

one who would like a chance to look them over. You would want to still purchase the English language kit to have the pieces and the party planner, instructions, etc. as a back up because none of the projects have been 100% completed with perfectly accurate translations, as of yet, but it's a work in progress!

Commentary on Seven Books for Learners of Irish

Seán O'Connor
Wallingford, CT

I am often asked by people who have achieved a reasonably decent level of competency in Irish for suggestions for reading matter. There are many interesting and readable books available in Irish. I have selected seven books for brief reviews together with my estimate of their level of difficulty. I have checked with Caitlín Fitz and all of them are now available at www.litriocht.com.

An Béal Bocht by Myles na gCopaleen: Mercier Press. ISBN 0853427941.

My copy of this savage satire is the 1964 reprint of the original which is in modified Gaelic script with overdotted consonants rather than the more modern convention of writing <h> after the consonant. "Myles" was one of the pen names of Brian Ó Nualláin, aka Flann O'Brien, the author of 'At Swim-Two-Birds'. *An Béal Bocht* is a first person account of the life of the self-styled Bónapáirt Míchealagaló Pheadair Eoghain Shorcha Thomáis Mháire Sheáin Shéamais Dhiarmada... who is told by his school teacher that he is to be known as Jams O'Donnell.' The satire is aimed not only at the school system, but even more so at the 'professional *gaeilgeoirí*' (language enthusiasts) who see the preservation of the true gaelic culture and language as de-

pending on those who are the most wretched, the wettest and the poorest. These enthusiasts are wedded to the idea that these poor creatures must be kept in that condition if the culture and language are to endure. The description of the descent of the *gacilgeoirí* on the local *feis* (language/culture festival) had me rolling on the floor in delight. An English translation has been attempted, and, indeed, published, but to no avail. This satire cannot be translated. Language difficulty is moderately easy.

Crann Smola and *Rí na gCearrbach* by Seán Ó Dúrois: Coiscéim 2001 and 2003 respectively. Coiscéim does not employ ISBN numbers.

I treat these two novels simultaneously because they are both detective stories set in the north of Ireland circa 1864. William Watters is a detective in the RIC who, having shown too great a sympathy for the plight of the Papists in the then rapidly industrializing Belfast, is sent to make a survey of the toilet facilities in the police stations in that part of the country. With his sidekick, Cameron, Watters comes upon crimes that seem to defy solution until he undertakes an investigation. Each chapter is prefaced by an apt excerpt from the late medieval to early modern Irish literature, the reading of which may present more difficulty than the novels themselves. The language is in largely standardized northern dialect, but access to FGB will be required. Of the two, the first novel was to me the more interesting, and bizarre. Language is moderately difficult.

L'Attaque by Eoghan Ó Tuairisc: Mercier Press, 1962 (re-issue 1980). No ISBN number.

Máirtín Caomhánach is a hardworking, honest, landless man who has managed to win the heart and hand of Saidhbhín Mistéil, a young woman with a dowry of twenty pounds. Her father, a man of some means, is the brother of the parish priest. Not a match one would expect, but Saidhbhín would have her way, and she did. They had a plan for their future and it was working out quite well until the day the French landed in Killala and Máirtín felt compelled to join them. This is often regarded as an historical novel, but I see it as having more in common with epic tragedy than with anything else. It is a great read, the language is polished, but, again, Ó Dónaill will need to be at hand. Language is somewhat difficult.

An Dochtúir Áthas (2nd edition 2004. ISBN 0898332195) and *Fontenoy* (2005. ISBN 1898332193) by Liam Mac Cóil: Leabhar Breac.

These are two magnificent novels written by a polyglot whose Ph.D. thesis centered on psychological and psycho-analytical aspects of literary theory. The earlier novel focuses on an unnamed patient, suffering, his physician says, from a malady with no symptoms. The patient is referred to the psychoanalyst, An Dochtúir Áthas (Dr. Joy), a man on the brink of retirement who intends spending his remaining days listening to music in Vienna. He wants his life's work to be collated and arrangements made for its publication, but in order that our unnamed hero be prepared for such an undertaking, he must undergo a series of sessions with the

doctor. To reveal anything further in such a short review would be to insult this marvelous novel. The language is of the 'take no prisoners' type: no more complex than is required of a very complex plot.

The second novel, *Fontenoy*, was launched by the French Ambassador to Ireland at a reception at the Alliance Française in Dublin. In many ways this is a book for the literary specialist in that it is a tale told in at least five voices. Briefly, Captain Seán Ó Raghallaigh fought in the battle of Fontenoy in 1745, one battle in the War of The Austrian Succession. When all seems lost to the French and their allies, the day is saved by a furious attack by the Irish regiment of Milord Dillon on the combined English and Dutch forces. To the French, this is French victory, to the Irish battalion, it is a strike against the old enemy (Remember Limerick: 'a treaty broken ere the ink where-with 'twas writ could dry'). Some years later the captain comes upon a scribe-historian and finds himself deciding, in light of the scribe's approach to the writing of history, that he must write his own account of the battle through the eyes, not of the generals as was the practice at that time, but through those of the officers and foot soldiers who actually fought bayonet to bayonet, hand to hand. This is a marvelously imaginative and exciting novel that amply repays the reader's efforts, but it is not for the faint-hearted. As in the author's other novel reviewed here, the language is just as complex and subtle as the subject calls for. For those of you who would like to read a more extensive review of these two novels, please refer to my article 'Liam Mac Cóil: Dhá Úr-scéal, Fontenoy & An Dochtúir Áthas: *Feasta*, April, 2006.

Cré na Cille (3rd edition 2007. ISBN 9780862890827) by Máirtín Ó Cadhain: Sáirséal Ó Marcaigh

This is one of the most famous novels of the last fifty years, a novel widely quoted but much less widely read. I believe there is a trick to reading and enjoying this masterpiece, and that is to intentionally gloss over the words one does not recognize. The author made it quite clear in interviews and articles subsequent to the publication of the first edition, that the language is that of Cois Ferraige in Conamara, but more particularly *that of his own parish*. Study groups have put together auxiliary word lists to aid in the study of this novel. I have neither sought nor used any such aid. After reading the book three or four times, there are still words I do not fully understand, but that does little to diminish my enjoyment of the 'word wars' of the interred in the churchyard. The recently interred bring news of the world above ground, and old passions, hatreds and frustrations burst into full bloom in a world where the only weapons are words. A must read, but don't sweat each and every word.