

This Road of Mine

Translated by Mícheál Ó hAodha

Chapter 1

They say the truth is bitter, but believe me it's harsh and this is why people avoid it. It was early in my life that I saw it stretched out in front of me, the road of my heart's desire, the winding path skirted by peaks more beautiful than any hills found in music and the breath of wind above more perfect than any earthly breeze — as wine vanquishes water; the old bridge that listens to the whispering stream for as long as first, fleeting memories linger; and whitewashed villages set between the early noon and the mouth of the dawn; and sheltered nooks quiet and peaceful where one rests and comes to know every living sprig and herb, the scattered roses made of dreams:

*Ar bhruach na toinne le taobh na Finne
'S mé 'féachaint loingis ar sáile.*

*On the edge of the wave beside the Finn
As I looked on ships upon the sea.*

The way of no return, that inconstant road between care and fear. Who'll tell me that I never walked it – me, the king of Gaelic poets in this, the twentieth century, the era of Revival? Who'll tell me that I was guided by the words of casual friends most days since I was born? And even if I was always slow to let them guide me, I still found myself halfway between admiration and contempt. You'd need patience with the likes of me, and I'll tell you now why. And I'm afraid they still won't understand even when I give them the truth straight.

But then, what's the point of me writing this here book if I am to remain misunderstood? And so I'll tell you now why I didn't keep my distance from these casual friends of mine the most of my days, and why I didn't take the path of joy and enchanted wandering as I should have; it's a long time now since I abandoned the armour that most other men sport — a steady job and opinions that stand to you and ensure you fit in with the crowd. Bad as I was, I never had any time for all of that. But then I also had a deep and powerful fear of myself. No wonder — when you think that my own crowd were always down on me as if there was a danger in me that the world could never see. And it was always like this: when someone else caught a cold, they felt sorry for them; if I got one, it was something to be ashamed of however. If someone else got angry, they were alright because they knew how to control themselves; but if I got angry, I was a wild bull of a man. If someone else did something untoward, it was quickly forgotten and they got away with it; but if I did something wrong, I never heard the end of it. I don't like this type of Christianity, if Christianity it is — but there's a lot of it in this world. Maybe I had a power in me that I didn't understand; maybe I still don't understand it. Is it any wonder that I felt myself tied up in a thousand knots before I'd done anything at all, I ask you? I rebelled. I broke out of schools and colleges. In 1916, I left Saint Eunan's with the intention of joining the British Army but

Easter Week put an end to that. I disappeared from other colleges too and yet, despite it all, I reached the age of twenty-one and I had qualified as a schoolteacher. If it wasn't that I had some bit of guidance from others, if it wasn't that I had a right fear of myself, the truth is that I'd have had no education at all. They didn't understand what drove me deep down and even if they tried to give me the odd bit of guidance, it was only very rarely. I knew early on that they were trying to break my spirit in reality, and so I was rash and uncontrollable as a consequence. I was wary of others. I also wrote stories that might never have seen print if it wasn't for others. Because I've never believed that the poet should prostitute his art.

Chapter 3

Eventually, my money started running out and I put an in the newspaper offering Irish-language classes. Not that teaching Irish was something I'd ever enjoyed much. Anyone brought up speaking English wouldn't understand what tnean by this. But if someone with good English had to it to people who had really bad English, they'd know exactly what I mean. Learners of Irish always reminded me of labourers who work with their hands, all blistered and I'd a feeling too that some strange people would show up to learn from me.

I never had a hunch that didn't prove true either because only a few people responded to me, just one of whom was worth knowing. This was Tom Kerrigan. He was just eighteen years old yet wise beyond his years. And he had all the cuteness and nerve lads that age have. It was easier to teach Irish to Tom than any of the others but after he'd come to me a few times for classes, I stopped teaching him Irish altogether. We both had lots of other things going on. We were both observing and exploring the world to see where we could find a niche or a chance for ourselves. I was older than him of course and I knew that I'd have to make a mark on the world sooner rather than later, while Tom had all the optimism of youth about him and could still spot a chance where I couldn't.

He was good at thieving. There are lots of lads around these days who are well-up on thieving and breaking into houses was Tom's favourite subject of conversation. At one stage, we'd identified a certain house on the south side of the city that we were going to break into. I thought of a different plan at the last minute however. I was good at reading human nature. I can look at someone's face and body language and even read their hands as well. I don't know where I acquired this skill from but I thought I could make money out of it anyway. I told Tom this idea of mine.

'You'd make money, for sure,' he says. 'You should put an ad into one of the papers saying: "Seosamh Mac Grianna, telling fortunes for a shilling a go."' '

'Hang on,' I says. 'Would this fellow be better off having a Middle Eastern name?' 'He would,' he says.

'And he'd need to be famous all over the world. Let's see now.'

'Sorry,' Tom says, 'I forgot something and I've to go home quickly now for it.'

'Alright,' I says. 'I'll see you tomorrow.'

I wrote the ad out that night. This is it. I have it here on the table in front of me right now:

STARTLING!!!
ELI BEN ALIM

says your future can be foretold, and that of your lover, your child, and your friend in trouble. ELI BEN ALIM, Arab prophet, knows the future as the skilled pilot knows the hidden rocks and the safe anchorages. He has travelled the five continents, has given readings for GENERAL WILLIAMSON, U.S.A., and for M. HENRI BEAUVAIS, famous French actor, the MAHATMA GANDHI, and the ex-King of Bulgaria. Send ELI BEN ALIM a frank account of your problems. Give sex, date of birth. Enclose P.O. value 1s. 2d., or stamps. Address.....

'Do people the likes of this really exist?' Tom asks when I showed the ad to him.

'Now, that's a very big question!' I says. 'It'd be a right low-breed who refused to believe in the existence of Gandhi, and the king that lost Bulgaria. As for the other two, I've never heard anything about them – but the chances are that they're real people. As for Eli Ben Alim himself, don't you see him right here in front of you?'

'That's a brilliant ad,' he says. I know a man who'd type It up for you.'

I put the ad into various newspapers and anyone who's meticulous enough to go through the old papers, they'll find it still. And the things that I was told that season were never heard by another living soul – even the priests themselves in the confession box never heard the likes of it. Women, women, women and so many men that it'd shock you. I always knew that if you wanted to make an idiot of yourself you'd have plenty of people in this world to keep you company.

Chapter 15

He was a small man, low-sized and light, and something under forty years of age. He had a narrow, tanned face, lively, black eyes and sported a moustache. You'll see thousands of his type in the big cities of northern England. His rig-out and clothes were distinctive and suited his wandering life. He had long, black hair, an inch or an inch and a half of which jutted out at the back from beneath an old cap. He was carrying a fairly big, heavy bag on his back, wore two overcoats, and a pair of shoes, the tops of which had been cut away for comfort's sake and the heels of which were at least an inch and a half thick.

'You've seen a good bit of the country, I'd say?'

'I'm not long in this country here,' he says, 'but I've travelled the whole of England and Scotland. I'm from England myself, from Yorkshire.'

‘It’s not good there at the moment,’ I says.

‘It’s not,’ he says, ‘not since the war. Growing up, I worked in a saddler’s but that fell apart after the war. I went to Scotland then and worked there until the Great Depression in 1923, when I was made redundant again. I vowed then never to do another’s day’s work again.’

‘Walking the roads is a harsh life all the same,’ I says.

‘It is,’ he says, ‘especially in the winter. But I don’t do much walking in winter. I stay in poorhouses. And I don’t sleep outdoors in winter either; I’m not sleeping outdoors yet this year. The human body can only take so much.’

‘It’s true for you,’ I says, realizing that by walking my own road, I’d been a lot more courageous than I’d first imagined. ‘Where do you go,’ I says, ‘when you sleep outside?’ ‘In haystacks,’ he says.

‘Do they ever give you any hassle about it?’

‘They don’t,’ he says. ‘As long as you don’t do any damage, they aren’t hard on you. I usually ask people for permission to sleep there beforehand.’

You’re an Englishman through and through, even if you were one hundred years on the road, I said to myself.

I took out some cigarettes. I’ve always hated it when people make little of others or ignore them, no matter who they are and I offered him a cigarette.

‘I don’t smoke anymore,’ he says. ‘That’s another habit I’ve overcome.’

‘You did well beating that one. Smoking is nearly as bad as work.’

A few seconds later, I asked him: ‘So, which of the three countries, Scotland, England, or Wales, do you like best?’

‘You can’t really generalize,’ he says, truthfully. ‘They’re miserly enough in all of them.’

‘The majority of the human race are miserly. They prefer that to honesty. Maybe it turns out cheaper for them in the long-run,’ I replied.

As we were talking, we spotted another tramp on the road ahead of us. He stopped and waited for us to catch up with him. He was Welsh, a small, wiry fellow with ginger hair of the type you’d find anywhere in Ireland. The three of us walked on together and they accepted me as one of their own, and it’s rare enough that this happens to me. Normally when I find myself amongst people who have the reputation for decency, they’re cold and hostile towards me. It might be that the same people would describe me as a fine person to others; that said,

anyone who got to know me so well that they fought with me would never say that. When I'm in a good mood, I haven't a care in the world. And I couldn't have asked for better company than these two men.

We weren't long walking when the conversation turned to the issue of Communism. The Englishman knew a fair bit about it but the Welshman didn't.

'It has to come at some stage,' says the Englishman. 'It came to Russia and it'll come in here too.'

'If it came in the way it's supposed to,' I says.

'I don't understand it at all,' says the Welshman.

'This is what I understand by it,' I said. 'Say, for example, that shop over there now ... instead of that shop being owned by one individual and that person always watching out in case anything is stolen from him – everyone would have the right to go in and do what they want with the goods on offer and take whatever they want from the shelves. People would only take what they needed and no more than that.'

'Humph!' says the Welshman, and I could tell by him he'd loved to have had the chance to try something like that.

'You wouldn't take any more than what you needed,' I says, 'because there'd be no one to give it to once you'd stolen it. Everyone would have enough to keep them going.' This set him thinking, even if I knew in my heart that he'd steal something and pass it onto others, given half a chance. And I knew that if he didn't have anyone to share it with, he'd lose interest in stealing too. Ah! The truth, the truth! How few ever walk that road and how close it is to the surface of the things even in the most dishonest of men! I tried to get a bit of chat out of the Englishman next.