

The Irish Are Still Poets

PADRAIC COLUM

ONE thing can be said for present-day Irish poetry—that is if the anthology that reached me a while ago is representative*—it is entertaining. In a community I stayed in, the book was constantly borrowed and read aloud. "How good that is!" was the exclamation made with regard to one poem after another. Those who heard and read were well entertained.

The entertainment is in part due to the speech rhythms of most of the verse, words that are colloquial and at the same time unusual, a statement now and again that is witty or humorous. But these are surfaces and there is something deeper than that. Ultimately it is from the poets' attitude to poetry. For them, or for most of them, poetry is not a private meditation but a topic that has a group interest, and it comes, one can think, as a flourish to a heady conversation.

To show the quality of these poems I should quote one completely, but I cannot show it in that way because the characteristic poems are of considerable length. But I can illustrate the points I have been making by quoting lines from certain of these "Poems from Ireland." I shall begin with what I regard as a very notable poem, Frank O'Connor's "To Tommas Costello at the Wars." It is a translation—I have no doubt it is as vigorous as the original—of a seventeenth-century Irish poem. We gather that a young wife is speaking to her husband, a commander in the war; she is complaining of the attention of one of his officers; then, without any marked transition, she is talking to the same officer who is none other than the famous poet, Tommas Costello. She begins:

Here's pretty conduct, Hugh
O'Rourke,
Great son of Brian, blossoming bough,
Noblest son of noble kin—
What do you say to Costello now?

Far to the Ulster wars he flies;
Some town he sacks—I am the town;
With some light love he charms the
night—
Beguiling her, he brings me down.

Then she is addressing the one who is really in her mind, Costello:

And since I never shall be yours,
Your father's trade take up anew
And magnify the northern blood—
The light of poetry are you,
The stirring of the coals of love,
The voice by which old griefs are
healed,

* *Poems from Ireland*. Edited by D. Mac-Donagh. Dublin: The Irish Times.

The mast of the rolling sail of war—
I may be yours, I shall not yield.

The same colloquialism is in Padraic Fallon's exploitation of Raftery's poem to Mary Hynes, and, with that colloquialism, humor, and a surprising imagery. The original of Padraic Fallon's was eighteenth century, and is folk as contrasted with the aristocratic poem to Tommas Costello. A poor wandering poet speaks:

That Sunday, on my oath, the rain
was a heavy overcoat
On a poor poet, and when the rain
began
In fleeces of water to buck leap like
a goat
I was only a walking penance reach-
ing Kiltartan;
And there, so suddenly that my cold
spine
Broke out in the arch of my back in
a rainbow,
The woman surged out of the day
with so much sunlight
I was nailed there like a scarecrow.

The end is as good as the beginning
and has to be quoted:

Bless your poet then and let him go!
He'll never stack a haggard with his
breath:
His thatch of words will not keep
rain or snow
Out of the house, or keep death.
But Raftery, rising, curses as he sees
you
Stir the fire and wash delph,
That he was bred a poet whose selfish
trade it is
To keep no beauty to himself.

The natural but surprising imagery, the speech rhythm, the humorous overtones are in the work of several other poets; they are in F. R. Hig-



gins's "The Auction," and in that poem of Patrick Kavanagh's called "Glut in the Market" in which the horse he would sell and not even the tinkers would buy turns into Pegasus:

I begged, O make some offer—
A soul is a poor man's tragedy.
—He'll draw your dungiest cart, I
said,
Show you short cuts to Mass,
Teach weather-lore, at night collect
Bad debts from poor men's grass.
And they would not.

Wittiness is in two nostalgic poems—in Robert O'Farachain's "The Western World" and in Francis MacManus's "Pattern of Saint Brendan." In the first, searching for memorials of J. M. Synge, "that meditative man," as W. B. Yeats called him, the poet finds that in the distant islands and far-off places that the dramatist of "The Playboy of the Western World" celebrated there is no memory of him left, but there is a memory of his contemporary, a murderer, "that violent man, James Lynchehaun," and concludes:

But Synge's reverberant name—
Like young men of Aran,
Like young girls of the Blaskets,
Took ship from the Western World
And never returned.

In "Pattern of Saint Brendan" the poet imagines the saint coming back from a transatlantic voyage (the outsider has to be informed that Saint Brendan was a medieval navigator) on his "pattern" or feast day when, for holiday music, there is "the bleat of melodeons" ending with "cries for a fight and calls for the sargeant:"

This is the evening, Brendan, O
sailor,
stand off the mainland, backwater and
glimmer,
though kirfies be flittered and flesh
be seasalted;
watch while this Ireland, a mirage,
grows dimmer.
What have you come for? Why cease
from faring
Through paradise islands and indigo
water,
through vinland and bloomland and
carribean glory?
Follow your chart with the smoky
sea-monsters;
stay with the bright birds where
music is pouring
balm for hurt souls, and Judas re-
pentant
sits for one day on the rock in the
ocean.
Turn from the ghostland, O great
navigator;
lower the oars for a legend
of journeys; scan tossed
empty horizons from pole to equator
for Ireland, time-foundered, that Ire-
land has lost.

"Poems from Ireland" are not all of one kind; rather, they are a miscellany that ranges from the Anglo-Irish to a mode that reproduces the

spirit of the Gaelic poets of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, from poems that have nothing to say to Irish tradition to poems that are inseparable from it. Leaving out the work of the poets named or quoted already, I shall put the others in an order that is from Gaelic to non-Gaelic.

But I find within the intentional Gaelic pattern a good deal of variety. There is Donagh MacDonagh's poem that goes no further to Gaelicism than the lilt of the folk-song:

Going to Mass on Sunday my true
love passed me by,
I knew her mind was altered by the
rolling of her eye,
And when I stood in God's dark light
my tongue could word no prayer,
Knowing my saint had fled and left
her reliquary bare.

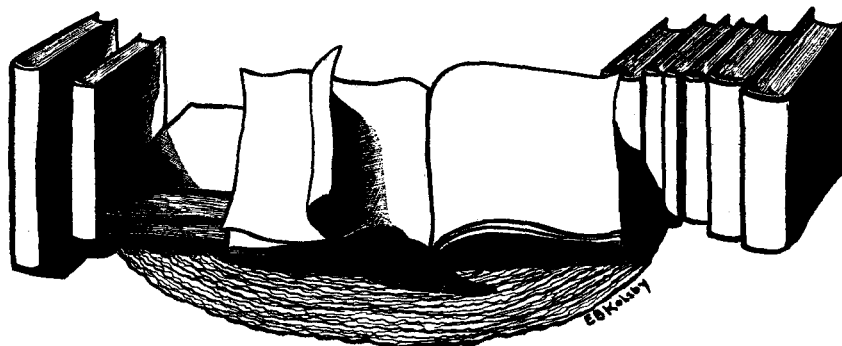
There is the medieval and the modern in poems muted by assonance that Austin Clarke and Patrick MacDonagh give us. This stanza is from Austin Clarke's "Wandering Men," a poem that has a visionary quality that I find memorable:

Among her women on the threshold
Great Brigid gave us welcome.
She had concealed in colder veil
Too soon the flaming of her forehead
That drew our eyelids in the wood.
By shadowy arch she led the way,
She brought us to a lighted room
And served each at table.

And this stanza is from Patrick MacDonagh's "Over the Water."

Though noon will drowse in roses her
young days carry coolness
Cropped from Meath's dawning acres
or stolen from shadows
Under Dunboyne's tall hedges that
lately shut the moon
From O more lucky lovers whom
fitting dusk has gathered
In gentle couples. Here skies have
scarcely room
To house the clouds of bombers, yet
had I but my darling,
We'd mix our hate with pity for strip-
pling airmen doomed
To their own strange damnation, and
in a night of horror
Softly we'd lie together under a
bomber's moon.

In Joseph Campbell's "Blanaid's Song" and "Butterfly in the Fields" there are a contrasting lightness and gracefulness that are also in the direct translations made by the poet whose pseudonym, Myles na gCopaleen, looks like a misprint. "Where Irish poetry in English is going in the future is not easy to guess," writes the editor, Donagh MacDonagh, in a foreword, and he goes on: "Every child who faces the microphone in a Gaelic quiz programme is able to give a thumbnail history of Gaelic poetry, to quote long passages from eighteenth-century poets, and to sing long and complicated Irish songs. . . . In these circumstances," he continues, "it seems reasonable to suppose that



either a new native poetry will begin to develop, or, at the very latest, poetry written in English will show ever more signs of Gaelic influence."

The poems written without benefit of Gaelic have freshness, too. The poems that pleased me in this mode are by Seumas O'Sullivan, Lord Dunsany, Michael Scot, Maurice Craig, Rhoda Coghill, Louis MacNeice, George Hetherton. As examples I shall quote two that are not too long: the first is Seumas O'Sullivan's "The Artist's House:"

The house of the artist
Laughs through the trees,
Its gay windows shining
In their blue lattices,
And round it are meadow flowers
As high as heifer's knees,
And water reeds are springing there
All scented and lush,
With the fat gold bees garnering
As much as they can eat;
Without a hive to care for
Their free wings beat;
For why should they care
For the order and the shelf?
Any more than the artist,
Who can, an' it please himself,
Get all fragrance sweetness
In a turn of his brush.

The other is the badly entitled "Mise en Scène," by George Hetherton:

Marsiliun at Saragossa, Charles at the
siege,
All Spain at hell, her castle broken,
all,
Save only Saragossa, every wall
A crumbling monument and every
liege
Dead or a Christian; speak, Blancan-
drin, speak.
Blancandrin speaking, every lord and
baron
Nodding and silent, strokes his beard-
ed cheek;
Clarín of Balaguet, Estamarin,
Malbien from over sea, all nod to hear
Blancandrin speaking for bright,
lovely Spain.
Marsiliun is there, he lends his ear
Also to treachery; and Charlemagne
Plays chess at Cordres and sees the
summer pass
And counts, perhaps, the days to
Michaelmas.

"The collection is a cross section of the Irish poetry of the past ten years," the editor tells us. All the poems in the collection were published in one journal—the *Irish Times*. "In the ten years during which the *Irish Times* has published verse," he says, "few Irish poets have been unrepresented in its columns, and from the four hundred or so poems which have appeared I have had little difficulty in choosing poems typical of their authors."

What of the Ostriches?

By James Broughton

THERE are no available vacancies for headless hermits
Now that the earthquake moon has burst on the desert
And the roadbeds are hot with ruin and rust.
Who will go running again upon their plumed behinds?
There are no down payments obtainable
For snug sandy islands in this scalded over-boiled sea.

If you are considering other possible long necks
This is not even a good time for swans.
How serene can they float in an overturned tempest?
How clear are the air-lanes for geese over volcanoes?
Flamingos appear merely incongruous
After the sandstorm scorches the jungle.

And where will your defeathered friends find a furnishable room
In the molten dust after the eruption?
There are no more life-rafts for light housekeeping.
There are no permanent addresses with a view of the morass.
Perhaps here and there, if you come early and stand in line,
A shifting lava bed, transient, on a daily rate.

So maybe the ostrich has had his eye on a good thing:
Maybe the grave new world is the underworld.
Shall we then scabble under the ruins
Down to the nether no-weather realms,
Bedfellow the worm, woo the mole,
And dwell in the dark among the decapitated ostrich heads?

Poetic Taste and Tact

CONTEMPORARY SPANISH POETRY. *Selections from Ten Poets.* Translated by Eleanor Turnbull. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press. 1945. 401 pp. \$3.50.

THE ARAUCANIAD. *A Version in English Poetry of Alonso de Ercilla y Zúñiga's "La Araucanad."* By Charles Maxwell Lancaster and Paul Thomas Manchester. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press. 1945. 326 pp. \$4.50.

Reviewed by DUDLEY FITTS

THESE two books, taken together, provide a useful treatise on the art of translation. The virtues of Miss Turnbull's work, positive in any event, are underscored by the ambitious failures of "The Araucaniad"; and if one needs a measure with which to sound the depths of the latter "version in English poetry," he has only to turn to the least successful of the translations from the modern Spaniards. It will not do to plead that Miss Turnbull has triumphed in a slighter task; in spite of what Ercilla's translators have to say about the hideous difficulties of their project—one earlier translator went mad, it seems, and another committed suicide—their every page betrays them as lacking in all but two of the tools essential to their job: industry and a knowledge of Spanish.

Fundamentally, it is a question of literary taste and tact. Miss Turnbull senses with extraordinary accuracy the complex of meanings—sense, sound, tone—of the poem she is rendering. Instinctively aware that no translation can hope to mirror these qualities and still keep faith with the original, she sensibly contents herself with retaining as much as possible of the imagery, the intellectual content. The other beauties are lost, though the refinement of her phrasing and the inventive grace of her diction preserve her from what the Ercilla impresarios call "a *pot-pourri* of literal drivel neither English nor Spanish." These gentlemen, however, would have us believe that the proper dress for a swaggering epic of the Golden Age is a jog-trot parody of the meter of "Hiawatha," "which like a splashing waterfall sings in the ears of America the immemorial romance of the Indian." That is what they say, and that is the way they say it.

The ten Spanish poets—Moreno Villa, Salinas, Jorge Guillén, Diego, García Lorca, Alberti, Prados, Aleixandre, Cernuda, and Altolaguirre—are by no means all that Miss Turnbull might have included in a

representative collection, but they do give an excellent idea of the art that came into its own in the five brief years of the republic and survived as a fighting force during the Civil War and the exile which followed. García Lorca died before the Fascist guns almost as soon as the rebellion broke out; and of the entire group, only Gerardo Diego—by no means the least gifted—chose Franco and betrayal. Politics is not poetry; but as I have remarked elsewhere, it is a pity that Miss Turnbull's selection reflects scarcely a trace of the Spanish agony: a pity the more strange because these very poets were so much involved in it and wrote about



it so movingly. Pedro Salinas's prefatory "Personal Reminiscences of the Poets," charming though it is, is equally reticent. But while I cannot account for this, and personally deplore it, the more useful fact remains that Miss Turnbull has given us a generous corpus of important poetry in the original language with translations more than adequate on the opposite pages.

"La Araucana" celebrates the Spanish conquest of an Indian tribe in central Chile—or, rather, it celebrates the tribe's resistance to conquest, since Ercilla, himself one of the conquistadores, was so enchanted by the valor of his quarry that his poem is really their epic. As a poem, it is one of those great sprawling awkward national monuments—every language has them: the kind of thing that you must read if you are a scholar, that you feel you must read if you are a patriot, but that only the itching of pedantry or the enthusiasm of patriotism could ever mistake for poetry. Its chief characteristics are rodomontade and gore: the nearest thing to it that I know in English is the Pyrrhus speech in "Hamlet." I have little doubt that it would be a good thing to have a version of it in English: the historical escapades of our elders are edifying, and we can't have too much source material on the American Indian. But I have

no doubts at all about the utility of "The Araucaniad." I select a strophe, wholly at random:

When this vile vituperation
Ended, Rengo, boiling over,
Waiting not for license, blustered:
"Bring him on! I'm firm and ready.
Your display of silly tantrums
Sends no shivers through my marrow.
Arms will speak and render verdict,
Not a bully's blathering blabber."

That is the tone of the whole.

"Lower Sails!" the seamen shouted.
"Pull the mainmast down, the fore-sail!"
And the passengers re-echoed
This request . . .

This request! Parody could be no more deadly.

And there is page after page of it, a relentless, roaring, tasteless gallop of ugly lines and ragbag diction. Whatever "Hiawatha's" faults, and it is not my favorite poem, it never plashed in the ears of America like this. "The authors," says the preface, "have sought to capture the spirit, the poetic vigor, and the beauty of imagery of the soldier-poet's creation, rather than to ladle out for pedantic critics a *pot-pourri* of literal drivel neither English nor Spanish, neither the penny jewel of jingling verse, nor the infecund pebble of polished prose." I do not know how my fellow pedantic critics feel about it; but in nominating this specimen for Sentence of the Year I should like to record my conviction that writers who preludize like this are done for before they begin.

Welcome

By Theodore Maynard

TO lonely and aloof
Men I offer a roof
Against the icy rain
Of their remorseless pain,
For I have built it first
When my own weather was worst.

If women choose to stay
Outside, of course they may—
That is their own affair;
Though they are free to share
Whatever I have to give
To friend a fugitive:

A mind that all day chimes
With bronze or silver rhymes,
In which flash images
Like the eternal seas
That change as flickering flame,
And yet remain the same.

The Fair may well prefer—
Although in this they err—
Some soft nook, downy-warm,
As shelter from the storm
Than this for Adam's clay.
If so, let them away!—
I have no more to say.