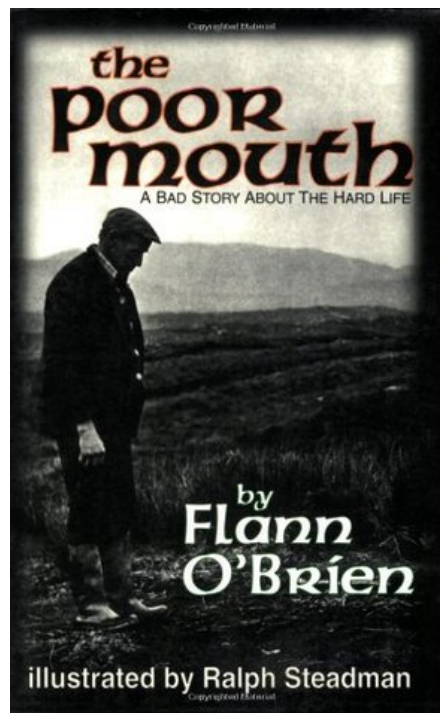




The Poor Mouth: A Bad Story about the Hard Life

Flann O'Brien , Patrick C. Power (Translator) , Ralph Steadman (Illustrator)

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The Poor Mouth relates the story of one Bonaparte O'Coonassa, born in a cabin in a fictitious village called Corkadoragha in western Ireland equally renowned for its beauty and the abject poverty of its residents. Potatoes constitute the basis of his family's daily fare, and they share both bed and board with the sheep and pigs. A scathing satire on narratives of Gaelic Ireland, this work brought down on the author's head the full wrath of those who saw themselves as the custodians of Irish language and tradition when it was first published in Gaelic in 1941.

The Poor Mouth: A Bad Story about the Hard Life Details

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From Reader Review The Poor Mouth: A Bad Story about the Hard Life for online ebook

Josh says

Pretty much perfect weird, short satire of the wretchedly poor turn-of-the-20th-century rural Irish life. Every meal is potatoes, every day is a downpour, and no one knows anything about the outside world.

Flann O'Brien's writing is tough to describe - it's funny without really being comic, surreal but about daily life. This one is less plotted than his longer novels, but it's a good intro to O'Brien, too, at just over 100 pages.

David Katzman says

I have quite the man-crush on Flann O'Brien. Call it a bro-mance if you wish. I'm making my way through all his work, including his newspaper columns. There's something so anti-twenty-first-century about his use of multiple pseudonyms and personas in our look-at-me-age of "FACEBOOK STATUS: Pooping right now." Here we have Brian O'Nolan who wrote his novels as Flann O'Brien and his newspaper column as a character Myles na Gopaleen (think mid-century Stephen Colbert). He even allegedly wrote letters to the editor under further pseudonyms complaining about his own writing.

He was a civil servant helping to support 10 brothers and sisters, and I believe never married. I picture him in grimy pubs, listening quietly to the voices around him as he drinks far too many tumblers of whiskey and smokes his teeth to the gums before walking steadily home, one foot in front of the other.

Above all, O'Brien is so goddamn funny he breaks the rules of goddamn respectable literature. Middle finger to conformity! And yet Joyce loved him. I think one element of his humor is a stoic acceptance of the unacceptable. Life is just so fucked up, and yet the likes of it shall never be seen again. Another element is a keen eye for the ridiculous in human nature.

Another quality that endears me to O'Brien: He was a risk-taker. He was an experimentalist who somehow kept one foot grounded in dirty reality. Most of his novels have meta-fictional qualities that pre-date post-modernism (or post-date pre-modernism, as the case may be.) Whether it's acknowledging the author, reusing scenes or characters from previous novels, having characters who admit they're fictional, or fictionalizing real people, O'Brien pushed the boundaries. Realistic narratives and characters are difficult to pull off, yes, great job. But I admire even more the author who can pull off an original form...i.e. ART...without being cold, abstract and irritatingly confusing.

He was also a lover of language who crafts his grammar and language with precision. The book in question here, *The Poor Mouth*, was originally written in (so the translation indicates) beautiful Gaelic. There is an effable quality of the punch in the mouth from O'Brien. His love and anger come across in every sentence. And yet, there is a sense of humility as well. That steady walk home that we all take, walking steadily to our deaths.

The Poor Mouth is one of O'Brien's less meta-fictional novels although it definitely exceeds realism into a state of satire. It's couched as the autobiographical story of one of the poorest Gaels in all of Gaeltacht, one Bonaparte O'Coonassa. Although, everyone in town is so poor that ...well, that they're Irish. It's ridiculously funny until at the very end when the weight of the poverty sinks into tragedy at the hands of the

English. It rains every day and night, they sleep with the pigs and cows, and they eat nothing but spuds. It's a Gaelic life for me.

Here is a sample to whet your appetite:

I was born in the West of Ireland on that awful winter's night—may we all be healthy and safe!—in the place called Corkadoragha and in the townland named Lisnabrawshkeen. I was very young at the time I was born and had not aged even a single day; for half a year I did not perceive anything about me and did not know one person from the other. Wisdom and understanding, nevertheless, come steadily, solidly and stealthily into the mind of every human being and I spent that year on the broad of my back, my eyes darting here and there at my environment. I noticed my mother in the house before me, a decent, hefty, big-boned woman; a silent, cross, big-breasted woman. She seldom spoke to me and often struck me when I screamed in the end of the house. The beating was of little use in stopping the tumult because the second tumult was worse than the first one and, if I received a further beating, the third tumult was worse than the second one. However, my mother was sensible, level-headed and well-fed; her like will not be there again.

I leave you with the same recommendations I made in my other O'Brien review (<http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/98...>). If you only have time for one book, *At Swim-Two-Birds* is his masterpiece. If I could read them all over again like a virgin, touched for the very first time—I'd read *The Dalkey Archive* first, followed by *The Third Policemen* (where he gets supremely weird), followed by *At Swim*. *The Hard Life* is quite hilarious too...oh, see I can't stop.

Gaedheal says

Chím nach bhfuil aon idirdhealú anseo idir ráitis ar An Béal Bocht agus an t-aistriúchán The Poor Mouth. Táim ag léamh An Béal Bocht athuair.....bhaineas triall é a léamh nuiar a (ath-)thosaigh mé Gaeilge a fhoghlaim ach b'éigean dom cuardach a chur ar bheagnach gach re fhocal ag an am! Is aobheann liom greann agus sruth an scéil, an stór fhocail agus an t-aoir nimhneach ar seandhearcadh na teanga.

Geoff says

Yesyesyes! Flawless, hilarious, scathing, blistering satire* of Irish/English colonialism of the Gaels and the Gaelic tongue. The funniest book you will read this or any other day. Not a rib-tickler or a knee-slapper but a whole body- and soul-shaker. Books like this make you glad to be a human being, alive and well and of unsound mind. Can you tell I liked it? Read this book. It's not even very long. Laughter destroys empires and pierces little lethal holes in the armor of imposed ideologies, languages, cultures.

Not long ago I met a man in the end of my house named Jams O'Donnell, and upon reading *The Poor Mouth* he laughed himself right out of his breeches and rolled about the rushes that were the makings of my wretched floor. Later, after a time wandering the beauteous country and hills of vast Erin, it occurred to me that this was no man at all, but a pink pig dressed up in someone's Sunday finest. I thought to myself, "The likes of this Jams O'Donnell will never be seen again."

*For a similar attack/approach, but aimed at the New York art scene, see Gil Sorrentino's *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things*. It's the only comparably sustained, hilarious satire that comes to mind. I think Sorrentino learned a great deal from this here Poor Mouth.

Ben Thurley says

So, early twentieth Century Irish author, Flann O'Brien – or Myles na Gopaleen or his other various pseudonyms – was a genius and you should, if you have not already, read everything he wrote.

The Poor Mouth is a scurrilous satire on Irish peasant novels of the time. Like those heartfelt laments over the Irish condition, it is full of potatoes and poverty-struck peasants, the Gaelic question being discussed earnestly in Gaelic by very Gaelic Gaels, and the workings of a fate utterly indifferent to the suffering Irishfolk. (I felt at a bit of a disadvantage never having read any of the works O'Brien is parodying, but I can't imagine this sharp, slightly surreal and very funny novel won him many friends.)

Narrated by the hapless Bonaparte O'Bannassa, it is a blackly comic coming-of-age tale. The extremity of O'Brien's satire and the finely-calibrated humour of his writing is evident in many, many passages. Take Bonaparte's account of his own birth:

I was born in the middle of the night in the end of the house. My father never expected me because he was a quiet fellow and did not understand very accurately the ways of life. My little bald skull so astounded him that he almost departed from this life the moment I entered it and, indeed, it was a misfortune and harmful thing for him that he did not, because after that night he never had anything but misery and was destroyed and rent by the world and bereft of his health as long as he lived.

Or his account of a poor man in the area who upgrades his habitation from a hole in the ground to an undersea cave he shares with the seals:

There was a man in this townland at one time and he was named Sitric O'Sanassa. He had the best hunting, a generous heart and every other good quality which earn praise and respect at all times. But alas! there was another report abroad concerning him which was neither good nor fortunate. He possessed the very best poverty, hunger and distress also. He was generous and open-handed and he never possessed the smallest object which he did not share with his neighbours... even the quantity of little potatoes needful to keep body and soul joined together... The gentlemen from Dublin who came in motors to inspect the paupers praised him for his Gaelic poverty and stated that they never saw anyone who appeared so truly Gaelic. One of the gentlemen broke a little bottle of water which Sitric had, because, said he, it spoiled the effect. There was no one in Ireland comparable to O'Sanassa in the excellence of his poverty; the amount of famine which was delineated in his person. He had neither pig nor cup nor any household goods. In the depths of winter I often saw him on the hillside fighting and competing with a stray dog, both contending for a narrow hard bone and the same snorting and angry barking issuing from them both.

It's a short, deeply ironic, and effortlessly funny novel.

Dan says

In this comic work, Flann O'Brien satirizes the "Gaeltacht autobiography", a literary genre that was popular in Ireland in the first half of the twentieth century, and which emphasized misery and impoverishment. In works such as these, the speaker will give voice, explicitly or implicitly, to doubts that anyone could have

experienced worse conditions than those he or she is describing (Angela's Ashes comes to mind as a recent instance of this sort of narrative).

In this fictional memoir, O'Brien undermines and subverts the conventions of this literary genre--reminding the reader that it is a genre and that has its own particular techniques and devices. For instance, O'Brien exaggerates the folk-dialect the characters employ. As well, he calls into question the characters' complaints about their mean conditions insofar as he represents them doing little to escape those conditions.

Sharon Barrow Wilfong says

This is the second novel I have read by Flann O'Brien. I'm trying to think how I discovered him. I know it was by accident, looking for one author, came across him, perhaps on eBay or the book exchange club I belonged to. I have discovered a lot of authors that way. For me discovering new authors (that I like, mind you) is comparable to archeologists machete-ing their way through the jungle and arriving at the ruins of some unknown civilization.

Well, that's probably an extravagant comparison, but I do get excited when I discover new authors.

Flann O'Brien was an Irish writer who is considered a key figure in post-modern literature. The first book I read by him, *At Swim-Two Birds*, was strange and hard to follow. Whether I caught on to his surreal style or not, I found *The Poor Mouth* comprehensible and quite funny.

The Poor Mouth is a story about a young Irish boy and his coming of age in Ireland. He lives with his mother, his grandfather, whom he refers to as the Grey Fellow or the Old Man, and a herd of pigs, all in the same hovel. Yes, the pigs live inside the house.

The book was written in Irish Gaelic and later translated by Patrick C. Power. The title comes from an Irish expression, "an béal bocht a chur ort" ("to put on the poor mouth") which means to exaggerate one's hard circumstances.

The protagonist, Bonaparte O'Coonassa, tells us about his hard life, starting with his birth. We see his grinding poverty, the hardship of his mother and grandfather, and yet also their humor and wit in dealing with all bad situations.

All the characters are colorful and we learn more than a few Gaelic customs that are performed at birth, marriage and death--all of which involve more than a little drinking (surprise, surprise). We meet the woman he marries and his baby, both of which die soon after being introduced into the story.

Really, the timeline is not interesting at all, it is how O'Brien tells the story. It is really very funny and each time O'Coonassa encounters takes on a surreal experience because of its absurdity.

He lightly mocks the Gaelic lovers who come from Dublin to learn the real language but soon leave because they can't abide the impoverished conditions of this tiny Irish country (it is called Corkadoragha). He less lightly mocks the assault on the Irish language and customs when, as a boy, he is made to go to school and beaten because he has not conformed to a more Anglicized version of his culture.

In the end he must go to prison for murdering someone (which he did not do, he just came across the body and took his gold seeing as the dead man would no longer need it). While entering the prison a man is leaving after a thirty year sentence. It is his father. They meet for the first time, hug and promise to meet

again when the son is free, which will be in another thirty years. The good news is that he will no longer be starving.

I cannot capture the color or the humor in the rich story of Irish parody. I suggest you read the story for yourself.

MJ Nicholls says

Better than a bag o' potatoes for breakfast, so it is. Its like in literature will never be seen again!

Bondama says

Although much of the American public may be unaware of the incredible talent that was Myles naGopaleen, Brian O'Nolan, Flann O'Brien (he wrote under many, many pseudonyms) I sincerely think that anyone who loves humour, surrealism, etc. is missing out if you don't at least sample this man's writing.

It's been said many times that O'Nolan (I believe that's his birth name) and his good friend, James Joyce, used to sit with each other for hours, without uttering a word. I don't know if this is true, but it's a crying shame that O'Brien doesn't get much credit next to Joyce - and his work is much, much more readable. (and funnier!)

This particular book was given to me by my former brother in law, who was from Derry. In Irish. Luckily, this friend took the time to translate the book for me and, although not as good as "Third Policeman" or, "At Swim Two Birds," I have a truly strong attachment to it.

The "poor mouth" of the title is, of course, a person who constantly complains about virtually everything. The fact that the narrator shares his cottage with his pig, is one of the funniest stories I can ever remember reading.

Again, you owe it to yourself to try some of this incredible writer. Last year was his centenary, the 100th anniversary of his birth.

Rowena says

This was a satire about the Irish life told by narrator Bonaparte O'Coonassa (what a name!). There are LOTS of references to potatoes, poverty, drunkenness, perpetual rainfall and the Gaelic language issue. It's a very grim book but manages to be quite funny because of the narrator's writing style. A very good introduction to Flann O'Brien, in my opinion.

Hugh says

Flann O'Brien (Brian O'Nolan) is better known for his first two novels At Swim-Two-Birds and The Third Policeman, which are still the best starting points for anyone who has never read him. This comic novella

was written in Gaelic and first published in 1941, but was not translated into English until after his death.

The Poor Mouth is a parody of the Gaelic novels that were fashionable in De Valera's Ireland, and as such is full of the clichés of the genre - starving peasants living in houses shared with pigs and cattle, eating nothing but potatoes and fish and being subjected to never-ending rain, while preserving their ancient and often outrageously exaggerated storytelling traditions. To a modern reader unversed in the source material and the political climate of the day, this is charming but loses much of its edge - as always with O'Brien it is surreal, inventive and often very funny, but one senses it was kept short out of necessity.

It almost certainly loses much in translation, and for me Ralph Steadman's illustrations are of tangential interest only and if anything distract rather than add to the narrative.

I do not think that its like will ever be there again!

Tom says

This book outraged many Irish readers, with its biting send-up of Gaelic Revival. For all its humor, though, it's also a very dark book. O'B's humor can spill into smoldering rage at times.

Cody says

Plaid Goeth Before the Fall.

A proper yarn, a fable of epically Gaelic proportion (the heroes travel kilometers!), and some running gags about pigs and a certain name—these are but a few of the substantial charms of *The Poor Mouth*. In ol' Ireland, where the sun is a mere rumor, the potato the national flower, and the rain only stops long enough to replenish itself with a glass or three of rye, this brutal farce unfolds and takes to task the pride that goes with nationalism and excessive cultural pride.

I can only begin to imagine that the ration of shit this book caught upon publication must have been seismic. Good thing it remained only in Gaelic for so many years, depriving a good portion of Irish readers (all three) the ability to see just how mercilessly they had been satirized by O'Brien. Goddamn it is hilarious, hitting on every Irish stereotype (and probably inventing a few) and exploiting them past the point of good taste and into the sublime.

For some reason, likely the framing, this is not dissimilar to Alexander Theroux to me. The fantastical yarn abutting a plain vicious streak on the author's part (along with a penchant for incredible names, à la *The Headache*, *The Lively Boy*, *The Gluttonous Rabbit*, *The Temperate Munsterman*) makes me recommend it to anyone who enjoys Theroux's more *Snickupian* leanings. This is, of course, a recommendation of the highest order.

Jams O'Donnell go bragh!

Alma Castro says

Flann O'Brien is sinisterly funny in his short novel about the life of Bonaparte O'Coonassa. The story is based in a rural area in the West of Ireland and it is home to the most Gaelic residents known to Ireland. O'Brien satirizes the Gaelic roots of these residents by using the carnivalesque to exaggerate their living conditions.

All of the residents of Corkadoragha are extremely poor and they only have potatoes to eat. They share their homes with animals even though they cannot stand the smell of them simply because they don't know any better. The weather conditions of Corkadoragha are also carnivalesque in that it rains so much, you can swim to different parts of the town. O'Brien is satirizing not only the poor uneducated people of the west coast but is also frowning up the people of Dublin and of the English.

The Dubliners for instance have a yearly feis where the townspeople get to show off their Gaelic-ness by dancing and speaking Gaelic. Crowds come from all over to experience what seems to be the last of the traditional Gaelic community of Ireland. The President of the feis scorns the villagers in a silly speech where he warns that it is not only necessary to speak Gaelic but you must also speak of the Gaelic language itself to be truly Gaelic. He says, "There is no use in having Gaelic, if we converse in it on non-Gaelic topics. He who speaks Gaelic but fails to discuss the language question is not truly Gaelic in his heart; such conduct is of no benefit to Gaelicism because he only jeers at Gaelic and reviles the Gaels. There is nothing in this life so nice and so Gaelic as truly true Gaelic Gaels who speak in true Gaelic Gaelic about the truly Gaelic language" (O'Brien).

The feis goes on for days in which some of the villagers lose their lives because of the mandatory Gaelic dancing. Many of them faint because they have not eaten anything for days. O'Brien is satirizing and sneering at the Gaelic Revivalists because they don't really know or care what it's like to be hungry and uneducated. It is almost as though they are live figures in a museum that are not allowed to feel human, only Gaelic. O'Brien talks about the death of a baby that belongs to the main character and it is because of their seclusion, miseducation and poverty that the little baby dies. It is the only part of the novel where O'Brien uses a serious tone and reveals his true thoughts and feelings about the whole foolishness of the nationalist sentiment.

One of the characters in the novel, the village beggar, Sitric O'Sanassa is made the exemplary Gael by the Dubliners and the tourists because he is so poverty stricken and so hungry, that he can barely stand up. His attitude towards life is amazingly happy though, as if being Gael and poor is a blessing instead of an affliction. Again, this is O'Brien's way of mocking the whole revivalist attitude. He is trying to express his disappointment in how the Gaelic speaking people of the west are treated by both the Irish and English governments. The residents are given meager aid and education and are expected to be thankful for it. For example, in the novel the main character goes to school to learn English and is beaten by the English schoolmaster for not answering correctly about what his name was. Bonaparte was told that his name was to be "Jams O'Donnell," the same as everyone else in the class. Throughout the novel, it is the only bit of English Bonaparte ever learns and in the end finds his father that amusingly has the same name.

O'Brien also mocks the traditional roles of the other members of the family. Bonaparte's father is in jail because he was accused of something he didn't do. His mother is an idiot that takes everything literally and his grandfather is an old coot who is constantly thinking of ways to make money. The Old Grey Fellow, as Bonaparte would call him, puts himself in charge of the money made from the humiliation of the residents by the Dubliners and tourists at the feis.

O'Brien's novel touches deeply upon the serious and sensitive matters of the Gaelic speaking people of Ireland and how they are viewed by the rest of Ireland. Yet it also satirizes the way of living from within the Gaelic community. Overall, I feel there are two ways you can read this novel. You can read it as a laugh-out-loud satire which lightheartedly and lovingly mocks the ways of the Irish or you can see it as a cry for justice and change in the attitudes of the world in regards to the Gaelic speaking citizens of Ireland. Only O'Brien is witty enough to have written something so obscure as famine, poverty and humiliation in a humorous way.

Beatriz says

Un libro muy gaélico con gente muy gaélica.

Me ha gustado bastante, me he reído con la ironía de O'Nolan, pero he tardado bastante en leérmelo (creo que tengo un problema con los libros de menos de 150 páginas). Supongo que el libro gusta todavía más si te has leído alguno de los libros que parodia (aunque yo no me he leído "Tirant Lo Blanc" y eso no me ha impedido leer "El Quijote").

Lo que sí me ha gustado muchísimo de esta edición (a parte de estar muy bien cuidada) es el traductor y sus notas, aunque su introducción sea casi tan larga como una cuarta parte de la novela.

Quería darle 3 estrellas, pero la morriña Erasmus me ha podido porque se menciona a Galway un montón de veces. Y yo me pongo muy así cada vez que recuerdo aquella época de mi vida (y lo que la echo de menos):

Oscar says

'**La boca pobre**' es un puro disparate. Desde el primer momento, Flann O'Brien te introduce en un juego caracterizado por la parodia, llegando al ridículo en muchos casos, de las costumbres y tradiciones más típicas del folclore irlandés. En esta historia, los irlandeses se alimentan solo de patatas, que además es el único alimento que les apetece; les gusta ser pobres, se regodean en sus miserias, porque el buen gaélico asume lo que la vida le trae; viven en el campo, dando más importancia a sus cerdos que a ellos mismos; buscan tesoros y cuentas leyendas; se pelean por ver quién es más gaélico; y, por supuesto, siempre está lloviendo.

De esta manera, parodiando aquellos libros publicados en Irlanda a principios del siglo XX, donde se describía a los *buenos irlandeses*, Flann O'Brien nos muestra la verdad desde la reflexión, la sátira y su mordacidad a la hora de plasmar la verdad de un país.

La novela está llena de sinsentidos y de historias estrafalarias, que te hacen esbozar una sonrisa en muchos momentos, como el primer día de clase del protagonista, o la historia de unos estudiosos que haciendo uso de gramófonos, recorren los caminos en busca de aquellos ancianos que hablan el verdadero gaélico. En suma, no es el libro que más me ha gustado de Flann O'Brien, aunque resulta original e interesante.

Georg says

i love this book

Tittirossa says

Autoironia irish: caustica e tagliente, che irride fino all'osso il proprio autocompiacimento.

Emma Flanagan says

The Poor Mouth, originally published in Irish under the title *An Beal Bocht* and the pseudonym Myles na gCopaleen, it is considered one of the great works of modern Irish literature. It is a satirical fictional autobiography of Bonaparte O'Coonassa, born in a cabin in a fictitious village called Corkadoragha in western Ireland equally renowned for its beauty and the abject poverty of its residents.

It is a parody of autobiographies of life in the Gaeltacht and on the islands off the west coast which were popular at the time and generally showed how miserable life had been, and then were used to inflict misery on generations of Irish school children (mention Peig Sayer's to anyone in Ireland over the age of about 30 and watch the look of fear and dread spread over them). The title "The Poor Mouth" comes from a well known phrase, "putting on the poor mouth", and means to play up one's misfortunes in order to elicit sympathy and charity from others. The characters spend much of the time discussing how unfortunate they are, and generally putting on the poor mouth.

I enjoyed it but didn't love it. While I found it amusing, the scene where pigs are dressed up in clothes in order to get a larger grant from the school inspector was particularly funny, I felt some of the satire is now somewhat dated. I was spared that instrument of torture that is Peig Sayers and her like, and so had no point of reference for the form of work is parodied, though I am aware of them. Equally the world it portrays is now so far removed from modern Ireland, that I though I know of it from history lessons, I cannot relate to it. Satire generally requires an ability to relate and identify with the events portrayed.

The encapsulation of the language and mode of speech, even in translation, was excellent. It thoroughly encapsulated the rhythms and phrases common to the Irish language, be it in Irish or Hiberno English.

Overall, I'm glad I read it and I will read more of Flann O'Brien (I've heard very good things about *The Third Policeman*). However I would be wary of who I would recommend this to. I suspect that those with no experience of Ireland would find it difficult to understand.

Bruce says

This short novel, written by Brian O'Neal (whose most commonly used pen name was Flann O'Brien) under the pseudonym Myles na gCopaleen, was written in Irish Gaelic and later translated, thus being subject to all the vagaries associated with translations. It is a parody on the style of works of the Irish literary revival, his satire being aimed at those who want to romanticize the Gaelic people and culture. In the novel, the author exaggerates the poverty, the ignorance, the fatalism, the drunkenness, and the general boorishness of the Gaelic-speaking population. Since the work was written in Gaelic and thus could be read only by the very people he satirized, it must be supposed that they were able to look upon themselves with a degree of humor. It is likely that this parody became for them an even greater joke on the outside world that they knew viewed them thus. It really is quite witty.

It also raises interesting issues about cultural stereotypes. We all have them, I suppose, often out of ignorance. How often, I wonder, do we recognize them as such? I have found that travelers often fall into one of two groups. Some are genuinely curious, hoping to find out things that they do not already know, open to new people and experiences and disappointed if they encounter nothing unexpected. Others, perhaps

more what one might categorize as “tourists,” primarily hope to have their prejudices and stereotypes reinforced. If, for example, they travel to Ireland and do not find talk of leprechauns, hear “Danny Boy,” and see quaint thatched cottages, they feel that they have not seen the “real” Ireland at all. What a shame.
