Ireland in translation

MICHAEL CRONIN

The tension between Irish and English has led to a creative space for translation and to a unique use of Irish English

Introduction

Translation has long featured as a convenient metaphor for the Irish condition. However, its use as metaphor should not disguise the insights translation provides into the status and formation of Irish English. When Richard II arrived in Ireland in 1394 his problems were not only political and military. They were also linguistic. On the occasion of the visit of the Irish kings to Richard in Dublin that same year, James Butler, the second Earl of Ormond, had to interpret the king's speech into Irish. Loyalty to Richard's kingship did not extend to loyalty to his chosen tongue. The translation skills of another Earl of Ormond would be further called upon in 1541 when the Irish parliament made Henry VIII King of Ireland. The Earl on this occasion interpreted the Speaker's address into Irish for the benefit of the Lords and Commons, although they were predominantly of Anglo-Norman or Old English origin. The act of translation, in this instance, was not without its ironies. James Butler was interpreting into a language that had been outlawed four years previously under the *Act for the English Order, Habit and Language*.

The seventeenth century marks the emergence of Ireland as a locus for English-language translation. The emergence was related to a new system of patronage. The elements that combined to constitute an infrastructure for translation activity in English came into being in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. Firstly, there was the establishment in 1592 of Ireland's first university, in the modern sense of the word. Although it provided for the teaching of Irish and through the agency of Uilliam Ó Domhnaill and William Bedell was centrally involved in translation projects into Irish, Trinity College in Dublin was predominantly English-speaking. This was hardly surprising as it had been founded on the initiative of the new English authorities in Ireland. Secondly, the massive land transfers of the seventeenth century had led to the emergence of a new landed aristocracy, the Ascendancy, who were almost exclusively English-speaking. This new class provided both the prestige and the support that was considered both desirable and necessary in order to have translations published. Thirdly, many of the settlers in the new Plantations in Ireland spoke English and there was little economic or political incentive for them to change their linguistic habits. Fourthly, the language of the established church was mainly English, despite valiant efforts by individual churchmen to adopt a more generous policy towards Irish. When Bishop Dopping of Meath appeared to lose interest in his efforts to have a number of the psalms translated into Irish for Bedell's Bible, Archbishop Marsh in a letter to Robert Boyle on 22 March 1685 noted that, 'The unwelcomeness of this



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undertaking to many in this country I believe, was the reason, why the bishop of Meath flew off from prosecuting what he designed and promised, and has ever since been wholly unconcerned and sat neuter' (de Brún, 1977–9: 64).

In 1890 a collection of prose translations entitled *Beside the Fire* was published. The translator was the future President of Ireland, Douglas Hyde. The collection included translations of some of the folk-tales contained in his own *Leabhar Sgeuluigheachta*, published in 1889, and the other sources were Irish-language material collected by folklorists such as William Larminie and Patrick Kennedy. The translations by Hyde were into an idiosyncratic form of Irish English. They were idiomatic, unpretentious and conveyed energy and difference without descending into parody. In the year that the folk-tale translations were published, Hyde's translations of poetry were being published in the *Nation* newspaper (between April and November). When that newspaper ceased publication further translations of poetry appeared in the *Weekly Freeman* in 1892. A year later a number of these translations were published in book form as *Abhráin Grádh Chúige Connacht* or *The Love Songs of Connacht*. In his introduction to a modern edition of the *Love Songs*, Mícheál Ó hAodha claims that the translations 'marked a turning-point in the Irish Literary Revival and revealed a new source for the development of a distinctive Irish mode in verse and poetic prose' (Ó hAodha, 1969: v). Hyde pursued the translation policy adopted in *Beside the Fire*. The prose translations of the poems were in the English vernacular of the Irish countryside. In the way that biblical translations in earlier centuries had conferred a new status and legitimacy upon European vernaculars, Hyde's bold step in translation opened up the possibility of using distinctive Irish English as a new literary vernacular. W. B. Yeats emphasised the liberatory effects of Hyde's translation strategy in a preface to a limited edition of the *Love Songs* published by Dun Emer Press:

> This little book. . .was the first book that made known to readers that had no Irish the poetry of Irish country people. There have been other translators but they had a formal eighteenth century style that took what Dr. Hyde would call the 'sap and pleasure' out of simple thought and emotion. Their horses were always steeds and their cows kine, their rhythms had the formal monotony or the oratorical energy of that middle class literature that comes more out of will and reason than out of imagination and sympathy. . .His [Hyde's] imagination is indeed at its best only when he writes in Irish, or in that beautiful English of the country people who remember too much Irish to talk like a newspaper, and I commend his prose to all who can delight in fine prose. (Yeats cited in Ó hAodha, 1969: vi)

Yeats felt that Hyde's prose translations were superior to his verse translations. The verse translations were victims of an anxiety of influence that compromised their novelty. Hyde was aware of the translation tradition, however, and saw his own individual talent invested in the attempt to reproduce the vowel rhymes as well as the exact metres of the original language. He is modest in his claims for the prose translations: 'My English prose translation only aims at being literal, and has courageously, though no doubt ruggedly, reproduced the Irish idioms of the original.' Hyde's translations mark a transition from translation as an act of exegesis to translation as an agent of aesthetic and political renewal. Translations no longer simply bore witness to the past, they were to actively shape a future. The threshold that was being crossed was clearly marked by the translator. In his preface Hyde claims that the work contained in the collection was originally in Irish and he continues:

> but the exigencies of publication in a weekly newspaper necessitated the translation of it into English. This I do not now wholly regret; for the literal translation of these songs will, I hope, be of some advantage to that at present increasing class of Irishmen who take a just pride in their native language, and to those foreigners who great philologists and etymologists as they are, find themselves hampered in their pursuits through their unavoidable ignorance of the modern Irish idiom which can only be correctly interpreted by the native speakers, who are, alas! becoming fewer and fewer every day.

The old and new audiences for translation, foreign philologists and native readers, are juxtaposed. Translation that down the centuries has featured in periods of political change in Ireland is once more present. The appearance of Hyde's work in weekly newspapers like the *Nation* and the *Weekly Freeman* meant that his work was reaching a wide audience. Popularity for Hyde did not come without contradiction. The paradox of dissemination is expressed by Hyde himself when he says that the decision to translate was dictated by the 'exigencies of publication in a weekly newspaper'. Newspapers that were sympathetic to cultural nationalism were powerful agents of

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Anglicisation. The full extent of the linguistic change in nineteenth-century Ireland is evident in the need for translation of Irish work into English if it is to reach a popular audience.

A contemporary and acquaintance of Douglas Hyde was the playwright John Millington Synge, author most notably of *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907). Synge as the unhoused, the extraterritorial, wandering between two languages is a figure that is both translator and translated. He translates but, like so many other Anglo-Irish writers of the nineteenth century, he is translating himself into the language and culture of the other. It is no wonder that he finds himself drawn to the process of translation as it externalises and in a sense resolves his divided linguistic allegiances. Synge not only embodies the centrality of translation to the Revival but he points to the linguistic and cultural future of twentieth-century Ireland, which lies under the sign of translation. Patrick Pearse, Brendan Behan, Eoghan Ó Tuairisc, Flann O'Brien, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Austin Clarke, Liam O'Flaherty and Frank O'Connor are but some of the writers in modern Irish literature that are caught between languages and cultures.

Synge studied Irish while in Trinity College from 1888 to 1892. In his early years his vision of Irish was mainly antiquarian, but during his period as a student in Paris he became passionately interested in Breton literature, and this eventually brought him back to Ireland and to the living reality of Irish on the western seaboard. The translator as writer or the writer as rewriter saw that the challenge was to convey the excitement and beauty of the source language in the target language. To do this he would have to abandon the artifice of fluency and allow the target language, the language of the coloniser, to be colonised in its turn by the language of the colonised. This Synge felt was now possible for the first time in centuries, 'the linguistic atmosphere of Ireland has become definitely English enough, for the first time, to allow work to be done in English that is perfectly Irish in essence' (cited in Kiberd, 1993: 384). In 1892 Yeats had argued that translation not (language) revival would be the way forward for a new national cultural movement:

> Can we not keep the continuity of the nation's life, not by trying to do what Dr. Hyde has practically pronounced impossible, (i.e. saving Gaelic), but by translating and retelling in English, which shall have an indefinable Irish quality of rhythm and style, all that is best in the ancient literature. (Yeats, 1892)

The critic and writer Seamus Deane sees language as a distinguishing feature of European Romanticism as it affected Ireland: 'Irish literature tends to dwell on the medium in which it is written because it is difficult not to be self-conscious about a language which is simultaneously native and foreign' (Deane, 1985: 13). Translation is the fault-line that runs between the native and the foreign, and Irish writers since the Literary and Language Revival in the 1890s have been divided as to whether translation is indeed possible. Is translation an act of pillage and conquest or is it a bisociative shift towards a newer, more exciting synthesis?

Lady Gregory was another prominent figure of the Revival who acted as mediator for the translation scholarship of earlier generations. Though considerably more proficient in Irish than earlier translators such as Standish O'Grady, she had recourse to English translations when preparing *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* (1902), her influential version in Anglo-Irish dialect of the stories of the Red Branch knights. Though criticised by Synge, Hyde, O'Grady and Meyer for the scholarly shortcomings of the text, and particularly for bowdlerisation, the value of Gregory's work was in a sense vindicated by its aesthetic importance for Synge among others. Her adoption of rurally based forms of Irish English crucially strengthened the case for a literature in that language. In his review of the translation, Synge mentioned Hyde's translations of the *Love Songs* as well as articles by Yeats on folklore written 'with this cadence in mind', and concludes:

> The intellectual movement that has been taking place in Ireland for the last twenty years has chiefly been a movement towards a nearer appreciation of the country people, and their language, so that it is not too much to say that the translation of the old MSS. into this idiom is the result of an evolution rather than of a merely personal idea. (Synge, 1966: 367)

The decision to use the English language of Irish people in written prose and on the stage represented a strategic change in the translation fortunes of the Irish. A standard attribute of the Stage Irishman from the seventeenth century onwards was a strong accent or 'brogue', Andelocra, an English character in a play by Thomas Dekker entitled *Old Fortunatus*, disguises himself at one stage in the play as an Irish costermonger and later as a French quack doctor. In both instances, the characters are distinguished by outlandish speech mannerisms and accents. In Beaumont and Fletcher's comedy, *The Coxcomb*

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(1609), the protagonist Antonio disguises himself as an Irish footman. His object is to uncover his wife's infidelity by delivering a love-letter to her. Antonio jibs at having to speak an uncouth English: 'This rebell tonge sticks in my teeth worse then a toughe hen; sure it was nere knowne at Babell, for they soul'd no apples, and this was made for certaine at the first planting of Orchards, 'tis so crabbed.' (Bowers, 1966: 297). In his discussion of another seventeenth-century English play, Robert Howard's *The Committee*, Joep Leerssen describes the appearance of a feature in the play that would enjoy a long life on the English stage. Teg is the name of the Irish character in the play:

> A new comical trait is his [Teg's] propensity to make verbal blunders, that is, statements which, though their intended meaning is clear and straightforward, are so infelicitously expressed as to be self-contradictory. When ascribed to Irishmen, such blunders became known as 'Irish Bulls' and came to occupy a place alongside the brogue as standard markers of an Irish character's nationality. (Leerssen 1986: 101)

A foreign accent and infelicitous expression are obvious consequences of unsuccessful translation, of the failure to master the language of the master. The notion that foreigners speaking one's language are irresistibly funny is of course common to many languages. However, in the Irish case, differences in language and expression became equated not only with the comic but with the inept. If Irish people after the conquest of the country were to become English speakers, then the same standards would be applied to them as to other English speakers. If they expressed themselves in strange or unusual ways or used different modes of intentionality, then they were classed with children and the insane as quaint but dim. Paddy the Irishman is above all the archetype of mistranslation. By concealing the labour of translation, the difficulties that many Irish people faced in learning English as a foreign language, coupled with mother tongue interference and with apparent idiosyncrasies of accent and idiom, were presented as the undisguised hallmarks of stupidity. Depending on the state of relations between Ireland and England, the dullness was cast as sinister or endearing. Therefore, the decision by Synge, Hyde, Yeats and Lady Gregory to positively champion the English language spoken in rural language was to make an aesthetic virtue of a translation necessity. The unwitting translation process that had sustained ridicule in jokes and on the stage was now consciously cultivated as a marker of specificity rather than shunned as a brand of inferiority. Instead of concealing translation, the process was now foregrounded in the public search for a new form of Irish cultural expression.

Maria Tymoczko and Colin Ireland have called Ireland the 'translational island' where two cultural traditions, the English-language and the Irish-language, once separate have now become blended and hybridised (Tymoczko and Ireland, 2003: 20). In this sense, Ireland is part of a more generalised, global condition where migratory forces are bringing any number of languages and cultures into closer contact. Something vital is being transacted in Ireland at present and language is at the heart of the transaction though it often only appears in public accounts in a fragmented, indirect way. The engagement takes two forms.

The first in Ireland is the country's incorporation into the turbomarket of the English language. As the Austrian artist and critic Rainer Ganahl has pointed out, languages are 'not just products of exchange; they also encourage the exchange and commodification of most other things' (Ganahl, 2001: 27). Whether scientific, technical or commercial discourse is produced in English, German, French or Yoruba 'has an impact on university studies, research, corporate investments, and decision and definition making of all kinds' (28). US investment in Ireland in 2003, for example, was two and half times greater than total US investment in China. It was often pointed out that a large, English-speaking labour force was a decisive factor influencing the investment decisions of US technology firms. However, little attention has been devoted to the linguistic dimension of Ireland's relationships with the rest of the world. One effect of the turbomarket was, for example, to reduce interest in foreign language acquisition at third level so that as the European Union expanded, Irish interest in European languages diminished. A further effect was the potential for intralingual translation, as the Irish moved from the translation afterlife of Irish English, with its marked shadowing by Irish Gaelic, and translated themselves into more global, less distinct forms of English.

The second form of engagement was linked to linguistic complexification of the Republic. The relative health of the economy in the boom years brought the citizens of Babel to the Irish doorstep. One view of the situation was to see language (singular) not as a barrier but rather languages (plural) as cultural and aesthetic resources. The

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Scottish poet Kenneth White spoke of the geopoetic adventure, physical journeying as a travelling through the conspicuous wealth of the world's languages and cultures. This geopoetic adventure now began at home where Irish and English, the official languages of the Republic, entered into a new phase in their linguistic co-existence (Cronin, 2004). How the languages of the new migrants will translate themselves into the dominant idiom of their hosts is bound to be another eventful chapter in the translation history of Irish English. The abrupt end to the economic boom from 2008 onwards means that the linguistic certainties of an economic future are no longer assured. The severity of the crisis affecting the two large Anglophone countries, the United Kingdom and Ireland, meant that English no longer appears as synonymous with economic success and competitive advantage. Irish Government ministers have begun to deplore the neglect of the study of modern languages and the Managing Directors of the giant US corporations which were responsible for substantial amounts of foreign direct investment in Ireland have begun to question the wisdom of de facto monolingualism. Martin Murphy, Managing Director of Hewlett Packard Ireland, has argued, for example, that 'In my view, every student needs to have fluency in two international languages when leaving school' (Murphy, 2010). One outcome might be the formulation of a long-awaited language policy in Ireland and a renewed interest in the teaching of modern languages and the other might be a view of migrant mother-tongue language skills as an asset rather than a hindrance for a small country operating in globalised market conditions. A further dimension to bear in mind is the continued presence of Irish Gaelic in the Irish school system and the popularity of Irish-language media such as the television channel *TG4*. Evidence of recent Irish-language translation in English would appear to point to the emergence of forms of Irish English which do not so much translate or transliterate but incorporate Irish-language words and phrases into English-language usage in contemporary Ireland (Cronin, 2006). As Richard II would no doubt have concurred in 1394, language and identity rarely make for a perfect fit, hence the endless drama of translation.

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