Ar an gCoigrioch: Migration and Identity in Twentieth-Century and Contemporary Irish-language Literature

AISLING NÍ DHONNCHADHA and MÁIRÍN NIC EÓIN

Journeys abound in modern and contemporary Irish-language writing, whether the focus of the narrative is internal migration, emigration, return migration or simply a modern travel experience. This should not be surprising, as there is a close relationship between physical dislocation and the processes of linguistic minoritisation which made modern Irish-language discourse in general a discourse of cultural displacement. What may be surprising, however, is the range of perspectives on migration represented by Irish-language authors and the wide range of genres employed to represent Irish emigrant and diasporic experience. Drawing on a selection of materials from the anthology Ar an gCoigrioch: Díolaim Litríochta ar Scéal na hÉine,¹ this essay will demonstrate how Irish-language literature on migration represents a rich diversity of individual voices and experiences.

While there is evidence to support Kerby Miller's contention that the dominant perception of emigration among western Irish-speaking communities in the post-famine period was that of involuntary exile,² many Irish-language autobiographical and fictional accounts complicate this interpretation. Migration and emigration are presented as being perceived and experienced differently depending on individuals' particular positions within families or communities. Attitudes towards emigration in Irish-speaking communities vary over time and are influenced by political developments, the destination of the migrant, the permanency or otherwise of the migrant experience and the individual response to personal or family circumstances. This essay will draw on a number of key texts to explore how migration and emigration have been imagined, experienced and analysed by twentieth-century Irish-language authors. The essay will focus in particular on various aspects of the relationship between linguistic, cultural, regional and national identity.

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Many early twentieth-century migration narratives present late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century emigration as an integral part of life on the impoverished western seaboard. As Kerby Miller has pointed out, this was a period of increased commercialisation of rural life in western Ireland, when ‘social relationships became more instrumental and migration became a societal and familial imperative’.

Connemara-born Máirtín Ó Cadhain (1906–1970), one of the most renowned twentieth-century writers of fiction in Irish, in his classic short story ‘An Bhliain 1912’, captures this reality by focusing on the emotional drama of the American wake from the perspective of a Connemara mother and, to a lesser degree, that of her eldest daughter. The mental map of a native Gaeltacht community is presented as incorporating overseas destinations like South Boston or Springfield, Massachusetts rather than Irish urban centres of population such as Dublin or Belfast. While the inevitability of emigration is accepted in a spirit of sad resignation by the adult and elderly, it is eagerly anticipated by the young, for whom the American trunk is a symbol of deliverance and hope:

Ag ceiliúr faoi Mheiriceá a bhí na mná óg. Ag ceiliúr faoi saol a bhí uaimh uaimh a chéile ar fad i South Boston go gairid, mar ba dhual do chine arth e trú de Mheiriceá a n-ainseal cóimhdeachta, arth i an long imirti a réalta i bhfad agus arth i an Fhatharóg Mhór a Mairéarta.  

The young women were chattering about America. Chattering about the life they would have together soon in South Boston, as was natural for a race whose guardian angel was the American trunk, whose guiding star was the emigration ship and whose Red Sea was the Atlantic.

An Ghealchathaí an t-achar abhaileó bhie a bhí Máirtín riamh. Ach ba sheanchas faoi Mheiriceá an chéad bhia a slíogdaí. Ba ghairid go fada do cheoil a tuíseána agus a samhlaíocht a South Boston, Norwood, Butte Montana, Minnesota, nó California nó Baile Átha Cliath, Belfast, Wexford, nó go fúis is áiteach nach raibh an crashú, mar fhuireadh den Ghlaschabbáin. Fuineadh agus faisteadh a saol agus a smaoine as an chinear, a saibhreas Mheiriceá, a siamsa Mheiriceá, a tóin cráite a dhul go Meiriceá... Agus ainmníonn go raibh cumhach uirthi an baile a tháithí anois, níor chumhach é gan an gachter, an dochtas agus an tiomantas a bhí ina oileán tríd. Faoi dheineadh thi an bhí si a chuirteach na Braíne Draiócht... Fharraige úisceachta, síolta seolaithe, soilse gráithnachta, siad an a bhí air an airgid, doine cróna a raibh leathainn an dáois ina geneacht, ag cur in éagracht cheama féin uirthi gort, sláibh, carraige agus ceoláire.

Brightness [i.e. Calvary] was the farthest from here Máirtín had ever been. But she had been nurtured from childhood on the lore of America. South Boston, Norwood, Butte Montana, Minnesota, or California, opened shutters in her understanding and imagination much more than did Dublin, Belfast, Wexford,
or even places only a few miles on the east Galway side of Brightcity. Her life and her thoughts were shaped and moulded by the fame of America, the wealth of America, the amenities of America, the agonised longing to go to America.

... And though she was lonesome now at leaving home, it was a lonesomeness shot through and through with hope, delight and wonder. At last she was on the threshold of the Fairy Palace... Tremendous seas, mists, blazing lights, streets the colour of silver, dark people whose skin gleamed like beetles, distorting for her already the outlines of field, mountain, rock and mist.

The Irish household, as represented in this and other texts, is a fractured one, as the emigration of the eldest child marks the beginning of a process of dramatic and rapid family break-up. Here we have a literary example of female chain migration. Máirín will be staying with an aunt of hers in Boston and her sisters, Máiteád and Nóirín, have already begged her to send them their passage money as soon as she can. From Máirín’s perspective, the story can be read as a narrative of maturation and independence, in which emigration is seen to accelerate and exaggerate the natural separation of the older and younger generation. Even before Máirín leaves home, a perceptible chasm has opened between herself and her mother – Máirín, dressed in her American clothes, is already elsewhere – making satisfactory communication of emotion impossible.

Moving now from fiction to memoir, another perspective on western Irish women’s emigration is offered by Aran Island-born Máirín Ó Díreáin (1910–1988). In his account of boyhood on Inis Mór, Fearann Bheightaine (1961), he recollects his mother and other island women reminiscing about their various experiences as young women working in America:

Ní raibh móthair clainne ar dá eolas air na cathracha seanna is a bhí áscu ar Ghaillimh. Déarthaínn go raibh aghas aon nó. Nó bheadh eolas air bith as 17 leathlíodhach at Bhaile Átha Cliath ná ar aon chathair i Sasana air tráth Úd.

There wasn’t a mother in the two villages who hadn’t spent a period in America. I used to hear them talking often when they’d be gathered around the fire of Boston, Dorchester, Woburn and other places.

They had as much knowledge of those cities as they had of Galway. I’d say they had and even more. The likes of them would know nothing of Dublin or of any city in England at that time.

Here the women’s emigrant experiences become the stuff of storytelling. They are presented as a mysterious or hidden aspect of their lives, incomprehensible to the young boy for whom the image of the emigrant ship is presented as a source of curiosity and wonder.

Ní raibh thios sige cén sárt áit é mar Meicseá, cé go gholoseadh sé a mháthair féin, a ainig an múr éile ag caint go minic zir. Chluiseadh sé ag caint iad ar *Country borns agus ar Greenhorns agus freisin ar dbhainn a dhuigiden *Shinamon* orthu... Chuala sé go mhiobh bail an-mhóra á dtabharfadh sall ach níor tháir idir leis sinmhi an bith a thabharfadh dóbh ar mhaid. A raibh ceann acu choradh mór leis an Muirbheach thios? Chomh mór leis an oileán uile? Ní raibh a thios sige. ¹

He didn’t know what America was like as a place, though he would hear his own mother, his aunt and other women talking often about it. He’d hear them speak of *Country borns* and of *Greenhorns* and also of people they used to call *Shinamans* (*Chinamen*)... He heard that very big boats used to bring them over but he had no mental image of their size. Was one of them as big as the sandbank down below? As big as a village? As big as the whole island? He didn’t know.

Ó Direáin’s references to emigration in his memoir are particularly interesting when one considers that he is best known for his poetry of urban alienation, written from the perspective of an Irish-speaking intellectual cut off from his Gaeltacht island home in Dublin. As various critics have demonstrated, this island home becomes increasingly a place of the imagination rather than a living reality in Ó Direáin’s later work, while Dublin is consistently presented as a place of loneliness and confinement.² The sense of community experienced by Irish emigrants in America eludes him, as it does west Kerry author Pádraig Ua Maoléoin (1913–2002), who, like Ó Direáin, spent all his adult life in Dublin. Ua Maoleoin describes his annual return home to Dún Chaoin like a pilgrimage to a strange place:

Is geall le hoolitheacht dom leithéid anois dul siar mar seo ar shaol atá imithe i réir auidh. Tá in rothadh imithe as chuain aon ní a bheith cáiththa agam ach an macalla, mar táim rite isteach i sac a chuir le blianta fada. Cuimhne an linbh agus an ógánaigh atá faide agam ar an sean-shaoil, lán de róimhnsloch agus de náisiúnta samhraidh. Gach aon phicfeasc a thagann chuig an tainseiste-aite an de draiochta, ceo brostailli Éic Cionn gach binne, agus gan aon ní fior ina cheart, ach é mar do bheadh ceann d’na pósíte i úd a chfé a go minic ag stáisiúin traenach d’isráidh tu a mhealladh go dtí an abhfidh go gceann.

It is like a pilgrimage for the likes of me now to return like this to a life that he has forgotten. I’m too long gone to have retained anything but an echo, because for a long time now I have become accustomed to another life. My memories of the old life are the memories of a child and a youth, full of romance and summer flowers. Every picture that comes to my mind from that place coloured with magic, a heat haze above each gable and nothing really ringing true, but as if it were one of those posters you’d see often in a train station trying to entice you to a faraway country.

¹ NÍ DHOINNCHADHA and NIC EDIN. ‘Ar an gCóigriocht’, *Irish Review* 44 (2012) 63
He compares himself to the Irish American returning home after thirty years, his worldview and his language transformed by his experience in a foreign land. He considers his own situation as an Irish speaker in Dublin to be more problematic in many ways. The emigrant of Gaeltacht extraction returning from New York may at least have had the benefit of an underground cultural existence that is more difficult to find in Dublin, where Gaeltacht migrants do not form a recognizable community or possess a cohesive group identity.

Migration narratives also raise questions about the role of kin and community in creating or destroying an individual’s sense of belonging. For renowned west Kerry storyteller Peig Sayers (1873–1958), family life at home became increasingly uncomfortable for the dependent relatives within the household after the marriage of her brother Seán. This situation eventually led to twelve-year-old Peig having to leave her home and terminate her formal schooling in order to take up the position arranged by her father for her as a servant girl in Dingle. One can infer from Peig’s account of her teenage migration and her parents’ acceptance of that migration, that her experience was not uncommon.

When family life had already been shattered by premature death, as was the case for the fatherless Donegal youth Máel Mac Gabhann (1865–1948), migration to Scotland was seen as an exciting adventure, while youthful emigration to America is depicted in the first instance as an escape from home and then as a form of reunion with kinsfolk and community on the other side. Mac Gabhann travels to America with two relatives, lodges with relations in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania and remains among the Irish community when he travels west to Butte, Montana. It is only when recounting his journey north to Klondike that he comments on the breakdown of group solidarity when severe physical conditions result in individualistic responses and survival is achieved at the cost of the erosion of a sense of communal responsibility.

Depictions of economic emigration in terms of liberation or adventure continue into the later periods and autobiographical and fictional examples by Gaeltacht writers such as Ger Ó Ciobháin (1928–2008), Maidhc Dainín Ó Sé (b. 1942) and Tomás Ó Ciméide (1914–1992) present emigration to England or North America variably as inevitable, accepted or anticipated and not always permanent. As would be expected in these accounts of Gaeltacht male emigrants’ experiences of working abroad, one finds references to the social life of Irish immigrant communities in cities such as London, Chicago and San Francisco. In describing the Irish dance halls, the popularity of Irish music, the working man’s Irish pubs and the celebration of St Patrick’s Day, the sense of an Irish-language community is

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strong and vibrant. Furthermore, various accounts underline the impor-
tance of a convivial social life as a necessary antidote to the harshness of
the working and living conditions experienced by the Irish emigrants.
While narratives of male emigration are more plentiful than female ones,
literary sources do support the evidence presented by historians such as
Páirc Travers that female emigration from Ireland in the first half of the

twentieth century was motivated by a desire for freedom from the social
and economic constraints associated with life in rural Ireland.14

If one is to look for tragic representations of emigration as involuntary
exile, one finds such depictions in fiction more than in Irish-language
memoir. The early classic text here is the novel Deonaíocht (1910)15 by
Galway author Pádraic Ó Conaire (1882–1928), who himself spent over
ten years in London. Here, an Irish-speaking economic migrant in
London, Micil Ó Maoláin, is knocked down by an automobile in a street
accident that leaves him disfigured and disabled, his only consolation being
the gold he received as compensation money. Disillusioned and alienated
from his home and kin, he squanders the money and becomes a performer
in a travelling freak show, whose owner turns out to be an Irish man and
where kinship ties do not protect the individual from exploitation of the
worst kind (Alf Trottan/Feach Beag Bui, owner of the show, exploits his
own obese daughter as much as he does the disfigured Micil). He is
befriended by Mayo-woman and Irish speaker Maigh Mhór, but his only
sense of community is to be found in the Irish ghetto (‘Éite bheag’) or in
the bars frequented by sailors, vagrants and other disappointed and disaf-
folded Irish emigrants. It Deonaíocht an anti-emigration novel, a political
and moral allegory, or is it a partly realistic depiction of actual condi-
tions for the Irish in turn-of-the-century London? The critical consensus
suggests that it is a combination of the above, incorporating various levels of
alienation,16 just as Ó Conaire’s famous short story ‘Nóra Mharcaí Bhrig’17
can be read as a melodramatic depiction of the fate of a young rural Irish
woman fleeing to London after rejection in love (and it is strongly hinted
that she is pregnant), or as an anti-emigration short story with a strong
moral message. Deonaíocht illustrates Edward Said’s definition of exile as ‘the
unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between
the self and its true home’.18 Adrift in London, the exile is unrecognised
and unrecognisable also when he returns to his native Galway. Micil’s only
natural community in the end is the nomadic, homeless and nameless
community of beggars and social outcasts he encounters in London’s pub-
lic parks. Nóra Mharcaí Bhrig’s fate is not dissimilar. When she returns
home after years of dissipation in London, Nóra initially tries hard to ful\fül
the role of the dutiful daughter and the successful returned emigrant.

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However, when Nóta's alcoholic tendency becomes apparent, her father Marcas immediately banishes her from her home and community and sends her back to England, the country that, according to him, had brought about the moral downfall of his only daughter. It is worth noting that the subtitle 'a true emigration story' featured in *An Claidheamh Soluis*, where this short story was first published in 1907.

While a novel like *Deoraíocht* will always hold a literary and aesthetic interest for readers, there is no ambiguity whatsoever as to the motivation behind anti-emigration texts such as the novelette *An Ceanmhaithe* (1902) by Úna Ní Fhaircheallaigh (1874–1951) and the much-produced play *An Deoraíthe: Dráma i n-Ághaidh Imtheachta thar Sáile* (1906) by Lorcán Ua Títhaile (1870–1909), two turn-of-the-century texts where readers and audiences are warned of the falsity of the embellished accounts of successful emigrants. The image of the emigrant or the returned emigrant as physically and morally weakened is typical of early twentieth-century anti-emigration literature. Examples occur in Tomás Ó Criomhthain’s *An tOileánach* (1929) where Tomás’s brother is shown to be worn out from his labours in America, from which he returned penniless and the daughter of Ó Criotmhthain’s neighbour is depicted as well-off, well-clad but physically failed after her seven years ‘i dthír an allaí’. Máirtín Ó Cadhain's short story ‘An Taóille Tuile’ is a masterly portrayal of how ten years working as a servant girl in New York has deprived the central character, Maireád, of the physical capacity to carry out the kind of work demanded of a young married woman in a maritime economy and the effect this shortcoming has on her relationship with her husband, kin group and community. Her sense of identity is severely tested as is her hitherto unwavering belief that to reject all that America offered and to return with a dowry to Connemara to marry the man she loved was the best option for her. In a similar vein, the novel *Éan Cuidéin* (1936) by Pádraic Óg Ó Conaire (1893–1971) shows how difficult it is for the Canadian wife of a returned emigrant to integrate with the west of Ireland community among whom her husband grew up. In their depiction of return migration, these literary texts are particularly valuable for the insights they provide on an under-researched aspect of migrant identity and of migration history.

Emerging from early twentieth-century nationalistic anti-emigration sentiment is the culturally motivated post-independence depiction of Gaeltacht emigration as post-colonial failure. Using emigration narratives as the focus of the critique, certain texts make causal links between physical displacement and the kinds of cultural displacement associated with language shift and language loss. Seosamh Mac Grianna (1900–1990), writing in 1925, refers to the haemorrhage of emigration from Gaeltacht regions:

Is iad na Gaeilgeoiri is mó atá ag imeacht. Aois naoir atá an uile dhuine a bhfuil Gaeilge áige de dhíobháil go cuí ar an ttrá, tá cáinteoirí maithe ag imeacht agus á lorgadh sa Ghaeltacht.25

It is the Irish speakers more than any other group that are leaving. Now when everyone who has Irish is badly needed in the country, good speakers are leaving and being eaten up in the Ghaeltacht [English-speaking community/region].

This kind of critique is most marked when referring to 1950s emigration to Britain and includes both the accounts of actual Irish-speaking emigrants, such as Donall MacAmhlaigh (1926–1989) and of commentators (of Ghaeltacht and non-Ghaeltacht background) who saw emigration as an index of the economic and cultural failings of the postcolonial state. In his autobiographical account Diaann Dóraí (1960) MacAmhlaigh describes the crowd on the ferry from Dún Laoghaire thus:

Tá an bíd bán luchtaithe sóis le daoine. A mbeann mar m’éall cheap-fainn, ag fé Ideadh tar én na Cáis. Cuid eile a n-athraí orthu gurb i an chead uair ag du anann dóibh i. Dornán beag de mhuintí Connamara ar thaobh mo dheasoge ag staidhadh Gaeilge ... Ná aonair a bheartaíteas Dún Laoire agus an sleibhte shóthla dhar de! Tá an caladh lá de bháid bheaga seóil agus de gheal eicoga geala agus de churacha adhmaid. Le lucht na sceilacha iad sin, leis an deamh a tháinig.

The emigrant ship is laden down with people. Most of them like myself, I’d say, returning after the Easter. Others I can tell who are going over for the first time.

A small group of Connemara people on my right speaking Irish ... Isn’t Dún Laoire and the mountains behind it looking beautiful? The harbour is full of small sailing boats and bright little yachts and wooden rowing boats. They belong to the comfortable classes, to those who are staying behind.

He takes up this theme in his 1986 novel Deontaíth,27 where the character Niall becomes the conduit for his own attitude to Ghaeltacht emigration, which echoed that of Mac Grianna.

Máirtín Ó Cadhain, who was a political activist and Ghaeltacht rights campaigner as well as an accomplished prose writer, was bitter in his condemnation of the state he deemed responsible for the emigration of the 1950s. In a 1953 newspaper article, he reacts angrily to the scene on a ferry boat of west of Ireland emigrants on their way to England:

Aithním gurb é lathair na bhuían na bhfuathar an tsoinse seo ar an mbád. Is dtí amháin ná르 smaoingigh an bhuachath dhuál nó rith dhual duidh an tóinche. Is cóir do na daoine a fhéadadh faoi cheacht bhuiochas le Dí in aithint, na hainmíneáigh a bheith chomh neamhsmaiointeach sin ... Cuimhíním ar na hainmíneáigh seo a chaithfois oíche ina suí, ag bréagadh a ghoid leathbh, nó ag suí eachtrí i gcúnta na neamhsmaiointeachá. Fiadhaim diom


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I can see that most of the people on the boat are from the West of Ireland. They are people who never gave thought to whether or not they should be emigrating. Those who can stay should be thankful to God that they are not. I think this is unreflective... I think of these emigrants who will spend the night sitting, sooting their children, or turning in narrow but unbeguiling corners. I ask myself why I too did not leave: why did I not leave when I lost my first job, or when I was released from prison. I've long thought that Ireland is dead. Health schemes will not cure something that is dead... What does Ireland deserve from me? My allegiance should be to England or to America. At a relative's funeral in Portland Maine recently, there were twelve first cousins of mine, twenty-seven second cousins and more than fifty third cousins! Allegiance to Ireland is only of value to those who are blind, crippled and deaf. None of their family members is forced to emigrate! It is a pity that I am not leaving forever! I'd prefer to be in the place where my people and my language are.

Journalist Dónal Foley (1922–1981), from the Ring Gaeltacht in County Waterford, focuses in his article ‘Oiche na hÉirise’ on poignant images of emigrants in transit. Socialist politician Joe Higgins (b. 1949), from the west Kerry Gaeltacht, recalls the annual image of groups of young teenagers waiting for the minibuses to take them to the ferry ports to go to England and claims that such sights moulded his socialist political vision.

Part of this critique of emigration is a tendency to focus on the lives of marginalised, desitute or desperate Irish emigrants. Thus bilingual novelist and short-story writer Risteárd de Paor (1928–1970) in his memoir Úl i mBarr an Ghéagáin describes an incident on a suburban train in Birmingham involving a drunken, confused and out-of-control Irishman, while Connemara-born author Diarmaid Ó Gráinne (b. 1950) focuses on the lives of marginalised Irish emigrants, including Irish-speaking patients in a British mental hospital.

Certain motifs are recycled again and again, becoming clichés of Irish emigration: the battered suitcase, the stingy landlady, the greedy contractor, the cruel foreman, the unhealthy food and niggardly rations, the hobnail boots, the park benches, the heavy drinking, the shared beds.

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Negative depictions continue into the eighties and appear regularly in the Connemara song tradition where one finds a fusion of the emigration ballad and nostalgic country-and-western themes of loss and longing. Negative images of emigration are to be found in the work of younger writers also and certain literary depictions are particularly gloomy: the stories of desolation and desperation set in London in the short story collection *Stráid Sidrón* (1986) by Micheál Ó Brolacháin, for example; the image of Connemara emigrant Patricia Connolly in the poem sequence 'Páidín' by Aine Ní Ghlinn (b. 1955), where he is depicted as sleeping rough in the doorways of London shops, lying to his family at home, borrowing money to sustain the myth of emigrant success. An interesting aspect of the emigration theme in Irish-language literature is that it appears in the work of writers with diverse experience of Irish emigration. Ní Ghlinn did not have personal experience as an emigrant, for example, while Ó Brolacháin was born in Warrington, England, to an Irish father and an English mother and was brought up in Southampton and Dublin. Emigration to London was part of the youthful experience of poet Cathal Ó Searcaigh (b. 1956) whose early poem ‘Miontragóid Chathrach’, republished in his 2000 collection *Ag Tuith leis an Solas*, depicts a young Irish-speaking gay man wandering the streets of London alone in search of love, companionship and sex. On the other hand, it is through the tragedy of the suicide of a young Belfast man in London that Belfast poet Gearóid Mac Lochlainn (b. 1966) depicts the experience of the Irish emigrant in the metropolitan centre in the poem ‘Paddy’, where he situates the Irish experience in the context of other post-colonial immigrants in post-imperial Britain. While there is a diversity of accounts, based on place of origin in Ireland and destination abroad, there are few success stories, few literary accounts of satisfactory emigrant experiences, despite the fact that during this period of recession in Ireland, emigration was the only chance of economic success available to many young Irish people and many of them were successful. More recent Irish migration narratives present more positive images of personal journeys, more or less freely undertaken. This change can be accounted for by the increased mobility associated with contemporary globalisation, as well as the personal factors which assist or restrict processes of integration or acculturation. The Columban missionary Pádraig Ó Murchú (b. 1944), in his autobiographical account *Idir Dhá Shaoil* (1989), for example, accepts his sojourn in Korea as part of life’s journey and he is happy in the belief that one can never re-travel the same road:

Níl sé méite agamsa an r-aistear san a dhéanamh siar go dtí radharcanna agus fuaimanna cheasta Chorca Dhuibhre mar nach bhfuil ná bhfrainn mé. Ni nior cheart do dhúine duit siar ar an mbóthar a tháinig sé. Is duine
mé atá ag dul i dtreo an lae amhrígh agus cuireann ruaig na mblian isteach ar gach rud ar chaol na cruaice.19

I do not intend making that journey back to the sights and gentle sounds of Coire Dhuibhne because I am not a swelled or a salmon. A person should not go back on the road that he has travelled. I am someone who is going in the direction of tomorrow and the onset of years affects every thing on the face of the earth.

When his father dies at home in Kerry, his adopted community – or the community that have now adopted him – arrange a three-day wake, thus creating an environment of communal support, as if they were an extended family, facilitating the grieving process for a deceased parent on the other side of the planet. One gets the sense that Ó Murchú is at home in the world and at ease with himself no matter where he is physically located.

For the central character John Paul in the novel of gay youth Sna Fír (1999) by Michéil Ó Conghaile (b. 1962) the journey to Dublin is socially and sexually exciting and liberating, despite his close attachments to his home place and community in Connemara. The challenge for John Paul is to achieve a satisfactory accommodation between his identity as defined by his place of origin and the kinds of identity construction made possible by his migration to the city.

For academic and novelist Pádraig Ó Siodhach (b. 1958), based in Nova Scotia in Canada, his sense of identity is defined by dual allegiance and the reality of living ‘between two countries’:

“Is an bhFráine im dhúscadh dhambh/ In Éirinn Chuinn im chiodadh,” a scriobh Pádraigín Haiéd sa seachtú haois déag. Tuigeann tú do. Rud fiscuít is ea é a bheith idir dhá thir. Tagann tú, imionn tú, Filleann tú, Fágann tú. Thar aon rud eile, rud sineolaioch is ea é. Bainneann tú le dhá áit. Usineanta, ò bhainneann tú le ceachtar acu. Den chuid is mó, bionn tú go fiscuít ar an choigfhoth agus tú ag tabhairt faoi ghráthchúramí an lae, acht do mhúthchóirí is do smaointe a bheith fíre faoi fuaite leis an fhóid dúchais.41

“In France while I am awake/ In Ireland in my sleep” were the words of Pádraigín Haiéd in the seventeenth century. You empathise with him. It is a physical thing when you are between two countries. You come. You go. You return.

You leave. More than anything else, it is a psychological thing. You belong to two places. Sometimes, you don’t belong to either of them. For the most part, you are physically abroad as you apply yourself to your ordinary daily duties, but your emotions and your thoughts are inextricably linked to your native soil.

Referring to Thomas D’Arcy McGee’s assertion that late nineteenth-century Irish Americans were ‘camped but not settled in America, with

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foreign hopes and aspirations, unshared by the people among whom they live', Ó Stiadhail describes himself as a camper, for whom certain issues are just not as important as they are for the native population, even if he is married to one of those natives. His experience is complicated by the fact that he is an Irish-language writer who speaks Irish to his Canadian-born son. Though he is not in any sense nostalgic, his ties to home are stronger because of this linguistic attachment:

Ach nach mithíd duit fein éiri as a bheith ag campáil is féramhacha buana a chur síos anois? D'fhéadfadh sé an puicín ar do dhíibseacht do do dhíchas ar son doigh phrathréic cuid. Ach d' Bhac siceoladóch ort nach fheidir leat a mhíniú go sóililt, muir bhfuil sé san fuil agat a bheith i do champaílai choiche. B'héidir gurb é do chuid oibre. Bhíonn tú ag plé le hféinín an-cháin lá, ag múineadh tangaína, i mbun scothaireachta, ag soléadh ainnéarcha bhréith Gaeilca do dháoin i d'ocht cheann a bhpaisti, a bhpuisínt is a bpaicín. Tá tú sí móile mhele ón áit mhílaide is gan an chailín agat uaithe. Agus, in ainm Dé, tá tú ag fhachánt le scothóibh i dtéanga nach raibh an leathanacht goait uairthi an lá ab fhéarr rinneadh sa bhaille is nach láhitheann tú ar aon leibheidhí agus anois.42

But isn't it time for you to give up the camping and to put down permanent roots now? You could have Canadian citizenship by now. That wouldn't be in any practical way take from your commitment to your native land. But you have a psychological block that you cannot explain properly, unless it is in your blood to be a camper always. Maybe it's your work. You are dealing with Ireland every day, teaching classes, holding forth, providing famous Gaelic names to people for their children, their kittens and their sailing boats. You are three thousand miles from the wretched place and you can't escape from it. And, for God's sake, you are trying to write in a language that you had only half a grasp of at the best of times at home and that you don't speak at any advanced level now.

The situation is complicated further by the fact that the emigrant's children are also living between two worlds:

Ar fhileadh ar Halifax doibh le déaná, chaiteár ceist a rinneadh ar ghasú: An maith leat, a bheith abhúis anseo arís nó arbh fhéarr leat a bheith ar ais sa Spideáil? Is fearr liom anseo é, ar seisean. Ní hionann dochas an champaíl a is dochas an tsaoirneag. Ní hionann dochas an athair ái dochas an mhacín.43

When you returned to Halifax recently, you asked the boy: Do you like being here again or would you prefer to be back in Spiedel? I prefer it here, he said. The natural affinity of the camper is not the natural affinity of the citizen. The hopes of the father are not the hopes of the son.

Will contemporary transport and communication technologies alter the reality of life for individuals and communities living between two

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countries? Academic and commentator Tórlach Mac Con Midhe is decidedly postmodern in his depiction of exile in the era of the internet. Mac Con Midhe employs the metaphor of the hypertext to describe the patterns of communication and affiliation associated with bilocation and interculturality: ‘Feictear domsa go bhfuil saol an deoraí ag éiri an-chosúil le hipirréacs. Feicim rud “anseo” i saol amháin a chuireann rud eile “ann” i gcúmahne dom, déanaim “sliúil” aigne air, agus tá mé ann.”[^44] ['I think the life of the exile is becoming very much like hypertext. I see something “here” in one life which reminds me of something else “there”, I “click” on it mentally and I’m there.'] When the trauma of displacement is replaced by the freedoms and excitement of mobility, migrants may become travellers and travel literature may come to replace the narratives of involuntary migration and dislocation: ‘Cosúil le lucht súil, b’fhéidir, nilim ar mo shuaimhneas in aon áit amháin, ach ar turas, ar cuairt timpeall.’[^45] ['Like the travelling people, maybe, I’m not comfortable in any one place, but on a journey, a round trip.'] There is growing evidence that this is now happening, with an ever-growing number of travel books in Irish coming to replace the memoirs and fictionalised accounts of Gaeltacht emigration.

As long as present states of mobility and global connectivity pertain – and of course there is no certainty that they will or that they should – then the metaphor of hypertextual relations may be particularly relevant and offer a new approach to Irish migration and to Irish migration studies. Whether minoritized languages and cultures can be strengthened by the kinds of communication possible in diasporic communities that are virtual networks rather than physically contiguous communities remains to be seen. Up to recently the prospect of witnessing an Irish-language literature of the diaspora seemed improbable, yet the number of publications in recent years by Irish-language authors living abroad and by authors of Irish extraction who have learned Irish abroad, would indicate that this is now a real possibility. With the increased popularity of travel writing and the regular publication of travel accounts by Irish-language writers, we may now be witnessing the beginnings of a new literary movement in which the experience of mobility, interculturality and transnationality may be the norm and the concept of home as a stable place of origin or return increasingly questioned.

Notes and References

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24 Pádraic Óg Ó Conaire, Eire Gidéin (Boile Átha Cliath: Oifig an tSoláthair, 1936).
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31 Risteárd de Poit, Dill i mBann na hÉagáin (Boile Átha Cliath: Sáiseal agus Dill, 1959), pp. 189–92.
33 For examples, see Ní Dhonnchadh agus Nic Ron (eag.), An ar gCoigioch, pp. 177–203.
34 For example, the songs about life in Leeds and Huddersfield by returned emigrant Tomas Seaghe in Micheál Ó Conghaile (eag.), Cruich Síos É! (Béal an Dáingéin: Cló Iar-Chonnacht, 1986).
35 Michael Ó Brolchain, Séad Sein (Boile Átha Cliath: Thabhairt, 1986).
40 Micheál Ó Conghaile, Sna Fír (ineadhsháin: Cló Iar-Chonnacht, 1999).
42 Ó Siadhail, Iar Dha Thiar: Scéal i Chesamada, p. 56.
43 Ó Siadhail, Iar Dha Thiar: Scéal i Chesamada, p. 58.

74 Ní Dhonnchadhha agus Nic Ron, ‘Ar an gCoigrúthh (Irish Review 44 (2012))