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“The windy day isn’t the day for thatching”: An Irish Proverb and its Wider Links

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ABSTRACT. In line with Professor Kazys Grigas’s work on proverbs in Lithuania and their place in the overall European body, my article looks at one widespread proverb in Ireland: “*Ní hé lá na gaoithe lá na scolb*” (The windy day isn’t the thatching day) with a similar approach. Not only are there many examples of it in oral tradition in both Irish and English, but several variants within the island, one of which, the one quoted, mentions a regional kind of thatching. As well as variants and how their distribution ties in with the material culture, I look at parallels, such as “*Ní hé lá na báistighe lá an phortaigh*” (The rainy day isn’t the day for the bog), the bog already being a wet place. Occasionally, this short genre is attached to anecdotes about local people and other lore, which I also outline. Since thatched roofs themselves are now rare in Ireland, I will attempt to see what proverbs about procrastination have replaced this once common and widespread proverb.

KEYWORDS: Irish, proverbs, scollop (scolb), Scottish Gaelic, thatched roofs, variants.

„Vėjuotą dieną netinka stogus dengti“: airių patarlė ir jos platesnės sąsajos

SANTRAUKA. Remdamasi profesoriaus Kazio Grigo darbu apie patarles Lietuvoje ir jų vietą bendrame Europos kontekste, savo straipsnyje panašiu požiūriu nagrinėju vieną plačiai paplitusią airių patarlę: „*Ní hé lá na gaoithe lá na scolb*“ (Vėjuota diena netinka stogus dengti). Tiek airių, tiek anglų žodinėje tradicijoje esama nemažai šios patarlės variantų; negana to, ir pačioje Airijoje aptinkama bent keletas variantų, iš kurių vienas, cituotasis, mini regioninį būdą stogus dengti šiaudais. Straipsnyje ne tik nagrinėju šiuos variantus bei jų paplitimo ryšį su materialine kultūra, bet ir šios patarlės paraleles, kaip antai: „*Ní hé lá na báistighe lá an phortaigh*“ (Lietinga diena – ne pelkėms), nes pelkėje ir taip jau šlapia. Kartais šios trumposios folkloro formos siejamos su anekdotais apie vietos gyventojus ir kitomis tradicijomis – tai

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irgi apžvelgiu. Kadangi pačių šiaudinių stogų Airijoje dabar reta, mėginu išsiaiškinti, kokios patarlės apie darbų atidėliojimą pakeitė šią kadaise įprastą ir plačiai žinomą patarlę.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: airių kalba, patarlės, šukutė (*scolb*), škotų gėlių kalba, šiaudiniai stogai, variantai.

INTRODUCTION

I did once have the good fortune to meet Professor Kazys Grigas – that was in 1998 in Budapest when we were the guests of Professor Paczolay Gyula at a small symposium.¹ In keeping with Professor Grigas's work my article explores insular variants of a particular proverb. In Ireland in oral tradition it often runs: "The windy day isn't the day for thatching", meaning that one should be prepared and not leave things until it is too late.

Many versions of this in both of the main languages present – English and Irish – have been noted. Almost 200 years ago William Carleton (1794–1869), an Irish writer from County Tyrone, referred to the proverb in English and Irish in one of his short stories "Larry M'Farland's Wake" in a series reflecting rural life titled *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry* (Carleton 1844: 86).² The story is about two brothers, Larry and Tom, who were very different in character. Larry was improvident: "How and ever, Larry spoke to his brother who was a sober, industrious boy, who had laid by his scollops for the windy day, and told him that he was going to marry" (*ibid.*). Carleton footnoted the reference to the proverb as follows:

In Irish the proverb is – "*Ha nahn la na guiha la na scuilipagh*"³ that is, the windy or stormy day is not that on which scollops should be cut. Scollops are osier twigs [that is, flexible *Salix viminalis*, willow], sharpened [pointed] at both ends, [bent double] and inserted in the thatch, to bind it at the eve and rigging. The proverb inculcates preparation for future necessity (*ibid.*).

Carleton's stories about rural life were aimed at metropolitan readers and, indeed, not only those in Ireland but beyond, therefore he felt that he had to explain

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1 Symposium and Exhibition for the 400th Anniversary of the Publication of János Baranyai Decsi's *Adagia* in the National Széchényi Library, 1998. The symposium papers were published in "*Igniculi sapientiae*" *János-Baranyai-Decsi-Festschrift* (see Barna, Stemler, Voigt 2004).

2 Carleton's version appears to be the earliest. While the quotation that I use here is from the 1844 edition of the story, there may be a version in an 1830 printing; see Hayley 1985.

3 Irish proverbs are spelt differently in the article because they were published or recorded before the Irish language was standardised; also variation occurs because the Irish language exists in three distinct dialects.

such things. Although the scollops were usually made of willow and willow trees were widespread other flexible things like briars were used in some places.

Due to the lack of slate in Ireland the traditional house roof was thatched and the thatch was secured to the layer underneath in one of two ways. By far the more common way was, as Carleton described, by using bent rods, the Irish for which is *scolb* and the Anglo-Irish the same along with derivatives such as *scollop*. The other method of holding the thatch on was by using a network of ropes, the ends of which were anchored to projections along the tops of the walls. These two methods have a particular distribution, with the rope method being used around the western, Atlantic Ocean, coast from County Donegal in the north to County Kerry in the south, a route officially promoted as the Wild Atlantic Way. In this part of Ireland the weather is much windier than elsewhere and ropes were more effective in keeping the roof in place than scollops. Throughout the rest of the island scollops were enough to secure the roof. While one could not reconstruct a house from the proverb record alone, I was interested, for one thing, to see how much, if at all, variants of the proverb reflected the two distinct roofing techniques.

My chief source for the proverb in Ireland is the National Folklore Collection (NFC), which is held in University College, Dublin. It has been built up since the 1920s, initially by the Cumann le Bhéaloideas Éireann (the Folklore of Ireland Society), made up of volunteers led by Séamus Ó Duilearga and which was established in 1927, and is one of the largest collections in the world. The Irish Folklore Commission part of the government Department of Education followed in 1935 with Ó Duilearga as its director. He realised that, with his limited budget and number of staff, it would be impossible to collect folklore from all parts of the island and later his successor Bo Almqvist was to compare the task to "a dozen farmers trying to cultivate the whole of a country" (Almqvist 1979: 4). So, soon after its establishment, the staff of the Irish Folklore Commission devised the Schools' Collection Scheme in which the older pupils, for about a year, would collect folklore on certain subjects at home or from knowledgeable neighbours. This is now known as the National Folklore Collection Schools' Collection (NFC S). A booklet outlining a limited number of suitable topics such as "Games I Play" was distributed and one of these subjects was "Proverbs" (Ó Súilleabháin 1937: 20–21). It was hugely successful, and proverbs were collected from the vast majority of primary schools in the Republic of Ireland.⁴ I have supplemented this, my chief source, with dictionaries, printed collections of proverbs and the work of some creative writers (see References), and through talking to colleagues.

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 4 The NFC also contains questionnaires. Over the years three of these were titled "Roofs and Thatching" NFC 1079–1081, NFC 1306 and NFC 1669. Although it is quite possible that they contain versions of the proverb under discussion I did not consult them for the article.

THE PROVERB ITSELF

Apart from having similar rhythm and stress the main marker of the proverb in both languages (Irish and English) is repetition; the chief variant in both languages is essentially the same:

The windy day isn't the day for thatching.
Ní hé lá na gaoithe lá na scolb.

Before going further, the Irish phrase “*lá na scolb*”, literally “day of the scolbs”, can also be used for the more specific “thatching day”, which is probably how it should be considered (Dinneen 1927: scolb).

KINDS OF THATCHING

As I mentioned, there are two kinds of thatching, one using scollops and the other using ropes. While I have not attempted to examine every single county in the Schools' Collection manuscripts, I have tried to make a representative selection of counties balanced between the two areas that practice the different kinds of thatching.⁵ In all the versions that I have located in the NFC S, only one mentions “ropes”: “The day of the big wind is not the day to make the ropes” (NFC S 0195: 384). Unexpectedly, it comes from an essentially inland county and one not noted for rope thatching – County Leitrim. While the County Donegal writer Séamus Ó Grianna, who would have been surrounded by rope-thatched houses, did not use it even when he directly referred to them, as in the following quotation from his novel *Caisleán Óir* (Golden Castle, 1924): “*Is minic a d'iarr mise ort, a mhic, 'na súgáin a theannadh ar a' teach, le fios nó le h-amhras. Ní h-é lá na gaoithe lá na scolb*” (I have often asked you, son, to tighten the ropes on the house, just in case. The day of the wind isn't the day of the scollops; [Séamus Ó Grianna] Máire 1934: 8).⁶

5 NFC S Manuscripts were read in full for the following counties: Cavan, Dublin, Leitrim, Louth, Monaghan and Sligo and all the lists titled “Proverbs” and similar for counties Carlow, Donegal, Kerry, Kildare, Waterford and Wexford, making a total of 12 out of the 26 counties covered by the NFC S. There were versions of the proverb from all the counties listed except Dublin and Louth.

6 I was alerted to this through Ailbhe Ó Corráin's *Concordance of Idiomatic Expressions* in the writer Máire's works (Ó Corráin 1989: No. 47, 216). Under this Ó Corráin also lists another instance of Máire's use of the proverb in a later novel. It should be mentioned, however, that Ó Corráin does say “Reference has not been made to all occurrences of an expression in the corpus. Certain idioms occur literally dozens of times [...]” (ibid.: Introduction 7.5, xiv). In the Introduction he explains that “The meaning of the headphrase has been defined in English either by means of a suitable English equivalent or by paraphrase”, so, in the case of the proverb in question, we find “there is no time like the present; a stitch in time saves nine (better safe than sorry)” (ibid.: xii and No. 47, 216) respectively.

While preparing my article I did receive a County Donegal version mentioning rope thatch. The speaker was talking in English and used the proverb in Irish but, on realising that his listener would not understand the Irish, immediately translated it thus into English: "The night of the storm is not the time to be tying the thatch down" (Irish lacking, heard about forty years ago from the townland of Kilkenny, north-west of Glenties, emails from Alun Evans, February 2025). All the other versions in Irish that I have come across refer to scollops rather than ropes. Could this indicate that the proverb began among scollop-thatched houses and later spread to where there were rope-thatched houses? The area of scollop-thatched houses is certainly much more extensive than that of rope-thatched ones.

VARIATION AND VARIANTS INCLUDING PARALLELS OF PROVERBS

There is much less variation in Irish-language versions of the proverb than in the English-language ones. In Irish I have located an instance of the converse, namely, "*Ní hé lá na sgolb lá na gaoithe móire*" (Thatching day is not the day of much wind). It appears in at least one post-1864 manuscript of proverbs and is probably from the Aran Islands in Galway Bay, part of the Atlantic Ocean (*Sean-fhocla Chonnacht* 1952: No. 4046). As well as it Tomás S. Ó Máille in his detailed, classic proverb collection from one of the four provinces in Ireland – Connacht – lists two of the regular versions and at least two parallels: "*Ní hé lá na stoirm-shínte atá teine chur ar an gcloich*" (The highly stormy day isn't the day to make a fire on the hearth) and "*Ní hé lá na báistighe lá an phortaigh*" (The wet day isn't the day for the bog; *ibid.*).

These four are all from the west of Ireland and, although not from the NFC Schools' Collection, with the exception of the island version which is probably nineteenth century, date to about the same era. They are all together under the heading "Tráthamhlacht" (Appropriateness). The two parallels are close to the common variant in that they dwell on the weather and local way of life: in Ireland all domestic cooking and heating was done by means of an open fire at ground level "a fire on the hearth" as the first parallel indicates, rather than in ovens or enclosed stoves, and the fuel for the fires was turf (dried compressed vegetal material) cut from bogs, rather than wood or coal.

The third parallel in Irish has a quite different image "*Ní hé lá an chatha lá an chnuasaithe*" (The day of the battle isn't the day for gathering troops), which is a dictionary entry of 1977 and probably has much less connection than the other parallels with "The windy day [...]" (Ó Dónaill 1977: cath).

I have not found any of these parallels among the English-language versions instead only the following: "It is not the day you are harrowing you should feed

your horse” (NFC S 0207: 122, County Leitrim), “The morning of the race is not the morning to feed your horse” (NFC S 0972: 092, County Cavan), “It’s late to be mending your nets when the eels are in the river” (NFC S 0668: 205, County Louth) and a fourth which runs “The night of the storm isn’t the night to be fixing your sails” (NFC S 0401: 241, County Kerry).

Aside from the variants in Irish mentioned above, there are very few others among the Irish-language versions. This contrasts with the many variations that there are in the English-language versions. Albeit that they are slight, variations even occur within counties. Looking at those that have been recorded from one representative county, Donegal, we can find “The day of the wind is not the day of the scollops”, and “A [...]” or “The windy day is not the day for thatching (NFC S manuscript number mislaid, NFC S 1028: 370 and NFC S 1100: 135 respectively). It is likely that in speech, rather than when being written down formally under a teacher’s eye, “is not” would have been condensed to “isn’t”. It is possible that the more widely used word “thatching” has replaced the specialised term “scollop”. Variants from other counties refer to gathering or preparing scollops. The single variant from County Sligo uses a rhyme: “Don’t put up thatch on a house of a windy day thatch and man might blow away” (NFC S 0178: 325).

CONTEXT OF THE PROVERB USAGE

While we have plenty of examples of the proverb in the Schools’ Collection that are closely provenanced and often attributed as to informant and collector, they are almost all in lists without comments, rather than showing us when they might be used. A few are attached to stories about local people. Here is a typical example, typically titled “A Funny Story”:

Once upon a time there lived in the townland of Moheraven a mother and her son... [The son M.] was getting old in years. He was nearly fifty before his mother gave him consent to bring a new Mrs B. into the house... A while after that [the mother] got sick and took to her bed... he ran for J.W. [to] go to Mohill with him for the coffin. “When did she die?” said J. excited. “She did not die at all yet”, says M., “it’s not the day of the big wind you should be pointing the scallops” (NFC S 0217: 045–046, County Leitrim).⁷

Other lore is of the cautionary type, a warning that such and such a named person in the district persisted in thatching his roof in the wind and either he or

7 Besides the indicated amendments a few slight silent amendments have been made to this and the other extracts from the NFC S.

the thatch was blown off. I suppose that even such simple, straightforward narrative would tend to keep knowledge of the proverb alive. Here is an example:

Tom Johnston of Ballymote was a man who was noted for thatching his house on a windy day. When people would say to him, "The day of the wind is not the day for thatching", he said to them that it was the right day because he had no time another day. One windy day in the middle of March when Johnston was thatching his house a terrible gust of wind came and blew the thatch off the house. In the evening at times there was terrible gales. The last one was the worst and every bit of the thatch Johnston put on was blown off again. That night he had to put a large sheet of iron and a ladder on top of it to keep it down. He never found a bit of the fresh straw he [had] put on so he had to buy more and the next day he and two more men thatched the house (NFC S 0177: 197–198, County Sligo).

The proverb has also been incorporated into a few Irish-language versions of the folktale "The hard hearted fiancée" in which it is used as an excuse by one suitor for not working (ATU 1455, four of the 89 versions in the NFC Main Manuscripts, all from County Kerry).⁸

THE NIGHT OF THE BIG WIND

Some variants of the proverb appear to refer to a particular windy day rather than any windy day. This happened on Epiphany, or Twelfth Night in 1839. It resulted in hundreds of deaths on land and sea and is vividly recalled in oral tradition. Here is one of the many narratives:

My father gave me the following account of the night of the big wind which he heard from his grandfather. They lived near Keash about three miles from Ballymote. The spray from the sea was blown as far as Keash, as farmers in that district found the taste of salt water on their lips when they were out securing their hay and corn [oats] from the storm which raged on that memorable night, and which has been spoken of down to the present day (NFC S 0183: 172, County Sligo, Keash is about 20 kilometres from the sea; see also Carr 1994).

The tragedy, even a hundred years later on at the time of the Schools' Collection, seems to have provided extra meaning for a pre-existing proverb and because of that

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⁸ In the ATU Catalogue, type ATU 1455 is classified in the "Jokes and Anecdotes: Stories About a Woman 1440–1524" chapter (see pdf version of ATU Catalogue: <https://edition.fi/kalevalaseura/catalog/view/765/713/2748-1>).

probably stoked its currency. There are many such variants in the 1930s Schools' Collection, in the English language at least, such as "It is not the day of the big wind you should point the scallop" (NFC S 0207: 122, County Leitrim).⁹

POSSIBLE RELATIONSHIP

The area where scollop-roofed houses once were is much larger than the one where rope-roofed houses ever were. I surmise that this is therefore probably where the proverb took hold, possibly at the time when Irish was still the predominant language in this area. The Irish language was being superseded throughout the nineteenth century, particularly in the second half, and has only survived primarily as a first language in western coastal areas.¹⁰ Carleton was able to quote a version in Irish, probably from his inland native County Tyrone, which he published in 1844, and towards the end of the nineteenth century Énrí Ua Muirgheasa was able to record versions from three counties, two of which were inland – Armagh and Monaghan; the third was Derry (Ua Muirgheasa 1907: No. 442; under "Procrastination: Delay"). It is known that proverbs and other fixed expressions survive beyond the time that the person who knows or even quotes them has ceased to use that language. Thus Ua Muirgheasa's versions were probably from people who knew the proverbs but did not use Irish as an everyday language.

SCOTLAND

Moving outside Ireland, I have located a version in a neighbouring country where there were similar thatched houses – Scotland – in Scottish Gaelic, a language closely related to Irish: "*Cha b'e là na gaoithe là nan sgolb*". This echoes the Irish material word for word. It is in a collection of Scottish Gaelic proverbs and phrases by Alexander Nicolson published in 1882 based on the earlier and first collections by Donald Macintosh (Mac Innes 1951: No. 4. 81) however this particular proverb does not appear to have been included in these first collections by Macintosh (in 1785 and 1819). Nicolson describes the word "*sgolb*": "The '*sgolb*' is a wattle, generally of willow, used for fastening the thatch, and the meaning is that the fastening of the thatch must not be left till the wind comes and lifts it. Ulster

9 This terrible storm gets a particular mention in the booklet prepared for schools in the section titled "Severe weather": "Are any accounts available locally of the Big Wind of 1839? If so tell how it affected your district" (Ó Súilleabháin 1937: 9). From what I have read, however, the proverbs do not seem to appear under accounts with headings such as "The Night of the Big Wind".

10 As Adams points out "it is clear that English quite suddenly gained an advantage about the middle of the last century" (i.e. from ca. 1850; Adams 1970: 163).

proverb in same words" (ibid.). He is probably referring to Robert MacAdam's version in *The Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, which had been published some years earlier (MacAdam 1858: No. 33). Dedicated searching and even help from a Scottish Gaelic-speaking folklorist colleague detected only one other version in Scotland: "*Cha b'e lath na gaoithe là nan sgolb*" (The windy day is not the day for wattles; Wattles are used to fasten thatch, but the operation should not be postponed to the windy day; *Gaelic Proverbs* 1913: 137). The colleague also unearthed an Irish version in a Scottish Gaelic newspaper *Mac-Talla* on Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia, Canada, in an unattributed list titled "*Sean Fhacail Eirionnach*" (*Irish Proverbs* 1897: 127).¹¹

THE PROVERB'S FORTUNES

While the National Folklore Collection shows us that the proverb was flourishing (widespread and well-known) in both languages in Ireland at the time of the Schools' Collection and giving rise to narrative and having an influence on a folktale it seems to have been out of use in English for decades and it was probably not long before its use also declined in Irish. The Irish-language version, however, has been adopted by purveyors of Irish traditional life and language in the way that many postcards which are currently being sold of thatched houses are actually photos taken decades ago that have been reissued. Most popular collections of proverbs in Irish include it, their source mainly being the much older genuine collections from living oral tradition. This is partly, I feel, because it includes the distinctive word "*scolb*".

A friend, an Irish speaker, told me how he had had to learn proverbs in Irish at school in the 1950s in County Wexford, but until I asked him if he knew the proverb and described the word "*scolb*" he said that the word had not been explained and that he just assumed that it was the thatching material.¹² Later it was also used in the Republic of Ireland at least in primary schools, and in County Donegal at least, on a poster about saving money, showing a man trying to thatch in the wind.¹³

Since the era of the Schools' Collection we have had two strands of the use of the proverb. One was lingering in Irish oral tradition in fringe areas in the kind of milieu from which it was derived. In 1981 Clannad, for instance, a traditional music group from a *Gaeltacht* or area of Irish speakers in County Donegal composed and recorded a piece called "*Ní Lá na Gaoithe Lá na Scoilb?*" [1] and the other lacking

11 Email from Tiber Falzett, 2 February 2024.

12 Conall Ó Catháin personal communication, January 2024.

13 Email from Lillís Ó Laoire, 18 February 2024.

context within the school system and teaching generally. As Pól Ó Múirí, writer and journalist, wrote: “*Ní hé lá na gaoithe* [...] The windy day is not the day for thatching. Although thatch has almost disappeared [...] everyone who learns Irish learns this proverb and indeed often knows what a scolb is [...]” [2]. Along with this second strand are the popular printed collections, most of which as mentioned are derived from older collections, rather than reflecting any contemporary currency.¹⁴

CONTEMPORARY USE

Fast forward, as they say, from this lingering proverb to a BBC Radio Four morning news programme in September 2023 discussing government finance in which I heard one ruling British politician asking another who was no longer in power “Did you fix the roof while the sun was shining?”¹⁵ And I had heard this before in regard to the United Kingdom Parliament at Westminster. But it came to the fore because of the leading US politician President J. F. Kennedy, when he used it in his State of the Union Address to Congress in January 1962 regarding planning: “The time to repair the roof is when the sun is shining” [3]. Wolfgang Mieder and his co-compilers Charles Clay Doyle and Fred R. Shapiro duly noted a variant in their *Dictionary of Modern Proverbs*: “Fix (Mend, Patch) the roof before it rains”, first instance 1910 (Mieder, Doyle, Shapiro 2012: roof). This thoroughly comprehensible proverb is no doubt one of those that is substituting for the other.

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 14 For example, Gaffney and Cashman, *Proverbs and Sayings of Ireland*, first published in 1974 and much reprinted, which consists of English translations of proverbs most of which had been previously published in Irish in various collections (Gaffney, Cashman 1995).

15 Interviewer Nick Robinson, 14 September 2023.

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NFC S – National Folklore Collection Schools' Manuscripts Collection.

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16 The first number refers to the volume number and the second to the page number.

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