

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 that 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 [a]re enriched by these sayings. The person who quote[s] a suitable proverb to sum up a situation or to suggest a certain course of action command [s] respect in the community. Such a person [i]s considered to be rich in conventional wisdom and his use or her use of proverbs [i]s worthy of respect as the use of textbooks by the formally educated. The proverbs [a]re 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 'refranes' (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 *refranes* 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 combair do chuid sicíní go dtaga said amach*.—"Don't count your chickens before they're hatched"; **hunting** *Is deacair an seanmbadra a bhaint den chosán*.—"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 babbann 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 imreas ná uaigneas*—"Strife is better than loneliness", or *Níl aon tinteán mar do thinteán féin*, which has given rise to the puckish *Níl aon tóin tinn mar do thóin tinn féin*—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 *Drochubb drochéan* 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: *Praemonitus praemunitus*—"Forewarned is forearmed" or *In vino veritas*—"In wine, truth" or Irish *Athníonn ciaróg ciaróg 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 Muirghessa's *Seanfhocail 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-

bot Press in 1922, Pádraig Ó Maoileoin's *Seanfhocail na Mumban* in 1926, Tomás Ó Máille's *Seanfhocla Chonnacht* Volumes I and II, in 1948 and 1952 respectively. Joyce's *English as we Speak it in Ireland* in 1910 offers a collection of proverbs in Hiberno-English, some of which are translations of Irish language proverbs, others being distinctly Irish adaptations of English proverbs and still others original Hiberno-Irish coinings. Liam Mac Con Iomaire points out that the Danish anthropologist Bo Almqvist of the Department of Irish Folklore in University College Dublin, collected some 1500 proverbs from one man, Mícheál Ó Guithín, from the Great Blasket Island over a period of eight years and that his mother, Péig Sayers, had an even greater store of proverbs, many of which are to be found in her autobiography *Péig and Machtnamb SeanaMhná (An Old Woman's Reflections)* (Mac Con Iomaire, viii). The list of works consulted at the end of this paper gives five books of Irish proverbs published in the past twenty years alone. Clearly, interest in folk wisdom has not diminished.

Irish proverbs reflect the rural world, the closeness to the sea, to land, to animal life. The following examples can be found in most collections of Irish proverbs currently available: *Ní hé lá na gaoithe lá na scolb.*—"A windy day is no good for thatching"; *Dána gach madra i ndoras a thí féin.*—"Every dog is brave on his own doorstep"; *Ná beannaigh an t-iasc go dtiocfaidh sé a dtír.*—"Don't bless the fish until it gets to land"; *Chan fbuair an madra rua teachtaire ariamb ab'fbearr ná é féin.*—"The fox never found a better messenger than himself"; *Nuair a bhíonn do lámh i mbéal an mhadra, tarraing go réig í.*—"When your arm/hand is in the dog's mouth, withdraw

it gently"; *Tá lán mara eile san fbarraige.*—"There are many more tides in the sea"; *Tá iasc san fbarraige níos fearr ná gabbadh ariamb.*—"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 muca ciúine a itheann an mbín.*—"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: *Níl eolas gan aontíos.*—"You don't know someone until you've lived together"; *Ceileann searc ainimb is locht.*—"Love (infatuation) conceals blemishes and faults"; *Bíonn an teanga ina póca ag an bbean 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"; *Níl leaghas ar an ngrá ach pósadh.*—"There's no cure for love but marriage"; *Más maith leat tú a cháineadh, pós.*—"If you want to be criticized, get married." And perhaps the most famous, *Ní féasta go rósta ní céasta go pósta.*—"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"; *Scéitbeann fíon fírinne.*—"Wine releases truth", close to the Latin *In vino veritas.* *Nuair a bhíonn an deoch istigh bíonn 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 fiacail riamb.—"A good word never broke anyone's tooth"; *Ná gearradh 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 dbá scéal uait.*—"The person who tells you a story will take two away with him."

To conclude, a few general proverbs. *Is maith an scéalaí an aimsir.*—"Time will tell (Time is the best storyteller)"; *Tús maith leath na boibre.*—"Well begun is half done"; *Is fearr obair ná caint.*—"It's better to work than to talk"; *Tagann práta mór as póirín.*—"Big potatoes come from small ones (great oaks grow from tiny acorns)"; *Bíonn cluasa ar na cláíocha.*—"The walls have ears"; *Giorraíonn beirt bóthar.*—"Two shorten the road"; *Is buaine bladh ná saol.*—"Your reputation outlives you." And perhaps, a proverb which was originally coined by a poitín distiller or a rabble rouser: *In gan fhios don dlí is fearr bbeith 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 Gaeltachtaí, 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.

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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 gcathaoireacha sa chúinne.

'Ach cad é an focal ceart, mar sin?'
Ní raibh a fhios acu,
iad ciúin go tobann, ag smaoineamh go dtí—
'Ach léireoidh mé duit más mian,
a stóirín,' arsa duine acu,
leath-chúthaileach, leath-mhaíteach,