

Lost in Flannslation

Reading & Translating the Early Work of Brian Ó Nualláin

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I am not a fluent *Gaeilgeoir* by any stretch of the imagination; I read and write it better than I speak it, and I very rarely find myself using it in my everyday life. More or less by accident, however, most of the Flann-related work I have been doing over the past year-and-a-bit has been focused on his early Irish-language work – stuff that was printed in a non-Roman alphabet, at a time when there was no consensus about how Irish words should be spelled. To put it mildly, this was not an area that I would naturally be drawn to.

It started with a paper I gave at the 100 Myles conference in Vienna. My own area of interest is science fiction, fantasy and horror, and after reading '*Díoghaltas Ar Ghallaibh 'sa Bhliadhain 2032!*' [Revenge on the English in the Year 2032!], I was convinced that Brian Ó Nualláin (to give the name under which he published most of the stories I ended up working on), who was 21 years old at the time it was published in *The Irish Press*, had read at least some 'pulp' science fiction from America.¹ The paper was sufficiently strange for people to become interested in other Flannish work from *The Irish Press*, and since I happened to have easy access to it, Keith Hopper and Neil Murphy asked me to have a go at translating them with a view to including them in an anthology of his early short work.

It was a daunting prospect at first, but if translating this stuff has taught me anything, it's that you shouldn't dismiss an approach just because it lies outside your comfort zone. The great thing about Brian/Myles/Flann is that, as Hopper pointed out at 100 Myles, there is an enormous amount of work left to be done, despite the ever-expanding list of wonderful books, chapters, and journal articles on the 100 Myles Bibliography page: <http://www.univie.ac.at/flannobrien2011/bibliography.html>.

Translation has its own challenges, but in my opinion, it's all the more rewarding for it. These challenges are accounted for by the history of the language revival movement through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Context

Early in Brian's life, the O'Nolan family were living in an area where the majority of the local population were barely one generation removed from grinding 'Gaelic poverty,' and had abandoned Irish as a relic of a past they wanted to forget.² As Declan Kiberd points out, this trend went back as far as the 1650s, by which time the Irish language 'had largely ceased to be a medium in which an intellectual life was possible, becoming the language of the poor and, in truth, a decisive mark of their poverty.'³ The project of language revival was thus at quite a disadvantage from the very beginning, and the combined efforts of the GAA, the Gaelic League, and other organisations was not quite enough to completely undo two centuries of negative publicity. What these organisations did achieve, however, was the establishment of Irish as a badge of nationalist authenticity – hence the readiness of politicians and public speakers, when addressing a crowd with nationalist sympathies, to claim that they spoke the language 'when it was neither profitable nor popular.'

Following the end of the War of Independence, the Free State government decided to emphasise their engagement with Irish, mainly because there was a nationwide perception that they had failed to deliver on the promises of the revolution, and they needed a strategy to mollify their critics. In Kiberd's words, the Irish language became 'a kind of green spray-paint' with which the new government could try to cover over their similarity to the old one.⁴ The effort which the Free State put into promoting the language reflects the degree to which Irish had become 'a cause of unexceptionable nationalist authenticity'⁵ and also illustrates the government's desperation: as Terence Brown points out, art, science, hygiene, nature study, and 'most domestic studies' were excised from primary school curricula to create more room for the language.⁶ The problem was that the nineteenth-century famine had eradicated most of the resources that could have contributed to re-establishing Irish as a spoken language.

According to Fr Colmán O'Huallacháin, the accepted form of nineteenth-century 'high Irish' was adapted from the formal, educated style of Gaelic used by poets in the seventeenth century and did not reflect the commonly spoken dialects that had emerged since that time. When the Commissioners of National Education added Irish to the curriculum in 1878 as an optional subject of philological study (on par with Latin), the texts written by these poets were adopted as classroom reading material. At this time, the vast majority of the native Irish speakers left in the country came from impoverished rural areas and were unable to read or write the language. An additional complication came in the form of the official choice of the uncial or 'Gaelic' alphabet, which 'had the effect of restricting the printing of Irish to a few centres where the

special lettering was available.⁷ Once an alphabet had been settled on, questions still remained on how it was to be used.

In 1904, P.S. Dinneen compiled his Irish-English Dictionary, using Irish poetry as a reference for spelling and grammar. The following year, a Gaelic League Committee suggested changes to improve Dinneen's dictionary, and in 1910, a society called *An Cuman um Leitriú Shimplí* [The Society for Simple Spelling] proposed a national standard for the spelling of Irish words based on the Munster dialect. This proposal had the unintended effect of creating further confusion, as individual translators made surreptitious adjustments in favour of their own dialect.⁸ Coinciding with these developments was an emergent concern with the state of Gaelic literature. Commentators argued that if the Irish language was to be respected as a working language, and not just a form of rural cant, it had to prove itself capable of engaging with the modern world. Once this was implemented as policy, however, there remained the question of vocabulary and terminology. The language simply did not have the vocabulary to deal with the various developments in science, art, and politics that had arisen in the time span between its near-eradication and the Gaelic Revival.

In the end, the Irish Free State stepped into the breach. In 1928, *An Coiste Téarmaíochta* [The Terminology Committee] was established, under the auspices of the Department of Education, and published vocabulary lists related to the sciences, the arts, commerce, and recreation. Native words were to be preferred in each case, whether on their own or as part of compound neologisms, and foreign words were to be 'Gaelicised.' Despite the construction of an official lexicon to deal with these topics, Philip O'Leary notes, 'readers were far more likely to learn necessary new terminology from the books, essays, and articles [...] in which many Gaelic writers tried, aptly or absurdly, to expand the capacities of the national language.'⁹

This project is further complicated by the fact that, in reality, there is no single Irish language. The Dáil's translation staff, according to O'Huallacháin, was comprised primarily of speakers of Munster Irish (thus creating hostility towards 'official Irish' in Connacht and Ulster), and in 1937 the Irish Constitution was prepared with the 'Gaelic' alphabet and Dinneen's spelling. In addition to all this, people often made adjustments to 'official spelling' in favour of their own preferred dialects.¹⁰ Tadhg Ó hIfearnáin illustrates that the relationship between standard Irish and regional dialects has not been placid: 'The decline of the dialects is not simply a coincidence, but in part a consequence of the promotion of the standard as a prestige form.'¹¹ Most of that pressure has come from an education system which has proven to be remarkably inefficient at teaching the language to non-native speakers.

Irish is a compulsory subject in Irish primary and secondary schools, and in past decades the education system was weighted in its favour: to fail the Irish exam was to

fail the Leaving Certificate as a whole, thus barring the way to higher education and limiting options for future employment. Because of this, Irish was particularly subject to academic 'regurgitation,' a means of study that still characterises the Leaving Certificate examination in the present day.

What one is left with, when all the hurly-burly's done, is a somewhat unforgiving language, full of oddities and sometimes lethal linguistic traps. To take one example, the Irish word for 'rat' is '*francach*'; unfortunately, the same word with a capital F means 'French person.' Even a native speaker like Brian/Flann/Myles had cause to complain every now and then:

The Irish lexicographer Dinneen, considered *in vacuo* is, heaven knows, funny enough. He just keeps standing on his head, denying stoutly that *piléar* means bullet and asserting that it means 'an inert thing or person.' Nothing stumps him. He will promise the sun, moon, and stars to anyone who will catch him out. And well he may. Just *take* the sun, moon, and stars for a moment. Sun, you say, is *grian*. Not at all. Dinneen shouts that *grian* means 'the bottom (of a lake, well).' You are a bit nettled and mutter that anyway, *gealach* means moon. Wrong again. *Gealach* means 'the white circle in a slice of half-boiled potato, turnip, etc.' In a bored voice, he adds that *réalta* (of course) means 'a mark on the forehead of a beast.' A most remarkable man. Eclectic I think is the word.¹²

Translating Flann

Translating Brian Ó Nualláin is tough. With regard to his early Irish-language work, what becomes apparent is his youthful self-confidence. While at college, waxing satirical about a planned masterpiece by the name of '*Extractum Ó Bhark i bPrágrais*' (i.e. 'Extract From a Work in Progress,' a common enough phrase among aspiring authors of the time), Ó Nualláin stated that the work would be 'a lengthy document comprising every known and unknown dialect of Irish, including middle-Irish, altirish, bog-Irish, Bearlachas, civil service Irish, future Irish, my own Irish and every Irish.'¹³ The scope of this ambition was not excessive in Ó Nualláin's case – Cronin remarks that he had a 'better than average' capacity for linguistics.¹⁴ He was a very clever young man, and his awareness of his own intelligence imparted an engaging youthful cockiness to his writing. However, it can be a hard slog to fully figure out what he's actually doing in and with the language – Ó Nualláin was not one to worry too much about whether anyone else would get the joke. Needless to say, everything of his I've worked on has gone through many drafts. Many, many drafts.

One very good example of this trouble is *'Teacht Agus Imtheacht Seán Buidhe: Iarsma an Bhéarla – Cuirtear ar Phlátaí Ceoil É!'* [The Arrival and Departure of John Bull: The Relic of the English Language – Let it be Put on Record!]. The story is fairly nonsensical: a fairytale set in a distant future when English has died out and Irish has taken its place as the dominant language of the Western world. The eponymous Seán Buidhe [John Bull] is a researcher from an organisation that wishes to revive English, and he comes to Ireland looking for fragments of vocabulary. The main joke of the story, however, is that it's written in very, very dodgy Gaelic – in the title, 'record' is rendered as *'plátaí ceoil,'* which literally means 'music plates.' The text is littered with mistakes a native speaker would not make – for example *'coille'* [forest] is replaced with the homophone *'coilleadh'* [castration], and the word *'troigh'* [a foot in length] is used in place of *'cos'* [a foot, as in the body-part].

The story is clearly a satire on the chaos created by the well-meaning but under-informed enthusiasts who concocted new additions to the vocabulary of Irish, without necessarily knowing what they were doing. This satire is further underlined by the joke of the narrative – the vocabulary John Bull collects is nonsense, and some of it isn't even English at all, but nevertheless he records it for posterity without analysing it critically. Ó Nualláin was not above coining some ridiculous terminology of his own, such as *'Léim an Albanaigh'* [Leap of the Scotsman] for 'hopscotch' (*'Mion-Tuairmí ár Sinnsir'*). Translating this type of linguistic wordplay into English necessitates a lot of footnotes. English homophones do not coincide with Gaelic ones, so a direct translation would simply not make any sense, and whatever else one might say about Ó Nualláin, the fact is that he never indulged in simplistic *non sequiturs*. Unfortunately, nothing kills a joke better than explaining it.

At a time when Irish had its own special alphabet, the printing of which was limited to a handful of places that had the required typeface, Ó Nualláin delighted in mixing-and-matching typefaces. Often, he switches back and forth between Roman and Gaelic script, most often to convey something about the characters: in *'Teacht agus Imtheacht'* and *'Díoghaltas ar Gallaibh,'* English-speakers always speak in Roman type, even (as in the case of John Bull) when they're conversing in Irish. I shudder to think of the practical considerations behind printing these things back in the days before word processing and can only conclude that he did it partly to have fun at the expense of his editors and typesetters.

Some final thoughts

There are works out there that either aren't freely available (because they haven't been anthologised or re-published) or need to be rediscovered – this is the impetus behind

forthcoming collection of early short stories compiled by Hopper and Murphy, and Daniel Jernigan's edited volume of the man's dramatic works, some of which are practically forgotten today.¹⁵ Masterworks like *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policeman* crowd out the author's other work, which can dwindle away and be forgotten as the majority of critical attention is focused on the more celebrated texts. Readers new to a particular author will sometimes pre-judge their work according to expectations established by a successful novel, and if those readers happen to be critics, the folly is compounded – hence the nonsensical dismissal of Myles na gCopaleen's newspaper columns as being somehow less worthy of study than Flann O'Brien's two great novels. For one reason or another, there are columns, stage plays, and short works out there that, until now, have never been anthologised. One logical reason is that in the case of a bilingual author, if certain works are written in a relatively obscure language, his or her English-language stuff will more than likely receive greater international critical attention.

This in itself is a great reason to devote some time to looking at Ó Nualláin's early Irish-language writing. Irish is not exactly a prominent world language, which means there are plenty of opportunities for researchers who can speak or read it. In addition, there are plenty of international researchers who would definitely welcome the opportunity to work with 'new' material. Translation is a rewarding activity for many reasons, not least of which is that it puts you in contact with people from all over the world. This aspect of O'Nolan's literary legacy is opening up and is every bit as fertile for discussion and analysis as his novels or the *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns.

Notes & references

¹ See Brian O Nualláin, 'Teacht agus imtheacht Sheáin Bhuidhe: Iarsma an Béarla – Cuireadh ar phlátaí ceoil é!,' *The Irish Press* (June 13, 1932): 4.

² Anthony Cronin, *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien* (Dublin: New Island, 2003), 13.

³ Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of a Modern Nation* (London: Vintage, 1996), 133.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 484.

⁵ Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922–1985*, 5th ed. (London: Fontana Press, 1990), 47.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁷ Colmán O'Huallacháin, *The Irish and Irish: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of the Relationship Between a People and their Language* (Dublin: Irish Franciscan Provincial Office, 1994), 111–2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁹ Philip O'Leary, *Gaelic Prose in the Irish Free State, 1922–1939* (University Park, P.A.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), 175–6.

¹⁰ O'Huallacháin, 112–3.

¹¹ Tadhg O'hlfearnáin, 'Endangering Language Vitality through Institutional Development: Ideology, Authority, and Official Standard Irish in the Gaeltacht,' in *Sustaining Linguistic Diversity: Endangered and Minority Languages and Language Varieties*, ed. Natalie Schilling-Estes Kendall A. King, Lyn Fogle, Jia Jackie Lou, and Barbara Soukup (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2008), 124–5.

¹² Flann O'Brien, *The Best of Myles*, ed. Kevin O'Nolan (London: HarperCollins, 1993), 276–7.

¹³ Cronin, 55.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 68–9.

¹⁵ Flann O'Brien, *The Short Fiction of Flann O'Brien*, ed. Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013); Flann O'Brien, *Plays and Teleplays*, ed. Daniel Keith Jernigan (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013).