Brian Friel's Translations *and the Ordnance Survey of Ireland 1824-1846*

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The CCS trip to Dublin in July included a visit to Brian Friel's play Translations. *Ann Marshal is originally from Dublin and on retirement completed a BA in theatre studies with a particular focus on Irish Theatre. She accompanied her husband Ed on the trip. This is an edited version of the talk she gave to the group prior to the theatre visit.*

Brian Friel's play is a fascinating one because it raises so many different questions. I knew a great deal about the play when I started to put this talk together and then discovered the intriguing world of the Irish Ordnance Survey. I finished up with enough material for a talk lasting about three weeks – and the Ordnance survey seems to have run into the same problem: in 1835 after ten years of work the Historical department of the Ordnance Survey proudly presented its report on one parish, Templemore, which ran to 400 pages. This was largely because Colonel Colby and T A Larcom who were responsible for the survey '*desired to collect more information than could find room on the maps themselves'* – but I will come back to that later.

I don't intend to cover the amazing feats which were accomplished in the OS work – I am sure you are all very familiar with these achievements but I would like to quote one comment from the website *Trigpointing Ireland* [1]:

> 'Measurement of the baseline began in 1827……. and was completed in November 1828 after 60 days of measurement by 70 men. The accuracy achieved is still marvelled at today'.

Neither am I going to tell you the story of the play: I am going to tell you what the play is about.

Friel's background is relevant. He was born in 1929 and grew up in the depressed and depressing atmosphere of the minority Catholic community in Derry which had been part of the United Kingdom since 1922 when Ireland was divided into the Irish Free State and Northern Ireland. He is a native Irish speaker as were his parents and grandparents so he was familiar with the linguistic challenges which he identifies in the play. He spent his childhood holidays in Donegal where his family had originated and Donegal has remained for him a powerful image of possibility. The small town of Ballybeg – anglicised from the Gaelic Baile which means town and Beag which means small – is the place where many of his plays are set and is a mixture of the socially and politically dislocated world of Derry and the haunting attraction of the lonely landscapes of rural Donegal.

I thought I would begin where Friel began when he came to write the play which was first presented at the Guildhall in Derry in 1980. He says that in the years before he began to write he had some ideas in his head the most constant being a play about the death of the Irish language and the acquisition of English.

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[1] *http://www.trigpointing-ireland.org.uk/*

During that same period he made two accidental discoveries: he learnt that his great-great-grandfather had been a hedge-schoolmaster in Donegal and that he was '*fond of a drop*' and this discovery led him to explore the hedge schools. The second discovery he made was that directly across the Foyle River from where he lived was a place called Magilligan and it was here that the first trigonometrical base for the Ordnance Survey was set up in 1828. The man in charge of that survey was Colonel Colby and that discovery sent Friel to his *book A Memoir of the City and the North-West Liberties of Londonderry*. He also began reading the letters of John O'Donovan, a noted Gaelic scholar who worked with the OS from 1830 almost continuously until 1842 researching place-names and researching and preserving manuscripts. The eureka moment for Friel was in 1976 when he came across J H Andrews' [2] *A paper landscape* where all the notions that had been visiting him over the previous years came together:

- An event in the first half of the nineteenth century
- An aspect of colonialism
- The death of the Irish language and the acquisition of English

Here was the perfect metaphor to accommodate and realise these shadowy notions: *mapmaking*.

All he had to do, he thought, was to dramatise *A paper landscape.* He started by trying to make it a play about Colby but that didn't work and Colby appears in the play as a minor character, Captain Lancey. After several attempts to build the play around other characters in *A paper landscape* he abandoned that idea and made it a play about a drunken hedge-schoolmaster. He did use another real character from the OS team, Yolland, placing him in Donegal in 1833 when in fact the real Yolland did not join the team until 1838. Most of this information was given by Friel when he and Prof Andrews spoke at an interdisciplinary seminar held in Maynooth in January 1983. When Andrews saw the play he said how much he enjoyed it – he felt himself carried forward by it – until it came to the first historical event which Friel had invented. He looked around him thinking that everyone in the audience would have seen through it but he then realised that for the audience there were no historically incorrect events – they believed every word of it. Eventually he rationalised that the OS was only a dramatic convenience – the play does not suggest that any of the events had anything to do with mapmaking and he does admit that all the characters in the play, including Lancey are treated very fairly. One commentator has said that '*Andrews choose graciously to excuse the fact that Friel had made a serious and unironic distortion of the historic reality which it implicitly claimed to represent*' and Andrews was too courteous to say so.

So that is the background of the play – a mixture of history and fiction. I want to now talk about some of the things in the play with which you may not be familiar. The action takes place in a hedge school in the townland of Baile Beag/Ballybeg. The Penal Laws which were passed between 1702 and 1719 were introduced to control the rebellious Irish and they covered many aspects of life

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[2] Professor John Andrews, incidentally, is Charles Close Society member number 4

for Irish Catholics. The relevant one here is the one about Catholic education:

> 'No person of the popish religion shall publicly or in private houses teach school or instruct youth in learning within this realm'.

One commentator on this Penal Law said that it was not merely the persecution of a religion; it was an attempt to degrade and demoralize a whole nation. As late as 1825 the Protestant hierarchy petitioned the King saying '*that amongst the ways to convert and civilise the Deluded People (that)…..a sufficient number of English Protestant Schools be erected wherein the children of the Irish Natives should be instructed in the English Tongue and in the Fundamental Principles of the true Religion*'.

The Irish Catholics did not attend these schools but instead established the hedge schools – originally under a hedge or in the side of a hill but over time they were held in barns as is the one in the play. The teachers were often priests who had been educated in seminaries on the Continent – hence the teaching of Latin and Greek was common, and some were classical scholars such as Hugh in the play. They also taught mathematics, history and geography, spelling and writing and of course catechism. There is one colourful description given by Seamus MacManus in his book *The story of the Irish race:*

> 'Latin and Greek were taught to ragged hunted ones under shelter of the hedges whence these teachers were known as hedge schoolmasters. A knowledge of Latin was a frequent enough accomplishment among poor Irish mountaineers in the seventeenth century and was spoken by many of them on special occasions. And it is authoritatively boasted that cows were bought and sold in Greek in mountain market-places of Kerry'.

To give you some idea of the scale of the schools in 1826 a Commission of Inquiry reported that of the 550,000 pupils enrolled in all schools in Ireland, 403,000 were in hedge schools but there were many children who had no schooling at all. The hedge-schoolmasters were paid by the pupils often in kind. In the play Marie brings milk as her payment for lessons and another pupil brings money – so much for lessons in one subject and so much for another.

The Penal laws were gradually repealed and the prohibition on Irish teachers was lifted in 1782 so by the time of the play - 1833 - there was no secrecy about the hedge schools. In 1832 State Elementary Schools acceptable to Irish Catholic population were introduced and we hear about one such school in the play where Hugh says he has been offered the headmastership. Manus had promised Marie that he would apply for it but he couldn't when his father applied. This highlights the problem of lack of work for men – or women - in these communities. Owen, Manus's brother who speaks English has gone away to Dublin for work and there are mythical stories about how wealthy he has become. Those men who are left behind – and Synge shows this too in his play about the Arran Islands – are the old men, alcoholics like Hugh, men like Jimmy Jack who could not survive in the outside world and cripples like Manus who have a place in Ballybeg but would struggle elsewhere. Almost all the young men have emigrated mainly for England or America to find work and send money home.

The main issue in the play, Friel tell us, is the language. Conventionally the existence of a shared language has been one of the fundamental criteria for nationhood. Placenames combine two things - land and language – that have been central to the cultural projects of romantic nationalism. To lose the Gaelic language would be to lose the soul of the nation, it was argued, and crucially the '*natural connection to the land that could only be experienced and articulated through the native tongue'*. The terms of a seventeenth century royal edict extended to placenames the restrictions imposed on language, dress, customs and lifestyle 'in order to preserve the cultural identity of the English settlers against the cultural and material threat of the 'native Irish'.

> 'His majesty taking notice of the barbarous and uncouth names by which most of the towns and places in the Kingdom of Ireland are called which hath occasioned much damage to diverse of his good subjects … for remedy thereof is pleased that it is enacted and be it enacted by the authority aforesaid that the Lord Lieutenant and council shall and may advise of, settle and direct in the passing of all letters patent in that kingdom for the future, how new and proper names more suitable to the English tongue many be inserted'.

English names were given to places some of which were still in use on maps up until the early twentieth century: Kingstown for Dun Laoghaire. Queenstown for Cobh, King's County for Offaly and Queen's County for Laois. The decision to map Ireland in the political context followed the Act of Union in 1801 when the protestant parliament in Dublin was dissolved and authority over Ireland returned to Westminster. The sappers had already done most of the mapping but Yolland's job in the play is to take each of the Gaelic names - every hill, stream, rock, every patch of ground which possessed its own distinctive Irish name and Anglicise it either by changing it into an approximate English sound or by translating it into English words. Obviously the maps could not be printed without the names so Yolland was under some pressure from Lancey to complete the work of naming. Friel gives an example in the setting for Act 2: a Gaelic name like Cnoc Ban, cnoc meaning hill and Ban meaning white or fair - would become Knockban or directly translated Fair Hill. These new standardised names were entered into the Name Book and were used in the new maps. In the play Owen and Yolland talk about Bun na hAbbann: Bun means bottom and Abha means river – in the Church registry it is called Bunowen, the freeholders call it Owenmore but Owen argues that that is another place and a different river - and in the Grand Jury lists it is called Binhome. They eventually decide to call it Burnfoot. Another example in the play is linked to local folklore – back to the romance again as Owen says. They come to a crossroads locally called Tobair Vree. Owen knows the story because his grandfather told it to him but he doubts anyone else in the area knows it. Tobair means a well and Vree is a corruption of Breen – Brian in English. One hundred and fifty years ago there used to be a well in a field close to the crossroads. An old man called Brian whose face was disfigured by an enormous growth believed that the water in the well was blessed and went every day for seven months and bathed in it. But the growth did not go away and one

morning Brian was found drowned in the well. Ever since then the place has been known as Tobair Vree although the well has dried up long ago. It raised the question for Owen: do we give the crossroads a rational name or keep piety with a man long dead, his name long eroded beyond recognition whose trivial story nobody in the parish remembers. These two examples give a flavour of the problem of naming places particularly in a highly oral culture where few names were written down and the people often could not read or write. The names were passed on by word of mouth and when they were anglicised or corrupted it alienated the places from the people who lived there. Clearly for mapping purposes it was essential to have a stable name to which everyone could refer but for the local indigenous people at the time it was traumatic.

Language is clearly of great importance in the; play but Friel does give both sides of the argument for and against the introduction of English – or rather replacing Irish with English. Bridget points out that the new National Schools will only teach English, '*every subject will be taught through English, she says 'and everyone will end up as cute as the Buncrana people'*. Marie is very much in favour of learning English and quotes Daniel O'Connell, the Liberator, who as recently as 1829 had brought about Catholic Emancipation giving Catholics the freedom to practice their religion, He had said '*I don't want Greek, I don't want Latin I want English*'.

Marie of course wants to learn English because she has decided to go to America. Although Hugh's lessons are made to seem attractive and stimulating the question arises as to what benefit they were to the pupils other than the sheer enjoyment of the learning. Jimmy Jack is clearly well-read, speaks fluent Greek and Latin but is not portrayed as a man equipped to make a living. Owen, the son who had learnt English and left Ballybeg, is shown as being quite successful in contrast to other members of the community.

Friel's source documents included George Steiner's book about the history and theory of translation, *After Babel*. Two key ideas in Steiner's book were important for Friel in relation to this play

1. Instead of acting as a living membrane, grammar and vocabulary become a barrier to new feeling. A civilisation is imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches… the changing landscape of fact – Hugh actually uses these words in the play. Hugh also says that English is the language of commerce while Gaelic had more connection with the classical tongues.
2. Eros and language mesh at every point. Intercourse and discourse, copula and copulation are sub-classes of the dominant fact of communication. They arise from the life-need of the ego to reach out and comprehend…another human being.

Friel uses this idea to portray the loving relationship which develops between Yolland and Marie in spite of the fact that they cannot understand each other. One of the difficulties Friel saw in the play was how to indicate that some people were speaking Gaelic and some were speaking English but he manages throughout the play to make it credible that the Irish people are speaking Gaelic although in fact they are speaking English and the English people cannot

understand them. This is almost certainly achieved by staging and performance: the actors can create the sense of speaking a different language where this might not be obvious on the page. This is quite different from the way Synge for instance deals with the native Irish – he has them speak a dialect which is a kind of translation of Gaelic into English but keeping the Gaelic word order – '*sure it's home I'll be going when I have the tea taken*.'

Friel's play raises many issues and can be seen as a very emotive evocation of the lives of the culturally deprived Irish people. The replacement of place names has been seen as important even though Friel makes the point in the play that often local lore attached to these names quickly becomes irrelevant – the story of Tobair Vree for instance. Re-translating these names back to the original will not recreate a Gaelic past. Friel himself comments in the diary he kept during the writing of the play that one aspect which kept eluding him was *'the wholeness, the integrity of that Gaelic past. Maybe because I don't believe in it'*. Earlier I promised some final thoughts on language before I return to Larcom and Colby. Language is a tool for communicating and all tools need to be changed with time to adapt to new situations. Whether or not the English colonisers had suppressed Gaelic, it would have waned naturally anyway. For a country with so many of its people distributed throughout the world – mainly in America and Australia – the use of English was a necessity. There is bound to be a loss – and that will be at the point where the first generation to speak another language cannot communicate fully with their parents – and even less their grandparents. There are memories of the past which cannot be shared – the young people don't know the word in the new language when their elders tell them stories from their own childhood. By the next generation it is as if they never existed – the old world has gone and taken its oral memories with it,

But not that which has been written down - and that brings us back to the Ordnance Survey. T A Larcom, under the command of Colonel Colby, gave a very detailed and wide specification to the people who were collecting data for the survey – they believed that for little extra effort useful cultural and social data could be collected. In addition to the broad categories in the specifications, a list of '*hints'* was given as to what the headings might include. The hint for bogs, which was a subsection of a subsection begins:

> 'Their extent, height above the sea, and the nearest river, their probable origin, does timber occur embedded in the bogs? Of what trees principally (p148A) and so on'.

Section III which is on people, under which there are two subsections and under the first there were ten headings one of which is *Habits of the people* and the hint begins:

> 'Note the general style of the cottages, as stone, mud, slated, glass windows, one storey or two, number of rooms, comfort and cleanliness ….any legendary tales or poems recited around the fireside? … Does emigration prevail? Do any return? and so on'.

The triangulation and measurements were undertaken by the soldiers and the fieldworkers sent out to investigate place names, architectural remains and

cultural artefacts were men like O'Donovan and O'Curry, eminent Irish scholars with a good knowledge of and a sympathetic interest in local antiquities and native lore. They salvaged the original placenames from neglect or corruption by painstaking inventorisation of manuscripts giving them English transliterations rather than translations and capturing a great deal of local lore and learning from communities which fifteen years later would be swept away by the famine. The possibility of the famine was foreshadowed in Friel's play where Marie talks about the sweet smell – the smell of rotting potatoes. The famine was devastating and it went on for four harvests 1845 to 1848. The population of Ireland at the time was eight million and after the famine it was six million - one million dead and one million emigrated many of whom died on their way to America in coffin ships. Larcom later became Commissioner of Public Works and was involved in organising famine relief. His later years were devoted to the collection of information concerning his own period of rule in Ireland which he arranged and had bound in hundreds of volumes. He left these to different learned societies, chiefly Irish, with whom he was closely associated,

The Ordnance Survey was a major contribution to the cultural nationalism of later decades in that it equated the very land itself with a Gaelic past and a Gaelic-speaking peasantry. One particularly important result at the ideological level was that the sense of place and sense of past were mutually linked. The Ordnance Survey which had worked under the very shadow of the imminent famine marked an important step in the development of interest in Ireland's past cultural history however much Brian Friel tries to implicate it in the destruction of the Gaelic language. When challenged his reply is that this is a piece of theatre, a play, and should be treated as such: you don't go to Macbeth to find out about Scottish history.

THE TRIGONOMETRICAL EXPERIMENTAL SURVEY - A detachment of the Sappers and Miners have commenced operations in this neighbourhood. The principal station is that of Beacon-hill, near Amesbury, where a small military encampment has been formed – a novelty which will doubtless attract many persons to that spot.

Salisbury & Winchester Journal, 19 May 1849, page 4, column 2

With thanks to Bill Riley