

Extracts from a Sporadic Diary (1979):
Translations

(I do not keep a diary. But occasionally, usually when the work has hit a bad patch, I make sporadic notes, partly as a discipline to keep me at the desk, partly in the wan hope that the casual jottings will induce something better. These notes were made throughout 1979. I was working on a play that came to be called *Translations*. *Translations* is set in a hedge-school in Ballybeg, County Donegal. The year is 1833. The British army is engaged in mapping the whole of Ireland, a process which involves the renaming of every place-name in the country. It is a time of great upheaval for the people of Ballybeg: their hedge-school is to be replaced by one of the new national schools; there is recurring potato blight; they have to acquire a new language (English); and because their townland is being renamed, everything that was familiar is becoming strange.)

i May 1979

Mayday. Snowing. Still circling around the notion of the hedge-school/ordnance survey play. Reluctant to touch down, to make the commitment of beginning.

ii May 1979

Bits and pieces of the new play are coming together. Characters are acquiring form and voice. Attitudes are finding shape and tongue. But only on this very basic level are there the first stirrings. The bigger issues - what the image of map-making evokes, what the play was born of and where it hopes to go to - none of these is acquiring definition. But at this point one still hopes for the numinous.

14 May 1979

Went to Urris today, the setting of the hedge-school in the play-in-the-head. No response to the place apart from some sense of how

the ordinary British sappers might have reacted to this remote, bleak, desolate strip of land attenuated between mountain and sea. And perhaps in an attempt to commit myself to the material I bought a first edition of Colonel Colby's *Memoir of the City and North Western Liberties of Londonderry*.¹

The people from Urris/Ballybeg would have been Irish-speaking in 1833. So a theatrical conceit will have to be devised by which - even though the actors speak English - the audience will assume or accept that they are speaking Irish. Could that work?

15 May 1979

I keep returning to the same texts: the letters of John O'Donovan, Colby's *Memoir*, *A Paper Landscape* by John Andrews,² *The Hedge-Schools of Ireland* by Dowling,³ Steiner's *After Babel*.^{*} And at each rereading I get interested in some trivial detail or sub-side beneath the tedium of the whole idea. For some reason the material resists the intense and necessary fusion of its disparate parts into one whole, and the intense and necessary mental heat that accomplishes that. One aspect that keeps eluding me: the wholeness, the integrity, of that Gaelic past. Maybe because I don't believe in it.

16 May 1979

I can envisage a few scenes: the hedge-school classroom; the love scene between lovers who have no common language; the actual task of places being named. Nothing more. The play is not extending its influence into unrealized territories. Stopping short at what it says and shows only.

22 May 1979

The thought occurred to me that what I was circling around was a political play and that thought panicked me. But it is a political play - how can that be avoided? If it is not political, what is it? Inaccurate history? Social drama?

23 May 1979

I believe that I am reluctant even to name the characters, maybe

because the naming-taming process is what the play is about.

2.9 May 1979

Reading and rereading Colby and Andrews and O'Donovan and Steiner and Dowling. Over the same territories again and again and again. I am now at the point when the play *must* be begun and yet all I know about it is this:

I don't want to write a play about Irish peasants being suppressed by English sappers.

I don't want to write a threnody on the death of the Irish language.

I don't want to write a play about land-surveying.

Indeed I don't want to write a play about naming places.

And yet portions of all these are relevant. Each is part of the atmosphere in which the real play lurks.

1 June 1979

What worries me about the play - if there is a play - are the necessary peculiarities, especially the political elements. Because the play has to do with language and only language. And if it becomes overwhelmed by that political element, it is lost.

18 June 1979

In Ballybeg, at the point when the play begins, the cultural climate is a dying climate - no longer quickened by its past, about to be plunged almost overnight into an alien future. The victims in this situation are the transitional generation. The old can retreat into and find immunity in the past. The young acquire some facility with the new cultural implements. The in-between ages become lost, wandering around in a strange land. Strays.

22 June 1979

Something finally on paper. But what is on paper is far removed from what I thought the play would deal with. For some time there will be this duality - the actual thing and the ideal thing, neither acknowledging the other. Then at some point they must converge. Or one is lost - and then the play is lost.

25 June 1979

Work on the play at a standstill. A complete power failure. This is always accompanied by a lethargy so total that it seeps into everyday things: all activity collapses. And it is also accompanied by a complete loss of faith in the whole *idea* of the play.

I have never found an antidote to this lethargy. Just drive the work on, mechanically, without belief, vaguely trusting in an instinctive automatic pilot.

2 July 1979

A busy week. The first thirteen pages rewritten a dozen times. To create the appropriate atmosphere. To create each voice and endow it with its appropriate pitch. To indicate the themes that will be inhabited and cultivated and to guide the play carefully towards them. Sheepdog trials.

And now standstill again. Because now that so much is on paper - the characters introduced, their voices distinctive, the direction of the play indicated - everything is so subtly wrong, just so slightly off-key, just so slightly out of focus, that the whole play is flawed. And the difficulty at this stage is to identify those small distortions. Because what the play and the characters and their voices and the themes ought to be - the ideal, the play-in-the-head, the model - can't be known until it is made real. The catch-22 situation. So you rework, go back over notes. And try to keep faith with that instinct. And at the same time you are aware that each day, as each page is forged, faith is being transferred from that nebulous concept in the head to that permanent and imperfect word on the page.

3 July 1979

Complete stop. Are the characters only mouthpieces for certain predetermined concepts? Is the play only an ideas play? And indeed are those ideas amenable to dramatic presentation?

4 July 1979

A persistent sense - the logic of the emotions? - that the character Manus is physically maimed.

6 July 1979

One of the mistakes of the direction in which the play is presently pulling is the almost wholly *public* concern of the theme: how does the eradication of the Irish language and the substitution of English affect this particular *society*? How long can a *society* live without its tongue? Public questions; issues for politicians; and that's what is wrong with the play now. The play must concern itself only with the exploration of the dark and private places of individual souls.

2 September 1979

What is so deceptive and so distressing is that the terrain looks so firm and that I think I know it intimately. But the moment I begin to move across it, the ground gives under me. There are a few solid stepping-stones - some characters fully realized - some scenes complete and efficient - but they exist without relationship to one another.

9 October 1979

Persistent, nose-to-the-desk, 9.30 a.m.-5.30 p.m., grinding work. Two acts completed. About to begin Act 3. Final acts are always less taxing because they are predetermined by what has already happened and at this point each character only completes himself, fulfils himself.

I'm not sure what has been achieved. I am more acutely aware of what has been lost, diluted, confused, perverted than of what has been caught and revealed. A sense, too, that on occasion I have lost faith in the fiction and shouted what should have been overheard. But there is still time.

5 November 1979

The play, named *Translations*, completed.

The task of writing the play, the actual job of putting the pattern together, itself generates belief in the pattern. The act and the artefact sustain one another. And now that the play is finished the value of the pattern and belief in the pattern diminish and lethargy sets in: the life process. But only after the play is produced will I be completely cleansed of my subscription to this particular pattern, this ordering of things. Then a vigour will be summoned. Then a

new pattern will have to be forged.

The process seems trivial and transient because the patterns are so impermanent. But is there another way? It is a kind of vigilance - keeping the bush from encroaching into the yard. All art is a diary of evolution; markings that seemed true of and for their time; adjustments in stance and disposition; opening to what seemed the persistence of the moment. Map-makings.

In Interview with Ciaran Carty (1980)

Although set in the days of the hedge-schools - British soldiers are carrying out an ordnance survey to establish English versions of local Irish place names - *Translations* expresses the theme of people living in a language that is not their own as a riveting metaphor for the North's continuing trauma.

Brian Friel, with Belfast actor Stephen Rea, set up their own company Field Day to stage *Translations* and chose Derry for the opening because it embodied the meeting of two cultures: the place became an extension of the play. During the week he has been talking with me about this concept of theatre and about the role of the dramatist in a changing Ireland.

He plops a tea bag into a cup of boiling water. 'I'm used to drinking tea in green-rooms and it's always filthy,' Friel apologizes.

Not that we're in a conventional green-room: the huge first-floor room of the Guildhall, with its high ceiling and panelled walls, has been made available to Field Day for rehearsals by Derry City Council. That Field Day should be in the Guildhall at all - to say nothing of Unionist mayor Marlene Jefferson leading the applause on opening night - is in itself remarkable.

To the minority in the North this intimidating neo-Gothic building overlooking the Foyle has always been a symbol of domination. This is theirs, boy, and your very presence here is a sacrilege,' jeered Skinner in Friel's 1973 play *The Freedom of the City*. With two other demonstrators he had taken refuge from CS gas in the Mayor's Parlour when troops broke up a civil rights march. Mistaken for an IRA assault force, they came under fire from the British and were shot as they surrendered. Thus was created a savagely ironic analogy to Bloody Sunday [30 January 1972.]-

But all that is changing. The Guildhall has fallen to words rather than bullets. Even with the recession biting deep - over 10,000

jobs have been lost in the area - a power-sharing Council offers Derry the beginnings of hope.

Friel's new play is in keeping with this new tolerance. He hasn't written a polemic. Theatre for him has never been a soap-box. His plays explore the ambiguities and confusions that pervade life; the truths of his characters are never more than approximations.

'The play found expression in the issue of actual place names,' he tells me, 'but I think in some way my concern is more with the whole problem that writers in this country experience: having to handle a language that is not native to them. There's a line where the hedge-school teacher says that they'll have to learn these names and they'll have to make them their new home. And in some way that's what the play is about: having to use a language that isn't our own.'

'But I'm not talking about the revival of the Irish language. I'm just talking about the language we have now and what use we make of it and about the problems that having it gives us. The assumption, for instance, is that we speak the same language as England. And we don't. The sad irony, of course, is that the whole play is written in English. It ought to be written in Irish.'

Much of the theatrical impact of *Translations* comes from Friel's inspired device of having all the characters speak the same language but with a translator all the time interpreting what the English and the Irish are saying to each other: a recurring reminder of the fundamental differences that can be embodied in the same language.

'Somebody asked me if it had a political message,' says Friel ruefully. 'Well, if it has, I don't know what it is. Of course, the play is also concerned with the English presence here. No matter how benign they may think it has been, finally the presence of any foreigner in your land is malign. Even if the people who were instrumental in bringing it in have the best motives - as some of them had.'

'We forget that it was the minority here - to step into that jargon - it was the Catholics who sent for the British troops in the height of the problem. And now the "Brits Out" calls are coming from the same people.'

But politics are merely incidental to Friel's preoccupation with

words. Hugh points out in *Translations*: ‘it is not the literal past, the “facts” of history, that shape us, but images of the past embodied in language.’

As a playwright Friel has been conditioned by this experience as much as anyone else: perhaps more so. ‘It’s a problem dramatists here never really faced up to: the problem of writing in the language of another country. We’re a very recent breed. Poets and novelists, I think, belong to a less fractured tradition than we do. We’ve only existed since Synge and Yeats. There was no such thing as an indigenous Irish drama until 1904.

‘Before that, dramatists from Ireland always had to write for the English stage: to pitch their voice in an English way. They had to do that if they were to practise their craft. The whole Irish drama tradition from Farquhar to Behan is pitted with writers doing that. Ultimately they were maimed.

‘But there’s a big change now. What many are doing is writing for ourselves. Not in any insular or parochial sense but they want to be heard by their own people. And if they’re overheard by anyone else, that’s a bonus.’

But having said that, Friel is at pains not to be thought to be making a cult of Irishness. ‘John McGahern once told you in an interview that he did not want to be considered as an Irish writer. And I can see the danger in that. But I think it’s an appellation that other people put on you. So what the hell. You go and do your job.’

Which is how Field Day came about: to give life to the idea of writing for an Irish audience rather than primarily for Broadway or the West End. The logical follow-through comes after Dublin with a series of one-night stands in Magherafelt, Dungannon, Newry, Carrickmore, Armagh and Enniskillen.

‘But we’re the most reluctant producers,’ Friel laughs. He formed Field Day with Stephen Rea (‘The company’s name is derived from both our names’) because it was the only way to get money from the Northern Ireland Arts Council to perform *Translations*. ‘They only fund existing establishments so we had to become an establishment.’

Now they find themselves into something much larger than they had anticipated, having to worry about everything from getting out contracts to putting up ‘no smoking’ signs. ‘It’s not like going into the Abbey where everything is provided and all you do is sit

in on rehearsals and that's it!

Even with £40,000 from Belfast, £10,000 from the Dublin Arts Council and £13,000 for a new stage and lighting system in the Guildhall from Derry Council ('their help and enthusiasm have been incredible'), *Field Day* is unlikely to break even. 'The issue is how small the deficit can be kept to. But the response has been so good that I'm much less worried than I was.

'We haven't given any thought to what's going to happen next. Perhaps the play will go to Hampstead. I'd love to see it performed in Belgium or Montreal or parts of Russia where there's the same problem of two cultures and languages coming together. But that's all romanticizing.'

Friel has lived all his life around Derry. 'We moved here from Omagh when I was ten. My father was a teacher and I became a teacher too, but gave it up to write stories for *The New Yorker*. They paid such enormous money I found I could live off three stories a year.'

Tyrone Guthrie invited him out to Minneapolis to the first of the regional theatres he had started. 'I don't know what I learned there but I suppose it was some smell of what theatre was about.'

Out of the experience came *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* in 1964, which became the longest-running Irish play on Broadway, a record not surpassed until last year's triumph of Hugh Leonard's *Da*.

Since then he has had play after play on Broadway - *The Loves of Cass McGuire*, *Lovers*, *The Mundy Scheme*, *The Freedom of the City*, *Faith Healer* - yet international success has failed to lure him away from the North. He continues to live with his wife Anne and five children a couple of miles over the Border in Muff, County Donegal.

Which is not really surprising. All his plays are set in Ireland and rooted in the Irish experience: that is where his material is.

Friel's plays give universal form to the particularities of his experience: the way he finds to express an idea invariably becomes an extension of that idea. 'The crux with a new play arises with its form,' he says. Thus *Philadelphia* has two actors to personify Gar's inner and outer selves. *Faith Healer* consists entirely of monologues, emphasizing the separateness of the characters. *Translations* is rooted in the varying nuances inherent in

the same language on different tongues.

‘A play offers you a shape and a form to accommodate your anxieties and disturbances in that period of life you happen to be passing through’, he explains. ‘But you outgrow that and you change and grope for a new shape and a new articulation of it, don’t you?’

He boils another kettle, to all appearances like a tweed-jacketed teacher in some school common room. Derry is full of his former pupils, to whom he’s known by the nickname Scobie.

He is a meticulous craftsman, attending every rehearsal, never letting go of a play until it is a reality on the stage. ‘The dramatist ought to be able to exercise complete control over the realization of his characters. The director can bring an objective view to the script that a writer can’t have. But I’m very doubtful about the whole idea of a director interpreting a play in any kind of way that’s distinctive to him.

‘A good director homes in on the core of what a play is about and realizes that and becomes self-effacing in the process. A director is like the conductor of an orchestra and the actors are the musicians. They are all there to play the score as it is written.’

If that makes Friel a conventional playwright, he’s not bothered. He prefers to work within the possibilities of theatre rather than trying to make it something else. He has shunned the fashions of English theatre, avoiding both the Pinteresque concern with dramatizing mood and the Howard Brenton vision of theatre as a vehicle for politics. The English, he argues, can indulge in the rhetoric of propagandist drama because it’s safe there: they’re secure in a continuing culture which has hardly changed in hundreds of years.

‘But here we’re continually thrust into a situation of confrontation. Politics are so obtrusive here.’

He gestures out of the window. The British army barracks dominates Derry from the opposite bank of the Foyle. Below, the entrance to the Guildhall is protected by a perimeter of barbed wire.

‘For people like ourselves, living close to such a fluid situation, definitions of identity have to be developed and analysed much more frequently.

‘We’ve got to keep questioning until we find some kind of port-manteau term or until we find some kind of generosity that can

embrace the whole island.

‘That certainly is the ultimate aim, isn’t it?’

In Interview with Paddy Agnew (1980)

Paddy Agnew: In the programme notes for *Translations* you cite a quotation from Martin Heidegger about the nature of language. This same quotation appears as the foreword to George Steiner's *After Babel*, a scholarly work about aspects of translation and language. How and why did you come to read Steiner? Brian Friel: I came to *After Babel* because I was doing a translation of *Three Sisters* [Field Day, 1981]. Although I do not speak a word of Russian, I had been working on this play with the help of five standard English translations. It was a kind of act of love, but after a while I began to wonder exactly what I was doing. I think *Three Sisters* is a very important play, but I feel that the translations which we have received and inherited in some way have not much to do with the language which we speak in Ireland.

I think that the versions of *Three Sisters* which we see and read in this country always seem to be redolent of either Edwardian England or the Bloomsbury set. Somehow the rhythms of these versions do not match with the rhythms of our own speech patterns, and I think that they ought to, in some way. Even the most recent English translation again carries, of necessity, very strong English cadences and rhythms. This is something about which I feel strongly - in some way we are constantly overshadowed by the sound of English language, as well as by the printed word. Maybe this does not inhibit us, but it forms us and shapes us in a way that is neither healthy nor valuable for us.

The work I did on *Three Sisters* somehow overlapped into the working of the text of *Translations*.

PA: The fact that you opened *Translations* in Derry would imply that you felt the play had a relevance to the North, in general, and to Derry, in particular, which it does not have to the rest of Ireland, or to anywhere else for that matter? BF: Not really, no. The reason that we wanted to rehearse in Derry was because the town

of Derry is close to the fictional location of the play. When the director, Art O Britain, came here he felt this was the obvious place to rehearse this play. So we looked around Derry and to our surprise the Guildhall were enthusiastic about the venture.

PA: Do you feel then that the play has a relevance to places like Belgium or Quebec, where there is a problem of two cultures? BF: Yes, I think so. Those are two places where I would love to go with this play. I am sure there are areas of Russia, perhaps Estonia or Southern Russia, where their languages have faded, as has Irish. Of course, a fundamental irony of this play is that it should have been written in Irish.

PA: The old schoolmaster, Hugh, at one point says that ‘certain cultures expend on their vocabularies and syntax acquisitive energies and ostentations entirely lacking in their material lives’. Do you feel that, in a sense, the loss of our Celtic background means that we have lost a vital energy?

BF: What Hugh is saying there is that societies which do not have material wealth or material stability are inclined to compensate for this by the invention and use of a language which is more ostentatious and opulent than the language of an economically secure society. What I am talking about however is the relationship of this island to the neighbouring island. We have all been educated in an English system; we are brought up in school reading Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats. These are formative influences on our lives and there is no possibility of escaping from this.

We must accept this. But we must make this primary recognition and it is a recognition which we must never lose sight of: that there is a foreignness in this literature; it is the literature of a different race. If we assume that we have instant and complete access to that literature, we are unfair to it and to ourselves. And we constantly make that assumption because of the common language error.

If I can quote from the play, ‘We must learn where we live. We must make them [those new names] our own. We must make them our new home.’ That is, we must make these English language words distinctive and unique to us. My first concern is with theatre and we certainly have not done this with theatre in Ireland. The only person who did so in this country was Synge. Nobody since him has pursued this course with any persistence or

distinction, and indeed this is one of the problems of the theatre in this country. It is a new and young discipline for us and, apart from Synge, all our dramatists have pitched their voices for English acceptance and recognition.

This applied particularly to someone like Behan. However, I think that for the first time this is stopping, that there is some kind of confidence, some kind of coming together of Irish dramatists who are not concerned with this [ventriloquism], who have no interest in the English stage. We are talking to ourselves as we must and if we are overheard in America or England, so much the better. PA: Does the same principle apply to other areas of Irish life, namely that we have not found our own voice? BF: I suppose so, but probably the voice can only be found in letters, in the arts. Perhaps this is an artist's arrogance, but I feel that once the voice is found in literature, then it can move out and become part of the common currency.

PA: Is the English which we speak still 'full of the mythologies of fantasy and hope and self-deception'? BF: I think so, certainly in our political lives. PA: Is it wrong then to suggest that *Translations* is a political, polemical play?

BF: I really do not know. I am the last person to ask, really. Apparently *An Phoblacht* did a piece on it which says that the character of Doalty is the central figure, that a man who does not know the seven times table can still have a deep instinct which is true and accurate.

PA: Because he says, 'I've damned little to defend but he'll not put me out without a fight'?

BF: Something like that, I suppose. But someone else suggested to me that the key figure is Owen, who was described to me as a typical SDLP man, but people are entitled to take their own interpretation out of the play. Perhaps there is some kind of validity in that, that the figure of Owen is an SDLP man and that if he is then the task upon which he embarked was done with some kind of honour.

PA: In the end, in terms of the narrative, the colonial presence is malign. This would suggest that simply there will be no solution to the Irish problem until the British presence removes itself or is removed?

BF: We are not just talking about the present time and I am no expert in matters political, but in the long run of course I think that that is going to be true. There will be no solution until the British leave this island, but even when they have gone, the residue of their presence will still be with us. This is an area that we still have to resolve, and that brings us back to the question of language for this is one of the big inheritances which we have received from the British. In fact twenty miles from where we are sitting, you can hear very strong elements of Elizabethan English being spoken every day. The departure of the British army will have absolutely no bearing on the tongue that is spoken in that area. We must continually look at ourselves, recognize and identify ourselves. We must make English identifiably our own language. PA: When Yolland describes his initial impressions of the Baile Beag community as being somewhere 'at its ease and with its own conviction and assurance', does that not imply some sort of nostalgia for Celtic Ireland?

BF: I have no nostalgia for that time. I think one should look back on the process of history with some kind of coolness. The only merit in looking back is to understand, how you are and where you are at this moment. Several people commented that the opening scenes of the play were a portrait of some sort of idyllic, Forest of Arden life. But this is a complete illusion, since you have on stage the representatives of a certain community - one is dumb, one is lame and one is alcoholic, a physical maiming which is a public representation of their spiritual deprivation. PA: You talk of looking back on history with some sort of coolness. Is that what is implied by suggesting that 'it is not the literal past, the "facts" of history, that shape us, but images of the past embodied in language'?

BF: In some ways the inherited images of 1916, or 1690, control and rule our lives much more profoundly than the historical truth of what happened on those two occasions. The complication of that problem is how do we come to terms with it using an English language. For example, is our understanding of the Siege of Derry going to be determined by Macaulay's history of it, or is our understanding of Parnell going to be determined by [F. S. L.] Lyons's portrait of Parnell? This is a matter which will require a type of eternal linguistic vigilance.

PA: 'Confusion is not an ignoble condition,' says Hugh, but in the Irish context can we afford to be confused?

BF: I think most of us live in confusion. I live in confusion. Hugh's words are perhaps a fairly accurate description of how we all live, specifically at the present time. Other countries perhaps have access to more certainties than we have at the moment. I was talking specifically about Ireland.

Making a Reply to the Criticisms of *Translations* by J. H. Andrews
(1983)

... I feel very lucky that I have been corrected only for using a few misplaced bayonets and for suggesting that British soldiers might have been employed to evict peasants. I felt that I had merited more reprimands than that.

Perhaps the simplest thing might be if I were to tell you, very briefly, something about the genesis of *Translations* and the notions I was flirting with before I came across [J. H. Andrews's] *A Paper Landscape* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975] and how those notions were adjusted and how they evolved after reading that book.

At any given time every playwright has half a dozen ideas that drift in and out of his awareness. For about five years before I wrote *Translations* there were various nebulous notions that kept visiting me and leaving me: a play set in the nineteenth century, somewhere between the Act of Union [1801] and the Great Famine [1845-47]; a play about Daniel O'Connell and Catholic emancipation; a play about colonialism; and the one constant - a play about the death of the Irish language and the acquisition of English and the profound effects that that change-over would have on a people. These were the kinds of shadowy notions that visited me and left me. But even when they had left me, from some of those ideas I was still getting persistent and strong signals.

During that same period (I am talking about the period prior to attempting the play that became *Translations*) I made two accidental discoveries. One, I learned that a great-great-grandfather of mine, a man called McCabe from County Mayo, had been a hedge-schoolmaster, had left Mayo and had come up to Donegal where he settled; and it was whispered in the family that he was fond of a drop. That discovery sent me into reading about the hedge-schools in this country and particularly to [P. J.] Dowling's *The Hedge Schools of Ireland* [1935, revised 1968]. And the second casual discovery I made at that time - this was really shameful but I hadn't known it until that point - was that directly across the River Foyle

from where I live in Muff is a place called Magilligan and it was at Magilligan that the first trigonometrical base for the ordnance survey was set up in 1828; and the man in charge of that survey was Colonel Colby. And that discovery sent me to Colby's book, *A Memoir of the City and the North-West Liberties of Londonderry* [1837], a very rich and wonderful book. And about the same time, too, as I made these discoveries, I began reading the letters that John O'Donovan wrote when he was working for the Ordnance Survey. He was surveying in Donegal in 1835, 'taking place-names' - if I may quote approximately from the play - 'that were riddled with confusion and standardizing those names as accurately and as sensitively as he could' [1981, p. 43]. So that was the general background: fugitive notions of a play about language, and simultaneously an incipient interest in the ordnance survey itself and particularly in the orthographical pursuits and torments of John O'Donovan.

Then in 1976 I came across *A Paper Landscape*. And suddenly here was the confluence — the aggregate - of all those notions that had been visiting me over the previous years: the first half of the nineteenth century: an aspect of colonialism; the death of the Irish language and the acquisition of English. Here were all the elements I had been dallying with, all synthesized in one very comprehensive and precise text. Here was the perfect metaphor to accommodate and realize all those shadowy notions - map-making. Now, it seemed to me, all I had to do was dramatize *A Paper Landscape*. (It seemed an excess of good luck that even Daniel O'Connell appeared in the book: 'A newspaper report of 182.8 drew the idyllic picture of how the people of Glenomara, County Clare, had helped the engineers to build a trigonometrical station, climbing their mountain in a great crowd with flutes, pipes and violins, and young women bearing laurel leaves; although they insisted on naming the station "O'Connell's Tower".' Even the detail of the young woman bearing laurel leaves had the reassuring echoes of Ibsen.)

I plunged straight off into a play about Colonel Colby, the prime mover in the ordnance survey of this island. Writers sometimes allow themselves to be seduced by extraneous and altogether trivial elements in their material; and what fascinated me about Colby was not that he masterminded the huge task of mapping this country for the best part of forty years but the fact that

he had one hand. That Oedipal detail seemed crucial to me, mesmerized me. And for many deluded months I pursued Colby and tried to make him amenable to my fictional notion of him. The attempt failed. And Colby appears in *Translations* as a minor character called Captain Lancey.

When Colby escaped me, I turned my attention to John O'Donovan. And just as I allowed myself to be misled by Colby's missing hand, so now I indulged in an even more bizarre and dangerous speculation: I read into O'Donovan's exemplary career as a scholar and orthographer the actions and perfidy of a quisling. (The only excuse I can offer for this short-lived delusion is that the political situation in the North was particularly tense about that time.) Thankfully, that absurd and cruel reading of O'Donovan's character was short-lived. But it soured a full tasting of the man. And O'Donovan appears in the play as a character called Owen.

I now went back to the earlier notion of trying to do something with O'Connell. But he had no part in the map-making metaphor, to which I was now wedded. And in my disappointment poor O'Connell gets only a few lines in the play.

Finally and sensibly I abandoned the idea of trying to dramatize *A Paper Landscape* and embarked on a play about a drunken hedge-schoolmaster.

Now that I meet Professor Andrews for the first time I want to thank him for providing me with that metaphor and to apologize to him for the tiny bruises inflicted on history in the play. He has pointed out the error of the bayonet.¹ I would like to admit to a couple of other sins.¹ One is having Donegal renamed in 1833 when in fact the task was not undertaken until two years later. Another is calling one of the characters Yolland and placing him in Donegal in 1833 when in fact the actual Yolland did not join the survey department until 1838. But I am sure that Professor Andrews will agree that the imperatives of fiction are as exacting as the imperatives of cartography and historiography.

Writing an historical play may bestow certain advantages but it also imposes particular responsibilities. The apparent advantages are the established historical facts or at least the received historical ideas in which the work is rooted and which give it its apparent familiarity and accessibility. The concomitant responsibility is to acknowledge those facts or ideas but not to defer to them. Drama

is first a fiction, with the authority of fiction. You don't go to *Macbeth* for history.

Thomas Heywood, a contemporary of Shakespeare, defined historical plays - or chronicle plays, as he called them - in these terms:

Chronicle plays are written with this aim and carried with this method: to teach the subjects obedience to their king; to show the people the untimely ends of such as have moved tumults, commotions and insurrections; to present them with the flourishing estate of such as live in obedience, exhorting them to allegiance, dehorting them from all traitorous and felonious stratagems.

If we accept that definition of an historical play, *Translations* is a total failure. But viewed from a different age - and maybe a different island - perhaps some merit can be found in it.

BRIAN FRIEL

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