Celtic Literatures in the Twentieth Century

Edited by
Séamus Mac Mathúna
and
Ailbhe Ó Corráin

Assistant Editor Maxim Fomin

Research Institute for Irish and Celtic Studies
University of Ulster

Languages of Slavonic Culture
Moscow, 2007

CELTIC LITERATURES IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY / Ed. by Séamus Mac Mathúna and Ailbhe Ó Corráin; Assistant Editor Maxim Fomin / Research Institute for Irish and Celtic Studies, University of Ulster. Moscow: Languages of Slavonic Culture, 2007. — 280 p., il.

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-5-9551-0213-9
ISBN 5-9551-0213-2

CONTENTS

CELTIC LITERATURES IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Introduction

The Centre for Irish and Celtic Studies at the University of Ulster hosted at Coleraine, between the 24th and 26th August 2000, a very successful and informative conference on 'Celtic Literatures in the Twentieth Century'. The lectures and the discussions were of a high standard, and it was the intention of the organisers to edit and publish the proceedings as soon as possible thereafter. Unfortunately, due to difficulties in assembling some of the papers, this was not possible and, consequently, publication has been delayed much longer than was originally anticipated. Despite this delay, we feel that those papers which we have received merit publication at this time, not only because of their intrinsic merits, but also because they represent the views of the authors on their respective topics at the turn of the twenty first century and will hopefully be of value to those interested in the state of the modern Celtic literatures.

Thirteen papers are published in the volume. Five present important overviews and appreciations of the major literary works produced in a number of the Celtic languages during the course of the twentieth century. They include chapters by Alan Titley and Diarmaid Ó Doibhlin on, respectively, Irish prose and Irish poetry, and by Ronald Black on Scottish Gaelic poetry. Peredur Lynch discusses and assesses Welsh literature and Francis Favereau deals with Breton literature.

The remaining papers examine more specific aspects of the traditions. Donald Meek's contribution fills a significant gap in the proceedings in that it deals with Scottish Gaelic prose writing; more specifically, the author considers the influence of Christianity on some twentieth century Gaelic short stories. In a contribution dealing specifically with drama, Eugene McKendry examines the work of the Irish dramatist Críostóir Ó Floinn, in the light of the European dramatic tradition, from Classical Greek theatre to the artistic innovations of Richard

Wagner. Seán Mac Corraidh's paper, which is the only one to be written in a Celtic language (Irish), investigates the contribution made by the pre-eminent author of Ulster Irish, Seosamh Mac Grianna, to Irish lexicography in his capacity as a translator of works of English into Irish. Mac Grianna's translations were made under the auspices of the Irish Government's publishing arm, *An Gúm*, and a study of the early years of this important and contentious body forms the subject of Gearóidín Uí Laighléis' paper. Art J. Hughes reflects on echoes of the great Blasket Island classic *An tOileánach* and Mac Grianna's starkly enigmatic and prescient *Mo Bhealach Féin* in Flann O'Brien's *The Hard Life*. Pádraig Ó Fuaráin's subject is that of landscape in the writings of the great Scottish Gaelic poet, Sorley MacLean. Finally, Sabine Heinz offers an appreciation of the writings of the influential Welsh author, writer, and activist, Angharad Tomos, and Gwenno Piette (Sven-Meyer) examines the interesting and provocative matter of Breton literature during the German Occupation (1940-1944).

Séamus Mac Mathúna Ailbhe Ó Corráin

Alan Titley

Twentieth Century Irish Prose

One of the difficulties in offering a paper with such a broad title as this is the uncertainty of whether to give a general survey, a critical introduction, a listing of the best and most beautiful or just to make a personal statement. I can't promise to do all of these, but I hope what I have to say will be more than just a mish-mash, a hodge-podge and a mixum-gatherum. I am also aware of a goodly number of general essays on this, or on related matters dealing with Irish literature in the twentieth century, and do not wish to simply cover old ground. But I do wish to recall a paper delivered by Máirtín Ó Cadhain with a title curiously similar to mine which he delivered at a congress like this one in Cardiff the year before his death. His theme and mine are the same, but it is instructive to note how things have changed, not quite utterly, but changed nonetheless since 1969. In purely literary terms it has been a *malairt bhisigh*, a change for the better.

His was a general survey with some good quips, some true, some less fair, as quips tend to be. He warned us of the danger of Celtic scholars being more interested in dialects and "more concerned with the type of Irish and the idioms in a piece of writing than with its literary value" while begging the question of what "literary value" might be. His comment on Séamas Ó Grianna that he wrote "*Caisleáin Óir* followed by a series of horror novels, where horror does not mean a literary catalogue, but simply horrible" (Ó Cadhain 1971: 147) still draws a giggle but is less than fair to some of those novels. And while it is true, as he put it, that "whole lots of novels got written by the most unexpected people, and quantity surveyors noticed that these had become twice and three times the size of previous novels" as a result of the foundation of *An Gúm*, as a comment it seriously undervalues the work of that agency in promoting Irish literature and writing.

More interestingly, he hardly mentions any specific prose works at all. And where he does he makes special mention of Frank O'Connor who never produced a book in Irish, Liam O'Flaherty who only wrote one and whose most famous story concerns the suicide of an old cow, and he singles out Liam Ó Catháin's historical trilogy which was not originally written in Irish but subsequently arranged. He gives one brief paragraph to drama and makes no mention whatsoever of discursive, critical, historical or reflective prose. The big change today is that any account of prose must place a great deal of the non-fictional in the centre of things.

To put it another way: the book in which Ó Cadhain's essay appears features lectures on Welsh poetry and literature, Scottish Gaelic poetry, Lowland Scots poetry, Writing in Breton and Anglo-Irish poetry. It appears as the proceedings of a conference held in Cardiff in 1969 under the title of *Literature in Celtic Countries*. The obvious missing link is any lecture on Irish poetry. Yet the last thirty-five years have been largely seen as thirty-five years of poetry by most cultural commentators. That is why this talk is a plea for prose.

The Irish writers who attempted to build anew a modern Irish prose at the close of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth were not quite starting from the egg. They were building from the shattered shell of the seventeenth century and grafting new colours from international species. The Irish situation was different from other colonial ones where English was introduced primarily as the language of administration, and consequently of higher education and learning, while native languages grubbed around in everyday life and in the lower castes of register. English did not replace the native languages of India or Africa as it nearly completely did in Ireland. So the Irish writer was not merely attempting to bridge the stylistic gap of more than two hundred years, he was also recreating the language as he went on.

Much prose suffers from the fact that it is not poetry. That is, the ordinary hack prose writer doesn't have the glamour about him that the poet necessarily claims because he is denied access to the mysteries which ordinary discourse can't reach. All modern prose in all languages has been at its best as poetic as most poetry has been prosaic, and writing in Irish is no exception. The poetry which bards of the medieval period produced by virtue of placing a stone upon their bellies and mumbling overnight in a darkened room is no better in substance than that which the *prosateur* produces because he has to meet the deadline of an irascible editor, or scribble about the dull quotidian, or recount a story that has

been often told before, or satisfy the demands of an educational system that requires that writing be ordinary, yet exciting, yet safe.

This homily is delivered, not so much because the tradition of Irish poetry is so strong that it threatens to overwhelm everything else that is written, but because, despite the long tradition of Irish prose, equally as ancient as that of the versifiers and therefore almost exceptional in Western European literatures, it seems always to be placed secondary to the musers, the messers, the metrifyers and the mystical masseurs because of their domination of the scribbled word for two hundred years prior to 1900. It is not, of course, that there is some kind of metaphysical rivalry between prose and poetry since various literary forms generally shape up because of social and political conditions. Poetry flourished in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Irish because it was relatively easy for an impoverished rhymester to rattle off innumerable verses on any subject in field or fair which took his fancy—whether it was the loss of a spade or the loan of a spancel; prose demanded the hard intellectual graft and sufficient leisure which was denied by the political regime. It is for that reason that the twentieth century has been the century of prose in Irish literature *par excellence*; there has been more prose written and read and thought about in the twentieth century in Irish than *in all the previous centuries put together* for all our two thousand years.

The great critical debate at the turn of the century was whether Irish prose should be based on the classical standard set down by Seathrún Céitinn at the time of the Counter-Reformation or, on the ordinary speech of the people used in their everyday and everynight and everymidafternoon lives. It was as if English writers wished to model their prose on the unbridled sentences of Thomas Nashe or the heavy iron curtains of John Milton, rather than on the gabble of a Shropshire lad or the cant of a cockney. While this might seem a wondrously strange and weird debate for those who inhabit an unbroken tradition, it is interesting that the Chinese, Greek and Arabic literary scenes suffered a similar wrangle at roughly the same time. As far as my paltry knowledge goes, modernism won the day on every occasion in each of these countries.

It did so in Ireland because writers don't generally give a ship's shine or a sheep's shake for what the critics say, or alternatively, because they are usually the best critics themselves. It is clear that An tAthair Peadar Ua Laoghaire, otherwise Canon Peter O'Leary, was not clear what he was about when he embarked on the first Irish novel, *Séadna*, published in book form, after serialisation, in 1904. It is equally clear, however, that he satisfied large numbers of Irish readers in produc-

ing a novel that was all things to all people (except for thousands from Ulster and Connacht who hated his dialect). It is, at the one time, a folk-novel based on an international tale, a study of individual character as in the best nineteenth-century Jamesian plodder, a book for beginners which the sophisticated can appreciate, a medieval allegory of good and evil, a thriller where the suspense is held until the last few pages, a documentary which describes the lives of ordinary "peasants" in a rural community, and a postmodernist tale which is self-reflective and self-critical. There is no doubt that it was a theme that suited bang-on as a dead-cert the concerns and the limitations of its author; we know that because most of the other attempts at creativity by An tAthair Peadar were successful only as failures, an example of which might be his second novel, *Niamh* (1907), which stretches our credulity a lot more than the eponymous hero was ever stretched. This was the novel which dealt with the triumphant victory of Brian Boru against the Barbarian hordes from Scandinavia at the beach of Clontarf, driving them into the holy tide and back to their heathen refuges in Stavanger or wherever, and which one critic pronounced would "not be popular with Vikings". What An tAthair Peadar did succeed in doing was establishing the speech of the ordinary people as the normal standard for everyday prose, and despite dialect bigots' misgivings about his Muskerry muscular diction, the principle was conceded and hankerers after the seventeenth century retired to their studies.

It would be oversimplistic to say that we can divide Irish writers into two camps from the beginning of the century, that is, the traditionalists and the modernists, but it is a pleasantly crude classification that serves some purposes as crude classifications do. The traditionalists would argue that the modernists were not being true to the genius of the Irish language and to the facts of Irish-speaking communities, while the modernists would argue that the traditionalists were confusing the nineteenth century and the folksy with life itself, while not being able to see the semantic wood for the linguistic tree. The truth might be that in any complete language or complete literature you need the lot, and readers of English literature in Ireland will find no difficulty in swallowing the experimentalism of a James Joyce, a Robert MacLiam Wilson or a Sebastian Barry with the same bitter pill as a Brinsley MacNamara, a Frank O'Connor or a Maeve Binchy, who wrote as if the twentieth century never happened. Although there is no inherent virtue in whoring after alien gods or goddesses, Padraic Ó Conaire proved in his short stories and in his one successful novel, *Deoraíocht* (1910), that much could be learned by applying one's own experience to the technique of a Dostoyevsky, a Dickens or a Balzac. Despite his penchant for walking very close to the cliff

between horror and melodrama, or for stepping on the very thin ice of depressing realism across the bog of improbable fact, he is still worth reading because we know that somewhere underneath all the schmaltz there is a real writer struggling to emerge, even if he breaks through only in fits and bleeps and glimmers and starts.

The much-reviled-by-revisionists Pádraig Mac Piarais succeeded in implementing a revolution in politics, in education and in literature, which is more than can be said for any of his detractors. While his revolution in politics failed because the guns arrayed against him were too great, and his attempt to change education floundered on the hard-headedness of parents who wanted their children to be trained in gainful employment as economic timeservers and wageslaves as they were themselves, his influence on literature remained profound because of his sensitivity and courage as a critic. In that, he joins a select band of writers in Ireland whose criticism was always more creative than their imaginative work, and of whom Daniel Corkery and Sean O'Faolain (as biographer) would be prominent. Pearse had a generosity of soul and a sharpness of critical perception which has set the standard for much that has been written about literature in Irish unto the present day.

One of the main differences between any account of literature in Irish and in English in this century must be the importance accorded to regional and dialectical writing in Irish. Although much writing in English in this century has centred upon coming home through the fields past the lake by lough begorrah and twice round the black church on the old bog road neath the green leafy shade in our village of longing amongst women as an only child and mind the dresser, we can readily see that much of its impetus is sentimental where it is not financial. In the case of Irish, it is much more likely to be part of the battle of the dialects, where each region tried to show by literary excellence that its particular forms should be dominant in whatever national standard would eventually emerge. Thus an Ulster *madadh* or a Munster *madra* became just more than hound dogs who were neither high class nor barking all the time, but carried the aspirations of an entire province in their paws.

Although the Munster dialect remained most prestigious for the first quarter century because of the success of An tAthair Peadar Ua Laoghaire's writings – with no little help from his friends – and the amazing dictionary of Patrick Dineen, there was a putsch by Ulster writers in the twenties and thirties which helped to restore equilibrium and some sense of proportion. Although containing in many

ways the most extensive Gaeltacht, Connacht, until the arrival of Máirtín Ó Cadhain as a major writer in the late nineteen forties, remained, like its hurlers and footballers, permanently at the bottom rung of losers and no-hopers, in slumber deep and unknowing. The Ulster revival was spearheaded by Séamas Ó Grianna, who wrote under the pen-name Máire, and his younger, more talented and more unhinged brother, Seosamh Mac Grianna. One of the great signs of life about these authors is that there is still a lively critical debate about their worth, although this is sometimes influenced by one's proximity or distance to or from Donegal. Critical geographers have noted that their esteem grows in direct proportion to how close the reader is to Rann na Feirste, but they are not likely to be covered with plaudits in the University of West Kerry. For all that, much about Máire is remarkable. He invented a form of the short story that was all his own, and he wrote a series of novels that were invariably interesting until he decided to introduce a plot. His best work is comic masquerading as tragic, and his misfortune was to have wearied the critics and his readers before his best novel, *Bean Ruadh de Dhálach*, was published in the nineteen sixties, long after everyone had given up the ghost and the spirit and the flesh and had gone home to their sheep. His autobiographies, *Nuair a Bhí mé Óg* and *Saol Corrach*, are masterpieces of tenderness and acerbity, and show what he was capable of if he hadn't read Pat McGill or presumed that Thomas Carlyle was a greater writer than he was. His greatest achievement is that he succeeded in producing a substantial body of worthwhile reading material for his own people and for enthusiasts of Ulster Irish from Belfast, occasionally reaching base camp on the mountains of Parnassus but never in danger of falling off the cliff of ambition at the summit.

His other achievement was that he added the much-needed ingredient of imagination to that documentary literature which was growing in each Gaeltacht as scholars persuaded small farmers and fisherman that they had something to say. Some did and some didn't. There was, of course, value in documenting the way of life, and more importantly, the language of the Gaeltacht while it remained strong. In this sense, most Gaeltacht autobiographies and old-timers' reminiscences are interesting, although only very few of them should be confused with literature. The most famous of these autobiographies is undoubtedly Tomás Ó Criomhthain's *An tOileánach* (1929), which was later translated as *The Islandman* and received some international recognition. This form of writing in Irish is almost *sui generis* in so far as it is about so-called ordinary people writing about their so-called ordinary lives, whereas most autobiographies which attain fame are written by the rich or the famous or those who are famous because they are

rich. Tomás Ó Criomhthain was no ordinary person, however, but a single-minded literary craftsman who learned to write his language when he was advanced in years and who provided a classic virtually without models. His prose, in the original, is as cold as the water around the Great Blasket, as supple as the seals which he hunted, as clean as the west wind and as tough as the hide of an old cow. He is the most unromantic of writers despite the apparent exotic location and the photography of calendar decorators. He wrote a second classic, *Allagar na hInise*, which is really just a lot of old talk, but which is more poetic in its execution than a shelf-full of celebrated anthologies with greater pretensions.

Seosamh Mac Grianna joined in the cult of autobiographies when he published *Mo Bhealach Féin* (1940) after a few novels and a fine collection of short stories. It is really an imaginative credo and a defiant manifesto against the world, more than any kind of reconstruction of the externals of life, and still remains one of our best statements about the frustrated and misunderstood artist. He was our existentialist before we had heard of the word, our rebel when all the others had gone soft or joined the civil service, our anarchist when others were looking for a code to live by. One always feels when reading him that there was much potential left unfulfilled, much talent that was never quite expressed. His final work, *Dá mBíodh Ruball ar an Éan*, which is really only the initial cut of a novel, is written in a prose that is the most poetic and magical and mysterious of all in the twentieth century. It is a prose which never seems to touch the ground, and is yet not forced, nor stylised, nor flourishy. At its best it is like another language which bears only a syntactical relationship to Irish. It is like seeing language through a rain drop, brightly. It is far from the land, but comes from some kind of, well, why not say, spring. Some translations approach it in beauty of language and of expression – Niall Ó Dónaill's version of Denis Ireland's *Cathair Phrotastúnach* for example – but Mac Grianna's voice is an *Ur*-original of an *Ur*-original and stands alone in the gap of the north.

The nineteen twenties and thirties saw the greatest outpouring of prose of all kinds apart from the last two decades. Although this outpouring may have been only great in bulk, it was certainly necessary in order to provide reading and working material for the new generation of people either learning or rediscovering the language. The state publishing company, *An Gúm*, which was founded in the nineteen twenties, provided support for original and for translated books. Many of the world's classics were rendered into Irish and are examples of what good translations should be. Its policy on original novels and short stories was not quite as successful, partly because you cannot order the coming of good au-

thors and partly because writers in Irish suffered the same malaise as their counterparts in English after the independence of the Irish Free State. This era of dull and plodding realism seemed to produce the same novels and short stories over and over again under different titles, although a few like Éamonn Mac Giolla Iasachta's *Cúrsaí Thomáis* (1927) – later translated into English as *The Little Fields of Carrick* – or Barra Ó Caochlaigh's *Lucht Ceoil* (1932) can still bear a close reading.

It was not until after the great barbarian war of 1939-45 that creative and imaginative prose underwent a transformation. For some reason, much was made at the time of Séamas Ó Néill's *Tonn Tuile* (1947), a novel which attempted to depict marital tensions in Dublin during the war. Unfortunately the main character and narrator is – with no hint of irony – such a prig, and the prose is as thin as toilet paper, that we find it impossible to empathise either with the author's intentions or his style, if such a word is at all applicable. It may have been welcomed more for its apparent modern urban setting than for its literary content in the belief that it heralded a departure from the dominant rural prose tradition up until then. The worst excesses of that tradition were beautifully and hilariously parodied in Myles na gCopaleen's *An Béal Bocht* (1941) some years previously, although the author admitted several times that his novel was written out of a profound respect for *An tOileánach* which it is seemingly sending up. Parodying of the stage Irishman remains a serious business, however, when one of them is regularly returned as a TD with the votes of the mountainy sheepfarmers of south Kerry on the promise of keeping his people poor for all eternity so that they can cadge the subsidies from the European Germans.

It was Máirtín Ó Cadhain's magisterial and masterful *Cré na Cille* (1949) which more than anything else broke the back of the realist incubus. If "the speech of the people" had been the literary catch-cry for so long, Ó Cadhain took it as far as it could possibly go and beyond. For, if we exclude some introductory passages to some of the interludes in which the book is divided, the entire novel is in straight talk, or what passes for straight talk in a rural community. More than that, all the characters are dead and buried in a graveyard in Connemara which means – necessarily – that their movement is restricted and that their development can go only in the direction of decomposition. And in a sense this is ironically apt, since the traditional novel is wonderfully decomposed within a form which is uniquely his own, and traditional society is buried under six feet and tens of thousands of words of bitchiness, and backbiting, and taunts, and sneers, and slagging, and animadversions. If one of the reasons for the cultivation of literature is to glorify

language, then *Cré na Cille* does it with power and wonder; it also showed, once again, that the rural novel could be modernist, just as *Tonn Tuile* had shown that the urban novel could be retrogressive. These sociological divisions much loved by those who think that the literature of the dual-carriageway is superior to that of the boreen, or that Finglas lilies smell sweeter than sweet Finogue willies, or who prefer their own real horny bull in a field to artificial insemination in an alley, never had much meaning when it came to the hot stuff of writing. Irish prose had been both rural and urban from the start, and had contained within it the traditional and the experimental. Good writers always understand that it is the critic who sucks his categories for comfort and who keeps putting the psycho back into analysis.

Máirtín Ó Cadhain did for the short story in a series of collections what he had also done for the novel. Although he had published one book of tales before the war, it was a work he was inclined to disown, but he was always proud of the best of his stories in *An Braon Broghach* (1948) and *Cois Caoláire* (1953). These best stories had to do with the toughness of life in his native Cois Fharraige, but they are written without the real sentimentality or the false toughness which marred one of the finest collections of short stories of that time, Liam Ó Flaithearta's *Dúil* (1953). Máirtín Ó Cadhain did not publish another book for seventeen years when *An tSraith ar Lár* (1967), the first of a trilogy of collections of short stories, appeared. This and *An tSraith dhá Tógáil* (1970) contain his finest writing apart from *Cré na Cille*, but they were part of such a good body of writing which appeared in the nineteen sixties that they seemed less remarkable then than they do now.

Any collection of the finest of Irish prose would be overburdened with writing from the nineteen sixties. It was in particular Eoghan Ó Tuairisc, Diarmaid Ó Súilleabháin and Breandán Ó Doibhlin who were innovative and courageous, and in an entirely different way Dónall Mac Amhlaigh and Pádraig Ua Maoileoin who breathed new life into more traditional forms of fiction. It was during this decade that Máire's best novel, the aforementioned *Bean Ruadh de Dhálach* (1966), was published, and even the censors shone on his brother Seosamh's forgotten novel, *An Druma Mór* (1969), which was written in the nineteen thirties but remained in the womb of the Gúm all those years because of political pressure. While it would always be wrong to compare Irish literature with the literatures of the major world languages, there was much written in those years of which anyone could be proud, no matter in what language it was composed.