

The Dublin Literary World

I was very nervous on 13 September 1962. I had never met a poet before, let alone that revered and able personage, an editor. I found the Bailey and went in. I was too early: there were very few people there, but a proliferation of liquor put me at my ease. John Jordan introduced himself and I found that he, as an editor and a man, lived up to my preconceived notions of reverence and ability. The room where the drink was soon filled up. I was shocked to find there were so many poets in Dublin, but a swift *per capita* comparison between Newcastle West and the capital showed me the number was just.

John Jordan had many guests to entertain, so I was left alone for some time with the first glass of sherry I had ever tasted and I watched. The talk was not the literary iambic I expected and I learned that the poets and writers did not talk shop in pubs: I heard snippets of scandal straight from the Vatican, the names of various racehorses: a novelist sang a bawdy song in his braces and a publisher sprang to the middle of the floor and shouted: "Bring on the mots!" (I thought he was calling in mock French for sublime aphorism: later I found out exactly what a mot was.)

Although there were many poets present there were at least as many more not: later I noticed that while magazine A published its own brood of writers, magazine B excluded that particular brood. I thought this strange: literary products are merely commodities at magazine level, and the only rule of non-publication should be lack of quality: but this is not the criterion. In the last few years I have looked carefully at certain publications and formed these opinions: lack of quality is no bar to publication if the writer is compatible to the editor in personality and sect. However, incompatibilities on these scores may be a bar to publication whatever the quality of the work.

I do not pretend to know the tastes of the editors at first hand, but these can be deduced from the work and from the

writers they publish. I mentioned “sect” because I found the main cliques (one of which I know is split into sub-cliques) to be “Irish Catholic” on one side and “Anglo-Irish” on the other. But perhaps this is too much of a generalisation: a small percentage of these groups appear in the publications of both. I have never even met a poet who did not belong to the coterie to which I found myself attached (there are poets associated personally with neither group but who are categorised, nevertheless). Of course, poets of more than Irish standing are patronised by both parties, whatever their origins.

The house is divided: there can be no Irish literature while The Book of Common Prayer considers the rambling and lyric rhetoric of the “Irish Catholics” to be entamed and the latter thinks the “Anglo-Irish” capable only of neat reserved hymns: a marriage must be arranged. The first step could be the breaking of the great idols Yeats and Joyce, who great while alive are deified into Molochs: the Parthenon did not inhibit the builders of the Gothic cathedrals. Then both groups could stand in the sun without the dubious benefit of heritage.

But to return to 1962. When the Bailey reception ended I was introduced to my first literary pub. Again the hope of sparkling talk foolishly came to me: again I heard racing results, the rapid solution of world crises and the extra bonus of gossip of the shady love-lives of absentees. John Jordan introduced me to Patrick Kavanagh, whom I did not know. I leant over to shake his hand but he declined saying: “I don’t know him”, gruffly.

I asked John Jordan what he was: he referred me to the biographical notes in *Poetry Ireland* 1. I was not impressed, so I read the poem he had contributed. I was young and foolish and not aware that Patrick Kavanagh was listening and I said: “It’s not poetry at all: it’s got the word ‘garage’ in it”. He towered up, scattering drink on the floor, shouted: “You insolent pup!” and left the table. I had not realised he was the pub idol. I thought he was a boor: I reversed this opinion when I read his poetry later and saw he was a poet indeed. But he played to the stalls: he went into the pub for company and he had to make the best of the company he found.

The fees which enabled me to spend my first year in Dublin in U.C.D. were supplied by a man who suffers that rare disease in this practical world, generosity: a man who gave with no ulterior motive like kindness, but merely because of the need of the

recipient, and who asked for no interest, material or metaphysical. My first and only year in university was not distinguished. I was more interested in the streets of Dublin than in the infallibility of the Angelic Doctor. Then I got the opportunity to co-edit *Arena* with James Liddy and Liam O'Connor: two years later it unfortunately ceased and I was left without an income. My parents, of course, did not approve of my leaving the post-man's job: still less of leaving U.C.D. It would not be easy to return to Newcastle West and my position on *Arena* had closed some literary doors to me in Dublin. So, on 13 January 1965, I was on the Irish Sea again, London-bound.

Why Write in Irish?

My road towards Gaelic has been long and haphazard and, up to recently, a road travelled without purpose. My first contact with Gaelic—as a living language—was in 1945 when I went to stay with my grandmother. She was a “native” speaker and had been born in north Kerry in the early 1880s. She rarely used Gaelic for conversation purposes but a good fifty percent of her vocabulary was Gaelic—more especially those words for plants, birds, farm implements etc. She occasionally sang a Gaelic song. I was not aware of anything unusual in this mixing of languages, but simply absorbed the words without question and used them in normal conversation. I learned some two thousand words and phrases from her. It was not until her death in 1967 that I realised I had known a woman who embodied a thousand years of Gaelic history.

In 1955, I spent a month in Cuil Aodha, in the house of Micheál Ó Tuama of Na Milíni. I spoke Gaelic all the time: my first contact with it as a social language. I began to think in Gaelic, to dream in it and even, as I was told to speak it in my sleep. I believe that anybody who was taught Gaelic by the cumbersome but unforgettable methods of national school teachers could do the same: in any case it is still in our brains, the very countryside breathes it out and even if the language did die out, its ghost could never be laid.

I went to London in 1961 and worked as a dishwasher. I had written some poetry by then, in English. A cashier working for the same firm had also written poetry—in Gaelic. The cashier was female, beautiful and a Gaelic poet from Connemara.

I fell in love with her. We discussed poetry and the language over the next two and half years. I would have given a hundred English lyrics then if I had been able to write one Gaelic poem for her. My inability to praise her in the language she wrote so beautifully gave me a feeling of inadequacy I have not conquered yet. I did not attempt to improve my pathetic knowledge of the language at that time.

I had gone back to Ireland with my *cailín dubh* but returned to London in 1965. In High Street Kensington Library I found Gerald Murphy's *Early Irish Lyrics*. Being out of work, I spent many days in bed reading that great book and studying Gaelic metres. Though I knew that he was a fine scholar, I felt that his prose translations did not do justice to the original poems. I believed then (and still do) that a translation of a poem must show the intricacy, the ornament and the metres of its original. In one month I learned more about the possibilities and limitations of English and Gaelic than I had ever done. I learned also that poetry *is* translatable: all it requires is that the translator (who must be a poet) must love the original more than the poem he is making of it: attempts to adapt destroy.

I then read every Gaelic poet I could find, avidly but not without censure: there is a mass of bad verse, as in all literatures, and it tends to be treated with reverence, regardless of its quality: fifty percent of what is in and out of print is mere history and has little value as literature.

I returned to Ireland in 1968 and began to speak Gaelic to a number of friends—some poets, some “native” speakers, some both. In 1970 my mind began to become enmeshed in a bilingual chaos—poems abruptly changing languages in mid-verse, words from one tongue insinuating themselves into poems written in the other. Then our government decided that the Franco-German policy of turning all Europe into a factory, with land and food supplies controlled by the State, was a good idea. So all things not conducive to trade were to be jettisoned—small shops, small farmers and, of course, Gaelic. And it was alleged that a child had died in Galway hospital asking for *deoch uisce* and no-one understood it. True or not, it rang in my head and

sometime after that my brain succumbed to the flood of Gaelic I was pouring on it and I found myself able to think and write whole poems in it, however bad.

I suppose I did solve, for myself, the problem besetting many poets writing in Ireland. I “realised my identity” and came to terms with it. Serious poets sometimes ask themselves: what is my relationship to Gaelic literature? To Anglo-Irish literature? What exactly is an *Irish* poet? Is it the same as an Anglo-Irish poet? My going into Gaelic simplified things for me and gave me answers which may be naïve, but at least give me somewhere to stand. The outline of my conclusions is as follows: there are no “Irish” poets. There are Gaelic poets and Anglo-Irish poets. To qualify for either epithet they must live in or have lived in this country and their poetic sensibilities must be moulded by its countryside, its people, its history and literature both in Gaelic and Anglo-Irish. The sonnet and the *rannaíocht mhór* must be their common property. Both must know as much about Liam Rua Mac Coitir as they do about John Todhunter. The only difference between them should be their languages.

My main and most simple reason for changing to Gaelic is that I love the language (I have no interest in Connradhs, Cumanns, Coimisiuns or churches). That any language would be allowed to die and that poets who are acquainted with it, borrow from it and even love it, should do nothing, is to me incomprehensible. I only wish that I was better known and a better poet so that my decision was more remarkable, and less unaccountable and “amusing”.

EDITORS' NOTE: These two articles appeared in *The Irish Times* in November 1968 and August 1975 respectively. They are reprinted here by permission of the Estate of Michael Hartnett c/o The Gallery Press.