**An Irish Navvy: The Diary of an Exile**

**translated by Valentin Iremonger**

**from Dialann Deoraí**

**by Dónall Mac Amhlaigh**

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I started the next morning in Ward I. I had to wear a white coat over my own clothes and I felt a bit of a fool in that rig-out. This was a children’s ward and I found them all mannerly enough, the poor things. There was a nice nurse with me there – a Lithuanian – but her English was good. I don’t know that I’ll like this place at all but I doubt it. It’s the devil and all to have to be working with women.

I was given the lead polisher (as Paddy Ryan used to call it back in Renmore) to work and, in no time at all, I had a fine sheen on the floor. The women showed some surprise at my being so good. Little they thought that I spent many a day with the same yoke when I was C.B. in the Army. It’s mostly Irish girls that are here between nurses and others but they weren’t very Gaelic – the bunch I saw anyhow. God be with the wonderful girls back there in Connemara! It didn’t take very long to get to know them at a dance or a hooley; but so far as this gang of Irish is concerned, I feel more of a foreigner with them than I do with the foreigners themselves.

I wrote a short letter home to the old lady and then I went out with Tommy Power from County Waterford, a young lad that’s working here. We went down to the Royal Oak (every pub here had its own special name) and had a couple of pints. A bottle of Guinness costs one and twopence here (compared with sevenpence at home) and it has a bitter enough flavour. You never hear tell of a pint of porter here but the Irish drink pints of stout and mild – a sweetish mixture that they think is something like the pint of porter.

The air is very healthy in these parts.

There’s no doubt about it but the nurse that works with me is a lovely woman. I passed a good part of the day talking to her, about this language and that and I thought that a lot of the words in her own tongue were similar enough to words that we have in Irish.

I’m afraid, from what I have seen so far, in this place, that the Irish girls don’t come within an ass’s roar of the ‘foreigners’ so far as deportment, manners and that sort of thing is concerned. They have an ugly fashion of screeching with laughter in the canteen and they have the most revolting English idioms at the tips of their tongues – such as 'you’ve had it, mate', and ‘crikey’. There's something demeaning about the Irish person that imitates the English or other people. I don’t think that, even if I was here until Doomsday, I’d ever acquire any of the unpleasant idioms that they use around the place.

I went down for the Rosary and then walked slowly home afterwards. Damn this place, there's nothing in it. Bad and all as it might be, there’s more in Kilkenny!

I was really fed up with myself today for a while as I thought about the times we had in the Army back in Renmore. All right – you might have good enough pay over here but by the time my keep was deducted there was only about four quid left for myself. And a wise little head from Waterford was telling me that I’d only get two days pay this week because they usually keep you a week in arrears until you’re leaving.

I went down to the National Insurance Office this afternoon to get a ration book, an identity card and an insurance card. In this country everybody has to have these papers and I’d say it would go hard with you to put a foot in front of you without notifying the authorities. They were wonderfully pleasant in the office, unlike their kind back home in Ireland and I was finished with the business without too much delay. I then walked around the town for a while and I was surprised at the size of the people there. I had always thought that the English were small people but it seems that in these parts they are very tall and you’d never think from them that they hadn’t had enough to eat for years.

Another thing that you couldn’t help noticing was how well-dressed they were compared with the people back home. I didn’t see a single person with threadbare clothes or worn-out footwear. Clothes and much else are dearer here than in Ireland and I’m thinking that I’d be well advised to go home to Ireland once a year and fit myself out.

I got a great wish for a handful of sweets but I couldn’t buy them as I hadn’t any coupons. I went into one of the big stores and had a drop of tea. I thought for a long time about my old comrades in the Army – Ward, Colum the Champion and Michael Saile’s son – the lot of them. They’re all over here now if one only knew where to look for them.

Tomorrow is St. Patrick’s Day and there’s great talk among the Irish about the Feast.

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Sunday morning I had to get up very early as I had to get first Mass since I had to be on duty until one o’clock. That’s the worst of this place – that you have to work different shifts all the time. I was free from one until five and I spent the afternoon writing a few letters home.

There are so many languages being spoken here that it’s worse than the Tower of Babel. You can hear Italian, Ukrainian, German and Lithuanian on all sides but, alas! not a word of Irish. I must teach a few words to that wild devil, Nicholas; it’s not so long since he left school so it shouldn't be too hard to get him speaking it again. He wouldn’t be here at all but for the fact that his sister is a nurse in the hospital and she brought him over from Ireland so that he wouldn’t break his mother’s heart altogether. They have a farm at home but since the father died, there was no controlling Nicholas. He is to be sent out to New York as soon as possible; and it’s a damn pity he’s not going tomorrow.

He’s a sturdy boy and, although he’s not yet eighteen years old, he’s as strong as a bull. He has me pestered because all the men working here are either D.P.’s or Englishmen and Nick dislikes the whole lot of them. He regards himself as a first-rate loyal Irishman and he thinks that the best way he can show his loyalty is by perpetually fighting with the English and the foreigners. His sister came over this morning to ask me to look after him as she thought I might help to improve him. It’s more likely that he’ll find himself on his backside on the floor if he doesn't leave me a bit of peace!

But to go back to the question of languages, the foreign people here have an amazing grasp of them. Apart from the Italians, there isn’t a national group that isn’t able to speak about four languages. For instance, the Ukrainians are able to speak German, Polish and a little Lithuanian; the Germans and the Poles are the same. Тhеге are about ten Italians here and they only speak their own tongue but probably because they never had to leave their own country like the others. Except for one woman, they’re all from Naples and they’re marvellous musicians. They live for singing and they have a life and vigour in them that nobody else has.

The woman here from the north of Italy has no regard at all for the other Italians that are here and she says that they are dirty and lazy at home. That can’t be said about them here, however, and they are a gay and lively crowd. It is as maids they work here since they have so little English. Some of the other foreigners work as hospital orderlies, or as assistant nurses; the English and the Irish have the best jobs. For example, the matron is English of Irish extraction; the deputy matron and half the sisters are Irish.

I still had the price of the dance in the Irish Club (eighteen-pence) left over from yesterday so I went down about an hour before the end. There was a fine gathering of girls there; and who should I meet but my old friend, Stephen O’Toole, (Steve Darby) from Spiddal. We spent at least a half an hour talking about Spiddal and the great ceilis that went on there in our day. Two lads were needling one another in the hall all the night and, when the dance was over, they asked the priest to give them the boxing gloves and to act as referee for them. When all the women were gone, the doors were locked and we gathered around to see the fight. They spent half an hour skipping around one another and falling and holding without either of them damaging the other until the priest had to send them packing off home in the end.

‘Fighters,’ he said in disgust, 'sure you’d beat them with your cap.’

But they tell me that there’s many a good hard fight takes place there under the priest’s auspices. Father Galvin believes that whatever enmity may arise between a couple of men, it’s better settled there in the Club rather than have them fighting it out in the street and giving bad example to the pagans. Stephen walked home a bit of the way with me and we talked for a good while before we finally parted. He was amazed to find me working in the hospital and he advised me to get out of it as I’d get twice as much pay working with him on the navvying. Maybe I’ll do it, too!

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It doesn’t do them any harm at all to pay you two quid for a day here. They get the value out of you all right. God knows a Corkman doesn't let the grass grow under him. Mike Ned and I spent all day filling trenches and we didn't get much time for stretching ourselves. One thing, however – there isn’t an Englishman anywhere near us; they’re all our own people. Most of the lads are from Rosmuc and Carraroe, and only about three in our gang speak English, one of whom is a Latvian. It was like the old days when I was in the First Battalion when you heard nothing but Irish all around you. The men on this job are all very tough, working away there like horses; but it seems that they are all nice lads. I know some of them form an old date.

We're on the main road at the moment but the pipe-line goes through gardens and farms as well. You wouldn’t be in the same place two days in succession on this job, we heard. You could be here today while tomorrow you’d be miles away depending on how Pat felt like moving you around – that or the actual demands of the job. He didn’t say much to us today but it seemed to me on a few occasions that he was taking my measure as he looked at me from under the peak of his cap. Well, let him! I can do no more than my best.

I nearly fell out of my standing laughing at the oul’ fellow from Cork who was working with us filling the trench. The poor devil, he was delighted to be beside someone who was satisfied to talk English to him – his heart was broken with the Irish since he started on this job. He was one of the most talkative men I ever came across – leaving aside some of the bucks that are always holding forth down there at Hyde Park Corner. And the outlandish talk that he went on with! What matter but that he meant every word of what he said. Little was troubling him but the number of Irish who were losing their faith over here. His brother's daughter was good in London, if you could believe him:

‘Yerra, boy. I calls on her there lately to remind her of her obligations and she only laughed at me. Coming out of the bath, she was. “There you stand,” says I, “with your hair half-wet, washing and batting and drifting away from the rites of the Church’’.’ I’m not sure that he didn’t think that there was some connection between bodily cleanliness and loss of faith!

Floods of chat were pouring from him the whole day and, in the end, Pat the Tailor wasn't slow to notice that he was keeping the men idle. I’m afraid the poor man won't last jig-time here on this job. At last, Pat sent the two of us way down the field, well away from the other men. We had plenty to do down there, deepening a trench, but nothing would do this devil but to lean on his shovel and gossip away about anything that came into his mind.

‘Wot do you think of the English, boy?' he said. I replied that I couldn’t answer a question like that off the cuff but he didn’t give me any chance to develop my point.

'Tyrants and robbers, that's wot they are, boy. Look at wot Cromwell did back vonder, boy. “To hell or to Connickt," sez he, and he drives all our ancestors from their rich lands an' their castles back into the mountains and boglands an' that's why we’re all over here today working for John Bull.’

I was going to say to him that it was a bit ridiculous to be putting the blame for the state of Ireland today on whatever happened over 300 years ago but I let it go with him. When the lorry came in the evening to take us back home, out gets Pat to see what we had done. I'm afraid that we won't be together tomorrow.

Mike Ned and I went off to the pictures tonight.

‘There was neither sense nor meaning to that picture,’ he remarked as we came out and he rubbed his hands together. What matter only he had been fast asleep through the whole picture!

We were in two minds this morning about what to do – whether to stay at home or go to work – for it was lashing rain and didn’t look as if it would change. We got into the wagon anyway in the end (the job is over twelve miles from the city but it was pouring down on us inside there. Ray O’Sullivan was pretending that we were sailors in a storm, roaring every now and again: 'Hold it, you devil, hold it, I say,’ and other sayings that the Connemara boatmen have but that I know nothing about. When we got to the end of the journey, Pat was there before us and not looking all that well-disposed.

‘There was no point in your coming along this morning lads,’ he said. Someone remarked that it might clear up after a while.

‘Well, do as you please,’ he siad, ‘but if you start, you’ll have to stick it out until evening whatever about the weather.’

We were certainly in two minds then. None of us wanted to get drownded wet but at the same time we didn’t want to lose the day’s pay (there’s no ‘wet-time’ money on this job). In the end, we decided to start so there we were digging, carting and preparing places for the pipes. By breakfast-time, no one had a dry stitch on him and we were disgruntled accordingly.

On this job, we all go into Towcester for the tea; we’re all so dispersed that this is the most suitable thing to do. No sooner had we the tea, however, and were feeling a bit more civilized that the rain started to come down heavier again. Soon enough Pat came to get us out again but it was no use – not a man stirred. That made him pretty annoyed and when every man started to ask him for a ‘sub’, he was fit to be tied. Those of us who needed it, however, got it from him in the end and as it was after ten o’clock by then, the lot of us moved out of the café and into the pub, every man jack of us.

The Sullivans, the Greallishes, Colm the Tailor, Paddy Walsh, Mike Ned and myself were all there and we had all the time in the world before us. When closing time came, we bought a half-dozen each and moved up to Martin Connery’s house. Martin is an in-law of Sean’s and his wife Maura gave us all a great welcome. I got great satisfaction from that part of the day – the whole houseful of us there and not a word of English being spoken: nothing but the best of Connemara Irish. A lot of songs were sung: ‘Return, O My Darling,’ ‘My grief that I’m not a white duck’, ‘Rise up, gallant Sweeney’ and I don’t know how many others and when Barney came with the wagon to take us home, he had a lot of trouble getting us out of Martin’s house.

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Tom Hopkins started here this morning and it’s well worth having someone like that working with me. Up above we were, repairing and filling holes in the wall of the tower; we weren’t very warm at this work but Tom kept the heart going in me with his many wise sayings and his stories about the people back in Cornamona.

The littled Dublin jackeen was below us on the scaffold and, after a while, he noticed that Tom and I were talking Irish to one another.

‘Are yous two speakin’ Irish?’ he says and wonder in his voice. We said we were. And then:

‘Listen, lads,’ says our friend, there’s a couple of foreigners up here jabberin’ away in some strange lingo.’ Tom was going to jump down on this bucko and rough him up a bit but I persuaded him not to bother about it. It would have been only a waste of time for there's nothing you can do with the likes of him. During dinner-time, Reg Manley christened Tom and myself Chang and Wong but there was no harm in that at all, only fun.

We had to take on the concrete after dinner and with that work we weren’t long getting warm.

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This afternoon, I stood for a while on the top of the water tower looking around at the red sky over westwards. Suddenly, I got homesick for the old place. I thought of Galway and Lough Corrib as they would be on a summer afternoon and how nice and fresh it would be in the shadow of the old castle at Menlo. Salthill on a summer’s day came into my mind then and I felt that I heard all the noises of the children playing on the strand and the mournful noise of the Connemara bus going by full of people. It was as if I had gone wandering in my mind, standing there not taking any notice of anything but remembering times gone. When Tom called me, saying it was time to pack up, I was as fed up with my life as any man could be.

I went to the film in the Coliseum and it nearly killed me that I couldn’t go out with the lads for a drink afterwards; but I had to look after the pennies. The cinema was full or boys running around noisily and playing together until I had to give up any hope of being able to follow what was going on. The poor creatures, their bit of fun depends on their parents’ pay; and then they only have a week-end of enjoyment.

It’s amazing how neglectful parents are of their families here in England. Normally, when the children come home from school, there’s nobody there to meet them as both the father mother are out at work. The creatures have to get themselves a bit to eat to tide them over until their mother comes home. What matter only that there’s no necessity at all for all this work except that people covet unnecessary luxuries like television sets, contemporary furniture and the like – not counting what they leave in the public houses.

Signs on the children as a result, for many of the working-class families have neither manners nor any discipline, running around dirty and uncombed. If it weren't for the good meals they get at school, they’d be undernourished, I believe.

A great defect like this is the ruination of a decent country. What causes it, in my opinion, is that the people aren't used to the affluence they are experiencing and are obsessed with greed and avarice.

I went into the café for a drop of tea on my way home. Going into the house, I heard the lads there in the sitting-room having great sport among themselves after their visit to the pub; but I sloped away upstairs unbeknownst for there’s nothing I dislike more than to be with a crowd that are half-seas over while I’m stone cold sober.