

FIRE COMMUNITY BOOKS



On the Keen

*Grief Given Voice,
and Those Who Kept It*

G. S. MAHER

A NOTE

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and on Those Who Kept It*

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Colophon

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Part of *The Fire Community*. Written in the Slieve Aughty mountains, east Clare,
Ireland.

Offered in respect, and held loosely.

On the Keen

Throughout the work of The Fire Community there is a word I have used again and again, almost without thinking, for the giving of voice to grief: the *keen*. It is the word for the moment when sorrow is not held in but let out — sounded aloud, wailed, sung half-broken — so that what is inside a person is carried into the air and shared, and no one is left alone in it. I did not invent this word, and I did not invent the thing it names. It is one of the oldest inheritances of this island, and I want, here, to honour where it comes from, and the people who kept it when others let it fall.

The Caoineadh

The keen comes from the Irish *caoineadh* — “to cry, to weep, to lament.” For centuries it was at the very heart of how Ireland met its dead. At the wake and the graveside, women — the *mná caointe*, the keening women — would raise a lament over the body: part cry and part song, improvised in the moment, rising and falling, calling the name of the dead again and again, woven through with old sounds and refrains. It was not performance. It was a kind of sacred work, done at the threshold between the living and the dead, and it was understood to help the soul on its way and to carry the family’s grief so that no one bore it alone.

Those who have studied it describe something that will sound familiar to any reader of this work: that the grief of the bereaved was not borne alone but spread out across the whole gathering, each person feeling it in the chest and the arms and the air — so that the keen became a collective act of carrying, ensuring no one was left isolated in their sorrow. That is the vessel. That is witnessing. That is

no one keeps the fire alone — sounded on this island a thousand years before I found my own words for it.

The keen held, in its very shape, the truth this whole philosophy is built on: that grief must be gone through, not around; that it must be voiced, not contained; that a sorrow given sound and witnessed together is a sorrow that can move, and pass, and free the one who carries it — where a sorrow swallowed only hardens and stays. One observer, longing for it in our own contained age, put it plainly: that now our grief is too contained, that we reach for anti-depressants and grief counsellors, while these people let it all out — a good cry, a good purging, from the feet up. The keen was the refusal of the going-around, made into sound.

How It Was Lost — and Who Kept It

The keen did not fade on its own. From the eighteenth century, and hardest in the nineteenth and twentieth, it was pressed out of Irish life — discouraged and shamed, chiefly by a Church that found its raw, woman-led, older-than-Christian intensity unseemly, too pagan, too much. Families began to fear that to keen at a wake would mark them as backward. And so, by the middle of the last century, the old ritual keen was widely said to be gone from settled Irish life — one more thing chipped away, as the folklorists put it, like so many old stones on this island.

But it was not entirely gone. The thread survived — in the *sean-nós* singers, and, notably, among the Travelling people. Among Travellers, it is said, one of the highest compliments you can still pay a singer is to hear in their voice the old keening quality — the *caoineadh* carried in the timbre, the grief-knowledge held in the

sound. When the settled world let the keen fall out of shame, it was in part the Travellers who kept its thread alive.

There is something here that I do not want to pass over lightly, because it is the heart of why I wanted to write this. The same society that shamed the keen out of its own wakes also shamed and marginalised the very people who kept it. Irish Travellers are a distinct ethnic group, indigenous to this island, with their own history, language, and traditions — and they have endured generations of prejudice, exclusion, and hardship for it. Their ethnicity was not even formally recognised by the Irish State until the 1st of March 2017, after decades of campaigning by Travellers and Traveller organisations. To this day they face real discrimination in housing, work, education, and health.

So when I say the Travellers helped keep the keen, I do not say it to make them picturesque, or to borrow their sorrow for my own book. I say it because it is true, and because it is a particular kind of truth worth sitting with: that a people pushed to the edges of a society can be the ones who carry, unbroken, what that society was too ashamed to keep. The margin held what the centre discarded.

There is a deep justice in naming that, and a deeper one in honouring it.

What I Can, and Cannot, Say

I write this as a settled Irish man, born in Dublin and long settled in east Clare. The keen is part of my inheritance too, as it belongs to this whole island — and I have drawn on it honestly, in the mystical register this work always uses, never claiming it as ceremony I have the right to perform. But I am not of the Travelling community, and I will not pretend to a knowledge of their living traditions that I do not have. The fullest truth of the keen, where it still lives, belongs to those who carry it — not to me. Much of what any of us who write about it can offer is, as the honest scholars of the tradition say of their own work, only our understanding — offered with respect, and held loosely.

If something in this has moved you, I would ask you to do what I try to do: go toward the source, not only the reflection. Listen to Traveller singers and storytellers in their own voices. And know the organisations who work for Traveller rights and dignity — among them Pavee Point (the Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre, Dublin), the Irish Traveller Movement, and the National Traveller

Women's Forum — who can tell their own story far better than I ever could, and to whom it belongs.

Why It Belongs Here

I have set this note apart from the philosophy proper because it is not mine to fold neatly into a system. But it belongs to the work all the same — for the *keen* is the living Irish ancestor of everything this philosophy says about grief: that it must be voiced and witnessed and carried together; that sorrow gone through is sorrow that frees; that no one, at the threshold, should be left to sound their grief alone.

When I use the word *keen* in these books, this is the ground it stands on. I wanted that ground named, and I wanted those who kept it — the singers, the *sean-nós* keepers, and the Travelling people of this island — honoured for keeping it, in the plain and grateful truth that they did.

Whole, and scarred, and lit.