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In Memoriam: BREANDÁN Ó CONAIRE, comhghleacaí agus scoláire

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In memory of BREANDÁN Ó CONAIRE.

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B'é *Myles na Gaeilge* (1986) le Breandán Ó Conaire an chéad leabhar lánchuimsitheach a thaighdigh buntíobraid *An Béal Bocht* (1941). Is cuma nó leabhar bleachtairreachta leabhar Bhreandáin sa tslí is go léiríonn sé dúinn thar amhras anonn an gaol atá aige leis an litríocht sin, go háirithe leis na dírbheathaisnéisí Gaeltachta a bhí i mbéal an phobail sna 1920í agus sna 1930í. Bhí éileamh as cuimse ar na leabhair sin toisc gurbh iad guth na Gaeltachta iad nár nochtadh riamh cheana agus go raibh tobar fíorghlan Gaeilge iontu go léir chomh maith. Go dtí sin ba dhócha gurbh ábhar magaidh iad muintir na Gaeltachta agus lucht na tuaithe seachas a mhalairt. Más thar fóir a chuaigh an t-ardmheas a bhí ar na saothair seo, go háirithe ó dhaoine nach leomhfadh a mbeatha a chaitheamh ar oileán mara faoi ghaoth is faoi ghailfean, níor chúrsaí iontais é go gcuirfí ina choinne. Ach fág gurb aoir atá in *An Béal Bocht* gan aon cheist, is de shuimiúlacht gur le barr ómóis do na leabhair sin agus don teanga inar scríobhadh iad a cumadh an chéad uair é.

Is minic dearmad nó beag is fiú á dhéanamh, nó neamhaird á thabhairt gur chainteoir dúchais Gaeilge ba ea é, agus gurbh é Brian Ó Nualláin a ainm dúchais agus baiste. Shocraigh a thuismitheoirí go dtógfaí an teaghlach le Gaeilge, óir bhain siad leis an nglúin sin ina raibh an athbheochan chultúir in airde láin. Fág nárbh as an nGaeltacht thraidisiúnta dó, mar a thuigtear an téarma sin anois, ba chuma nó Gaeltacht an teaghlach ar fad, agus de thoradh na leabhair go léir a tugadh dóibh le léamh as a n-óige ba dhaingne agus ba dhomhaine a ngreim ar dhúchas na teanga ná mar a bhí ag go leor a tógadh i nGaeltacht ar bith. Tá's againn nár labhair Brian Béarla ar bith lena athair go dtí go raibh sé tuairim is seacht mbliana d'aois, agus nuair a dhein sé sin is amhlaidh gur bhain an cineál Béarla seanfhaiseanta aníos as leabhair a labhair sé rámsach gáire as a athair. Tugadh oideachas baile don teaghlach ar fad ar eagla go dtruaillíodh an t-oideachas oifigiúil a gcuid foghlama. Dá bharr seo, léitheoir craosach ba ea Brian agus bhí leabhair gan teorainn léite aige faoin am ar fhreastail sé ar scoil. Léitheoireacht fhairsing gan stiúir, gan treo, gan léarscáil ba ea í a dheimhnigh go raibh sé dea-eolach ní hamháin ar fharraigí leathana an Bhéarla ach fairis sin ar leathantas agus ar dhoimhneacht litríocht na Gaeilge. B'as an gcaidreamh sin le litríocht na Gaeilge idir shean, nua agus chomhaimseartha a d'fhás *An Béal Bocht*.

Rianaíonn Ó Conaire eachtraí an leabhair siar go dtí a nead agus a leaba sa litríocht, agus fairis sin, léiríonn go beacht cad ba inspioráid le habairtí agus le frásaí faoi leith. Tugtar 'Lámhleabhar' air, agus is leithne go mór is go fada ná sin é. Tá innéacs cuimsitheach ann dá scríbhinní iomadúla sa Ghaeilge, fara an 446 colún san *Irish Times* a raibh an *Crúiscín Lán* mar theideal aige air sular déanadh colún Béarla as.

Staidéar mionchúrsach ó scoláire oilte mionchúrsach féin. Is dá bharr a glacadh leis *An Béal Bocht* mar leabhar dáiríre a raibh a chuid fréamhacha go daingean in ithir na litríochta seachas mar phíosa grinn, mar mhagadh, mar aoir, mar áilteoireacht amháin. Mhúscaíl sé arís eile suim na scoláirí Gaeilge i mbeatha agus i saothar Bhriain Uí Nualláin, agus bíodh a theist ar sin sraith de Léachtaí Cholm Cille in Ollscoil Mhá Nuad sa bhliain 2018 agus sárleabhar cuimsitheach Bhriain Uí Chonchubhair *An Saol Bocht: Brian Ó Nualláin agus Flann O'Brien* a foilsíodh i mbliana.

Ach b'fhairsinge agus ba leithne mar scoláire é Breandán Ó Conaire thairis seo amháin. Ní nach ionadh, dhein sé sáróbair ar Thomás Ó Criomhthain, údar *An tOileánach*, a bhfuil oiread sin den *Bhéal Bocht* bunaithe air. B'é an leabhar sin ab ansa ar fad le Flann O'Brien é féin. San *Irish Times* agus é ina Mhyles na gCopaleen ar ais scríobh sé: 'I read contemporary literature in five languages, thanks to the Christian Brothers and an odd hiding now and again. That book, *An tOileánach*, is the superbest of all books I have ever read.'¹

Fairis sin, chuir sé eagar ar chnuasach aistí le scoláirí mórcháile dar teideal *Tomás an Bhlascaoid* (1992), agus b'é féin a scríobh ocht gcinn den cheithre aiste is fiche atá ann. Is cóir a rá san aiste a scríobh John McGahern ar *An tOileánach* sa leabhar céanna go ndearbhaíonn sé a ardmheas féin ar an leabhar: 'Déarfainn féin go luíonn an t-oileán níos gaire d'Ard Olympus ná don bhflaitheas Rómhánach úd a mbíodh muid ag guí dó le linn ár n-óige.'² Chuir Breandán eagar chomh maith ar aistí éagsúla Thomáis, agus go fiú nuair a bhí sé ina mhac léinn d'fhoilsigh sé sleachta as *An tOileánach* nach raibh ar fáil an t-am sin sa chéad eagrán. B'é an chéad nochtadh é go raibh míreanna ar lár sa leabhar sin.

Bhí an dúspéis, leis, aige i gcéad Uachtarán na hÉireann, Dubhghlas de hÍde a raibh cáil air roimhe sin mar dhuine de bhunaitheoirí Chonradh na Gaeilge agus mar scoláire aitheanta é féin. Nuair a d'fhoilsigh sé a chuid aistí ar ábhar an teidil *Language, Lore and Lyrics* (1986) mhúscaíl sé suim athuair sa mhéid a dúirt de hÍde é féin go dílis. Bhunaigh sé Comhdháil an Chraoibhín chomh maith, scoil shamhraidh mar ómós dó agus dhein sé eagarthóireacht ar imeachtaí léannta na scoile sin ar feadh dhá bhliain déag. Bhain ceann de na foilseacháin sin go ró-áirithe le tubaist mhór na hÉireann san 19ú haois mar *The Famine Lectures/Léachtaí an Ghorta* (2001), leabhar ina raibh aistí sa Ghaeilge agus sa Bhéarla a chuirfeadh gliondar ar chroí de hÍde agus Bhriain Uí Nualláin araon.

¹ Tá seo le fáil sa leabhar a chuir sé in eagar *Tomás an Bhlascaoid*, Breandán Ó Conaire (eag) (Cló Iar-Connachta 1992). Tá mar fhorlíonadh dhá leathanach ar an taobh istigh den chlúdach ina bhfuil tuairimí na léirmheastóirí greamaithe.

² An leabhar céanna, aiste le McGahern 'An tOileánach/The Islandman,' 311.

Foilsíodh a chuid léinn agus taighde féin go fada is go fairsing in irisleabhair scolártha ar nós *Studia Hibernica*, *The Irish University Review*, *Irish Economic and Social History*, agus *The Dictionary of Irish Biography*.

Bíodh is nach mbaineann sé le branar ceart an tráchta seo, tá sé fíorthábhachtach a rá gur chaith sé dua gan staonadh lasmuigh dá shaol acadúil ar chur chun cinn agus ar riaradh na dornálaíochta. Toghadh faoi dhó é mar uachtarán ar Chumann Dornálaíochta Lúthchleas na hÉireann agus bronnadh gradam Dámhachtain na Laoch de chuid an chumainn air mar thoradh ar a dhíocas agus a shaothar. Shiúil sé an domhan mór ar son dornálaíocht na tíre, agus toisc gurb í an dornálaíocht an spórt is éirithí ar fad atá againn sna Cluichí Oilimpeacha caithfear a rá go raibh páirt shuntasach gan iomrá aige sna gaiscí sin.

Bhí Breandán ina chomhghleacaí liom ar feadh scór agus dhá bhliain déag i gColáiste Phádraig, Ollscoil na hÉireann agus Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath ina dhiaidh sin. Ba mhór an taca dom é i rith na mblianta sin, agus ba mhór agam a chomhairle, a thuiscint, a dheamhén agus a chogar ciúin im chluais nuair ba mhó a raibh mé ina ghá. Airím uaim é go dóite.

Breandán Ó Conaire's *Myles na Gaeilge* (1986) was the first full-length study of the Irish roots of *An Béal Bocht* (1941). It is a detective story of how *An Béal Bocht* relates to Irish literature, particularly the many Gaeltacht autobiographies which were popular in the 1920s and 1930s. They were popular because they were the first authentic statement by generations of people whose language and knowledge had been ignored except as fodder for stage Irishry and Paddywhackery or for the curious eye of the baffled anthropologist. As the esteem for these autobiographies became overwhelming, especially among people who would never live on a windy, rain-soaked island on a diet of turnips and thin gruel, it was not surprising that somebody would balk and write a parody. But the interesting thing about *An Béal Bocht* is that, while it certainly is a satire, it is also a homage to those books, written largely out of love for them and their language.

Brian O'Nolan's parents, being part of that generation full of hope for a new Ireland, raised him and his siblings as Irish speakers. While not living in the Gaeltacht, the family themselves were a kind of Gaeltacht in miniature, and through the books that they read, the O'Nolan children would have been more conversant with Irish literature than many children raised in such an area. We know that Brian didn't speak English to his father until he was about seven years of age, and when he did it was in a stream of Victorian book-English which made his father burst into laughter. Brian and his

siblings were all initially educated privately, not allowing the state school system the opportunity to corrupt their learning. As a result of this we know that Brian was extraordinarily well-read by the time that he had to attend school. It was out of his acquaintance with ancient, modern, and contemporary Irish literature that *An Béal Bocht* (1941) was pupped and born.

Ó Conaire was sensitive to these facts, and not only traces many of the events in the novel back to passages, happenings, and characters in the literature, but he also traces and tracks down individual phrases and particular words to their precise lairs and hiding places. *Myles na Gaeilge* is described as a 'handbook,' but it is much more than that. It contains an important index of all Ó Nualláin's prodigious writings in Irish, including 446 columns of the *Crúiscín Lán* column in *The Irish Times*, which he wrote in his native language before turning to English.

Myles na Gaeilge is a meticulous study by a meticulous scholar that established *An Béal Bocht* not just as a piece of easy hilarity, but as a serious book which took a great deal of modern Irish literature as its source. It also resuscitated the interest of Irish language scholars in Brian O'Nolan, which has seen a Léachtaí Cholm Cille series of lectures in Maynooth University in 2018 dedicated to him and his family, and Brian Ó Conchubhair's marvellous *An Saol Bocht: Brian Ó Nualláin agus Flann O'Brien* published this year.

But Breandán Ó Conaire was also much more than a Brian O'Nolan scholar. Not surprisingly, he did a lot of work on Tomás Ó Criomhthain, author of *An tOileánach* (1929; *The Islandman* or *The Islander*), the main book on which *An Béal Bocht* was based and which was one of Brian O'Nolan's favourite books. Writing in *The Irish Times* as Myles na Gopaleen, he said, 'I read contemporary literature in five languages, thanks to the Christian Brothers and an odd hiding now and again. That book, *An tOileánach*, is the superbest of all books I have ever read.'³

Ó Conaire edited a collection of essays on Ó Criomhthain entitled *Tomás an Bhlascaoid* (1992). He brought together notable scholars, and out of the twenty-four chapters in the book contributed eight himself. One of those scholars in the collection was John McGahern, who also held *An tOileánach* in the highest regard, writing that 'I would say that that island lies closer to the Heights of Olympus than to the Roman heaven which we used to pray to in our youth.'⁴ Breandán's scholarly work included editing a collection of Ó Criomhthain's own journalism, and as a student he used

³ Myles na Gopaleen, *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *The Irish Times*, 3 January 1957, 6, quoted in Breandán Ó Conaire, *Tomás an Bhlascaoid* (Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 1992), inside title page.

⁴ John McGahern, 'An tOileánach/The Islandman,' in *Tomás an Bhlascaoid*, ed. Breandán Ó Conaire (Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 1992), 311 (my translation).

a journal he had founded himself to make previously unpublished selections of *An tOileánach* available to the public. This was one of the first demonstrations that the published book had left significant sections untold.

Ó Conaire also had a passionate interest in the first president of Ireland, Douglas Hyde, who was one of the founders of Conradh na Gaeilge/The Gaelic League and a great scholar himself. Ó Conaire's collection of Hyde's essays, *Language, Lore and Lyrics* (1986), was one of the first to begin to re-assess what that scholar and revolutionary thinker had actually said. He also set up Comhdháil an Chraoibhín, a summer school in honour of Douglas Hyde, and edited its learned proceedings for twelve years. One of these publications was dedicated to the famine that decimated Irish society in the nineteenth century, *The Famine Lectures/Léachtaí an Ghorta* (2001), and contained talks both in English and in Irish which both Hyde and Brian O'Nolan would have appreciated.

Ó Conaire's knowledge appeared far and wide in learned journals and publications including *Studia Hibernica*, *The Irish University Review*, *Irish Economic and Social History*, and *The Dictionary of Irish Biography*.

Although it is not the immediate concern of this appreciation, it is very important to say that Ó Conaire spent a great deal of his non-academic life in the promotion and administration of Irish boxing. He was elected president of The Irish Athletic Boxing Association on two occasions and was inducted into their Hall of Fame because of his dedication to the sport. He represented Irish boxing all over the world and, given that boxing has been the most successful Irish Olympic sport of all time, including in our own era, it deserves to be said that he played a great and often unhailed part in this success.

Breandán was a colleague of mine for thirty-two years in St Patrick's College, Dublin, initially a college of NUI and latterly of DCU. He was the most genial, pleasant, and considerate of colleagues, a prodigious worker and diligent lecturer. Unlike others, he never involved himself in the frequent pettiness of academic life and had a wise word for me and for others when we most needed it. He was a rock of great sense which I always appreciated and a fount of knowledge and advice when it was needed. I miss him terribly.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

