

LIMERICK SOCIALIST

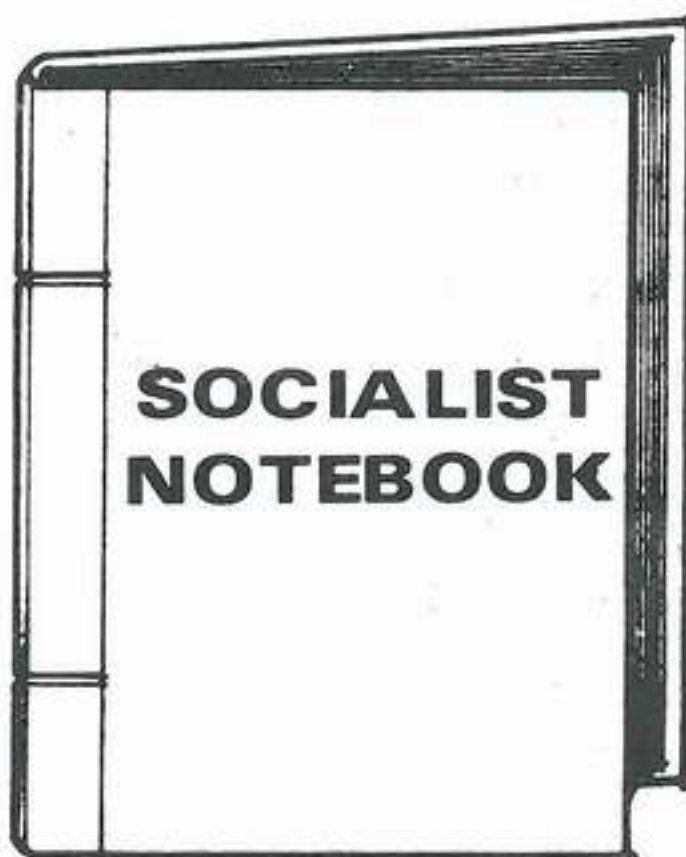
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THE
VOICE
OF THE
WORKER

'That which is good for the working class I esteem patriotic ...' *James Connolly*



A Poet .. and his influential uncle



FEATHERY BOURKE



DESMOND O'GRADY

A Socialist Notebook

THE HOTHOUSE KIDS

The last few years have seen a lot of theoretical work on the Left in Ireland, some good, some stimulating and some pretty hairbrained. Theory and organisation are the basics of a political movement and much of the good theoretical work has not been lost on the serious Left. The young theoreticians, many of them writing and researching practically on a full-time basis, have done the groundwork for the establishment of a serious socialist party.

The Republican Congress split on a slogan. (Splitting is the traditional preoccupation of Irish Socialists). However, the contemporary theoreticians have terminated the politics of the slogan. The slogan-mongers have no future. All that belongs to the past. Theory is important; it maps out the roads to the future, examines the past, and explains the present. Its importance goes without saying.

Theory tends to be read by other theoreticians. Theoretical journals are like books of poetry. In Ireland, poetry is read, assessed, reviewed and discussed, mostly by other poets. There are poets turning out volume after volume of which not a single line is read by the majority of the population. Whether this reflects on the level of culture or on the relevance of the message or on the form of presentation is not relevant to this argument. Just that this is so; it is a fact. Books of poetry gather dust. Journals of socialist theory do likewise.

The Dublin theoreticians, earnest men of high intelligence and many with good university degrees, have examined analysed and pronounced on all the major issues. They have produced pamphlets, articles, informed and in-depth studies. Unfortunately, like poetry, these are only read by other educated left-wingers who admire, agree or disagree on a

by
WILLIAM GALLAHER

political basis.

Many of the theoreticians live, if not in an ivory tower, in a political hothouse. Rather like experimental scientists, they work alone, hoping that their work and experiments will be of some permanent benefit to mankind. Unlike the scientists, they run two risks; firstly that their work will never be widely read or their proposals implemented; or secondly, that when it has been discovered, time will have made it irrelevant.

The scientists are generally backed and subsidised by a government or organisation which will promote successful work.

Left wing theorists in capitalist countries do not get financial or any other kind of encouragement. But in Ireland today they do have freedom to think and publish. Given this they should at this stage realise that, for instance, demolishing Fianna Fail in an article and showing them to be the crooks and conmen they are does not mean they will lose an election. The Irish electorate does not read socialist theory and even if they did and were convinced by the arguments, there is no reason to believe that they would not still vote Fianna Fail; indeed, there is every reason to believe they would.

Theory must have action to succeed. The theoretician needs the party to articulate and embody the philosophy. People identify with other people as well as with ideas. People vote on personalities as well as on philosophies. This may be good or bad and you may bemoan or scorn it but it is still true for all that. Theoreticians and activists need each other and both groups need the party. If the theorist does not realise this he is destined to remain within his political hothouse.

N.I.T.R.O.

N.I.T.R.O. is the National Income Tax Relief Organisation, founded in 1971 to combat the inequitable tax system. At present the P.A.Y.E. victims pay 25% approximately of their earnings in tax. It is N.I.T.R.O.'s aim to reduce this to 10% of the combined total of all earnings of the people in this sector. To highlight the injustice that exists they intend to contest the constitutionality of the income tax laws in a high court action. They are using the case of Basil Morahan, a Lewisburgh secondary teacher, to challenge the distribution of taxation and the percentage of earnings paid by blue and white-collar workers. To do this they are raising funds to finance the High Court action, which should at least direct public attention to the subject if it achieves nothing else.

N.I.T.R.O. is not the best of names; it sounds like the bomb-making section of the Provos but is a non-political organisation. In fact, the executive members are practically paranoid on political infiltration and takeover. Since they set up the organisation, they have seen branches dissolved and membership decimated by politicians and political birds of passage using the cause for personal and political advancement. When Fianna Fail were in power, the coalitionists were enthusiastic members and tax reformers, but when their parties came to power in 1973, they changed their stance and left. The Fianna Failers repeated this performance.

On the basis of these experiences, N.I.T.R.O. decided to dispense with branches and set up an executive to direct the campaign and finance its High Court action. The secretary is an E.S.B. worker from Ferbane, Alo McNamee; the president is Dan Buggy of Portlaoise.

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Limerick workers do not need detailed lectures on the unequal distribution of the tax burden: the brandy and steak farmers, purring up and down the streets in Rovers, Range Rovers and Mercedes are a living proof of this inequity.

THE G.A.A.

There is a socialist school of thought that sees sport as a drug for the workers. That it is and can be used as such is undoubtedly true. General Videla buttressed his military dictatorship by holding the World Cup in Argentina and went on to copperfasten it when the national team won the cup. Videla discovered he was a great soccer fan and made sure he missed none of the homeside matches. Soccer is a popular international drug, and sport in general is for many an important part of life.

The G.A.A. is the largest and most important sporting organisation in this country. Gaelic football attracts vastly more followers than any other game and hurling takes second place. But the G.A.A. stands for more than sport. It is a cultural, religious and political organisation; its leaders would accept having cultural aims but would deny the other two. But the organisation does have wide national aims and promotes a distinctive philosophy and way of life. The G.A.A. is nationalist and republican; it fosters the concept of a united Ireland, promotes the triumphs of republicans — the acceptable ones — the glory of 1916, the gallant men of the flying columns and the equatation of footballer/hurler and republican.

Many of its leaders and officials are chauvinistic, narrow and bigoted. The 'ban' is only gone for a few years and the hardline G.A.A. type still thinks soccer and rugby are British games that should not be supported in Ireland. When will we see a soccer or a rugby international in Croke Park? And even when we do it will just be an exercise in camouflage, a bending to opinion to which they are basically hostile. They are and always have been anti-British and the Artane Boys Band, part of Croke Park furniture, perpetuate this in their familiar renderings of such tunes as *Roddy McCorley*, *The Boys of Wexford*, *Follow Me Up To Carlow*, rascist songs glorifying bloodshed and violence.

The G.A.A. can hardly claim to be blind to the effect of piping songs of violent republicanism into the national bloodstream. The Provos were once youngsters fed on this kind of culture.

The Association also promotes a dreary parochialism and rural introspection. County is pitted against county, town against town and parish against parish. This need not be intrinsically bad; it could merely lead to healthy rivalry; but unfortunately the G.A.A. brings out only the worst narrowness and rural idiocies.

I have been at football matches where the most ignorant and barbaric inter-parish rivalries surfaced and became inflamed. The outcome: spectators howling for blood, violent and dangerous tackling, players punching and kicking each other, or splitting skulls with hurleys, rival crowds invading the pitch in a free-for-all.

It is difficult to blame the central council for the antics of followers in West Mayo but, if such behaviour is found at matches in different parts of the country, the common denominator will be found to be the G.A.A.

And then there are the players that are permanently injured. Some suffer serious damage to ankles or knees; there are broken legs, wrists and fingers, loss of sight, internal abdominal injuries, back injuries, head injuries inflicted by enthusiastic hurling opponents. What does the G.A.A. do for such players? If the injured man is a national figure, they'll put on a show and offer some form of compensation; if he's an unknown club player, he can go to the devil. Supporters followers and players know this.

The Grab All Association it is called privately but few are willing to take on one of the sacred cows of Irish life. The G.A.A. has traditionally been led by morons and boors and the fact that players and supporters have not demanded more says little for them.

Until recent years, there was little social life in the G.A.A. Inter-county teams were the only sides fed and put up in a hotel after away games. The club player organised his own transport to the match, togged out on the sideline, in the back of a car, or in a friendly pub. He got no meal after the game; nor are there any showering or washing facilities in most country pitches, so he took home the mud of the match beneath the Sunday suit.

In recent years, in some of the big towns social clubs have appeared, the G.A.A. being invariably shamed into doing so by the local rugby club. But a building cannot change the mentality of the officials. At local level the games are rough and tough and there is no post-match relaxation in pleasant surroundings nor any opportunity for rival players to indulge in the *camaraderie* found even amongst tough professional sportsmen. It is all so mean and penny-pinching.

The association can't even maintain the toilets in the Cusack Stand; you'd need wellingtons to splash through the urine flowing out the door on the day of a big match. And where does the money go? That's a question often asked privately. There is a big stadium in Dublin; another in Cork. There are fields with corrugated shelters in other cities, and some provincial towns, and there are pitches, some rented, some bought outright, in country villages. Maintenance is not a major task; there isn't that much to maintain; there are no paid officials (except the small, number of brass at the top).

So where does the money go? A final or semi-final in Croke Park brings in about £60,000 and then there are the regular gates from inter-county and inter-club games. The local clubs are expected to raise a high percentage of the cash for all local projects and to do this there are G.A.A. dances, G.A.A. carnivals, raffles and so on.

Teams taken to the States were put up in the homes of American G.A.A. supporters, until the Dubs protested at this cheapjack practice and made the association loosen the purse-strings and pay for hotel accommodation in the normal fashion of other sporting organisations.

There is a mafia element in the upper echelons of the G.A.A., clouding the financial dealings with secrecy; players know that there is a fiddle but it is not in their interest to speak out. Successful players who achieve a certain national recognition can secure well-paid jobs, especially with foreign and international firms who like to front their enterprises with nationally known sportsmen. The most famous living hurler works for an oil company, and Kerry's Mick O'Connell also worked for an international oil corporation for a period. Teachers, guards, engineers, solicitors, bank clerks and budding politicians secure promotion as a result of their success on the playing field, and indeed there is a traditional snobbery amongst selectors who prefer to field strong farmers and professional men on a county team than workers and 'men of straw'.

The G.A.A. politically is an extension of Fianna Fail republicanism and could hardly be seen as anything but a supportive organisation. Many prominent Fianna Fail politicians, including the Taoiseach, are former heroes of the playing field, and the G.A.A. and Fianna Fail mix like gin and orange. One big happy family of cuteness, religiosity and gombeenism. Fine Gael are not part of the ethos. Liam Cosgrave looks as out of place in Croke Park as Sean O Siochain would at a cricket match.

The G.A.A. is sectarian and Catholic. Senator John A. Murphy wrote a letter to the papers some years ago asking the association to dispense with the ritual bishop throwing in the ball. The leaders would not do this.

Croke Park on the day of a big game becomes an opportunity for the Catholic Church to show its greatness with the people, to bring home to onlookers the bond between Church and State. On All-Ireland Final day, seated in a solid square on the Hogan Stand, you're likely to see the most powerful politicians and Churchmen in the land. Now if you lump these into a picture with the takings at the gate and the Artane Boys Band, belting out triumphalist Roman Catholic nationalist sentiment, that fairly well captures the Gaelic Athletic Association.

SÚRAS OF THE V

FROM CYCLADIC SURA

FLUTE PLAYER

Nose ridged butty man
 he's fingers his song's flute
 to pursed lips. Pauses. Then,
 head thrown back to pitch it,
 closed eyes face to the sky,
 he gives us his sound
 for the processional. High
 his held note, supple his bend
 of his poem's grace. We lads
 and girls sing together with gladness
 behind him dancing while he leads
 the lengthening line of his chorus
 to festival round the narrow roads
 of our village all holding hands.

HARPER

Seated, his seven stringed instruments
 propped on his knee like a child,
 handled as gently. A mild
 serenity feathers his features the moments
 his resined fingers, smooth as alabaster,
 feather his strings. His face otherwise
 expressionless with the fall and rise
 of his song. Though blind he plays his lyre,
 his ancient instrument. His voice
 like birds' wings at evening in flight,
 makes song of ancient ceremony in white
 marble and his voice stirs deep delight.
 We'd prefer to hear this sound by far
 than witness weapons on parade for war.



DESMOND O'GRADY

FROM THE GREEK A

GIRLS

The girls of our island
 parade their beauty through the town's
 main square draped in fluted gowns
 of seamless linen. On either hand
 the holy song of women softly
 praises the gifts
 of the goddess in you.

Alcaeus

II COUNTRY GIRL

That country clodhopper
 in her cloutish country clothes
 has bent your mind.
 She doesn't even hold
 her gown with grace
 about her country ankles.

Sappho

III JEALOUSY

Bitch,
 you've grown to hate
 the very thought of me
 and gone off
 with that other bitch
 what's-her-name?

IV DESIRE

Desire for love
 stuck, twisted
 between my heart's
 ribs like a blade.
 My eyes misted
 as my spirit seeped
 through the rusted wound.

Archilochus

V THE GOWN

That girl
 radiates desire now.
 When she saw

WANDERING CELT

DM ANTHOLOGY

by
Desmond O'Grady

that gown she trembled
all over her body.
And I'm happy for her.

Sappho

VI FRIEND

Place
sweet flowers
through your hair.
Weave
anise stems
with your faultless
fingers.

Sappho

VII WEDDING SONGS

We're off
to a wedding.
You must
join us,
friend, with
all young girls
you meet
on your way.
Marriage
marks the height
of happiness but
do not ask
too much of it.

2

Build high
the bride's new
rooftree, men.
Her bridegroom's
bigger than no
small man.

3.

You're a happy man.
You're marriage's made
as you wanted, with the girl
you picked and courted.
Her eyes, her smile
radiate devotion
and love's sacred power
moves in sacred motion.

4

The sweetest apple ripens
on the topmost branch
forgotten by the harvesters –
no, not forgotten,
unreachable.

5.

May song all night
celebrate the love
of the pair of you.
And when you awake
to your fond morning
come out and get drunk
with your family
and friends still celebrating
till dawn.

Sappho

VIII FRAGMENT

Beauty
stands plain
to see.
Goodness
shines beauty
also.

Sappho.

IX NEIGHBOUR

Gold
without goodness
is not harmless.
Fused,
they forge
high happiness.

Sappho

X ANGER

An angry
heart
rattles
a stupid
tongue.

Sappho

XI FULL MOON

Tonight the stars
surround the moon
yet hide their shining
faces because she's
at the full and brightens
all below.

Sappho

XII ADMIRATION

When I look
straight at you
I think even Raphaella
was not as lovely,
that you are as fine
as dark haired Magda.

Sappho

LONGING

Listless
with longing,
a miserable wretch
I'm drained in soul
and body. Bone
bending torment
crushes me.
It's a power
beyond all
human power.

Archilochus

A Poet .. and his influential uncle

Throughout his writings, Desmond O'Grady has been haunted by the pain and the fascination of journeyings, exile, loneliness and alienation. But of all the people who have crowded these poems one dominant presence has overshadowed all others: the formidable figure of his uncle Michael "Feathery" Bourke.

In *The Dying Gaul* (1968), the poet tries to come to terms with the uneasy reality of his uncle's influence:

*A butty man
uncle wore black;
had nailhead eyes,
hid in a house of himself.*

*For me, a child
he loomed hugely homeric:
stories, history.
Yet I never heard him sing.*

*Father replacer
he outbulked mine.
Mastered my day
a long time.*

*Outgrown it
I still baulked,
couldn't shift—had
to inhume his image.*

For more than fifty years, Feathery worked as a feather merchant and scrap metal dealer in his store at the corner of High Street and Cornmarket Row. He was born on June 6th 1895, one of a family of four brothers and two sisters. His mother Lil Bourke had slaved night and day to build up the business. At an early age Feathery, her favourite son, joined her in running the store and both frequently laboured together round the clock, loading and unloading scrap and feathers and skinning horses and cattle. Feathery showed a natural aptitude for this work and quickly became expert in all aspects of the trade. In due course Lil died and her business, money, ground rents and property, including slum houses, passed to Feathery.

Annie Bourke, Feathery's sister, married a C.I.E. clerk, Leonard O'Grady and the poet Desmond is one of their three children. Leonard became the nearest thing to a friend that Feathery ever had. Later, when his uncle came to live with the O'Grady's, the young Desmond studied his relative at closer range. His poem, *Memories of an Influential Uncle*, first published in *Poetry Ireland* in Spring 1968 shows how vivid and lasting these first childhood impressions were:

*In a crow black suit you'd confuse for a beggar's grey hair
combed
straight flat across his head,
he stands in the door of his condemned house, bronzed
fists in his coat pockets, spit grey eyes
no brighter, no bigger than nailheads. In his forehead
a small deep dent from the shaft of a backing cart when a
child.
Away over the rooftops and pigeon-coops, the spire of St.
John's
Cathedral. Straight in front, his slum
inheritance—his mother's empire. Over his head
the three floors of the old house that bred
the lot of them, still furnished, its harm
done. Forty years of dust on the sheet covered forms.
Up in the rat looted attic, black sea trunks still standing half
open,
packed with the wardrobe he wore on those Indian
cruises after his mother's death and her will.
Not a penny has seen daylight since. He remained alone:
his position with contemporaries always the blind side of
form, playing rare*

and wise in his silences—a kind of hostility.

*He was tight with money, superstitious, secretive, cold
as a herring when driving a bargain, honest as salt.*

He feared his God, but distrusted his clergy.

*He returned unchanged from his cruises and never again went
anywhere.*

In 1932 Fianna Fail came to power and the "Economic War", with Britain began shortly afterwards. Feathery distrusted the financial policies of the new patriots and had no intention of going down with the wrap-the-green-flag-round-me boys in the event of a financial collapse. In 1933 he travelled to London and exchanged £2,205 in Irish currency for English money at the Westminster Bank. On his return to Limerick, he locked the sum away in his own private safe for the impending rainy day.

After this transaction, he redoubled his money-making efforts. This overwork brought on a bout of illness and, on doctor's orders, he was forced to rest. Faced for the first time in his life with the prospect of taking an enforced holiday, Feathery, naturally enough, hesitated before venturing alone into the big unknown world. A sea cruise was suggested and, after some financial negotiations, off he went.

His maiden voyage was not a success. He travelled in his everyday clothes, and, dressed in a cloth cap and an old, shabby suit, the out-of-place dealer spent most of his time in the confinement of his first-class berth. But Feathery persevered and, up to the outbreak on the Second World War, went on a series of other cruises. On these trips, however, his brother-in-law Leonard O'Grady had him rigged out in shirts, hat, blazer and white trousers and, for the first and last time in his life, Feathery travelled in style.

It came as a surprise to many people when Feathery married. Once again, his brother-in-law had a hand in the affair. When he first came to Limerick, and before he married Annie Bourke, Leonard stayed in the same house as a woman named Maude Guerin. He introduced Maude to Feathery and, after a fifteen-year friendship, they got married in 1945. They were both nearly fifty years of age and the marriage was more a business arrangement than anything else. They married quietly at St. Michael's Church after 8 a.m. Mass. Two hours later, Feathery was back to his store buying and selling feathers and scrap.

The death of his uncle's wife had a disturbing effect on the boy Desmond. In an extract from his memoir *Inheritance*, published in the sixth edition of *The Stony Thursday Book*, the poet describes the death scene:

*Maude, lying there like a bundle of wattle sticks under the
clothes, looking out at the three of them, was living her last
hours dying of cancer. Mykey, Father and Mother were
watching her die. I was watching the four of them. Mother
sitting on one of her own grandmother's chairs. Father
standing like the outsider he was, looking in and Mykey, with
a broken rosary beads clutched in his fist, squatting on what,
with closer inspection in the gloom, could be seen to be a
black coffin. Maude lay severely watching them watch her die.*

After his wife's death, Feathery withdrew further into himself. In *The Death-Bed* (1961), Desmond O'Grady has given this picture of his uncle as he entered the last decade of his life:

*Now at the end of his life, in a suit of clothes you'd give to
a beggar
and a house smelling of death and the dung of rats,
with no one to talk to and no one to wive
the bed where he slept with the corpse of his mother,
he lives with the wealth, which, made so hard, is too good for
spending
and waits for the day when he'll join her.*

But even in old age, Feathery was hard and stubborn to the very end. Despite the loss of two fingers of his right hand, he was no mean performer in ejecting unwanted and drunken

people from his store. During his long life he retained an air of quiet unbending, authority and never allowed himself to be frightened by threats from anyone. But he suffered one serious beating and robbery a few years before his death. This incident took place at his house Portland Lodge, North Circular Road, on January 27th, 1968, when he was 73 years old. He was attacked and badly assaulted by three young men, who also gagged and tied him.

During evidence given at a Limerick Circuit Court case in May 1968, when a man was charged with robbery with violence of £1,800, it emerged that Feathery was not sure of the precise amount of money taken. He claimed to have had £2,500 in his home safe and to have spent only £700 of this. For the thieves the loot was a Pyrrhic plunder. All the money stolen was part of the £2,205 sum exchanged by Feathery at the Westminster Bank in London, 35 years before. The £20 and £10 "tissue-paper" notes had long been withdrawn from circulation and so were useless to the thieves.

Though he had little formal education, Feathery had an uncanny knowledge of property and ground rents; it could well be said that his insatiable search for ground rents was the abiding passion of his life. But his intelligence did not extend to taking decent care of himself. He lived on a bread and tea diet and treated himself to a boiled egg on Christmas Day. His end was sad and squalid: when he died, in September 1973, he was found to be suffering from malnutrition.

Feathery never made a will. He was incapable of doing so, because making a will, involved giving, albeit posthumously, and Feathery Bourke had never given himself the habit of giving anything to anybody in his entire life.

This, then, was the remarkable influential uncle whose shade has continued to dog the days of Desmond O'Grady. Is it possible for an outsider to find an explanation for this intriguing influence: Could it be that O'Grady recognises in himself at least one of Feathery's characteristics? Both nephew and uncle have shown the same great, headstrong driving force in the pursuit of their respective goals: one gave his life to the making and saving of money; the other has given his life to the making and study of poetry.

O'Grady has written few political poems. *Michael Foot at the House of Commons* shows his admiration for the British Labour M.P. Though he worked with Ezra Pound for a few years, he came under the poetic rather than the political influence of the American writer. By far the clearest expression of Desmond O'Grady's own politics was given in

Hellas, written as a personal protest on the day after the fascist military take-over in Greece, on April 21, 1967. The poet was living in that country then, as he still does, for most of the year and these verses convey the brutality and terror of the Papadopolous regime:

*Midnight. Units reserved for crushing
insurrection and the capture
of cities deploy like brute chessmen
to their places and reconnoitre.*

*The trundle of armour at night
through empty streets as it fans
to planned positions rouses light
sleeping taximen alone at their stands.*

*First they witness in silence;
then, resignedly, one by one,
as if from old-hand experience,
they shut-down their meters, go home.*

*By early morning, armour, men
and machines cocked at the ready,
the country's shut tight as a tin.
Death is restored as the minimum penalty.*

Kitty Bredin, that shrewd and modest critic, has described Desmond O'Grady as a sculptor in words. The image is apt. Like the journeymen masons of old, he has taken to the roads to practise his trade, quarrying his words from the literature of life and shaping them into poetry.

"I saw my life and I walked out to it". Thus O'Grady wrote in his poem *Purpose*. The first verse of the same work tells of the vision and compulsion that drove him out.

*I looked at my days and saw that
with the first affirmation of summer
I must leave all I know: the house,
the familiarity of family,
companions, and memories of childhood,
a future cut out like a tailored suit,
a settled life among school friends.*

Ever since, Desmond O'Grady has followed his Muse, always faithfully, sometimes recklessly, never taking time out to count the pain, the cost, or the trials of the journey. With fourteen books of poetry behind him, there is now a new, growing appreciation of his work. He has achieved much and has the vision and writing force to achieve much more.

With the recent publication of his two books, *The Limerick Rake* and *The Headgear of the Tribe*, the poet has entered the most productive period of his career. He is now lecturing at Cairo University, and is hard at work on the preparation of six more books for publication.

So, Desmond O'Grady is well placed for further achievements. But no matter what new paths he takes or new themes he writes about, one thing is certain: Uncle Feathery will never be too far away.

THE STITCHER

by Richard Rowley

What time is that? It's strikin' four.
My God, to think there's two hours more!
The needles go leapin' along the hem,
And my eyes is dizzy wi' watchin' them.
My back aches cruel, as I lean
An' feed the cloth to the machine,
An' I hate the noise, an' I hate the toil,
An' the glarin' lights, an' the stink of oil;
An' yet, it's only strikin' four,
Two hours more, two long hours more!

Well, there's another dozen done,
An' here's another lot begun;
When these are finished there are more,
My God, it's only just struck four!
An' all day long, an' every day,
I'll sit an' stitch the same oul' way,
An' what's the good? I might ha' been
Born just a part o' my machine,
An' not a livin' woman at all;

A wooden figure or a doll
Has just as much o' life as me,
Tied till a bench, an' never free.

Monday morning till Saturday,
I sit an' stitch my life away,
I work an' sleep an' draw my pay,
An' every hour I'm growin' older,
My cheek is paler, my heart is colder,
An' what have ever I done or been,
But just a hand at a sewing-machine?
The needles go leapin' along the hem,
An' my eyes is sore wi' watchin' them;
Och! every time they leap an' start,
They pierce my heart—they pierce my heart!

DUBLIN DIARY

BY KEVIN O'CONNOR

LUNCH with writer Hugh Leonard, to discuss a radio programme. We met at *Na Mara* restaurant in Dun Laoire, aptly named as the white caps are doffing over the muddy waves outside. Viewed from within the double-glazing the stormy outside looks no more threatening than a courtly oil-painting. He is considerate but stringently straight-talking too. Behind the acerbic writer lies an acerbic man – as he delivers over the meal a sample of what will be in the programme (Christmas Day, radio) I catch a glimpse of the little boy-tensely performing that he might be noticed and moved. Behind the accumulated wares of the world, Rolls Royce, artistic acclaim and all that, one suspects a great loneliness.

On the way back a copy of the *Sunday Woad* has been plastered by a rainy gust against a lamppost, reminding me how another columnist in that paper helps keep Tony O'Reilly's silk underwear laundered by purveying 'radical' journalism. It is ironic that the same McCann, who had once declaimed how much he hated the man I had just been lunching with – and that in a week when McCann's play had opened to hoots of derision in London as Leonard's play was whipping even Neil Simon into second place for a Broadway award. 'Must be a connection there' I think to my imponderable self as a Dun Laoire dog of deft judgement jets a squirt of absolving acidity onto the columnist's wet visage. Yes, even in the rain.

FRIDAY MORNING: Aaah . . . no . . . no . . . anything but this! More contraceptives on the radio (not a suitable place to keep them). The Minister for Stealth's Safe Bill is being discussed with an abundance of phrases like '... the issue here is one of ...' to the collective hilarity of almost anyone under thirty. Even in Abu Dhabi the well-oiled sheiks will be shrieking with laughter at the provision in the Bill for the amount of condoms that any Irish person may import *for their own personal use*, leading one to a new definition of an Irish Contraceptive, i.e. One you throw away before you use . . .

And before we all succumb to visions of dog-dealers from Ahane and Bruff scurrying back from the White City with hundred-weight cartons of 'dem tings' on their rounded shoulders, let us a cautionary note on the customs of the Irish Customs. Last time I was on a train from Belfast, which of course could easily have been the last trip on a train anywhere, courtesy C.I.E.'s O'Bradaigh Brigade, the ritual stop for Customs at Dundalk was marked by a sudden flurry of playing-cards tossed in the air as the young officers, gleaming with the vigour of Leaving Cert. evangelism, marched stoutly through the train, pulling jackets with gold braid over their mother-knit jerseys – and marched off again to resume their card-game without as much as a trick-losing pause to even notice baggage. Indeed one had the inescapable impression that had one drawn their attention to anything of a possible contraband nature they would have been profoundly embarrassed.

SATURDAY: Bewilderment is what one feels this morning at the top of Grafton Street, stopping to observe a miserable Provo protest over H-Block. Nobody should be treated as these prisoners are treating themselves. Bewilderment because one knows that the Provisional campaign, especially the recent activity in murdering prison officers on their doorsteps, has so alienated the majority that effective public protest is now impossible – and it is only potent public opinion that changes the world. The world goes blithely by the Provo Protestors, who are left, literally, talking and listening only to themselves. A few handfuls of cold men in anoraks (green) abandoned to themselves.

EVENING: Feeling distinctly better, as the enema and

poultice have helped. Spirits rise audibly as it is announced from the radio in tones of a National Disaster – there will be no *Late Late* this evening. My much, *much* better half breaks down into a deluge of uncontrollable weeping. The cat and I carry her to the boxroom where we seat her in a rocking-chair and show her pictures of herself as a pleasant young lady, from the family album. The cat gets offended that there are no pictures of *her*, and so bereft of company both female and feline I retire to the kitchen to the contemplation of a world without the *Late Late*. In Ireland to-night, no pints will be drunk in pubs by old men with bitter memories and the women will *not* be knitting by the hearth-sides, being told what to think by ex-clerics with suspect degrees in sociology. There will be no conversation among those going to work on Monday morning and sub-editors on the evening 'papers will have to concoct stories of wolves in an obscure part of Russia descending to devour travellers.

SUNDAY MORNING: All of which reminded me to dash out this morning, unshaven and in dressing-gown before the Faithful across the way have borne away with their piety the last copies of the *Sunday Press* and *Sunday Woad*. In the *Press* I am pleased to read that the Jewish-looking son of Major Vivian De Valera has been (stet) 'appointed' to the board of that newspaper. Very interesting, when you recall how the *Press* was first funded i.e. by Irish-American contributions to help combat the 'Imperialist British etc. etc. propaganda press'. Very few of those vengeful American investors ever got a dividend – and now a paper which was founded to help 'the down-trodden Irish blah blah . . .' has passed into the ownership and iron control of *one* political family. Such are the interesting movements after revolutions. As my grandfather whose middle name was O'Cohen used to say, Nice vork if you can get it . . .

AFTERNOON: Even 'dem tings' atop the radio cannot take the combined fire-power generated by the slithery Minister and the McNamara band discussing the 'pro's and 'cons'.

Moving their sadly-wilted shapes to be revived on top of the fridge, I mutter about taking them to the little garage down the road, 'to be vulcanised'. Whereupon the cat, having emerged from the box-room, leaps out the door and has been warily eyeing me with tight-legged rectitude from the garden wall. I shall take myself for a walk in the afternoon and have another poultice when I return.

The Eve of Stephen

Cheery minstrel
Of winter's clime,
Flitting shyly
In fitful forays
From frozen hedge
To leafless briar
Scratching for groundsel.
In the year's twilight
Of December day
Thy silver song lingers
When other birds are still.

Thou asketh nothing of man
But his trust;
And this is given
On all days but one:
The Eve of Stephen;

For on that day
Pacts are thrown away,
And the men of Park
Hunt thee,
With murderous wattle
To destroy.

When the falcon
Makes its death-swoop
Hunger is the spur;
But the Parkmen
Hunt and kill
Only to keep their fathers' faith
On Christmast Day.
Still a tradition lives
That the wren must die.