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MÁIRTÍN Ó CADHAIN

Cathal Ó Háinle

Máirtín Ó Cadhain's career in Trinity College was relatively brief, spanning just less than fifteen years. He was appointed to a lectureship in the School of Irish in January of 1956 when he was fifty years of age and he remained in that grade until October 1967 when, having applied unsuccessfully for appointment to the vacant Chair of Irish, he was appointed Associate Professor of Irish and Head of Department. In 1969 he was appointed to the Chair and the following year elected to Fellowship. He died in October 1970.

That brief narrative conceals what an unlikely, courageous, enlightened and important decision it was for the University of Dublin to appoint Máirtín Ó Cadhain to its academic staff in the first place. There were a number of reasons why it might have declined to do so. Other than his qualification as a primary teacher, Ó Cadhain had no third level academic qualification, not even a primary degree. He had published very little of what might be regarded as academic research. Even though he was fifty years of age when he was being considered for appointment to the TCD lectureship, he had held no third level position before that. And he had been a member of the IRA, had been dismissed from his post as principal of a Galway primary school for his republican activities and had been imprisoned in Arbour Hill and interned in the Curragh in the period 1939-44. On the other hand Ó Cadhain was widely recognised as the foremost prose writer in Irish of the time.

All of this would have been known to the University authorities, and it must be frankly admitted that in the Trinity of the nineteen-fifties, Ó Cadhain's republicanism would have rendered him a *persona non grata*, just as earlier in the century 'a man called Pearse' was unwelcome here. If Trinity had found Ó Cadhain's republicanism so unpalatable as to make his appointment unthinkable, it could well have dissembled and given his age and his lack of academic experience and credentials as sufficient reasons for refusing to appoint him. If it had chosen to ignore his republicanism, it might still have felt itself genuinely unable to appoint him because of his age and lack of experience and credentials. That Trinity chose to take neither of those approaches, and instead appointed Ó Cadhain to the lectureship must be to the University's undying credit; at all events it earned Ó Cadhain's sincere gratitude, which he frequently expressed, and the admiration of all of those who had an interest in the Irish language and its literature.

Máirtín Ó Cadhain was born at An Cnocán Glas near Spiddal in Conamara on the 4th of January, 1906. His parents were Seán Ó Cadhain and Bríd Ní Chonfhaola and, of the thirteen children born to them, Máirtín was the first who survived; they had lost their first child, Pádraig. Seán Ó Cadhain was a small farmer who, like most of his neighbours,

struggled to eke a living from the poor soil of Conamara and from the sea. Manual labour was the norm and Seán would have looked forward to the day when his eldest son would be able to help with the daily toil. Máirtín must, of course, receive his primary schooling and he began attending the boys' National School in Spiddal in June 1911. In the course of the years that Máirtín spent there, Éamon Ó Gógáin, as assistant teacher and later as principal, came to recognise his ability and urged his father to allow him to continue with his schooling when he had come to the end of the normal years of attendance. Seán refused, but the teacher continued to insist and Máirtín's father eventually capitulated. The system of 'monotoring' or apprentice teaching was a recognised form of preparation for entry into the teacher training colleges. Máirtín became a 'monitor' with Ó Gógáin and in 1923 won a King's Scholarship but was too young to be admitted to a training college; he continued as 'monitor' the following year, won a King's Scholarship again in 1924 and in September of that year he entered St Patrick's College, Drumcondra.

He does not seem to have attracted any attention during his two years in St Patrick's, but graduated in due course in July 1926. A class-mate remembered him as a quiet, studious young man, who took no part in the sporting activities of the College, but spent most of his spare time reading. In later life Máirtín Ó Cadhain was a shy man who was not particularly socially adroit, and was painfully aware of this. It may well be that it was this shyness that caused him to be withdrawn as a student, and his lack of full confidence in his competence in English may have been a further reason for his feeling unsure of himself. But his interest in literature was no mere substitute for socialising.

Máirtín's people were materially poor; they also lacked any serious formal education, indeed earlier generations would have been technically illiterate in Irish, their native language, and would have had only a basic literacy in English in which they would have had but a poor oral competence. But they were not illiterate in any real sense: for Irish was rich in oral literature, and Máirtín's people, particularly his grandfather, his father and his uncle, all three of whom lived in the house in which Máirtín was reared, were important repositories of folklore and were skilled storytellers. Their minds and imaginations were enlivened by folklore and their language was enriched by it. So too were Máirtín's, when, during his youth, he learned to tell these stories. But more significantly as a boy of eight he set himself to write a long Ossianic story in his school copy-book. Clearly then, from an early age Máirtín had an interest in writing – even if it was only realised at first in transcribing a folktale – and it is likely that by the time he came to Drumcondra this interest would also have whetted his appetite for books, a ready supply of which was then available to him for the first time. By the end of 1926 he had had his first short story published. He also began collecting and publishing folklore: in the 1930s, he published four significant collections of material from his native district in *Béaloidéas*, the Journal of the Folklore of Ireland Society.

Having spent short periods teaching in the Islands and in Galway city, he was appointed principal in Camas, Conamara, in 1927 from where he transferred to An Carn Mór east of Galway in 1932. While in Camas he produced a translation into Irish of Charles Kickham's novel *Sally Kavanagh* and had it published in 1932 by An Gúm, the Department of Education's Irish publication office, and he also had some further short

stories published. He had also enlisted in the IRA and become captain of the local group, and in 1930 he was elected chairman of the West Connacht branch of the Irish National Teachers' Organisation. In Carn Mór he continued to engage in republican activities; he also founded a branch of the Gaelic League there and subsequently was elected to the Central Committee of the League, and he was extremely active in an organisation called Muintir na Gaeltachta, which he helped to found in 1934. Already Ó Cadhain was gaining experience in working in and through organisations and a pattern was being established of action and agitation in the interest of causes and issues with which he was passionately concerned, a pattern which he was to maintain for the rest of his life.

Ó Cadhain's republicanism was no merely theoretical matter. He did have a philosophy of which he was unashamed and which he expressed frequently enough. He did have an ideal of the kind of Ireland which he believed had been delineated in the Proclamation of Easter Week 1916. But ultimately his republicanism was based on issues which were bound up with the very fabric of his own life, as he explained in 1960 when he wrote: 'I know what took me into the IRA: there was a need to fight to free my own people, the rural poor.' That and the Irish language, the historical language of the Irish nation, the language of his own people in the Gaeltacht of Cois Fharraige, his own first language and the language to the literature of which he was to make such a momentous contribution and through which his imagination would achieve its most satisfactory expression. Ó Cadhain believed that the death of Irish was imminent if action was not taken to avert this tragedy. Imagine how painful it was for him to realise, as he said himself, that he was writing in a language that he believed would be dead before himself!

Ó Cadhain, then, was undoubtedly committed to a certain ideal of the Irish nation, but all his beliefs and actions were rooted in a more local concern for the social well-being of his own people and for the maintenance and enhancement of their language, his own language.

So, as I have mentioned, he began to agitate in 1934 for the improvement of social conditions in the Gaeltacht areas through Muintir na Gaeltachta and the efforts of this organisation contributed to the establishment by the Government of the scheme which provided for the migration in 1935 of many Conamara families to Ráth Cairn in County Meath where a new Gaeltacht was established and still strongly survives. In the nineteen-fifties a new organisation called Muintir na Gaeltachta was founded and subsequently gave rise to another organisation, Cúl Taca, through which Ó Cadhain marshalled Irish-speakers in Dublin to support efforts to improve the lot of the Gaeltacht communities. In the 1960s he became the guiding spirit of an organisation founded by a group of younger people, called Misneach, which sought to bring pressure on the State to take its duties to the Irish nation seriously and which in 1966 organised a hunger strike in Dublin to protest at what was seen as the hi-jacking by 'gombeenism' of the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the 1916 Rising. The 1960s were, of course, the era of the Civil Rights Movement, and not surprisingly saw the establishment of Gluaiseacht Chearta Sibhialta na Gaeltachta, the Gaeltacht Civil Rights Movement, which had a very strong base in the Conamara Gaeltacht. Here in 1969 as part of its Civil Rights campaign and seeking to embarrass and discomfit the Fianna Fáil party in the heart of its stronghold in the West

Galway constituency, the Movement nominated an independent candidate, Peadar Mac an Iomaire, to stand in the election of that year. Ó Cadhain took an active part in the campaign, speaking at public meetings in support of Mac an Iomaire and making direct approaches to voters, while members of Misneach and others in Dublin assisted with the postal campaign. Ó Cadhain's public speeches had a powerful impact: he was a persuasive public speaker, but then, too, he was speaking to his own people in their own language and swayed them in a way that politicians such as Jack Lynch could never dream of doing when they visited the constituency. The Gaeltacht Civil Rights candidate garnered sufficient votes to embarrass and distress the Fianna Fáil party in West Galway and nationally. In the late sixties Ó Cadhain was also active in campaigns to have the Roman Catholic Church provide proper religious services in Irish for the Gaeltacht people of Ráth Cairn in Co. Meath and for Irish speakers in the Dublin Archdiocese.

In later life Ó Cadhain claimed to be 'lethal in both Irish and English'. One of the strongest suits in his armoury was his ability to use mockery, abuse and vilification in either Irish or English. He had no scruples about deploying these, no matter how viciously, when his conscience told him that the cause was a just one, and he attacked with great vigour those whom he regarded as the enemy, whether on the one hand it was the Government of the day, the political parties, the Churches, academic institutions or individuals that he regarded as being inimical to the nation and to the Irish language, or Irish language organisations which were failing in their duty on the other. As the poet, Seán Ó Ríordáin, wrote with some truth after Ó Cadhain's death, 'his method was not to fight for the cause, but to attack its enemies.' Over the years he launched verbal assault after assault, most famously on the Fianna Fáil Minister for Education, Pádraig Faulkner, at a conference in Dundalk in 1969, and in the following year, just weeks before his death, in the protest at the closure of Dún Chaoin primary school in the West Kerry Gaeltacht by the same Minister for Education; and he attacked in print too, writing scores of letters to the papers and essays, and in later years a series of pamphlets: *Irish above politics* (1964), *Mr Hill: Mr Tara* (1964), *An Aisling* [The Vision] (1966) and *Gluaiseacht na Gaeilge: Gluaiseacht ar Strae* [The Irish Language Movement, A Movement Gone Astray] (1970).

The weakness of Ó Cadhain's approach was that he expended so much energy in attacking what he regarded as betrayal, rather than in advancing a programme for action on the issues with which he was concerned. In this he was reacting rather than positively acting; and inasmuch as he sought to embarrass those whom he attacked, frequently enough he failed to have any effect since they simply refused to be ashamed and ignored his onslaughts. Earlier in his career, however, his republicanism was not to be ignored, and led first of all to his dismissal from his post as principal of Carn Mór school in 1936, and then in 1939 to his imprisonment in Arbour Hill Barracks, and later to his internment in the Curragh Camp from April 1940 to July 1944.

For some of those interned, the grinding boredom of prison life was deeply depressing and led to a certain inertia. Towards the end of his internment Ó Cadhain too seemed to be finding it so, for he wrote to a friend: 'In places like this one's mind becomes numb, when indeed one does not go mad.' But at the beginning it was otherwise, in spite of the

fact that during his period of internment he suffered two cruel blows when his mother died in 1940 and his father in 1943. The internees established a system of education among themselves in which classes in Irish, history *etc.* were set up. Ó Cadhain was a member of the committee which organised these classes and seems to have thrown himself into the work with great gusto, not only providing excellent tuition in Irish but also giving series of lectures on Irish history. He also edited the prison journal, *Barbed Wire*, and contributed material in Irish and English to it, including songs which he had translated into Irish, such as 'The Red Flag' and 'The Internationale' and more homely Irish ballads. Eventually, however, he found the history lectures trying and withdrew from them; and he also suffered from the persistent questions put to him about nice points of Irish grammar by overzealous learners. He came to resent, too, the intrusion on the time that he wished to spend on learning languages or improving his command of them, on reading and on writing.

In 1937-38 Ó Cadhain had written the short stories which were published in his first collection in 1939 under the title *Idir Shúgradh agus Dáiríre* [Half in Earnest]. The title is interesting in that it points up Ó Cadhain's inability to take himself entirely seriously, an aspect of his character which reveals itself again and again in his creative writing. The stories are not particularly strong in terms of imaginative engagement and provide no signal that they were the work of a writer who might break out of a kind of mould that had established itself in writing in Irish in the generation or two since the beginning of the revival. During his period of detention in the Curragh Camp Ó Cadhain wrote a series of letters to his friend Tomás Bairéad. These were published in 1973 and provide a fascinating insight into his literary activities while in the Curragh. He refers to the authors and even individual books he has been reading, mentioning, apart from material in Irish, authors such as Auden, T.S. Eliot, Hazlitt, Rob Donn (Robert Mackay), Walter Pater, Pound, Edith Sitwell and Stephen Spender in English; in French, Chateaubriand, Corneille, de Vigny, Maritain, Mérimée, Racine and Villon; and in German and Russian, Bakunin, Chekhov, Dostoevsky, Gogol, Gorky, Koestler, Pushkin and Toller; and works by writers such as Cervantes, Dickens, Charles Reade, Franz von Rintelen, Sholokhov, Lesage, Swedenborg, Flaubert, Tolstoy and Turgenev. He says in one letter that he has read Rabelais from beginning to end, and in another that he is studying Maritain.

His reading was highly eclectic and this was no doubt the result of the vagaries of what was available to him in the branch of Co. Kildare Library which had been established in the prison, and what his friends might send him. It is clear that he read the French authors in the original; and he mentions in one letter that he is now writing French with some ease. On the other hand he read the Russian authors in English and French translations. While he mentions that he is learning Russian and has a good teacher, he still regrets that he cannot read the Russians in the original. He has the greatest respect for all the Russian writers, but is particularly taken by Gorky's stories which he has read in a French version and believes that he has gained a new literary insight from reading what he describes as Gorky's 'long short stories'. In this context it is evident that he read some literary criticism too, for he mentions that he has read an essay by Stephen Spender in *New Writing* which contained similar opinions of Gorky's work to his own and he refers later to an essay on the short story in the *Times Literary Supplement*. It is clear that

he was consciously working to develop his own individual literary technique. He mentions that he has recently written four stories, and though he believes he has mastered what he calls the English short story technique, he says that he has little fondness for it and is dissatisfied with the stories he has just written. Three months later, however, he has written six or seven long short stories which he believes are better than anything he had previously written; he has several other short stories that he intends to write and then he hopes to turn to a longer work.

Ó Cadhain was an inveterate reviser, producing several versions of his stories, making additions, frequently quite substantial ones, even at the proof stage. While in prison he sent some of his work out for safe-keeping, and then subsequently had it sent back to him for re-writing. In 1944 he was working on a short novel and mentions that he had already produced two full drafts of it and was working on a third. He found it difficult in the circumstances of prison life to have the quiet necessary for properly concentrating on serious writing: he could produce first drafts easily enough, but was painfully conscious that he was often unable to finish his work to his own satisfaction. He valued the opinion of his friend, Tomás Bairéad, of his work; yet he was growing in self-confidence as a writer and by 1944 he was able to say to Bairéad that, though he would not like a story he had written, he was himself sure that it was his best piece of writing to date and that he believed that he could write more of the same kind of long piece which was neither short story nor novel. Such is his self-confidence in his creative work now that he clearly takes pleasure in saying that, in spite of Gerard Boland, the Minister for Justice, who had consigned him to detention in the Curragh Camp, the experience had allowed him to develop his mind in unexpected ways. Already in 1941 he had written to Bairéad that the detention camp had done much for his education and that he had gained excellent insights into life, even if he had to pay dearly for them, a belief which he repeated in 1969 when he said that his period of detention had allowed him to get to know more about human nature than if he were to live for a hundred years.

His letters to Bairéad in 1944 show him to be aware of his growing self-confidence; he even allows himself to suggest that his writing now deserves to earn higher than average fees. But Ó Cadhain would not be Ó Cadhain if mocking self-deprecation did not follow hard on the heels of this moment of boastfulness. Immediately he says to Bairéad: 'This is strange talk. I have become over-confident now – or is this caused by lack of fresh air?'

Ó Cadhain was released from the Curragh Camp in July 1944. Four years later he published his second collection of short stories, *An Braon Broghach*, which contains several of the stories which we know he wrote while in detention. The title is again rather self-deprecating: literally it means 'the dirty drop', that is the first drops of distillation of *poitín*, and so 'impure spirits'. But there is much here of which he could be justifiably proud. There are examples of his new form, the long short story, and of other signs of a more mature approach to writing. There is also a deeper insight and a surer imagination revealed in a number of the stories. But on the other hand there is a lamentable tendency towards over-writing, to verbosity. Some of the best pieces here have women as their principal characters: in fact Ó Cadhain had intended that this volume would contain only stories about women, but his publisher, an Gúm, rejected at least one story, and the

contents of the book had to be reorganised. Then the following year Ó Cadhain's first novel, *Cré na Cille* [Graveyard Earth], was published by the independent publishing house, Sáirséal agus Dill, which had been established by Seán Ó hÉigearthaigh and his wife Bríghid. They were to publish a further four collections of Ó Cadhain's short stories in the following years, but Seán Ó hÉigearthaigh was not just his publisher, he was also his friend and counsellor.

The world of *Cré na Cille* is in the afterlife; all the characters are dead and exist in and speak from their graves. They are nevertheless in another sense very much alive for their dialogue, of which the work consists virtually entirely, is vibrant and colourful and nowhere more so than in the mouth of the principal character, Cairtriona Pháidín. This woman is one of the very few characters in Irish fiction who have achieved a status akin to that of a historical person; she is the Don Quixote, the Robinson Crusoe, the Moll Flanders of Irish writing. In his novel Ó Cadhain presents a rather sardonic view of human nature: we are essentially incapable of being reformed; our weaknesses remain with us through life, and if granted an eternity of after-life we still would not change, just as in after-life the characters in this novel cannot divest themselves of their petty jealousies and enmities. Some reviewers of the time found Ó Cadhain's picture of a Gaeltacht community unpalatable, even objectionable. A more perceptive critic, writing in 1950, said: '... With the publication of *Cré na Cille* Irish literature has come of age. No superlatives can exaggerate its importance', and another wrote: 'The imaginative beauty of [*Cré na Cille*] amazes me.'

By 1951 Ó Cadhain had written a further novel, *Athnuachan* [Renewal], which, however, he decided not to publish – it eventually appeared in print in 1995 – and he also published a series of short stories in various journals. Then in 1953 his third collection of short stories, *Cois Caoláire* [Beside Galway Bay] was published. The variety of formal treatment of the material and the depth of the characterisation in a number of the stories in this collection is impressive and demonstrate that Ó Cadhain was not a writer who would settle into any rut, however comfortable. Then too there is a strong tendency here to depict troubled people: insanity and lesser psychological ailments have become an important subject for scrutiny. Unsatisfied human needs can cause psychological injury, as in one story is portrayed the frustration of a woman who devotes all her energies to working a farm rather than to any interpersonal relationship, or in another the eventual insanity of a woman who experiences the heartbreak of a long series of still births. In yet another story a man goes berserk from anxiety that he will be driven out of the land-holding which he has worked for years but does not own. As in *Cré na Cille*, Ó Cadhain is here drawing on his knowledge of the rural community with which he was so familiar and the picture he draws is no romantically rosy one but is informed by stark realism.

By the mid-fifties then Máirtín Ó Cadhain had established himself as a most important figure in Irish writing. Since his release from detention, however, he was struggling to support himself in a variety of menial employments and in February of 1945 he had married Máire Ní Rodaigh to whom he had been engaged since 1939. He was, however, busy with his writing, with arranging material for publication and with gathering lexical

matter for a new edition of Dinneen's famous dictionary of Irish which the Government had proposed. Then in March 1947 he was appointed to a junior post in Rannóg an Aistriúcháin, the Translations Section in the Dáil. Initially there was not much enthusiasm in Government for this appointment, but representations were made on his behalf, strangely enough by Ernest Blythe for whom Ó Cadhain had little affection, and apparently also by Canon Pádraig Ó Móráin, the parish priest of Carn Mór who had been instrumental in having him dismissed from his teaching post in 1936. The income was no doubt welcome, but Ó Cadhain found the constraints of the world of civil servants utterly unbearable, and matters did not improve when he began in 1953 to write a weekly column for the *Irish Times* in which he frequently expressed unacceptably trenchant opinions. By 1952 his health was beginning to suffer. He wrote a withering critique of the civil service in the story 'An Eochair' [The Key], which, however, was not published until 1967, by which time he had escaped from the clutches of the civil service.

It appears that Ó Cadhain's publisher and mentor, Seán Ó hÉigearthaigh, recognising how unsuitable the civil service was for one of Ó Cadhain's temperament, had set up a committee whose object was to canvass for his appointment to a university post. Éamonn Ó Tuathail retired from the Chair of Irish here at TCD in 1955 and the new Professor, David Greene, was appointed in September of that year. Greene was already a senior academic having been an Assistant Professor in the School of Celtic Studies at the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies from 1948-53, and a full Professor from 1953-55, but the staff of the School of Irish of which he now held the chair consisted only of himself, a lecturer in Irish, Seán Beaumont, and a Reader in Celtic Languages, Gordon Quin, who, however, was really only part-time in the School of Irish, since he also functioned as Lecturer in Phonetics and Linguistics and Lecturer in Sanskrit and Comparative Philology. In the nineteen-fifties the staff complement was very limited in all the Arts departments, but Greene's staff in Irish was pitifully small. There was a vacancy at the level of Assistant Lecturer in Irish, and Greene won approval for the filling of this at the level of Lectureship and had Máirtín Ó Cadhain appointed in January 1956.

As I suggested at the outset, the appointment of Ó Cadhain may not have been particularly palatable to many in Trinity. David Greene, however, would have had no doubts about Ó Cadhain's status as a creative writer: in later years he was to review one of Ó Cadhain's books under the by-line 'Ireland's leading writer'. Already in 1950 he had favourably reviewed *Cré na Cille*, and much later in another context he wrote that 'Ó Cadhain's *Cois Fharráige* takes its place with Joyce's *Dublin*, and *Cré na Cille* is the only book by an Irishman which is worthy of comparison with *Ulysses*.' The latter comment is particularly apt, since Ó Cadhain himself reported that, when *Cré na Cille* was being serialised in *The Irish Press*, he heard himself being described by a fellow-passenger in a bus as 'a Joycean smutmonger.' He relished the insult and wrote an echo of it into *Cré na Cille* when it was published in book form – a typical Ó Cadhain stratagem. Greene would also have had a great deal of sympathy for Ó Cadhain's battling on behalf of the Irish language and of the Gaeltacht people. He would no doubt have been much in favour of Seán Ó hÉigearthaigh's idea of finding a more congenial post for Ó Cadhain than the Civil Service one he held. Furthermore Greene would have been aware of the inestimable wealth of Irish that Ó Cadhain in person and through his writings represented; of his

command of the language and of the value of his judgements relating to it. He would have understood that this linguistic wealth could be fully realised only in an academic setting. Folklore has it that the College Registrar at the time, Dr Frank Mitchell, strongly supported Greene in his efforts to have Ó Cadhain appointed to the lectureship, and also that the Provost, Dr Albert McConnell, was very supportive. And so Trinity College did the magnificent thing and appointed Ó Cadhain.

Ó Cadhain threw himself into the work of lecturing with his usual total commitment. Though some of his students seem to have found him difficult to approach, over the years he had an immense impact on many others who seem to have sensed that their own youthful idealism was shared by him. There was always a number of students who had a certain reverence for him, as if he was their hero. It is said that one student not only sought to imitate Ó Cadhain's speech patterns, but also tried to ape his gait! Ó Cadhain's sense of humour was always at the ready to prick the balloon of excessive seriousness, however. In the Maoist years he offered a passage from an English translation of Mao's Little Red Book as an exercise in translation in his language class. No doubt he was well aware that some of his students were Maoists and that there was a danger that they would be offended by this slight to the Chairman. They were, and let Ó Cadhain know of their extreme displeasure – proving that his humour had struck home! In fact Ó Cadhain worried, too, about the influence his anti-establishment views might have had on his students, and was conscience-stricken when a particularly bright student of his decided to act on her Maoist principles and abandon her university career.

In 1967 Ó Cadhain agreed to travel to Belfast on a weekly basis to provide supplementary lectures on Modern Irish literature and culture in the Department of Celtic in Queen's. In that year too David Greene returned to the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies and Ó Cadhain became Head of Department of the School of Irish, a position which he must have found extremely trying. The late Nessa Ní Shéaghda has described him dashing to lectures and meetings with bundles of papers always in danger of escaping from his grasp. His lack of social aplomb would have made him extremely uncomfortable at such meetings. Nevertheless various College officers of the time have told me of his dedication to his duties and to his responsibilities for his undergraduate and postgraduate students and his serious interest in maintaining high academic standards. In the last three years of his life he was also Extern Examiner in Modern Irish to the four Colleges of the National University, a very burdensome position. I myself was Head of the Department of Modern Irish in Maynooth at the time and can vouch for the fact that Ó Cadhain did not spare himself in fulfilling the demands of the examinership.

Apart from a series of review essays on works of Irish and Scottish Gaelic literary and linguistic scholarship and, in his last years, two essays on literary and linguistic history, and his striking writer's testament, *Páipéir Bhána agus Páipéir Bhreaca* [Blank Pages and Written Pages], which was published in 1969 and which offers a vibrant self-assessment, Ó Cadhain published little of academic interest during his years at Trinity College, though he had plans to publish a book on the literary history of Irish and also a highly personal account of the recent history of the language which was published at last in 2002. Perhaps it was never expected of him that he would turn to academic writing, but

rather that Trinity would become a *tearmann* [refuge] for him where he could apply himself seriously to his creative writing. It must have seemed to Irish readers in the late fifties and through the sixties that this hope too was being frustrated and that Ó Cadhain's energies were being absorbed by the duties of his lectureship. In fact though, from the early sixties, this was not the case. In 1962 he published a long satirical essay, in the journal *Comhar*, on individuals and institutions who were failing, in his view, in their duty to the Irish language.

The essay created a furore of the kind Ó Cadhain relished, and he set to work on four more essays in the same vein, though with a more humorous bent. *Comhar* decided not to publish these; whereupon Ó Cadhain began to work them up into what he saw as a single work. By lavish use of intertextuality he established a frame of reference in European and earlier Irish literature; in a number of sections he discussed advances being made in the biological sciences, and problems of time and history. He then submitted this work for an Oireachtas na Gaeilge competition in 1965. He failed to win a prize and was deeply angered by the comments of the adjudicators, who, rather than considering the literary quality of the work, pointed out that it would be so offensive to so many people that it could not be published. Ó Cadhain knew that the work would be hurtful and he gave it the English title *Barbed Wire*. I edited it for publication and it finally appeared in print in 2002.

In 1965 Máirtín's wife, Máire, died. This was a cruel blow as he depended greatly on her in many ways. They had no family.

In spite of all this, or perhaps because of it, and with the support of his friend, Seán Ó hÉigearthaigh, Ó Cadhain continued to write creatively and began to publish again. In 1966 a new short story appeared in print. It is a fine piece called 'Círéib' [A Riot] in which his particular brand of dry humour is in evidence. Based on the gospel narrative, it poses the question: 'What if Christ had performed his miracles with greater frequency, turning water into wine, multiplying loaves and fishes, healing and raising from the dead?' The answer provided by the narrative is, of course, that people would not have needed to buy bread, wine, fish, would not have needed medical care, would not die. Bakers, fishermen, wine pressers, tavern owners, doctors, grave-diggers *etc.* would be out of work; there would be deep social unrest, disorder, riots ... and some crafty politician would emerge to exploit the social misery of others to his own advantage! This story was no single swallow. It is clear that he had already written several other stories, for later that year a new collection was being prepared for publication and, when the Irish-American Cultural Institute offered a prize of £2000 for a work in Irish, Seán Ó hÉigearthaigh proposed to Ó Cadhain that his new collection be submitted to the competition. Ó Cadhain, still smarting from the rejection of *Barbed Wire*, demurred but later agreed to let Ó hÉigearthaigh have his way, and the collection, *An tSraith ar Lár* [The Fallen Swath], won the prize for Ó Cadhain and was published in 1967. It contained fourteen pieces of great variety in form and content, including 'Círéib', his satirical piece on the civil service, 'An Eochair', and a series of five stories, each with its own theme, but all having characters from the same Gaeltacht community. It marked a triumphant return for Ó Cadhain, who apparently was now thinking in terms of producing a trilogy of

collections. A short three years later he published another in the series, *An tSraith dhá Tógáil* [The Swath Being Raised Up]. The hope expressed in the title strikes a strange note, for apart from two further gospel-based stories, the collection contains several bleak and disturbing stories of urban alienation and failure of personal relationships.

Ó Cadhain was appointed to the Chair of Irish in Trinity in 1969 and was elected to Fellowship the following year, as I mentioned earlier. There was now plenty of evidence, too, to support the belief that he had recovered his creative urge. Apart from his writing there was, of course, the on-going College round of lectures, classes, meetings, departmental administration; there was the NUI external examinership; and there was his participation in the Gaeltacht Civil Rights campaign and later in the protest about the closure of Dún Chaoin school. In 1969 he delivered three public lectures: in January one of the Radio Éireann Thomas Davis lectures on the Gaelic League; in February a long lecture to Cumann Merriman on aspects of his own creative writing; in September he travelled to Wales to lecture at the Welsh Academy's 'Taliesin' Congress. But his health was failing: he had already spent a number of periods in hospital during the sixties, and now his energy was being sapped by the demands he was making on his physical and mental resources. Just as the 1970-71 academic year was beginning, he was taken to the Mater hospital on 9 October 1970: he died there nine days later in his 64th year.

In 1977 the third title of Ó Cadhain's trilogy appeared: *An tSraith Tógtha* [The Swath Raised Up]. It contains some interesting writing, though ultimately it is only a reminder of what might have been if Ó Cadhain had lived longer. But at all events it allows him the last mocking word about the writer, perhaps about himself. The last story in the book seems to subvert the principles of the classical short story, especially in its long discursive introductory section. Then at its end the narrator, who is a man who has spent his life writing documents, is approached by his lover who is pregnant with his child, but he has been dehumanised, made incapable of feelings of human love, for his heart has, he tells her, been transformed into paper. Then he announces to the reader: 'I have become paper entirely at last, heart, crotch, everything ...' Readers of Irish can be grateful that Máirtín Ó Cadhain has become paper, that so much of his personality and creative energy has been transmuted to survive in his stories on the written page.¹

¹ Details of the sources from which information in this discourse is derived are given in my essay 'Máirtín Mór Ó Cadhain: Trionóideach' in *Bliainiris* 6 (2006), eds. Ruairí Ó hUiginn and Liam Mac Cóil, 9-42, and in my introduction to Ó Cadhain's *Barbed Wire*, Coiscéim, Baile Átha Cliath, 2002, v-xxix.