TRANSLATOR’S INTRODUCTION

In *The Dirty Dust* everyone is dead. This may seem an unlikely way to write a novel, but Máirtín Ó Cadhain* was not your usual author. He was both traditional and experimental as he willed, and the device he chose for this novel suited his own genius and the community he was depicting.

The characters in the novel may be dead, and lying down in their graves, but they do not shut up. It is the fact that the dead do not shut up that gives life to the novel. The novel is composed entirely of heard and of unheard conversation, apart from the introductions to some of the chapters (which are called interludes) that are spoken by the Trumpet of the Graveyard and act as a kind of a linguistic and philosophical contrast to what is going on below. What is going on below is a continuation of what was going on above before all the residents of the cemetery died. It is a novel that is a listening-in to gossip and to backbiting and rumours and bitching and carping and moaning and obsessing about the most important, but more often the most trivial, matters of life, which are often the same thing. It is as if, in an afterlife beneath the sods, the same old life would go on, only nothing could be done about it, apart from talk.

And talk is the principal character in this novel. Although the introductory pages of the novel say that the time is eternity, which is

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* Máirtín Ó Cadhain may seem difficult to pronounce to anybody without knowledge of the Irish language. His name has never been Anglicised and we are not going to do it here. But for the sake of pronunciation it might be rendered as something like Marteen O’Kine.
understandable, in fact, the locus of the novel is a graveyard somewhere in Connemara in the west of Ireland in the early 1940s. In that Connemara of the thirties and the forties there was no radio, except in the priest’s and the teacher’s houses; there was no cinema and few shops, and television had never been heard of.

The only culture was talk.

There were songs and music and some dancing, but talk was the centerpiece of creativity. This novel attempts to capture the talk and the never-ending gabble and gossip of which the community was made. It might be said that all human communities before the onset of common literacy were simply made of talk. While anthropologists tell us that there are “loquacious” communities and “reticent” ones, there is no doubt whatsoever into which of those boxes Ireland fell. In that sense of never-ending chatter this novel is a better reflection of the concerns of ordinary humanity over thousands of years than those which deal with the great and the good. These concerns are not always that pleasant, of course, no more than are those of the great and the good, but at least they don’t do as much harm.

All these dead voices in the unquiet grave are concerned only with the immediate quotidian—the stolen seaweed, who is marrying whom, a donkey’s trespass, what somebody’s will contains, how the publican robbed them—although there are distant echoes of national politics and even of the Second World War. But all human life is here; and if you were to transfer yourself to any part of the world even today and to listen to the clatter of local voices, it would be not that much different from what you will encounter in The Dirty Dust.

This book is generally seen as one of the greatest achievements of the Irish novel. Although the Irish language can boast the longest

* Just in case of ambiguity, “Irish” here refers to the Irish language, and “Irish literature” refers to writing in the Irish language, just as “English literature” generally refers to that which is written in English, or “Spanish literature” to that which is written in Spanish. The term is linguistic and not geographical. “Irish” is sometimes erroneously referred to as “Gaelic.” The Irish language should never be referred to as “Gaelic” because doing so is historically, socially, formally, and linguistically wrong. “Gaelic” is now correctly applied to the principal historical language of Scotland,
unbroken vernacular literature in all of Europe with the exception of Greek, and indeed, one of the greatest of all European literatures until the modern period, its development was ruptured during the English conquest. Thus the novel came late in Irish, as it did in most noncosmopolitan pre-urban societies. While Irish did have a lively prose tradition up until the middle of the seventeenth century, for political and social reasons it went into rapid decline during the following two hundred years. As literacy in the language was minimal, there was little chance of developing the novel. This changed with the resurgence of interest in the language in the late nineteenth century and in particular after the independence of the new Irish Free State, when a fresh generation of Irish readers appeared.

A common theme in the early Irish novels was a depiction of life in Irish-speaking communities, often referred to as the Gaeltacht. While Gaeltacht originally meant Irish speakers, it came to mean those areas in which Irish was the dominant language. Most of these were in the west of Ireland, one of the largest being in Connemara, where Ó Cadhain was born. These novels often painted the Gaeltacht and its people in a glowing idyllic light, or if they didn’t, they were perceived to do so. One writer, Séamus Ó Grianna, remarked that he would never knowingly write a word of which his mother would be ashamed. *The Dirty Dust* burst in upon this world with its robust talk, its mean-spirited characters, its petty pursuits, and its great mirth.

Its publication met with immediate acclaim, but not universal. One critic damned it as “a dirty book,” when dirty books were banned in the hundreds. Another claimed he would never have supported the Irish language if he had thought it would lead to such abuses as this. Yet another, that such conversation shouldn’t be put into the mouth of a dog. On the other hand, it was widely read out loud in Ó Cadhain’s own Gaeltacht, rapidly became a best-seller, and gained

although it also was referred to (in English) as “Irish” for most of its history. The distinction is not subtle: “Irish” refers to the native language of Ireland, and “Gaelic” refers to the major native language of Scotland, although the term came into common usage only in the past two hundred years, or less.
classic status among Irish-speakers. One writer remembers that his mates in secondary school would wait eagerly for the next instalment when it was first being serialised in a newspaper. The author recalls walking through a crowd at a football match and hearing a spectator mutter, “There goes The Dirty Dust.” It was referenced in the Dáil, the Irish parliament. There has been a bigger critical literature around it than around any other single Irish novel, and like all major works of art there is no single consensus as to what it “means.”

Máirtín Ó Cadhain believed that speech was the best way to depict what was going on inside people’s heads, which explains a good deal about the narrative structure of the novel. It was said that it was based on a short story by Dostoyevsky on the one hand, and Edgar Lee Masters’s Spoon River Anthology on the other. In reply to this wild speculation about its origins, he recounted an incident that happened in his own area some years previous to his writing it. A woman was being buried on a particularly miserable rainy day in Connemara and the gravediggers had inadvertently opened the wrong grave. The day was so bad they couldn’t dig another, so they chucked her into the one they had already opened. Then someone realised that they were putting her coffin down on top of an old adversary. One of the onlookers muttered: “Oh holy cow, there’s going to be one almighty gabble!”

Máirtín Ó Cadhain was born in 1906 in a completely Irish-speaking area. He said that he never heard English spoken until he was six years of age. He trained as a primary schoolteacher in Dublin and taught in various schools throughout Connemara and east Galway. He became involved in illegal republican politics and in community activism and was dismissed from his position as a teacher after a row with the parish priest in 1936. He had already begun to write stories and translated a really bad novel by Charles Kickham for An Gúm, which is best described as a government publishing house. He moved to Dublin in search of employment but continued his republican activities.

Shortly after the outbreak of the Second World War he was imprisoned without trial in an internment camp which the then gov-
ernment had put aside especially for dissenters. Although he had one book of stories published in 1939, it is claimed that his years of imprisonment were his real education as a writer. His letters show that he read voraciously and wrote furiously. It is no surprise, then, that his first great burst of creativity took place immediately after the war, the period in which this novel was written.

He was a prodigious writer, with five collections of short stories published during his lifetime and another after his death. His collected works include novels, stories, lectures, letters, polemics, political tracts, history, translations, satires, and other writings which are entirely unclassifyable. Having worked at various slave labour jobs, he was appointed to a lectureship in Irish in Trinity College Dublin because of his deep and abiding knowledge of literature garnered from tireless reading and his almost unsurpassed knowledge of contemporary Irish speech. He eventually was appointed to the Chair of Irish in the same university the year before his death.

*The Dirty Dust* should best be read as a symphony of voices, although a cacophony of voices might be more appropriate. It is at turns a series of monologues, which can become duologues, rise up to vindictive diatribes and fade out at judicious and injudicious moments. There is a narrative, but you have to listen for the threads. There is more than one story, but they are all interrelated. We have to suss out what each person is saying according to each’s own obsession—a phrase can tell us who is talking—or each’s one singular moan, or each’s big bugbear like a signature tune. It is like switching channels on an old radio, now you hear this, and then you hear this other. Once you get the knack, the story rattles on with pace. It was natural for it to be made into a hugely successful radio play; it has also been staged several times, and even more surprisingly, it has been made into a darkly comic film.

The novel is also replete with references to Irish storytelling traditions, to mythology, to sagas, and to songs, which were all part of the common discourse. Indeed, there are verses of songs thrown in which were often meant to be extempore. One person would cast out a few lines as a challenge, and another person had to answer them.
This was all normal in the community, whereas nowadays people’s points of reference may well be TV shows or the doings of some flash celebrity. The mental furniture of another time and a different place is never easily transferred, but we must at least recognise it for what it is.

The main character, if it can be said that such exists, is Caitriona Paudeen. She is not a woman you would have liked to meet in real life, although meeting her in the next would be just as scary. If she has a love of her life it is well hidden, but the hatred of her life is her sister, Nell. Their bitterness sweetens the story throughout. Everyone in the community is dragged into this hatred, old sores are opened, old scores are maintained, and permanent grudges are given new life. We are given a full picture of a closed community largely indifferent to the outside world, a picture with warts and more warts, but we are also energised by their wonderful and beautiful and terrible and gruesome and magic humanity.

It should not be thought that this was Ó Cadhain’s only view of life in his community. His choice to write in this fashion was an artistic one, while many of his other stories dealing with the traditional life from which he came can be tender, tragic, and sensitive. While many of the women in The Dirty Dust are savage amazons, much of his writing is concerned with the personal and societal entrapment of women, either in economic slavery, or in barrenness, or having lost children. He knew well the price of poverty and the crushing of the human spirit that it often brought.

Translating this novel into English was a linguistic challenge. Translating the simplest story is a huge challenge, as languages are not algebraic equations. There has not been much modern Irish prose translated into English or into other languages, and some of what has been translated has been rendered into Anglo-Irish Synge-like gobbledegook. While this may have its own charm for some, it makes its Irish speakers sound like peasants and idiots and simpletons and clodhoppers. The Irish speakers of Irish Ireland were just as normal and as intelligent and as thick as the people of any other community, ever. I felt that the tradition of making good Irish people speak like bog trotters, hayseeds, and hillbillies should be avoided. There is also
the added difficulty that what we used to call Hiberno-English is now as dead as the diplodocus. Whatever the parlous state of the Irish language, which has been under unrelenting pressure for hundreds of years, it has far more life in it than the fag ends of the peculiar way English used to be spoken in Ireland. Apart from a phrase here and there, English in Ireland is as undistinguishable as English in the U.S. or the U.K., and even the erstwhile pronunciation of many Irish people is being rapidly smoothed out by contact with our betters.

On the other hand, to use some version of sub–Jane Austen–like polite urbanities and words of pleasantly standardised appropriateness would be a total denial of the energy and manic creativity of Ó Cadhain’s prose. Is not the word “appropriate” the most disgusting word in the entire English language? It means no more than that snobby people do not like unsnobby things. The challenge was to get some of the tone and vivacity of the original across without seeming too bizarre. English is a much standardised language with a wonderful and buzzing demotic lurking beneath. I tried to match the original Irish common speech with the familiar versions of demotic English that we know, mixing and mashing as necessary, and even inventing when required. But slang is always a trap. The more hip you are, the sooner you die. Language changes unsubtly from one half-generation to the under-ten-year-olds just coming after. There is no imaginable way to keep up with the whirl of changing language. Irish is no different, and much of the Irish of The Dirty Dust in the original would be incomprehensible and even weird to many native Irish speakers now. That Irish, after all, was the Irish of a generation born in the nineteenth century, when knowledge of English was minimal, and is a language much changed today, when nearly all of its speakers are bilingual.

There are some constants within this change, however. The characters in The Dirty Dust call to one another by their names, as this is far more common in Irish than in English. A familiar halloo is commonly greeted by using someone’s name. I have tried to follow this, but have on occasions left it out, as it would appear tiresome and unnatural. Likewise there is much that might be seen as “bad language.”
As someone who fervently believes that there is no such thing as bad language except that which is tired and dull and clichéd going forward outside the box, the language of The Dirty Dust pulsates with energy and brio and gutsiness. It is full of creative curses and inventive imprecations. If one objects to some of the crudity from a linguistically puritanical point of view, it should be remembered that the most common curses in Irish derived from the “Devil” himself, and to those who believed in him and his works and pomps, this was far worse than any “fuck” or “shit” or their attendant pard. “Damn-ing” someone to the horrors of Hell for all eternity was probably the worst that you could do. Modern “bad language” is a mild and ghostly shadow of the serious stuff of the past.

Ultimately, as we know, there is no easy equivalence between languages. It is not the meaning itself which is the problem but the tone, and feel, and echo. I have no idea whether this works or not in this translation. It may do so for some, and not for others. There is no such thing as a literal translation, as the simplest small word beyond “cat” and “dog” expands into a foliage of ambiguity. Even a fairly direct word like baile in Irish throws up difficulties. It appears all over the country, most usually as “Bally” in place-names, and usually refers to a town or a village. This, however, is a more recent growth, as the original Irish most probably refers to a cluster of houses, not quite “settlement,” not quite “town land,” more like “just around here where I live.”

The title itself raised some problems, but also some mirth. The most literal translation of Cré na Cille might be “The earth of the graveyard,” but this doesn’t have any sense of the ring of the original. I must presume that Ó Cadhain put in the alliteration for his own purposes as he had done with other titles. On the other hand, Cré can also mean “creed,” or “belief”—perhaps a pun for the discerning reader, to whom “The Common Creed” might come to mind. “Cemetery Clay” certainly also gives the necessary consonants, but I just don’t like it. If I was determined to stick with those lovely Cs, there was always “Cemetery Chatter,” “Crypt Comments,” or “Coffin Cant.” I toyed with a title such as “Six Feet Under,” which would
be a normal colloquialism for being buried, and it does retain a certain aptness. Once I was on this road, however, many suggestions rose up from the deep: “Graveyard Gabble,” “Talking Deads,” “The Last Words,” “The Way of All Trash,” “Undercurrents,” “Tomb Talk,” “All the Dead Voices,” “Beneath the Sods,” “Deadly Breathing,” “Biddies in the Boneyard,” and much more, culminating in “A Hundred Years of Verbitude.” Ó Cadhain’s first book of stories is entitled *Idir Shúgradh is Dáiríre* (Between joking and seriousness), and he once observed that if there ever was a single particular Irish trait it was the ability, even the necessity, to mix fun with solemnity. He might have preferred some of the above to *The Dirty Dust*, which I finally settled on in order to maintain some sense of the rhythm of the original, along with the biblical echoes that dust we are and “unto dust we shall return,” while not forgetting that what goes on below amongst the skulls and cross words is certainly dirty.

I have taken some liberties with this translation, but not many. Certainly not as many as those which Máirtín Ó Cadhain took in his very first work of translation. His first manuscript version of that bad Charles J. Kickham novel *Sally Kavanagh* was returned to the publisher with nearly twice as many words as the original! There was always a tradition in translation in Ireland of taking some freedoms, and it would have been untraditional of me not to do likewise.

The main reason that Máirtín Ó Cadhain was so profligate with words was that he couldn’t help it. His supreme gift was his torrent of words which gushed and laughed and overflowed in a flush of excess. Not only was this the way he wrote, it was also the way he spoke. But every writer’s supreme gift is also his weakness, as he cannot be everything. The writer Liam O’Flaherty once advised him to take a scissors to his prose, although he probably meant a bill-hook. If he had, he would not have been Máirtín Ó Cadhain, but only an anaemic version of him.

His inability to be unable not to let fly meant that although he tried his hand at drama, he was singularly unsuccessful. Drama demands some sense of structure and control of time, traits which he lacked. While *The Dirty Dust* does have a definite structure, it is big
and baggy enough for him to dump everything into. Readers therefore might find it odd that in this graveyard there are elections, and Rotary clubs, and writers, and even a French pilot who was washed up on the shore and interred with the others. If you are wondering what they are doing there, it is quite simply that Ó Cadhain as a public polemicist could not resist the temptation of taking subtle and not-so-subtle swipes at colleagues and at issues which intrigued or pissed him off. Much of the novel is satire, not only on the easy pieties of country life but on the snobbery, pretence, and charlatanry which were as much a part of his country then as they are now.

This satire goes deep in Irish literature and links it with texts at least as far back as the eighth-century Fled Bricrenn (The feast of Bricriu) and the twelfth-century Aislinge meic Conglinne (The vision of Mac Conglinne), but you don’t have to know anything about this to enjoy Caitriona Paudeen’s poison tongue, the Old Master’s abiding jealousy, Nora Johnny’s whoring after “culture,” and the entire interlocking spite that gives them life while they are dead. There have only been about three hundred novels written in Irish since the start of the twentieth century, and if there were a typical mould, this certainly wouldn’t be it. Like all great novels it is unique and is to be enjoyed as a feast of language, the kind of language you might hear outside a door when everybody inside is tearing themselves apart; or in a country graveyard in the dark light of day.

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CHARACTERS AND DIALOGUE CONVENTIONS

Primary Characters

CAITRIONA PAUDEEN  Newly buried
PATRICK CAITRIONA  Her only son
NORA JOHNNY’S DAUGHTER  Wife of Patrick Caitriona. Living in Caitriona’s house
MAUREEN  Patrick Caitriona and Nora Johnny’s Daughter’s young girl
NORA JOHNNY  Toejam Nora. Patrick Caitriona’s mother-in-law
BABA PAUDEEN  A sister of Caitriona and of Nell. Living in America. Her will expected soon.
NELL PAUDEEN  A sister of Caitriona and of Baba
JACK THE LAD  Nell’s husband
PETER NELL  Nell and Jack’s son
BLOTCHY BRIAN’S MAGGIE  Peter Nell’s wife
BLOTCHY BRIAN JUNIOR  Peter Nell and Blotchy Brian Maggie’s son. Going for the priesthood.
BLOTCHY BRIAN  Maggie’s father
FIRESIDE TOM  Relation of Caitriona and Nell. The two of them vying for his land.
MAGGIE FRANCES  Neighbour and bosom friend of Caitriona

Other Neighbours and Acquaintances

BIDDY SARAH  Keening woman, but fond of the drink
COLEY  Traditional storyteller. Can’t read.
Kitty  Neighbour of Caitriona’s who claimed to have lent her a pound but never got it back.

Dotie  A sentimental woman

Margaret  A friend of Kitty’s

Chalky Steven  He didn’t go to Caitriona’s funeral because he “hadn’t heard” about it

Peter the Publican  Pub owner. Still alive.

Huckster Joan  Shopkeeper

Michael Kitty  Lying on top of Huckster Joan

Tim Top of the Road  Lives in a hovel at the end of the town land. Accused of stealing by neighbours.

Mannix  Lawyer who dealt with Caitriona and her family

John Willy  He had a dicey heart

Breed Terry  Wants only peace and quiet in the grave

Guzzeye Martin, Gut Bucket, Black Bandy Bartley, Paddy Lawrence, The Foxy Cop, The Old Master, Redser Tom and others.

Guide to Dialogue Conventions

—  Beginning of Talk

— . . .  Middle of Talk

. . .  Conversation, or Missing Talk
THE DIRTY DUST

Time
For Ever

Place
The Graveyard

Range

Interlude 1: The Black Earth
Interlude 2: The Scattered Earth
Interlude 3: The Sucking Earth
Interlude 4: The Grinding Earth
Interlude 5: The Muck Manuring Earth
Interlude 6: The Mangling Earth
Interlude 7: The Moulding Earth
Interlude 8: The Heating Earth
Interlude 9: The Wasting Earth
Interlude 10: The Good Earth
Interlude 1

THE BLACK EARTH

1.

Don’t know if I am in the Pound grave, or the Fifteen Shilling grave? Fuck them anyway if they plonked me in the Ten Shilling plot after all the warnings I gave them. The morning I died I calls Patrick in from the kitchen, “I’m begging you Patrick, I’m begging you, put me in the Pound grave, the Pound grave! I know some of us are buried in the Ten Shilling grave, but all the same . . .”

I tell them to get me the best coffin down in Tim’s shop. It’s a good oak coffin anyway. I am wearing the scapulars. And the winding sheet . . . I had them ready myself. There’s a spot on this sheet! Like a smudge of soot. No, not that. A daub of finger. Who else but my daughter-in-law! ’Tis like her dribble. Oh, my God, did Nell see it? I suppose she was there. Not if I had anything to do with it . . .

Look at the mess Kitty made of my covering clothes. I always said that that one and the other one, Biddy Sarah, should never be given a drop to drink until the corpse was gone from the road outside the house. I warned Patrick not to let them near my winding sheet if they had a drop taken. All they ever wanted was a corpse here, there, or around the place. The fields could be bursting with crops, and they’d stay there, if she could cadge a few pence at a funeral . . .

I have the crucifix on my breast anyway, the one I bought myself at the mission . . . But where’s the black one that Tom’s wife, Tom the crawthumper, brought me from Knock, that last time they had to lock him up? I told them to put that one on me too. It’s far nicer than this one. Since Patrick’s kids dropped it the Saviour looks a bit
crooked. He’s beautiful on this one, though. What’s this? My head must be like a sieve. Here it is, just under my neck. ’Tis a pity they didn’t put it on my breast.

They could have wrapped the rosary beads better on my fingers. Nell, obviously, did that. She’d love it if it fell to the ground just as they were putting me in the coffin. O Lord God, she better stay miles away from me . . .

I hope to God they lit the eight candles on my coffin in the church. I left them in the corner of the press under the rent book. You know, that’s something that was never ever on any coffin in the church, eight candles! Curran had only four. Tommy the Tailor’s lad, Billy, had only six, and he has a daughter a nun in America.

I tells them to get three half-barrels of porter, and Ned the Nobber said if there was drink to be got anywhere at all, he’d get it, no bother. It had to be that way, given the price of the altar. Fourteen or fifteen pounds at least. I spent a shilling or two, I’m telling you, or sent somebody to all kinds of places where there was going to be a funeral, especially for the last five or six years when I felt myself failing. I suppose the Hillbillies came. A pity they wouldn’t. We went to theirs. That’s how a pound works in the first place. And the shower from Derry Lough, they’d follow their in-laws. Another pound well spent. And Glen Booley owed me a funeral too . . . I’d be surprised if Chalky Steven didn’t come. We were at every single one of his funerals. But he’d say he never heard about it, ’til I was buried.

And then the bullshit: “I’m telling you Patrick Lydon, if I could help it at all, I would have been at her funeral. It wouldn’t have been right if I wasn’t at Caitriona Paudeen’s funeral, even if I had to crawl on my naked knees. But I heard nothing, not a bit, until the night she was buried. Some young scut . . .” Steven is full of crap! . . .

I don’t even know if they keened me properly. Yes, I know Biddy Sarah has a nice strong voice she can go at it with if she is not too pissed drunk. I’m sure Nell was sipping and supping away there also. Nell whining and keening and not a tear to be seen, the bitch! They wouldn’t have dared come near the house when I was alive . . .

Oh, she’s happy out now. I thought I’d live for another couple