

Ó Ríordáin, Seán

by Seán Ó Coileáin

Ó Ríordáin, Seán (1916–77), poet, diarist, and essayist, was born in Ballyvourney, Co. Cork, on 3 December 1916. His father, also named Seán, was a cobbler by trade and a native of the area, in which the Irish language was, by then, in sharp decline. The writer's mother, Margaret Linehan, had grown up in the English-speaking area of Carrigadrohid, and English was also the language of the rented family home, where she established a small shop when she moved to Ballyvourney on marriage. The couple had three children, of whom Seán was the eldest; another son, Tadhg, and a daughter, Bríd, followed.

Seán was stricken with pneumonia at the age of thirteen, the beginning of a life of illness and isolation and of his development as a poet. His father had died on 3 March 1926 of tuberculosis, and the family circumstances had become increasingly straitened. Anxious that the children should have a secondary education and the prospect of a better future, their mother decided to leave the area and move nearer to Cork city. So it was that they came to Iniscarra in summer 1932 and that Seán enrolled as a student in the North Monastery in the autumn.

On being awarded the Leaving Certificate in 1936, Ó Ríordáin successfully applied for a clerical position with Cork corporation, but was diagnosed with tuberculosis before he could take up employment. Thus began a pattern of absenteeism and frustration that would be maintained until his retirement on 30 September 1965. The intervening years were marked by frequent visits to sanatoria, beginning with Heatherside, Doneraile, in 1938, followed by periods of recuperation in a specially constructed isolation room at home, which increased his sense of alienation from society and his resentment of what he perceived to be its overbearing authority; an outcast, he would identify only with such as himself, shunning the normal as he had been shunned by it. His mother's death, on 21 January 1945, severed what had been the most meaningful link; it was also a significant event in his poetic development, giving rise to the cathartic 'Adhlacadh mo mháthar' (My mother's burial).

Ó Ríordáin had begun to maintain a journal in Irish in 1940 while still in Ballyvourney, and he came to rely on this more and more as confidant. To it he addresses his physical and mental anguish, from which he seeks relief by reconfiguring it in the written word. He observes that the pages fill up more quickly in winter than in summer, and in time of illness rather than of relatively good health. Occasionally there are pieces of sustained reflection of a philosophical or literary nature which sometimes anticipate poems on similar subjects; lines and drafts of poems also appear and, exceptionally, a finished poem. By this means he developed a distinctive style and idiom that answered to his needs and objectives. He continued to make entries in his journal until five days before his death.

Ó Ríordáin's first book of poetry, *Eireaball spideoige* (A robin's tail), received mixed reviews on publication in 1952. The publisher, as for all his work, was Sáirséal agus Dill, an exciting new enterprise which removed the dead hand of the state from writing in Irish. While all recognised a unique, original voice, for some the breach with tradition in terms of subject matter and personal use of language was unacceptable. The controversy greatly damaged the little self-confidence that remained to Ó Ríordáin: his only means of forming an alternative world was in danger of being taken from him. Although his critics were largely seen off by

his defenders, the fact that he himself harboured doubts as to the legitimacy of his claim on the language served further to undermine him from within.

Already in 1950 Ó Ríordáin had visited the West Kerry Gaeltacht, and he now moved to immerse himself in the spoken language of the area, then still far richer than that of the Ballyvourney of his childhood. For him this was not merely a linguistic resource but one that, if drawn upon, would restore the national psyche broken at the battle of Kinsale; here at last was a community in which he could feel at ease to some degree. But finally it was not his community, for he could have none, nor could it speak adequately for him: he must return to Iniscarra alone and confront his demons in the darkness and storm of the winter night, hurling words, coherent and incoherent, at fate.

Ó Ríordáin's second book of poetry, *Brosna* (*Kindling*), published in 1964, has little of the sentimentality or romanticism of the first, and is more intensely focused. It is characterised by short poems such as 'Claustrophobia', 'Fiabhras' (*Fever*), 'An gealt' (*The lunatic*), and 'Bagairt an marbh' (*The threat of the dead*), as well as poems reflecting his Gaeltacht experience and others questioning his own relationship to the language. The title of the final collection published during his lifetime, *Línte liombó* (*Lines from limbo*) (1971), suggests something approaching relief from his personal hell but at the cost of meaninglessness: poems such as 'Súile donna' (*Brown eyes*) and 'Toil' (*Will*) deal with the triumph of impersonal destiny over the individual. *Tar éis mo bháis* (*After my death*), published posthumously in 1978, contains Ó Ríordáin's last poems and others found among his papers. He also produced a selection of renderings of early Irish religious poetry, in collaboration with Seán S. Ó Conghaile, published in 1964 as *Rí na nUile* (*King of all being*).

In late 1967 Ó Ríordáin began to supply prose articles to the *Irish Times*, and this developed in the following years into a somewhat irregular weekly column. Written in remarkably concise and agile prose, these essays, when concerned with current affairs, reveal a different side of the Ó Ríordáin persona, marked by an acerbic wit and a sharp eye for the ridiculous; more reflective pieces, which come nearer the subject matter of the poetry, are drawn largely from his journal.

Having retired on 30 September 1965 from his post with Cork corporation, from 1969 Ó Ríordáin gave desultory lectures at University College, Cork, where he also met and encouraged young writers of Irish. He died 21 February 1977 in Sarsfield's Court Hospital, Glanmire, worn out from his long struggle with illness and officialdom, scarcely believing in anything. As he had requested, he was buried alongside his father and paternal grandparents in St Gobnait's cemetery, Ballyvourney. His journals and other papers are held in the archives of UCD, while his library is maintained as a special collection in UCC.

Seán Ó Coileáin, Seán Ó Riordáin: *beatha agus saothar* (1982); personal knowledge