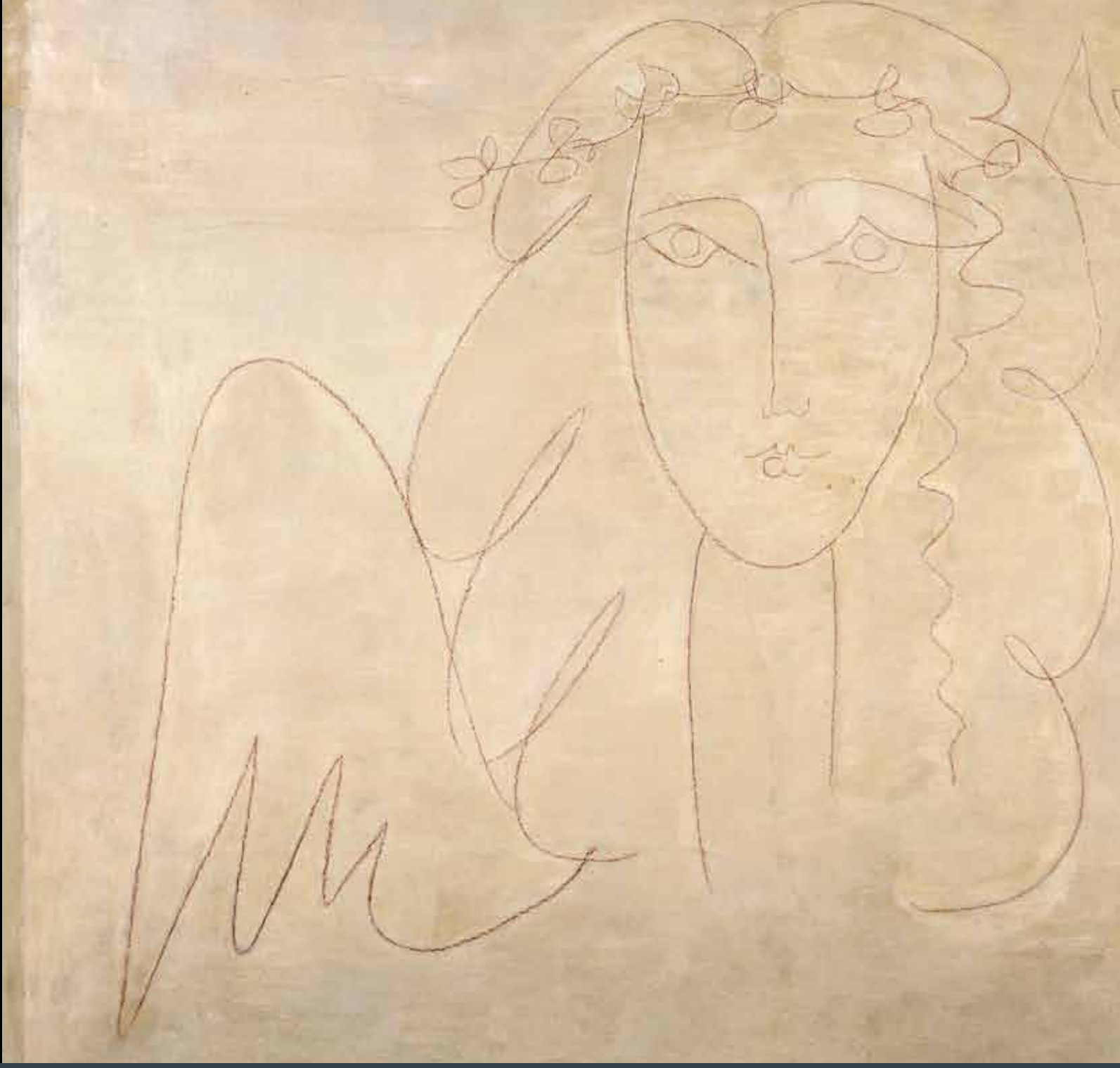

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fieldday@nd.edu

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ESSAYS

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REVIEWS

ESSAYS

Triangulation point and cairn.
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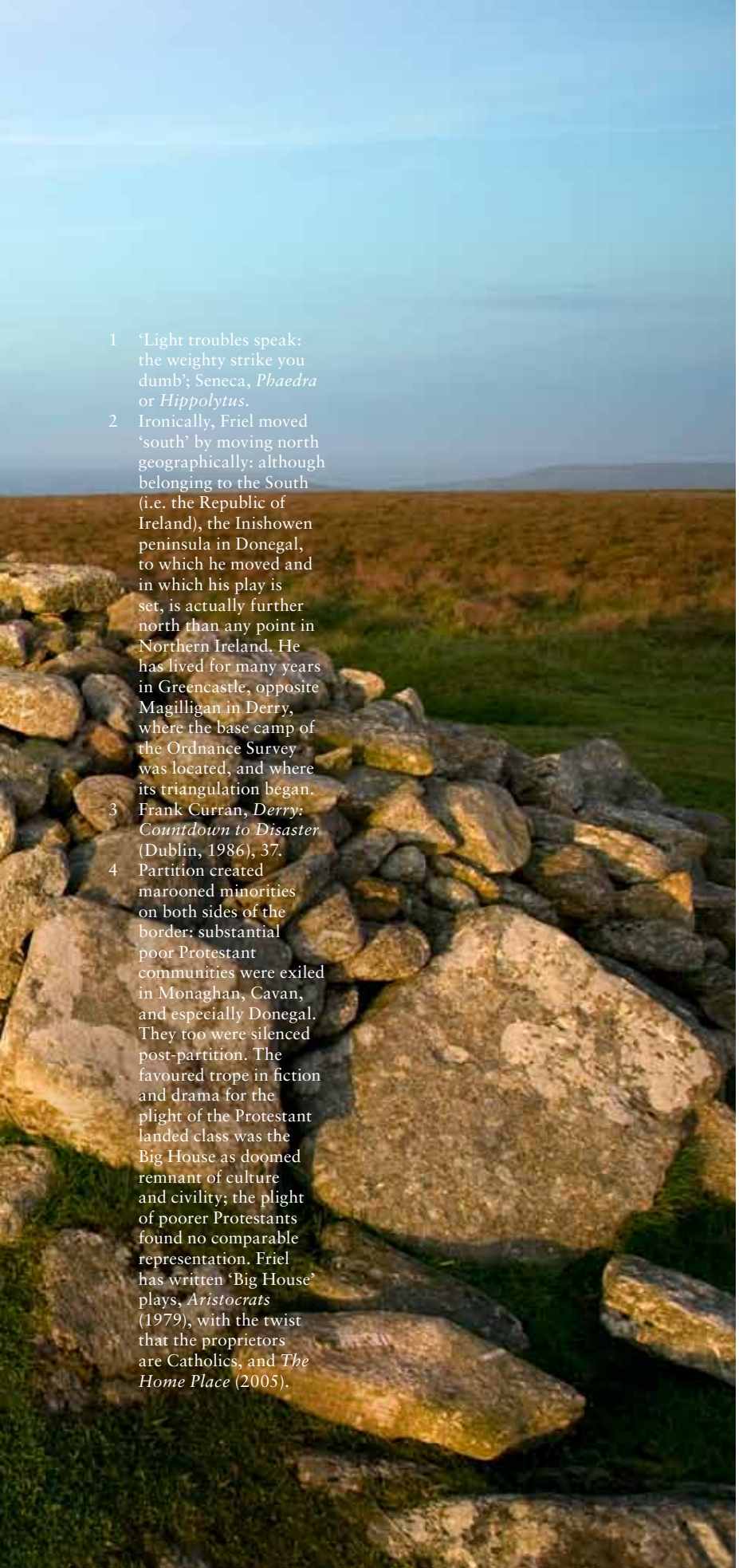


Between: The Politics of Culture in Friel's *Translations*

Kevin Whelan

Curae leves loquuntur ingentes stupent.[1]

[This is the second of two essays saluting Brian Friel on his 80th birthday and acknowledging the 30th anniversary of his play *Translations*. The first essay, 'Brian Friel's *Translations*: The Origins of a Cultural Experiment', by Ciarán Deane, appeared in *Field Day Review 5*.]

Brian Friel was born in 1929 at Kilclogher, near Omagh in County Tyrone, Northern Ireland, the son of a Derry schoolmaster and a Donegal postmistress, a child of partitioned Ireland. He later moved just across the border into County Donegal in the Republic of Ireland.[2] He belonged to the generation of northern nationalists famously described by the Derry MP Eddie McAteer (1914–86) as 'the bastard children of the Republic'.[3] After the trauma of partition,[4] and the brutal suppression of initial

1 'Light troubles speak: the weighty strike you dumb'; Seneca, *Phaedra* or *Hippolytus*.

2 Ironically, Friel moved 'south' by moving north geographically: although belonging to the South (i.e. the Republic of Ireland), the Inishowen peninsula in Donegal, to which he moved and in which his play is set, is actually further north than any point in Northern Ireland. He has lived for many years in Greencastle, opposite Magilligan in Derry, where the base camp of the Ordnance Survey was located, and where its triangulation began.

3 Frank Curran, *Derry: Countdown to Disaster* (Dublin, 1986), 37.

4 Partition created marooned minorities on both sides of the border: substantial poor Protestant communities were exiled in Monaghan, Cavan, and especially Donegal. They too were silenced post-partition. The favoured trope in fiction and drama for the plight of the Protestant landed class was the Big House as doomed remnant of culture and civility; the plight of poorer Protestants found no comparable representation. Friel has written 'Big House' plays, *Aristocrats* (1979), with the twist that the proprietors are Catholics, and *The Home Place* (2005).

opposition to it in the 1920s, Northern Irish Catholics were cowed into silence. Abandoned by both the British and Irish states, they became a subdued, silent, watchful generation, internalizing their sense of historic betrayal. Friel taught for many years in Derry, and he has described 'the personal, traditional and acquired knowledge that cocooned me: an Irish Catholic teacher with a nationalist background, living in a schizophrenic community'.[5] He diagnosed the Catholic population there as 'a dispossessed people living in a state they never subscribed to, with Donegal lying just across the bay. Janus-like, they had one head looking to the north and one looking to the south.'[6] Friel considered northern nationalists as being 'at home but in exile',[7] and talked of them (and himself) feeling like 'an exile in your home', their birthright more a disinheritance than an inheritance.[8] And yet lurking somewhere in the Northern Catholic imagination at this time was what Friel has called 'the secret notion we nurtured that in some ridiculous way we were the true keepers of some true notion of what being Irish meant. The Free State squandered and abused that idea. We guarded it in suffering silence.' [9]

Translations was the foundational play of the Field Day Theatre Company, [10] established in 1980 by Friel and Stephen Rea. Friel finished writing it at the height of the northern conflict on 5 November 1979, and it was first produced on 23 September 1980 in the Guildhall, Derry.[11] The play can be read as both a parable about, and a diagnosis of, the conditions of the post-partition Catholic community in Northern Ireland. Field Day sought to deploy the communal effects of theatre to release Northern Ireland in particular from its numbing violence and stasis. Friel identified his involvement in the enterprise as stemming from *dúchas/pietas*—'a sense of loyalty and dutifulness towards one's own home'.

The play is set in a Donegal hedge-school in 1833, before the devastating Famine of the 1840s, at a time when two controversial state projects were being introduced: the standardized mapping of the country by the Ordnance Survey, and the national system of education to replace the existing informal system of hedge-schools. Both had implications for the Irish language; the national schools were to be rigorously English-speaking, while the new maps would render the old place names in English orthography. Friel combines both of these anglicizing projects in the setting for his play.

Colonialism is never just a political and economic condition but also a psychic one. *Translations* probes the psychodynamic effects of colonialism as they play out in the linguistic realm, where the private and the public spheres meet. Masquerading as a version of universalism, colonialism presented the acquisition of English as a liberation, the golden bridge that carried the native beyond localism into the world at large, rescuing him from provincialism by awarding full participation in British civic life. The toll required was the relinquishment of the native language, disavowal of native history, severance from native culture. Edward Said's memoir *Out of Place* probes the meaning of a displaced linguistic identity:

> The basic split in my life was the one between Arabic, my native language, and English, the language of my education and subsequent expression as a scholar and teacher, and so trying to produce a narrative of one in the language of the other — to say nothing of the numerous ways in which the languages were mixed up for me and crossed over from one realm to the other — has been a complicated task.[12]

The master text for *Translations* is George Steiner's *After Babel*.[13] Steiner emphasized that a language constitutes a community of shared history and aspirations, and that, accordingly, each language remains incommensurable and opaque to translation:

5 Cited from a 1973 interview by Friel, in Tony Corbett, *Brian Friel: Decoding the Language of the Tribe* (Dublin, 2002), 107.
6 Paul Delaney, ed., *Brian Friel in Conversation* (Ann Arbor, 2000), 159.
7 Christopher Murray, ed., *Brian Friel: Essays, Diaries, Interviews: 1964–1999* (London, 1999), 106.
8 Murray, ed., *Brian Friel*, 106.
9 Brian Friel to K. Whelan. Sep. 10, 2010.
10 On Field Day, see Marilynn Richtarik, *Acting between the Lines: The Field Day Theatre Company and Irish Cultural Politics 1980–1984*, 2nd edn. (Oxford, 2001).
11 The most complete treatment of the context of the original production is Ciarán Deane, 'Brian Friel's *Translations*: The Origins of a Cultural Experiment', *Field Day Review*, 5 (2009), 7–47.
12 Edward Said, *Out of Place* (New York, 1999), 15–16.
13 George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (Oxford, 1975). Likewise, Friel's *Molly Sweeney* (1993) is inspired by a case study in Oliver Sacks, 'To See and Not See' in the *New Yorker*, 10 May 1993, 59–73.

Etching. Thomas Frederick Colby (1784-1852). Director of the Ordnance Survey from 1820 to 1847. © Science and Society Picture Library

They are the instruments of storage and transmission of legacies of experience and imaginative construction particular to a given community ... Languages communicate inwards to the native speaker with a density and pressure of shared intimation which are only partly, grudgingly yielded to the outsider. A major portion of language is enclosure and willed opaqueness.[14]

Friel's borrowings from Steiner include some of the best-known lines in the play: 'Uncertainty of meaning is incipient poetry'; 'a syntax opulent with tomorrows'; 'Often cultures seem to expend on their vocabularies and syntax acquisitive energies and ostentations entirely lacking in their material lives'; 'All communication "interprets" between privacies'; 'Confusion is not an ignoble condition'; 'It is not the lived past, the

14 Steiner, *After Babel*, 300.

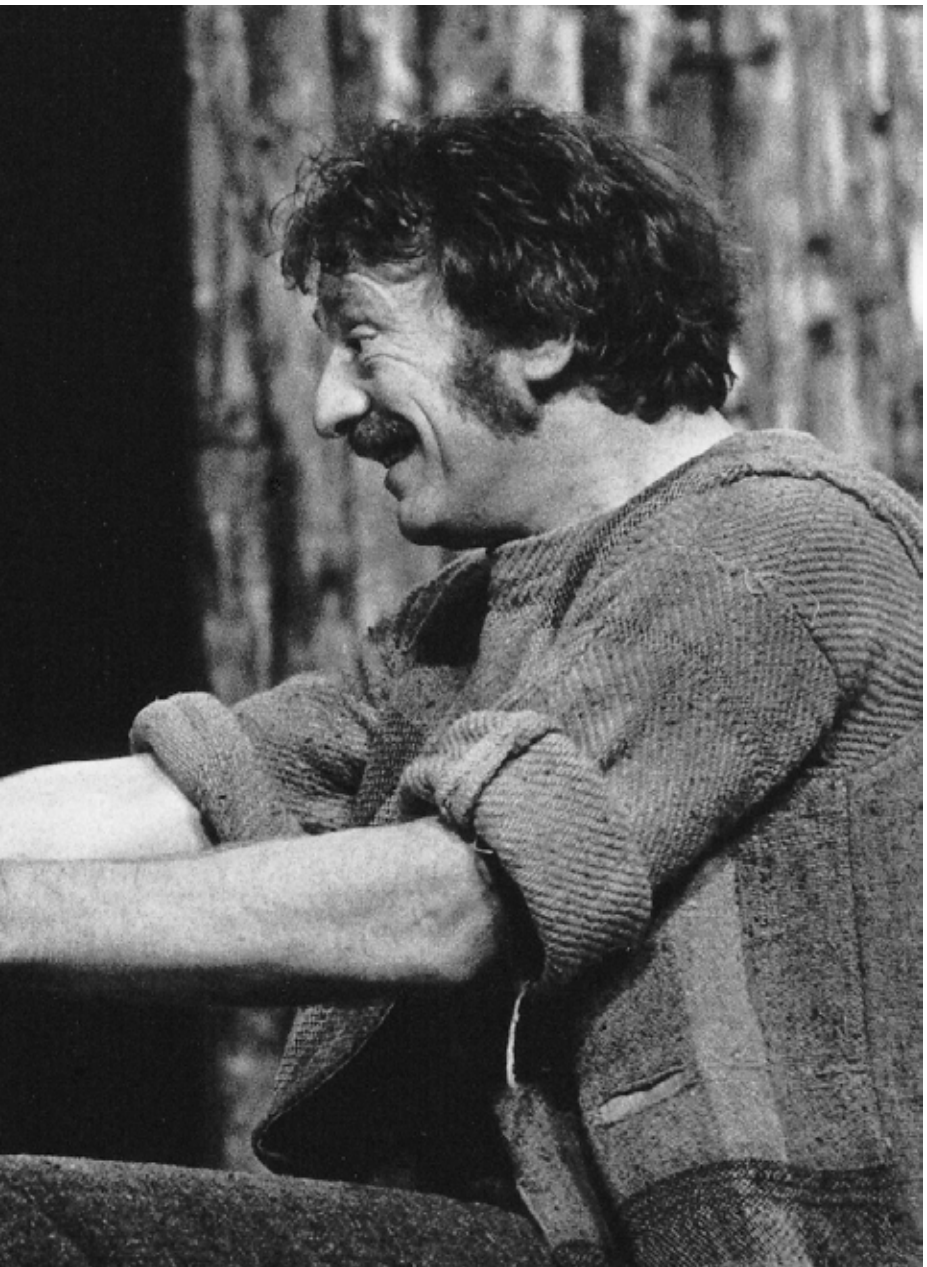
"facts" of history that shape us but images of the past embodied in language'; 'The fixity of a linguistic contour ... which matches only at certain, ritual, arbitrary points the changing landscape of fact'.[15] Friel's adroit manipulation of quotation and of intertextual echo is a rhetorical strategy, enhancing the central action of the play in its rehearsal of the oscillation between the historical and the interpretative. Deliberate anachronisms, like the use of the word 'cartographer' (first used in 1839) or 'contour' (from *c.*1860), extend this strategy and allow for the interpolation of the contemporary conflict in Northern Ireland. The military aspects of the survey are emphasized: weapons-carrying sappers, army searches, 'prodding every inch of the ground with bayonets' and (in a significant pun) 'levelling the whole land'. The stolen theodolite[16] is wielded as if it were a weapon. Similarly, the ominous Donnelly twins carry the resonance and threat of the modern Provos. Friel therefore has argued that questions of historical accuracy are fundamentally beside the point. *Translations* is ultimately a language play not a history play, an emphasis that Friel himself constantly stressed: 'The play has to do and only to do with language.' [17] He wished to understand what it means to become a

15 These were first carefully tracked by F. C. McGrath, 'Irish Babel: Brian Friel's *Translations* and George Steiner's *After Babel*', *Comparative Drama*, 23, 1 (1989), 31–49.

16 Friel is drawn to visually striking instruments and the technical vocabularies that identify them and their functions. *The Home Place* (2005) makes extensive use of the exotic instrumentation of ethnographic calibration.

17 Brian Friel, 'Extracts from a Sporadic Diary', in Tim Pat Coogan, ed., *Ireland and the Arts: A Special Issue of the* Literary Review (London, 1986), 58.
18 Murray, ed., *Brian Friel*, 80.

Mick Lally and Ann Hasson in rehearsal for Brian Friel's *Translations* at the Gulidhall, Derry, 1980. Photo Rod Tuach. © Field Day

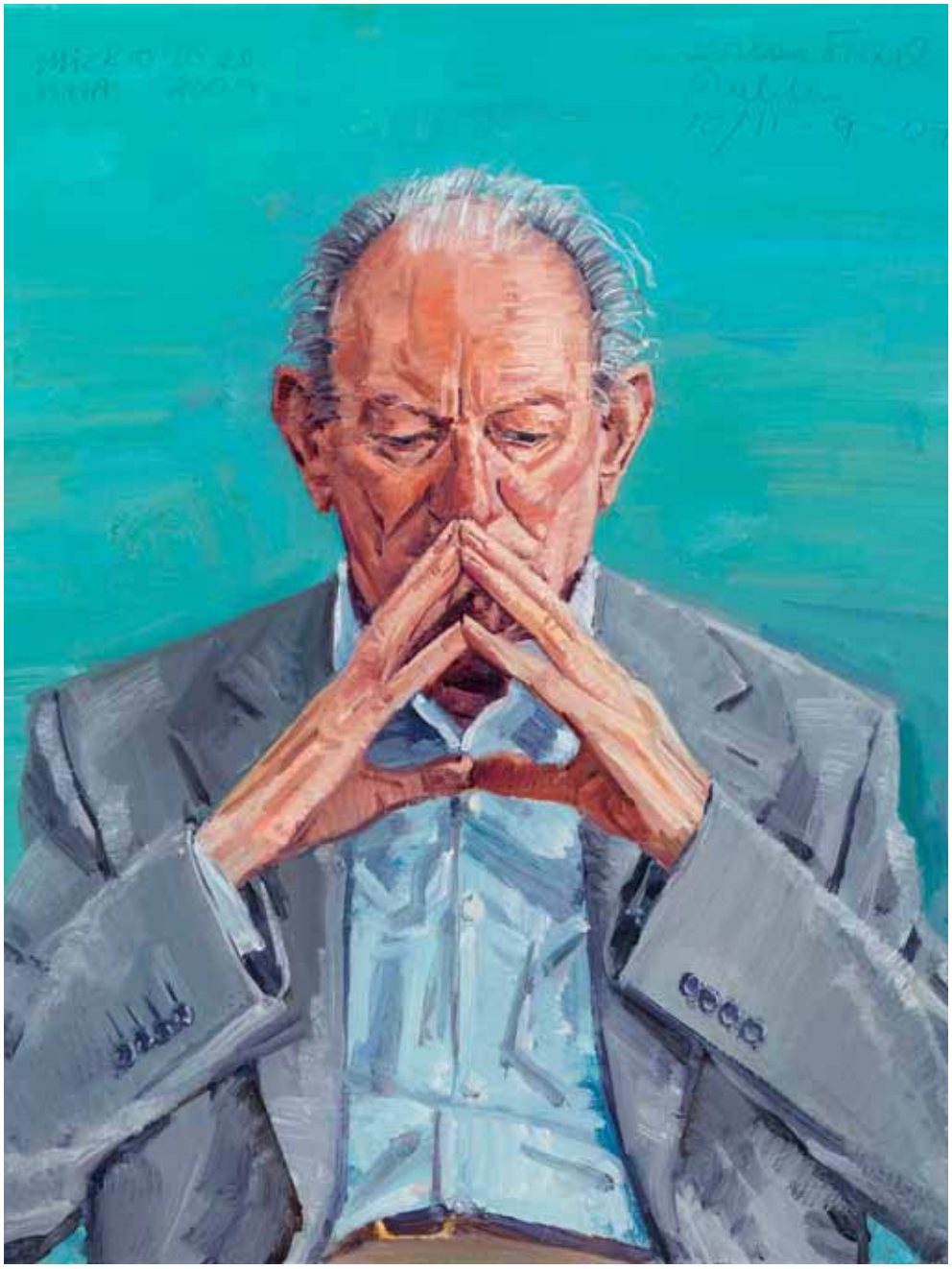


people having to use a language 'that isn't our own' and how Irish people today respond to 'having to handle a language that is not native to them'.[18] Consider Friel's own mastery of the language as in a deceptively simple phrase like 'English cannot express us': this has at least three mutually enriching meanings in this context — to hurry us up, to squeeze us out, to describe us.

The Language of Landscape

Friel's programme notes list other sources that he used — John O'Donovan's *Ordnance Survey Letters: Donegal*; Thomas Colby's *Memoir*;[19] J. H. Andrews's, *A Paper Landscape*;[20] Patrick J. Dowling's *The Hedge Schools of Ireland*;[21] and William Carleton's vivid treatment in *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry*.[22] *A Paper Landscape* provided Friel with 'a perfect metaphor' for the trauma of the linguistic lesion in nineteenth-century Ireland, although his expansive treatment moves far beyond that of the austerely scholarly cartographic historian.

The mapping of Ireland had been a long-standing colonial ambition. The native Irish tradition of *dind seanchas* (place lore) relied on a narrative rather than a technical mode of surveying the landscape. It produced a cultural landscape[23] that coded a reciprocal, vernacular relationship between a community and its environment, not imposed from outside or above but developed cumulatively, spontaneously, organically. The material practices and associated symbolic forms that comprised this cultural landscape had a dual function. The first was secular, pragmatic, social; the second was symbolic, cultural, associational. The lived landscape provided a locus for human affection, imprinted as remembered forms, ways of being, ways of living, ways of seeing, ways of knowing. This version of landscape connected its outer contours with an inner vision: in place names the landscape and the imagination meet. Place names are an accumulated repertoire of historical knowing, a narrative sediment deposited by the continuous flow of history. The sense of place fuses a material environment, a historical experience and a lived reality, and is encapsulated in the Irish word *dúchas*.[24] This version of landscape is embedded in the Irish tradition — the place lore of the *dind seanchas*, a *liber locorum*, *lieux de mémoire*, in which each place name bears a specific density of meaning. In *Translations*, Friel draws on this tradition. As the phrase *la France profonde* is widely used to indicate, even evoke, deeply enduring (or still surviving) aspects of French culture,



Mick O'Dea, b.1958
Portrait of Brian Friel, 2009
Oil on canvas
Unframed: 60.5 × 50.5cm
Photo © National Gallery of Ireland

so a 'Deep Ireland' is evoked by place names, a pre-colonial history still legible in them. Friel's contemporary, the poet John Montague, makes the point:

> The Irish landscape is a kind of primal Gaeltacht ... anyone brought up in it has already absorbed a great deal of the language. And to return to my Knockmany poem; when I wrote those lines about the hills burning with 'golden light', did I realize that I was crossing the

19 John O'Donovan, *Ordnance Survey Letters: Donegal. Letters Containing Information Relative to the Antiquities of the County of Donegal Collected During the Progress of the Ordnance Survey in 1835*, edited and with an Introduction by Michael Herity, Preface by Brian Friel (Dublin, 2000); Thomas Colby, *Ordnance Survey of the County of Londonderry, Volume the first: Memoir of the City and Northwestern Liberties of Londonderry, Parish of Templemore* (Dublin, 1837). Friel's diary described the latter as 'a very rich and wonderful book' and acknowledged that the Captain Lancey of the play is modelled on Colby.

20 J. H. Andrews, *A Paper Landscape: The Ordnance Survey in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Oxford, 1975). For Andrews's work, see Kevin Whelan, 'Beyond a Paper Landscape: John Andrews and Irish Historical Geography', in F. H. A. Aalen and Kevin Whelan, eds., *Dublin City and County: Prehistory to Present* (Dublin, 1992), 379–424.

21 Patrick J. Dowling, *The Hedge Schools of Ireland* (London, 1935).

22 William Carleton, *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry*, 5 vols. (Dublin, 1830–33).

> Bealtaine, the ridge of the god of fire? The racial aspect of a poet's inheritance should be unconscious as breathing. Where I was brought up, Irish is no longer a spoken language, but it is still very much alive in the place-names and the local idiom ... I must tap tradition where I find it, in my part of the landscape.[25]

The Ordnance Survey project became for Friel a dramatic metaphor of both colonialism and the linguistic issue in Ireland. The 1830s mapping sought to give definitive shape to a long-standing project that went back to the seventeenth century. This cartographic transition from the Irish *dind seanchas* to the new colonial language and landscape of fact reached an early culmination in the pioneering work of William Petty (1623–87). Petty's 'political arithmetic' (the origin of the discipline of economics) was itself a response to the upheavals consequent on the Reformation: he sought to rescue 'facts' from the murderous anarchy of theological disputation, which threatened to tear Britain apart in the mid-seventeenth century. By rescuing 'facts' (generated by mathematical and technical protocols) from the partisan wrangling of theologians and politicians, Petty sought a common ground of reason.[26] Rhetorically, he promoted the 'plain' style, shorn of baroque excess, inviting the consent of common experience and of a rationality based on observation and measurement. Facts in such a discursive regime were as far as possible divested of historical memory; indeed, their claim to obdurate, scientific reality depended on their repudiation of cultural ramification as a significant dimension of knowledge. Petty's Down Survey (so-called because the results for the first time were systematically set down on paper) was based on innovations in mathematical mensuration, precise instrumentation and bureaucratic efficiency. It should also be regarded as an effort to strip the inherited Irish landscape of meaning and narrative. This great humanist scientist, like his predecessor, the great poet Edmund Spenser, advocated genocide as a necessary prelude to a new beginning in Ireland. Maps did not only record, they also obliterated.

The Hedge-School Setting

The patriot Henry Grattan brusquely observed in 1811:

> One great object of national education should be to unite the inhabitants of the island and such an event cannot be well accomplished except they are taught one common language. I think that the diversity of language, and not the diversity of religion, constitutes a diversity of people. I should be very sorry that the Irish language should be forgotten but glad that the English language would be generally understood ... A real political division is founded on the diversity of language.[27]

His utilitarian-Benthamite stance was matched by Daniel O'Connell in 1833:

> I am sufficiently utilitarian not to regret its [the Irish language's] gradual abandonment. A diversity of tongues is no benefit; it was first imposed on mankind as a curse, at the building of Babel. It would be a vast advantage to mankind if all the inhabitants of the earth spoke the same language. Therefore, although the Irish language is connected with many recollections that twine around the hearts of Irishmen, yet the superior utility of the English tongue, as the medium of all modern communication, is so great, that I can witness without a sigh the gradual disuse of the Irish.[28]

The determined effort by state and Church to regain control of popular education via a national system stemmed from the conviction that the 1790s had exposed the

23 In historical geography, the term 'cultural landscape' denotes the landscape as it is altered by human occupance: fields, farms, roads, towns, houses, place names: see F. H. A. Aalen, Kevin Whelan and Matthew Stout, eds., *Atlas of the Irish Rural Landscape* (Cork, 1997).

24 See the pioneering treatment of the concept of *dúchas* by Peter McQuillan in his *Key Words of the Irish Language: Essays in the Irish Ideas of Identity and Freedom* (Cork, 2002).

25 John Montague, 'A Primal Gaeltacht', in his *The Figure in the Cave and Other Essays* (Dublin, 1989), 42–44, 44. Montague was born in 1929, the same year as Friel, in Brooklyn. In 1933 he was sent to live with his aunts at Garvaghey, County Tyrone, the same county where Friel was born. His *The Rough Field* (Dublin, 1972) is structured around an extended meditation on the meaning of Garvaghey/Garbh Achaidh/the Rough Field, as a metaphor for understanding the modern conflict.

26 I am indebted here to Mary Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society* (Chicago, 1998), 92–143.

27 Cited in Thomas Blayney, *Narrative of a Forced Journey through Spain and France, as a Prisoner of War, in the years 1810 to 1814*, 2 vols. (London, 1814), vol. 1, 340–41.

political danger of allowing an informal education sector (the 'hedge-schools') to flourish with minimal supervision by Church and state. For conservatives, the dominant role of schoolmasters in the United Irish organization at local level had been one of the most disturbing aspects of that decade. Masterless men, hedge-schoolteachers were to be feared as agents of sedition. Outside the reach of Church and state, they had a foot — and a tongue — in both worlds: 'From this it follows then that education is your only resource; 'tis this alone can open to you all channels of instruction, and this will enable you to meet the enemy, who has secretly got possession, not only on equal terms, but with superior advantage.'[29] Richard Lovell Edgeworth (father of the novelist Maria) observed: 'It is fresh in our memories that in the progress of the last rebellion in this country, those who could read or write were at first employed to influence and direct the rest.'[30] It suited both Church and state that these schoolmasters be demonized as a prelude to gaining control over them, hence the post-rebellion surge of polemical writing that emphasized the luridly inappropriate school texts, their anomalous emphasis on Latin and Greek and, ultimately, the character defects of the pedagogues themselves.

But this is all part of a propaganda campaign that successfully obscured the reality that the national school project was in essence a response to the success, not the failure, of the hedge-schools.[31] The 1798 rebellion had shocked both Church and state by demonstrating their lack of control in this crucial area; part of the response in the post-Union period was a campaign of increasingly vituperative attacks on the hedge-schools' allegedly baneful influence. Here the Catholic Church and the British state shared a moral and political aim, to control education. Their co-operation was necessary for the success of the new national school system. Control rather than reform was the central issue; after all, 85 per cent of hedge-schoolmasters were quietly absorbed into the national system.[32] But the curriculum and the organization of the schools themselves came under sustained attack. Opponents of the hedge-schools regularly assembled lists of the texts (primarily chapbooks) they used, to demonstrate how dissolute and archaic these establishments were.[33] The Catholic bishop, James Doyle (known as JKL), for example, disapproved of the mixed education of the informal schools: 'the children are piled on each other and the sexes promiscuously jumble together'.[34] Educational historians have been hasty in endorsing these partisan attacks. Yet the most striking feature of the hedge-schools was their pragmatism and success. How, for instance, was the astonishing language transition in Ireland in the hedge-school period achieved or how did Ireland become English-speaking, if not through the medium of the hedge-school? The most effective anglicizing influence in eighteenth-century Ireland, the hedge-schools were not an archaizing, but a modernizing force. Their wholesale absorption into the new system shows that what occurred was a takeover, not a radical reform, by the state.

The very term 'hedge-school' was a semantic deformation. It originated in the common English usage of 'hedge' as 'an attribute expressing contempt' (*OED*), for example, hedge-doctor, hedge-lawyer, hedge-alehouse, etc. Because of the informal nature of popular, especially Catholic, education and the lack of accredited training for schoolteachers under the Penal Laws, the term 'hedge-school' was increasingly applied in this pejorative sense as the education debate intensified in the early nineteenth century when the word was popularized. The application of the term to mean schools held in the open air, or in the side of a ditch, is adventitious: the original derivation has simply been occluded. The English traveller Arthur Young was one of the first to use the term 'hedge school'.[35] The first literary use occurs in John O'Keefe's play *The Wicklow*

28 Cited in Dermot Gleeson, 'Peter O'Connell: Scholar and Scribe 1755–1826', *Studies*, 33 (1944), 342–48.

29 [James Dunn?] *Essay on the Present State of Manners and Education among the Lower Class of the People of Ireland and the Means of Improving Them* (Dublin, 1799), 7.

30 Blayney, *Narrative*, vol. 1, 344.

31 L. M. Cullen, 'Patrons, Teachers and Literacy in Irish 1700–1850', in Mary Daly and David Dickson, eds., *The Origins of Popular Literacy in Ireland* (Dublin, 1990), 15–44.

32 Mary Daly, 'The Development of the National School System 1831–40', in Art Cosgrove and James McGuire, eds., *Studies in Irish History Presented to R. Dudley Edwards* (Dublin, 1979), 157.

33 Rolf Loeber and Magda Stouthamer Loeber, 'Fictions Available to and Written for Cottagers', in Bernadette Cunningham and Máire Kennedy, eds., *The Experience of Reading: Irish Historical Perspectives* (Dublin, 1999), 124–72.

34 Cited in W. Vaughan, ed., *A New History of Ireland, Volume V: Ireland under the Union 1801–1870* (Oxford, 1990), 582.

35 Arthur Young, *A Tour in Ireland*, 2 vols. (London, 1780), vol. 2, 147.

Commercial illustration depicting the 12-inch coast survey theodolite, no. 13, for primary triangulation. Undated engraving. © Bettmann/CORBIS

Goldmines (1796). Matt Frayne, the hedge-schoolmaster in Carleton's popular *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry* (1830–33), became the model for future literary versions, in which the 'master' was regularly represented as the epitome of Gaelic Ireland, and his school as a site for a picturesque 'Gaelic' cultural dilapidation. Thomas Flanagan's novel *The Year of the French* (1979) offers a modern example.[36] The overblown romanticization of this figure conceals the English-speaking mundanity

36 Flanagan's close friend Seamus Heaney was the model for the poet/teacher Cormac McCarthy.

Building the Tower of Babel, from Bedford Book of Hours 1423. © The Art Archive / British Library

of the actual Irish popular education system that worked so effectively.

The *locus classicus* of the description of a hedge-schoolmaster is Lady Morgan's (Sydney Owenson's) chapter on Thady Connellan[37] in her *Patriotic Sketches* of 1807.[38] Although Friel never refers to it, his hedge-schoolmaster Hugh seems closely modelled on it. He was later drawn to the reminiscences of Charles

37 Thaddaeus [Thady] Connellan (1780–1854), a native of Skreen in County Sligo, received a 'fair classical education', started his own small school and became 'a thorough Irish scholar'. He converted to Protestantism *c.*1808, and like many other 'manuscript men', he ran an evangelical Bible school dedicated to converting the native Irish through the medium of the Irish language. His *An Irish and English Spelling Book* reached a nineteenth edition by 1848, and he also produced *An English–Irish dictionary, Intended for the Use of Schools* (1814) and *The Proverbs of Solomon* (1823), containing English, Irish, and Hebrew versions. He died in great poverty in Sligo, and his funeral provoked bitter sectarian scenes. All previous accounts are superseded by the magisterial treatment in Pádraig de Brún, *Scriptural Instruction in the Vernacular: The Irish Society and Its Teachers 1818–1827* (Dublin, 2009), 14–39.

38 Sydney Owenson, *Patriotic Sketches in Ireland* (London, 1807), 131–50.

McGlinchey (1861–1954), a weaver and tailor of Meentiagh glen in the Inishowen peninsula of County Donegal (the setting of *Translations*). Friel edited and introduced the book *The Last of the Name*.[39] He presents the old man, as he does Hugh in the play, as a Janus figure, inhabiting both 'a rural community in the process of shedding the last vestiges of a Gaelic past and of an old Christianity that still cohabited with an older paganism', and an emerging community coming to an uneasy accommodation with the modern world, 'the buses, the cars, the silk stockings'.[40] In forming this figure, Friel also had in mind his Irish-speaking and illiterate grandparents,[41] and a great-great-grandfather McCabe, a hedge-schoolmaster from Mayo who settled in Donegal and who was remembered as being 'fond of a drop'. This world was not at all remote in any sense — 'It's very close, you know'.[42]

John O'Donovan

Friel has confirmed that the character Owen in the play is a version of John O'Donovan.[43] O'Donovan, the indispensable Irish-language adviser to the Ordnance Survey, was appointed 'orthographer and etymologist' to the survey in 1830.[44] He quickly acquired a pivotal role in the new topographical department, investigating the derivation of Irish place names.[45] In 1834, he commenced on his heroic fieldwork, travelling on foot across Ireland to study the vast array of place names, sending back an inexhaustible flow of correspondence, at once witty, irascible and erudite (the justly celebrated 'Ordnance Survey Letters')[46] from 1834 to 1841. He personally sourced 140,000 Irish place names in the field, and established the authorized versions in anglicized orthography, chosen to mimic the sound of the Irish-language names, which were subsequently inscribed on the Ordnance Survey maps, and which are still the legally binding versions of place names in the modern Republic of Ireland.

This little man (five feet, two inches) was a giant of nineteenth-century scholarship, the greatest-ever scholar of the Irish language. His exemplary edition, including text, translation and notes, of *Annála Ríoghachta Éireann/Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland*, appearing in six volumes from 1848 to 1851, established new and formidable scholarly standards for Irish-language material.[47] His translations opened to English speakers the hitherto sealed casket of the Irish literary tradition. In that sense, O'Donovan was an indispensable precursor of the Literary Revival,[48] which sought, in the aftermath of the linguistic shift from an Irish-speaking to an English-speaking Ireland, to establish a version of English sufficiently distinctive to anchor an Irish aesthetic. The Revival could be regarded as an extravagant discourse in the English language about dumbness in the Irish language.[49] It craved access to the world of a vanished or vanishing Gaelic civilization, whose ambiguous absence must be brought to renewed presence in English-language forms. Hence the Revival featured strenuous efforts to invent a new English-based but distinctive language capable of that task. The experiments include W. B. Yeats's occult dialect in *A Vision*, James Joyce's molten English in *Finnegans Wake*, Lady Gregory's Kiltartanese, heavily influenced by the sounds and grammatical forms of Hiberno-English, J. M. Synge's variations on folk-dialect, and Samuel Beckett's experiments in escaping 'the Anglo-Irish exuberance and automatisms' by writing in French and then back-translating into an almost comically austere English.

Yet despite O'Donovan's eminence as an Irish-language scholar, none of his six surviving sons was an Irish speaker.[50] He himself believed that the language did not merit a future role in the public sphere:

I respect it as a great influence that has

39 Charles McGlinchey, *The Last of the Name*, edited and with an Introduction by Brian Friel (Belfast, 1986). McGlinchey's tales had been transcribed by Patrick Kavanagh, the local teacher, in the 1940s and 1950s. For the chapter on education, see 107–11.

40 Friel, Introduction, *The Last of the Name*, 2.

41 Murray, ed., *Brian Friel*, 108.

42 Murray, ed., *Brian Friel*, 116. Friel lived for many years about a mile from Burnfoot, a key location in the play.

43 John O'Donovan/Seán Ó Donnabháin (1806–61) was born in the parish of Slieverue, County Kilkenny, to a Catholic farming family. He was employed as a scribe to copy Irish manuscripts and legal documents in 1827, prepared an analytic catalogue of Irish manuscripts at Trinity College, Dublin, and was co-founder of the Irish Archaeological Society in 1840. He wrote topographical and historical essays for the *Dublin Penny Journal* and the *Irish Penny Journal*. His serviceable *Grammar of the Irish Language* appeared in 1845. Appointed professor of Celtic Studies at Queen's University, Belfast, in 1849, he continued to live in Dublin. The last decade of his life was preoccupied with his editorial work on the ancient Irish laws (the so-called Brehon laws), the *Seanchas Mór*: See R. B. Walsh, 'John O'Donovan: The Man and the Scholar', in Cyril

Mick Lally and Ann Hasson in rehearsal for Brian Friel's *Translations* at the Gulidhall, Derry, 1980. Photo: Rod Tuach. © Field Day

been and no longer is or can be. It fed the poetical flame within the people's mind, and was the parent of true poetry in the more cultivated: it nourished the latent, instinctive aspirations of the Irish race, gave them aliment, and directed their movements, and rescued their ancestors from the dominion of brutish ignorance, stirred them with insatiable thirst for true knowledge, which, when established on a right basis, will raise this ancient and imaginative people to a truly noble standard among the civilised nations of modern Europe: but its office has been fulfilled: it is no longer necessary to the exigencies of modern society, with which the Irish race must either amalgamate or perish. The only interest it can have is a historical or poetical one. [51]

Owen in *Translations* is 'a city man', 'wealthy', who 'got out in time': he shrugs

Byrne and Margaret Harry, eds., *Talamh an Éisc: Canadian and Irish essays* (Halifax, NS, 1986), 119–39; Éamonn de hÓir, *Seán Ó Donnabháin agus Eoghan Ó Comhraí* (Dublin, 1962); Nollaig Ó Muraíle, 'John O'Donovan', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004).

44 Patricia Boyne, *John O'Donovan, 1806–1861* (Aberystwyth, 1987).

45 Art Ó Maolfabhail, 'An tSuirbhéireacht Ordanáis agus logainmneacha na hÉireann 1824–34', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 89C (1989), 37–66; Art Ó Maolfabhail, 'Éadbhard Ó Raghallaigh, Seán Ó Donnabháin agus an tSuirbhéireacht Ordanáis 1830–4', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 91C (1991), 73–103.

46 These survive in manuscript (Ordnance Survey Archives, Phoenix Park, Dublin), in typescript volumes edited by Fr Michael O'Flanagan from 1924 to1932 (National Library of Ireland), and in a modern series published by Four Masters Press. Friel contributed the Preface to the Donegal volume: John O'Donovan, *Ordnance Survey Letters: Donegal. Letters Containing Information Relative*

to the Antiquities of the County of Donegal Collected During the Progress of the Ordnance Survey in 1835, edited and with an Introduction by Michael Herity, Preface by Brian Friel (Dublin, 2000).

47 Nollaig Ó Muraíle, 'Seán Ó Donnabháin, "An Cúigiú Máistir"', in R. Ó hUiginn, ed., *Scoláirí Gaeilge XXVII: Léachtaí Cholm Cille* (Magh Nuad, 1997), 11–82.

48 Vivian Mercier, *Modern Irish Literature: Sources and Founders* (Oxford, 1994), 10–11. Joyce's gleeful parodies of the mellifluously alliterative O'Donovan translations pepper both *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*.

49 This argument is made at greater length in Kevin Whelan, 'The Memories of "The Dead"', *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 15, 1 (2002), 59–97.

50 Four of them joined the Irish revolutionary group the Fenians, including the flamboyant Edmund, a pioneering 'war correspondent' in Spain, Bosnia and Afghanistan, whose final fatal posting was to cover the Mahdi revolt in the Sudan in 1883.

51 John O'Donovan, 'On the Traditions of the County of Kilkenny', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, 1 (1849–51), 369.

52 See Delaney, ed., *Brian Friel in Conversation*, 118; in another revealing comment, Friel agreed that the Owen/O'Donovan character could be regarded as 'a typical SDLP man' (86). The

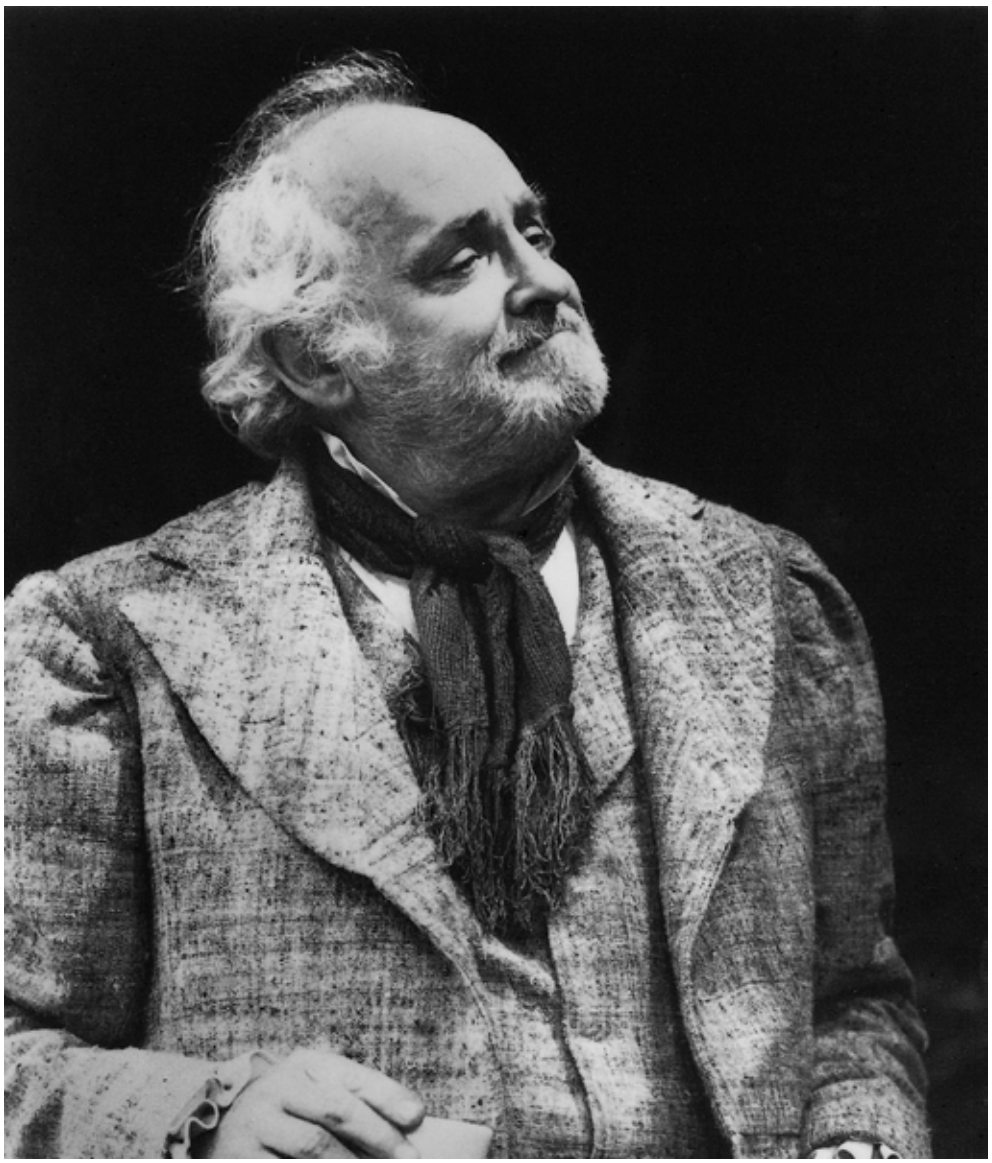
off his dual identity as Owen/Roland — 'it's the same me', 'a mistake'. He works for the benefit of the colonists, he is on their payroll, he is a go-between, and he is faintly soiled by the taint of being an informer. In the context of Northern Ireland in 1980, at the height of its dirty war, the long-standing Irish paranoia about informers had reached another culmination, driven to it by the new British tactic of employing 'supergrasses' — informers whose uncorroborated testimony jailed large numbers of their former colleagues. Friel's own comments are that O'Donovan could be seen both to have performed 'the actions and the perfidy of a quisling' but also to have embarked on a 'task of honour'.[52] (We are reminded of the long-standing joke among translators: *traduttore/traditore*, translator/traitor, as in the mocking nickname 'the Translator' given by Barcelona fans to José Mourinho.)[53] William Hazlitt claimed in 1814 that 'He who speaks two languages has no country' — but adds: 'The French, when they made their language the common language of the courts of Europe, gained more than by all their other conquests put together.'[54] Here again in *Translations* a question is posed but not resolved: should we admire or condemn Owen/O'Donovan? And here, too, we can see a recurrent pattern in Friel's work; his plays often feature an outsider figure whose comments on the action of the drama constitute a translation that is both a rational account of it and yet is suspect in virtue of its detachment, a distance that seems scandalous, as, for example, Tom Hoffnung in *Aristocrats* or Mabel Bagenal in *Making History*. Their ancestry ultimately extends to Thornton Wilder's play *Our Town* (1938), whose Grover's Corner is an obvious antecedent of Friel's Ballybeg.

The Irish Language: 'The Modern Babel'

We cannot properly weigh the language issue in Friel's play unless we understand the contempt in which the Irish language was held at the end of the nineteenth century. Consider the contribution of John Pentland Mahaffy (1839–1919),[55] provost of Trinity College, prolific, if erratic, classical scholar, leading Anglo-Irishman, and brilliant conversationalist.[56] Mahaffy, a quintessential Trinity man, gave six decades of service as student, tutor, professor, senior fellow, vice-provost and provost: he was accordingly taken to speak as the official voice of Anglo-Ireland. He dismissed cultural nationalism as a diseased version of provincialism, and vigorously resisted efforts to have Irish taught as a subject at any level in the Irish education system. He disparaged Gaelic literature on the grounds that it was impossible to find a text in the language that was not 'either religious, silly or indecent'.[57] In his 1896 essay 'A Modern Babel', directed at a British audience, Mahaffy distinguished between advancing and receding civilizations: one spoke a universal imperial language; the other a local 'tongue'. A common language like Latin or its modern successor English was 'a lever of civilisation': 'The British tongue, like British gold, will probably pervade the world' — 'the great object which every promoter of imperial Britain interests should have in view'. He dismissed Irish as a 'miserable remnant of barbarism', 'a most difficult and useless tongue, not only useless, but a mischievous obstacle to civilisation' and sneered that Irish-language enthusiasts 'might also turn their attention to the dying language of the Maories [*sic*] and the natives of Australia'.[58] Thus the entire Revival project was a retrograde step, a retreat to the Dark Ages, a futile scrabbling in the ruins of Babel.

The Hidden Ireland

The most considered riposte to such dismissals came from Daniel Corkery.[59] His cultural criticism was established on a Ruskinian basis of contempt for neo-classical 'egotism'. From John Ruskin, he learned to value the integration of art and



Ray Hanlon in rehearsal for Brian Friel's *Translations* at the Gulidhall, Derry, 1980. Photo: Rod Tuach. © Field Day

life as an expression of cultural unity that sustained social harmony. Yet it took him some time to realize that he was himself living in such a polity. When he had first seen Gaelic script in Cork shop signs, he thought that it was Chinese. Although the Cork city hinterland had vibrant Irish-speaking communities, he was incredulous that people still lived their lives through the language. Gradually, as his awareness of the language deepened, he came to regard living Irish-language communities as an antidote to the pallor and disconnectedness of modern urban life. Because these communities had never been severed from their ancient attachments, they did not suffer the dissociation of sensibility that Ruskin before him and T. S. Eliot after him diagnosed as a morbid symptom of modernity.[60] In an Irish context, Yeats had striven, unconvincingly, to promote the Anglo-Irish Big House as an achieved culture, a serene remnant of the ancient unity: now Corkery transposed the

Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) repudiated the use of violence as a political weapon and pursued moderate constitutional nationalist goals. Hard-line republicans regarded the party as too craven (the 'Stoop Down Low Party') in its response to the British presence. Its leader, and later Nobel Peace Prize winner, John Hume, was a Derry man, so an overtly political reading of the play would have resonated with the play's first audience in the Guildhall in Derry, including Hume himself.

53 Mourinho worked at the Camp Nou, the Barcelona football stadium, in the 1990s translating for the English manager Bobby Robson—thus earning him the taunting nickname from Barcelona fans.

54 William Hazlitt, 'Illustrations of Vetus', in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 21 vols., ed. P. Howe (London, 1930–34), vol. 7, 374–75.

55 R. B. McDowell and W. B. Stanford, *Mahaffy, A Biography of an Anglo-Irishman* (London, 1975 [1971]).

56 Mahaffy was a sparkling if malicious conversationalist and epigrammatist: 'An Irish bull, Madam, is always pregnant.' His *The Principles of the Art of Conversation* (1887) was reviewed by his pupil Oscar Wilde,