

# CADERNOS 27

DE LITERATURA EM TRADUÇÃO



Os Muitos Mapas da Irlanda

# Making a Way through Grassland (An Approach to Translation)

*Celia de Fréine*<sup>1</sup>

[This essay will provide some background information on the history of the Irish language.<sup>2</sup> It will also put forward reasons as to why it is essential for Irish-language writers to have their work, e.g., poetry, translated into English. Different approaches to translation will be outlined as will reasons as to why some choose to write in a minority language. My approach to translating my own work, and that of others, from Irish, and other languages, into English will be discussed also.]

Báinseach,<sup>3</sup> a grassland beside water – river, sea or lake – is sometimes seen as a crossing point, or place, through which a person travels from one world to the other, in this case, from land to water. It is also a place where, in the past,

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1 Celia De Fréine writes in many genres in both Irish and English. Awards for her poetry include the Patrick Kavanagh Award and Gradam Litríochta Chló Iar-Chonnacht. To date she has published nine collections. Her plays and film and television scripts have won numerous awards. She was shortlisted in the short story category of the An Post National Book Awards in 2023. Ceannródaí LeabhairCOMHAR, (2018) her biography of Louise Gavan Duffy won ACIS Duais Leabhar Taighde na Bliana (2019) and was shortlisted for the Irish Book Awards (2018) and Gradam Uhuilleabháin (2019). *Cur i gCéill*, her first thriller, published by LeabhairCOMHAR in 2019, was shortlisted for the Irish Book Awards (2020). *An Dara Rogha*, a young adult novel, was published in 2021 by LeabhairCOMHAR. [www.celiadefreine.com](http://www.celiadefreine.com)

2 Ideas on the history of Irish discussed here are taken from ‘The Decline and Rise of Irish’. Celia de Fréine. *Irish Writers Centre Italo-Irish Literary Exchange 2013*. Pages 32-34.

3 [manchán magan – Search Results](#) | [Facebook](#) link active on 30 June 2023.

unbaptised children were buried and where, today the presence of An Slua Sí (The Fairy Folk) may still be felt. When translating poetry from Irish to English I move from one world to the other and, in doing so, find myself in a similar in-between place, a grassland where the weather is clement, discoveries are made and magic can happen.

As an invited speaker at festivals in the US or continental Europe I read my poetry in Irish along with its English-language translation. In the discussion which follows, whether as part of a Q&A, or in a less formal setting, I find the audience knows little or nothing about Irish, one of the oldest living languages in Europe: some think it's a version of Hiberno-English; others believe it's a language spoken every day by everyone on the island of Ireland.

## Background

From the late twelfth century, when Ireland was colonised, Irish continued to be spoken throughout the island apart from in the Pale, an area around Dublin, seat of the English administration. By the 1840s the country's population had reached eight million, most of whom lived in abject poverty and subsisted on potatoes. At this time the two main factors, which contributed to the decline of Irish occurred: the introduction of primary schools in which all subjects were taught through English and the failure of the potato crop, which led to the famine.

The 'English' schools might have taken longer to make an impression, had not the Famine worked hand-in-hand with the new system to bring about the widespread use of English. Many of those living in poverty, having been offered passage on a coffin ship,<sup>4</sup> realised that, in order to get work in America, Canada or England, proficiency in English was needed. As the end of the nineteenth century drew near, Irish had all but disappeared from the country, apart from in the Irish-speaking *Gaeltacht* areas.<sup>5</sup>

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4 During the famine, rather than pay taxes to raise money for public relief works some landlords paid for their tenants to be shipped to North America. [Coffin ships: the Irish immigration ships that sailed to North America \(irish-genealogy-toolkit.com\)](#) link active on 30 June 2023.

5 Today the main Gaeltacht areas are in Donegal, Connemara, Mayo, Kerry, West Cork, Waterford and Ráth Cairn, County Meath (established in the 1930s and populated with native speakers of Irish from other Gaeltacht areas).

When the Irish Free State was established in 1922 Irish was given a central role on the school curriculum. A pass in Irish in state exams was necessary in order to be employed in the civil service, the bank, An Garda Síochána (the police force), to work as a teacher or lecturer, to join the Abbey Theatre (Ireland's national theatre) or RTÉ (the national broadcasting authority). Needless to say, many reacted against the compulsory aspect of Irish; the fact that it was often taught by fanatics, with little training, led students to dislike and, sometimes, hate the language. As a result, most of the population left school unable to speak, read, or write in Irish, despite having been taught it for thirteen years.

As the century progressed, the speaking of Irish continued to decline in the *Gaeltacht* but began to gather momentum in urban areas.<sup>6</sup> Although a few schools had been teaching all subjects through Irish from the early part of the century,<sup>7</sup> from the late sixties onwards, many parents in cities and towns demanded their children be educated through Irish.<sup>8</sup> *Gaelscoileanna* (Irish-language primary schools) increased in number, followed by *náionraí* (pre-schools), and *gaelcholáistí* (second-level colleges), making it possible for children in urban areas to be schooled exclusively through Irish between the ages of three and nineteen, and resulting in new generations of urban Irish-speakers. Another contributory factor to the growth in Irish was the establishment in 1996 of the Irish language television station, *TnaG* (*Teilifís na Gaeilge*), now *TG4*.

## Current situation

According to the 2022 census, the population of the Republic of Ireland stands at 5,123, 536 million.<sup>9</sup> 1,873,997 of these indicate they can speak Irish; 623,961 say they speak it daily within and outside the education system; 71,968<sup>10</sup> of

6 The Irish language revival in urban areas began towards the end of the nineteenth century and was spear-headed by Conradh na Gaeilge (The Gaelic League).

7 Scoil Bhríde, co-founded by Louise Gavan Duffy and Annie McHugh in Dublin in 1917, was the first all-Irish school established outside the Gaeltacht. See: De Fréine, Celia. *Lúise Ghabhánach Ní Dhúfaigh: Ceannródaí. Leabhair* COMHAR. 2018.

8 Factors in the growth of the gaelscoil movement include: expansion of the suburbs; an alternative to church-controlled schools.

9 [Census of Population 2022 - Preliminary Results - CSO - Central Statistics Office](#) link active on 30 June 2023.

10 [Education and Irish Language - CSO - Central Statistics Office](#) link active on 30 June 2023.

the daily speakers say they use Irish outside the education system. How many of these read books in Irish? While there is demand for textbooks and grammar books in Irish within the education system, the greatest demand outside the classroom is for picture books for children. Sales of novels, short stories, plays and poetry are low. Publishers can expect to sell approximately 200-300 copies of each of such books unless they are prescribed reading on a university course.<sup>11</sup> Such figures beg the question: why write in Irish?

In order for Irish-language writers to expand our readership most opt to have work translated into English. Although English is my first language and writing in English presents less of a challenge to me, I find Irish is “better suited to the surreal nature of my poetry and that through it I can more successfully mine the stuff of my imagination”.<sup>12</sup> In writing, the subject often chooses the writer. In my case the Irish language has chosen me. Such a choice might result in limited book sales, lack of visibility on the ‘literary stage’ and marginalisation within academic discourse, were it not for the fact that my work is available in English.

## Issues and approaches

Native speakers of Irish, such as Cathal Ó Searcaigh and Micheál Ó Conghaile,<sup>13</sup> who were born and raised in the Gaeltacht, insist on having their work translated into English, their second language, by someone other than themselves. During the Cúirt International Festival of Literature in 1998 Ó Conghaile explained that, for him, entering the world of English is akin to entering someone else’s kitchen: nothing is familiar; everything is stored in a place other than that used by the writer; making breakfast is, therefore, best left to the owner of the house.

It isn’t within my remit to put forward any theory as to why those born and raised outside the Gaeltacht, whether in Irish-speaking, English-speaking, or bilingual households, choose to write in Irish, other than to suggest that each is driven by their own unique passion. While it is understandable that those raised

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11 Róisín Ní Mhianáin. (Editor). ‘Réamhrá’. *Idir Lúibíní*. Page 15. Cois Life. 2003. (*Idir Lúibíní* is the collected papers from ‘Fleá Leabhar agus Léitheoireachta agus Siompóisiam faoin Léitheoireacht’ which took place in 2002. (Few facts, regarding literature in Irish, will have changed in the meantime).

12 Mills, Lia. ‘In Full Voice: Celia de Fréine in conversation with Lia Mills’, *Irish University Review*, vol. 48, no. 2, 2018, Page 169.

13 Ó Conghaile, Micheál. *Comhrá Caillí. Cló Iar-Chonnacht*. 1987. Ó Conghaile is better known as a novelist, short story writer, dramatist and translator.



through Irish might depend on translators, it is worth noting that most Irish-language poets, raised outside the Gaeltacht, irrespective of the language(s) spoken at home, opt to be translated by others.

At present, a minority, including Paddy Bushe, Rita Kelly and myself, translate our own work. Occasionally I come across extracts from my work translated by academics or critics as part of an essay and, while their versions cannot be faulted for their accuracy, I am intrigued, not least, as to the extent to which these versions differ from mine.

In his 'Introduction' to *An Tonn Gheal: The Bright Wave* Alan Titley states that:

The bilingual writer in Ireland runs the danger of being treated with suspicion by both traditions without gaining the entire respect of either.<sup>14</sup>

This was certainly true at the time (1986) and during the preceding decades when it was felt that in order to be pro-Irish, one had to be anti-English. Michael Davitt, editor and driving force behind the publication *INNNTI*,<sup>15</sup> confided to me in a private conversation that he was not anti-English: his mother was English and English was her first language. His observation was as striking and as fresh as his poetry.

While 'suspicion' of the bilingual writer has now all but disappeared, purists are reluctant to engage with those working in both languages and some poets continue to write in Irish only. Biddy Jenkinson has in the past refused to have her work translated into English, stating:

I prefer not to be translated into English in Ireland. It is a small rude gesture to those who think that everything can be harvested and stored without loss in an English-speaking Ireland.<sup>16</sup>

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14 Bolger, Dermot. (Editor). 'Introduction'. *The Bright Wave: An Tonn Gheal*. Raven Arts Press. 1986. Page 21.

15 INNNTI was a poetry magazine first published in 1970. Michael Davitt, Liam Ó Muirthile, Gabriel Rosenstock and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, who all attended University College Cork in the late sixties / early seventies, are known as the INNNTI poets.

16 [Translating Contemporary Irish Language Poetry: Wasafiri: Vol 25, No 2 \(tandfonline.com\)](https://doi.org/10.1080/00141801.2023.2238888) Page 25. link active on 30 June 2023.

Jenkinson has since translated the work of Irish-language poets, including that of Máire Mhac an tSaoi<sup>17</sup> and Louis de Paor.<sup>18</sup> She has also read one of her poems in both Irish and English for *Cead Aighnis* the Irish-language Poetry Jukebox Quotidian Curation.<sup>19</sup>

## Trends

The trend of translating contemporary Irish poetry into English began in earnest in 1986, when Raven Arts Press published the revolutionary anthology *The Bright Wave*,<sup>20</sup> which included the work of six Irish-language poets translated by fourteen poets who wrote in English. Some of the translators were fluent Irish speakers, others had only a limited knowledge of the language. The translations, presented *en face*, paved the way for the publication of anthologies and single-author volumes with parallel Irish / English texts.

The publication of *The Bright Wave* also began the tradition of having the work of contemporary Irish-language poets translated by poets who tend to have a higher profile than those being translated. Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill numbers Seamus Heaney and Paul Muldoon<sup>21</sup> among her translators; Aifric Mac Aodha is translated by David Wheatley<sup>22</sup> and Caitríona Ní Chléircín by Peter Fallon.<sup>23</sup>

Dermot Bolger, editor of *The Bright Wave*, writes in the ‘Editor’s Note’:

In giving my instructions to translators, I have merely stressed that, for this book, I am more concerned that the spirit of the original poem should come across and work as effectively as possible, as against producing a strictly literal line for line version.<sup>24</sup>

17 De Paor, Louis. (Editor). *An Paróise Míorúilteach*. The O’Brien Press and Cló Iar-Chonnacht. 2011.

18 De Paor, Louis. *Ag Greadbhadh Bas sa Reilig, Clapping in the Cemetery*. Cló Iar-Chonnacht. 2006.

19 De Fréine, Celia. *Cead Aighnis*. [0005 Biddy Jenkinson in Cead Aighnis - Leave to Speak \(soundcloud.com\)](https://www.soundcloud.com/0005BiddyJenkinson) link active on 30 June 2023.

20 Bolger, Dermot. (Editor). *The Bright Wave : An Tonn Gheal*. Raven Arts Press. 1986.

21 Ní Dhomhnaill, Nuala. (Multiple Translators). *Pharaoh’s Daughter*. The Gallery Press. 1990.

22 Mac Aodha, Aifric. Wheatley, David. (Translator). *Foreign News*. The Gallery Press. 2017.

23 Ní Chléircín, Caitríona. Fallon, Peter. (Translator). *The Talk of the Town*. The Gallery Press. 2020.

24 *The Bright Wave : An Tonn Gheal*. Page 10.

This initiated a shift in focus to the translated version of the poem rather than a faithful rendering of the original text. Since then, some translators, while respecting the ‘spirit’ of the original text, have taken liberties and imposed their own style on the poem being translated, while others have striven to remain as close as possible to the original. In ‘Translating Contemporary Irish Poetry’<sup>25</sup> Clíona Ní Ríordáin compares two translations of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill’s poem ‘An Crann’, one by Paul Muldoon, translated as ‘As for the Quince’,<sup>26</sup> the other by Michael Hartnett, translated as ‘The Tree’.<sup>27</sup>

The extravagances of the Muldoon translation are nowhere to be found in Michael Hartnett’s translation. If translation is about giving voice to the other poet in the target language, it seems to me that it is Hartnett’s version that carries Ní Dhomhnaill’s voice. The voice in the Muldoon version, with its whimsy, allusiveness and shifting registers, is that of Muldoon himself.<sup>28</sup>

The approach to translation, as suggested by Bolger, differs from that adopted in *An Duanaire 1600-1900: Poems of the Dispossessed*. As its title suggests, this anthology includes poems from the years in question which have been collected by Seán Ó Tuama and given ‘verse translations’ by Thomas Kinsella. In ‘Réamhrá : Introduction. 111: Na hAistriúcháin / The Translations’ the editors write that the translations:

are meant to read with some naturalness, suggesting something of the poetic quality of the originals. They are not free “versions”, however. It was taken that fulfilment of our primary aim required translations of the greatest possible fidelity of content, and the results are as close to the original Irish as we could make them.<sup>29</sup>

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25 [Translating Contemporary Irish Language Poetry: Wasafiri: Vol 25, No 2 \(tandfonline.com\)](#) Page 22. link active on 30 June 2023.

26 *The Bright Wave : An Tonn Gheal*. Pages 114-117.

27 Ní Dhomhnaill, Nuala. Hartnett, Michael. (Translator). *Selected poems : Rogha Dánta*. New Island Books / Raven Arts Press, 1993. Pages 92-95.

28 [Translating Contemporary Irish Language Poetry: Wasafiri: Vol 25, No 2 \(tandfonline.com\)](#) Page 22.

29 Ó Tuama, Seán. (Editor). Kinsella, Thomas. (Translator). ‘Réamhrá : Introduction. 111: Na hAistriúcháin / The Translations’. *An Duanaire 1600-1900: Poems of the Dispossessed*. Page XXXV. The Dolmen Press. 1981.



When translating my own work and that of others I prefer the *An Duanaire* / Hartnett approach and strive to remain close to the original poem, while at the same time, ensuring its ‘poetic’ outcome in the target language. I suggest a way in which to achieve this in ‘Translator’s Licence – A Look at Translation in Relation to the Poetry of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill’, an article I wrote almost thirty years ago in which I compare the act of translation to acting:

Some actors are the same in every part – they play themselves. Others create a different and interesting character each time they assume a role. Their own personality, nuances of voice and gesture are subsumed into the role; a new persona takes over, while a tiny part of themselves is retained. It is this combination that makes the role unique. Translators of poetry sometimes impose their own style on poems they translate: the poet who likes rhyme translates into rhyme; the surrealist imposes his/her particular style on the poem in question.<sup>30</sup>

Another reason for not departing from the original text is cited by Louis de Paor in his bilingual collection *Ag Greadhadh Bas sa Reilig, Clapping in the Cemetery*. Three translators, including Jenkinson, worked in consort with the poet to render the poems into English. De Paor says of the process:

In fact the basic principle of translation was that the English should, as far as possible, be sufficiently close to the author’s own voice in English as to allow him to read his work in another language with conviction; in other words, to read his own work in another language without feeling he had become a ventriloquist’s dummy speaking someone else’s words.<sup>31</sup>

From that statement it can be inferred that, while de Paor is reluctant to translate his own work, he wants to be involved in the translation process so as to ensure that when he reads his work in translation he feels confident of, and comfortable in, what he is saying.

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30 De Fréine, Celia. ‘Translator’s Licence – A Look at Translation in Relation to the Poetry of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill’. *HU Issue 103. Special Feature: In Translation*. Sewell, Frankie. Editor. Spring 1997. Page 25.

31 De Paor, Louis. *Ag Greadhadh Bas sa Reilig, Clapping in the Cemetery*. Indreabhán: Cló Iar-Chonnacht. 2006. Pages 231-32.

Apart from the instances mentioned above, I have not seen other translations of my work into English, but can identify with de Paor: I would find it strange to be obliged to speak words which others have applied to my work. More importantly, I would not be happy knowing such words would be used when my work was being translated into a third language. i.e., Spanish, Portuguese or any other European language. Having rendered my work into English myself, I'm confident the translation will be as close as possible to the original text.

### Found in translation

There has been much discussion as to what is lost in translation. What interests me is what is found there. What if the translator encounters flaws, repetition or insurmountable obstacles when rendering the text into English? In further discussing the process involved in translation in *Ag Greadadh Bas*, de Paor states:

While I have made minor changes to a number of poems in Irish, I have avoided the temptation to rewrite poems from the dubious perspective of hindsight. The only exception is 'Oileán na Marbh/The Isle of the Dead' where I have contracted the opening section, after individual attempts by all four translators foundered on an unnecessary confusion in the first three stanzas of the poem as it was originally published in Irish.<sup>32</sup>

Commenting on these changes to the original text, Clíona Ní Ríordáin asks in her essay 'Translating Contemporary Irish Language Poetry':

Does *Ag Greadadh Bas sa Reilig* mark a new stage in the relationship between Irish language poetry and English language translation? It is clear that the rewriting of the original, to facilitate the translation, raises the whole issue of the stability of an original for a poet equally at home in both languages. It also raises not just the issue of voice...but also the more problematic relationship between original and version, when the relationship between the two is based on the relationship of a minority language to a global giant.<sup>33</sup>

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32 Ibid.

33 [Translating Contemporary Irish Language Poetry: Wasafiri: Vol 25, No 2 \(tandfonline.com\)](https://www.tandfonline.com) Page 24.

Such an issue does not arise in my case: during my forays into the grassland I treat both languages with respect. That respect applies to their history, tradition and literature; it recognises influences from writers whose work may have been forgotten or buried.<sup>34</sup> I discovered and developed my approach to translating my own work by accident. My earliest poems, which were written in Irish, were rejected. Convinced I could never become a poet, and nor could I write in Irish, I turned to other genres until limited availability of time forced me back to poetry. Though the impulse for these poems came to me in Irish, I immediately switched to English until such time as I grew confident and allowed the poems to be completed in Irish. I then translated them into English and moved back and forth between languages until I was satisfied with the basic poem in Irish and its English version. This *modus operandi* worked, and continues to work, as an editing tool: it eliminates the unnecessary, the overly-descriptive and the repetitive.<sup>35</sup>

When reading in public, whether abroad or in Ireland, apart from during Irish-language events, I read my work in both Irish and English. The greater proportion of those attending bilingual readings in this country tend not to be proficient in Irish but many have some memory of the language from their schooldays and are often surprised at how much of the original text they recognise when they hear the English-language translation. Although the bilingual writer may no longer be frowned upon in Ireland, there is less movement between the Irish-language writing camp and that of English-writing. I feel the bilingual writer, who reads publicly in both languages, is, in a small way, building a bridge between both camps.

## Rewards

Although poets writing in a minority language face many challenges, as described above, we are often rewarded with initiatives organised by institutions such as LITERATURE IRELAND, CLUTURE IRELAND and LITERATURE ACROSS FRONTIERS who finance translation and travel, and also sponsor platforms which facilitate the presentation of such work. With support from

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34 See: Nic Eoin, Máirín. 'Fianaise Lom / Bare Witness: Surrealism and life writing in the work of Celia de Fréine'. *Reading Gender and Space. Essays for Patricia Coughlan*. Fogarty, Anne and O'Toole, Tina. (Editors). Cork University Press. 2023. Pages 80-105.

35 See: ["I Control The Translation Myself": An Interview With Celia de Fréine: Women's Studies: Vol 44, No 7 \(tandfonline.com\)](#) link active on 30 June 2023.

these organisations and some universities, I have had my work translated, enjoyed residencies in continental Europe and read at festivals, seminars and conferences in France, Spain, Portugal and Slovenia. Not only have I become acquainted with the work of poets from across Europe, and they with mine, I have met academics who, on learning of my work, have since written about it and championed it.

## Publications

My first two books of poetry *Faoi Chábáistí is Ríonacha* (Cló Iar-Chonnacht, 2000) and *Fiacha Fola* (Cló Iar-Chonnacht 2004) were published in Irish as they had been successful in the competition Gradam Litríochta Chló Iar-Chonnacht. *Faoi Chábáistí is Ríonacha* won the runner-up prize in in 1999, *Fiacha Fola* won the competition outright in 2004. Although I had translated the texts into English they were not published at this time. Sixteen of the poems from *Faoi Chábáistí is Ríonacha* were published in my first English-language collection *Scarecrows at Newtownards* (Scotus Press, 2005) and *Blood Debts* my translation of *Fiacha Fola* was published by Scotus Press in 2014. My subsequent Irish-language poetry books were published in dual-language form: *imram : odyssey* (Arlen House 2010. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 2019); *Aibítir Aoise : Alphabet of an Age* (Arlen House, 2011); *cuir amach seo dom : riddle me this* (Arlen House, 2014); *I bhFreagairt ar Rilke : In response to Rilke* (Arlen House, 2020); *Léaslíne a Lorg : In Search of a Horizon* (Arlen House, 2022). My ‘new and selected poems’ *Aoi ag Bord na Teanga* was published in Irish by *LeabhairCOMHAR* in 2022.

## Translating the work of others: some examples

As well as translating my own work from Irish, I have translated the work of the three twentieth century giants, Máire Mhac an tSaoi,<sup>36</sup> Máirtín Ó Díréain<sup>37</sup> and Seán Ó Ríordáin,<sup>38</sup> “most often spoken of as those who pioneered the way in writing excellent stuff, not Irish merely, but modern as well”.<sup>39</sup> In doing so, I

36 De Paor, Louis. (Editor). *An Paróiste Míorúilteach*.

37 De Paor, Louis. (Editor). *Leabhar na hAthghabhála Poems of Repossession*. Bloodaxe Books. 2016.

38 Ó Ríordáin, Seán. *Selected Poems*. Sewell, Frank. (Editor). Yale University Press and Cló Iar-Chonnacht. 2014.

39 Titley, Alan. ‘Introduction’. *The Bright Wave*. Page 12.

adopted my usual approach of remaining close to the original text while creating a worthy poem in English. In the case of Máire Mhac an tSaoi, the main challenge was in understanding her rich Munster dialect. I enjoyed working on poems such as ‘Miotas : Myth’<sup>40</sup> which references the gods Kore and Dionysos and ‘An bhean mhídhílis : The unfaithful woman’,<sup>41</sup> from the Spanish of Federico García Lorca’s ‘La Casada Infiel : The Faithless Wife’.<sup>42</sup> When translating this particular poem, in consultation with editor, Louis de Paor, I concentrated on the Mhac an tSaoi version in Irish but also studied Lorca’s original. The poem describes bringing a woman to the river and making love to her on St. John’s Eve. A Spanish colleague informed me that ‘bringing a woman to the river’ is a euphemism for having sex. While it is clear that this is what the poem is about, I had fun speculating as to whether or not Mhac an tSaoi was familiar with the colloquial use of the phrase.

In the case of Ó Díreáin, I had no difficulty with the poem ‘Ár ré dhearóil : Our wretched era’<sup>43</sup> in which the poet writes of loneliness when in exile in the city. However, in the poem ‘Ó Mórna : Ó Mórna’,<sup>44</sup> though I admired its rich language, I was repelled by its titular anti-hero, whose wont is rape and plunder. I was unable to finish translating the poem and had to enlist the assistance of editor, Louis de Paor.

I enjoyed translating the work of Ó Ríordáin, the simplicity of whose poems belies their strength. My favourite was ‘Cuireadh : Invitation’,<sup>45</sup> in which the poet longs for female company. In her review in the Irish Times, Róisín Ní Ghairbhí suggests my translation “might be an early Leonard Cohen song”.<sup>46</sup>

When reading poetry translated from Chinese, Galician, or other languages I have no knowledge of, I trust that the translator has adopted an approach similar to my own in the crib (literal translation) provided: I want to know, with the minimum interference, what the poet is saying.

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40 Mhac an tSaoi, Máire. (Multiple Translators). *An Paróiste Míorúilteach*. Page 177.

41 Ibid. Page 101.

42 Lorca, Federico García. Lorca, Francisco García and Allen, Donald M. (Editors). Multiple Translators. *The Selected Poems*. New Directions publishing Corporation. 1955. Pages 68-73.

43 *Leabhar na hAthghabhála Poems of Repossession*. Pages 78-85.

44 Ibid. Pages 62-71.

45 Ó Ríordáin, Seán. *Selected Poems*. Pages 24-25.

46 Ní Ghairbhí, Róisín. ‘Like a Woody Guthrie to the Dylans who came after him’. *The Irish Times*. Arts & Books. November 8th, 2014. Page 10.

My most challenging translation assignment to date was to render *June* by the then-imprisoned writer, Shi Tao, from Chinese into Irish, which I undertook at the request of IRISH PEN. The translation was to form part of a poem relay organised by PEN International to coincide with the journey of the Olympic torch on its way to Beijing in 2008. The crib consisted of powerful images. It was up to me to not only interpret those images, but to transmute them into words. The translated poem ‘Meitheamh : June’ is included in my collection *Aibítir Aoise : Alphabet of an Age*.<sup>47</sup>

In 2010 I translated *Penélope* by Xohana Torres into Irish as part of *To the Winds Our Sails*,<sup>48</sup> an anthology of contemporary Galician women poets translated, into English and Irish, by Irish poets. When I received the poem and the crib I was under pressure of time and didn’t have the luxury of allowing my translation to ‘percolate’ before submitting it to the editors. Manuela Palacios-González<sup>49</sup> remarks in ‘Of Penelopes, Mermaids and Flying Women: Celia de Fréine’s Tropes of Mobility’:

The peculiar grammar of the oracular voice, its puzzling symbols, and Penelope’s similarly unruly register have posed a challenge to De Fréine in her subsequent published translations of this poem. However, the difficulty of translation must have been accompanied by a deep attraction to this female navigator because, of the five poems selected by Torres for *To the Winds Our Sails* (2010), De Fréine chose “Penélope” for further refinement in her 2011 collection *Aibítir Aoise: Alphabet of an Age*.<sup>50</sup>

As stated by Palacios-González I made two Irish-language translations of the Torres poem: the first was published in *To the Wind Our Sails*,<sup>51</sup> the second was published in *Aibítir Aoise*:

*Alphabet of an Age*.<sup>52</sup> This is the only time I have returned and reworked a translation, the reason being that I hadn’t grasped, at the outset, the delibe-

47 De Fréine, Celia. *Aibítir Aoise : Alphabet of an Age*. Arlen House. 2011. Pages 74-75.

48 O’Donnell and Palacios. *To the Wind Our Sails*. Salmon Poetry. 2010. Page 59.

49 Palacios is the surname used in *To The Wind Our Sails* and *Forked Tongues*.

50 [Of Penelopes, Mermaids and Flying Women: Celia de Fréine’s Tropes of Mobility – Estudios Irlandeses](#). link active on 30 June, 2023.

51 O’Donnell, Mary and Palacios, Manuela. (Editors). *To the Wind Our Sails*. Salmon Poetry. 2010.

52 De Fréine, Celia. *Aibítir Aoise : Alphabet of an Age*. Page 82.



rate awkwardness and strange syntax of the poem's title, which is contrived to suggest that Penelope, who, in her life heretofore, is not given to eloquent speech, begins to discover her voice during the course of the poem.<sup>53</sup> I also rendered the first two stanzas into direct speech in *Aibítir Aoise: Alphabet of an Age*<sup>54</sup> as this seemed more appropriate.

Two years after participating in *To the Wind Our Sails* I was involved in the anthology *Forked Tongues*,<sup>55</sup> edited by Manuela Palacios, which featured Galician, Basque and Catalan Women's Poetry translated by Irish writers. In this anthology I translated five poems by Itxaro Borda, the French Basque poet. I had been given the English crib and also the poet's own translation of her work into French and decided to work from the French translation which seemed closer to the original than the English crib. In 'Maria Merceren (B) : The Eye of Maria-Mercè Marçal'<sup>56</sup> (though I can't remember the exact sequence of events), I juxtaposed the word 'mote', 'eye' and 'beam', having recognised a reference in Borda's poem to 'The Sermon on the Mount'. Although much of Borda's work is concerned with same-sex relationships, I understood from her poems that both she and I had 'endured' a similar Catholic upbringing.

While it has been satisfying to translate these, and other, poets from their native languages into Irish and English, in each case my aim has been to create a true and effective rendition of the original poem. Clearly, other translators use different approaches and, though I might not agree with their method, I respect their work. When it comes to my own poetry, I continue to believe that the act of translation is best compared to that of acting. I doubt there is an Oscar for translation. However, in 1999 I was awarded the British Comparative Literature Association Translation Award for translating some of my early poems. Perhaps such an award could be considered the BAFTA of translation.

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53 *To the Wind Our Sails*. Salmon Poetry. 2010. Page 59. De Fréine, Celia. *Aibítir Aoise : Alphabet of an Age*. Page 82.

54 De Fréine, Celia. *Aibítir Aoise : Alphabet of an Age*. Page 82.

55 Palacios, Manuela. (Editor). *Forked Tongues*. Shearsman Books. 2012.

56 *Ibid*. Pages 84-85.

## Recent work

My most recent translation assignment has been to render the poem ‘My Ireland’ by Stephen James Smith<sup>57</sup> from English into Irish for the San Patrizio Livorno Festival.<sup>58</sup> As this poem was written to be performed I took that into account when translating: I rearranged some of the line-breaks to make ‘phrasing’ easier for the reader / performer, kept the tone colloquial throughout and recreated a rhythm in Irish to correspond with that in the original English. It was necessary to make some small changes to the original text: in line 1, Stanza 3, I translated “Hibernia” as “Róisín Dubh”; in consultation with Catherine Dunne I translated “You have a teanga / so add your voice” as “Is leatsa teanga: /bí á labhairt ar son do mhuintire”, exhorting the country to speak on behalf of its people.

‘My Ireland’, which addresses the contradictions and anomalies in today’s Ireland, also exhorts the poet’s Ireland to ‘cop-on’. Bearing the content in mind, my first challenge was how to convert the title ‘My Ireland’: a direct translation would not convey the satiric subtlety present in the original title. I opted for ‘Éire, Mo Thír-se’, meaning ‘Ireland, My Own Country’. The initial poem had been edited down to 1,000 plus words by Catherine Dunne and this is the version I translated. ‘My Ireland’ was translated into Italian by Massimiliano Roveri and Maria-Grazia Mati. The following excerpt is taken from a section near the end of the poem:

Ireland you are:	A Éire, is tú:
Happy Pears and Apple accounts.	Piorraí Sona is cuntaisí Apple.
Ireland you are still living in the past,	Tá tú fós ag maireachtáil san am atá thart.
how long can this last?	Cé chomh fada a fhanfaidh tú ann?

Ireland you are:	A Éire, is tú:
Some woman’s yellow hair,	Folt buí mná éicint,
EU fishing quotas,	cuótaí éisc an Aontais Eorpaigh,
Bankers, bonuses,	Baincéirí, bónasáí,
Paddy Clarke HA HA, Enya,	Paddy Clarke HA HA, Enya,

57 Poet, Stephen James Smith and Italian translators, Massimiliano Roveri and Maria-Grazia Mati, have given permission for their work to be reproduced here.

58 San Patrizio Livorno Festival. June 16th, 2023 was organised by Massimiliano Roveri, Maria-Grazia Mati and Catherine Dunne.

Eircodes, uilleann pipes,  
NAMA and the HSE,  
a biscuit and stout industry,  
Riverdance, The Walls of Limerick,  
private islands, apologies,  
Bog Poems, Blackberry-Picking,  
fermenting,  
Wild Geese, Web Summits, Harps,

Jimmy X, All Kinds of Everything,  
caught in a whirlpool spin.  
You are part of the world,  
look out  
and  
look within...

Mise Éire, Ireland, Hibernia,  
you are all this  
you are all this  
and more!

My Ireland you are  
trying to be all encompassing  
and it's an impossible task.  
So I ask you,  
“what's your My Ireland?”  
Ireland are you evolving,  
Arising, an Aisling,  
Remembering,  
Ireland Arise!

Ireland from what I've heard  
a great compassion  
is calling you.  
You have a teanga,

Éirchódanna, píopaí uileann,  
NAMA is an HSE,  
tionscal póirtéir is brioscaí,  
Riverdance, Fallaí Luimní,  
oileáin phríobháideacha, leithscéalta,  
Dánta-mhóna, ag piocadh sméara dubha,  
ag coipeadh,  
Géanna Fiáine, Cruinnithe Mullaigh,  
Cláirseachaí,  
Jimmy X, chuile shórt dá bhfuil ann,  
gafa i gcasadh guairneáin.  
Is cuid den domhan thú,  
bí ag faire amach,  
is  
ag breathnú isteach...

A ‘Mise Éire’, a Éire, a Róisín Dubh,  
is tú an méid sin uilig  
is tú an méid sin uilig  
is tuilleadh.

A Éire, mo thír-se, tá tú ag iarraidh  
chuile shórt a chuimsiú,  
rud atá dodhéanta.  
Fiafraím díot, mar sin.  
“céard í do ‘Éire, do thír-se?’”  
A Éire, an bhfuil tú ag teacht chun cinn,  
ag éirí suas, id' Aisling,  
ag tabhairt a bhfuil thart chun cuimhne?  
A Éire, éirigh suas.

A Éire, ón méid atá cloiste agam,  
tá comhbhá ollmhór  
ag gairm ort.  
Is leatsa teanga:

so add your voice.  
 Ireland from what I know  
 a great courage  
 is in you.  
 So stand united rejoice.  
 Go back to the source, the flow,  
 forget mainstream.  
 Let out a roar,  
 I want to hear you scream:

“This Ireland is my land.  
 This Ireland is your land.  
 This island is our land.”

And know I love you.  
 And know I love you.  
 I love you.  
 Sin é!  
 I’m trying to listen,  
 so what have you to say?

My Ireland you are  
 The river rush of the  
 Corrib, Nore,  
 Foyle, Suir, Shannon,  
 Lagan, Liffey, Lee  
 And every tributary  
 Wash over me,  
 Wash over me,  
 Wash over you,  
 Wash over us...

bí á labhairt ar son do mhuintire.  
 A Éire, de réir mar a thuigim,  
 is ionat  
 misneach suntasach.  
 Seas suas, aontaithe, ríméadach.  
 Fill ar an bhfoinse, an sruth,  
 déan dearmad ar an ngnáthamh.  
 Lig béic asat,  
 is mian liom tú a chloisteáil a rá in ard do  
 chinn  
 is do ghutha:  
 “Is liomsa an talamh seo, Éire.  
 Is leatsa an talamh seo, Éire.  
 Is linn an t-oileán seo.”

Bíodh a fhios agat go bhfuil grá agam duit.  
 Bíodh a fhios agat go bhfuil grá agam duit.  
 Tá grá agam duit.  
 Sin a bhfuil.  
 Tá mé ag iarraidh éisteacht –  
 Céard atá le rá agat?

A Éire, mo thír-se, is tú  
 sruth abhann na Coiribe  
 na Feoire, na Siúire,  
 na Sionainne, na Life, na Laoi  
 an Fheabhail is an Lagáin  
 Is chuile chraobh-abhainn  
 Sceith tharam,  
 Sceith tharam,  
 Sceith tharat.  
 Sceith tharainn...

Irlanda sei:

“Pere Felici” e conti in banca della Apple.

Irlanda, vivi ancora nel passato,  
quanto può durare?

Irlanda, sei:

i capelli biondi di una donna,  
le quote di pesca dell’UE,  
banchieri, bonus,  
Paddy Clarke HA HA, Enya,  
codici postali, cornamuse,  
NAMA e il sistema sanitario,  
un’industria di biscotti e birra scura,  
Riverdance, le Mura di Limerick,  
isole private, scuse,  
Poesie di Torbiera, raccolta delle more,  
fermentazione,  
Oche Selvagge, Web Summit, Arpe,  
Jimmy X, All Kinds of Everything,  
Il tutto intrappolato in un vortice.  
Fai parte del mondo,  
guarda  
e  
guarda dentro...

Mise Éire (Io sono Irlanda), Irlanda, Hibernia,  
sei tutto questo,  
sei tutto questo  
e di più!

Mia Irlanda, stai cercando  
di essere totalizzante  
ed è un compito impossibile.  
Quindi ti chiedo,  
“qual è la *tua* Mia Irlanda?”  
Irlanda stai evolvendo,

risorgendo, un'aisling,  
ricordando,  
Sorgi, Irlanda!

Irlanda da quello che ho sentito  
una grande compassione  
ti sta chiamando.  
Hai una lingua,  
quindi aggiungi la tua voce.  
Irlanda da quello che so  
un grande coraggio  
è in te.  
Quindi stai unita e rallegrati.  
Torna alla sorgente, al flusso,  
dimentica la corrente dominante.  
Lascia uscire un ruggito,  
voglio sentirti urlare:  
“Questa Irlanda è la mia terra.  
Questa Irlanda è la tua terra.  
Questa isola è la nostra terra.”

E sappi che ti amo.  
E sappi che ti amo.  
Ti amo.  
Questo è tutto!  
Sto cercando di ascoltare,  
quindi cosa hai da dire?

Mia Irlanda, sei  
Lo scorrere dei tuoi fiumi  
Corrib, Nore,  
Foyle, Suir, Shannon,  
Lagan, Liffey, Lee  
E ogni affluente  
Scorri su di me,  
Scorri su di me,  
Scorri su di me...