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DÓNALL MAC AMHLAIGH

Dialann Deoraí



Dónall Mac Amhlaigh 1926-1989

Life and Literary Status

Dónall Mac Amhlaigh was born in Knocknacarra, Co. Galway, and moved to Kilkenny at age thirteen when his father, a soldier in the National Army, was transferred there to James Stephens Barracks. Mac Amhlaigh himself enlisted in the Irish Army in 1947. He joined the Irish-speaking regiment. On leaving the army after three years he struggled to find employment and he emigrated to Northampton, England in 1951 where he took up a position as ward orderly in a hospital. Later he worked on building sites and as a navy, preferring to be out in the open air. Around this time he began to write stories and to keep an account of life around him. He kept a diary for thirty years. The National Library of Ireland has fifty three volumes of his diaries and literary notebooks. *Dialann Deoraí* (which translates as ‘The exile’s diary’) was published in 1960. It was translated to English by Valentin Iremonger and published under the title *An Irish Navy: the diary of an exile* in 1964. Mac Amhlaigh’s writing gives a frank descriptive account of his life as an Irish emigrant working alongside working-class Irish navvies, mostly from the West of Ireland, in mid-century England.

More information on Dónall Mac Amhlaigh and his work, can be found in: Margaret Kelleher and Philip O’Leary (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature: Volume II, 1890-2000*, (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 279-280.

For further information in Irish, see www.ainm.ie/Bio.aspx?ID=1558

A note on this diary entry

As these diary entries show, Mac Amhlaigh was especially attentive to questions of language and identity among immigrant communities. As an Irish-speaker, he did not always identify easily with Irish emigrants to England who spoke little, if any, Irish. His observations on native language use amongst immigrants is often based on comparisons with other non-English speaking groups. He was also concerned and exercised by the economic and social barriers that immigrant communities faced in mid-century England, and used his journalism to bring attention to these matters. As we can see from accounts below, he was not uncritical of Irish immigrants, and was especially unsympathetic to those whoaped their superiors unthinkingly.

His observations on the stresses of acculturation, and the pressure on minority groups to assimilate to host culture which appears to barely tolerate them, have abiding relevance in a European and global context.

Language and translation

Mac Amhlaigh’s diary is written in an easy conversational style. It appears to directly address the reader and bring scenes and dialogues alive. As the setting is an English-speaking environment, the translator, Valentin Iremonger, was essentially translating back to English what Mac Amhlaigh had translated from English in the first instance!

Excerpts from *Dialann Deoraí* (Baile Átha Cliath: An Clóchomhar, 1960) are reprinted here with the kind permission of Cló Iar-Chonnacht. Excerpts from *An Irish Navy: The Diary of an Exile* (Cork: The Collins Press (Revised Edition)) are reprinted here with the kind permission of The Collins Press.

Dialann Deoraí

THOSAIGH mé ar maidin ag obair in Aireagal I. B'éigean dom culaith bhán a chaitheamh os cionn mo chuid éadaí féin, agus d'airigh mé cinéal pleidhiciúil san fheisteas céanna. Páistí uilig atá san Aireagal seo, agus tá siad lách múinte, na díthreabhaigh! Bhí banaltra dheas ag obair istigh san aireagal liom. Liotuánach í, ach tá Béarla maith aici. Níl a fhios agam go fóill an dtaitneoidh an áit seo liom, ach ní móide é. Is é díol an diabhal é bheith ag obair le mná.

Cuireadh mé i mbun an 'luascán luaí' (mar a thugadh Peadar Ó Riain air sa Rinn Mhór) agus ba ghearr go raibh an-snas ar an urlár agam. Rinne na mná an oiread iontais díom a bheith chomh maith á oibriú. Is beag a shíl siad gur iomaí lá a chaith mé in éadan an ruda chéanna nuair a bhínn ar C. B. san Arm. Cailíní Éireannacha is mó atá anseo, idir bhanaltraí agus eile, ach ní dream an-Ghaelach iad, an méid díobh a chonaic mise ar chuma ar bith. Céad slán do na cailíní deasa a bhí thiar i gConamara. Ba bheag an mhoill a bheadh ort ag déanamh teanntáis orthu istigh ag ceol nó damhsa; ach maidir leis an dream seo, airím níos coimhthíthí leo ná leis na coimhthígh iad féin.

Scríobh mé litir ghairid abhaile chuig an tseanlady, agus chuaigh mé amach in éindigh le Nioclás Wade as Co. Phort Láirge, lead óg atá ag obair anseo. Chuaigh muid síos sa Royal Oak (tá ainm ar chuile theach ósta anseo, dar ndóigh, gur ól muid cúpla deoch. Scilling is dhá phingin atá ar an mbuidéal Guinness anseo (seacht bpingne sa bhaile) agus tá blas goirt air. Níl caint ar bith ar phionta pórtair anseo, ach ólann na hÉireannaigh piontaí stout and mild, meascán milis a mheasas siad a bheith rud beag cosúil leis an bpionta pórtair.

Tá an t-aer an-fholláin thart anseo.

Níl baol ar bith nach álainn an bhean í siúd, an bhanaltra atá ag obair san áit chéanna liom. Chaith mé píosa mór den lá ag caint léi, ag cur síos ar theangacha is mar seo is mar siúd, agus meas tú nach mar a chéile cuid mhaith focal ina teanga siúd agus sa Ghaeilge.

Tá faitíos orm, ón méid a chonaic mé den áit seo fós, nach bhfuil na cailíní Éireannacha anseo in ann teacht i bhfoisceacht scread asail do na 'coimhthígh' maidir le hiompar, béasa agus mar sin. Tá faisíún gránna acu bheith ag sciotaíl gháirí istigh sa bhialann agus tá na seanráite suaracha sin a bhíos ag na Sasanaigh i mbarr a ngoib acu, leithéid "You've had it mate," agus "Crikey". Tá rud éigin suarach i dtaobh an Éireannaigh a bhíos ag déanamh aithrise ar an Sasanach agus ar dhreamanna eile. Feictear dom féin dá mbeinn sa tír seo go Lá Philip an Chleite nach dtógfainn aon bhlás den chanúint ghránna atá ag muintir na háite seo.

Chuaigh mé síos chuig an bPaidrín agus shiúil mé abhaile go mall réidh ina dhiaidh sin. Díleá ar an áit seo, níl tada ann! Is mó go mór atá i gCill Choinnigh, dá dhonacht é.

Bhí mé fíorbhréan díom féin inniu ar feadh tamaill ag smaoineamh ar an saol a bhíodh againn san Arm thiar ar an Rinn Mhór. Céir chás dá mbeadh pá fiúntach le fáil san áit seo, ach ní mórán le cois ceithre ghine a bheas agam nuair a bhainfear luach na dídine as an bpá. Bhí ceannín beag as Port Láirge á rá liom nach mbeidh le fáil agam an tseachtain seo ach pá dhá lá, go gcoinníonn siad seachtain siar uait i gcónaí go mbí tú ag imeacht.

Chuaigh mé isteach go dtí Oifig an Árachais Náisiúnta tráthnóna ag iarraidh leabhar ciondála, cárta aitheantais agus cárta árachais. Caithfidh na nithe sin uilig a bheith ag chuile dhuine sa tír seo, agus déarfainn gur doiligh duit aon chor a chur díot i nganfhiós do na húdaráis. Bhíodar iontach múinte istigh sna hoifigí, ní hé fearacht a leithéidí thiar in Éirinn, agus scaoileadh amach gan moill ar bith mé. Chaith mé seal ag siúl thart ar an mbaile mór, agus b'éigean dom suntas a thabhairt don mhéid a bhí sna daoine a chonaic mé. Cheap mise riamh gur dream an-bheag iad na Sasanaigh, ach is cosúil go bhfuil siad seo uilig an-ard agus gan a dhath cosúlachta orthu go rabhadar gan a sáith le n-ithe le blianta.

Rud eile nach bhféadfá gan é a thabhairt faoi deara, chomh dea-ghléasta is atá siad le hais na ndaoine thiar sa bhaile. Níor casadh oiread is duine amháin orm a raibh éadaí scagacha air ná bróga caite. Tá an t-éadach agus mórán chuile shórt eile i bhfad níos daoire anseo ná thiar in Éirinn, agus tá mé ag ceapadh gur beag ná gurbh fhiú duit dul siar go hÉirinn uair sa bhliain ag ceannach éadaí. Tháinig an-dúil agam i nglac milseán, ach níor fhéad mé iad a cheannach cheal cúpón. Chuaigh mé isteach i gceann de na stórais mhóra gur ól mé braon tae ann. Chaith mé i bhfad ag smaoineamh ar mo chomrádaithe san Arm: Mac an Bháird, Colm a tSeaimpín, Mac Mhicil Saile, is iad sin uilig. Tá siad uilig sa tír seo anois, dá mbeadh a fhios ag duine cá rachadh sé á n-iarraidh.

Amárach Lá Fhéile Pádraig agus tá an-chaint anseo ar an bhFéile i measc na nÉireannach.

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MAIDIN Dé Domhnaigh b'éigean dom a bheith i mo shuí an-mhoch leis an gcéad Aifreann a fháil, mar go mbeinn ar dualgas go dtí a haon a chlog. Sin é an rud is measa faoin áit seo, go gcaithfidh tú uaireanta briste mar sin a oibriú ann. Bhí mé saor óna haon go dtí a cúig agus chaith mé an tráthnóna ag scríobh litreacha abhaile.

Is measa ná Túr Bhabel an áit seo lena bhfuil de theangacha éagsúla á labhairt ann. Tá Iodáilis, Úcráinis, Gearmáinis agus Liotuáinis le cloisteáil ar chuile thaobh, ach mó léan, níl aon fhocal den Ghaeilge. Caithfidh mé cúpla focal di a mhúineadh don diabhal fiáin sin, Nioclás. Go deimhin níl sé achar ar bith ó d'fhág sé an scoil; mar sin ba cheart nach mbeadh sé ró-dheacair é a chur á labhairt. Ní bheadh sé san áit seo chor ar bith marach go bhfuil a dheirfiúr ina siúr san ospidéal, agus thug sí anall as Éirinn é le nach mbrisfeadh an scaibhtéirín croí a mháthar amach is amach. Tá feirm sa bhaile acu, ach ó cailleadh an t-athair níorbh fhéidir an

buachaill a smachtú chor ar bith. Tá sé le seoladh amach go Nua-Shéalainn chomh luath agus is féidir, agus faraoir nach amárach é.

Staic dhéanta de bhuachaill é agus tá sé chomh láidir le tarbh agus gan é ocht mbliana déag fós. Bímse cráite aige, mar níl aon fhear eile ag obair anseo nach D. P. nó Sasanach é, agus tá gráin ag Nioclás ar chaon dream acu sin. Feictear dó go bhfuil sé thar a bheith dilis d'Éirinn, agus ceapann sé nach bhfuil caoi ar bith is fearr leis an dílseacht sin a chur in iúl ná bheith ag troid leis na Sasanaigh agus na 'coimhthígh'. Tháinig a dheirfiúr ansin ar maidin gur iarr sí orm bheith i mo chomrádaí ag Nioclás, mar gur mheas sí go gcuirfinn ar bhealach a leasa é. Is é is móide go mór go gcuirfidh mé ina shuí ar a thóin ar an urlár é mura dtuga sé beagán suaimhnis dom.

Ach le filleadh ar cheist na dteangacha, is iontach go deo an greim atá ag na coimhthígh seo ar theangacha. Níl dream ar bith acu (cés moite de na hIodáiligh) nach bhfuil in ann ar a laghad ceithre cinn de theangacha a labhairt. Cuirim i gcás, tá a bhfuil de Úcránaigh anseo in ann Gearmáinis, Polainnis, agus beagán Liotuáinise a labhairt, agus is é do na Gearmánaigh agus do na Polannaigh. Maidir le muintir na hIodáile, agus tá suas le leathscór acu anseo, níl acu ach a dteanga féin, ach tá mé ag ceapadh nár chorraigh siad amach as a dtír ar nós na ndaoine eile a luaigh mé. As ceantar Napoli uilig iad ach aon bhean amháin, agus is iontach na ceoltóirí iad. Mhairfidís ag amhránaíocht, agus tá beocht agus brí iontu nach bhfuil in aon dream eile anseo.

An t-aon bhean amháin as an taobh ó thuaidh den Iodáil atá anseo, níl meas madra aici ar na hIodáiligh eile, agus deireann sí go mbíonn siad salach agus leisciúil ag baile. Níl sé sin le rá fúthu anseo ar chuma ar bith, agus is dream aerach suáilceach iad. Mar chailíní aimsire atá siad sin uilig fostaithe anseo, de bharr a laghad Béarla atá acu. Tá riar de na coimhthígh eile ag obair mar ghiollaí otharlainne, nó mar bhanaltraí cúnta, agus is ag na Sasanaigh agus ag na hÉireannaigh atá na poist is airde. Mar shampla, is Sasanach de bhunadh Éireannach an mátrún anseo, is Éireannach í an leas-mhátrún agus is Éireannaigh bordáil ar a leath de na siúrachas.

Bhí luach an damhsa sa Chlub Gaelach (ocht bpingin déag) fanta agam ón lá inné, agus bhuail mé síos ann i bhfoisceacht uair dá dheireadh. Bhí tiomsú ban breá istigh ann, agus cé chasfaí dom ach mo sheanchara, Stiofán ó Tuathail (Stiofán Dáirb) as an Spidéal. Chaith muid leathuair an chloig cinnte ag cur síos ar an Spidéal agus ar na céilithe breátha a bhíodh ann nuair a bhí muid ag tarraingt ann fadó. Bhí beirt éigin ag spochadh as a chéile istigh sa halla i gcaitheamh na hoíche, agus nuair a bhí an damhsa thart d'iarr siad ar an sagart na miotóga a thabhairt dóibh agus bheith mar mholtóir orthu. Nuair a bhí na mná uilig gafa amach dúnadh na doirse agus bhailigh muid uilig thart go bhfeiceadh muid an troid. Chaith siad leathuair an chloig ag sciorradh is ag titim is ag coraíocht le chéile, agus gan aon duine acu ag déanamh a dhath dochair don fhear eile, nó gurbh éigean don sagart iad a chur abhaile i dtigh diabhair as ar deireadh.

“Fighters,” ar seisean agus déistean air, “sure you'd beat them with your cap!”

Ach deir siad liom gurb iomaí troid mhaith chrua a bhíos istigh ansin acu faoi chúram an tsagairt. Séard a chreideas an tAthair Ó Gealbháin gur fearr dóibh cibé aighneas atá eatarthu a shocrú sa Chlub ná bheith ag troid amuigh ar an tsráid, áit a mbeadh siad ag tabhairt drochshampla do na Págánaigh. Tháinig Stiofán píosa den bhealach abhaile liom agus chaith muid i bhfad ag caint sul má scar muid. Bhí iontas air faoi mé bheith ag obair san ospidéal agus thug sé comhairle dom teacht amach as, mar go bhfaighinn a oiread pá ag obair in éindigh leis féin, ag náibhíocht. Brath ar é a dhéanamh, dar m'anam!

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Is beag an dochar dóibh bheith ag íoc an dá phunt coróin anseo, maise. Baintear as do chraiceann go maith é. Dar ndóigh, b'annamh leis an gCorcaíoch aon cheo a scaoileadh uaidh go bog. Ag athlónadh trinse a bhí Maidhc Ned is mé féin i gcaitheamh an lae agus, go deimhin, níor chuir muid aon am amú ag díriú na ndromanna. Tá rúd amháin ar chuma ar bith, níl aon Sasanach i ngar dúinn ach ár muintir féin ar fad. As Ros Muc agus as an gCeathrú Rua formhór mór na leads seo agus níl thar triúr Béarlóirí ina measc, agus is Laitveach duine acu sin. Ba gheall leis na seanlaethanta arís é, nuair a bhí mé sa Chéad Chath, lena raibh de Ghaeilge ar siúl ar chaon taobh dín. Is diabhláí na fir atá ag obair ar an job seo, iad chomh láidir le capaill; ach is cosúil gur leads lácha uilig iad. Tá seanaithe ar chuid acu againn.

Ar an mbóthar mór atá muid faoi láthair, ach téann líne na bpíopaí isteach trí gharraithe is trí fheirmeacha freisin. Ní san áit chéanna a bheifeá ar an obair seo aon dá lá, de réir mar a chuala muid. B'fhéidir go mbeifeá anseo inniu agus amárach go mbeifeá na mílte as seo de réir mar a bheadh fonn ar Pháidín tú a athrú timpeall, nó mar a bheadh gá leis. Ní mórán ar bith adúirt sé inniu linn, ach b'fhacthas dom cúpla uair go raibh sé do mo mheas agus é ag breathnú amach faoi speic a chaipín orm. Féadfaidh sé. Níl mé in ann dul thar mo dhícheall.

Is beag nár thit mé i lagachair ag gáirí faoi sheanphinsire as Corcaigh a bhí ag obair in éindigh linn ag athlónadh an trinse. An diabhal bocht, bhí lúcháir an domhain air faoi bheith in aice le fear a bhí sásta Bearla a labhairt – bhí sé cráite ag an nGaeilge ó tháinig sé ar an job seo. Ba é an fearín ba chaintí dá bhfaca mé riamh é, cés móite de chuid de na boic sin a bhíos de shíor ag cur díobh thíos i Hyde Park. Ach na ráite barrúla a bhí aige! Cér chás é ach bhí sé lán dáiríre faoi gach ar dhúirt sé. Ní raibh tada ag cur as dó ach an méid Éireannach a bhí ag cailleadh a gcreidimh sa tír seo. Bhí iníon a dheirféar féin nach raibh ag dul ar aon bhealach fóna thíos i Londain, má b'fhíor dó:

“Yerra boy I calls on her there lately to remind her of her obligations and she only laughed at me. Coming out of the bat, she was. ‘There you stand’, sez I, ‘with your hair half wet, washin’ and battin’ away from the rites of the Church’”. Níl a fhios agam ar cheap sé go raibh dlúthcheangal éigin idir glaine coirp agus tréigean creidimh!

Bhí an chaint ag teacht ina rabhartaí uaidh ar feadh an lae uilig, agus ba bheag an mhoill a bhí ar Pháidín an Táilliúra a thabhairt faoi deara go mbíodh sé ag coinneáil na bhfear díomhaoín. Tá faitíos orm gur gearr an réim a bheas ag an bhfear bocht anseo. Faoi dheireadh dhíbir Páidín an bheirt againn síos an pháirc, i bhfad ón gcuid eile. Bhí ár sáith le déanamh thíos ansin againn, ag doimhniú trinse, ach ní shásódh an diabhal mo dhuine ach bheith ina luí anuas ar chois na sluaiste agus é ag síorchaint ar chuile rud beo.

“Wot do you tink of the English, boy?” ar seisean. Dúirt mé féin nach bhféadfainn ceist den sórt sin a fhreagairt de léim, ach níor thug sé cead dom dul níos doimhne sa scéal.

“Tyrants an' robbers, that's wot they are, boy. Look at wot Cromwell did back yonder, 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 to-day working for John Bull”.

Bhraith mé a rá leis go mba fánach an beart é bheith ag cur an mhilleáin faoi dhrochstaid na hÉireann inniu ar rudaí a tharla breis agus trí chéad bliain ó shin, ach scaoil mé leis é mar scéal. Nuair a tháinig an leoraí tráthnóna le muid a thabhairt abhaile, b'shiúd amach Páidín gur thomhais sé an méid a bhí déanta againn. Tá faitíos orm nach mbeidh muid in éindigh le chéile amárach.

Bhuail Maidhc Ned is mé féin chuig an bpictiúr san oíche.

“Diabhail a raibh caill ar bith ar an bpictiúr sin”, arsa Maidhc ag teacht amach dúinn agus é ag cuimilt a bhosa ar a chéile. Cén bhrí ach bhí sé ina chodladh ó chuaigh sé isteach ann!

Bhí muid in amhras ar maidin faoi céard ab fhearr dúinn a dhéanamh, fanacht istigh nó dul amach chuig an obair, óir bhí sé ag gleáradh báistí agus gan aon chosúlacht ligean suas air. Chuaigh muid isteach sa bhaigín sa deireadh (tá an obair breis agus dhá mhíle dhéag amach ón mbaile mór), ach bhí bail an diabhail istigh ansin orainn ag braon anuas. Bhí Réamonn Ó Súileabháin ag déanamh spraoi dúinn mar dhea go mba bhádóirí muid ar an bhfarraige lá stoirme, chaon “Fan a'd a dhiabhail, fan a'd adeirim” aige, agus téarmaí eile a bhíos ag bádóirí Chonamara nach eol domsa tada fúthu. Nuair a shroich muid ceann scríbe bhí Páidín romhainn agus m'fhocal duit nach aon chuma fhónta a bhí air.

“Diabhal a raibh mórán graithe agaibh amach ar maidin, a leads”, ar seisean. Dúirt duine éigin go mb'fhéidir go nglanfadh sé suas ar ball.

“Bhuel, déanaigí bhur rogha rud,” ar seisean ansin, “ach má thosaíonn sibh caithfidh sibh é shtickeáil amach go tráthnóna, cuma céard a dhéanfas an aimsir”.

Bhí muid idir dhá comhairle ansin. Níor mhaith le fear ar bith againn go bhfliuchfaí é, ach san am céanna bhí drogall orainn pá an lae a chailleadh (níl am fliuch ar bith ar an job seo). Shocraigh muid tabhairt faoi sa

deireadh, agus b'shiúd linn ag baint is ag cartadh is ag réiteach áit do pháip. Nuair a tháinig am bricfeasta ní raibh oiread is snáth tirim ar aon duine againn agus bhí muid cantalach dá réir.

Is é an chaoi a dtéann muid isteach go baile Towcester faoi choinne an tae ar an job seo, mar go bhfuil na leads chomh scaipthe timpeall gurb é sin an socrú is feiliúnaí dúinn. Ní túisce a bhí an tae ólta againn agus muid ag aireachtáil roinnt sibhialta ná nearthaigh ar an mbáisteach arís. Ba ghearr gur tháinig Páidin dár n-iarraidh amach, ach bhí sé fánach aige an babhta seo mar nach gcorródh aon fhear amach as. D'fhág sin sách corraithe é, nach nuair a d'iarr mórán chuile fhear againn sub air bhí sé oibrithe ceart. Fuair muid uaidh é ar chuma ar bith, an méid againn a bhí á iarraidh, agus ó bhí sé a deich bailithe an tráth sin chuaigh muid amach as an gcaife agus isteach sa teach ósta, lán an tí againn.

Bhí na Súileabhánaigh, na Griallaiseacha, Colm an Táilliúra, Pádraig Breathnach, Maidhc Ned is mé féin ann, agus mura raibh 'time' againn ní lá go maidin é. Nuair a tháinig am dúnadh rug muid linn leathdhoas buidéal an duine agus bhuaile muid suas tigh Mháirtín Uí Chonaire. Cliamhain do Chlainn Sheáin é Máirtín agus bhí an-fháilte ag a bhean, Máire, romhainn. Bhain mé féin an-taitneamh as an gcuid sin den lá – lán an tí againn is gan focal Béarla á labhairt ag aon fhear ach Gaeilge bhinn Chonamara. Tháinig cumha orm nuair amháin nuair a smaoinigh mé ar na laethanta a bhíodh fadó againn thiar i nGaillimh. Dúradh an-chuid amhrán: 'Fill, a Ruain Ó', 'Nach é mo léan géar gan mé i mo lachóigín bhán', 'Rise up, gallant Sweeney', agus níl a fhios agam cé mhéad eile, agus nuair a tháinig Barney tráthnóna leis an bhaigín le muid a thabhairt abhaile bhí obair mhór air dár mealladh amach as tigh Mháirtín.

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THOSAIGH Tomás Ó hOibicín anseo ar maidin agus ba mhór ab fhiú dom a leithéid a bheith ag obair liom. Bhí muid thuas in uachtar ag deisiú agus ag líonadh poill i mballa an túir agus níor fhéad muid féin a théamh leis an obair sin, ach choinnigh Tomás an t-anam ionamsa lena raibh de ráite barrúla aige agus scéalta faoi na daoine thiar i gCor na Móna.

Bhí leadín Bhaile Átha Cliath ag obair thíos fúinn ar an scafall, agus faoi cheann scaithimh thosaigh sé ag tabhairt suntais do Thomás agus mise a bheith ag labhairt Gaeilge.

“Are yous two speakin' Irish?” ar seisean agus iontas air. Dúirt muid go raibh. Ansin:

“Listen lads,” arsa mo dhuine, “there's a couple of foreigners up here jabberin' away in some strange lingo.”

Bhí brath ag Tomás léim anuas mar a raibh an boc agus tosú ag gabháil air, ach dúirt mé leis gan bacadh leis. Ní bheadh ann ach cur amú aimsire, mar ní fhéadfá tada a dhéanamh lena leithéid sin. Bhaist Reg Manley Chang agus Wong ar an mbeirt againn in am dinnéir, ach ní raibh aon dochar ansin, ach spraoi.

Chuaigh muid ag concreidiú tar éis an dinnéir agus is gearr an mhoill a bhí orainn ag éirí te.

Sheas mé scaitheamh, tráthnóna inniu, ar uachtar an túir uisce agus mé ag breathnú ar an spéir dhearg san iarthar. Go tobann bhuail taom uaignis mé i ndiaidh an bhaile. Smaoinigh mé ar Ghaillimh agus ar Loch Coirib tráthnóna samhraidh, agus ar chomh deas fionnuar is a bhíodh sé faoi scáth an tseanchaisleáin i Mionloch. Shamhlaigh mé ansin Bóthar na Trá lá breá gréine, agus b'fhacthas dom gur chuala mé gleo na bpáistí ag súgradh sa ghaineamh agus an torann caointeach a bhíos ag bus Chonamara ag dul siar is í luchtaithe le daoine. Bhí sé mar thiocthadh mearbhall orm, mé i mo sheasamh ansin is gan aird agam ar thada i mo thimpeall ach ag smaoineamh siar. Nuair a ghlaigh Tomás orm faoi dheireadh, á rá liom go raibh sé in am dúinn críochnú, bhí mé chomh bréan de mo shaol is a d'fhéadfadh aon fhear a bheith.

Chuaigh mé chuig an bpictiúr sa Choliseum, agus bhí sé do mo mharú nuair nár fhéad mé dul amach in éindigh leis na leads ag ól; ach b'éigean dom aire a thabhairt do na pingíní. Bhí an phictiúrlann lán de ghasúir, iad ag rith timpeall is ag déanamh gleo is ag súgradh le chéile i gcaitheamh an ama nó gurbh éigean dom éirí as bheith ag iarraidh aon mheabhair a bhaint as an rud a bhí ar bun. Na créatúir, tá a gcuid pléisiúir ag brath ar phá a dtuismitheoirí agus ní bhíonn acu ach an deireadh seachtaine.

Is iontach chomh faillíoch is a bhíos tuismitheoirí ina gclann anseo i Sasana. Nuair a thagas na páistí ón scoil is iondúil nach mbíonn aon duine rompu sa bhaile mar gheall ar go bhfuil an t-athair is an mháthair amuigh ag obair. Bíonn ar na créatúir ruainne le n-ithe a fháil dóibh féin ansin go dtaga an mháthair abhaile. Cén bhrí, ach níl gá ar bith leis an obair seo, marach go santaíonn na daoine rudaí nach bhfuil call ar bith leo, boscaí teilifíse, troscán 'comhaimseartha' agus a leithéidí, gan trácht ar an méid a chaitheas siad sa teach ósta.

Tá a shliocht ar na gasúir freisin, mar tá muiríneacha an lucht oibre go minic gan múineadh gan smachtú, ag rith thart go brocach neamh-chíortha. Marach na béilí maithe a thugtar dóibh sna scoileanna is dona a bheidís beathaithe, tá mé ag ceapadh. Loch an-mhór é seo a mhilleas tír mhaith. Séard is ciontach leis, sílim, nach bhfuil na daoine oilte ná cleachta ar an rachmas seo atá acu faoi láthair, agus tá siad ag imeacht craiceáilte le saint agus dúil.

Chuaigh mé ag ól braon tae sa chaife ar mo bhealach abhaile dom. Nuair a bhí mé ag dul isteach sa teach d'airigh mé na leads uilig istigh sa seomra suí agus iad ag baint an-scléip amach dóibh féin tar éis bheith thíos sa teach ósta; ach d'éalaigh mé suas i nganfios dóibh, mar b'fhearr liom an diabhal ná bheith san áit a bhfuil fir bogtha is mé féin ar mo chéill.



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VALENTIN IREMONGER

An Irish Navy: The Diary of an Exile



Translated from
Dialann Deoraí
by Dónall Mac Amhlaigh

An Irish Navvy: The Diary of an Exile

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.

6

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. There 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!

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 drowned 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.

11

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.

13

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.