

Liam O'Flaherty's Letters

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The Letters of Liam O'Flaherty. Selected and edited by A.A.Kelly. Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1996, n.p. pp. 458. ISBN 0 86327 380 7.

Dr. A.A. Kelly, who published her useful study, *Liam O'Flaherty, the Storyteller*, in 1976, compiled this selection of the writer's letters for publication in 1996, the centenary year of his birth. She and Wolfhound are to be congratulated. In the absence of a definitive biography of this most colourful of Irish writers, this selection of his letters and Dr. Kelly's careful annotations provide invaluable insights into O'Flaherty's mind and career. There is so much of interest here, that it is difficult to know where to begin. One might, perhaps, note first the formative effects of his colourfully diverse parentage. His father, an Aran man, was a Fenian and active in the Land League. His mother, a noted storyteller, was descended from a family of Plymouth Brethren from Co. Antrim who had come to Aran to build lighthouses. To add to this parental antithesis, the boy grew up between two languages. A letter sent by O'Flaherty to the *Irish Statesman* in 1927 makes this point rather colourfully:

English was the first language that I spoke. My father forbade us speaking Irish. At the age of seven I revolted against father and forced everybody in the house to speak Irish.

The pattern of contrasting allegiances and conflicting tongues was to persist throughout his long life (he died in 1984 at the age of 88). Educated to the priesthood, he became fiercely anticlerical. A natural rebel, he organised the seizure and occupation of the Rotunda Theatre at the top of Dublin's O'Connell Street in 1922, hoisted the red flag of revolution, dubbed himself the 'Chairman of the Council of the Unemployed' but fled to Cork after three days to avoid bloodshed. Earlier, he had abandoned his studies at UCD, enlisted in the Irish Guards under his mother's name, Ganly, and been blown up at Langemarck in 1917, an experience which was to affect his entire life. Discharged from the British Army, he was diagnosed as suffering from *melancholia acuta* and spent over a year in a military hospital. "You have to go through life with a shell bursting in your head", he said and it seems clear that the frequent bouts of depression and other illnesses which one notes throughout the letters stem back to his horribly traumatic,

wartime experience. Dr. Kelly, in a revealing note, recounts a meeting with O'Flaherty at her own home just before Christmas 1917, when he was already old and ailing:

The pseudo-British accent (abandoned completely in his last years) seemed more marked than on our last meeting. The adoption of this seems part of his false front, his divided attitude to life and others, but he also has an admiration for the long-gone Great Britain of the twenties, especially London.

The assumed British accent is a curious detail and one notes that, in the letters, O'Flaherty not infrequently employs a kind of outmoded Noel Coward-ish slang. (acknowledging a visit from his daughter, Joyce Rathbone, who had come to see him after he broke a hip in a street accident, he tells her "your gesture was tophole"). This kind of thing from the author of *Dúil* (the last complete book he published) has an odd ring, particularly since he seems to have continued to enjoy the native Irish of his youth. A letter of 1961 says:

Padraig Concannon just phoned after a lapse of about three years and invited me to go with him to Croke Park tomorrow for the Kerry-Down match. It was nice talking Irish to him. He's so charming and genuine.

His assumed English mask seems to have irritated him at times. In 1944, he writes

I really am a whore when I write in English, no matter how I try to gild the lily with pretensions to art structures, etc. In the Anglo Saxon world literature is a form of commerce. I am tired, tired of the Anglo Saxon-world.

He had good reason, however, to be grateful to the Anglo-Saxon literature world, for it was there he met Edward Garnett, who recommended publication of his first novel, *Thy Neighbour's Wife* (1923) and continued to encourage and support O'Flaherty with remarkable generosity for over a decade. Clearly, O'Flaherty's debt to this good man is immense. The other main correspondent in this volume is Kitty Tailer, a New York divorcée whom the writer first met in Santa Barbara in 1934. The bulk of the later letters are to Kitty, who was on hand to support him in every way during the sadly sterile thirty years after the publication of his only Irish-language collection of stories, *Dúil*, in 1953. In April, 1952, O'Flaherty took a lease on a flat in Wilton Place, Dublin which was to remain his base until his death in 1984. He struggled to complete a final novel which was to be called *The Gamblers* but failed. Dr. Kelly supplies a useful summary of the uncompleted manuscript on pp.443-45. What we have is a dismayingly protracted example of writer's block, dragged out over thirty miserable years and many harrowing letters. O'Flaherty, as he aged, became lonelier and more idiosyncratic. Reading the letters written from the mid Fifties onwards, one veers between profound pity and intense

irritation. The pity is for the death of a talent, the irritation is provoked by his infuriatingly casual anti-semitism (numerous references to “Yids”, “Kikes” and “Sheenies”) and his increasingly tasteless anti-Catholicism. On 24 July, 1960, in a letters to Kitty Tailer, he writes:

Lots of fun at the moment in the Congo... As I get no papers except *Le Monde*, which is always two days late, I try to listen to the radio which is very amusing if you listen to Paris, Brussels, Moscow and Schenectady altogether, more or less. These buck negroes are having quite a ball with nuns, etc. according to some sources. One fellow claims they held a priest tied to a stake and made him watch twenty nuns being raped several times by all ranks of the local Forcee Publique... There is a very grave problem involved, if the report is true. Should these nuns, if they become pregnant as a result of being raped by negroes, produce and rear their children? Or should they abort? Or should they give away into fosterage the newborn? Let John XXIII work it out.

This shocking crudity, along with the recurrent anti-semitism may (one would like to believe) have a regrettable consequence of the crude, almost Mosley-like Britishness which he seems to have assumed as one of his public personae. Incessant attempts to *épater le bourgeois* tend to overspill of this kind. The letters of his last thirty years make melancholy reading and whet the appetite for a full biography which would, one hopes, eventually make sense of this turbulent, talented, tormented life.