

# The Irish

A point which I noticed was not emphasised at the Celtic Congress was the *precision* of the Irish language. Therein is the secret why Irish cannot be revived; the present age shrinks from precision and 'understands' only soft woolly words which have really no particular meaning, like 'cultural heritage' or 'the exigent dictates of modern traffic needs'. The Latin *scribo*, for example, means 'I scratch' but the same word is used to denote the meaning 'I write, I draw'. What does the phrase *equum scribo* mean? It could mean 'I draw a horse, as in a sweepstake'. Or it could mean 'I scratch a horse because he is itchy'. Or 'I scratch a horse, because he is lame and will not win'. Or 'I draw a horse (sketch)'. Not much precision there, you will agree. Now the Irish take this word *scribo* for their roan, pardon, for their own but they throw out all this damn ambiguity. The Irish word *scribim* means 'I scratch' and nothing else, while *scriobhaim* means 'I write' and nothing else. (Just what does the English word 'scribble' mean? Don't answer - your 'explanation' will be just as vague!)

When you consider the awkward, stiff, self-conscious and 'literary' stuff that was written by Chaucer - *and so recently!* - and compare it with Irish poetry written by me one thousand years before Chaucer was born, you will inevitably reflect upon the ludicrous pretensions of the jerry-built brand-new limey civilisation and 'literature' you are so urgently begged to admire by the Editor of the *Irish Times* (a Mason, by the way!). You may also bring to mind the noble, proud and scornful words of the seventeenth-century Aodhagán O Rathaille:

*Rachadsa a h-aithle searc  
na laoch don chill,  
Na flatha fá raibh mo shean  
roimth éag do Chríost.*

Let me now quote a little poem I scratched - sorry! - I

wrote myself at least a thousand years ago. That would be, of course, before Jurtheim, the German pedant. Observe, I ask, the felicity, the freshness – above all, the *humanity* – of these following little verses:

*Sgíth mo chrob ón sgríbin  
ní dígainn mo glés géroll,  
sgeithid mo phenn gulban-caolta  
dígh daolta do dub glégorm.*

Now is not that fine? See the old monk, weary, but good-humoured? He sighs and shakes his head, but writes on. Why? Listen again:

*Bruinnidh sruaim n-ecna nDé  
fhinn  
as mo láim degduinn desmais,  
doirridh a dígh for duillinn  
do dubh in chuilinn chnesglais.*

Well lads? Good or bad? See that berry? See how it glistens, holly berry of the green epidermis! By the gob you can't deny it. I could write in those days, aye, and write about writing without being a bore, like Seamus. Here's the last verse:

*Stnidh mo phenn beg braonach  
tar aonach lebor lígoll,  
gan sgor fri selba segann,  
dian sgíth mo chrob ón sgríbunn*

By Gor! Did Bernard Shaw himself put pen to paper with better effect 'the best day he was in it', as they say in Irish? Could, say, Frank Lemass of C.I.E. write as fine a poem as that? (If he could he's a most affected man to refrain from writing poetry.) Could Hone attempt the task? Father Gannon, S.J.? Willy Dwyer? The Manager of the M. and L. in Terenure? Faugh!!!

Perhaps I'd better translate the poem for the benefit of limey visitors who are over here drinking the malt intended by Providence for our good selves. Here goes:

My hand has a pain from writing,  
Not steady the sharp tool of my  
craft

Its slender beak spews bright  
     ink –  
 A beetle-dark shining draught.  
 Streams of the wisdom of white  
     God  
 From my fair-brown, fine hand  
     sally,  
 On the page they splash their  
     flood  
 In ink of the green-skinned holly.  
 My little dribbly pen stretches  
 Across the great white paper  
     plain,  
 Insatiable for splendid riches –  
 That is why my hand has a pain!

Anybody who thinks that isn't excellent must be mad! I wrote the original in an age nearer to that of Horace than to this, yet it could have been written yesterday. Which, of course, is the test of true art. (Never let me hear you use a phrase like 'modern art'.) It is indeed a very fine, engaging, handsome poem. See the humorous juxtaposition of *gulban* and *daolta* – the contrast as between the bird-beak swallow-ing beetles and the pen-beak spewing beetles, black beetle-like words on the page! Witty? Surrealist? I should think so!

Would any reader who knows a grander person than my Excellency please communicate with the Editor of the *Irish Times*?

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You have a lot of chat out of you from time to time about 'the priceless heritage of our Gaelic past', 'our national language' and so on but so far as I can see, ye are doing very little to bring the old native civilisation back. I wonder are ye in earnest at all? Beyond the earnest lip-service ye pay to Irish (here I mean *Irish Malt* and I don't exclude those visiting doctors) I can't think of a single thing that has been done to bring back *an seana-shaol*. Take the political organisation of society. The ancient native order was patriarchal and aristocratic, the people knew their place (i.e. the scullery) and 'democracy', God help us, was unheard of. The administration of law was speedy and simple, because only a handful

of people had 'rights'. An exclusive caste of poets discharged the functions of commentator and recorder, and these men acknowledged *no one* as their superiors. They were maintained in great luxury and treated with the reverence and circumspection that are reserved for those who are feared, for they could ruin a man with a poisonous couplet. They were the journalists of their day, and they had a traditional right to libel whom they pleased. What is the position of the journalist today? Let it suffice to say that in my own case, when I go out for a walk (of an evening) I deem it wiser to go disguised as a man!

These speculations were brought into my mind by an encouraging note which appeared in a June issue of the *Irish Builder and Engineer*, dealing with the erection of churches:

At the annual meeting of the Royal Society of Ulster Architects in Belfast, the subject of the founding of a Choir of Architecture at Queen's University was mentioned by the President, Mr R. H. Gibson . . .

A choir suggests monks, and monks suggest beautiful medieval architecture such as the abbey at Timoleague, planned and built with limestone, sand and bullocks' blood by monkish hands. Why should it have to be left to Mr Gibson of Belfast to suggest so venerable an alternative to the shams and affectations of present-day architects (whom I recently dealt with so delightfully)?

You can't revive Gaelic civilisation overnight but you *can* reassemble it piecemeal. Reinstate journalists in their ancient office of privilege, re-entrust the building arts to monks, and you have made a beginning. Then proceed to revive the various Gaelic *fonctionnaires* who have been permitted to disappear completely in the shabby secondhand conditions of today. Opportunities exist on every hand. For example, the arrangements in your hotels are bad copies of those in foreign hotels, with a boots, porter, 'office' and so on. Meals are not ready for you at the times you specify, and you frequently find a retired bank manager from Cardiff asleep in your bed when you leave the bar at 4 a.m. No large establishment in the old days would dare to exist without a *Taoiseach Teaghlaigh*, or Household Captain. The old tale

*Bruighen Da Derga* gives you some idea of his standing and duties:

I saw there a bed and one man in it. Coarse hair upon him. Though a dish of wild apples had been cast upon his hair, not an apple of them would fall to the ground, but each apple would stick upon its own separate hair. His high-priced cloak about him in the house. Every controversy which occurs in the house about a seat or a bed, it is to his decision they all come. If a needle should drop in the house its fall would be heard when he speaks. A great black pole over him. It is like the shaft of a mill with its wings, and its head-cogs, and its points. Dost thou know the like of him? That man is Tuidle of Ulster, the Captain of Conaire's household. There is no annulling the decision of that man. A man who regulates seats, and beds, and food, for everyone. It is his Household-pole that stands over him.

Such an essential type of man simply does not exist now. How many Irishmen can boast even of a household-pole today? Probably not a dozen in the whole country. I don't believe there is one in the much-vaunted National Museum.

I think it would be quite simple to revive the Household Captain, with his own household-pole complete with wings, head-cogs and points. He may appear a bit archaic but so also, I suppose, is the notion that it should be somebody's business to look after beds and food. (Even in English I think the word 'food', in its true sense, is nearly obsolete; nowadays people have 'bites', 'snacks' or 'tea' at a 'buffet' or 'canteen'; anything horizontal is a 'bed'.)

Tell you what might be a more popular choice. How about reviving the historic Irish maiden? Your ancient saga *Táin Bó Cuailgne*, or *The Cattle-Spoil of Cooley*, gives a fairly detailed description of this lady – the sort of thing the Guards would circulate if she was 'wanted'. Surely the following does not quite describe your wife? –

Thus was the maiden, and a sword in her right hand, with its seven joints of red gold in its points. A speckle-spotted green cloak about her. A bushy, heavy-headed brooch in the cloak over her breast. A crimson, rich-blooded countenance with her. A blue, laughing eye with her. Lips red, thin. Teeth shining, pearly: it would seem to you that they were showers of fair pearls that had been cast into her head. As sweet as the strings of triangular



harps, a-playing by the hands of true professors, were the sweet sound of her voice and her charming words. As white as snow shed during one night, was the lustre of her skin, and her body appearing through her robe outside. Feet thin, long, white. Nails crimson, regular, circular, sharp, with her. Hair fair-yellow, gold-shining, upon her. Three locks of her hair turned round her head; another lock shading her down to the calves of her legs.

And phwat is wrong with that, may I ask? Is what you have today . . . an improvement? Which would make the better film star – the old or the new? Let me put it this way: the Irish girl of today is just the run of the mill, whereas yesterday's girl is the run of de Mille.

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Well, I see ye have your *Oireachtas* on again, with speeches, pipe bands, songs, story-telling and chess competitions. God speed the work, I hope it keeps fine for ye! No shadow of the atom bomb there, I'll go bail! Things went off well, if I can believe what I read in the *Irish Times*:

The occasion of the *Oireachtas* was a very interesting one, and was a most gratifying success from almost every point of view. The hall was fully occupied, and the deepest interest was manifested in the proceedings, which, for the most part, were conducted in the Irish language. Portions of the prize compositions were read to the meeting, and the remainder of the programme consisted of musical selections. The first item was a performance of Irish airs on the Irish pipes by Mr T. Rowsome. He opened with the famous old melody, 'The Cuilfhionn', of which Handel is related to have said that he would rather have been the composer than of any of his great oratorios . . .

I forgot to say that the copy of the *Irish Times* in which *that* appeared is dated 1897; probably you guessed as much, for nobody would dare to speak of Handel like that nowadays. But here is the point: you have had your *Oireachtas* now for fifty years. Are you satisfied, from a study of the results, that it is a good act? Bless me, I believe you are!

Many years ago I had occasion to examine, at the instance of His Grace the second Duke of Argyll, that extremely odd assemblage of hagiologies, prayers, incantations, myths and poems which you claim to be your national literature and,