‘Pilf’ring from the first creation’: Dáibhí de Barra’s Parliament of weavers

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INTRODUCTION

Párlíment na bhFíodóirí (The parliament of weavers hereafter) was composed by east Cork scribe and writer Dáibhí de Barra (1757/8–1851). In common with a great number of his Gaelic-speaking contemporaries, the author was educated locally at a hedge-school. Our knowledge of his life and career is scant: we have only a dozen or so surviving manuscripts in his hand and a small amount of correspondence between him and local antiquarians from which to piece together a biography. Records show that by 1833 de Barra was farming a small holding of twenty-nine acres in Carrigtwohill, which he had inherited. His circumstances were accordingly modest and not infrequently quite difficult. As far as we can tell, he never travelled widely or left his home for any extended periods. His literary works also offer occasional insights into his life. The author was unusual in that at a time when the flow of Gaelic writing – prose writing in particular – was petering out, his own output was reasonably substantial. His surviving writings, comprising well in excess of 150 poems, over a dozen translations (all from English) and two original prose works, reveal a continuing preoccupation with the social and political issues of his day. Varied topics and themes emerge in the work: reflections on the transience of human existence (a concern with mortality recurs) and the consequences of one’s actions in life are the focus of several of his devotional poems; in other works, nationalistic

1 For a short biographical account in English of Dáibhí de Barra’s life, see Dictionary of Irish biography (Dublin, 2009), s.n. The most comprehensive account of de Barra’s life and work can be found in B. Ó Conchúir, Scriobhaithe Chorcaí (Dublin, 1983), pp 8–13. I should like to thank my colleague, Dr Pádraigín Riggs, who read an earlier draft of this article and suggested several helpful amendments. I would also like to acknowledge the support of the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences, which funded this research.

2 Regarding his poetic output, almost 160 compositions alone are attributed to Dáibhí de Barra (the majority of these being in his own hand) in the catalogue description of the Irish-language manuscripts held in St Colman’s College, Fermoy, see P. Ó Fiainnacha, Clár lámhscribhinni Gaeilge: leabharlanna na cléire agus mionchnuasaígh – fascál II (Dublin, 1980), pp 108–12. For an account of his translations, see S. Ó Duinnshléibhe, ‘Mar is fánach mac á teacht mar ’athair: Dáibhí de Barra’s surviving translations’ in C. Breathnach and E. Lawless (eds), Visual, material and print culture in nineteenth-century Ireland (Dublin, 2010), pp 257–70.

3 De Barra’s devotional verse was collected together by the author in the form of an anthology in 1835; this manuscript (Fermoy MS F PB 6) is now held in St Colman’s College,
sentiments are often to the fore as is a firm denunciation of the Protestant clergy – the Second Reformation, for instance, and the spread of proselytizing bible societies were an especial source of antipathy, as was the extortion of tithes by the Established church, and the two subjects feature in a cluster of poems that advert to the contemporary position of the oppressed Catholic underclass.

The parliament of weavers, likewise prompted by events in contemporary life, in the first instance, is of interest because of its literary representation of the artisan and his craft and, to this end, the work draws heavily both on Gaelic literary tradition and on a store of general stereotyped descriptions. The work was inspired in part by developments in the local industrial milieu (itself characterized by unrest and distress) which not only received widespread attention in local press but were also a source of much public comment and concern far beyond Cork and its hinterland. Contemporary prose accounts in Irish from the post-classical period (c. 1650–1850) of events of the day are comparatively rare. For this reason, the Parliament, which remains largely unexamined, is of further importance because of its distinctive portrayal – highly-coloured and satirical as it may be – of the various actors and viewpoints involved. The evolution of the relevant textile industries in Cork and their respective adaptation (or lack thereof) to new technologies pioneered elsewhere have been charted in great detail by Andy Bielenberg. De Barra’s Parliament reflects particular aspects of the contemporary situation of weavers in the final quarter of the eighteenth century and the first quarter of the nineteenth, and, to a certain extent, the work (the final part in particular) prefigures the severe industrial decline locally that would gather pace soon after. Cornelius Buttimer in his study of Gaelic life and literature in Cork in the pre-Famine period has demonstrated how native scribes and writers in the region did not operate within ‘an isolated and introspective Irish-speaking community’, as once imagined, but sought to articulate in their works local reactions to specific events much further afield such as the Seven Years War as well as more general developments in Revolutionary and Napoleonic Europe. These

writings also sometimes offer a window into the subject of communal tension within their authors’ community: in his article, Buttimer, for instance, cites two examples of *barántais* (a literary genre, taking the form of a parody of certain conventions of English law, in which individuals are brought to book for misdemeanours committed) that deal with the contentious issues of landholding prices and labourers’ wages. Turning his attention to *The parliament of weavers*, he contends quite rightly that this work allows us to observe similar ‘communal stress […] in full measure’, albeit that such stress pertains in this instance to matters primarily affecting the weaving fraternity. In the case of the *Parliament*, the result is not reportage of real-life events; rather de Barra reflects the contemporary circumstances of weavers through the prism of his native literary tradition in a comic and engaging manner. A mock-heroic register is employed regularly throughout, in particular in his description of the solemn parliamentary debates, which are given over to quite trivial and self-serving concerns. Further, the influence of medieval romance tales is in evidence at the beginning and end of the work, where the tone is set and reinforced respectively as well as in the occasionally archaic and alliterative style that the author adopts. Owing to its pervasive influence, and because of the need for careful attention to the literary features of the text, it is to the Gaelic tradition and analogues, rather than to the historical context, that I shall first turn.

**THE LITERARY BACKGROUND: ‘A TALE OF TWO PARLIAMENTS’**

De Barra’s work falls into two parts, each of which describes an imaginary parliament of weavers. The first of these assemblies has as its locale the author’s neighbourhood of Carrigtwohill and is set towards the end of the eighteenth century (1790), while the second book, although situated in the same location, was composed over twenty-five years later and is set at the time of writing in 1826. The two books share a broadly similar structure, which can be summarized as follows: the weavers are summoned by their leader to assemble on an appointed date for the purpose of discussing the recent decline in their circumstances. Soon afterwards, the tradesmen gather in a local pub and proceed to elect a speaker, crier and committee, and the members remove themselves from the gathering in order to consider the state of the trade. The chief aim of their discussion is the enactment of a series of resolutions intended to revive their fortunes. After some debate and deliberation, the resulting acts are delivered to the assembly where they meet with enthusiastic approval. These acts or regulations consist of a variety of unpromising and deceitful measures (mostly

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aimed at short-term advancement) which seem certain to drive the weavers further out of favour with their customers. A dissenting voice rises from the crowd, prevailing on them to see sense and to abandon the proposed decrees. At this juncture, a riotous debate ensues before the leader restores some order and instructs all present to return home, but not without first cautioning the weavers to enact the measures in full.

This general outline of events clearly recalls another literary work in Irish, *Parliament Chloinne Tomáis* (The parliament of Clan Thomas hereafter), the most famous example of the parliament genre in the Gaelic literary tradition. In order to demonstrate the degree to which *The parliament of weavers* is indebted to the earlier work, I offer the following brief description of the precursor text and its background. *The parliament of Clan Thomas* was written in the seventeenth century, in part to satirize the lower orders (known as Clan Thomas in the text) of a fragmenting Gaelic society whose opportunism may have resulted in its authors’ reduced state. As the editor of the definitive edition of *The parliament of Clan Thomas* has shown, the work in its best versions falls into two books, the first of which (PCT I) consists of ‘a cruel and sometimes bawdy satire on the rural labourers of south-west Munster in the early seventeenth century’. The second part, an imitation of PCT I written approximately fifty years later by another author, ‘describes a similar imaginary parliament of labourers, small tenants and minor tradespeople from Leinster and eastern Munster, that sat near Mullingar at some time during the Commonwealth’. The work proved to be immensely popular and was copied by generations of native scribes. As well as being frequently transcribed by Gaelic copyists, *The parliament of Clan Thomas* was often imitated by later authors. In point of fact, the work gave rise to a long literary progeny in Irish which was initiated in the mid-seventeenth century, and among the various targets satirized in these works were the native clergy and social climbers of one kind or another. *The parliament of weavers* is the last known example of the genre in the post-classical period and is one of the last works in this period to have come under the influence of *The parliament of Clan Thomas*.

De Barra’s work not only copies the general structure of the earlier *Parliament*, which likewise consists of two parts, but also borrows motifs from it, most notably that of giving certain of his characters mocking sobriquets and surnames, in order to lampoon the weavers. Examples include the humorous surnames: Ó Glugaráin, Ó Preicealláin and Ó Smulcacháin, all of which are patterned on the common Gaelic surname form containing the patronymic Ó (grandson or descendant), but which stem in these instances from frivolous and insulting epithets: Glugarán can be

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9 Relatively few parliament texts in Irish have come down to us. Of the four examples of the genre known to have survived, none was written before the seventeenth century. For a brief discussion of the subject, see B. Ó Cuív, *Páirtíum na mBán* (Dublin, 1952), p. xxxiv. A short summary of the main forms of the parliament genre as well as a discussion of some examples in Irish are given by A. Titley in ‘Scéal bleachtaireachta’, *Eiriceachtaí agus scéalta eile* (Dublin, 1987), 104–5. 10 N.J.A. Williams, *Parliament Chloinne Tomáis* (Dublin, 1981), p. xi.
rendered as ‘prattler’; \(^{11}\) *Preiceallán* as ‘double-chinned one’ \(^{12}\) and *Smulchachán* can be variously translated as ‘one having a prominent or ugly nose’ or as ‘a surly-looking person’. \(^{13}\) De Barra sometimes adapts this motif to his subject matter and so, as well as referring to unfavourable attributes, the sobriquets are on occasion linked to the trade or its accoutrements, instances of which include *Diarmuid na Sonóg* and *Rághnall na Stangán*. The former can be translated approximately as ‘Dermot of the rags or clouts’ \(^{14}\) (a rag was often used in the application of a weaver’s size), while the latter can be rendered as ‘Reginald of the twines or cords’ (*stangán* may be a reference to the [hempen] cords that run from the laths at the top of the loom to the treadles at its base). Other motifs borrowed from *The parliament of Clan Thomas* are similarly adapted in line with the author’s intention and thus the taking of oaths, which occurs frequently in the earlier *Parliament*, also appears in de Barra’s work but in a manner more in keeping with the object of the satire; accordingly, the weavers swear fervently and with great gusto on their treadles, on the cross straps of their aprons and on their heddles. In a few instances, de Barra makes so bold as to incorporate into the weavers’ remarks occasional sentences or short snatches of speech paraphrased from Clan Thomas’ pronouncements. These remarks invariably consist of gibberish and are clearly intended to reinforce the comparison he is making. In a handful of cases, the mocking epithets assigned to the weavers so nearly resemble humorous epithets and surnames from the earlier *Parliament* that there can be no gainsaying the parallels; the weavers *Maonas na Feime* and *Domhnall an Dioscáin*, for example, plainly recall *Rághnall na Fime* (PCT II, l. 1394) and *Donnchadh Drochbhéasach Ó Diosgáin* (PCT I, ll. 99–100) of Clan Thomas respectively. In one instance, the same character, *Cormac Ó hAlpacháin* (PCT II, ll. 1384, 1672), appears in both works, although de Barra adds the epithet ‘speisialta’ to the character in his work as a means, perhaps, of lessening the act of appropriation. With these further echoes and repetitions, the association with Clan Thomas and their uncouth, self-serving ways is emphasized for the benefit of more ‘knowing’ readers/listeners familiar with the precursor text. \(^{15}\) Interestingly, in both books of *The parliament of weavers*, flesh-

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\(^{11}\) This substantive is based on the noun *gliogar*, see Revd P. S. Dinneen, *Foilóir Gaedhilge agus Béarla* (Dublin, 1927) and N. Ó Dónaill, *Foilóir Gaeilge-Béarla* (Dublin, 1977), s.v. *preiceall*. \(^{12}\) See Dinneen, *Foilóir Gaedhilge agus Béarla* and Ó Dónaill, *Foilóir Gaeilge-Béarla*, s.v. *preicall*. \(^{13}\) See Dinneen, *Foilóir Gaedhilge agus Béarla* and Ó Dónaill, *Foilóir Gaeilge-Béarla*, s.v. *smulchachán*. \(^{14}\) See Dinneen, *Foilóir Gaedhilge agus Béarla*, s.v. *somóg*. \(^{15}\) Although de Barra’s scribal activities involved the transcription of a range of earlier native works, no copy of *The parliament of Clan Thomas* has come down to us among the transcripts made by him of traditional material. Nicholas Williams has shown that the text itself was subject to frequent change as received versions of the *Parliament* were gradually revised in the eighteenth century by subsequent generations of scribes. This series of changes occasioned a shorter composite version of PCT, which predominated in the textual tradition in successive decades, see N.J.A. Williams, ‘Nótaí éagsúla ar Phairlement Chloinne Tómas’, *Studia Hibernica*, 16 (1976), 76–7. The preponderance of literary borrowings and echoes between *The parliament of Clan Thomas* and *The parliament of weavers* strongly suggests that de Barra was acquainted with such a composite version when he set
and-blood characters exist alongside the aforementioned literary incarnations, some of whom we know from historical records (Tithe Applotment Books and Griffith’s Valuation) to have been neighbours of de Barra’s; although described as weavers in the Parliament, I have been unable to uncover any direct links between the trade and the individuals mentioned. In lampooning the greed of contemporary weavers through satire and in overlaying his work with frequent and sometimes elaborate allusions to Clan Thomas, de Barra raises the subject of the Parliament beyond the level of a mere querelle de clocher to a work of broader appeal. Ironically, this also proves to be a shortcoming. In the final analysis, what denies The parliament of weavers any claim to high literary merit is an over-reliance on The parliament of Clan Thomas; interesting and ingenious as some of de Barra’s borrowings are, the reader feels at times that his work owes too much to the earlier satire.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT TO THE PARLIAMENT OF WEAVERS

It is the enactments themselves and the debates surrounding them that provide the primary focus for much of what happens in The parliament of weavers. In de Barra’s work, the weavers are consistently portrayed as an opportunistic and greedy set, bent on extracting money from their unwitting customers at all costs. These resolutions, presented in burlesque fashion, deal, inter alia, with matters relating to the retention of yarn for the weavers’ own use, the administering of false measures, the inflation of prices of substandard cloth and the fixing of apprenticeship fees. The more elaborate the deception involved, the greater the weavers’ approval of the enactments. In both books of The parliament of weavers, contributors to the debate take great pains to convince those assembled of the merits of the proposed course of action and of the benefits that will accrue to them in the long term. The following example, taken from the second book of the Parliament, is typical of the resolutions they are intent on enforcing:

Muna mbeidh slinn is úim cheart agaibh is é an t-acht déinig meabhla,
is bainige roint chéadta do leataobh an tsábhra.
Má bhíd na mná a’ cannrán ná a’ gearán gur cúng é,
glaofam air fí an huckabag is glacfa’ siad an ciúineas.
Ó ardaiodh an pá dhúinn, gach lá beam a’ famaiol;

about writing his own work. However, in the absence of any copies of the earlier work among his surviving manuscripts, internal testimony remains our most compelling evidence of this connection. For the most part, the cast of characters who participate in the parliamentary assemblies changes from the first book to the second and so, for instance, a new leader is elected to guide the weavers in the second book as well as a new committee. A similar criticism was levelled by Seán Ó Tuama at Aogán Ó Rathaille’s satire, Eachtra Thaidhg Dhuibh Úi Chóinín, another of The parliament of Clan Thomas’ literary progeny, see S. Ó Tuama, Fili faoi sceimhle (Dublin, 1978), p. 98.
is bíodh poitín a’ bhracháin againn lán do gach dramhaiol.
Más tanaí é an t-éadach an tan dhéanfam é smeardadh;
beidh tíugh, deighscéimheach nó go ndéinid é ghlanadh.
Ag sin dibh na dlíthe, a shlua chlíste na seoltha;
is ná brisige tríotha, nó diolfa’ sibh as an rósta.18

If you are without proper reed or heddles, treachery is the course of action
I decree,
Take several hundreds [of thread] from one end of the chain [= warp].
If housewives grumble or complain that [the cloth] is narrow,
We will call it a ‘huckabag’ weave and quieten they will.
Since our pay has been raised, we will pass every day going about idly;19
And let us have the dressing pot full of all kinds of dross.
 [So that] if the cloth is thin when being smeared by us;
It will ‘appear’ thick [= closely-woven] and beautiful until they wash it.
These are the laws for you, o clever host of the looms,
And do not infringe them, or you will ‘pay for the roast’.

The foregoing reference to the production of cloth for housewives along with several
other similar references elsewhere in the text suggests that the artisans described in the
Parliament were working at household level and that their textiles were intended
for local consumption. The frequent use throughout of the terms bannlá (‘bandle’, a
measure for homemade cloth usually twenty-four inches in length) and slat (‘yard’)
to quantify their ware would seem to corroborate this interpretation.20 On the
whole, the false and deceitful devices that de Barra catalogues in the text are aimed
at unsuspecting individual customers and, in most cases, the weavers attempt to justify
this treachery by reference to their reduced circumstances, although there is also an
implicit suggestion of caveat emptor. The fraud involving a ‘huckabag’ weave

18 NLI MS G 636:161. The spelling in the original here (and elsewhere) has been
normalized in order to render quotations more intelligible to contemporary readers, but
only insofar as the linguistic integrity of the extracts is not compromised. 19 Brenda
Collins, Irish Linen Centre and Lisburn Museum, Lisburn, reminds me that the practice
described in this line was one which ‘Industrial Revolution employers’ generally tried hard
to end (pers. comm., Apr. 2010). I should like to thank Ms Collins very sincerely for her
advice on matters of a technical nature. 20 The term dosaein (‘hank’) is used on a handful
of occasions in the second book of the text, but this measure relates only to the manner in
which cloth was spun. It should be stated that the exact nature of the weavers’ dealings with
their customers is not clearly outlined. What is more, there is no compelling evidence in the
Parliament to imply the existence of a formal ‘putting out’ system between weavers and
merchants or of other proto-industrial arrangements (current at the time of writing)
between artisans and capitalized middlemen. For a description of the ‘putting out’ system,
see W.H. Crawford, Domestic industry in Ireland: the experience of the linen industry (Dublin,
1972), pp 39 and 44–6 and David Dickson, Old world colony: Cork and south Munster, 1630–
1830 (Cork, 2005), pp 396ff.
mentioned above underlines the weavers’ technical knowledge and ingenuity in this
guard. ‘Huckabag’ is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as follows: ‘a stout linen
fabric, with the weft threads thrown alternately up so as to form a rough surface, used
for towelling and the like’. 21 This particular weave was especially suited to the kind
of deception alluded to above for the reason that, being a form of twill weave with
an uneven number of warp threads to weft threads, it was possible to remove some
of the warp threads more easily from one side of the chain; that is, a number of
threads [hundreds] could be more readily taken out of the reed that aligns them. This
would make the appearance of the woven cloth structure seem different at one side,
perhaps denser or tighter. As a huckaback weave is tight, and the web produced
thereof is absorbent, a cloth could be represented as ‘huckaback’ for a use with which
the housewife would be familiar, while the weaver would have got away with using
an inappropriate reed or harness. 22 Incidental benefits of a corresponding kind are
mentioned earlier in the text, for instance in the following decree taken from the first
book:

achtaimid easnamh do bheith ar abhras gach mná
gan faionna ná fuíollach chur abhaile go brách. 23

we decree that there be a ‘deficiency’ in every housewife’s yarn
and never to hand back the [resultant] thrums or remnants.

As is clear from the quotation, the enactment proscribes the return to their rightful
owner (a housewife in this instance) of any thrums or remnants left over after
weaving; this does not refer, however, to the usual surplus but rather to additional
leavings arising most probably from a deliberate adjustment of the ratio of the
number of warp threads to weft threads. This is, I believe, the deficiency in the web
to which de Barra is referring. Other examples of deliberate fraud are found in the
text, but to list all instances would be to labour the point.

Although a trade society of weavers is not mentioned by name in the Parliament,
the manner in which the dimensions and prices of cloth are set out in the form of
legislative decrees carries undeniable overtones of a regulatory body. 24 Moreover, a

huckaback. 22 Personal communication by email from Brenda Collins, Irish Linen Centre
and Lisburn Museum (Mar. 2004). 23 NLI MS G 656:140. 24 It is worth noting that
the text contains no explicit references to either journeymen or masters. Reference is made,
however, in the second book, to the conditions under which apprentices would be accepted
for work, see NLI MS G 656:162–3. Apart from individual guilds and trade societies, other
regulatory bodies came into existence during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The
most famous regulatory body of the time was the Linen board, which was set up in 1711
and dissolved in 1828, and whose primary function was ‘to regulate and subsidise the
growing industry’, W.H. Crawford, Domestic industry in Ireland: the experience of the linen
industry (Dublin, 1972), p. 3.
small number of motifs in de Barra’s work echoes practices common to contemporary trade societies. The choice of a public house as a setting in both books, the taking of oaths during the two assemblies, as well as the reference in the second book to the need to keep their activities away from the attention of the local peelers and constabulary imply a definite degree of illegality. The meeting of tradesmen in public houses in order to force those in attendance to swear agreement to various conditions of work and to price rates was widespread; a series of acts of parliament outlawing these practices had been passed during the eighteenth century, the last of which came into effect in 1792. In addition, an ironic reference to ‘intermarriage’ can be found in the decree below and the lines in question, although satirical in tone, are reminiscent of contemporary endogamous patterns of marriage found not infrequently among families working in the trade:

Achtaímíd gach fíodóir ag a mbeidh scóiléad iníne
dá tabhairt do mhac fíodóra chum ná saileofaí an síreach.

We decree that every weaver possessed of a slovenly daughter
give her over to [another] weaver’s son so as not to contaminate the line.

Given that women were typically responsible for the spinning of cloth, the virtue of this decree under normal circumstances might be the resultant pooling of skills. In this instance, however, the reference to ‘scóiléad iníne’ (‘a slovenly daughter’) is obviously satirical and implies the passing on of a liability rather than any increase in expertise. Earlier in the text it is mentioned, in the initial debate on the worthiness of individual decrees, that weavers’ daughters should be married only to men of their own ‘class’ and not to fullers, tailors, shoemakers or any other category of worker, thereby improving the material situation of the couple and the trade. This exclusivism is, at the very least, suggestive of the discriminatory pooling of skills found in many trade societies, albeit that such exclusivism consisted of restricting entrance to the trade to weavers’ (members’) sons. The tendency to limit entry to the trade in this way was often lambasted by outsiders as being unjustly restrictive and an impediment to the natural flow of supply and demand.

25 John W. Boyle refers to these acts in his book, *The Irish labor movement in the nineteenth century* (Washington, DC, 1998), p. 8. An interesting account of an illicit gathering of a small group of wool-combers (who were subsequently tried for their actions), which took place around the time of writing of the second book of *The parliament of weavers*, can be found in the *Southern Reporter*, 6 Nov. 1826. Incidentally, wool-combers were the only branch of the textile industry in Cork at the time to still have an active society. 26 NLI MS G 656:140. Of further interest is the fact that, in the course of proceedings in the work, two of the offices of the imaginary parliaments are given to the respective sons of the two leaders of the tradesmen (that of speaker in the first book, and supreme chief of deliberations in the second) see NLI MS G 656:134 and 153 respectively. 27 NLI MS G 656:138. 28 M. Cronin, ’Work and workers in Cork city and county, 1880–1900’ in C.G. Buttimer and P.
More generally, the act of assembling privately for the purpose of regulating prices, wages, fees etc., as described in detail in de Barra’s composition, calls to mind the actual practice of combination, which was prevalent among many trade societies in Ireland in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This practice has been commented on and described in great detail by historians such as Seán Daly and Maura Cronin in the case of Cork, by Brian Henry in respect of Dublin and in a more general context by John Boyle. Combinations were widespread in Cork throughout the eighteenth century and continued to be so well into the nineteenth. Such was the prevalence of the practice in Cork that two separate anti-combination acts were passed – the first in 1764 (3 Geo. III, c. 17) and the second in 1772 (11 & 12, Geo. III, c. 18) – both of which pertained specifically to the region. It is not clear in all cases exactly when a particular trade society came into existence, but we do know that weavers in Cork had established theirs some time before 1768, although no record of the specific date for the founding of the society has survived. The sixties, seventies and eighties were turbulent and extremely unstable decades for local weavers, as individual branches of the industry enjoyed mixed fortunes. The woollen industry in Cork suffered a slow but steady decline for most of the second half of the century; the linen industry in the south, forever overshadowed by the zenith of linen production and demand in the thirties, experienced a serious depression during the period 1771–3, while the cotton industry in the region was only just beginning to establish itself. As a result, members of the trade were frequently active in clubbing together and, in some cases, were responsible for violent behaviour and the destruction of property as a consequence of their gatherings and enactments. By then, a pattern had been set as industrial disturbance increased or declined throughout the second half of the eighteenth century in response to the prevailing, though not always unfavourable, economic conditions (the situation of the linen and cotton industries would improve somewhat during the final decades before beginning to fail towards the end of the century). For instance, combinations among weavers in Cork were still taking place in the 1780s and early 1790s, due in a

number of cases to the fact that woollen operatives in the city had suffered great misfortune in the 1780s; 1784 proved to be something of an *annus horribilis* for the branch, with many of its workers being consequently forced on to the streets to protest. In June 1791, not long after the time of writing (1790) of the first book of *The parliament of weavers*, a series of accusations was traded in the local newspaper, *Cork Hibernian Chronicle*, between cotton and linen weavers on the one side, and worsted weavers on the other, focusing on claims that respective sides had been combining for a number of years in the city to the detriment of the industry in general. All of these disturbances form part of the pattern that had begun mid-century and it is against this backdrop of industrial unrest that de Barra composed the first part of his satire.

Ironically, by the time he set about writing the second book in 1826, combinations among weavers in Cork had all but ceased and the trade generally was so depressed that the weavers’ ability to organize and unionize themselves effectively had virtually deserted them. Many of the city’s trade societies, prompted perhaps by the supposed Union of Trades, had been active in organized protest and violent disruption in the early twenties, but weavers had had no hand in these activities. Notwithstanding the weavers’ weakened position, the work seems to indicate strongly anti-unionization sentiments on de Barra’s part. Without the benefit of hindsight, the author could not have fully appreciated the extent of the depression the industry was experiencing nor could he have known that the effective organization of the trade and its society would diminish significantly soon after. 1826, the year in which *The parliament of weavers* was completed, is a particularly significant one in the history of the industry. In fact, the second half of the twenties along with subsequent decades proved to be a truly devastating period, resulting in famine and hardship for many involved with the trade. Dissatisfaction among the tradesmen of Cork (as elsewhere) was compounded by the assimilation in 1826 of the Irish and English currencies and the resultant decrease in the nominal value of wages. Such was the depressed state of the trade in the mid-twenties that relief schemes were set up in Dublin and Cork in order to afford weavers temporary respite. The *Southern Reporter* (16 May 1826) describes a gathering of some 5,000 people in Cork city

36 Ibid., p. 32. An account of the march undertaken by weavers through the streets of Cork can be found in the *Cork Hibernian Chronicle*, 8 Apr. 1784. The years 1776–83 had brought short-lived respite to the industry because of wartime demand for woollen clothing. 37 The initial accounts given on both sides can be found in the *Cork Hibernian Chronicle*, 20 June 1791 and 23 June 1791 respectively. The calamitous effects of the rise of the cotton industry on woollen manufacture are alluded to by the worsted weavers in their contribution to the newspaper. 38 Combinations did persist among weavers in Bandon as late as the 1930s, owing to the profound set-back the town’s cotton industry had suffered in the previous decade, see M. Cronin, ‘The role of organized labour in the political and economic life of Cork city, 1820–1920’ (PhD, U Leicester, 1979), p. 15. 39 Some scholars doubt whether such a union ever existed. The vexed question of the historicity of the union is discussed by Cronin, *Country, class or craft?*, pp 219–20. 40 Ibid., pp 36, 206; see also Daly, *Cork: a city in crisis*, p. 310.
centre, consisting for the most part of the wives and children of weavers from Blackpool and surrounding areas. The ‘ragged procession’, as it was described, made its way to the Mansion House bearing placards that read ‘we want employment – ourselves and our families are starving’. While the protest was mostly peaceful (apart from a minor scuffle), the intention of the newspaper account was clearly to draw attention to the severe privations being suffered by weavers and their families. A related account can be found in the same newspaper a month or so later.\(^{41}\) It retails an appeal submitted by the operative woollen, cotton and linen weavers, and wool-combers of the city of Cork, who were seeking relief employment at an allowance of one shilling per day in the hope of improving their circumstances. The support they received was short-lived, however, as relief funds soon dwindled. Maura Cronin gives the following summary of the state of the trade in the ensuing years:

> By 1827, journeymen weavers’ wages had fallen to between four and six shillings, and a scheme of relief payments and subsidized emigration to England failed to substantially remedy the condition of the trade. By the early 1830s the situation had declined still further: subsidized emigration schemes were continued but unemployment still rose, and by February 1830, of the city’s 160-plus cotton weavers, from 100 to 150 were idle.\(^{42}\)

By the time de Barra had finished writing his *Parliament*, the industry’s fate in the region was effectively sealed: the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 and the accompanying reduction in demand for cloth production (primarily army clothing, coarse woollens and linen), the removal of the remaining protective duties in 1824 (a condition of the earlier Union of Ireland and Great Britain) and a general lack of mechanization had left weavers in Cork in a highly vulnerable position and they were no longer able to compete with their counterparts in Britain. The industry in the south would never recover its former importance thereafter. In view of this, by choosing to close the *Parliament* with a comment on the pointlessness of the gathering(s) and on the subsequent abandonment of the artisans by their customers, the author strikes a firmer and more final chord with readers in retrospect than was perhaps ever intended by him when completing his work.

**SOCIAL, LITERARY AND FOLK STEREOTYPES OF THE WEAVER**

The portrayal of the artisan and his craft in *The parliament of weavers* can be appreciated and the satirical thrust of the text enjoyed without a thoroughgoing knowledge of *The parliament of Clan Thomas* or of the socio-economic conditions obtaining at the time of writing. The various descriptions of the weavers as a greedy, dirty set,
given in turn to improvidence and laziness, and to gambling and drinking, have parallels in contemporary accounts produced by travel writers and sundry officials, as well as in descriptions in folklore and literary genres. For this reason, it could be argued that parts of de Barra’s work owe their inspiration as much to the store of common stereotyped descriptions that can be found in many of the foregoing sources as other parts of the *Parliament* do to the contexts already outlined. Weavers were always known for their resourcefulness and cunning in extracting better prices for their produce. Because workers were often paid according to the length of the web, the Congested Districts Board – as late as 1900, and possibly later – was forced to address the custom among weavers in Donegal of stretching tweeds between two donkeys in order to add measure to the cloth! To take an example closer to the time in which *The parliament of weavers* was composed, Cesar Otway in his submission to *Report of the Royal Commission on the hand loom weavers* (1840) frequently refers to the dishonesty of the fraternity. It was his view that the frauds perpetrated by weavers had brought the profession into serious disrepute. He claimed that the embezzlement and detention of yarn were common among practically every category of weaver he encountered on his travels in Ireland; only the silk weavers of Dublin, according to him, were not affected by the practice. The following is an illustrative account from the same source of a local trial in Co. Down, which indicates the extent of the fraudulence prevalent among weavers of the locality (in a factory context):

At the petty sessions of Banbridge, from 11th October 1836 to 4th October 1838, there were 548 cases tried for the detention of webs beyond due time, and 32 cases for the embezzlement of yarn; one firm alone, employing only 1,500 weavers, had 115 cases tried within the time I have mentioned for detention of yarn, and three cases for embezzlement of the web.

The motif of the underhand and fraudulent tradesman or merchant is, of course, known also in literature, and the image can be found at least as far back as medieval times in French *fabliaux* or among the popular social stereotypes satirized in *Estates Literature*, where tradesmen are often guilty of administering false measures and pass off substandard produce as worthy, merchantable goods. Folklore, a subject less

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43 This information was communicated to me by the late Mairéad Dunlevy (pers. comm., June 2003), who in turn had received it from the late Dr Muriel Gahan, whose father, Townsend Gahan, worked as an inspector for the Congested Districts Board. 44 It should be borne in mind, however, that at the time Otway was preparing his report he was very much in favour of bringing the handloom weaving system to an end; this conviction may well have coloured some of his opinions and observations. 45 C. Otway, *Report of the royal commission on the hand loom weavers* HC 1840 (43), xxiii, pt. 3, p. 613. W.H. Crawford, on the other hand, expresses the contrary view that ‘quite a lot of fuss was made about weavers embezzling yarn but it was not so serious as it sounded, for comparatively small quantities could have been involved and inspection of the webs was a sufficiently effective deterrent’, *Domestic industry in Ireland*, p. 54. 46 Ibid., p. 652.
removed from de Barra’s realm of knowledge than the aforementioned examples, offers similar motifs. Here, for instance, the image of the unscrupulous merchant or tradesman is common: Stith Thompson in his Motif-index of folk-literature cites examples of stories concerning millers and tailors in which a closely related motif can be found. Although the figure of the weaver in Irish folk tradition awaits proper treatment, certain tales and other narrative material (seanchas) occurring in published collections of folklore suggest that such a reputation for dishonesty is likewise echoed in native oral tradition. A well known tale in Ireland, based on the motif of ‘man admitted to neither heaven nor hell’ (Q565) and which recounts the fate of a dishonest tradesman after death, provides a good example. In this story, we encounter a weaver who, following a life of underhand dealing, reaches the gates of Heaven, only to be summarily dismissed by St Peter down to Hell and burdened on his journey with all the clews (ceirtlíní) he has embezzled while alive. To this fardel is added the embezzled skeins of a tailor whom he meets along the way and who slyly offloads them on to the unsuspecting weaver. On reaching Hell, the Devil refuses the weaver entry, believing mistakenly (owing to the latter’s stuttering reply) that there are sixty weavers outside rather than one. He orders ‘them’ off, protesting a lack of space. Unwilling to give up, the weaver pokes his protuberant nose through the keyhole only to set it alight. He runs thence back to earth through rivers, streams and marshes in an effort to quench his burning nose and there he still remains in the guise of Jack-o’-lantern, presumably as punishment for the transgressions he committed during his lifetime. Interestingly, the belief that Heaven was unattainable for weavers on account of their treacherous nature is actually mentioned by one of the artisans towards the end of the Parliament and the subject sets off a brief debate among the gathering.

In the following oral account we learn how the weavers’ distinctive brand of professional fraudulence came to acquire a particular name in Irish. The excerpt in question was collected in the 1940s by Donnchadh Ó Céileachair, the Irish-language short-story writer, from his father, Dónall Bán Ó Céileachair (1871–1950), a renowned tradition bearer from Cúil Aodha in west Co. Cork (who was also the source of the preceding tale). He has this to say about weavers generally:

47 S. Thompson, Motif-index of folk literature: a classification of narrative elements in folktales, ballads, myths, fables, mediaeval romances, exempla, fabliaux, jest-books and local legends (Bloomington, IN, 1955–8), pp 507–8. 48 See, for instance, P. Ó Crualaoi, Seanchas Phádraig Uí Chmalaí (Dublin, 1982), pp 201–2. This is a collection of traditional lore (much of it in verse form) from west Co. Cork, which includes a typical story about weavers' fraudulent behaviour. See Irish Folklore Commission MS 822:481 for a further version of the story. 49 S. Thompson, Motif-index of folk literature, p. 261. Reference is made by Seán Ó Súilleabháin to this motif in his Handbook of Irish folklore (Detroit, MI, 1970), pp 68–9. 50 This version of the tale is given in D. Ó Céileachair, ‘Conus a deintí éadach sa seanchaí’, Béaloideas, 14 (1944), 285–6. 51 NLI MS G 656:165. The artisan in question was one Uílilliam Ó Céileachair of Baile an Bhriotaigh. This was a widely held folk belief, see Ó Súilleabháin, Handbook of Irish folklore, pp 68–9.
Many weavers had the name of not being very honest. They used to keep back some of the thread they received in order to make yarn for themselves. The practice was known not as theft or robbery but as 'cribeáil').

The latter term is most likely based on the English verb 'crib', which means to steal and is itself derived from thieves' slang. The practice came into use in the Irish of the region, a fact which suggests that such fraudulence was all too common among weavers in that part of the county.

The physical appearance of the weavers in the *Parliament* is remarked on both directly and indirectly. Some of the mocking epithets given to characters in de Barra's work refer, for instance, to less attractive physical attributes or even deformity: *garbh-chliabhach* ('rough-bodied': norm. l. 139); *cos-dhreoite* ('having a withered foot': norm. l. 141); and *caol-scrógach* ('thin-necked': norm. l. 146) are just some examples. Although these epithets are suggestive of *The parliament of Clan Thomas*, there is no doubting also their association with the trade and with received ideas about its members' appearance, particularly when taken together with other internal evidence in de Barra's satire. At the beginning of the second book, for example, the new leader of the weavers, their 'bishop designate' (*caspag-dhh|amhna*), Tomás Firéast, is visited while sleeping by a spectral figure (*sighebhrogha*) whom Tomás recognizes from a cursory observation of the phantom's appearance to have once been a weaver:

Biogas Tomás as a shuan go bhfeacaidh ag colbha a lepa fuirm fir thrua, dhroch-dhealbhach agus naprúinín beag, smeartha óna immleacán go leath a cheathrún air agus drannadh beag gáire ina bhéal, ionnas go mbá léir do as a fhionnachruth créad ba cheard dho, gurab ann ró rádh Tomás ris [...].

(Tomás starts from his sleep and sees at the [outer] edge of his bed the outline of a man pitiful to behold and badly formed, who had on a small greasy apron (running) from his navel halfway down his thighs and wearing a small grin on his mouth, so that it was obvious to Tomás from the phantom's old worn appearance what his occupation was, and so Tomás spoke to him thus [...]).

Furthermore, during the quarrel that ensues at the very end of the *Parliament* when weavers fight among themselves, some of the barbs they exchange centre on each other's ugly and slovenly appearance. The notion that one could tell a weaver from his grubby and unhealthy look was common and is remarked upon by Otway in the...
'Pilfering from the first creation

aforementioned report. He describes as follows the weavers’ working conditions and diet before alluding to the concomitant effects these usually had on their health and appearance:

The physical condition of the weavers appears to me to be worse than that of any class of Irishmen. The length of time they continue at work, and the damp, unwholesome cabins they work in [a disgrace to any country that would permit such a state of things], appears one great cause of their inferiority. To this we must add their low diet [...] I could not pass a weaver by without knowing him to be one; and I never saw a weaver that had not dyspepsia written in his countenance.56

The tendency among weavers to fritter away their earnings on gambling and alcohol also comes in for censure by Otway57 although he is careful not to suggest that such behaviour was confined only to members of the fraternity. This improvidence is hinted at in *The parliament of weavers* on a number of occasions. At the beginning of the first book, we are told that the leader of the trade, Séamas Ó Achiarrainn, is virtually penniless despite his years of weaving, having no savings to boast of for his time and effort. Subsequently, it is implied that penury is the lot of the trade generally and their financial position is compared unfavourably to that of other professions (farmers, smiths, shoemakers and publicans) who have been prospering lately. Moreover, during the second assembly we learn that, in the weeks leading up to the parliament, weavers make a point of restricting themselves to one meal a day in order to save a shilling for beer on the occasion of their meeting. Such is the demand for alcohol at the gathering that two female weavers are obliged to leave their place in the parliament in order to offer assistance to the attending womenfolk in administering the ale. References to weavers’ fondness for alcohol survive elsewhere in Gaelic literature: for instance, Co. Mayo poet, Antoine Raiftearaí (1779–1835), himself reputedly the son of a weaver, in a song of praise of the trade mentions how ‘[gur] maith é i dteach óil fear chaite an spóil’ and in a poetic dialogue between Donncha Ó Céirín (a poet and journeyman weaver) and An Tiarna Barrach (a schoolmaster in Listowel), Ó Céirín is accused by the latter of having been reduced in circumstances through gambling and drinking (‘imirt is ól ar bord is crosaibh an

57 Report of the royal commission on the hand loom weavers, HC 1840, p. 663. Crawford makes the point that because of the monotony of working at a loom for long hours ‘many a weaver was glad of the excuse to leave his loom for a spree if the work was not too pressing’, *Domestic industry in Ireland*, p. 34.
tsaoil do lagaigh do stóir is ní ceolta bladair mo scéal’).

58 Clearly, such a store of stereotyped descriptions, which emphasizes the reputed greed and improvidence of weavers as well as their supposedly unhealthy appearance and unfailing dishonesty, influenced de Barra’s portrayal of the fraternity and, to judge from oral sources, was not only current in his day but persisted well into the twentieth century.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The terms in Irish employed by the author to describe different weaves and textiles, some forms of which are not known elsewhere, make the Parliament a rich source of Irish-language terminology on the subject. The great majority of these terms suggest manufacture from either wool or linen. Although the types of cloth (and weaves) mentioned in the enactments alter somewhat from the first book to the second, these changes are predominantly in line with the prevailing trends of regional production in the relevant branches of the industry in the final quarter of the eighteenth century and first quarter of the nineteenth. To cite an illustrative example, the only mention of mixed/union goods in the text, slait lin et cottún (‘a yard of mixed cotton’, that is, one in which cotton weft was woven with a linen warp), occurs in the first part (1790) of the Parliament; unsurprisingly no reference is made to such fabrics in the following book (1826) as ‘mixed’ cottons were already being replaced by the manufacture of pure cotton as early as the 1780s and were no longer common in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Despite the fact that de Barra was obviously

58 The lines quoted here are drawn from Ciarán Ó Coigligh (ed.), Raiftearaí – anmháin agus dánta (Dublin, 1987), p. 48 and Pádraig de Brún, ‘Fíli agus fíliocht Chiarráí Thuaidh (1700–1850)’ (MA, UCC, 1963), p. 428 respectively. Raiftearaí’s description may be rendered literally as ‘the caster of the spool is good in (= excels in) the public house’ while the second quotation may be translated as: ‘gambling and drinking as well as the crosses of this world have weakened your resources, and not an insincere “strain” is there in my account.’ On a related note, Jane Gray makes some interesting observations on the social meaning of drinking in the poetry of the Ulster ‘rhyming (weaver) poets’ and on the perceived need for moral improvement among them found in their work, see Gray, ‘Gender and uneven working-class formation in the Irish linen industry’ in Laura L. Frader and Sonya O. Rose (eds), Gender and class in modern Europe (Ithaca, NY, 1996), pp 37–36 at p. 30. 59 NLI MS G 656:138 and 139. 60 For references to the rise in use of mixed cottons from the mid-eighteenth century and to their subsequent decline after the turn of the following century, see Bielenberg, Cork’s industrial revolution, 1780–1880: development or decline?, pp 12–13 and 21ff as well as Rynne, The industrial archaeology of Cork, p. 114. The production of cotton was stimulated by a government bounty on mixed goods which came into place in the 1750s, see C. Ó Gráda, Ireland: a new economic history, 1780–1939 (Oxford, 1994), p. 274ff. By 1790, machine-spun cotton had become stronger and it was used to replace the linen warp. Further, Brenda Collins (Irish Linen Centre and Lisburn Museum) informs me that by the mid 1820s mixed cottons ‘were being power woven successfully and cheaply and so there would have been no market for handwoven ones, certainly not as far away from the English market as Cork’ (e-mail communication, Apr. 2010).
quite familiar with the various processes involved in the production of cloth as well as with changing trends in fashion, and may himself have been the victim of dishonest weavers, it should be emphasized that the author offers no explanation anywhere in his work as to the specific nature of his grievances with the trade and its practitioners, that is, of course, presuming he had ever been so aggrieved. Needless to say, the question of auctorial motive or intention is problematic and the dangers of adopting an overly deterministic approach in the case of a work such as this need to be borne in mind. Although efforts have been made in the essay to delineate the relevant literary and socio-economic milieux as well as to describe some of the stock images of weavers that abounded in tradition and contemporary discourse, the parodic nature of The parliament of weavers along with its inter-textual relationship with The parliament of Clan Thomas complicate matters to a significant degree. Ultimately, the meshing of literary strands and contemporary events remains the salient feature of the text and unquestionably lends colour, humour and depth to the work. The Parliament is of importance too as an unofficial (partly insider) source, revealing as it does some of the ways in which weavers were apparently willing to exploit their knowledge of the technology they used on a daily basis for their own self-serving purposes; it also uncovers the resentment which this must have aroused in, at least, some of those who were accordingly duped by them.

What, then, of the reception of The parliament of weavers? De Barra’s satire survived only in manuscript form until the early years of the twentieth century, when it first appeared in print. The majority of extant Gaelic manuscripts date to the post-classical period and the bulk of these are paper manuscripts written prior to the 1830s. By the time Dáibhí de Barra finished his work, the scribal tradition had been in sharp decline for some years. In view of this, it is interesting to note that The parliament of weavers circulated to a certain extent in manuscript: in total seven copies of the work (or parts thereof) have come down to us and at least one other copy is now lost. The reception the text enjoyed is evidenced not only by surviving copies but, perhaps, more so by the knowledge that a contemporary of de Barra’s, one Uíleáig Ó Céitrín (or Ulick Kerins), from Castleisland in Kerry, who was by turns a poet, scribe,
bible teacher and weaver, took it upon himself – so angered was he by de Barra’s satire – to write in prosimetric form a spirited response to the Parliament. In his work, which dates to 1845, Ó Céirín counters what he regards as an unwarranted attack on the weaving fraternity, who have suffered greatly in the preceding decades. Framed in the barántas tradition, his work not only attacks de Barra’s motives but also cast aspersions on the latter’s origins as well as calling into question his abilities as a writer. In the textual tradition, the Parliament and Ó Céirín’s response are found together in the majority of surviving copies, clearly an account of the direct connection between the two works. Of greater interest is the fact that some of those who copied the work were themselves weavers or connected to the profession; this suggests that members of the trade showed more than a passing interest in the two works, and may indeed indicate that the Parliament and Ó Céirín’s rejoinder excited a certain amount of debate on the subject among concerned tradesmen.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ The copyist of the portion of the Parliament that occurs in RIA MS 24 P 45:78–80 was one Daith Ó Lurcáine (David Larkin), a weaver resident in Fieries, Co. Kerry. Seán Ó Catháin, the scribe of the exemplar (and oldest known, but now lost, copy) of Ó Céirín’s response (two copies of this exemplar survive, Cork Archives MS IE 0627 G. 8:151–61 and UCC MS T 11:239–56), was son of the famous Kerry weaver, Séamas Neamhurchóideach Ó Catháin (James ‘Harmless’ O’Keane), a resident of Brosna, see P. de Brún, ‘Lámhscríbhinn Ghaeilge ó thuaisceart Chiarraí’, Stud. Hib., 4 (1964), 197–9.