

# Breandán Ó Doibhlin: Pathfinder

Tadhg Ó Dúshláine

A few things to explain at the outset:

My first difficulty is public speaking in English and to do so with my Cork city *patois* in Derry is a bit rich. A second difficulty I had was with the subject: the notion that a prophet would be recognised in his own country and while he still alive is unusual by international standards and mind-boggling in the light of Dr. Johnson's remark when he said of us that: 'the Irish are a funny race, they rarely speak well of each other.' In any case this is not a 'This is Your Life' celebrity occasion, the vulgarity of self-interested promotion does not surround Ó Doibhlin's message. In other words, he does not have a cult following, but a readership and a discipleship based on the democratic Christian principles of free will and choice, not promotion and fashion. And therefore, it is the message I wish to examine, rather than the messenger. The message rather than the messenger, because the notion of admiration, let alone reverence for teachers and mentors is long since gone. Sports stars and pop stars are the great celebrities. The wearing of the footballer's jersey number is not discipleship. It is democracy gone mad, leaving no room for an elite or an aristocracy of talent or of intellect. At a time

when the educational landscape of this country is succumbing to the demands of consumerism it is timely and advisable to consider those concepts which we have inherited, but which are no longer fashionable, considered even divisive, concepts which have become dumbed down or neglected in the helter-skelter world of the eternal present: such concepts as 'tradition', 'culture', 'nationality' and 'humanity', much more than words, which Ó Doibhlin has spent a lifetime interpreting.

The standard entry is Welch:

**Ó Doibhlin**, Breandán (1931 - ), novelist, critic, and translator. Born in Rooskey, Co. Tyrone, he was educated at St Columb's College in Derry, Maynooth and the Gregorian University, Rome, become Professor of French and Modern Languages at Maynooth in 1958. He edited *Irisleabhar Mhá Nuad* and pioneered the application of critical methods to the works of modern writers in Irish. His fiction draws upon modern French literature and upon the cultivated religious prose of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> cent. Gaelic Writing. The novel *Néal Maidine agus Tine Oíche* (1960) deals with cultural values and their transmission in modern society, while *An Branar Gan Cur* (1979) depicts the attitudes of an alienated northern Catholic. He helped develop a modern and contemporary outlook in Irish writing in the 1960s and 1970s, and contributed to the revival of literature in Irish in that period. He translated *Ísida* (1975), which became part of *An Btobla Naofa* (1981), and *Pascal* (1993).

*The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature*

Some of the detail is wrong, and there's a lot it does not tell. Significantly, he was professor at 28. Straight from the Sorbonne. This is providential and significant because Maynooth was originally founded to ensure that clerics would not be returning from France and spreading subversion. And here we had an individual who had been found disobedient as an undergraduate coming back from

France with a current of new and fresh ideas, something which created a certain heroic myth around the person of Breandán Ó Doibhlin. When we came to Maynooth in 1969 the myth had grown. Paris riots, civil rights, end of old Maynooth and Ó Doibhlin's pioneering work in Irish all became crystallized into one.

I remember one of the more radical catch cries of the time was: 'Educated, not in Maynooth but in spite of it'. Ó Doibhlin, as instigator of innovative approaches to Irish literature became synonymous with the rejection of the old order in Maynooth, and on return to the staff is reported to have remarked to the then bursar, formerly the dean responsible for his chastisement: 'the stone which the builders rejected has become the corner stone'.

On the 27 October 1963, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Eoghan Ó Gramhna, champion of the Irish revival, Ó Doibhlin preached in Irish in the College Chapel, a sermon entitled *Téachtairacht an Athar Eoghan/Fr. Eoghan's Message*, on the text of Isaiah 58: 12:

You will rebuild the ancient ruins,  
Build up on the old foundations,  
You will be called 'Breach-mender',  
'Restorer of ruined houses'.

Significantly, Ó Doibhlin's translation differs from the *Jerusalem Bible*: 'Is ar do chrannta a tháinig na ballaí briste do dheisiú, agus bhéarfad mar ainm ort fear cóirithe na ród.'

Since the destruction of Gaelic Ireland in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the consequent diaspora, Irish writers have compared our predicament with that of the Israelites during the Babylonian captivity and their wandering in the desert, a comparison which prompted Chesterton to remark:

How odd of God to choose the Jews  
How could he fail to choose the Gael.

At the time of the plantation of Ulster, the cleric, Feardorcha Ó Malláin, prays that God be with them in their exile:

In ainm an Athar go mbuaidh,  
in ainm an Mhic fuair an phian,  
in ainm an Spioraid Naoimh le neart,  
Muire 's a Mac linn ag triall...

Colam Cille feartach caomh,  
's Colmán mhac 'Aoidh, ceann na gcliar,  
beid linn uile ar aon tslí  
's ná bígí ag caoi fá dhul siar...

Uirscéal as sin tuigtear libh:  
clann Israel a bhean le Dia,  
san Éigipt cé bhí i mbruid,  
furtacht go grod a fuair siad...

Má ghoirthear dhaoibhse Páipis,  
cuiridh fáilte re bhur ngairm;  
tugaidh foighead don Ardri -  
*Deo gratias*, maith an t-ainm.

Northern clerics, for the most part, in Leuven, in Belgium, tended the flame of faith and fatherland throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> century and even after the foundation of Maynooth at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century people like John McHale, Archbishop of Tuam, continued to crusade for culture and faith, as did Ó Gramhna at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup>.

Of course, this is not just Ó Gramhna's message: it become very much Ó Doibhlin's own. In an imaginative, inspiring format he

published ten passages from Isaiah in 1970. And it isn't just the format and the layout that is significant, but also the arrangement, the selection and the language. The collection is entitled *Amhrán Dóchais*, an echo perhaps, of what many consider should be our national anthem, the *Amhrán Dóchais* we learned at school:

Canam laoihe dóchais  
I dteanga bhinn na Fódhla  
Is seasaimis go beomhar  
Os comhair an tsaoil

Let us sing songs of hope  
In the sweet language of Ireland  
And let us stand proudly  
Before the world

The songs are arranged as follows: 'Prepare ye the way' (Is: 40: 1-11); 'Liberation and New Exodus' (Is: 43: 16-21); 'The Liberation of Jerusalem' (Is: 52: 7-10); 'The Resurrection of Jerusalem' (Is: 54: 5-14); 'The New Covenant' (Is: 55: 1-9); followed by the four messianic songs of the servant (Is: 42: 1-7; 49: 1-6; 50: 4-9; 52: 13, 53: 12). Essentially a proclamation and constitution for a chosen people. The brief introductory note explains:

It can be deduced from what he says that his audience are suffering and sad, enslaved far from their homeland and the reason he speaks is to give them hope and courage and confidence.

His love for his own people is great but he is no narrow minded nationalist, for he is the first person who understood and proclaimed that every race of people were entitled to the love and peace of God. Even today no part of his message is more attractive than this noble vision of human fellowship throughout the world under the just rule of the Lord God.

It is easy to see why these songs from the Book of the Consolation of Israel would resonate so strongly here at home. The first song proclaims:

All flesh is grass  
And its beauty like the wild flower's.  
The grass withers, the flower fades  
When the breath of Yahweh blows on them.  
(The grass is without doubt the people.)  
The grass withers, the flower fades,  
But the word of our God remains for ever. (40: 6-8)

These same verses inspired a mischievous Irishman to say:

Do threascair an saol is do shéid an ghaoth mar smál  
Alastar, Caesar is an méid sin a bhí ina bpáirt  
Tá an Teamhair ina féar, is féach an Traoi mar tá,  
Is na Sasanaigh féin, b'fhéidir go bhfaighidís bás.

In the most famous of these songs of hope:

How beautiful on the mountains,  
Are the feet of one who brings good news...(52: 7-10)

When I read this in the format presented by Ó Doibhlin I was moved to add a gloss in the margin from one of the great messianic songs in the Irish tradition: 'Rosca catha na Mumhan':

Tá barra na gcaobh ag déanamh sceoil  
Ní fada bheidh Gaeil i ngéibhinn bróin.

The songs of the servant too with their insistence on true freedom and true justice and the faith and leadership required to attain them

would resonate strongly with us. This is not the voice of political opportunism; this servant is no rabble-rouser: 'He does not cry out or shout aloud/, or make his voice heard in the streets.' (42:2)

The very same voice of consolation and messianic hope that gently and constantly encourages us in *Néal Maidine agus Tine Oiche*, which with Máirtín Ó Cadhain's *Cré na Cille* (1949), form the two most talked about novels in Irish over the last half-century. The novel opens with this cry from the depths:

Sirim ar Dhia go scaoiltear mé feasta ón fhaire fhada seo.

*I implore God to release me from now on from this long watch.*

And the novel closes with this wonderful vision of serenity:

The mountains that encircle this glen, my chosen glen, on either side, border my view. Those mountains are unchanging and yet they are never the same: green with the first bloom of spring, russet at the end of summer, blue under the clear cold winter sky. And still they are unchanged forever, encircling us, surrounding us, protecting us...

My little community is tied to the march of time. Everything turns, from day to night, the coming and going of the seasons, young and old; the everlasting stream of time which provides each of them with the means to develop their own way to survive. And they are happy, for sadness comes from time passing without bearing fruit...

For that reason I moulded and thought my people – so that they could recognise the eternal aspect behind the constant change of life. Generations come and go... But God made me realise that a person seeks something that does not change, that the world does not disturb, so that it remains an anchor for him, as a definite measure, as a haven of peace in a sea of time. The fleeting moment will not satisfy a person. Something that slips from his grasp forever; one drop from the stream that everlasting silence continually pours down as long as the world lasts. And the human being, the beseecher, trembling like a salmon in the poacher's net, earnestly wishing for everlasting

peace...

From year to year I have observed a team of men harvesting, across the river opposite my front door, working hard through evening and after night-fall when the harvest moon has risen, to store away the fruit of the seasons. And an old man aside in a corner of the field, his patient eye and practiced fingers plying out the súgán rope, while his grandson spins for him. So they were, age and youth, sage and pupil, sharing tales, the súgán of their spinning binding them together. So it is with me here in the centre of my glen, drawing from my store of old and new. And I disseminate among my people the riches I got from of old, teaching them, shaping them, binding them together – plying out the súgán rope, the súgán of my heritage.

This works on two levels, what is now called the micro and the macro. On the micro or the personal level, Maynooth was very much a dark night of the soul. In an interview with the *Irish Times* a few years ago Ó Doibhlin himself put it well when he said:

We were locked up in a seminary in Maynooth. You weren't out drinking, all you could do was read. Many of us spent four hours reading every single day for years.

So generations (former) of Maynooth students individually read themselves to freedom. And on the collegiate level, as a community, we came to repossess our heritage, the Bible in one hand, *Néal Maidine agus Tíne Oíche* in the other. We came to interpret for our own time our heritage of faith and culture with a spirit of hope and enthusiasm instead of the blind sense of duty enshrined in the fossilised faith of our fathers.

As well as the subject-matter of our heritage there was also the question of methodology, approach to the question, dissemination, and again this was quite revolutionary. All of thirty six years ago now, in 1970, Ó Doibhlin gave the inaugural lecture in a series of public



lectures entitled coincidentally, *Léachtaí Cholm Cille*, the longest running series of public lectures in the country. Not only did he deliver that first lecture, the series was also his idea suggested to the President of *Cuallacht Cholm Cille*, the Irish language student movement. Again the approach is important: this was not an *ex cathedra* diktat from on high but a directive that empowered and encouraged through sharing. That inaugural lecture 'Irish Literature in the Contemporary Situation' has since formed the basis for many a post-graduate thesis. Regarded as a watershed that changed the perspective from that of a postcolonial apologetic whine, to that of a celebration of a phenomenal achievement in European and even universal terms.

Ó Doibhlin himself, of course, saw nothing extraordinary in this: like the mathematician Msgr. Pádraig De Brún and the philosopher Donncha Ó Floinn, he brought the insights of his professional discipline to all this Irish close to his heart; and like his fellow professors in Maynooth, Gerard O'Nolan from Tyrone and Tomás Ó Fiaich from Armagh, he had never quite forgotten the flight of the earls and the unexpected blessings that was to bring, by way of European inclusion and enrichment, despite the high price paid at home.

*Léachtaí Cholm Cille*, was in a sense, *Irishleabhar Mhá Nuad* (*The Maynooth Magazine*), on tour. This longest running annual in Irish had been part of the annual, staple diet of pre-Vatican Two Gaelic Catholic Ireland. The date may be significant or it may not be, but 1966, fifty years after the proclamation of 1916, *Irishleabhar Mhá Nuad* proclaims a radical new campaign:

As far as we know this is the first attempt to dedicate an entire magazine to in-depth critical reviews of the products of modern Irish literature...

Modern Irish literature needs reviewers who know what they are about, who can express their opinions clearly, sympathetically and courageously;

reviewers who do not mind incurring the wrath of clergy or class in the pursuit of truth, who are not suspicious of the new through lack of understanding, who do not praise well known authors just because of their fame; whose concern for friendship or enmity stands in the way of literary integrity; who are equally familiar with world literature as with that of their own and who are not concerned whether the purpose of the story is in accord or in opposition to their own outlook.

If that introduction has all the marks of Ó Doibhlin's philosophy, his name does not appear on it. But the names of the committee, and not just for that year but for a number of years afterwards tell their own tale; for one thing there a seismic shift in the balance of power and a lot of names are of fellows from this side of the country: Ó Ruairc, Ó Croiligh, Mac Dáibhéid, Ó Gallchóir, Mac Giolla Riabhaigh. And the list of contributors is like a who's who of who's worth reading in Irish criticism: Declan Kiberd, Micheál Mac Craith, Pádraig Ó Gormáile. Small wonder then that this magazine came to be known as the journal of the new criticism of Maynooth. In each of those formative years Ó Doibhlin contributed what was to be a pioneering essay in Irish criticism: 'Literature and Culture', 'Towards the New Criticism' and to engage with them was a road to Damascus Experience. Single phrases like 'Máirtín Ó Direáin, péintéir Árann' and the scales fell from our eyes and you grasped the essence of Ó Direáin's poetry; 'Seán Ó Ríordáin agus an Spiorad Barócach' – 'Seán Ó Ríordáin and the Baroque Spirit' – never used before in this country, in Irish or in English, except pejoratively, opened vistas of understanding from which we still get a buzz.

Neither was Ó Doibhlin a member of the faculty of Celtic Studies, but he did teach us. I think it was on Friday afternoons, there was no mass exodus home, no going on the town, no Sky Sports, so for recreation we formed a poetry reading circle but I'm almost sure Ó Doibhlin gave us the nod. I know this sounds perfectly harmless, like

recreation for retired nuns. But remember, that the right to free association and assembly was comparatively recent in Maynooth, and there were academics who regarded the exercise as an invasion of their turf. So, we engaged radically with the poetry of Seán Ó Ríordáin. I know Paddy Gormley, being diligent and organized kept extensive notes of these sessions so, if you are interested talk to Paddy tomorrow. Two recollections I would like to share. I remember we paused and deliberated for a long time over a single line of poetry: 'gluaiseacht farraige is stad na gcnoc' – the movement of the sea and the stability of the mountains' – until we realised that here was a metaphor representing the paradox of the human condition: the unchanging self in the flux of time; the eternal soul in the temporal body and our cultural environment that frames our understanding of it all as in the piece we read in *Néal Maidine*. The second memory is of a poem entitled 'Catchollú'. I was already familiar...

We just left those poetry sessions like the guys in the *Acts of the Apostles*, saying 'wow' and went off to preach the good news. And so, out of respecting our heritage of faith and culture, because it had been beat into us that we should, we came to appreciate, to cherish 'dúchas' and 'oidhreacht' and we came to understand what adjectives like 'aiceanta' (authentic), 'allabhrach' (evocative) and 'connail' (concise) meant as a yardstick for the good and the beautiful. Not the word 'dílseacht' but 'urraim'. If we were somewhat reluctant at first we were told not to be afraid, that the necessary tools would be provided and so the list of literary terms published in IMN in 1970 became *Gaoth an Fhocail*, an analogical dictionary, a thesaurus in time.

When I look back on it now it took a considerable act of faith and humility on Ó Doibhlin's part to raise us up to understanding and leadership. This quiet dedication and commitment is at the very heart of Christian faith and hope and charity. In *Néal Maidine* two

sentences make the point, based perhaps on our historical experience:

And I chose to live among the ordinary people, in the out of the way places away from the glare of high living. For often when the great temples are levelled the simple wayside chapel is overlooked by the destructors, and survives until its time comes again. In any case the temple is useless unless it is filled with the hum of devotion, while in the lonely cell and the little street chapel, strong faith survives.

The fundamental relationship between faith and culture is dramatically presented in *Inton Mhaor an Uachta (The Daughter of the Keeper of the Testament)*, an original play which won the Abbey Theatre prize in 1993. Set in the period of the plantation of Ulster, we are brought to realise that despite the wheeling and dealing of Churchmen, and the use of force by Government, it is the heroic commitment of a young girl that saves St. Patrick's Bell, the native Ark of the Covenant, for posterity.

It would be wrong to think that such humility means a cowering retreat for the sake of the peace. On the contrary, the peace maker's struggle not to be enslaved by blind adherence to old inheritances but to interpret and shape tradition according to the requirement of the present, in order to ensure the continuity of that which is meaningful and worthwhile, this struggle demands great courage.

So too, *Néal Maidine agus Tine Oíche*, ironically dedicated to 'Róisín Dubh', for better for worse as it were, but where the heady introduction mounts a spirited defence of the necessity to enlist foreign aid to compensate for the linguistic neglect of over two hundred years; the need to break new ground; and the famous injunction to 'read creatively' in order to learn to think for ourselves and forge a new understanding of language and culture and their relationship and value.

Almost forty years later, in 2002, he finds it necessary to restate the case and remind us of the wealth of linguistic and philosophical understanding that is awaiting our repossession:

Basically the purpose of this collection of terms is to remain within the honourable and venerable tradition of Christian speculation in Irish and to revitalise it as far as possible. After all it is the oldest theological language in Europe, outside of the classical languages.

*(Sanasán Diagachta, A Theological Glossary)*

In the intervening years he made available the great world classics of Pascal (1994), La Fontaine (1997), Montaigne (2001) and Rabelais (2004), because as good Europeans we should know our fables; know how to respond intellectually to our human predicament; know how to appreciate our common humanity; and know how to laugh at ourselves.

In order that we better appreciate the value of literature as the best expression of a people's culture Ó Doibhlin collected and translated a selection of French poetry under the title *ón fhraicis, Translations from the French* (1997), freeing us from our over reliance on English literature in a phrase borrowed from Seán Ó Ríordáin: 'shrathar shibhialtacht an Bhéarla' / 'the straddle of English civilization.'

The political expansion of the Community of Europe has heightened our awareness of our common heritage and Ó Doibhlin's most recent contribution in that regard is a collection of the short stories of the celebrated Slovakian writer Drago Jancar: *Dalta an tSeoighigh* (2004).

It is precisely because of his understanding of our contribution to European culture that Ó Doibhlin was invited to select and edit Irish texts for inclusion in volume seven of a massive inventory of Europe's literary heritage, *Patrimoine littéraire européen*, published in Brussels in 1995. Both his selection, together with its explanation, for

that turbulent period in European and Irish history from 1515-1610 is inspirational: here are a few examples;

### **A Fatal Compromise**

Unlike most western European countries the literary Ireland of the 16<sup>th</sup> century did not come under the joint influences of the Renaissance and the Reformation, because Ireland lacked the humanist milieu where the Reformation thrived. In fact any efforts to establish a university in the country did not succeed; the last in date that of the Earl of Kildare in Maynooth in 1515, had been destroyed in 1535 under Henry VIII of England. And the reform of the Gaelic culture in the 15<sup>th</sup> century had been accompanied, under the influence of the Observantine Franciscans, by a type of reform of religious life. The military aggression of the Tudors and the English religious schism meant that for the majority of Irish people the programme of the reformers came under the banner of a conquering foreigner. The compromise by which the great Irish chieftains accepted the supremacy of the English king, in politics and in religion, was inaugurated at the Parliament, re-convened by the Lord Deputy in 1541.

### **A Fortress Recaptured**

Ulster, the last independent province of Ireland, under the leadership of their princes O'Neill, O'Donnell and Maguire, succumbed under the murderous assaults of the Nine Years' War, the summit of which was the defeat at Kinsale in 1601. The politics of methodological destruction and genocide put into effect by the Elizabethan generals saw nothing less than the annihilation of the native civilization and its replacement by a colonial population.

For this reason the literary history of the era is nearly impossible, for the documentation is reduced to chronicles or collections saved from the general devastation. Some examples of the poetic production of the court poets of the great families were however preserved in manuscripts, the only evidence of the hopes, the beliefs and the final agony of the Gaelic aristocracy.

### **Tadhg Ó Cianáin**

In 1603 the princes of Ulster despairing of efficient Spanish help and depleted at the end of the Nine Years' war, accepted an agreement with the

Lord Deputy of Elizabethan England that re-established them in their traditional rights on the condition of making an act of allegiance to the Queen. The adventurous English who flocked to the country, seeing their hopes of making a fortune disappear, renewed their intrigue so that the chieftains, thinking they were victims of a plot, resolved to leaving the country and to search for political and military support among the Catholic powers of the Continent. Their departure in 1607 left a void that was quickly filled by that which one called at the time 'a plantation' of Protestant settlers from England and Scotland. Similar colonies were established at the same time at the other side of the Atlantic, the French in Canada, the English in Virginia. But the 'plantation' of Ulster inflicted on Ireland a wound that still bleeds.

To read the tragic story of the dissolution of Gaelic Ireland celebrated in this volume is to experience the consolation of seeing our case recognised and our independence and linguistic status acknowledged among the nations.

The publication of the first volume of *A Manual of Irish Literature* in 2003 continues this great work. The stated aim is again clear:

This is the first of a series of handbooks aimed at allowing readers to repossess their literary heritage, through selected passages with commentary. Memory is the thread that binds a people together, the memory of that Gaeltacht, not a narrow district but a human gathering stretching back hundreds of years, the Gaeltacht of the mind of which Irish literature speaks, a great, contented, lasting Gaeltacht. This is a means of taking mental and imaginative control of our heritage, designed to enthuse the Irish community, especially the young generation.

But why all this preoccupation with literature, you may well ask? After all, there is more to life than literature? Well, there is, but not much more. Life is a series of experiences in time that come and go. Literature by capturing those experiences attempts to ensure that

they do not quite disappear.

In times of economic boom such as ours, where the frantic video game is preferred to the film, never mind the book, it does not suffice any more to couch the message in the leisurely metaphorical terms of *Néal Maidine*. In an Ireland of a shambolic health service and exploitative nursing homes Ó Doibhlin chooses to put it in the sensationalist terms of a current affairs program:

In practical terms, I suppose, we are trying to decide what to do about what is for the *elites* of our society that embarrassing relic of a disreputable past, the Irish language. There it is like some toothless grandmother huddled by our hearth, mumbling over days of misery or ancient heroism that we, her forward-looking children, have never known and would sooner forget. We can not in all decency throw her out – she is after all of our blood – but we can park her in a geriatric ghetto where she can expire in comfort and in solitude, while we get on with the business of living. So we have given her government commissions to revive her, Gaeltacht grants and schemes to build up her resistance, even the promise of her own television service to cheer her last lucid hours if her timely death doesn't spare us that expense.

Ó Doibhlin could never be accused of not living in the real world, something which is true, I suppose, of most Northern Catholics, till recently, and maybe even still. Unlike those of us down my way, appeased by Independence, the thorny question of Irish identity was something from which self-respecting Northerners were not prepared to shrink. In the dark days of the mid 1970s Ó Doibhlin gave a talk in Rome, published in the magazine of the Irish College, *The Coelhan*, entitled 'Problems of Irish Culture'. The title is deliberately ironic. A lot of you recall that at the time 'revisionism' was fashionable – thankfully it itself is being revised again, if one is to believe the President and the Taoiseach on the reinstatement of 1916 as an event in our history worthy of official annual commemoration – and the thesis was that 'Irish' and 'the Irish' were the problem. We were



bombarded with the unreasonableness of our aspirations to linguistic and political freedom constantly. In the very first paragraph here in a reasoned, deliberate understatement, for affect, he contextualized the question, so that you can have some kind of fruitful debate and draw fruitful conclusions:

We hear constant reference these days to the 'problem' of Irish culture and it is a constant subject for debate in the press and on television whether there is any way whatsoever of characterising what it is to be Irish. Of course we live in an age of problems anyhow when the arduous process of living tends to be presented in the form of a succession of intellectual puzzles which have to have answers provided for them, much as a schoolboy used to have to turn up with answers to the geometry 'problems' he had been given for homework. It seems to be further assumed that discussion of these problems, on the public platform, or better still on a television screen, somehow or other will 'solve' them and so make life easier for all of us, whereas of course such a presentation seems to be an inevitable part of public affairs programmes or feature articles, and the insatiable nature of journalism, particularly radio and television journalism, would seem to ensure that our 'problems', like the poor, will be always with us.

The core of this talk concerns itself with Ó Doiblin's constant message and mission: a proper understanding of what 'tradition' means, to rescue it from the misconceptions that associate it with 'old-fashioned', 'conservative', and 'stuff from the past'. The linguistic definition is simple enough: from the Latin verb 'tradere' – to hand on, but it is values we are talking about not goods:

It would be arrogant to attempt to define in detail at this moment in history, what constitutes being Irish. For one thing, as in the case of any other nation, it has varied in the past, varies in the present in the minds of different individuals, and will no doubt be subject to change in the future. For a community, like a person, is in a state of constant tension between permanency and change. It endures in time and has therefore a past, a

present and a future; it is aware both of continuing identity and yet a constant process of change...As in the case of the individual, the presently existing national community has received all the raw materials, so to speak, of its existence and identity from its forebears through the handing-on process that we call tradition. In this process, a younger generation receives, at least initially, its own being and sense of identity from its predecessor. It identifies with what is handed on to it, at least at first, because in maturity it can and should examine its inheritance and even re-shape it according to its own needs before in turn handing on to its successors. Tradition is therefore a process which likewise combines permanency and change, although too often it is regarded purely as a process of conservation.

This needs to be applied practically on the ground. In an essay 'Local History and Peace in the North' (1978), he returns to the importance of understanding that tradition 'is a living dynamic process' and it is not without significance that this is the only place I have come across his use of the word 'loyalty' in either English or Irish:

If we regard a 'tradition' as a body of beliefs and attitudes to which unconditional loyalty must be given and which must be handed on unchanged as a kind of sacred trust, we are putting ourselves in bondage to a dead past...

The most genuine kind of loyalty that a generation can show to its tradition is precisely to study it critically in the light of their experience and estimate as clearly as it can what is of continuing value to it and what seems no longer to be essential...

This can of course be a painful process, as witness the contemporary example of the Catholic Church's effort at renewal and reform since the Second Vatican Council.

It has always been a source of sadness and annoyance among Irish speakers that they were treated as political extremists, an attitude based on a misconception of tradition. We have rights too and you

might have expected that a state whose constitution acknowledges it, would cherish it because it was the voice of the people over thousands of years. In reality we are often ignored, sometimes neglected and by times, even harassed. It is this emotive issue Ó Doibhlin tackles in an essay entitled 'Iron Harps and Iron Ladies' – the Iron Ladies, the successive policies of military solutions of the British Government; the Iron Harps, the other extreme mentioned by Séamus Heaney's *Station Island*: '...that harp of unforgiving iron/ the Fenians strung...'

A programme which aims at no more than the preservation of these two 'traditions', even in mutual respect, seems to me unlikely to generate the enthusiasm and unleash the energies needed to transform this country, North and South.

Surely it is a very superficial use of the word 'tradition' that lies behind this view. Tradition is a fundamental force in human life, but only if it is alive. And if it is alive, it is changing, growing, assimilating new elements by meeting new situations, drawing upon its own past to provide the material for a satisfactory future. In many ways, the outlook of the early Gaelic League showed a greater insight into human historical and social processes...

In the last analysis that is what a culture is, a framework and seedbed of hope.

...the steady erosion of all those things which gave our forebears a sense of themselves and a confidence in their future.

Nothing less than the working out of a new consciousness, one that would free us from the 'traditions' of colonizer and colonized.

His most recent pamphlet, *Cosaint na Daonnachta* (2004) is an ambitious attempt to situate the question in its global context, because the old catch cries of 'Ourselves alone'; 'not free merely but Gaelic as well, not Gaelic merely but free as well', are no longer

relevant in the global world in which we live. So the questions need to be asked: 'What does the question of Irish identity mean in the era of globalisation? What does our way of being teach us about life?'

In an era of individualism we wish to see everyone cherished equally. At a time when the notion of self-sacrifice in the cause of the common good is rejected, let us speak of our obligation to the historic nation and our ancestors; when all the talk is about the global picture let us remind people of the small island community; when the ruling elite speak of efficiency and competitiveness, high tech and investment, the Irish person's concern must be the identity of the person and the people and the continuity of their historical memory.

We have this understanding because of our historical experience, those forces that helped us to survive: the conviction of our unique existence; our never say die attitude; our understanding of our historic continuity and our sense of destiny for the future.

Human civilization is under threat of extinction by neglect, by alienation, by consumerism, by exploitation, individualism. Protecting humanity against technology and profit and despair.

At the end of the day, identity or Irish culture is simply this: a resolve to survive, to triumph over the forces of destruction and death, the march of time and apathy, and those executors of death: malice, violence and tyranny.

But while economic and political freedom provide the optimum conditions for sustaining progress, as Governments would put it, only the genuine voice of our people over the centuries of their experience will make it meaningful and for that sustenance we need to access our literature. And literature has always been subversive in the proper sense of the word: always challenging boredom, lethargy, sameness, staleness, apathy; always inspiring, motivating, awakening. It is now both profitable and popular to speak Irish – though as a

Tyrone man remarked some fifty years ago – they spoke it at a time when 'twas neither profitable nor popular. Raidió na Gaeltachta is now world wide on the web. You can get all the children's programmes, country and western and sport you need on TG 4; swap your *Sunday World* for *Foinse* and your *Irish News* for *Lá*; your Model School for your Gaelscoil. If our day has come, if certain civil rights have been achieved it must be remembered that it was the creative writers who inspired them: Máirtín Ó Cadhain in Conamara, which is now what Flanders was some fifty years ago, and which is one of the most vibrant Gaeltacht communities in the country. About the same time the poet Seán Ó Ríordáin made the point that the writers would awaken the language and the awakened language would inspire the people. It is no coincidence that the economic boom of the Celtic Tiger is contemporaneous with much of this Irish revival, not as a consequence of Governments being in a position to fund Foras na Gaeilge's lavish promotions, but because the new found confidence stemming from a greater awareness of our identity has fuelled the spirit of innovation. Joe Lee makes the case that this has been the pattern of other countries success (like Finland and Israel). Ó Doibhlin goes further and points out that:

People are moved above all by the imagination. Time and again, the schizophrenia and sense of inferiority produced by a long experience of colonialist exploitation have been exorcized by a major work of literature in the formerly proscribed language.

And he cites the example of Flanders, Catalonia, and Iceland and then he adds: 'Works of such cultural vision are curiously absent in modern writing in Irish.' He is precluded from admitting, of course, that his own creative and critical contribution, particularly over the last forty years has been part of that imaginative vision behind the success of this country. In the year he wrote *An Branar gan Cur* –

Rome, 1974, I think I recall a barren period of a full six weeks, when, so to speak, the train broke down on this metaphysical, cultural journey from Dublin to Derry. For that full six weeks he was stuck in that train in Portadown. I think it may be from that predicament he formulated the response, also delivered in Rome, contained in that essay 'The Problems of Irish Culture'. It is gratifying to now look back at the concluding paragraph of that essay and realise that we have made some progress:

In the last analysis, it is precisely a de-colonising of Ireland and its culture that we have not yet achieved. The preservation and revival of Irish is not, as current revisionists sometimes assert, 'divisive'. It is in fact, or should be, a healing process, healing the mutilation of history, curing the sense of inferiority due to past debacles and allaying anxiety about our future by generating a natural self-confidence and self-esteem. When we have put our people back in possession of themselves, their memory of the past and their hope of the future, we can claim to have re-made for ourselves a culture.

If we may continue with the railway metaphor, in the words of the CIÉ advertisement 'we're not there yet, but we're getting there.' I have a feeling that maybe it is part of our destiny to always be on our way, realising that here we have no lasting city, to search in hope, with the direction and confidence that tradition gives, winning some, losing some, but always giving it a try.

And if this challenge and struggle is part of the human condition then our history has prepared us well for the task. The following few verses from a lament written for Fr. Éamonn Ó Doibhlin, who died in 1972 remind us that this privilege of nationhood with which we have been blessed comes at a price:

We came away leaving him there in his enclosure,  
Facing south, his back to Ulster,  
Irish was still been spoken as we scattered,

North to Moyry Pass and down by Cooley.

He was carried in those Irish voices scattering  
Towards the troubled North and the neglectful South:  
But it still troubled our hearts to think  
That the old resolve, his personal resolve, remained unresolved.

We cannot succumb now, no more than the mountains  
That protected us together with our people's long struggle;  
May the voice of our mentality always be on our lips,  
The breath of those mountains to where we look for help.

With the support of our heritage let us face the enemy  
Whose name we no longer know, we whose destiny it is,  
To die, like him, before the matter is resolved,  
Let us bind ourselves together till death takes us.

This respect for what we are reminds us of that famous story of the 'Pass of Thermopylae' about the brave handful of Spartans who defended Greece against the might of the Persians. The inscription on the monument reads:

Go tell in Sparta, passer-by  
That here obedient to their laws we lie!

That obedience unto death to an idea of civilization is something that English does not have a word for but what is called 'pietas' in Latin.

Universities have now succumbed to consumerism. Ó Doibhlin is in danger of being a voice crying in the wilderness. That may be no bad thing. After all, our history teaches us that voices crying in the wilderness are needed to prepare the way. But those who have ears to hear need to ensure that the considerable body of scripture I've referred to is heeded. It would be a sin if it could be said of us with

all our opportunity and education as was said of a former generation:

D'aithle na bhfilí dár ionmhas éigse is iúl  
is mairg do chonaic an chinniúint d'éirigh dhúinn:  
ár leabhair ag titim i leimhe 's i léithe i gcúil  
's ag mic na droinge gan siolla dár seoda rún.

After those poets, for whom art and knowledge were wealth,  
'tis terrible to see the fate that has befallen us:  
our books in corners rotting away  
and the present generation ignorant of our wealth.

In practical terms that means that we fight our corner in the increasingly crowded and competitive field of academia. There is too an obligation to ensure that the haven that Maynooth was for the safeguarding of our heritage - that wonderful collection of Mss. from the hidden Ireland of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries - be recognised. May we suggest that Ó Doibhlin's investigations and examinations of the complex concepts of faith and culture, in both his critical and creative writing, for over forty years, be included in the curriculum of the newly established Institute of Faith and Culture in Saint Patrick's College, Maynooth. It would provide food for thought for the academic Catholic community, both clerical and lay, as they face the challenges of the twenty-first century. In this period of transition and of our new-found European status it could provide a proper understanding and appreciation of tradition, not just for our identity, but for our meaningful survival into the future.

Permit me, in conclusion, one phrase from the volume to be launched presently, *Manuaíl de Litreach na Gaeilge: Faisicil II*, in reference to the work of Irish scholars abroad at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Ó Doibhlin says:



Leagadh síos bunraith d'fhéiniúlacht nua-aimseartha na hÉireann  
(A foundation was laid for the identity of modern Ireland)

It has taken some four hundred years to fulfil the words of the prophet Isaiah referred to at the beginning:

You will rebuild the ancient ruins,  
Build up on the old foundations.  
You will be called 'Breach-mender',  
'Restorer of ruined houses'.