

Máirtín Ó Cadhain, “The Road to Brightcity”

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As an undergraduate, I had fallen head over heels in love with the short stories of the Irish-language writer Máirtín Ó Cadhain. When I first met my future husband Ullrich Kockel, I gifted him an English translation of these (Ó Cadhain 1981). I wanted to share my treasured reading with him. Ó Cadhain’s volume has journeyed with me over many university positions and house moves. Since Ó Cadhain wrote in Irish (Gaelic), his was a closed readership (Nic Craith 2009) and he has not garnered the international reputation he deserves. In the past decade, some of his major works have been translated into English and German, but it is in his native language that his writing is best read.

Máirtín Ó Cadhain was born in 1906 and raised in the Connemara *Gaeltacht* (Irish-speaking area) in the West of Ireland. Having trained to become a primary school teacher, he returned to the *Gaeltacht* to teach. A radical republican, he became active in the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and actively fought for better social conditions for Irish-speaking areas. His political activities didn’t endear him to the local Catholic parish priest, who sacked him. Ó Cadhain subsequently moved to Dublin where he was appointed Commanding Officer of the Dublin Brigade of the IRA and eventually elected to the Army Council in 1938. He was arrested in September 1939 and detained, without trial, until December that year, at Arbour Hill prison. He was re-arrested a year later at the funeral of a friend who had died on hunger strike in protest at the lack of political status for republican prisoners. For more than four years, Ó Cadhain was interned in the Curragh military prison. He acknowledges that this period of internment in *Sibéir na hÉireann* (Ireland’s Siberia) deepened his understanding of the human condition. A controversial

character and a strong critic of the newly-founded Irish state, Ó Cadhain was eventually employed by Trinity College in Dublin as Professor of Irish. He died in 1970.

The novel *Cré na Cille* (Graveyard Clay; 1949) is regarded as Ó Cadhain's masterpiece, but my favourite piece is a short story entitled "An Bóthar go dtí an Ghealachathair" (The Road to Brightcity). It was originally published in Irish in his 1948 collection *An Braon Broghach* (The Cloudy Drop). The story was written when the author was still in prison. Ó Cadhain says that he penned the story over a few days in a quiet corner of a mess-hut. It was the first story that absorbed his full attention as a writer.

The narrative is loosely based on his mother and on the lives of all other *Gaeltacht* women in the west of Ireland who regularly sold eggs and homemade butter to earn income to raise their families. In the short story we journey with Bríd, the mother of two living and two still-born children, on a nine-mile walk from the rural *Gaeltacht* into Galway city to sell her domestic produce. As we read the story, we become aware of Bríd's physical and emotional circumstances and of the hopelessness of her situation. The journey takes place in the early hours and the reader "walks" with Bríd through the night.

At the beginning of the journey, it is quite dark, but there are some bright moonlit places, and the light of the moon is reflected on the granite stone walls. Although Bríd cannot afford the fare for a lift, there is a spark of hope in her that some passerby will invite her onto a side cart—particularly towards the end of the journey when it would be unreasonable to expect a fare. As neighbor after neighbor passes her without as much as a salute on the road, we can empathize with the hopelessness of her situation and the indifference of neighbors to Bríd's circumstances. Bríd pretends to be unconcerned as each horse and cart passes. She doesn't want to give the impression that she is desperate. There is one particular moment when she looks back and sees a neighbor who has regularly visited her home. She is hopeful of a lift but instead he quickens the horse and passes her by without a salute. She regrets the fact that she looked back, thinking it a sign of weakness. She must appear strong.

While her husband and children are at home in bed, Bríd is doing what generations of Irish women have practiced—going to the market to sell eggs and butter. This is what is expected of her and she must conform to community norms. Bríd's individual story is a shared pattern of women's experience within the constraints of a larger structure. Throughout her life, Bríd's fate has been determined by the expectations of her family and the wider *Gaeltacht* community. Few would challenge these norms—apart from Ó Cadhain himself whose confrontations led to many years in prison. As a younger woman, Bríd had wanted to emigrate to America, but her parents had refused to let her go. If her father had allowed her marry Larry the Peak, "it would have shortened her road to Brightcity by about six miles." Or indeed, if she had married Páid Conannon, "she'd be within call of the city, with nothing to do but get up fairly early, milk the cows, sit up on

her ass-cart and take the milk into town" (Ó Cadhain 1981: 73). Instead, she has been given to a husband who forgets to set the clock, so that she is already late when her journey begins.

There was no contraception in 1930s Ireland and Bríd has already had four pregnancies and has buried two children. "That's what robbed her of her young girl's shape and left her with the lazy bones of middle age" (68). The ache in her belly means she is now expecting a fifth child and will likely have many more while she is fertile. Although married to a sympathetic husband, he doesn't understand why Bríd is not as strong as his mother. "His own mother, when she was a servant girl with Liam Cathail used to go twice a day to the city with a tankard of milk and no cart to bring her home" (56). His grandmother used to carry a hundredweight of meal on her back to the city and would still be home before milking time.

Bríd's husband is hopeless at minding their two existing children. And what will be her fate when the children grew up? Will they emigrate to the US and leave her or will her unborn son bring a new daughter-in-law into the house who will resent Bríd's presence? Or will her children have to share her miserable fate? "Then they too would have the week's contriving to face and the Saturday walk" (71). There is a strong sense of powerlessness in the narrative, but that weakness is never spoken aloud. It is important to consistently give an impression of strength and of conforming to community expectations.

The irony in all of this is that the story was written at a time when Ireland had broken the shackles of 800 years of British colonialization and had gained its independence ten years previously. While colonialism had pushed the indigenous Irish Gaelic language culture to the western peripheries of the country, the indifference of Irish politicians to miserable conditions in the *Gaeltacht* was more challenging. Instead of nurturing and revitalizing the Irish language, politicians had drawn boundaries around the *Gaeltacht* regions in the hope that they would serve as repositories for the indigenous "peasant" language and culture while the rest of the country would advance and progress in an increasingly Anglophone world (Nic Craith 1996). For that reason, Ó Cadhain was determined not just to write in Irish, but to enrich the language by drawing on older Irish expressions and words that had fallen into disuse. (In consequence, some people find his writings in the original Irish language challenging to read.)

One reason I love the story is its very "ordinary-ness." It captures regular, everyday lives in 1930s rural Ireland. It is possible that Maxim Gorky's writings influenced Ó Cadhain's focus on the miserable conditions of everyday lives. Ó Cadhain suggests that upon reading a short story of Gorky's, he sat up in the bed and developed a fierce appetite for portraying every aspect of life in Ireland. Interestingly, Tomás Ó Criomhthain (O'Crohan), the author of *The Islander*, reports a similar reaction (Nic Craith 2020). On the day he was interned, Ó Cadhain was carrying Gorky's story in his pocket.

Another reason I love the story is Ó Cadhain's empathy with female emotions. The fact that a male writer "gets inside the head" of a female is (for me)

exceptionally impressive. I am aware that such an argument suggests that men and women see and feel the world contrarily and that this can be represented differently. In a post-modern world, such an argument would be regarded as very dubious. At the same time, I cannot help but appreciate the way Máirtín seems to understand a female perspective in a world which (at that time) was utterly dominated by men. Ó Cadhain is unflinching in his vivid description of the miserable conditions in which Bríd finds herself. And his understanding of the female outlook was not confined to Bríd's mind but also her embodied experience.

We experience Bríd's emotional and bodily sensations as she moves on her journey. "Her body was hot from hard walking. Her feet were getting in each other's way and refusing to go forward. Every time she stopped to rest, her perspiring body shivered in the cold" (Ó Cadhain 1981: 67). As she approaches her destination, Bríd looks back at the road behind her and realizes that she will have to do it repeatedly, until her jaws harden and her cheeks become leathery, "printed with crowfoot marks like the marks of a milestone" (70). Ó Cadhain writes with memorable details about the effect of ageing on Bríd's body. The heavy physical labor will shape her body. There will be no escape while her body ages and her back bends. She will become tough and rough like all *Gaeltacht* women. She will acquire the hump of older women from carrying the butter creel on her back. Her jawbone will become sharp and bleak like the beak of a currach boat. "Such were the middle aged women she knew, their girls' features beaten ironhard by the weekly managing, the slaughtering Saturday walk" (70).

Of special note is the manner, in which Ó Cadhain gives voice to the unspoken thoughts and feelings of a married woman, who is in a psychological rather than a physical prison. She has never had the freedom to make her own choices and determine her lifepath. From the cradle to the grave, male family relatives control her life. Ó Cadhain's prison experience was undoubtedly a source of anthropological understanding and he was able to connect this to the psychological prison suffered by Irish-speaking women at the time.

It is as if the author is giving voice to the inner biography of a typical *Gaeltacht* woman. We have absolutely no idea what Bríd's voice sounds like. We have no concept of her vocal inflections, or timbre, but we are intensely aware of what is unspoken. Bríd's voice is silenced but not crushed and through the unspoken dialogues we hear her "voice" directly. Her words are restrained; her thoughts and emotions are unspeakable. We understand the pain communicated in her unspoken dialogues and these convey key insights that are central to the *Gaeltacht* experience. Ó Cadhain creatively imagines the disjuncture between what Bríd says and what she does. This is a freedom given to creative writers rather than anthropologists!

But Bríd is not entirely without optimism ... There is one moment of triumph as she nears the end of her journey and uncovers the basket. The butter looks fresh and her waterdrop is clearly visible. She counts her three dozen eggs. "In no particular order, yet she knew the egg of each and every hen—the little grey pullet's, the speckled hen's one white with hardly the breath of a shell, and those of the

crested hen brown and big as duck-eggs” (78). Ironically, she would love one of those eggs for herself but it would have to be boiled in private out of sight from her husband and children and she is not one for secrets. She is proud of her produce and that she has managed the early morning walk. “Her pulse throbbed and her heart sang. She was gamesome and happy, knowing the pure high spirits of a young, wild creature, and her body was a scythe with a new edge to it eager for the swathe. She was ready again to take up her share of the burden of life. She gripped the strap of the buttercreel ...” (78).

Ó Cadhain was not a professional anthropologist, but—to paraphrase Kirin Narayan (2012)—he has written a story that might not be labelled ethnography but is clearly ethnographically informed. Just as Chekov was richly ethnographic for Narayan, and E.M. Foster for Nigel Rapport (Rapport 1994), Ó Cadhain has captured the lives of rural women in an Irish-speaking Ireland as well as any ethnographer. The fact that he has presented it as “fiction” does not make it inherently less valuable than “objective” accounts that were written on 1930s Ireland by anthropologists such as Conrad M. Arensberg and Solon T. Kimball (Nic Craith and Kockel 2016). The story does not constitute formal ethnography, but it is “saturated with ethnographic insight” (Narayan 2012: 3) about rural Irish-speaking twentieth-century Ireland. It is full of personal details and carries personal and cultural meaning. Ó Cadhain matters to me in the same way that Chekov matters to Narayan. As a participant in *Gaeltacht* life, he is also able to stand aside and articulate his observations in a manner that invites readers almost a hundred years later to understand how women’s lives in rural Ireland were shaped by larger systems. Drawing on his years of informal participant observation of *Gaeltacht* life, Máirtín Ó Cadhain’s “Road to Brightcity” is a masterpiece.

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