On Amhrán na bhFiann

Sinne Fianna Fáil,
atá faoi gheall ag Éirinn,
Buíon dár slua
thar toinn do ráinig chugainn,
Faoi mhóid bheith saor
Seantír ár sinsear feasta,
Ní fhágfar faoin tíorán ná faoin tráill.
Anocht a théam sa bhearna bhaoil,
Le gean ar Ghaeil, chun báis nó saoil,
Le gunna-scréach faoi lámhach na bpiléar,
Seo libh canaig' amhrán na bhFiann.

Translation

Liam Ó Rinn's *Amhrán na bhFiann* is a masterpiece of translation. To see this, we're going to have to acknowledge one important thing: the song upon which it is based, 'A Soldier's Song', is not very good. Actually, it is cringe-inducingly bad. Peadar Kearney wrote some charming songs in his life time, 'Down by the Glenside' is haunting when sung right, 'God Bless England' is genuinely amusing. But 'A Soldier's Song' blunders clumsily from line to line, heaving in pursuit of the next rhyme - most notably the rhyming of Ireland with 'Sireland' (shudder) in the sixth line. It's adoption as the national anthem was almost certainly a result of its association with the Irish Volunteers in the GPO rather than any literary merit. So, why, when the original source material is so bad, does *Amhrán na bhFiann* have the dignity and force it has? Well, let's look at it line by line.[1]

[1] I'll confine my focus to the chorus.

Line by line

Sinne Fianna Fáil

Soldiers are we

From the first word, we get some explanation. It's Munster Irish. During the Irish language revival, there were, as you would expect, fights about which dialect would get to serve as the new standard Irish. Ultimately an artificial standard, the *Caighdeán Oifigúil* was created to resolve this. For a time, the main contender was Munster Irish, in part at least because it spoke with a kind of authority. This was in part due to the reputation of Fr Peadar O'Laoghaire, a novelist from Cork who wrote several influential books in Munster Irish and never hesitated to tell everyone outside of Cork that they were speaking Irish wrong.[2]

The first word, *Sinne*, is 'we' in Munster Irish. However, it's not 'we' in the sense of 'we are going to the shops'. In everyday speech, the pronoun comes built into the verb. Rather it is 'we' in a more emphatic sense. Elsewhere in Ireland, the form *sinn*has been replaced with the word *muid*except in certain idiomatic contexts. So the political party Sinn Féin might have otherwise been called *Muid Féin*.[3] However, you've probably seen the extra -e at the end which is sometimes added for emphasis. So it is really WE or US, an affirmation.

[2] This attitude extended beyond the bounds of Munster. The oral tradition is rich with Ranns on the matter.
Cé go raibh Virgil glic sa Róimh
Is Hómar eolach ins an Ghréig,
Ní samhail iad le hollaimh Mumhan
Ag seasamh clú do chlann na nGael.
While Virgil was clever in Rome
And Homer, insightful in Greece
They're not a match to the learned of Munster
Who bring fame to the clan of the Gaels

[3] *Sinn Féin* means 'we ourselves' though sometimes you might encounter an erroneous and politically motivated mistranslation 'ourselves alone'.

Second, the line has begun with ‘we’. That’s grammatically a bit odd for Irish as Irish sentences normally begin with the verb (Irish is one of the 11% of languages in which the verb starts the sentence). A simplistic translation of ‘Soldiers are we’ might be *is saighdiúirí muid* ; however, Ó Rinn’s translation is more dramatic and drops the verb altogether leaving the apposition, ’we, soldiers’. It’s worth noting that Kearney also breaks grammatical conventions of English to say ‘Soldiers are we’ rather than the less dramatic ‘We are soldiers’. I wish I could say that this was driven by the same sense of gravitas as the Irish version but it was almost certainly because he wanted to rhyme ‘we’ with ‘free’ in the fifth line. If he could have thought of a rhyme for soldiers, he probably would have used it.

So, that’s the first word. The second is where the genius really begins and where Ó Rinn begins to connect the lyrics with a literary tradition spanning well over a millennium. The trick is how he translates soldiers: *Fianna Fáil*. This is familiar as the name of the political party who took their name from the song. There are two parts here. Let’s start with Fianna.[4]

[4] The earliest translation used the term *laochra* , heroes, rather than *fianna*.

While Medieval Irish law texts describe a *Fianna* as a band of young, aristocratic men who had not yet come into their inheritance and would hunt deer and boar, the term is largely understood to refer to a specific *Fianna*, that of Fionn MacCumhaill. The stories of Fionn McCumhaill date back to at least the 7th century. He appears later in the 9th centurt *Bruiden Âtha Í* and the 10th century *Tochmarc Ailbe* all the way to *Acallam na Senórach* in the 14th century. This alone spans 700 years of literary history in which the Fianna do battle with Fomorians and Fír Bolg, monsters and witches.

The third word, *Fál* [genitive, *Fáil*], is one of the ancient names of Ireland. There are several names for Ireland including *Banba, Fál and Éire*. The *Lia Fáil* is the standing stone on the Hill of Tara which is said to cry out when touched by the rightful High King of Ireland (though technically Cúchulainn is said to have broken it at some point).

And so the world ‘soldiers’ becomes *Fianna Fáil*. Each word here packs centuries of accumulated memory and myth which simply isn’t present in any of the English words.

atá faoi gheall ag Éirinn	whose lives are pledged to Ireland

This is relatively straightforward. *atá*forms the relative clause. It’s the ‘whose’ in English.*Faoi gheall* is the Irish way of saying ‘pledged’. Literally it means ‘under a pledge’ (like being ‘under oath’). *Geall* can be pledge but it can also be promise (e.g. Geallaim duit…, I promise you…). The lives are *faoi gheall* to Ireland.

Buíon dár slua // thar toinn do ráinig chugainn,	Some have come from a land beyond the wave

I’ll take these lines together. *Buíon dár slua* is effectively doing the job of ‘some’ in English but as you’d expect, it’s doing a lot more. Crudely, this is something like ‘a band of our crowd’. *Buíon* is a ‘band’ in the military sense, *dár* is ‘of our’ and *slua* is ‘crowd’, the source of the English word slew (as in ‘a slew of people’).

Thar toinn is ‘over waves’ while the rest of the sentence captures ‘they came to us’. The original meaning here concerned soldiers from the continent who came to fight for Irish Independence. Historically, these were Spanish and French soldiers. I think it has considerable potential, though, for reinterpretation. We can acknowledge it as a statement that some Irish people are immigrants. Not all of us were born in Ireland. Some Irish people were born in Poland, Nigeria, Latvia, all over the world but they are still Irish; they are still *ár slua. Buíon dár slua, thar toinn do ráinig chugainn.*

Faoi mhóid bheith saor — Sworn to be free

Again, like *faoi gheall,faoi mhóid* captures the idea that you are under something, a *móid*, ‘a vow *a bheith saor*, ‘to be free’. Now this is the kind of idea that Germans love. To a certain mindset, this sentence is an oxymoron. You can’t vow to be free. You can’t bind yourself to the commitment to be free because freedom is independence of bonds and obligations. This is the negative conception of liberty. What this line does is capture the idea that freedom is an obligation. Something which is taken up generation after generation, which must be preserved and championed. One doesn’t receive freedom but one takes it upon oneself as a responsibility.

Seantír ár sinsear feasta — no more our ancient sireland

And now we get to the worst single line of the English version. But instead of the dreadful, wretched ‘sireland’, Ó Rinn refers to *Seantír ár sinsear. Seantír* is a compound word combining *sean* , ‘old’, and *tír* , ‘land’ while *ár sinsear*refers to ‘our ancestors’ (though sometimes is used to speak of elders).[5] *Feasta* simply means ‘from now on’.That makes the line, ‘From now on, the old land of our ancestors’. This removes the worst part of the English text and replaces it with the nice symmetry of *seantír* and *sinsear* .

[5] *Sean* like *Sean Chill* , ‘Shankill’. *Tír* like *Tír Eoghain* , ‘Tyrone’.

Ní fhágfar faoin tíorán ná faoin tráill. — Shall shelter the despot or the slave.

Ní fhágfar faoin means ‘will not be left under’ rather than ‘shelter’. The word *tíorán* , as you might guess, is more connected with ‘tyrant’, while *tráill* stems from the norse word. Thralls were often the Irish women abducted by Vikings and brought to other countries. In English, one still speaks of a person being ‘enthralled’ or you might hear of a vampire’s thrall. The English version of this line says ‘slave’. Rule Britannia speaks of slaves because the trafficking in slaves is English history. Ó Rinn has used the word linked to thrall because that is more related to Gaelic cultural history.[6] His translation isn’t just doing what Douglas Hyde controversially spoke of, ‘de-anglicising’, but it is weaving together past and present. Tending to the fabric of cultural memory that had been torn by Kinsale and the Famine. His translation is an affirmation of a cultural memory that is lost or inexpressible within the English language. We see that again in the next line.

[6] This isn’t to say that the Irish didn’t play a shameful role in the transatlantic slave trade

Anocht a théam sa bhearna bhaoil — Tonight we man the "bearna bhaoil",

Tonight we mount the *bearna bhaoil*. The term *téam* [*théam*] does not occur in any of the main Irish dictionaries (de Bhaldraithe, Ó Dónaill, Ua Maoileoin). It is most likely a dialectical form of the verb *téigh*, 'to go' though even then *téimis* might be more appropriate. The term *bearna bhaoil* is in Kearney's version. The *bearna bhaoil* is literally the 'Gap of Danger'. It has been used to describe various points in battles in Irish history. I think the original reference may have been to the battle of Clontarf in 1014 when Brian Bóramha [Brian Boru]) allegedly drove the Vikings from Dublin. The actual situation was much more complex that the story given in *Cogadh Gáedhel re Gallaibh* [the war of the Gaels against the foreigners], the Irish text from around 1111 which details the history of wars between the Irish and Vikings.[7]. Later it was used to describe a point in the The Battle of Ramillies (a battle fought in Belgium during the War of Spanish Succession but fought when many Irish men moved abroad to serve in European armies to avoid religious discrimination at home). And even later it was used to describe the Three Bullet Gate in the Battle of New Ross during the 1798 uprising. The term *bearna bhaoil* has a long history in Irish military history.

[7] Clontarf also shows up in the 13th century Icelandic epic, Njáls saga

Le gean ar Ghaeil, chun báis nó saoil — In Erin's cause, come woe or weal

The English version refers to Erin, the anglicised form of *Éirinn* which is the dative form of Éire. I suspect it was the occurrence of this form in phrases like in *Éirinn* or *ó Éirinn* that lead to its adoption as a name. I have read that the dative form is dominant in parts of Galway and Waterford but haven't heard this in speech. That said the term Erin crops up in phrases like Erin go bragh (or *Éirinn go brach*), popular among Irish-Americans. This is a bit odd as Éire go brach would be the grammatically more natural form but perhaps there is something going on here I don't understand. Ó Rinn replaces reference to Erin's case with *le gean ar Ghaeil.Le gean* is simply with love or affection so the line is, with love or affection for the Gaels towards death or life. As you can probably tell, this also leaves a nice triple rhyme, *bhaoil, Ghaeil, saoil,*which creates the momentum towards the climax of the song.

Le gunna-scréach faoi lámhach na bpiléar, — 'Mid cannons' roar and rifles' peal,

With the screech of guns and under the *lámhach*, 'the firing (of volleys) of bullets'. At this point, the crowds in a GAA match start cheering so no one hears the last line.

Seo libh canaig' amhrán na bhFiann. — We'll chant a soldier's song.

Seo libh. This means something like, here we are, this is us (this, with us). *Canaig* singing *Amhrán na bhFiann.* It's worth highlighting how odd this is. Under volleys of gunfire, here we are singing. Not, as the French national anthem suggests, drowning the furrows of our fields in the impure blood of the enemy. Instead, we are being shot at, and we are singing. Singing a song about it. But I suppose that's a big part of Irish music. Not necessarily winning but singing nonetheless.

What Ó Rinn did with these original lyrics is remarkable. He took some forgettable English-language doggerel and ennobled it. Raised

it from the gutter of English verse and through translation into Irish, weaved together centuries of history and memory into something truly memorable.