

Irish Poetry – translations by Rosemarie Rowley

Here are some translations from classic Irish poems

“**Dónal Óg**” (**Young Donal**) which was Ted Hughes’s favourite poem, some versions in Ireland and Scotland date back to the middle ages,

“**Gile na Gile**” (**Fairest of the Fair**) by Aodhghán (Egan) O Rathaille

Donnchadha Bán (**Fair-haired Donncha**) by an anonymous woman bard from Connaught, written after the 1798 rebellion

DŌNAL ŌG

Dónal Óg, don’t let your words astray
But take me with you when you cross the water
You’ll have a fairing on every market day
And you can sleep with the Greek king’s daughter.

If you go without me I have your description
You have fair tresses and two green eyes
Twelve yellow curls in your hair, a depiction
The colour of a cowslip or a garden rose

It was late last night a dog barked where you stood
And the snipe squawked of your presence in the marsh
You were deep in solitude in the wood
May you be without a wife even if this sounds harsh.

You promised me and it was a lie
You’d wait for me at the sheep’s paling
I whistled and called three hundred times my cry
And all I heard was a small lamb wailing

You promised me something which came easy
A fleet of golden ships with silver masts
Twelve townlands and the market busy
And a limestone court near the sea headfasts

You promised me something quite impossible
That you would give me gloves made of fish-skin

That you would give me bird-skin shoes, incredible
And a suit of Irish material, the costliest, silken

Donal Og, I'd be better for you
Than a haughty woman puffed with pride
I'd do your milking and churning for you
And however hard the blows, I'd be at your side

Ochone, and it isn't that I'm famished
For the want of food or drink or sleep
It's the reason I'm skinny and almost vanished
My love for a young man has cut me deep

It was early in the morning I saw a young man
Upon a horse, taking the road
He didn't come near me nor exert a ban
On returning home, I cried a load

When I go to the Well of Loneliness
I sit and cry till my heart's a stone
All life is around me, save a true caress
From he with amber shadow on his high cheekbone

It was upon a Sunday I gave you my love
The very Sunday before Easter Day
I was reading the passion on my knees, it behove
My two eyes sending you love all the way

O mother, please let me have him, please
And give him all in the world I possess
Even go out and beg for alms on your knees
Don't prevaricate and deny me access

My mother told me not to speak to you
Today, tomorrow, or on the Sabbath
It was bad timing to be warned against you
The stable door closed: what's left is the ha'p'orth

Black as the sloe is the heart inside of me
Black as a lump of coal in a smithy's forge
Black as a footprint in a shining hallway
As a dark mood overcoming humour's urge.

You took the East, and you took the West from me,
You took my future and my past, it's hell
You took the moon and you took the sun from me
And I greatly fear you have robbed me of God as well.

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Fairest of the Fair (Gile na Gile) by Egan O Rahilly- translated from the Irish
by Rosemarie Rowley – All these translations Published in Books Ireland, 2000

Fairest of the fair, she was seen on the road alone
More translucent than crystal the green rims of her blue eyes bleak
Yet sweeter than sweet the expression far from a wizened moan,
Her tinge red and fair-hued, setting fire to the embers of her rosy cheek

There was a twist and a turn in every hair of her yellow tress
I saw the round perfection of the dew drop gathered like a glistening comb,
Like an accoutrement that was clearer than glass, on her swelling breast
Springing to life a generation of hope in her creamy celestial home

Give me the wisdom of the prophets, and she so lonely in truth
The knowledge that he who is faithful will return and reverse
Such information that the company was bewitched that forced him into sharp
rout
And other sources I would not dream of putting into well-joined verse

Such insipidity of impotence to let me weft into hard opinion, judge
I'd be a bondsman of slaves to tie me into hardship of truth
On the blue of the Blessed Mary I would seek protection from rashness lest I
budge
From the story that the beautiful maiden vanished in flame in the breast of
Luachra

I ran with the speed of the really volatile to pilot my nimble heart
Through craggy borders and long eared crests of trees with sallies by hand
Through the darkness I came, not understanding how I found my part
Of the way to the place of places magically put together by a Druidic band

I was beset by a hirsute drunken gang, thrown on a heap
And a mob of slender maidens with many a tight curl
Cast me in irons without a wink of sleep
And a stocky brute took hold of me by the breast – a churl

I told her in the highest expression of truth of which I was capable
That she had no right to be joined to so craven a lout at her side
When she had at all times a noble one who was able
And of three times over the finest of Scots blood, to make her his tender bride

When she heard my voice she complained with pride and round
The flood of tears coursed down her cheekbone
She sent me away out of the fairy mound
Fairest of the fair, I beheld her on the road alone.

My trial, my trouble, my heartscald, my sorrow, my loss
Our sunny bright darling loving and tender
Tossed on the black horns of the twisted crew
There is no remedy till our Lions return over the sea and rescue her from such a
bender!

FAIR-HAIRED DONNCHA (Donnchadha Bán)

In this small townland happened a wonder
Fair-haired Donncha hanging loose
The death cap on him his hat to sunder
His cravat replaced by a hempen noose

I am approaching in the dead of night
Like a helpless lamp under a flock of sheep
My breast covered and my head a fright
To see my dear brother in eternal sleep

I keened the first bout at the head of the lake
And the second long scream at the foot of the gallows
The third agony at the start of the wake
In the midst of strangers, my mouth like aloes

If I had you, where you used belong
Down in Sligo, or the town of the Robe
I would break the gallows, cut the rope strong
And set fair-haired Donncha free from foreign probe

Fair-haired Donncha, it's not the gallows you deserve
Your place at the market and the threshing of corn
North and South, your plough would swerve
Turning the deep red sod upwards to be reborn

Fair-haired Donncha, sweet faithful little brother
I know the people who turned your life to blight
Passing the goblet, reddening the pipe for each other
Waist high in the dew at the ending of the night

You, seed of Mulhaun, misfortunate harbinger of ill
He wasn't an amenable sucker, though you got him early
He was a fine figure of a young man, not yours to kill
Who was made for sport and getting sweet sounds from a hurley

O, Fair-haired Donncha, is not death your spancel
In spurs and boots, no ornament would you worsen
I would put fashionable clothes on you, in your everlasting chancel
How I would deck you out as a noble person!

Seed of Mulhaun may your sons be scattered
May your daughters never a dowry seek
The two ends of your table empty and your floor splattered
For my brother you slew, and his fine physique

The dowry of fair-haired Donncha is coming home, you vandal
And there is no sign of a sheep, a cow, or a horse
But tobacco, pipes, and a guttering candle
I won't upbraid them, to grudge would be worse

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