Ireland in Proverbs

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A proverb is a pithy saying in general use encapsulating a commonly held belief. Proverbs are found in every language and play a pivotal role in oral traditions, preserving and transmitting the wisdom and experience of a community. Comparisons of proverbs from different parts of the world show that the same kernels of wisdom recur testifying to the universality of human experiences and the shared values of human communities. Some maxims praising desirable behavior and underlining the consequences of undesirable comportment have been around for thousands of years. One can easily understand the process by which the first proverbs became entrenched as a teaching tool. They sum up handily the wisdom gleaned from reflection on lived experience, embodying it in a set form. Validity is then conferred through their repetition and subsequent transmission from generation to generation. The same proverb can be found in various forms in neighboring areas, the differences reflecting ethnic, historical and cultural biases. English has “Where there’s smoke there’s fire” when speaking of the nucleus of truth found in rumor, while Spanish has “Río que canta agua lleva” (the brook which babbles contains water).

Common proverbs can be explained by the common origin of communities, for example, the Indo-European communities in Europe and the Indian subcontinent, or to the cultural influence of one group on another. This seems to have been the case with the English proverb “A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush” whose origin can be traced to a Medieval Latin proverb that spread throughout Western Europe wherever Latin influence was felt. Likewise, the use of a proverb to illustrate the point of a story can be traced to the influence of Aesop’s fables in their Medieval Latin guise. Each of these fables consists of a story illustrating a point summed up in the proverb at the end. This narrative use of the proverb can be seen in the literatures of Medieval France, England and Spain.

Proverbs derive from many sources but they are always anonymous. Someone had to coin the original formulation, but sanction through repetition has made the proverb the property of the community at large. Proverbs share this popularity and anonymity with folk tales and myths. They appear to emerge from the consciousness of the human species itself.

In more recent times, proverbs have been derived from literature. Shakespeare’s plays have been a fertile source of such maxims. For example, Polonius’s advice to his son, Laertes, before he leaves for college: “Neither a borrower nor a lender be”, and “To thine own self be true then it must follow as the night the day thou canst not be false to any man.” Shakespeare is not likely to have coined these nuggets himself; more likely, he incorporated into Polonius’ tedious list of advice clichés current in his day and familiar to the audience. Many other proverbs in English are associated in this way with literature: the King James Bible, Geoffrey Chaucer, Alexander Pope and Benjamin Franklin. Abraham Lincoln is reputed to have coined the bit of politi-
cal advice about not changing horses in mid-stream but most likely he was using a current saying already familiar to his rural audiences.

The proverb is associated with pre-literate societies. Mac Con Iomaire points out in the preface to his Ireland of the Proverb that the use of proverbial phrases in conversation is a trademark of pre-literate, rural societies: “Conversations between ordinary people [are] enriched by these sayings. The person who quotes a suitable proverb to sum up a situation or to suggest a certain course of action commands [s] respect in the community. Such a person [is] considered to be rich in conventional wisdom and his use or her use of proverbs [is] worthy of respect as the use of textbooks by the formally educated. The proverbs [are] like the set of rules the community share[s] for reasoning with one another.” (Mac Con Iomaire, vii) From the earliest manifestations of Spanish literature, such ‘refrains’ (proverbs) have constituted an important stylistic element. Fernando de Rojas’s Renaissance drama, La Celestina, Lope de Vega’s and Tirso de Molina’s Golden Age plays embody many refrains in the dialogues of the characters. In short, the proverb is cited as an authoritative source much as people today cite statistics or students cite recognized critics or historians to back up a point.

Proverbs embody the contradictions of human experience. “Look before you leap” advises one adage while another teaches that “he who hesitates is lost”; “great minds think alike” is matched by “fools seldom differ”; “absence makes the heart grow fonder” is paired with “out of sight, out of mind.” This contradiction does not cancel the value of each lesson but rather points to a nuanced perception of the truth of experience determined by a particular situation. Both are true according to the case in point.

Proverbs are revised, updated, adapted to unfolding social norms. An old, obsolete usage gets replaced by something more contemporary. The Medieval fool’s cap in “If the cap fits, wear it” has been rephrased as “If the shoe fits.” Modern versions include references to automobiles “Put your brain in gear before engaging your mouth” or electricity, popular movies or music.

Irish proverbs, like proverbs the world over, vary greatly in style but rely principally on colorful imagery, metaphors, rhyme and rhythm. The following reflect rural life: farming Ná combhair do shuidicin go dtacaig amach.—“Don’t count your chickens before they’re hatched”; hunting Is deacrach an seanbhadra a bhaint den choisín.—“It’s hard to pull an old hound off the trail/scent”, cf. “It’s hard to teach an old dog new tricks”; fishing Éist le tuile na bhabhán is gheobhaidh tú breac.—“Listen to the river and you’ll catch a salmon.” Others rely on rhythm and rhyme, alliteration and assonance, such as the Scottish Many a mickle makes a muckle or the Irish saying Is fearr inreas ná uaignes—“Strife is better than loneliness”, or Nil aon tinteán mar do thinteán fèin, which has given rise to the puckish Nil aon tóin tinn mar do tóin tinn fèin—playing with the sound and the sense of the words, as the Red Queen tells Alice in Alice in Wonderland, “Take care of the sense and the sounds will take care of themselves.” Some proverbs are rooted in superstitions such as “Rain before seven, fine before eleven” or the Irish Drochubh drocbeán based on the belief the best chickens came from eggs lain
and hatched in the same month. Other proverbs, as in Latin, are characterized by their succinctness: *Praemunitus praemunitus*—“Forewarned is forarmed” or *In vino veritas*—“In wine, truth” or Irish *Athbhionn cearóg cearóg éile*—“One bug recognizes another bug” or “Birds of a feather flock together.”

Most societies which developed into more advanced literate civilizations have valued the conventional wisdom embodied in proverbs and collected them—the Book of Proverbs in the Old Testament being one example. Ancient Egyptian, Sumerian and Chinese, and Indian collections date from 2500 BC. Medieval collections of proverbs are also found in Western Europe: *The Proverbs of Alfred* in Old English 1150, *Proverbios morales* in Spain 1355.

In Ireland, the practice of compiling proverbs has a long history, dating to the *Teagasc Chormaic* ascribed to the mythical Cormac Mac Airt in pre-historic times. (Flanagan, 1) More recently, the early nineteenth century, the age of Romanticism, saw the rise of interest in folk literature on the part of the literary and intellectual classes throughout Europe. Collecting proverbs and conventional sayings together with comparative studies and analyses of them constituted part of this cultural anthropological thrust. The early decades of the twentieth century saw the systematic collection, compilation and publishing of proverbs from all parts of Ireland, but especially in the Gaeltachts, as part of a desire to ‘re-Gaelicize’ Ireland. Enrí Ó Muirgheasa’s *Seanchóis Uladh* was published by the Oifig and tSoláthair in Dublin in 1906, to be followed by Thomas Ó Rahilly’s *A Miscellany of Irish Proverbs* published in Dublin by the Tal-
it gently”; Tá lán mara eile san fharraige.—“There are many more tides in the sea”; Tá iasc san fharraige níos fearr ná gabbadh ariamh.—“There’s a fish in the sea that’s better than any that have ever been caught”, undoubtedly an endorsement of increasingly taller fishing tales. Na múca ciúine a theann an mhín.—“The quiet pigs get to eat the meal.”

Irish proverbs about marriage attest to the universal ambivalence about the joys and sorrows of the institution: Nil eolas gan aontús.—“You don’t know someone until you’ve lived together”; Ceileann searc ainmhb is locht.—“Love (infatuation) conceals blemishes and faults”; Biónn an teanga ina póca ag an bhun roimh pósadh.—“A woman keeps her tongue in her pocket before she gets married”; Is uaigneach an níochan nach mbíonn léine ann.—“It’s a lonely washing that doesn’t have a man’s shirt in it”; Nil leaghus ar an ngrá ach pósadh.—“There’s no cure for love but marriage”; Más maith leat tú a chéimeadh, pós.—“If you want to be criticized, get married.” And perhaps the most famous, Ní féasta go rósta ní chéasta go phásta.—“It’s not a feast till you have a roast, it’s not crucifixion (torture) till you’re married.”

Proverbs concerning drinking and eating are less varied and resemble similar assessments the world over: Is maith an t-anlann an t-ocras.—“Hunger is an excellent spice”; Marbh le tae agus marbh gan é.—“Dead with tea, dead without it”; Scéitheann fionn firinne.—“Wine releases truth”, close to the Latin In vino veritas. Nuair a bhíonn an deoch istigh bhíonn an chiall amuigh.—“When the drink is in you, your reason is outside.”

Gossip and rumor mongering likewise inspire nuggets of wisdom not unlike those found in English: Níor bhris focal maith fiaicai riamb.—“A good word never broke anyone’s tooth”; Ná ghearradh do theanga do scórnach.—“Don’t let your tongue cut your throat.” A sensible bit of advice followed by a reminder of the nature of a true gossip: An té a thabharfas scéal chugat tabharfaidh sé dhá scéal uait.—“The person who tells you a story will take two away with him.”

To conclude, a few general proverbs. Is maith an scéal a chumhrir.—“Time will tell (Time is the best storyteller)”; Tá maith leabhair na baibre.—“Well begun is half done”; Is fearr obair ná caint.—“It’s better to work than to talk”; Tagann príata mór as párin.—“Big potatoes come from small ones (great oaks grow from tiny acorns)”; Biónn cluasa ar na cláicheanna.—“The walls have ears”; Giorraíonn beirt bóthar.—“Two shorten the road”; Is buaite bladh ná saol.—“Your reputation outlives you.” And perhaps, a proverb which was originally coined by a poitín distiller or a rabble rouser: Íngan fheás don dli is fearr bheith ann.—“It’s best to live unnoticed by the law.”

Proverbs have become less frequent in spoken language with the transformation of society from rural to urban, and with the surge in literacy and the popularity of newspapers, television, movies. Proverbs now sound quaint, old-fashioned, out-of-place, un-cool. Most young people today would find it difficult to come up with a proverb, so rare have they become. Even in rural Ireland, Liam Mac Con Iomaire comments on the decline of the seanfhocail in the speech of natives of the Gaeltacht, a fate which he attributes to formal education as well as the advent of radio and TV. Proverbs express moral principles, lessons about life, with a succinctness that exploits the genius and idiom of a
living language. Lovers of folk wisdom can be grateful for the efforts of those who compiled collections of proverbs, the blood and marrow of Ireland’s Gaelic past.

Works Cited


Starting with this issue of the JCLL, we will include a section entitled *Learner’s Showcase* presenting original essays, poems or short stories written by learners of Celtic languages. We invite submissions from learners or from their teachers. Pieces should be kept to no more than 1,000 words (longer pieces may be considered on occasion, though you may be asked to shorten a longer text). When submitting a piece for consideration please also include a translation or a summary in English. When possible we will publish the translation as well as the Celtic language text.

**Leathanach 996**

Colleen Dollard

Idir riach agus riachtanach
tá focal in easnamh
a fhágann mise ina cheap.

Nuair a phléigh mé é, ní fhuair mé ach
‘Tá an riach imithe orthu,
na daoine sa chathair sco,
ag cumadh a bhfocal féin’
ó na fir críonna sa comhrá
óna gcathaíreacha sa chúinne.

‘Ach cad é an focal ccart, mar sin?’
Ní raibh a fhios acu,
iad ciúin go tobann, ag smaoinemh go dtí—
‘Ach léireidh mé duit más mian,
a stóirín,’ arsa duine acu,
leath-chúthailcach, leath-mhaiteach,