

Ireland in Translation

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Diplomats, or diplomatists, share a special interest in the art of translation. Indeed, translation in the widest sense is one of the key skills of success in our profession. However, I'd like to start out on an autobiographical note with a few words about the reasons for my own interest in this topic. My first language is English, but I attended a school in Dublin where Irish was the language not only of instruction but also of everyday communication.¹ Indeed, you could be expelled from school for speaking English –theoretically anyhow; I never heard of that actually happening. My early exposure to the language made me feel emotionally very much at home in Irish, in some ways, more so than in English. This may seem a bit odd, although this is a common feeling among Irish people, even among those who do not even know the language. The most famous instance is James Joyce, who knew virtually no Irish, but whose alter ego Stephen Daedalus in *Portrait of the Artist* writes about the different meaning that words such as “home,” “ale,” and “master” have on Irish as opposed to English lips.

My interest in translation has been significantly influenced by the fact that I and my siblings were raised in a linguistically self-challenged household where apart from our school-going years being through the medium of Irish much store was placed on foreign language acquisition (I should say that this was in fact showed remarkable foresighted resourcefulness in the Ireland of the 1960s), with an elaborate scheme of rewards for the learning of words, and with a particular focus on German given that we had an Austrian living with us for some time, a factor which, in turn, contributed to the career choice of one of my elder brothers who went on to become a literary scholar and a distinguished translator, who has produced some of the most accomplished recent translations of Kafka into modern-day English. I am entirely indebted to him, Professor Mark Harman, for the reflections that follow².

In a short historical perspective on the task of the translator in a commentary in the *Times Literary Supplement* entitled “A Circus Rider on Two Horses: Kafka and literary translation”, he (Harman) wrote: “from the 17th century to the early decades of the last, translators and critics in England and France insisted on the need for qualities such as naturalness and elegance, irrespective of the texture of the original. In the preface to his rendering of Ovid (1680), John Dryden insists that a translator “ought to make his author appear as charming as he can”. A century later, in the first systematic discussion in English of translation, “Essay on the Principles of Translation” (1791), Alexander Fraser Tyler defines a good translation as one that possesses “the ease of original composition” and praises Alexander pope for omitting passages of the Iliad and the Odyssey that “offend by introducing low images and puerile allusions.”

In Germany in the late 18th century and early 19th century figures such as von Humboldt and Goethe began to argue that translators ought to let foreign traits show through in the target language. Humboldt called for a delicate balance between foreign and conventional elements: “So long as one does not feel the foreignness/strangeness, a translation has reached its highest goal; but where the foreignness appears as such, and more than likely even obscures the foreign, the translator betrays

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1. To avoid misunderstanding I should point out here that I call the indigenous Celtic language of Ireland Irish rather than Gaelic, the term often used in the U.S., because in Ireland the term Gaelic is generally used by those hostile to the language.

2. I would refer readers to his review of *Translating Ireland: Translation, Languages, Cultures* by Michael Cronin published by Cork University Press - <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/07374836.2000.10524089?needAccess=true>

his inadequacy." In the fullest statement of this theory, which has come to be called foreignizing translation, Schliermacher famously describes the two principal approaches to translation thus: "Either the translator leaves the writer alone as much as possible and moves the reader toward the writer, or he leaves the reader alone as much as possible and moves the writer toward the reader."

To return to our subject today: Ireland and Translation. Because of the abrupt and indeed traumatic way in which we turned our back on our own language and native literary culture in the nineteenth century, a painful but perhaps also productive rift runs through Irish culture. Translation has long been one of the ways of coping with this rift, and so translation is more central in Irish cultural life than it is in that of some other English-speaking countries. Indeed, for over a thousand years, translation has played a vital, if controversial, role in Irish culture. In the middle ages, Irish monks and scholars translated Greek and Latin works into Irish in monasteries and colleges scattered throughout continental Europe. In the late 19th century, the Irish Revival ushered in by W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, and J. M. Synge was energized by translations of the ancient Gaelic sagas. Aptly enough, it was a translator, George Sigerson, who said of the ancient Gaelic bards and poets that they were the "Moderns of the Past" and rightly forecast that they might be "the Moderns of the Future." That prediction proved to be accurate, since the Irish Revival transported the Gaelic bards into the twentieth century and beyond. It is worth reminding ourselves that the monoglot W. B. Yeats could draw inspiration from the oldest vernacular literature in Europe only with the help of translators such as Samuel Ferguson and Hyde, founder of the Gaelic League and first president of the Irish Free State³.

Oddly enough, relatively little attention has been devoted to the Irish tradition in translation, except in the area of Celtic Studies, where the focus has tended to be on narrow questions about lexicography that are of interest only to specialists. One exception is Michael Cronin's exhilarating survey of the unexpectedly diverse range of translation activity in Ireland from the 10th century to the present, which has almost single-handedly opened up this new field of study.

Medieval Irish culture was far from insular, and there was a thriving climate for translation, especially translations into Irish from classical and vernacular European sources. Gaelic culture produced some of the earliest European translations into the vernacular –the first Irish-language glosses on Greek and Latin texts date from the 10th century. These culturally self-confident translators loved to embellish the classical tales for their home audience, adding riffs in the style of the bardic storytellers.

In Ireland, as in many other colonies, territorial and linguistic domination went hand in hand. After the Vikings, who founded Dublin and other cities, came the French-speaking Normans, who first landed in County Wexford in 1169. In Britain the Normans soon traded their native French for English; in Ireland, they switched from French to Irish. By 1536, the English monarch Henry VIII can be found insisting in a message to the Burghers of the town of Galway in the West of Ireland, descendants of those original Norman invaders, that they must cease speaking Irish and instead adopt English, the language of the crown: "every inhabitant within the saide towne indevor theyme selfe to spek Englyshe, and to use theym selffe after the Englyshe Facion; and specially that you do put forth your childe to scole, to lerne to speke Englyshe." Such measures met with little success, and by the 14th century the English authorities in Ireland attempted to put the force of the law behind the effort to revive the sagging fortunes of the English language. To give you a flavor of the times, I'd like to quote from the original document, entitled: "A Statute of the Fortieth Year of King Edward III., enacted in a parliament held in Kilkenny, A.D. 1367":

"now many English of the said land, forsaking the English language, manners, mode of riding, laws and usages, live and govern themselves according to the manners, fashion, and language of the Irish enemies"

Therefore:

"it is ordained and established, that every Englishman do use the English language, and be named by an English name, leaving off entirely the manner of naming used

3. Hyde was President from 1938-1945 of the Irish Free State, which in 1949 became the Republic of Ireland.

by the Irish...and if any English, or Irish living amongst the English, use the Irish language amongst themselves, contrary to the ordinance...his lands and tenements... shall be seized into the hands of his immediate lord... his body shall be taken by any of the officers of our lord the king, and committed to the next gaol..."⁴

Given the adversarial relationship between English and Gaelic culture in Ireland, translation was often a fraught activity. Sometimes it served as an instrument of peace; at other times it was used as a way of scoping out the enemy. For instance, the Elizabethan poet Edmund Spenser, author of "*The Fairie Queene*," took the trouble to sample the indigenous culture by having Gaelic poems translated into English for him. However, that exposure to his Gaelic literary contemporaries, sophisticated masters of an intricate native poetic tradition, did not prevent him from advocating what he himself calls the "translation" of entire Gaelic clans away from the south of Ireland, where he had lands. By the word translation, Spenser of course means "enforced displacement" –using language in a way that anticipates the Orwellian double-speak we have also become so used to in more recent times.

In Ireland ever since translation first became a weapon in the war between colonizers and natives, it has been a controversial practice. When Queen Elizabeth I commissioned a grammar of the Irish language, it was not because she was a budding Celtic scholar. Translations of Protestant religious texts into Irish could be used to wean the Papists from their faith. It is no accident that the first book printed in Irish Foirm na nUrnuidheadh (Edinburgh, 1567) was a translation of a Protestant devotional text.

Translations even became the intellectual equivalent of battering rams. Take, for instance, the decision in 1577 to publish John Hooker's translation of Gerald of Wales's virulently anti-Irish Latin tract *Expugnatio Hibernica*. This was an attempt to secure intellectual weapons in the propaganda war against the native Irish. If the natives could be effectively portrayed as barbarians, this would help justify the Tudor and Cromwellian policies against the indigenous Irish, who, however, fought back by translating from the Irish a history of the island by the Norman-Irish scholar Seathr Ceitinn (anglicized as Geoffrey Keating) that emphasized the antiquity and nobility of Gaelic civilization.

By the mid-19th century, even before the outbreak of the calamitous potato famine, the Irish language and Gaelic culture in general had fallen on hard times. English had become the urban language; Irish the tongue of the impoverished hinterlands, especially in the West. Scholars, often from an Anglo-Irish background, sensed the importance of the Gaelic heritage, and sought to preserve it by translating ancient Gaelic texts into English. It is no exaggeration to say, as one scholar has done, that this new translation phenomenon "led eventually to fundamental changes in Irish self-perception" (Cronin, 84). However, initially, this movement to translate Gaelic literature was more archeological than communicative in intent. Little was done to preserve the spoken language. This was because the spoken language was a badge of national allegiance and identity –and, generally, also of religion. Most were native Gaelic speakers. The largely Anglo-Irish early-19th century translators preferred to see their work as disinterested antiquarian scholarship because the living Irish language was potentially a source of division between those who wanted to retain the Union with Britain and those who favored autonomy for Ireland.

And this is where the would-be apolitical Douglas Hyde comes in. In 1890, his collection of prose translations, *Beside the Fire*, introduced an entirely new tone into translations from the Irish. Hyde himself wrote modestly of his enormously influential subsequent prose translation of Gaelic stories that it "only aims at being literal, and has ... no doubt ruggedly, reproduced the Irish idioms of the original." Yet it was precisely this ruggedness that inspired such writers as Yeats, who contrasted Hyde's fresh translation strategy in his famous *Love Songs of Connacht* with the jaded approach of his predecessors:

There have been other translators but they had a formal eighteenth-century style that took what Dr. Hyde would call the "sap and pleasure" out of simple thought and emotion.

"Their horses were always steeds and their cows kine, their rhythms had the formal monotony or the oratorical energy of that middle-class literature that comes more out of will and reason

4. Quoted from the verbatim online text of the Statutes of Kilkenny at www.rootsweb.com/~irlkik/statutes.htm

than out of imagination and sympathy... His (Hyde's) imagination is indeed at its best only when he writes in Irish, or in that beautiful English of the country people who remember too much Irish to talk like a newspaper..." (Cronin, 135)

The appreciation of Yeats for translations that hew to the texture of the original ought to give pause to those who advocate smoothness and naturalness in the target language at all costs. By and large, the Irish experience suggests that the translations with the greatest creative potential are those that subvert English by infusing it with the qualities of the foreign (or in the Irish case, native!) tongue.

Of course, Yeats's commentary is that of a man who himself knew virtually no Irish and for whom translation was necessarily all gain. For those who care about the survival of Irish as a living tongue, translation has often seems a mixed blessing, especially given the massive hemorrhaging of the language that accompanied the potato famine of the 1840s, which struck the poor Gaelic-speaking parts more strongly than it did the rest of the country. Although Ireland contained the greatest numbers of Irish speakers ever in 1831, by the turn of the century the language seemed headed toward extinction. As a result, the question arises as to what end translation into English is serving: Is it merely a final nail being driven into the coffin of the Irish language?

The continuing centrality of translation in Irish cultural life was made clear by Brian Friel, the award-winning playwright whose play *Translations* was partly inspired by George Steiner's treatise on translation, *After Babel*. In the play, a few years before the outbreak of potato famine of the 1840s, a translator called Owen helps the British Ordinance Survey to obliterate the original Gaelic place names and replace them with bastardized Anglicizations, only, finally, to recognize the error of his ways. Although Irish translators have sometimes behaved like Owen, generally, far from being collaborators or parasites –a charge sometimes leveled against translators in Ireland and elsewhere– they have played a creative role in forging connections between the diverse and often warring languages, cultures, and traditions of Ireland.

Translation continues to be a controversial activity. Some Irish language poets refuse to allow their works to be translated into English. They feel that to do so is to capitulate to those in Ireland who want to avoid the effort of attaining proficiency in their native tongue. Is that a short-sighted and self-defeating attitude? The remarkable poet Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill regularly attracts large audiences. However, how many would come if she refused to allow English translations of her work, which have in the meantime gained her entry into the somewhat inappropriately entitled *Longman's Anthology of British Literature*. On the other hand, the late Seamus Heaney, who translated a Middle Irish epic as well as the Old English *Beowulf*, and who claimed that it does not really matter whether the Irish language lives or dies, because, he figured, it will live on through the mediating efforts of translators and poets such as himself. But the question is perhaps why we can't have both? Many argue both for original works in the Irish language and for translations that will ensure them a readership beyond the small numbers of people capable of appreciating them in the original. This is the position of most literary translators. They do not aim to supplant the originals, but rather to create roads that lead towards them. If readers really want to experience the text first hand, inspired perhaps by the work of the translators they will learn the language and read the text in the original medium.