“Untitled”

“Untitled”:

A Memoir of Ireland’s Nascent Years

By

Tomás Bairéad

Translated and edited from the Irish
by Mícheál Ó hAodha

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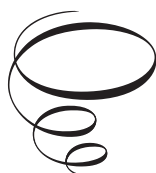

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To Pól Ó Muirí, Béal Feirsteach.

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About the Author

Tomás Bairéad (1893–1973), short-story writer and journalist, was born on the 7th of July 1893 in Baile Dóite, Maigh Cuilinn (Moycullen), Co. Galway. He received his only formal schooling at the local National School in Moycullen. Involved with the Republican movement throughout his life, he joined the Irish Volunteers and was a member of the IRB, initiating several people from his locality into the organisation. In the course of his republican activities he developed an Irish-language shorthand that enabled him (1918) to get a job as a reporter on the Sinn Féin-owned *Galway Express* newspaper in Galway city. In 1922, he secured a job with the *Irish Independent* newspaper in Dublin, where he worked for twenty-six years after which he retired to live in Moycullen again. He is one of the most important, albeit underrated, short–story writers in Irish of the twentieth-century. His short story collections include: *Cumhacht na Cinniúna* (1936), *An Geall a Briseadh* (1938), *Cruithneacht agus Ceannabháin* (1940), *Ór na h-Aitinne* (1949), and *Dán* (1973). His autobiography *Gan Baisteadh*, on which this book is based, was published in 1972. The following year Bairéad published *As an nGéibheann* (lit: "From the Prison-Camp), a collection of letters written to him by Republican activist and Irish-language writer Máirtín Ó Cadhain during the latter's imprisonment in the Curragh between the years 1939 and 1944. Bairéad was married to Ellen ('Nellie') Mara in London and they had two daughters.

FOREWORD

The human drama of history is brought to life for us by Tomás Bairéad in this remarkable memoir. The fear inherent in setting out at night as an Irish Volunteer to burn a police barracks; the dangers of covering the Irish Civil War as a journalist; the guilt that accompanies the cruel actions of a revolutionary solider—all this is rendered immediate and real by the gifted pen of Tomás Bairéad. But one would expect no less from such a distinguished writer of fiction, as well as of journalism.

However, this autobiography also honours the more personal and local pleasures of Irish rural life, as lived in Co Galway at the start of the last century. Far from the public stage of history, from the violent events that shaped modern Ireland, we get a glimpse of a country where people had little and were resourceful by necessity. We learn of a time when ash trees were cut to make hurleys, of how the youth stitched their own footballs for their sport, we learn of the games and amusements that were prevalent in a time where fun was home-spun and married women would never venture out without a shawl.

Bairéad's autobiography, therefore, is of interest to the historian, as well as to anyone interested in the life and customs of rural Ireland in this bygone time.

As for the student of Irish journalism, Bairéad offers invaluable insights into the early years of the craft in the fledgling Irish republic. His accounts of the difficulties faced by the republican press during the War of Independence are of particular interest. What a time to learn your craft, and under what trying conditions, as presses were often broken up by the colonial police force with no warning. This was a time when newspaper editors were wanted men, when many were even on the run. Bairéad's depiction of his time working for the Sinn Féin-owned Galway Express is full of rich detail and important factual information that fleshes out our knowledge of Irish journalism during this fraught period. His descriptions of later writing copy for the Irish Independent to the sound of machine gun fire during the Irish Civil War are full of the detail and colour that mark out the best memoir writing. For anyone seriously interested in the history of Irish journalism, Bairéad's autobiography is required reading. The author's contribution to the national newspaper culture was truly significant

in his invention of an Irish shorthand. With this book, Bairéad has made an equally important contribution.

But it is to the diligent work of editor and translator Mícheál Ó hAodha that credit must go for this present volume. Previously available in the original Irish, Tomás Bairéad's memoir will now win a wide and appreciative audience in this new English translation. The fact that Ó

hAodha is himself an author of some note is evident in the rendering of this work into English – each sentence is carefully tended to, ensuring a highly readable and flowing version of Bairéad's original prose in the new language.

By bringing this work to a new audience, Ó hAodha is making an important and scholarly contribution to many areas: to journalism studies, Irish studies, and to Irish history, both local and national. He also enriches our understanding of one of our noted writers in Irish, a man that moved in the same circles as the great Liam Ó Flaithearta, and that master of modernism, Máirtín Ó Cadhain. For this careful and important work, Ó hAodha is due our gratitude. And the pleasure you will get in reading will prove that it is a gratitude earned.

Ian Kilroy
Lecturer in Journalism
DIT School of Media
Dublin, Ireland

CHAPTER ONE

GOOD NEWS

Aindí Rua,[1] the postal delivery boy, was the lad who brought me my first major “good news” story. One Saturday morning he arrived into the kitchen of the house where all my family and neighbours were sitting around chatting. It was good timing on Aindí’s part because everybody was teasing me about the fact that I hadn’t heard the ferocious storm that had struck the area the night before. I’d slept so soundly that I hadn’t heard a bit of it, this storm that had shaken the house to its foundations and blown the hay everywhere and anywhere all over the fields. The storm had been so strong that it had actually blown off bits of the roof. “A larch tree fell in on top of the National School and made pieces of the roof”, said Aindí “It’ll be a while before you lot will see any school again”, he said glancing over in my direction.

I ran out of the house so that no one would notice how happy I was to hear this news. I joined the other children in the village and we went off hopping and skipping with joy from place to place. Aindí was a bit of a joker at the best of times and so we all went to Confession shortly afterwards so we could pass by the school and confirm that he had been telling the truth about it. My only regret was that the tall fir tree that fell down about twenty feet away from the house, didn't fall in on top of the schoolhouse also. Then we would have been guaranteed a really long time off school.

The stonemasons weren’t long setting to work on renovating the school again however, and every now and then we’d drop down to see how they were progressing. The speed of their renovations was a sombre reminder that we would be cooped up inside the walls of the school again before too long. That said, the larch tree that fell in on the school lent a twist of fate to that summer for me. Rather than staying at home until the school was fully renovated again, my Uncle Riocard asked my parents if I’d like to go and stay with himself and his wife Nóra for a while. They lived in a very

[1] Aindí Rua (lit: Red (haired) Andy)

remote and out-of-the way place and Riocard said that the loneliness of the place was beginning to bother my grand-aunt Nóra and that they would love to have some company. I didn't let on anything but I was absolutely delighted about this and couldn't wait to go and stay with them for a while up in Baile na Locha. "Will he stay up there if there are no other young people his age to play with though?" someone asked. The truth was that I'd have gone anywhere that signaled "no more school". The only bit of "excitement" that was coming up was that young neighbour's girl from Cloch na Speice who was due to come home from America on a visit soon – that's if she did come home at all in the end. I had stayed up in my uncle's place before. Not only that, buy my uncle had a great array of hobbies and jobs that any young lad would give his right arm to be part of – he had a boat that he kept on the local lake for fishing. Not only this, but he owned fishing rods, a gun, a hunting dog, a mongrel terrier, a sheepdog and a whole array of traps and snares for hunting. Add to this a horse and car that would transport us to Mass and - occasionally - Galway town. Baile na Locha might have been a very lonely and remote place but it was somewhere that I got used to over time. It hadn't always been such an isolated place. There had been a time once when there were nine landholdings there instead of one. There was little left of those old houses now, just a few ancient stone walls. Carraig an Phíobaire[2] was still standing just as it had been back in the days when landlord George Burke had evicted all of the families from there fifty years earlier. It was a giant green rock, which was still smooth and shiny from all of the feet that had once climbed it – and observed the old settlement from a height. Although a full half-century later, one could still see traces of the ridges and the drills where the evicted tenants had ploughed and planted the crops years earlier. All of the families had been evicted at the beginning of summer and the area around the rock was where my uncle grazed his sheep. The fields around about were now rough and desiccated-looking from years of over-grazing but my uncle was doing his best to help the soil there recover again. He had bought fertilizer in bags and spread it across whatever grass was still left there. Sheep were the main form of livestock that he kept. He'd always been interested in sheep-farming and had even worked with them during the many years he'd spent working as an emigrant in Australia. "The blackface (mountain) sheep who'll give birth just before Christmas; they're the sheep that would best suit the local people here. If we got a few weeks of fine weather, these lambs will be ready for butchering before any of the others. You'd get more for those lambs if you

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[2] Carraig an Phíobaire – (lit: The Piper's Rock)

sold them just before Saint Patrick's Day than you would for any lambs sold on the feast of Lá Fhéile Muire Beag in the autumn". A few weeks before Domhnach Chrom Dubh[3] my uncle and I drove more than twenty blackface sheep home from the local train station. My uncle had bought the sheep at a fair in Leinster and was hopeful that these new acquisitions were just the beginning of a successful new enterprise. Some of these sheep had such strangely-twisted horns on their heads that one would almost imagine they were growing into their eyes. "Adharca cúbacha"[4] was the term the locals used for these types of horns. They had a typical ram-like look about them. "I know that the locals won't think much of my plan with this new batch of sheep here. If it proves successful, however, you'll see them copying me before long; mark my words!" The most frequent visitor to my uncle's house was the postman. "Mind that letter there; there's money in that" he'd say, handing me a letter, and he was rarely wrong. "You'll have a great day in Galway this Saturday." Come Friday evening, I didn't let on anything when my uncle announced: "We'll go to Galway tomorrow if the weather is fine, with the help of God." This'll be a special day. "Aren't the boys who go there every day the lucky bunch?" my uncle said to me one Saturday as we left the house behind and trotted along in the horse-and-trap. He was teasing me of course. Various groups of hurling followers would visit us in Baile an Locha on the occasional Sundays between Saint Bridget's Day and Halloween when they would select ash trees which they could fashion hurleys with. There were plenty of good ash trees in the area and I'd always mark the best trees for them beforehand.

My uncle's goats were always the best harbingers of future weather. If we saw them heading for the shelter of the house or the trees; or when the sun was still beating down, we knew it'd soon be lashing rain. And if the goats headed out into the rain, you could be sure that the weather would clear again shortly. "Tá mé chomh fuar le gabhar" (*I'm as cold as a goat*) was a phrase used by an elderly man in our townland, a man who was very old and frail. My uncle was proved right about the way some of the locals dismissed his "new-fangled ideas" in relation to the sheep. Maybe there was some jealousy involved also, of course. "He still thinks that he's out in Australia", one farmer said to a couple of other men one Sunday as we were walking into the local church. "He's trying to bring Australia to Baile an Locha!" remarked another. "There's great shelter there all the same. Too much shelter, really. The foxes and the wildcats will eat all of those

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[3] Domhnach Chrom Dubh - (i.e. the last Sunday in July)

[4] ("Adharca cúbacha lit:"twisted horns")

sheep on him; wait'll you see". I never bothered repeating what I'd overheard to my uncle. I didn't want to hurt him. That said, many of the neighbours had taken a great interest in these horned mountainy sheep when they were born a few months earlier than the other sheep bred in the locality. The first lamb was born at the beginning of December and almost all of them had arrived by the Feast of Epiphany. "Here's my head and my arse is following on", was a phrase my uncle used when he was happy and a new lamb was being born – and was coming out the right way up. It was the ewes that you had to pay most attention to in those days; they were the most work. The first lamb I ever saw being born came out feet-first. This new-born lamb was big and the ewe suffered a good deal during the birth. I could tell by her that she'd never have a second lamb. Around this time, I was assigned a job which I'd little experience of prior to this. This was to go out before dawn and check on the sheep who were expecting new lambs. It was common to find ice and frost on the ground in those early mornings but I got used to that fairly quickly. A "toirtín"[5] was the term my uncle used to refer to a young lamb. Initially, I was fascinated by the cosy, sheltered nests in which the sheep gave birth to their lambs. That was the ewe's instinct, of course – to make her own grassy bed, if possible. If we knew that a ewe was due to give birth before midnight, say, my uncle and I would head down to the fields, lantern in hand. If they were born while we were out, we carried the lambs back to the house with us in case anything happened to them. We'd often hear the foxes barking and scolding one another in the surrounding woods on those nights. Their voices were clear but harsh-sounding in the darkness and anytime a fox called out my uncle always spoke quietly to the lambs, so as to encourage them in closer to another. "Don't be surprised if you find a sheep missing in the morning." He was right too; many's the morning that I spent searching for a couple of sheep and their lambs. My uncle did well with the sheep that first winter although there was one morning when all that was left of a lamb was its head. "The fox by the looks of it", I said to myself. "A dog, more likely," my uncle said. "The fox would hardly be bothered killing that lamb when rabbits are as plentiful as they are currently. You can never trust some dogs fully. It happens to every sheep-farmer at some stage. When I was in Australia, a dingo destroyed all my sheep one year." We only lost one sheep that year that I was living in my uncle's house although the sheep that disappeared left a couple of lambs behind her, a fact which meant more work for us. We had to make sure her lambs were given milk every day for the first few months of their lives.

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[5] ("toirtín" lit: a small cake or a shilling)

We also had one sheep that proved a bit of a burden. Her lambs had been killed when they were still small and we had to milk her a couple of times each day. To listen to her bleating was heart-rending, the sound of a mother who has lost her young. One thing my uncle was delighted about that year, however, was the fact that none of the sheep rejected their lambs, as sometimes happened. “Last night, I was trying to work out what the best plan is, and I was thinking we should assign a stepmother to those lambs who are orphans.” That’s what my uncle did although it didn’t actually work out so well for him in the end. The stepmother didn’t take too well to her new responsibilities. In fact, the first thing she did to her new charges was give them a belt each with her horns. My uncle milked her then and fed some of her milk to the two orphans so that the stepmother had a change of heart. Once she smelled her own milk on the two orphans, she had a change of heart. She grew fond of the twin lambs and within a couple of days you would have sworn that they were always hers. Caring for the lambs was a more serious job than I’d originally imagined. You had to give them a purgative in case any trace of their mother’s afterbirth or fluid was left in them or in case a piece of wool or wild-grass had formed a hard ball inside them and caused an obstruction in their stomach – something which could kill them if left untreated. Because the land was poor and the grass all eaten away, we had to regularly go out into the fields and hills and give extra feed to the sheep on a regular basis; this was so that they produced enough milk for their lambs to grow and develop properly. My uncle was very happy with how things went in the end; none of the sheep were left barren and none of the lambs left orphaned. To be honest, I think my uncle was pleasantly surprised with how well things went that first year. The lambing season was always one of the nicest parts of the year when all was said and done. Over the space of a couple of weeks, you saw the lambs grow and develop. And I was promised a new suit of woolen clothes, as soon as the sheep were sold at the fair! Coming on for Saint Bridget’s Day, a north wind blew in across the countryside and the air became cooler; the wind changed as soon as it blew in and the temperatures rose once more. My uncle and I went out to examine the entire herd on the evening of Candlemas.[6]

They were all huddled together in a shelter at the bottom of the field and they all looked fairly well-fed. “There’s no one as committed a sentinel as I am tonight”, my uncle said. “Do you see that sky over there; look at the indigo colour of it. I’ve a funny feeling about it. Maybe we should round them up and put them in the shed? Yes that’s what we’ll do.

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[6] *Lá Fhéile Máire na gCoinneal* - Candlemas

We'll put them inside where they'll be safe". When I called over the sheepdog, my uncle had changed his mind again, however. "Come to think of it, I think we'll leave them where they are. They'll be fine in the shelter there, safe from the worst of the south-west wind." About supper-time, the weather took a dramatic turn, however. The wind came in from the north and the snow soon fell, the wind swirling about. I was delighted when I looked out the window and saw the road covered in a blanket of white. "Oh! Of all the luck...why in God's name didn't I put them in when I had the chance?" my uncle said in a tormented voice. My uncle was up at dawn, worrying about the sheep but he got the fright of his life when he saw the extent of the snowfall outside. "No lamb could survive a blizzard like that; the snow must be a couple of feet deep in some places. I wouldn't be surprised if the sheep are all dead too. God blast this country that takes away all your sweat and hard work in one night". Only twice in my life have I seen snow that heavy in Ireland; once in the spring of 1947 and another year that I can't remember just now.

We headed out in search of the sheep but there was no sign of any of them. We couldn't find even one of them – out of a herd of fifty sheep! My uncle got his horse and called around to get six other men who arrived with their shovels to join the search and clear the snow. The men travelled to my uncle's place on the back of his cart, the poor horse struggling in snow that was up to its knees. He showed them the places where the sheep had been grazing and resting just the day before.

"Take it handy lads and be careful in case you hit any of the lambs that might be buried under the snow with your shovels", my uncle said. "It's unlikely that they're too far from where they were yesterday evening." The men started shifting the snow and it wasn't too long before a few of them reached the grass beneath; there was still no sign of any of the sheep, however. "Only God knows where they are", my uncle said. "For all we know, maybe we've actually shifted more snow over on the top of them, unknown to us. They could be anywhere really. We better keep looking around – let's search around where they were last night but also the places that they mightn't be at all". Although the day was bitterly cold, some of the men were soon sweating profusely. They were working so hard, turning the snow over – especially over near the ditches and the bushes where the wind had blown some enormous snow-drifts. It was dinner-time by the time they'd cleared most of the snow from the first field.

"Forget it! Forget it", my uncle said. "The day the snow melts we'll find them and they'll only be fit for carrion by then". What a strange turn the weather took yesterday evening!"

“Where’ll we look now?” said Tadhg Mhaitís after they’d eaten their dinner.

“Anywhere really – this is like looking for a needle in a haystack.” my uncle replied.

“Maybe they made for Gort an Tobair and the dip in the ground up there?”

“Have a look wherever you want lads. You’re guess is as good as mine”, my uncle said.

Tadhg Antaine – a boy who was about the same age as me - and I headed up in that general direction. We walked along the width of the huge wall that the landlord had built there years earlier in an effort to get rid of some of the rocks that once littered the fields there. As I walked carefully along the wall, what Máire Bhríd Mhór had once said came back to me suddenly and made sense: “Even if there wasn’t much wrong with men when you were a young lad, Riocaird, there’s no doubt about it but you were brought up a right innocent”. When one of the snow-drifts fell in on top of Micil Sheáin Aodha, Tadhg and I burst out laughing. This drove my uncle mad; he’d been on edge all morning anyway – like a right weasel altogether. “Wait’ll I get my hands on you messers” he shouted out. “You’ll be sorry – I can guarantee you that!” Everyone began throwing snowballs at us and we had to lie face-down on top of the wall so’s not to get hit by them. The snowballs whizzed by above us. “You shower wouldn’t hit a haystack if it was right in front of you”, Tadhg shouted at them, taunting them. After a while the snowballing died down and we moved over in the direction of another field. Whatever way it happened, I looked down beneath me at one point and noticed some holes in the blanket of snow beneath me – just as I was standing on top of the highest wall of the lot. There were holes in the snow-drift and then another few holes just a few feet away from that again.

“They’re here!” I called out excitedly; I thought that it must be the breathing of the sheep and the lambs that was the cause of these holes in the snow.

“If you lot are playing games on us, God help you!” my uncle shouted out. “I’ll give you each of you a belt that you’ll never forget once I get my hands on you”, my uncle said making his way over to where we were standing.

He began to shovel the snow furiously and then we noticed something moving beneath it. It was the ram; he was buried just beneath the surface. Peadar gave a shout and everybody came over. “Fair play, lads. Don’t worry, you’re in the good books now” Peadar said to us. All of the men arrived over and they began to do some serious digging together. The

more snow they shifted, the more that those of us on top of the wall were able to see below. In the end, we managed to save the entire flock of sheep and lambs - all barring one of them.

"There's one hogget still missing", my uncle said after he'd counted them all and wiped the snow off the lambs. We both climbed back onto the wall again to do another count. "Hang on. There's another hole over here!" Tadhg called out. He was about fifty feet from where we had found the other sheep.

"And there are two other holes here" I added.

"Actually, here's a third hole, over here" Tadhg said. "Two small holes and one big one." "Cut the messing now lads – sure, we are only missing the one sheep now – the hogget" said my uncle. "Don't mind them Peadar" he said to Peadar Neansa who had come over and was churning up the snow like nobody's business.

"Mind lads - I think this hogget isn't by herself!" exclaimed Peadar. "And she's already suckled the two of them by the looks of them. They're already hardy."

"A thousand thanks be to the Son of God", I heard my uncle say.

"If it wasn't for the young lads here, we wouldn't have found any of them"

My uncle sent for an extra cart to transport the extra lambs that we'd found. Our search in the snow that day would prove the inspiration for my short story – '*Sé Dia a Rathaíos*[7] written many years later. The Gúm didn't like my story, for some strange reason. They told me that it was a nice story for youngsters from rural Ireland but that it would be inappropriate for city-raised children! Those kids are awful innocent, of course! I think that it was probably the "loose" morals of the west of Ireland sheep that bothered the An Gúm censors in reality – believe it or not!

[7] *Sé Dia a Rathaíos* (lit: It is God who apportions)

CHAPTER TWO

A MATCH[1]

One Spring night, as I lay exhausted after a day spent chopping wood, my uncle woke me from a deep sleep. He felt terrible, he said. He had an awful pain in his stomach and wanted me to go and get some *Lourdes* water[2] somewhere if I could. He wondered whether I should go and call the doctor – he felt so terrible. We chatted for a while but I fell back to sleep again almost immediately.

About midnight, he shook me awake again and told me to call down to the O'Briens – so that they could call the doctor for him.

"Hurry up in God's name", he said

I shook myself awake. "This is one job I wouldn't have to do – if I had been happy to remain at school" – I said to myself.

I took the lantern and the dogs with me but I was still fairly nervous walking along in the darkness as I'd never travelled that three-quarters of a mile of road at night-time before. As I left the house behind me, I could hear the moans and sighs of pain my uncle was making from his bedroom.

The only light in the darkness was the big bank of stars lighting up the sky. I didn't hear the rumbling of any thunder but I could tell that a storm was brewing; I could feel it on the air. The clouds seemed to be massing above me; the air was freezing and the ground was frosting over. In the distance I heard the ice crack at the edge of the lake as the dogs stepped out onto its surface. The terrier and the greyhound disappeared off to do a bit of hunting and only the sheepdog stayed next to me on the road. While the tree that fell on the school may have proved fortuitous, that wasn't the case with the trees on this particular night. They looked ominous and threatening in the darkness. At one point, a larch tree and a fir tree intertwined above my head on the road and blocked out whatever light

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[1] *Cleamhnas* – (lit: a wedding match)

[2] Lourdes in the south of France is a major pilgrimage site for Catholics throughout the world. It is still the tradition today that people visiting Lourdes may bring home a bottle of Holy Water with them from the baths there.

came from the stars completely. The thing that was bothering me the most was not so much the darkness, however. It was how I would wake up the O'Briens. Maybe their dogs would start barking and would wake some of the family up as I approached the house? Whoever uttered the phrase the first day ever – that "nothing is as it seems" – spoke a lot of sense - no doubt about it.

As I approached the O'Brien's house from the head of the road, I was surprised to find it all lit up as if some sort of a party or celebration was in full swing. I didn't know what was going on but then I remembered something that the post-boy had said shortly prior to this when he'd mentioned that there was a match likely to be made in that house shortly. A match-making night! What would they make of a small ragamuffin like me arriving to the door in the middle of a match-making party? As I approached the house, I heard a man's powerful voice belting out "An Droighneán Donn"[3]

Thabharfainn comhairle dho mhná óga
dhá nglacfaidís uaim,
Gan a bheith ag ól le fir óga
ná ag creidiúint a scéil;
Níl ina gcomhrá ach mar a dhoirtfeá braon uisce ar dhroim na gé,
Is Rí an Domhnaigh go gcuire comhairle mo leasa romham péin.

(If they listened to me
I'd advise the young women
not to drink in the company of young men
Or listen to their tall tales.
Their stories are as useless
as water off a goose's back
And may the King of Sunday always
be my guiding light.)

This is a song that has more than twenty verses in it, according to tradition! I listened outside as a woman sang the song firstly in Irish and then in English! I felt like it would go on forever! "For God's sake, get a move on," I said to myself. Talk is cheap, however and I remained rooted to the spot. I was too embarrassed to go into the house but it was the dogs that saved me in the end. My uncle's terrier and the O'Brien's dog began

[3] The song *An Droighneán Donn* – (lit: "The Brownthorn Bush" is a well-known Irish romantic ballad.

tearing into one another near the door of the kitchen. The singing inside came to an abrupt end as the front door was thrown open and the two dogs rolled into the front-kitchen, biting and mauling one another. Pandemonium ensued. Chairs were upturned and all the plates and cutlery that were laid out on two end-to-end tables for the celebration meal began to clatter. A few of the women roared out with fright and one of them screamed – “Watch out for the badger! Watch out for the badger!” She could easily have been forgiven for thinking that my uncle’s terrier was a small badger because he was very similar to a badger, right down to the big white line down in the middle of its forehead. One boy grabbed a hold of the terrier’s tail and the other grabbed the other dog the same way and they threw them out the door head-first. The dogs were still stuck in one another. “Blast ye - but maybe this’ll dampen your ardor”, exclaimed O’Brien as he emptied a big bucket of water down over the dogs. “Who do we have here, in God’s name?” he said spotting me and the half-dimmed lantern at the door. I told him the reason that I’d called to them and how the journey in the dark had been a bit stressful. “Come in here a minute – will you? Aren’t you the right shy one?”

He pulled me indoors. Everybody was dressed to the nines inside and there was me in my rough old raggy clothes. There were many people in there from neighbouring parishes that I didn’t recognize at all. The young girl and boy whose match it was were sitting next to the fire and there were two big kettles heating on the embers. Everyone there felt sorry for me and they came over offering me all sorts of cakes and other delicacies to eat.

“There’s no chest pain, back pain or stomach pain that this stuff can’t cure” said O’Brien indicating the five-nagin bottle of poteen next to him on the table.[4]

“Does he ever take a drop of it I wonder?” asked Mrs. O’Brien.

“If he’s not used to it, won’t it be even more effective in relieving his pain?” As there were no other children there, I couldn’t wait until they had their horse and car ready and we were setting out to get the doctor. Who appeared from the back-room just then, however, but the Spailpín[5]

Spotting me, he walked over and gave me a vigorous handshake.

“Put it there old stock”, he said. Then he grabbed my other hand, my right-hand and gave that a good shake as well. He had such a powerful grip that I’d barely any feeling left in my hand by the time he let go again. The poor man who was as kindly a soul as one would ever meet never

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[4] A reference to the uncle’s pain

[5] *Spailpín* – migratory labourer

realized that he was hurting me and secretly, I was waiting for someone to call on him to sing a song. I have to go back in time a bit to tell you about the Spailpín. He was a Joyce from Connemara but everyone always referred to him as "An Spailpín". A man who was always the heart and soul of every gathering, he spent whatever little bit of money he earned as quickly as his employer gave it to him. In fact, the farmer he worked for and himself would always be drinking and carousing together at all the fairs and markets. So much so – that the employer's wife never stopped giving out to her husband. She came from money and she was determined to hold onto it whereas her husband enjoyed spending money and living the good life. The Spailpín was really well-liked by all the local people. He was too popular really – if such a thing is possible. It probably also shortened his life however because he was at every party and gathering and drank a lot. He had a fine voice and knew scores of songs. He was able to sing every type of song and ballad – the likes of *"A Landlady, a chroí na páirte, tá an bás ar mo chroí le tart"*[6] and many others. Unfortunately, he probably brought many songs that are long-forgotten now to his grave with him when he died.

Not only was he a great man for singing, but he was also a great dancer (or a great man for making a racket with his feet anyway!). Only for he wore hobnailed boots, he probably wouldn't have had any soles left on his shoes come morning.

The May previous to this, we were going to a session in somebody's house when my uncle said: "Will the Spailpín be here tonight I wonder?" He wasn't long getting an answer to his question because who did we see the next minute but the Spailpín coming along the road. He had barely sat into the cart when he said to my uncle: "Have you any penny at all?"

"All I have on me is a few pence and a ten-shilling note" my uncle replied.

"I've no business with paper money anyway" the Spailpín said.

My uncle rummaged through his pockets while I took hold of the reins. Three pence is what the Spailpín got.

"Good health and long life to you"[7] the Spailpín said. "If I had just one more penny – two pence in each pocket – I'd really be on the pig's back".

I still had a penny left over from the day of the fair and I gave it to him. His face lit up with joy. He was so grateful to me that you'd swear I'd given him a guinea.

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[6] *"A Landlady, a chroí na páirte, tá an bás ar mo chroí le tart"* - (lit: O landlady generous heart, my heart is dying with the thirst)

[7] *Sláinte agus fad saoil a'd*) – (lit: "Good health and long life to you")

"I always love to hear the clinking sound that the money makes in my trousers. The sound of the money hopping when I am dancing – there's nothing like it. I think it helps me dance better too, if I'm honest about it.

Now – back to the night of the match in O'Brien's house.

"You might as well finish your song Beartla", someone said.

"But - where was I again?" "Those bloody dogs knocked me off my stride and now, I can't remember where I was."

Beartla was singing again to his heart's content by the time we left the house.

Faraoir ghéar nach bhfuil mé féin
agus grá mo chroí,
I ngleanntán sléibhe le héirí gréine
Agus an drúcht ina luí.

(What a terrible pity
That my love and I
Are not together in a mountain glen
at sunrise,
The dew lying on the ground.)

"We'll try him with a drop of this stuff (poteen) first and if that doesn't cure him, then we'll head for the doctor's", O'Brien said as we made for Baile an Locha. On arrival at the house, I put my head against the window outside my uncle's room. There were no sounds of groaning or moaning coming from within now, however. Instead, there was the sound of his fine healthy snoring. "There's nothing wrong with this man anymore, thank God. Now – like a good boy - when he wakes up, tell him that we'll be expecting you at the wedding next Monday". Don't forget to tell him that now, whatever you do."

A fat chance that I'd forget to pass on that message – after the night I'd had! I went into the house and went straight to bed. I didn't bother waking my uncle at all.

"Only that you were already gone too far down the road, I would have whistled out loud and called you back as soon as the pain left me", he said to me the following morning. A few weeks later I was returning from the forge with some metal wedges when I came across O'Brien and one of his sons looking for something near the ditch, just where the road met the edge of a field. I could hear the anguished bleating of a sheep nearby, that sound a sheep makes when it has lost one of her lambs. I hopped into the field to help them with their search. "We've spent the whole morning

looking for the lamb but there's not a trace of it anywhere. "There's no hoof or bone or skin; and not a sign of the lamb's head even.

As sure as I'm standing here the lamb has been stolen. And there's only the one person who's stolen it and that's ___.

Maybe I've said enough…just in case I might regret saying it later." Even if he hadn't told me the name of the sheep-stealer, I knew well who he was referring to. There was only one "thieving John" in that area and everyone knew him well.

Gach ní dhá ngoidtear ó Thuaim go Tuamhumhain
Go bhfaighfeá a thuairisc in ualach Sheáin.

(Anything that's stolen between Tuam and Thomond
You'll find it in John's possession, sooner or later)

On one occasion it was a character reference from the local priest that saw him released without charge from a court case where he was accused of thieving – (in this case, stealing potatoes out of a pit). Wasn't he brazen enough to go out that very same night again and get caught in the act – while trying to steal potatoes from another pit? After a while, the O'Briens gave up searching for the lamb and climbed out of the field again. Just then, Páidín Anna from Cloch na Speice[8] appeared on the road. Páidín Anna was a neighbour of the aforementioned "thieving John". "Yesterday, back at his (i.e. John's place), I heard the sound of a sheep bleating out in search of its baby lamb". Today, it was a lamb that was making noise - a lamb that was missing its mother. What you should do now is bring the mother back up there with you and see do mother and baby recognize each other."

I followed the men over to John's place as I knew this was going to be some fun! John never heard us approach. He was out in the field trying to get his "new" lamb to suckle another sheep (i.e. a sheep that wasn't its natural mother). O'Brien peered over the ditch and shouted into John before he realized what was happening. "God bless the work – that's if you call what a crooked devil like you does - work", O'Brien shouted in. "How does he like his new stepmother anyway?"

John bristled. He denied everything.

"That lamb there didn't get that fat by feeding on the scutch-grass and thorns of Cloch na Speice here anyway, that's for sure" O'Brien said.

[8] *Cloch na Speice* (lit: "The Peaked Rock")

"You're lying" said John. Sure you'd know this lamb by his mother here? It's obvious" was Seán's reply.

"Yes, you can always tell a child by its stepmother, that's true" was O'Brien's retort. The two men began to argue and shout and there was no name or curse that they didn't direct at one another.

Next thing, Burke's sheep bleated and the lamb leaped from John's arms and bolted for her. The lamb began to suckle on its real mother immediately.

"Now! Now!" O'Brien said in a soothing voice.

"Many's the time a woman gave suck to someone else's child" John said. He was still denying everything.

"Yes. And many's the time the thief was a liar too", was O'Brien's response.

O'Brien didn't bother with the law. He just took his lamb back there and then. My uncle actually bought it from him later and it made a fine ram. It sired many lambs. When my uncle began to break the ground on the old plain in an effort to make it into pasture for sheep, it proved very difficult work. Who knows? I might have spent a good deal more of my life working at the same thing if it hadn't been for my sweetheart from Cloch na Speice?

CHAPTER THREE

THE MASTER

There couldn't have been too many teachers in Ireland then like were the first teacher we had. He was a disabled man who moved around in a wheelchair. The locals referred to the wheelchair as a "cairrín" (little car). I don't how what accident befell our teacher that first day ever that he was disabled. His disability didn't affect our parent's respect for him in any way however. They thought that he was the best teacher ever. There were even a few who'd have attacked you if you'd dared contradict anything that the Master said or even hinted that he might be wrong about something. And he was often wrong about things too! All the adults had to say was: "Didn't Kerrigan say it?" – and that was enough to put an end to any further debate on the issue. Children would travel long distances to be taught by Kerrigan. There were boys who attended the school who came from other neighbouring parishes and who could have attended schools that were closer to them but they chose Kerrigan's school instead. Kerrigan was originally from Leenane in north-west Connemara. At one stage, his sister Cáit and the three grown-up sons of another sister of his used to live with him in the house in Moycullen – the latter were Kynes – dark and swarthy-looking people. One of these brothers, Pilib Kyne would later be the chairperson or secretary of a branch of the Gaelic League in one of the north of England cities. The youngest of these brothers, Peadar, would help his uncle Mícheál Ó Ciaragáin (the Master) at school. Peadairín Cheirigin[1] was what everybody called him locally and it was his job to give us the stick as punishment, as the poor uncle was barely able to give us a slap. Our nickname for Peadar was "Gaisce", a nickname he really hated, although we spelt it "phonetically" as "Goshke" when we wrote it secretly on the walls around the place. He would go really crazy when he saw this word written somewhere and would immediately ensure that it was whitewashed over during the holidays. It was never too long before some joker had inscribed the nickname on the wall again, however.

[1] Peadairín Cheirigin (lit: Little Peter Kerrigan)

The master often smoked his clay pipe during the day but when Mab, his little dog, barked outside, he immediately hid it. The sound of the dog barking meant that someone such as the priest or a school inspector was about to arrive. Sometimes Cáit would stick her head in the door and shout: “Mr Cox! Mr Cox!” – indicating that the school’s inspector, a big block of a man with a whiskey-red nose was on his way. The inspector usually arrived by side-car. Another occasion when the master was on alert was when we heard the Germans[2] playing outside.

The master would often send one of the big lads out to the townland of Garraí Gabhann to get tobacco for him or paraffin oil for the lamp. To us smaller children then, those bigger lads seemed so grown-up that they might as well have been men. Some of the older lads who were still at school then must have been about fifteen or sixteen years of age.

One “message” that these older lads were never entrusted with was going to get a re-fill of the half-gallon can of porter. Peadairín was always chosen for this job and he used to walk across the fields rather than along the road to get this. The half-gallon can that the porter was kept in was actually originally an oil-lamp and it was always kept scrubbed and clean. They thought that by using this old oil-lamp they would fool the priest – who was very anti-drink. I don’t think the priest was that stupid, however. Interestingly, the master himself didn’t seem to be that fond of drink himself. It was Peadairín who often smelled of drink when he was in the school. Cáit liked a drop of porter from time to time herself also. It was rare enough to hear any mention of a bottle of porter out in the country areas, in those days.

One time that Cáit was at a gathering in our village, she hopped up on the table inside in the kitchen and began to sing: “I will get married for the humour is on me now” and all the other women were shouting:

“Watch out! She’ll break it! She’ll break the table!” Next thing, Cáit began dancing on the table.

“What’ll we do if she breaks Tadhg’s table?” the woman of the house was saying. (The table was on loan for the night from a neighbour named Tadhg). But the “humour” was on Cáit that night and nothing would stop her; she wasn’t worried about the table.

I remember one particular day when the master ran out of tobacco and there was no sign of Peadairín anywhere. He called over one of the older lads and told him to hurry to the shop to get the tobacco for him. Kerrigan had beautiful Irish and always spoke Irish to the children whose parents

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[2] This may be a reference to a group of “foreign” i.e. non-Irish prosletyizers who were in the area at that time – small groups of Evangelical Protestants).

were Irish speakers. I'll never forget the strange comment he made one day at school while he was teaching us Irish – that only one man in Ireland was able to write properly in Irish and that man was Doctor Douglas Hyde.[3]

The messenger was taking his time returning with the tobacco and the master was getting more and more irritated. His mood got even worse when one of the pupils let a writing slate fall on the floor and it smashed into pieces. He jumped up in his wheelchair, in a mixture of fright and anger. "Don't tell me you broke another one?" he said. "Isn't it better that the slate broke than that I broke my leg?" was the pupil's reply. This lad was a brother of the lad he had sent off to get the tobacco and he was actually older than the messenger. He was someone that you wouldn't push around too easily. He is still hale and hearty to this day. I met him only recently in Galway and he bought me a pint. "We'll have a pint here and now – even if the seven seals were to strike the earth"

The master was fit to be tied by the time the messenger re-appeared, a couple of hours later. There was tension in the air and the classroom was so quiet that you could almost hear the grass grow outside – all the boys were waiting for the master to explode. The master followed his usual tactic however – his first words were calm and gentle:

"You were a long time gone, weren't you?"

"I had to push Mrs. Connolly, (the doctor's wife) Kate Kerrigan and Bríd Dhónail Bháin on the swing outside", the lad replied. There was a rope that people used as a swing attached between two beech trees at the front of the school. The master couldn't say anything to the messenger then since his own sister had been involved in delaying him. Also, the messenger was actually telling the truth; the master had been expecting him to say something else – something to cover up the fact that he had gone off to play handball or some other such thing.

"You couldn't have done a more essential day's work than that" (i.e. pushing the women on the swing) is what the master said sarcastically once he had gathered his thoughts again. The master was always praising the rich heritage that was the Irish language. Irish and Greek were the richest two languages for either cursing or praying in, he often told us. And even then, it was the Irish language curse that would outdo the Greek one in many instances.

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[3] Douglas Hyde (1860-1949), was a well-known scholar of the Irish language who served as the first President of Ireland between 1938 and 1945. He founded Conradh na Gaeilge (The Gaelic League) which became one of the most influential cultural organisations in the Ireland of his era.