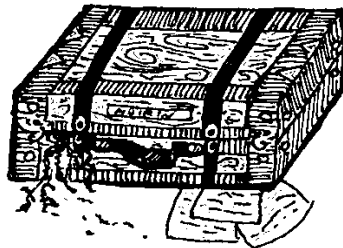


DR RIÓNA NÍ FHRIGHIL

Aistriú:

Migration, Texts & Translation



The young women were chirruping of America. Chirruping of the life they'd have together soon in South Boston. Typical of a race whose guardian angel was the American trunk, whose guiding star was the exile ship, whose Red Sea was the Atlantic. ('The Year 1912')

Ag ceiliúr faoi Mheiriceá a bhí na mná óga. Ag ceiliúr faoin saol a bheadh acu abail a chéile ar fad i South Boston go gairid, mar ba dhual do chine arbh é trunc Mheiriceá a n-aingeal coimhdeachta, arbh í an long imirce a réalt eolais agus arbh í an Fharraige Mhór a Muir Rua. ('An Bhliain 1912')

The foregoing passage from the short story 'An Bhliain 1912' (The Year 1912) by Máirtín Ó Cadhain reminds us that emigration was perceived as an inevitability for many generations of Irish people – welcomed by some (often young women) and resented by others. Between 1841 and 1925, for example, 4.7 million Irish emigrants went to the United States. Migration and emigration became

an integral part of the life of Irish-speaking communities, particularly in the wake of the Great Famine (1845-1850) and well into the twentieth century. Migration from Irish-speaking areas was disproportionately high. Little wonder then, that migration and emigration emerged as central themes in Irish language literature in the nineteenth and twentieth century.

A remarkable feature of much of this emigration literature is that it transcends the immediate historical and cultural context in which it was written, and gives contemporary readers a valuable insight into the complexities of migration and emigration. For, despite the advances in communication and travel technologies, the challenges faced by those who leave their native place to pursue a new life in a host country remain to a large extent unchanged in the present day.

The texts chosen as part of the *Aistriú* project exhibit a range of perspectives on the theme of migration and emigration. The excited anticipation of the young females who eagerly awaited the passage to America, paid for by an older sibling or friend, is portrayed in Ó Cadhain's short story and in the chosen excerpt from Peig Sayers' autobiography *Peig: A Scéal Féin* (*Peig: The autobiography of Peig of the Great Blasket Island*). In both texts, the devastation felt by those left behind – ageing parents and grandparents in particular – is vividly portrayed. Máirtín Ó Direáin's poetry portrays the decline of his native island (Inis Mór, County Galway). However, the same silence fell on many other rural communities as the younger generation migrated, and continues to migrate, to larger cities in Ireland and abroad.

For many of these young women in particular, emigration was an opportunity to live independently, to choose one's own husband and to lead a more varied social life. The short story 'Nóra Mharcius Bhig' ('Nora, Daughter of Marcus Beag'), first published in 1907, is an audacious portrayal by Pádraic Ó Conaire of the strict moral and social code from which many young women wished to escape.

Chain migration among young men, and the importance of those networks in securing employment and accommodation, is also evident in the excerpts chosen from autobiographical accounts by Micí Mac Gabhann in *Rotha Mór an tSaoil* (*The Hard Road to Klondike*) and by Dónall Mac Amhlaigh in *Dialann Deoraí* (*An Irish Navy: The Diary of an Exile*). The gruelling nature of the physical labour expected of these male emigrants, along with the abysmal living conditions they endured, parallels the contemporary experience of many migrants. The sense of camaraderie and homosocial bonding, so prevalent in these excerpts, is notably absent in the autobiographical poem 'Óchón! A Dhonncha' ('My Sorrow, Donncha') by Pádraig Ó hÉigearthaigh. The distraught father who speaks in this poem grieves the tragic drowning of his son, and bitterly laments the fact that his child will not be buried in his ancestral home.

The physical journey is often a crucial element of the emigrant's story. Liam Mac Uistín's historical novel *Esperanza* (*On Board the Esperanza*) depicts the deplorable and degrading conditions faced by Irish famine refugees on board ships travelling to the United States of America during the nineteenth century. It is estimated that between 20% and 50% of the passengers died on board these 'coffin ships'. The exploitative and abusive relationship between vessel operators and passengers desperately trying to flee their home country is explored in Alan Titley's novel *Gluaiseacht* (*On the Move*). In this instance, art appears to have presaged reality; the novel's story of unaccompanied minors fleeing from Africa to Europe in unseaworthy vessels predated the so-called 'European migrant crisis' by six years. The parallels between both novels remind us, however, that the ruthless exploitation of vulnerable migrants is neither unprecedented nor culturally specific.

Indeed, it is the parallels between the historical experience of the Irish and the contemporary situation of other disenfranchised groups that informs the poem 'Fáilte Uí Dhonnchú' ('O'Donoghue's Welcome') by Louis de Paor. This poem can be understood as an overt criticism of Ireland's refugee policy and of the public's apathy to the plight of those who seek sanctuary in modern-day Ireland.

An acute awareness of the challenges faced by displaced Irish emigrants in the past informs, but does not define, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's series of poems 'Na Murúcha a Thriomaigh' ('The Assimilated Merfolk'). Ní Dhomhnaill employs the international motif of the mermaid to explore the theme of displacement and the challenges faced by marginalised individuals and groups who feel like fish out of water. These poems serve to remind us of the physical, psychological and emotional stress of trying to acclimatise to a new culture and society.

At a time when Europe, and indeed the global community at large, is faced with unprecedented levels of migration, these Irish language narratives attest to the long experience of displacement by Europeans. They provide a variety of perspectives that offset uncomplicated narratives and impersonal reports about migration. They bring the *human being* who has been relegated to the margins of society back into focus.

Suggested further reading:

Aisling Ní Dhonnchadha & Máirín Nic Eoin, 'Ar an gCoigríoch: Migration and Identity in Twentieth-Century and Contemporary Irish Literature', *Irish Review* 44 (2012), 60-74.

Available at: <http://doras.dcu.ie/21568/> and <http://eprints.maynoothuniversity.ie/4646/>

Aisling Ní Dhonncha & Máirín Nic Eoin, *Ar an gCoigríoch: Díolaim Litríochta ar Scéal na hImirce*. (Cló Iar-Chonnacht: Indreabhán, 2008)