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Éire na Seanfhocal

Comhrá

Milis

Éire na Seanfhocal:
the Ireland of Proverbs

A proverb is a succinct, pithy saying in general use, expressing commonly held ideas and beliefs. They are found in every spoken language, and together with riddles and fables and tales, constitute oral tradition, the **béaloideas**, the most common form in the centuries of human history prior to very recent times for preserving the wisdom and experience of a human community. Comparisons of proverbs found in different parts of the world show that the same kernel of wisdom is found in varied cultural, linguistic and social conditions, attesting to the universality of human experience and values.

Some maxims about human behaviour and the consequences of such behaviour must have been around for thousands of years. One can imagine how the first proverbs got started, summing up wisdom gleaned from exerience of life, encapsulated in a set form,

and repeated for the benefit of others, and thus passed on from generation to generation. Often the same proverb may be found in various forms in an area among different ethnic or cultural groups, each one adding its own colouring reflecting its own special conditions. English has "Where there's smoke there's fire" speaking of the nucleus of truth in gossip or rumours, while Spanish has "Río que canta agua lleva" when a brook babbles it contains water. The Biblical "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" has its equivalent counterparts in other regions of the world, the eye and the tooth being replaced by elements of significance in that culture .

Common proverbs may be due to the common origin of different communities , for example, the Indo-European families in Europe and the Indian subcontinent, or to the influence of one group on another, with proverbs being borrowed or exchanged between groups. This seems to have been the case of the English proverb "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush" which is believed to have originated in Medieval Latin

and spread throughout continental Europe. Variants of the proverb such as "Más vale un pájaro en jaula que cien volando" (a bird in the cage is worth more than a hundred in flight) in Spanish, can be found in the whole of Europe to which Latin influence extended. The influence of Aesops's fables, which gained currency through their medieval Latin translations, stories followed by a proverb summarizing the moral of the tale, can be seen in the Medieval literatures of France, England and Spain.

Proverbs come from many sources, usually anonymous, and all of them difficult to trace. Without doubt, someone had to coin the original formulation which was then sanctioned through repetition, but just when and where and by whom that original formulation took place cannot be established. Proverbs, in this sense, are like folk tales and myths, emerging from the consciousness of the human species itself.

Sometimes, a specific proverb is associated with a particular literary manifestation -- for example, Polonius's

speech to Laertes before he leaves for college. "Neither a borrower nor a lender be"(**Hamlet** I, iii, 70) "To thine own self be true, And it must follow, as the night the day, that thou canst not then be false to any man"(**Hamlet** I, iii, 74-75). No doubt, Shakespeare did not coin these nuggets himself; rather, he incorporated into Polonius's 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 Shakespeare, the King James Bible, a particular poet, such as Geoffrey Chaucer or Alexander Pope, Benjamin Franklin, whose **Poor Richard's Almanack** was a compilation of clichés, or proverbs, if your prefer, all current in Europe, but endowed by Franklin with a peculiarly American flavour. Abraham Lincoln, that masterful speaker who knew how to incorporate popular home-spun wisdom into his political speeches, is credited with having invented the oft-repeated political saying about not changing horses in mid-stream. While this is possible, it is more likely that he used a current saying already familiar to his audience.

Liam Mac Con Iomaire points out in the preface to his Ireland of the Proverb, that the use of proverbial phrases in conversation is much more prevalent in illiterate or rural societies:

> *Conversations between ordinary people were enriched by these sayings. The person who quoted a suitable proverb to sum up a situation or to suggest a certain course of action commanded respect in the community. Such a person was considered to be rich in conventional wisdom, and his or her use of proverbs was worthy of respect as the use of textbooks by the formally educated. The proverbs were like a set of rules the community shared for reasoning with one another.* (vii)

From the earliest manifestations of Spanish literature, traditional sayings called 'refranes' have constituted an important element. Fernando de Rojas has his main character in La Celestina speak in 'refranes' or sayings which repeat the common wisdom of the age, just as Lope de Vega and Tirso de Molina riddle their plays with similar such

'refranes' or bits of popular wisdom in the drama of the Spanish "Edad de Oro". Both Chaucer and Shakespeare made regular use of folk wisdom in the same way. In short, the proverb is cited as the authoritative source much as people to-day cite statistics or experts to back up a point.

Proverbs can contradict each other: "Look before you leap" advises one adage, while another teaches "He who hesitates is lost"; "Great minds think alike" is matched by "Fools seldom differ"; "Absence makes the heart grow fonder" and "Out of sight, out of mind". The contradictions reflect the contradictions in humanity itself, with each saying containing its own truth to be applied in a given situation.

Proverbs sometimes reflect a usage which is old or obsolete and get rephrased to reflect a more contemporary context. The cap in "If the cap fits, wear it" refers to the Medieval fool's cap. A more current version has it "if the shoe fits". Proverbs, likewise, may be revised to suit a new set of circumstances, more recent coinages being

concerned with sports, computer lingo, electricity, automobiles, movies and television. Some common metaphors are on the way to becoming proverbs -- "Put the pedal to the metal," "Put your brain in gear before engaging your mouth", derived from the language of automobiles, "AC/DC," from electricity, "What planet are you from?" from Star Trek or "Beam me up" likewise from Trekkie culture.

Proverbs vary greatly in style. Some rely on colourful imagery and metaphors, depicting rural life :"Don't count your chickens before they're hatched" -- in Irish **"Ná comhair do chuid sicíní go dtaga siad amach"** or hunting, **"Is deacair an seanmhadra a bhaint den chosán"** -- It's hard to get an old dog off an the track ("It's hard to teach an old dog new tricks") or fishing **"Éist le tuile na habhann is gheobhaidh tú breac"** -- Listen to the sound of the river and you'll catch a trout/fish. Some are based on observation of animal life. Others rely on rhythm and rhyme, alliteration and assonance, such as the Scottish: "Many a mickle makes a muckle" and the Irish **"Is**

fearr imreas ná uaigneas" -- Strife is better than loneliness, "**Níl aon tinteán mar do thinteán féin**" (There's no hearth like your own hearth) which has given rise to "**Níl aon tóin thinn mar do thóin thinn féin**" (There's no sore ass like you own sore ass), playing around with the sounds of the words themselves.

Sometimes proverbs are rooted in superstitions: "Rain before seven, fine before eleven" or the Irish "**Drochubh drochéan**" on the belief that eggs hatched in March produced better chickens than others. But the egg had to have been lain in March and hatched in March (3 week incubation) to be lucky. (Mac Con Iomaire 153)

Latin proverbs were characterized by their succinctness, "Praemonitus praemunitus" (forewarned is forearmed) "In vino veritas" (In wine, truth) "Fur a fure agnoscitur" (A thief recognizes another thief -- in Irish "**Athníonn ciaróg ciaróg éile**" -- One bug recognizes another bug), similar to the Enlish "It takes a thief to know a thief" or "Birds of a feather flock together".

Most societies which evolved into more advanced literate civilizations, have valued the conventional wisdom embodied in proverbs and collected them, giving them written form. Ancient Egyptian collections of proverbs date from 2500 BC. Some Sumerian inscriptions were proverbs. In Ancient Indian and China, proverbs (Confucius says ....) were used for ethical instructions and in the Vedic writings of India, proverbs are the vehicles for expounding philosophical concepts. The **Book of Proverbs**, the **Wisdom of Solomon**, in the **Old Testament** likewise represents a compilation of conventional wisdom expressed in proverbs. The sayings recorded here have their counterparts in the "Wisdom literatures" of the Middle East.

In the Middle Ages, Latin was taught to novices in monasteries, in schools of rhetoric through the medium of proverbs. Homilies, sermons, didactic works throughout the Middle Ages made use of such conventional sayings. One of the Earliest collections in English was the Proverbs of Alfred (1150-80), and in Spain, the Proverbios morales (1355). (Encyclopaedia Britannica)

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-historical times. (Flanagan 1) The nineteenth century which saw the rise of interest in folk literature on the part of the intellectual classes throughout Europe also saw widespread interest in conventional sayings and systematic collections of proverbs with comparative analyses. The early decades of this century saw the collection of proverbs in both Irish and English in Ireland, with greater attention being given to the Irish language forms, all in keeping with the goal of re-Gaelicizing Ireland. Collections were made in all the major Gaeltacht areas, with Pádraig Ua Maoileoin's Seanfhocail na Mumhan published in1926,Thomas Ó Rahilly's A Miscellany of Irish Proverbs Dublin: Talbot Press, 1922, Tomás Ó Máille's Seanfhocla Chonnacht Baile Átha Cliath: Oifig an tSoláthair,1948, 52 Vols I, II and Enrí Ó Muirgheasa's Seanfhocail Uladh Balte Átha Cliath: Oifig and tSoláthair, 1906 Likewise Joyce's English as we Speak it in Ireland 1910 offers a collection of proverbs in Hiberno-

English, some of which are translations of Irish language proverbs, others of which are distinctly Irish adaptations of English proverbs, and still others are original Hiberno-Irish creations. Liam Mac Con Iomaire points out that 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 his mother, Peig Sayers, had an even greater store of proverbs, many of which are to be found in her autobiography Péig and Machtnamh Seana-Mhná (An Old Woman's Reflections). (Mac Con Iomaire viii) The List of works consulted which accompanies this paper gives 5 books of Irish proverbs which have been published in the past 20 years. Clearly, interest in folk wisdom has not diminished.

Irish proverbs reflect the world of rural Ireland, the closeness to sea, land and to animal life: "**Ní hé lá na gaoithe lá na scolb**" -- The windy day is not for thatching" (O'Donnell 6). "**Drochubh drochéan**" -- A bad egg, a bad bird (40) "**Dána gach madra i**

ndoras a thí féin" -- Every dog is brave on his own doorstep. (66) "**Salachaidh aon chaora chlamhach sréud.**" -- A single scabby sheep will infect a flock. (Flanagan 23) -- [one rotten apple will spoil the barrel] "**N á beannaigh an t-iasc go dtiocfaidh sé a dtir.**" -- Don't bless the fish until it gets to land. (Flanagan 22) "**Chan fhuair an madra rua teachtaire ariamh ab' fhearr ná é féin**" -- The fox never found a better messenger than himself. (23) "**Nuair a bhíonn do lámh i mbéal an mhadra, tarraing go réig í**" -- When your hand is in the dog's mouth, withdraw it gently. (24) "**Tá lán mara eile insan fharraige.**" -- There are many more tides in the sea. "**Tá iasc san fharraige níos fearr ná gabhadh ariamh.**" -- There's a fish in the sea that's better than any that have ever been caught. "**Ní chuimhníonn an chú ghortach ar a coileáin.**" -- The hungry hound thinks not of her whelps. "**Na muca ciúine a itheann an mhin**" -- the quite pigs get to eat the meal.

Irish proverbs about marriage attest to the universal ambivalence about the joys and sorrows of the institution, but they are

expressed in memorable form: "**Níl eolas gan aontíos**" -- a quite modern preoccupation, "You don't known someone until you've lived with them." "**Is uaigneach an níochan nach mbíonn léine ann**" -- It's a lonely wash that doesn't have a man's shirt in it. "**Níl leigheas ar an ngrá ach pósadh**" -- The cure for love is marriage [which may be positive or negative advice according to the situation]. "**Bíonn a dteanga ina bpóca ag na mná go bpósann siad**" -- Women keep their tongues in their pockets until they get married. "**Más maith leat tú a cháineadh, pós.**" If you want to be criticized, get married. "**Ceileann searc ainimh is locht**" -- Infatuation conceals blemishes and faults. Perhaps the most original and severe is "**Ní féasta go rósta ní céasta go pósta**" -- It's not a feast till you have a roast, it's not a crucifixion [intense suffering] until 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 (sauce). "**Marbh le tae agus marbh gan é**" -- Dead with tea dead without it.

"**Scéithean fíon firinne**" -- Wine releases the truth -- close to the Latin "in vino veritas", and "**Nuair a bhíonn a deoch istigh bíonn an chiall amuigh**" -- When the drink is in you, your common sense is outside.

Gossip and rumour mongering likewise inspire nuggets of wisdom not unlike those in English: "**Níor bhris focal maith fiacail riamh**" -- 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 gossip: "**An té a thabharfas scéal chugat tabharfaidh sé dhá scéal uait**" -- The one who tells you a story will take away two with him.

To conclude, a few general proverbs. "**Is maith an scéalaí an aimsir**" -- Time will tell (Time is a great storyteller). "**Tús maith leath na hoibre**" -- Well begun is half done. "**Bíonn gach tosnú lag**" -- Every beginning is weak. "**Is fearr obair na caint**" -- It's better to work than to talk. "**Tagann práta mór as póirín**" -- Big potatoes come from small ones (Great oaks grow from acorns). "**Bíonn**

cluasa ar na claíocha" -- The walls have ears (The fences have ears). "**Giorraíonn beirt bóthar**" -- Two shorten the road. "**Is buaine bladh ná saol**" -- Your reputation outlives you.

Perhaps the following proverb sums up the wisdom of the common Irish man gleaned from centuries of Irish history and political rebellion and struggle: "**I ngan fhios don dlí is fearr bheith ann**" -- It's better to live unnoticed by the law.

Liam Mac Con Iomaire comments in his study of Irish proverbs that they are used less frequently now that greater literacy, newspapers, television have made an impact in the Gaeltachtaí. Lovers of folk wisdom should be grateful to the efforts of those who have collected proverbs and sayings, an important link with the past.

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