

# On Translating The Insurrection In Dublin (In Dublin)

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I.

Translating James Stephens' *The Insurrection in Dublin* on location, only metres away from where the book was written and where the action took place, with the celebrations of the 1916 centenary in full swing all around me, has been a rare and privileged experience. So much so, in fact, that it is hard for me to know where to begin to describe its positive effects on my work. I feel as if I had to expound on the advantages of having feet to walk, or the conveniences of being properly dead before burial: they are simply too many to tackle in one sitting.

At any rate, I will try to give some context about the book and the translation first, and then discuss more than a few particulars later, to try to convey exactly what I mean.

II.

Known as one of the great talkers in Dublin, by 1916 James Stephens was also an established journalist, poet and novelist. His first-hand account of the Easter Rising, full of intriguing observations and asides, remains one of the most powerful and yet subtle books written at the time. Stephens' own position and sensitivity clearly play a big role in its enduring appeal.

The Easter Rising not only caught him, as it caught the vast majority of the people, completely by surprise, but also put him in a tight spot ideologically. Stephens was fiercely patriotic and had the highest esteem for military courage. The only thing that stopped him from ever joining the army, in fact, was his height. (Like Nabokov's *Lolita*, he stood four feet ten in one sock.) However, in practice, he seemed constitutionally averse to entertaining any violence that exceeded the charms of purely verbal abuse. In his ideals he was nothing if not romantic, but in his appraisal of the practical means to achieve them, he was – as slanderous as this word might seem when talking about a poet – sensible, for the most part.

Stephens points out over and over, throughout the diary that makes up the heart of *The Insurrection in Dublin*, just how fascinatingly reticent everyone in the city was of declaring their sympathies during the conflict, how skilful in never stating outright on which side they stood. During the whole week he himself never really does, either.

Day after day, Stephens tries to make sense of the situation, questioning bystanders and occasionally exploring the streets as far as gunfire and soldiers would allow. Many of the fragmentary scenes he describes are incongruous, trivial or confusing. But they are so in a way that is often unexpectedly revealing, precisely because no sane historian would ever choose to dwell on such details as he does.

Paula Meehan has a wonderful poem titled 'Them Ducks Died for Ireland' in which she muses on the waterfowl officially reported as 'killed or shot' in St Stephen's Green during the Rising – the unsung avian casualties of independence. Stephens gives us a similarly brilliant titbit of microhistory in animal rights, for example, when he describes how on Tuesday 25th, in the heat of

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battle, a group of Irish women, armed with bricks, bottles and sticks, aggressively defend the British cavalry while hurling 'this petrifying query' at the Volunteers: 'Will you be hurting these poor horses?'

This furious fit of equine pity, of course, is not witnessed by Stephens himself. It is passed on to him as a rumour. Stephens must have heard the story from someone in the street, nodded with approval, and dutifully jotted it down. 'Barbarism is largely a lack of news', he melancholically observes on the Friday.

Rumours, often vague or contradictory, are the only type of information at his disposal, and he collects them with starved curiosity. His book is a sort of live rumourology of the Rising, a compendium of confusing narratives, 'a gathering together of the rumour and tension which for nearly two weeks had to serve the Dublin people in lieu of news'. There was nothing else to go on. Rumour, as Stephens quickly adds, 'had to serve many Dublin people in place of bread'.

III.

When my editors at Ediciones Godot, in Argentina, found out that Literature Ireland was promoting the translation of James Stephens' *The Insurrection in Dublin*, they immediately jumped at the opportunity to publish it in Spanish. It's an old philosophical conundrum whether editors are truly bestowed of some sort of rudimentary reason or whether their decisions are actually guided by something that merely resembles it – be it instinct, inspiration or some darker force at play. In this case, however, my editors' logic was perfectly sound and straightforward.

Stephens' book is simply the kind of hidden classic that seems tailor-made for an independent publisher. Besides its appeal as a historical document and the unobtrusive allures of Stephens' prose, there is a lingering oddness to it, a hovering sense of uncertainty that makes it intriguing as a literary artefact on its own. Stephens even lends to the book that familiar throb or pulse of paranoia, so dear to modern fiction, when he hints at the end, out of the blue and with a straight face, that the whole rebellion could be a vast conspiracy, orchestrated by a secret esoteric organisation. ('They may be Orangemen, they may be Masons', he mutters.)

The Irish community in Argentina, on the other hand, is the largest in any non-English speaking country, between half a million and a million strong. And the centenary would not go unnoticed. A vast exhibition in the Argentine National Library was in the works to celebrate the Easter Rising, as a matter of fact, together with a series of related lectures and events. All of which could hardly hurt sales, even if could hardly assure them either.

On the whole, the auguries, as Stephens would say, were good.

IV.

Translation always involves a sort of groping in the dark, and I must admit that in this case it has been quite refreshing to be able to use some of my five senses instead of having to rely on the mythical sixth to get my bearings through a text. After all, Stephens' book is grounded in direct observation, in the concrete reality of everyday life. It stands to reason that, ideally, so should its translation.

And while I wouldn't call my translation ideal, its conditions certainly have been. I had already been appointed Translator in Residence at TCD, to work on an ongoing Samuel Beckett project, when news reached me that Literature Ireland had approved Godot's application for the James Stephens' book. In other words, by pure chance, I was going to be in Dublin for *The Insurrection in Dublin*.

This coincidence was made even more remarkable by what, I soon discovered, was a singularly hard-to-miss fact: massive Easter Rising centenary commemorations would be taking place during my stay. I must admit their sheer scope took me completely by surprise. Even the preparations for the commemorations were an event on their own. Sometimes it seemed the preparations themselves were being celebrated in turn, as in an Escher painting of national pride.

For someone hoping to absorb as much information about the Rising as possible, it was almost overwhelming. Every Irish newspaper seemed to offer treasure troves of historical minutiae daily. I learned the Insurrection was the setting of the first ever radio broadcast. I learned Dublin and London were then in different time zones. I learned the first shot of the rebellion was fired in Laois. I learned Laois existed. I learned one of the flags over the General Post Office was hoisted by Eamon Bulfin. I learned Eamon Bulfin only managed to escape execution because he was born in Argentina and could not be judged as an Irishman. (A particularly interesting instance, then, of that phenomenon known in Spanish as 'Yo, argentino'.)

I took several guided tours and was offered countless others, each with its own spin on the common theme. I witnessed colourful historical re-enactments, parades, readings, re-readings and lectures. I received flyers from people in full military regalia (circa 1916), flyers that, even when short and apoplectic with exclamation marks, never failed to include the odd recondite datum I had still somehow missed. I saw the best Irish minds of several generations write poems on Pearse. I saw wax dolls with far more lifelike complexion than mine peer heroically into the distance, edifying me with the very pitch-perfect accuracy of their garb and pose. I read lucidly concise biographies of the signers of the Proclamation, displayed on shop windows.

I felt, in short, briefly afflicted by a sort of reverse paranoia: it was as if the whole city was conspiring to help me with my research.

V.

Meanwhile, I began to retrace James Stephens' steps with care. It is not uncommon to get inside an author's head; it is much more unusual and exclusive to get inside an author's boots. I walked, as Stephens regularly did, from his house at 42 Fitzwilliam Place to his office at the National Gallery. I stood on the corner of Merrion Row, looking at St Stephen's Green, as Stephens was doing when he felt the first shudder of the Insurrection. I stood where Stephens saw the Volunteers shoot an unarmed man. I examined the remains of Jacob's Biscuit Factory, where the Volunteers had raised a blowing tricolour that could be seen from Stephens' house. I made a point, in fact, of visiting all places Stephens visits or highlights in *The Insurrection in Dublin*, like a methodical tourist would do with a regular travel guide.

This evidently led me to the National Gallery, where staff members were kind enough to help me with certain enquiries, not always sensible-sounding ('Did the Gallery really have a gong?'). Luckily for me, the Gallery had organised a long series of lectures related to the Rising and had put together an invaluable James Stephens exhibition. Both the exhibition and the lectures have given me more than a few pointers. It was thanks to the Gallery, for example, that I first learned the real identity of 'Miss P.', of 'D.H.', and of other acquaintances to which Stephens makes cryptic allusions in his diary. (Some authors drop names; Stephens dropped initials.)

It almost goes without saying that my stay has not only been invaluable for the things I've been able to get out to see but also for the things I've been able to lock myself in to read. I've had at my disposal an endless wealth of priceless bibliographical material that I could never have checked had I not been in Dublin. James Murphy's introduction and afterward to the 1965 edition of *The Insurrection*, for example – an edition which also happens to include a nifty hand-drawn map of Stephens' wanderings through the city during the Rising. Or Bernard Shaw's articles on Ireland and on the rebellion, which so infuriated Stephens at first and which so completely won him over at last. Or the numerous other first-hand accounts of the insurrection, in many cases never reprinted or distributed outside of Ireland.

In fact, taking full advantage of Trinity College's library, I quickly made my way through Stephens' collected poetry, as well as his fiction, his letters and his uncollected articles. This was rather revelatory, not just in terms of discovering the full extent of what he had written but also in terms of discovering the full extent of what he had not. Digging into his correspondence, for

example, I discovered his megalomaniac project of writing '*Le [sic] Comédie humaine of Ireland*', a series of fictions that would encompass the whole island and its people, with their idiosyncrasies, their foibles, the varied atlas of their eddying hopes and regrets.

This Balzacian extravaganza had, according to Stephens, the ulterior goal of forever altering the political viewpoint of its readership, instilling widespread national pride and a wild hunger for republicanism in the Irish populace. The work, one imagines, was to sprawl over dozens of novels, belaboured with febrile energy and uncompromising, unflinching determination. He never wrote it. ('Every writer should have some kind of literary ambition big enough to explain his failure' – he tells Alice Stopford Gren in late 1914 – 'if he is too little for the job'.)

Nonetheless, perhaps the echo of this discarded project could still be felt in *The Insurrection in Dublin*. A certain thirst for the epic, for the meeting point between domestic and public life, between the trifling and the historical. A sensitivity for the drama of big, sweeping, epoch-making changes and their effects on the daily lives of common people. And all in a purely Irish setting, of course.

The possible relevance of this apparently irrelevant fact stayed with me.

VI.

As part of TCD's academic staff, I now also had access to whole archives of digitised newspapers, stretching all the way back to the Easter Rising and beyond. Newspapers (and the lack thereof) are a common topic in Stephens' book, so I naturally looked into the matter as soon as I could.

However, after perusing several of these archives, both online and at the National Library, I became curious about what else was going on during the insurrection. Stephens records, in one of the most charming bits of his book, his fruitless efforts to learn how to read and play music just as the rebellion was breaking out. People were preparing to die; he was preparing to face the suspicious indignity of the dulcimer. ('I do not relish the idea of procuring music with a stick.')

What were other literary figures doing at the time, I wondered?

Going through the bookshelves, I consulted diaries, journals, letters, notebooks, the cream and dregs of marginalia. I was especially attracted to authors who didn't have the remotest idea that the Rising was taking place, or who were too busy with things so mundane or uninteresting in themselves as to usually escape notice. Little by little, then, I started putting together a sort of calendar of infra-ordinary events.

For example, on Monday 24th April 1916 (which he hazily dates as '22th or 23th'), Paul Claudel complains in his journal that some people are inexplicably friendly towards him.

This throws him into such a fit of indignation (equally hard for the reader to understand) that he claims to only find 'some solace at the piano, at work, or in my garden'. On Tuesday 25th, Franz Kafka tells Felice that his business trip to Marienbad has been postponed and that he has spent the last few days 'moving back and forth between the street, my desk, and the sofa'. On Wednesday 26th, Proust writes a warm letter to the most prolific and distinguished pornographer of his time, thanking him for sending along his latest booklet (which Proust compares to Moses' Tablets of Stone). On that same day, Robert Bridges writes a letter to Mrs Manley Hopkins to argue he's been very unjustly accused of germanophobia ('Besides, I spoke chiefly of Prussia.').

The Great War, of course, was very much in people's minds. In 'late April' 1916, H.G. Wells sends Hedley Le Bas a letter explaining how much he regrets hiring people willy-nilly, following advice from other Fabians, just to prevent 'cataclysmal unemployment'. ('I have had all sorts of things done to my house and garden, and that I now perceive was wasting the national resources.')

He also claims to be in favour of cutting back on theatrical expenses but distrusts Beatrice Webb's initiative to do without 'the cinema and alcoholic refreshment'. ('It is a question, Wells valiantly argues, 'whether sudden total abstinence may not fling large numbers of influential persons

between the ages of 50 and 70 into states of dyspeptic digestion injurious to our national moral'.) He also calls cinemas "'movy" palaces'.

On Thursday 27th, E.E. Cummings expresses his desire to kiss French money. Also on Thursday, Thomas Hardy tries to get rid of an old Bath chair that belonged to his late wife by way of offering it to Sydney Cockerell, who in turn was supposed to hand it over to *his* wife. (It came with its own 'great case', or so Hardy seductively added, which 'locked-up' for transit.) On Friday 28th, E.M. Forster records family trouble ('Mother upset.'). On Saturday 29th, Wyndham Lewis, confined in a war camp, slips through a hole in a hedge to post a letter to Ezra Pound ('Excuse delay in answering your letter. I have made various efforts to get out.').

On Sunday 30th, Hardy resumes Bath chair negotiations. He extols its practicality ('Our man used to drag my late wife to church in it every Sunday'), while conceding some hitches ('The chief trouble is, the stowage.'). He also remarks meeting with Bernard Shaw and his wife two days earlier, as well as 'the Burys', who also dropped in for tea. ('Mrs Bury & Mrs Shaw went arguing about the Irish rising, of course', Hardy observes – the subject being, apparently, unpolemical to the men.)

Other trivial scenes during the week happen to be more ominous or poignant. On Easter Monday, Virginia Woolf writes to Violet Dickinson and opens with an abrupt ovine tragedy in Sussex, which now seems frankly heavy-handed in its retrospective symbolism. 'Here we are', she begins her letter, 'sitting with open windows, looking onto the meadow in which a lamb has just died'.

## VII.

Predictably, this has in turn led to an embarrassment of riches. Spurred by archive fever, I have since collected a more than slightly unhinged amount of minute details and remote factoids that quickly exceeded what could be considered sensible addenda. I am now in the process of deciding if they could be published or used in any way or if I will have to be buried with them, like a bespectacled Pharaoh.

A considerable part of this intriguing material that has suffused my translation, but that will probably never get even the backdoor decorum of an endnote, actually comes from people I happened to have met fortuitously. In fact, as in a bad travelogue, interesting people have just kept cropping up. Always with their own stories about the Rising, with their own unique stash of insider information, with their own family flora of trivia and fauna of anecdote.

Take Manchán Magan, for example. On 14th April, I chatted with Magan in the Long Room Hub at Trinity College, where, a bit earlier, in the middle of a lecture/performance at the First International Conference of Ultimology, facing of a room full of people, he had stripped to his underwear to impersonate a 6th century monk.

The subject of the Easter Rising somehow came up in a conversation during the coffee break. Without really knowing to whom I was talking, I mentioned I was translating James Stephens' book on the Rising. Taking a polite interest, Magan asked a few questions and then casually dropped that oh, by the way, he was The O'Rahilly's great-grandnephew. From there, he proceeded to describe what must probably be the most nationalistic upbringing anyone has ever received in modern Ireland. His mother tongue, of course, was Irish, English being a distant, furtively self-taught second language for him. ('I only speak German', he added, 'because my family thought Germany might be a good source of weapons'.)

In *The Insurrection in Dublin*, Stephens calls The O'Rahilly 'a man of unceasing ideas and unceasing speech'. Magan was perhaps slightly less garrulous, and there is a good chance that at some moment he made sounds with his lips that were not altogether accompanied by perceivable laughter, but he was without a doubt endlessly interesting in his insights to Irish history.

He had rejected, he said, offers and commissions for doing any documentary work related to the Easter Rising. ('I just didn't want to be a part of it all, you know?') To put it simply, he had been dreading the centenary, with all the artificial fist-pumping and tearful military romanticising this sort of celebrations can entail. But when the moment came, what he finally saw in the streets was not altogether what he had expected.

'I was surprised ... It actually hasn't been that bad', he said, nodding his head and tipping the sides of his mouth downwards, in what many a memeologist would call, precisely, a 'Not Bad' face.

'No, not bad at all, actually.'

VIII.

Sometimes, the connection between the people I met and my translation was remote but persuasive. Recently, at Sweny's Pharmacy, the local shrine of picturesque Joycean arcana, I met Simon, a t-shirted man in his forties, endlessly affable and very much taken with the place. 'Fantastic' was his catchphrase.

After buying a couple of fabled bars of sweet lemony wax, Simon was happy to share with the rest of us in the shop that he had come all the way from Australia especially for the Easter Rising centenary. This was in preparation for the book he was currently writing, a book on a notorious Irish ancestor of his. Well, that ancestor, as it turned out, was no other than Henry James O'Farrell!

I had no idea who that was, though. No one there else did. But Simon was kind enough to explain. Henry James O'Farrell – Simon's great-great-great-uncle – was an Irishman raised in Australia who, on 12 March 1868, had shot Prince Alfred in the back. Prince Alfred – who was also Duke of Edinburgh and Queen Victoria's son – was seriously wounded but managed to pull through, thus making O'Farrell the first failed political assassin in recorded Australian history.

He was hung six weeks later, on 21st April, after claiming in vain that he belonged to a supposed band of Melbourne Fenians. From there, Simon had tracked him all the way back to Ireland, unravelling a historical tangle in which the Irish Republican Brotherhood played a mysterious, tantalising, and quite possibly non-existent role.

The book had become a personal mission for Simon. For the last two years he had done nothing but work on it. ('I'd never written anything before', he confided. 'And I don't think I will, after this. This ... this is it. This is *it*!') His family had always considered O'Farrell to be a disgrace, a dark misshapen fruit hanging too high from the family tree. A topic of non-conversation, brought up now and again for the sole purpose of explaining that it should never be brought up again. Simon was beaming.

'I want to show how a family can cover up something ... something they're ashamed of but that, at the same time, is always there. Lurking. How they can almost pretend someone didn't exist, someone that happens to have actually made history, in a way. And how a person can grow up in that ... atmosphere. Of silence and shame. This ...', he said, showing me his forearm, 'this is making my hair stand up as I speak!'

'It will be one thick book', he added, forming a wide vertical crescent with his thumb and index. Then, thinking it over for a second, he joined his hands palm to palm, as if praying, and then slowly separated them in parallel fashion, measuring air. 'Or three.'

For some reason or another I brought up my James Stephens translation. 'You are translating James Stephens?' he said, laughing. 'That's fantastic!' To my surprise, he seemed to know several particulars of Stephens' life, some of which I'd never heard. 'But wasn't he exiled in Paris?', he asked. 'He was in Paris, but he came back when he was offered a post at the National Gallery', I explained. 'And he wrote about the Rising?', he puzzled, taken aback.

Only several days later did I realise that, obsessed with all things Fenian, he must have thought I meant James Stephens (1825–1901), the co-founder of the IRB, not the homonymous writer. (That

same obsession would also explain why, when I said I might be working on a Kevin Barry translation sometime in the future, he gravely remarked, shaking his head, 'That poor kid'.)

While we were talking, an old man shuffled into Sweny's with a copy of the Proclamation under his arm. Slowly, but surely, his quiet, hesitating monotone starting turning heads. He had begun, prodded by some mysterious stimuli, an impromptu dissertation on early 20th century typesetting. A typesetter by trade, he went on to explain in loving detail how the Proclamation was printed in 1916, including what fonts were used, what tribulations were involved in the process and even what metal alloys were better for hot type. (Protip: antimony actually expands as it cools, so you can use it to compensate lead's tendency to shrink.) We couldn't believe our luck.

After an enthusiastic Q&A, however, the old man's gravitational pull relented, and we all drifted back to our respective conversations. Simon then asked me if Stephens and Joyce had ever met. Happily oversaturated with Stephensiana, I explained that not only they had met but that Joyce had actually asked Stephens whether he would be willing to help him finish *Finnegans Wake*, if it turned out he couldn't do it on his own. I also remembered Joyce had a very specific reason for choosing Stephens as the only man worthy of what in all probability was the toughest literary job in the world: they both shared the same birthday.

Hearing this, Simon laughed and shook his head in disbelief once again. It was almost too much to take in a day, I suppose. Sweny's, the insurrection, the Proclamation, Joyce and Stephens, antimony and lead. He was, after all, a writer now, someone supposed to be able to put into words even the slippery oddness of a day in Dublin. This was, in a sense, a test to his new-found vocation. And when he looked up, I knew he had hit upon a formula that, in effect, summed it all up quite nicely.

'That's *fantastic*', he said.

IX.

Again, these might be details and scenes that lie just outside what one could sanely consider relevant. But as unwieldy as they can get, they have coloured my perception of the book. In a way, they are important because they aren't. They veer away from the practical and into that vague domain known as 'atmosphere'. And if I wouldn't outright claim I've captured the spirit of Stephens, at least I would like to believe I have helped stir the ghost of O'Farrell.

That is not to say that being in Dublin has not had a major impact on the tangible side of my translation. On the contrary, a considerable part of my research has, indeed, kept me from all sorts of inaccuracies, blunders and howlers. (Or, at worst, I hope, from way bigger ones.) I have been able to see, ask and explore in person, instead of resorting to Google Earth, to very specific and very deserted online forums, or to the more mystical tradition of outright guessing. And my work is, to put it mildly, all the better for it.

Having said that, the very fact of unearthing a wide variety of captivatingly inconsequential details in situ (each one almost relevant enough for a footnote, but never quite) seems for some reason to have been as vital to me as getting to know Dublin itself. Or, in a sense, it was a very roundabout way of getting to know Dublin and getting to know Stephens' time as well.

After all, James Stephens, the man who almost co-authored the *Finnegans Wake*, who almost embarked on a demented quest to rewrite Balzac's *La Comédie humaine*, who was almost at the right place and the right time to get wind of the Rising before anyone else, certainly knew the value of being on the brink of things. Even when that meant staying on the brink of relevance.

Now that the translation itself is almost done – except for the usual martyrdom of revision and proofreading – I will have time to ponder what to do with all I have amassed. I've always thought a book of collected and discarded research material for translation purposes, only indirectly or esoterically connected to translation itself, was something still waiting to be written. Like an Irish *Comédie humaine*, say.

In any case, this is all to say that I am very thankful that I've been given the opportunity to discover Ireland and to slowly render into Spanish what Stephens so hastily and vigorously put together a hundred years ago.