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LEGLISS IN LONDON:
PÁDRAIC Ó CONAIRE
AND ÉAMON A BÚRC¹

ANGELA BOURKE

PÁDRAIC Ó Conaire's short novel, *Deoraíocht* [*Exile*] (1910), written in London and published when he was twenty-eight, is the earliest example of modernist fiction in Irish.² Its narrator, Micil Ó Maoláin, has been hit by a car shortly after arriving from Galway to look for work; emerging from hospital, he has lost an arm and a leg, and his face is *casta millte scólta*: "twisted, warped and ruined." He becomes a sideshow freak to support himself, traveling around England and even back to Galway, but returns eventually to London, where he dies, down and out, in one of the city's parks. "Seoirse Lap agus Banríon na Bruíne" [Seoirse Lap and the Fairy Queen], on the other hand, is an oral legend told in Connemara in September 1937 by Éamon Liam a Búrc, of Aill na Brón, near Carna, County Galway, and recorded on wax cylinders with an Ediphone machine by Liam Mac Coisdeala, a thirty-year-old collector for the Irish Folklore Commission. Seoirse Lap is a young rural tradesman: a maker of nets and of the rope harnesses used on looms, who travels on foot around the West of Ireland to sell his work. His home is beside a fairy hill, however (perhaps Knockmaa, in East Galway), and one night its occupants carry him by magic to Dublin. Further "trips" take him to Scotland, where the

1 I thank University College Dublin, The National University of Ireland, Dublin, for a President's Research Fellowship in 2002–03, during which I prepared this paper for publication. From an early version, presented at the IASIL annual meeting in Dublin in August 2001, I developed the arguments in a seminar for the MA in Culture and Colonialism at the National University of Ireland, Galway, in February 2003. I am grateful to those who attended, and participated in the discussions that followed, and especially to Dr Lionel Pilkington for his invitation.

2 Pádraic Ó Conaire, *Deoraíocht* (Réamhrá le Micheál Mac Liammóir) (Baile Átha Cliath: An Comhlacht Oideachais, 1994 [1910]). Translations used here are from *Exile*, translated from the Irish by Gearailt Mac Eoin (Indreabhán: Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 2001 [1994]).

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fairies need his help to abduct a king's daughter, and to London, where they abandon him in the cellar of a public house after drinking it dry. Much longer, at over half an hour (fifteen printed pages), than the average legend performance, and with many meditations on right and wrong, and the individual's entitlement to work and earn a living, "Seoirse Lap agus Banríon na Bruíne" is this storyteller's elaborate version of the migratory legend folklorists refer to by number as ML₅₀₀₆.³

Éamon a Búrc was seventy-one when he told the story of Seoirse Lap for Liam Mac Coisdeala, and its length and complexity suggest that the legend may have been in his repertoire for many years. Pádraic Ó Conaire, author of 26 books, 473 stories, 237 essays and 6 plays, had been dead since 1928.⁴ He had spent the last thirteen years of his life in Ireland, mostly in County Galway, and at least some of the time in Carna.⁵ Like most Irish-language writers of his generation, he had drawn on the modes and motifs of oral storytelling in some of his writing. Unlike them, however, he had spent fourteen years in London, and was a committed socialist, widely read in contemporary European and Russian literature.⁶ His best prose, including *Deoraíocht*, moved decisively away from oral tradition to deal with the preoccupations of urban life in spare, descriptive language with many neologisms; even there, however, references to oral stories and songs mark moments of liberation for his characters. His first readers were the men and women whom the Gaelic League's language classes had made literate in Irish, but Éamon a Búrc was not among them. The storyteller

3 Peadar Ó Ceannabháin, ed., *Éamon a Búrc: Scéalta* (Baile Átha Cliath: An Clóchomhar, 1983), 223–38. For the classification of legends, see Reidar Th. Christiansen, *The Migratory Legends* (Helsinki: Folklore Fellows Communications 175, 1958), and for legend scholarship in Ireland, Bo Almqvist, "Irish Migratory Legends on the Supernatural: Sources, Studies and Problems," *Béaloideas* 59 (1991), 1–43. The same journal issue, titled *The Fairy Hill is on Fire*, contains several essays on important aspects of the legend tradition. For Éamon a Búrc, see also my "The Virtual Reality of Irish Fairy Legend," *Éire-Ireland* 31:1–2 (1996), 7–25, at 21–23, and "Economic Necessity and Escapist Fantasy in Éamon a Búrc's Sea-Stories," *Islanders and Water-Dwellers: Proceedings of the Celtic-Nordic-Baltic Folklore Symposium held at University College Dublin, 16–19 June 1996*, ed. Patricia Lysaght, Séamas Ó Catháin, Dáithí Ó hÓgáin (Dublin: DBA, 2000), 19–35.

4 An tSr Eibhlín Ní Chionnaith, "Pádraic Ó Conaire 1882–1928," *Pádraic Ó Conaire: Léachtaí Cuimhneacháin*, eag. Gearóid Denvir (Indreabhán: Cló Chonamara, i gcomhar le Raidió na Gaeltachta, 1983), 1–8, at 8.

5 Pádraigín Riggs, *Pádraic Ó Conaire: Deoraí* (Baile Átha Cliath: An Clóchomhar, 1994), 41.

6 For his selected essays, see Gearóid Denvir, *Aistí Phádraic Uí Chonaire* (Indreabhán: Cló Chonamara, 1978).

never learned to read; instead his fame rests on his expertise in a tradition that many believed had changed little since medieval times.⁷ The collection of folklore in the 1930s was a nation-building enterprise, fueled by a “folk ideology” in the politics of Éamon de Valera, and intended at least in part as a bulwark against the intrusion of foreign thought.⁸ The Irish Free State, which celebrated its oral storytellers and showered awards and honors on the books of Tomás Ó Criomhthain and Peig Sayers, would reserve deep distrust for the writers who carried on Ó Conaire’s socialist vision, like Liam Ó Flaithearta from Gort na gCapall in Aran and Máirtín Ó Cadhain from Cois Fharraige, County Galway.

At first sight, therefore, *Deoraíocht* and the story of Seirse Lap are totally different, and although both originate in the Galway Gaeltacht, they are certainly independent of each other. Their depictions of the experiences of Irish-speakers in London, however, have remarkable parallels in imagery and rhetoric. A comparative analysis of their narratives shows both artists confronting issues of economic imbalance, racism and colonization, and using similar strategies to articulate radical ideas about belonging and stigma among migrant speakers of a minority language. Comparing the two texts allows us to widen the terms of critical reference for Ó Conaire’s work, and to discern the influence of nineteenth- and twentieth-century radicalism on the verbal art of Éamon a Búrc, even as he participated in a central cultural project of the rigidly conservative Free State.

PÁDRAIC Ó CONAIRE AND *DEORAÍOCHT*

Born in Galway in 1882, and orphaned at age eleven, Pádraic Ó Conaire nevertheless had a relatively privileged upbringing. After his mother’s death, he lived with his father’s brother, P.D. Conroy, a prosperous shopkeeper in Ros Muc. That household was English-speaking, but the area was Gaeltacht, and the boy learned to speak Irish fluently. His uncle later sent him as a boarder to Blackrock College in Dublin, where one of his classmates was Éamon de Valera. At age eighteen he went to London,

7 See, for example, James H. Delargy, “The Gaelic Story-teller,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 31 (1945), 177–221. Reprinted, *Reprints in Irish Studies* 6 (Chicago: American Committee for Irish Studies, 1969).

8 See Gearóid Ó Cruaíoch, “The Primacy of Form: A ‘Folk Ideology’ in De Valera’s Politics,” in J.P. O’Carroll and John A. Murphy, *De Valera and His Times* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1986), and Diarmaid Ó Giolláin, *Locating Irish Folklore* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2000).

where he worked as a clerk at the Board of Education in Whitehall, and soon became involved in Gaelic League activities there. In 1904 he submitted a short story, “Páidín Mháire,” to one of the League’s *Oireachtas* literary competitions in Dublin, and won.⁹ “Páidín Mháire” tells of a young fisherman forced by poverty and his responsibility for elderly parents to labor on public works that are changing the face of his local landscape: blasting rock with dynamite to build a new causeway. When Páidín loses an eye in an explosion, he receives £50 as compensation, but his generosity and his unfamiliarity with money mean that it is soon spent. When the sight of his second eye fails, he has no alternative but to enter the workhouse, where he pines for the sea, and in his blindness loses touch with reality, retreating into the legend that his family, Muintir Chonaola, is related to the seals.¹⁰ Eventually he wanders off, falling ill through exposure, and dying.

“Páidín Mháire,” with its themes of maiming and money, and its preoccupation with the effects of industrial technology and a centralized economy on the individual brought up in a traditional society, anticipates the much longer *Deoraíocht*, on which Ó Conaire may have begun to work at about the same time. Like Páidín Ó Conaola, Micil Ó Maoláin is from Galway. He has come to London to earn money so that he can marry his cousin Máire Ní Laoi, but on streets where most of the traffic is still drawn by horses, he falls beneath the wheels of a motor car and suffers terrible injuries, for which he is awarded £250 compensation. When he collects the money from the bank, he insists that it be paid in gold sovereigns, which he takes back to his room in a yellow bag, like the hero of a folktale. The text proceeds as awkwardly at this point as its central character-narrator: although Micil has lost an arm as well as a leg, he can apparently use a pair of crutches, and also carry the bag of gold; later, when just one half-sovereign remains, he will toss it from hand to hand. Caring little about such details, however, his furious narrative moves urgently on, sometimes even in the present tense, as a diary, or running commentary.¹¹

9 Pádraic Ó Conaire, *Scothscéalta* (Baile Átha Cliath: Sairséal Ó Marcaigh, 1994 [1956]), 133–45.

10 Cf David Thomson, *The People of the Sea* (London: Granada, 1980 [1965]), and Bairbre Ní Fhloinn, “Tadhg, Donncha and Some of their Relations: Seals in Irish Oral Tradition,” *Islanders and Water-Dwellers*, ed. Lysaght, et al., 223–45, at 234–36.

11 For the likelihood that Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the Underground* influenced Ó Conaire in his choice of this technique, see Riggs, *Pádraic Ó Conaire: Deoraí*, 234–36.

On a cold and foggy night, his money almost gone, Micil decides that he would rather rob than beg, and manages to buy a silver-handled pistol from a sailor he meets by the river. When they retire to a drinking-house to seal the bargain, he relaxes and begins to tell stories, but unconsciously lapses into Irish, to the puzzlement of his listeners. The sailor resourcefully improvises a heroic tale, however, whereby Micil is a German, incarcerated after killing eight men in a fit of madness, but later released and allowed to go to East Africa, where he became a lion hunter. An old lion, attacking him as he slept, inflicted the scars they can see on his face; he managed to kill it with his knife, and drag its body to his ship, but alas, his arm and leg had later to be amputated.

Two strangers hear this story and observe its mutilated hero. They are Alf Trott, “a small, yellow-faced man,” boss of a traveling show, and Big Mag, a drunken, red-haired woman with a face like a Roman emperor’s. Big Mag has understood Micil’s speech, for she is from Cill Aodáin, twelve miles from Galway; she addresses him in Irish, and he is at first embarrassed and then deeply comforted by this human contact. The sailor meanwhile has negotiated with Alf Trott to hire the lion-killer for his show, and Micil prepares to go on the road as a freak: *feic saolta*, a public spectacle. He will be the Madman, killer of eight men, the terror of the world; his face painted in grotesque colours, he will sit with his one leg doubled under him to look as though he has none, wearing a long shaggy black wig and a multicoloured coat; big, clanking brass chains will encircle his neck and waist, and he will not speak, only roar, to terrify the people. He will be paid three pounds a week.

The novel’s climax comes when the show visits Galway, and Micil is paraded through the streets on a cart. His old neighbors gape, not realizing who he is, and when they visit the freak show, make disparaging comments about him as though he could not understand. Máire Ní Laoi, pregnant, comes with her husband, and faints when she sees the Madman, but even she does not recognize Micil. Later, he hears the show’s wild animals roaring in their cages and compares their state to his own. “Nach fear a bhí ionam?” he asks himself: “Was I not a man?” It is unlikely that Pádraic Ó Conaire was familiar with the words supposed to have been spoken by the slave-woman Sojourner Truth in Akron, Ohio, in 1851: “And ain’t I a woman?”; but those he gives Micil have the same poignancy, and the same underlying meaning.

Pushed beyond endurance when Alf Trott betroths him to the show’s Fat Lady before a crowd of Galway onlookers, Micil finally

straightens his one good leg and stands, throwing off his wig and chains. “*Cead cainte,*” he shouts, “Permission to speak!” He addresses the crowd in Irish, denouncing the deceptions of the freak show and its owner; a riot breaks out and the show is destroyed, but he himself escapes by train—back to London. There, hungry in mind, heart, and soul, as well as in body, he embarks on a series of attempts to get the money that Alf Trott still owes him. When a chemical factory goes on fire one night, and the women who work there are divided between celebration and despair at the loss of their jobs, he spots Big Mag in the light of the flames. “*Fuil na mban a cailleadh leis an nimh!*” he shouts: “The blood of the poisoned women!” She takes up the cry, and the crowd joins in. The factory owner begins to be afraid, and Micil knows that this is his finest hour: “*Tá beithíoch céasta na mban ar lár,*” he shouts, as the factory collapses: “The beast who tortured women is dead!” and again the crowd echoes his voice.

The novel reaches a kind of resolution at this point, and the remainder is a somewhat haphazard tying-up of its strands. Big Mag takes Micil under her wing once more, and finds him lodging in an Irish ghetto where he observes and deplores the condition of his fellow countrymen. Even the highly cultured among them are reduced to working with pick and shovel, and their children quickly learn to be ashamed of them, their language and their songs. The Fat Lady catches up with Micil, as do Alf Trott (revealed as her father), and a widowed Máire Ní Laoi, who arrives with her own father to look for him, but he slips away from a scene in which almost the whole cast of characters is assembled, to take refuge with the down-and-outs in the park. In the last hours of his life he observes the waking of insects in the first warmth of spring; he curses an enemy, and sings a song as he sits at the base of an oak tree, on the nineteenth of April, 1907. When his body is found, the papers he has written are in his pocket. The pistol is beside him, but it has not been fired: it was nothing but a toy, after all.

Early critics read *Deoraíocht* for good or ill as a realistic narrative about the social problem of emigration, but in 1956 Seosamh Mac Grianna described it as more advanced than anything written in English by an Irish writer of its time, and in 1977 John Jordan selected it to initiate a series of radio talks in English on “The Pleasures of Gaelic Literature.” Reading the pistol Micil buys from the sailor as a “surrogate virility,” he suggested that notwithstanding the element of melodrama in his work, “Pádraic may *not* have been the possessor of exceptional intuition alone, but an artist of the

greatest deliberation.”¹² The centenary of Ó Conaire’s birth sent critics back to his work in 1982. Micheál Mac Craith argued that the story of the Elephant Man, Joseph Carey Merrick, who died in the London Hospital on 11 April 1890 at the age of twenty-seven, had been the inspiration for *Deoraíocht*, and that its central message was the beauty of the human spirit that can transcend any physical imperfection.¹³ In a commemorative lecture on Raidió na Gaeltachta the same year, Pádraigín Riggs interpreted the exile portrayed in *Deoraíocht* as not simply removal from home and family, but a mental condition: a flaw in personality that could prevent an individual from making satisfactory relationships, with physical maiming (seen also in “Páidín Mháire” and various other Ó Conaire stories), as a metaphor for this alienation. In the same series, however, Declan Kiberd read *Deoraíocht* as a critique of the destruction of personality under capitalism, when the individual becomes divorced from the products of her/his labor, and wealth is generated through images and illusions.¹⁴ In her full-length study of Ó Conaire, published in 1994, Riggs developed her earlier interpretation of *Deoraíocht* as a reflex of the author’s own psychological history; she scrupulously traced its literary antecedents, but rejected Kiberd’s interpretation of Ó Conaire’s fiction as inspired by socialist thought.¹⁵ I shall argue below that the two readings are not incompatible, and that *Deoraíocht* is a poetic articulation of what Ashis Nandy has called the “loss and recovery of self under colonialism,”¹⁶ no poorer in psychological insight for its political dimension and, if anything, more coherent as a work of art. In its representation of the maimed Micil being exhibited in a freak show, but acquiring agency, becoming in some sense an artist of his disability as he roars and shakes his heavy brass chains, Ó Conaire anticipated Franz Kafka’s *The Hunger Artist* (*Ein Hungerkünstler*, 1922) by twelve years. His hero recovers his lost self, however, when he

¹² Riggs, *Pádraic Ó Conaire: Deoraí*, 170–71; Seosamh Mac Grianna, “Pádraic Ó Conaire,” *Scotchscéalta*, 187; John Jordan, “Deoraíocht,” in *The Pleasures of Gaelic Literature* (Dublin and Cork: Mercier, in collaboration with Radio Telefís Éireann, 1978 [1977]), 13–24, at 15.

¹³ “. . . [N]ach féidir le máchail fhisiciúil ar bith, dá ghránacht í, dílleacht an anama a mhúchadh,” Micheál Mac Craith, “Deoraíocht agus The Elephant Man,” *Macalla* (Gaillimh: An Cumann Éigse agus Seanchais, Coláiste na hOllscoile, 1982), 1–7, at 5.

¹⁴ See Gearóid Denvir, ed., *Pádraic Ó Conaire: Léachtaí Cuimhneacháin* (Indreabhán: Cló Chonamara, i gcomhar le Raidió na Gaeltachta, 1983), 19–29; 45–57.

¹⁵ Riggs, *Pádraic Ó Conaire: Deoraí*, 117–31, 165–73, 208–9, and passim.

¹⁶ Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998 [1983]).

refuses to utter the inarticulate roars that have been assigned to him and finds his voice in his native language.

ÉAMON A BÚRC'S "SEOIRSE LAP"

Éamon a Búrc's "Seoirse Lap agus Banríon na Bruíne" begins with two deaths, one natural, after an illness in old age, the other premature, accidental—in the terms of fairy legend, unnatural. After Seoirse's mother's death, he and his father mourn her, but eventually, realizing that life must go on, they begin again to make nets and loom harnesses for sale. This time, however, Seoirse leaves his father at home and sets out alone to visit the Connemara fishermen and weavers who are their customers. Like so many of Éamon a Búrc's characters, therefore, he is on the threshold of adulthood. When he visits one weaver and finds him and his wife distraught after the apparent death by drowning of their only son, he realizes that the child must have been abducted by the fairies, his own neighbors. Returning home, he proceeds to peg rope to the ground outside his house for the outline of a new net, covering the entrance to the hill where they live, and barricading them in as he knots the mesh. The fairies plead with him to remove the net, but he insists on his right to leave it there:

*"Is í mo cheird í," a deir Seoirse, a deir sé, "agus caithfidh mise," a deir sé, "mo cheird féin a dhéanamh agus teastaíonn uaim mo chuid oibre a dhéanamh agus teastaíonn airgead uaim agus teastaíonn saothrú uaim agus níl aon oibligeáid orm an eangach a thógáil go mbeidh an eangach deilbhithe ceart agam."*¹⁷

"This is my trade," said Seoirse, "and I have to practise my trade; I have to do my work; I need money, so I have to earn it, and I'm under no obligation to take up the net until I've finished making it."

The storyteller devotes several minutes to these negotiations, as Seoirse insists for three days and three nights that he will not remove the net until the fairies return the little boy. Eventually, the Fairy Queen herself comes out, and orders the child's release, and Seoirse returns him to his parents the next day. Now the Fairy Queen makes overtures to him, reminding Seoirse of the good relations between her people and his ancestors, seeking his support and offering inducements:

*"... beidh greann agus cuideachta agus feiceál ar go leor agat nach bhfuil a fhios agat an bhfuil a leithéide chor ar bith ann—má gheallann tú dúinn go mbeidh tú inár bpáirt agus nach gcuirfidh tú aon bblas as dúinn."*¹⁸

17 Ó Ceannabháin, ed., *Éamon a Búrc: Scéalta*, 225–26.

18 *Ibid.*, 227.

“. . . you'll have fun and companionship, and you'll see things you never knew of—if you promise to take our part and not obstruct us.”

Seoirse agrees and the next night joins the fairies as they fly to Dublin on horses conjured from nothing by the magic words, “*An capall dubh agus an capall glas agus an láirín bhán mo roghain-sa*”: “The black horse and the grey horse, and the little white mare is the one I choose.”

In Dublin, they remain invisible; they spend their time drinking and laughing at the humans who live there. Before they leave, calling out the magic words that will summon their horses, they fill the bottles and barrels they have emptied with dirty water from puddles and pipes, and then go back the following night to laugh at the gullible city people as they innocently drink it.

When he returns home, Seoirse has a visit from the Fairy Queen, who presses her advantage:

*“Anois a Sheoirse”, a deir sí, “nach fearr duit go fada an spóirt agus an aimsir atá agat in éineacht linn féin ná mar a bhí tú i dtús do shaoil? Nach bhfeiceann tú féin go bhfuil feiceál ar go leor agat agus tá tú ag éisteacht le ceol agus ag breathnú ar dhaoine, ag ól do dhóthain agus ag ithe do dhóthain agus nach fearr duit go mór é ná ag déanamh eangachaí, ag déanamh mísc orainn?”*¹⁹

“Now Seoirse,” said she, “are you not having much more fun and a much better time with us than you did before? Look at all you’re seeing! You’re listening to music and looking at people, eating and drinking your fill, and are you not much better off than when you were making nets, causing mischief for us?”

Their next trip is to Scotland, where the Fairy Queen’s brother falls in love with the king’s only daughter and wants to abduct her. This requires a mortal man, however, to lay his hand on her forehead, and Seoirse refuses, reminding the fairies of the heartbreak they caused by abducting the weaver’s son, and insisting on going home to discuss the matter first. After much persuasion, and a certain amount of emotional blackmail about how well Seoirse’s father and grandfather used to treat their fairy neighbors, he eventually agrees to play his part. He returns to Scotland the following night with the fairies, and they carry the girl back with them, but Seoirse has grave misgivings, increasing when he learns that they have left a changeling in her place, which will grow sickly over the next six months and then appear to die. The Fairy Queen’s brother, however, is

19 Ibid., 229–30.

unrepentant, and simply tells him to be ready for a trip to England that night.

In England, they do as they have done before, drinking everything in sight while staying invisible, but when the fairies call for their horses, Seoirse is too befuddled to utter the magic words and so remains behind in the cellar, where he is discovered between empty barrels in the morning and arrested. He appears in chains before five or six judges in London, but cannot answer when they ask what has brought him there and stays silent. As the court sentences him to hang on the following day, the storyteller mentions twice that nobody knows where he is from. On the scaffold, before the noose is placed about his neck, his chains and the rope that binds his hands are struck off, and he is asked what he has to say. Instantly he remembers the magic words. "Not much," he says, "*An capall dubh agus an capall glas agus an láirín bhán mo roghain-sa!*" The white horse immediately appears beneath him and bears him away to safety and home.

After his return, the Fairy Queen and her brother come to his house to express concern, but Seoirse wants nothing more to do with them. Instead, when a call goes out for doctors to cure the desperately ill daughter of the king of Scotland, he takes matters into his own hands, and uses their magic words for a private visit to Scotland, where the king promises him his daughter in marriage if he can cure her. Back home, he does not wait for morning, but once again constructs a net across the entrance to the fairy hill. Again, he argues with the Fairy Queen until the king's daughter is released. Thousands of fairies burst out of the hill then, like a swarm of midges, each going to a separate place, reminding readers of something Éamon a Búrc's listeners would already have understood: that the fairy hill, like most rural dwellings in the 1930s, was without indoor plumbing. Seoirse carries the king's daughter back to Scotland on the magic horse, marries her that evening, and inherits the kingdom. On waking in the morning, however, he discovers that one of his legs is six inches shorter than the other.

Much of this story consists of heated debate, which the storyteller relays in vivid direct speech, as Seoirse painfully learns to follow his own conscience through conflict with the Fairy Queen and her brother. Skilled work, it tells us, is ultimately worth more than unearned luxury, and seductive promises of ease are not to be trusted; cities are exciting, but unhygienic and dangerous, and an Irish-speaking man alone in London is nobody. The final detail, about Seoirse's shortened leg, seems gratuitous until we reflect, first, that the storyteller had had his own leg amputated

as a teenager in Minnesota, leading to his family's return to Ireland when he was seventeen; second, that fairy legend frequently insists that the fairies leave a physical mark on those who have spent time among them and third, that the phallic connotations of a shortened leg offer one of several parallels with Micil Ó Maoláin's story in *Deoraíocht*.²⁰

STIGMA AND STORY

Migratory Legend number 5006 is known as "Hie for Spain!" or "Hie over to London!" from the magic formulae used in English-language versions. The earliest telling recorded in Ireland is in the *Royal Hibernian Tales*, a chapbook published before 1825. "Manus O'Mallaghan and the Fairies" tells of magic travel to Spain and Rome (reflecting the reality of much seventeenth-century travel out of Ireland), from where Manus brings back tokens of "abroad": boots of Spanish leather, and documents from the Pope. Later he rescues a rich man's daughter from the same fairies who brought him away.²¹ Other versions, more than one of which were told to American folklorists, entail magic travel by an Irish countryman, in a small boat or on horseback, to New York and Boston, from where he brings clothes, tobacco, and dollars. When the protagonist is transported to England, however, he comes home penniless, alcoholic and/or criminalized.²²

In the earlier versions, travel is a benign experience, associated with privilege and always illustrated and attested to by objects of desire brought

²⁰ Ibid., 11, and Liam Mac Coisdeala, "In Memoriam, Éamonn (Liam) a Búrc (Aill na Brón, Cárna, Co. na Gaillimhe)," *Béaloideas* 12 (1942), 210–14, at 211, give Éamonn's age at the time he left Ireland as four or five, and St. Paul, Minn., as his family's destination; however Seosamh Ó Cuaig has established that the migration took place in 1880 and that Éamonn Liam was one of 390 people from Galway and Mayo who sailed on the S.S. Austrian, and settled in Graceville, Minn., at the invitation of Archbishop John Ireland. I am grateful to Seosamh Ó Cuaig for sharing with me the results of his research for the film *Graceville* (Telegael, 1996), and to Peadar Ó Ceannabháin for valuable discussions. For the Graceville settlement, see also Gerard Moran, "In Search of the Promised Land': The Connemara Colonization Scheme to Minnesota, 1880," *Éire-Ireland* 31:3&4 (1996), 130–49, and Bridget Connelly, *Forgetting Ireland: Uncovering a Family's Secret History* (St. Paul: Borealis Books, 2003). For discussion of the physical marks left by fairies on humans, and their connections with disability, see my *The Burning of Bridget Cleary: A True Story* (New York: Viking, 2000), 38–39, 66–71, 83–84.

²¹ Reprinted in *Béaloideas* 10:1–2 (1940), 148–203, at 172–75.

²² See, for example, "Seán Palmer's Voyage to America with the Fairies," in Seán O'Sullivan, *Folktales of Ireland* (London: Routledge, 1966), 209–19; W.Y. Evans-Wentz, *The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries* (Oxford 1911), 73; "Hie over to London," *Béaloideas* 2:4 (1930), 354–57.

back from a wealthier world. Storytellers engage with the narratives of priest, landlord and visiting expert, whose authority, made visible in their clothing, footwear and documents, seems always to derive from elsewhere. Later stories, telling of travel to Dublin or London, are structurally similar, but represent a dramatic shift in attitude. This travel is initially heady and exhilarating, but quickly leads to disillusion, with isolation, alcoholism, criminalization, and a fantasy of grateful escape home—as recent studies of the Irish in Britain show was all too common in reality. Éamon a Búrc’s version, told by a disabled man, reminds us obliquely, as does *Deoraíocht*, that Irishmen did the heaviest and most dangerous work in building England’s canals and railways, and that many were crippled in accidents.²³

Signs left on the body, whether by machines out of control or by the fairies of oral tradition, are examples of *stigma* in the literal sense. Erving Goffman’s classic study defines stigma as “the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance.” The stigma may be a physical blemish, such as amputation, scars, or birthmarks; a social dysfunction, like alcoholism, thieving, or unemployment; or from membership of a despised race or religious group.²⁴ Speaking a despised language, of course, is also a stigma, as is lack of fluency in the dominant language. Goffman reminds us that extra stigma is attributed to stigmatized persons (as when blind people are shouted at, or lifted bodily, or foreigners are assumed to be stupid or dishonest), and points out that the issues involved for the person marked as discredibly different can be those of life and death:

By definition, of course, we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human. On this assumption we exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce his life chances. We construct a stigma theory, an ideology to explain his inferiority and account for the danger he represents, sometimes rationalizing an animosity based on other differences, such as those of social class.²⁵

The third kind of stigma listed above, membership of a despised race, religion or language community, is that experienced by the colonized Irish

²³ See, for example, Ultan Cowley, *The Men Who Built Britain: A History of the Irish Navy* (Dublin: Wolfhound, 2001), and Catherine Dunne, *An Unconsidered People: The Irish in London* (Dublin: New Island, 2003).

²⁴ Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of a Spoiled Identity* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968 [1963]), 9, 14.

²⁵ Goffman, *Stigma*, 15.

seeking work in London in the early twentieth century, and by refugees and asylum seekers everywhere.

The colonized and stigmatized exile (refugee, asylum seeker), finds (i) that her / his language is silenced—forbidden, derided, or simply not understood; (ii) that his / her human-ness has been removed or canceled and (iii) if he is male, that his masculinity is denied. The individual thus becomes mute, or a beast, or castrated—or all three, as Micil Ó Maoláin effectively is in *Deoraíocht*. The double bind of colonialism required that he go to London in order to become a man—to make enough money to marry his sweetheart—yet London has emasculated him and made him inarticulate. When he spoke Irish, only Big Mag understood him, and his physical blemishes combined with the unfamiliar sounds he made were enough to convince onlookers that he was “wild”—a madman, not quite human. The impresario Alf Trott simply exaggerated these characteristics with props and makeup, and by ordering Micil to roar, not speak. Returning thus edited to his native Galway, he found that people talked about him, rather than to him, and fled from him as from a beast. Seoirse Lap too found himself unable to speak when confronted by the majesty of England’s law, and he too was paraded in chains as an exotic from someplace unknown. Both characters, however, found voice at last, and managed to express themselves effectively in Irish.

In *The Intimate Enemy*, Ashis Nandy concluded that:

In order to truly live, . . . it might be sometimes better to be dead in somebody else’s eyes, so as to be alive for one’s own self. In order to accept oneself, one must learn to hold in trust “weaknesses” to which a violent, culturally barren and politically bankrupt world some day may have to return.²⁶

Unable to read and write, physically disabled from an early age, and living in poverty on the farthest periphery of Europe, Éamon a Búrc nevertheless achieved high status as an artist in the twentieth century. His story about Seoirse Lap, though told in terms of the fairy belief that was a laughing-stock of literate metropolitan culture, is an adult discussion, expressed through powerful imagery and metaphor, of urgent questions that faced the young men who were his audience in 1937. It is not possible to say whether or not he had ever met Pádraic Ó Conaire, but from 1934 to 1937 radical ideas of the kind the writer had espoused were to be found in the pages of *An tÉireannach*, an Irish-language newspaper aimed

²⁶ Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy*, 111–12.

specifically at the people of the Galway Gaeltacht. And there seems little doubt that he became aware of them, for his combativeness and lively interest in current affairs were well known, and his American experience had given him a perspective unusual among his neighbors.²⁷

In considering Éamon a Búrc's telling of "Seoirse Lap," we do well to keep in mind the observation of Danish folklore scholar Bengt Holbek (1933–92), that "[t]he storyteller has a purpose, a grasp of the whole, which directs his or her organization of the narrative."²⁸ The 1880 migration that brought hundreds of people, including fourteen-year-old Éamon, from the boggy coasts of Galway and Mayo to settle on the Minnesota prairie came at the height of the Land War. Connemara historian and journalist Seosamh Ó Cuaig has established that a Liam a Búrc, probably Éamon's father, was one of those involved in agitation against the local landlord's interests in Carna shortly before the emigrants left, an incident commemorated in the song *Bád Dóite Loideáin*, "Lydon's Burnt Boat," or "The Burning of Lydon's Boat." Inspired by Ó Cuaig's research, a remarkable recent study has detailed the exploitations the migrants experienced in Minnesota.²⁹ It seems reasonable to conclude that Éamon a Búrc learned some of his anti-authoritarianism within his own family. Meanwhile his closing detail, attributing Seoirse Lap's short leg to his amazing adventures, in a narrative that portrays him as intelligent, resourceful and morally courageous, offers a heroic reading of his own disability, much as the sailor does for Micil in *Deoraíocht* when he explains his physical disfiguration as the result of a tussle with a lion in Africa.

The insights offered by Erving Goffman and Ashis Nandy, forty and twenty years ago, respectively, suggest that the parallels between these two very different narratives are not accidental. Pádraic Ó Conaire and Éamon a Búrc shared an intellectual heritage, an experience of emigration, and most crucially, a language. As artists, both address the stigma they experienced and witnessed as colonized subjects by expressing themselves in Irish, and by depicting characters who find liberation in the same way—an irony that is not lost on the present writer.

27 See Éamon Ó Ciosáin, *An tÉireannach 1934–1937: Páipéar Sóisialach Gaeltachta* (BÁC: An Clóchomhar, 1993). The paper's contributors included Máirtín Ó Cadhain and the singer Sorcha Ní Ghuairim.

28 Bengt Holbek, *The Interpretation of Fairy Tales* (Folklore Fellows Communications No. 239, Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1987), 410.

29 Seosamh Ó Cuaig, in conversation with the author; Bridget Connelly, *Forgetting Ireland*.