

Galway 2020 Gaillimh European Capital of Culture
CULTURAL PARTNER

Aistriú

LIAM MAC UISTÍN

Esperanza



Liam Mac Uistín
1938-2018

Life and Literary Status

Liam Mac Uistín was a native of Dublin. He wrote in both Irish and English. A playwright and novelist, he also translated Irish legends and arranged them for young readers. His novel *Esperanza* (1994) was awarded an Oireachtas Literary Prize.

For further information, in Irish and English, see <https://portraidi.ie/en/liam-mac-uistin/>

A note on the excerpt from the novel

Published at the time of the centenary commemoration of the Great Famine in Ireland (1845-1849), this novel contains chilling accounts of famine refugees who travelled on 'coffin ships' to America in the mid-nineteenth century. Although a fictional account, it is true to the reality of the time; as emigrants, mostly Irish speakers, undertook an arduous sea journey across the Atlantic ocean in conditions which were not as promised; ships were often dangerously overcrowded and disease-ridden, food was deplorable, and emigrants were at the mercy of sea captains and crews who often abused their positions of power. The frightening parallels with refugees crossing the Mediterranean sea in unseaworthy boats does not need to be laboured.

Language and translation

This language of the text is standardised Irish and, although set in the mid-nineteenth century, there is nothing archaic about the language used. The style is journalistic and unsentimental. *Esperanza* has not been translated to English. For the purposes of this project, a literal English language translation has been made to assist translators.

The excerpt below is taken from the novel *Esperanza*, published in 1994 (Baile Átha Cliath: An Clóchomhar). This work is republished here with the kind permission of Cló Iar-Chonnacht.

Esperanza

Cuid II, Mír 5

Tháinig an chéad stoirm anuas orthu an oíche sin. Thosaigh an soitheach ag damhsa go fiáin ar an bhfarraige choipthe. Tháinig screadach ón ngaoth ar nós anamacha damanta á gcéasadh.

Thíos sa stíris ní fhéadfaí an fharraige fhraochta a fheiceáil ach samhlaíodh do na daoine sa dorchacht go raibh deireadh an domhain ag druidim leo. Le hoibriú na mara caitheadh cúpla clann iomlán amach as a leapacha. Bhual siad ceann ar aghaidh le paisinéirí ar an taobh eile den stíris. Ansin teilgeadh ar ais iad in aghaidh na landairí adhmaid. Brúdh go dona iad agus ba bheag nár fáisceadh an t-anam as na leanaí óga.

Chuir na paisinéirí liúrachá arda uafáis astu le gach rolladh obann a thug an long. Thosaigh uisce mara ag rith anuas ón deic os a gcionn. Fliuchadh na tochtanna tríd is tríd agus fágadh daoine go murnáin san uisce. Shleamhnaigh potaí is crúiscíní, gréithe is prócaí timpeall na stírise; briseadh buidéal is miasa ina smidiríní.

Bhí an soitheach ar crith ón bhun go barr sa chaoi go raibh lucht na stírise cinnte go raibh sé ar tí briseadh agus go slogfaí gach a raibh ann i ndoimhneacht na farraige.

D'ordaigh an Captaen Burton dá chriú an haiste a leagan anuas ar an mbealach síos chun na stírise. Mhéadaigh ar uamhan na bpaisinéirí thíos nuair a fuairadar amach go raibh siad i ngéibheann ina ndoinsíun gruama. Ní raibh aon bhia te acu ach bhí a gcuid fíoruisce truaillithe ag an sáile. Níor fhéad aon duine dul amach anois chuig an dá leithreas thuas. Bhíodar ar nós ainmhithe faoi ghlas i gcás.

Tar éis tamaill nuair a mhaolaigh an stoirm beagáinín thosaigh siad ar an dochar a bhí déanta a áireamh. Bhí a lán acu brúite agus gonta. Bhí potaí is pannaí is bia scaipthe i ngach áit mar aon le héadaí, bróga, is blaincéid. I gcúinne amháin bhí bean le huillinn bhriste. I gcúinne eile bhí leanbh le heasnacha basctha.

Rinne cúpla duine iarracht ar fhaoiseamh a thabhairt dóibhsean a bhí gortaithe. Chuaigh a bhformhór eile i mbun a ngiúirléidí a bhailiú is a chur ar ais ina n-áiteanna. Dheifriugh duine i ndiaidh duine chuig an haiste le dul suas go dtí an leithreas. In ainneoin a scairteanna níor osclaíodh an haiste. D'fhan sé dúnta ar feadh dhá lá go dtí go raibh an stoirm thart agus an fharraige suaimhnicthe.

Bhí lucht na stírise i gcruachás in éagmais na leithreas uisce. Réitigh na daoine óga agus na leanaí an fhadhb dóibh féin. Nuair a ghlaoigh an nádúr orthusan rinne siad a gcuid gnó ar an láthair ab oiriúnaí dóibh. Tar éis tamaill bhí ar an gcuid eile a ngnó a dhéanamh chomh maith i gcibé áit ina raibh sé inrásta. De ghrá na modhúlachta d'éalaigh cuid de na cailíní síos go dtí an deic íochtair ina raibh an lasta. Seithí a bhí á n-iompar ag an long an turas seo. Bhí boladh géar gránna astu.

‘An dtiocfaidh tú liom?’ arsa Áine de Paor i gcogar le Máire. ‘Tá eagla orm bheith i m’áonar sa dorchacht thíos. Tá an áit dubh le francaigh.’

Thóg Máire a lámh agus d’éalaigh siad síos. Chuardaigh siad áit i lár an lasta nár baineadh úsáid as cheana. Rinne siad oiread fothraim is a d’fhéadfaidís chun na francaigh a scanrú chun siúil.

‘Is trua nár éisteamar leis an mangaire úd a bhí ag díol na bpotáí seomra ar an gcé,’ arsa Máire. ‘Ní bheimis sa chruachás seo dá nglacfaimis a comhairle.’

‘Bheadh sé deacair iad a choinneáil glán.’

‘Ní bheadh, muis. Ní gá ach sreang tuartha a cheangal de lámh an phota agus é a thumadh sa bhfarraige.’

‘Ní thig liom an bréantas uafásach seo a sheasamh.’ Chuir Áine a méara timpeall a pollairí.

‘Tá sé níos measa ná seamlas.’

‘Is gearr go mbeidh an áit thuas chomh dona leis. Tá fúíoll na n-óg is na sean ag carnadh suas in aghaidh an lae. Ba cheart don chriú an brocamas go léir a ghlanadh amach.’

‘Mura n-osclóidh siad an haiste sin go luath beimid go léir plúchta.’

‘Ní osclóidh siad é go dtí go n-oirfidh sé dóibh. Is cuma sa diabhal leo cad a tharlaíonn do lucht na stírise.’

(Leathanaigh 28-30)

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SÉAMUS Ó COILEÁIN

On Board the Esperanza



Translated from
Esperanza
by Liam Mac Uistín

On Board the Esperanza

Part II, Section 5

The first storm hit them that night. The ship began to dance wildly on the choppy sea. The wind howled like damned souls being tortured.

The wild sea couldn't be seen from the ship's steerage but those down there in the darkness imagined that the end of the world was near. The violent waves threw a few families from their beds. They crashed into passengers from the other side of the steerage. They were then thrown against the wooden partitions. They were battered and bruised and life itself was almost squeezed out of the younger children.

The passengers wailed in terror with each sudden roll of the ship. Sea water started running down from the deck above. Mattresses were soaked and the water rose to above their ankles. Pots and jugs, earthenware and jars were sliding about the steerage; bottles and dishes were smashed to pieces.

The vessel was shaking from top to bottom and those in the steerage were certain that it was about to break apart and that they would all be swallowed up by the depths of the ocean.

Captain Burton ordered his crew to close hatch down to the steerage. Those below became more terrified when they discovered that they were trapped in their gloomy dungeon. They had no hot food and their drinking water was contaminated by seawater. Now no one could go up to the two toilets above. They were like animals locked in a cage.

After a while, when the storm abated slightly, they began to assess the damage. Many of them were bruised and injured. Pots and pans and food were strewn everywhere, as well as clothes, shoes, and blankets. There was a woman with a broken elbow in one corner. In another corner was a baby with bruised ribs.

Some people tried to give help to those who were injured. Most of the others began to collect items and put them back where they belonged. They hurried, one after another, to the hatch to go up to the toilet. Despite their calls, the hatch didn't open. It remained closed for two days until the storm had gone and the sea was calm again.

Those in the steerage were in dire straits without the use of the toilets. The young people and the children had their own solution. When nature called they did their business wherever it best suited them. After a while, the others had to do their business where they determined most suitable. For modesty's sake, some of the girls snuck down to the lower cargo deck. The ship was carrying animal hides on this occasion. They gave off an awful, sour smell.

'Will you come with me?' whispered Áine de Paor to Máire. 'I'm afraid of being alone in the darkness below. The place is full of rats.'

Máire took her hand and they slipped away down. They searched the centre of the cargo that had not been used already. They made as much noise as possible to scare away the rats.

'We should have listened to the hawker who was selling chamber pots on the pier,' said Máire. 'We would not be in this predicament had we taken his advice.'

'It would be hard to keep them clean.'

'It wouldn't, then. You'd only have to tie a bleached cord to the handle and dunk it in the sea.'

'This filth is disgusting! I can't stand it.' Áine squeezed her nose with her fingers.

'It's worse than a slaughterhouse.'

'The place above will be as bad before long. Old and young people's waste is piling up by the day. The crew should clean out all the waste.'

'If they don't open that hatch soon we'll all be smothered.'

'They won't open it until it suits themselves. They don't care what happens to those in steerage.'

(Pages 28-30)