression, impoverishment and degradation of a people, and the debasement in them of human nature itself, as ever proceeded from the perverted ingenuity of man.”

Some of the Penal Laws included the following:

- Catholics were barred from holding most public/elected offices
- Intermarriage between Catholics and Protestants was banned
- Catholics could not own guns or serve in the army
- Catholics were denied membership in the British or Irish Parliament (remember: the Irish Parliament would be abolished completely with the Act of Union, 1801)
- Catholics could not vote
- Catholics could not enter the legal profession
- Catholics could not attend Trinity College, Dublin (the leading university in Ireland)
- Catholics could not lease land for more than 31 years at a time
- Catholics were banned from owning a horse worth more than five pounds
- New Catholic churches were to be built of wood, not stone, and away from main roads
- Catholics were not allowed to work as school teachers

From Modern Ireland: “Penal law enforcement and its impact on Catholics was highly variegated, and modern scholars have emphasized the patchy and unsystematic way in which the laws had been introduced and enforced in the 18th century. But their existence was rooted in deep suspicion of Catholics and a belief in their inherent disloyalty (19-20).

Daniel O’Connell, “The Liberator” (1775-1847), nephew of Eileen O’Connell

- leader of the movement for Catholic Emancipation (ie. the repeal of the Penal Laws)

- O’Connell was educated in Europe and studied for the Bar in London and went on to become a successful lawyer (note that both of these—education abroad and becoming a lawyer—were forbidden by the Penal Laws. O’Connell was able to do both of these things because the Penal Laws were unsystematically enforced, as mentioned above, and because certain laws were also occasionally repealed and then re instituted).
1823: O’Connell founded the Catholic Association, an organization designed to defend the rights of ordinary Catholics affected by the penal laws (i.e., not those who wanted to run for office or be educated abroad, but rather, those who simply wanted to be able to pay fair rents, practice their religion in peace, etc).

He charged one penny for membership in the Catholic Association. This fee was small enough that even poor people could afford it. His organization grew to an enormous size.

O’Connell’s activism and the “monster meetings” he held were substantial contributors to the eventual passage of “Roman Catholic Relief Act” passed by British Parliament in 1829. The main benefits of the Relief Act went to middle class Catholics in Ireland who could now hold civil service jobs and take advantage of other greater freedoms related to land ownership, money, and education. But some restrictions on Catholics still remained in place. For instance, Catholics were still required to pay taxes to the Church of Ireland, a major source of grievance.

In 1830, the year following the Roman Catholic Relief Act, O’Connell established the Repeal Association, a group geared toward repealing the Act of Union that had eliminated the Irish Parliament in 1801. O’Connell wanted to restore the Irish Parliament (but was not advocating for complete separation from England: he worked within the bounds of the empire as a “constitutional nationalist,” like his successor Charles Stewart Parnell).

Daniel O’Connell (1775-1847)