

WRITING IN IRISH

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One of the more insensitive *clichés* often bruited about Dublin is that Irishⁱ was never spoken there. The truth is that Irish was the principal language, or even the only language, of the area for most of its populated history. When the non-literate Viking hordes sneaked their way in under the mist on some dull Irish morning in the late eighth century they encountered a population which at least knew that the written word existed. For round about them were the monasteries of Tallaght and of Finglas and of Clondalkin, among others, in which knowledge was taught and learned in the only two languages about which anybody had a clue, Irish and Latin.

It took the Viking barbarians more than two weeks to take Dublin in one of their initial assaults. As they brought no women with them, their men learned Irish within a few years as they had to make out with Irish wenches. Although tourist Dublin makes a big splash about the Vikings, it is never said that they spoke only Irish within a generation or two. When Brian Boru scuppered the Nordic alliance in the marshes of the Tolka in 1014 it is unlikely that the defeated grunts were groaned in Gottlandish.

The Norman pirate adventurers had the same problem when they barged in late in the 12th century. They had learned some kind of French when they conquered Northern France, and had brought it to England.

Thus, when they took advantage of the fine wooden landing places for their ships they brought new words with them which had never been heard before, such as *ancaire* ('anchor') and *margadh* ('market') which they spread along the plains; and these words joined the full flush of Irish which had been flowing for more than a thousand years before this at least in the Liffey sludge.

English sat in as a prong of the partial conquest. The 'quality', meaning the English and the Anglicised spoke the language of the crowns. Those down from the hills above in Wicklow and round about on the pleasant plains of Kildare and coming in from the fat lands of Meath spoke their own Irish as always.

Not surprisingly, however, as part of the political struggle there were attempts to keep the Irish out of Dublin, or to banish them when they came in at various times during the later middle ages. Nonetheless, one of the purposes of The Statutes of Kilkenny of 1366 was to require the English of the country to learn English; and even though all of the peers attending the Dublin parliament of 1541 were of Norman or of English origin, only one of them could understand the English language.

It was no accident, then, that the very first printed Irish book was published in Dublin in 1571. As most European publishing was necessarily religious we find that this was also the case with the Irish language, and it is only when we come to the late 17th and early 18th century that we find a flourishing secular literature. Much of this centred around the Ó Neachtain circle of writers and scribes who lived in the Pimlico area, and were acquainted with Jonathan Swift and his interests. Seán Ó Neachtain and his son Tadhg were the leaders of this group, and as well as being scholars, they wrote poetry and fiction. Tadhg wrote a poem which names twenty-six writers of Irish in his Dublin area in the early 18th century, and if we consider that the city at this time was no more than the size of a middling rural town today, they must have had a considerable impact on its intellectual and literary life. Seán Ó Neachtain wrote what is the closest thing we can get to a novel in Irish in 18th century Ireland *Stair Éamainn Uí Chléirigh* ('The Story of Eddie Cleary'), but given the lack of a reading public and the dearth of support for secular printing it did not herald a new beginning in Irish urban literature.

The continuation of a literate tradition, however, is attested to by scholars like Richard Tubber (fl. 1720) who was born in Castleknock just then outside the city and who died in 1786, and clerics such as the Archbishop of Dublin John Carpenter who appears to have been a native speaker of Irish born in Ussher's Island as late as 1729. Carpenter was responsible for an Irish prayer book which was widely used by the local population and continued to be reprinted until after the famine.

The fact that there continued to be a native Irish speaking population in the city well into the 19th century, and that the city continually attracted people from all over the country, made it natural that what we loosely call 'The Irish Revival' should begin in Dublin. There was always an antiquarian interest in the language which gave rise to a number of learned societies throughout the 19th century, but it wasn't until the founding of Conradh na Gaeilge/The Gaelic League in 1893 that ordinary people began to be involved in the linguistic part of the general cultural revival.

One of the aims of the League was to promote a modern literature in Irish, and in this they were spectacularly successful. For the very first time cheap and accessible books were published for the general public. New writers arose from the streets of the city and produced works which are still read today. Liam Ó Rinn from Ballybough should be best known for his translation of the National Anthem into Irish, which is the version most widely sung on public occasions today. While Patrick Pearse is mostly recognised as a revolutionary, he was also a notable literary figure alternating between polemical criticism and short stories of a simple and innocent beauty. Liam S. Gógan from the

North Circular Road was a considerable poet and was the principal collaborator of Fr Dineen when he compiled his great dictionary.

Writers better known internationally for their writing in English were also considerable authors in Irish. Brendan Behan wrote his best poetry in Irish, much of it acerbic, some satirical, and more strikingly elegiac. His famous play 'The Hostage' is basically a cannibalisation of his earlier Irish play 'An Giall.' It is often forgotten that Brian O'Nolan/Flann O'Brien/Myles na gCopaleen was a native speaker of Irish and his *An Béal Bocht* ('The Poor Mouth') is the work he was most proud of. This bilingual dexterity is also evident in poetry in the various collections of Micheál Ó Siadhail, Michael Hartnett and Pearse Hutchinson.

Dublin is, of course, a vacuum cleaner and sucks up much of the best of the rest of the country. Thus, the greatest prose writer of the 20th century, Máirtín Ó Cadhain, although from Conamara, lived most of his life in the capital city, and many of his later stories are set there. His novellas *An Eochair* ('The Key') is a savage satire on the inanities of the civil service, while '*Fuíoll Fuine*' ('The Dregs of the End') is the odyssey of a rambling soul through a long night of disorientation. Another writer from the west of Ireland, Máirtín Ó Direáin began his poetic career writing about his native Aran, but contrasted it with sharp vignettes of a changing urban landscape. Máire Mhac an tSaoi initially drew much of her inspiration from the Kerry Gaeltacht, but later wrote memorably of domestic middle-class life, its joys and travails. Of a similar generation Eoghan Ó Tuairisc wrote a long meditative semi-narrative poem *Aifreann na Marbh* ('The Mass of the Dead') comparing and contrasting Dublin and Nagasaki after the atomic bomb, but his documentary novel on the 1916 Rising, *Dé Luain* (which could be translated as either 'Monday', or 'The Day of Judgement' as there is a pun in the title) is as much a rich tale about Dublin and its people as the events depicted.

Most contemporary Irish writers seem to have some relationship to Dublin, and many live there, whether they write about it or not. While Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill has lived in the city for many years her imaginative worlds are elsewhere; on the other hand, Liam Ó Muirthile, while supping from the same West Kerry well, has made the city his own, both in poetry and in prose; Michael Davitt had great fun in much of his poetry with the kind of urban Irish now growing up, and stretched the language to meet the argot of the streets; and Gabriel Rosenstock, the fourth of the original *Innti* poets, all of whom came to live in Dublin, is at home anywhere in the world, and draws inspiration from all quarters of the known and the unknown universe.

Although this poetic revolution which was begat in the late 1960s is still with us, it has taken new turns along the way. Colm Breathnach never had to prove his modern

credentials, as they were just there for him; while Bidy Jenkinson plays with every part of the Irish tradition and with whatever takes, or doesn't take her fancy, in a wide-ranging oeuvre of writing encompassing poetry, short stories, drama and children's fiction. And if the *Innti* journal has gone the way of the best literary publications, it has been replaced with renewed vigour by another Dublin poet, Roddy Gorman, who also has the distinction of writing in Scottish Gaelic, cementing a joint tradition which had been long fractured.

A more recent wave of younger poets takes Irish as an urban language entirely for granted and can mix and match tradition with place and time through feeling by way of an international sensibility just as they like. The most prominent of these are Aifric Mac Aodha and Caitríona Ní Chléirchín who have established themselves quickly with very distinguished collections.

Prose is a more knotty problem, not being as easily chopped into categories or movements. Every novel seems to be a new beginning, and while there are many Dublin novelists the city is not always their main concern. An early attempt to show marital tension in the city was depicted in Séamas Ó Néill's *Tonn Tuile* ('Tidal Wave')(1947), while Lorcán S. Ó Treasaigh has written powerfully about what it is like growing up as an Irish speaker in an English-speaking city with his *Céard é English?* ('What is English?'). Ciarán Ó Coigligh's *Duibhlinn* ('Dublin') explains some of its concerns in its title, but goes far beyond that in its portrayal of the city and the country as scary domains but where hope also abounds. Both Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, also an accomplished author in English, and Anna Heussaff have written exciting literary popular fiction, including detective novels, in which the city streets are just as mean as they are in English. Liam Mac Cóil and Tomás Mac Síomóin are both Dubliners to their core, and yet having written of the city, they have spread their imaginations and investigations into history and wider political and cultural concerns. Mediaeval Dublin makes a brief appearance in Alan Titley's *An Fear Dána* ('The Man of Letters'), but the wider city is more apparent in many of his stories.

Seán Mac Mathúna is probably the most accomplished practitioner of the classic Irish short story, and his cityscapes and scrapes are marked by humour, quirkiness and a large dollop of wisdom. He can be as gentle as the breeze on the canal, or as savagely satirical as is required by the moment. His selected stories in *Úlla* ('Apples') show a banana against a green background, which probably tells us something, especially when a previous collection *Banana* showed an apple against a yellow background.

There is a sense in which Dublin is the centre of Irish writing. Although the strongest Irish-speaking communities are in the *Gaeltacht*, mainly but not exclusively in the west of Ireland, there is a strong Irish-speaking community in the capital which continues a tradition of writing in the language since the first calf was killed to make vellum for some

monk to dip his quill into his ink to pen his Irish letters in Clondalkin, or Tallaght, or Finglas, or Glasnevin sometime in the eighth century or before.

ⁱ 'Irish' here refers to the native language of Ireland, and is sometimes wrongly referred to as 'Gaelic'. Historically it was always known in English as 'Irish' as was the language of Scotland. When the Scots, not surprisingly, wished to differentiate their language from ours, they called it 'Gaelic', which is really only a phonetic representation of name of the language in the original. Nobody in Ireland ever called it 'Gaelic' until the latter half of the 19th century, partly as a result of British influence from Scotland, and partly because of the popularity of The Gaelic Athletic Association. It is both historical and useful to distinguish 'Irish' and 'Gaelic' as languages in two countries, because while they derive from a common root, they have not been mutually intelligible since the 13th century.