

Foreword by the President of Ireland and the Honorary President of the Percy French Summer School Michael D. Higgins

When I was a youngster I admired the songs of Percy French that were most familiar to County Clare. *Sweet Marie* was the most important one I think because the Parish had a certain connection with horses. If you might call it the farmers horse, this was the time when breeding horses was democratic and before breeding had become monopolised by a very narrow number of people. Spencil hill was just up the road and in a way 'Hold your holt, Sweet Marie', and so forth captured the melodic rhythm of the movement of the horse and also I remember very distinctly *Slattery's mountain foot*, or as Percy French had it 'Slattry's Mounted Fut', which was much more popular than the more structured *Clare Dragoons* which had made its way into the school syllabus.

The interpretation of the songs is significant to understanding the extent to which Percy French recorded the language. He recorded it as he heard it. When you read James Healy's book* and you look at the notes, for example, to *Whistlin' Phil McHugh*, Healy highlights the notion of all of the underlying languages e.g. fluthering and sluthering and so forth. That is very important in itself because of another project during the same time which was entirely different. It is useful to contrast the difference in this project to the relationship between Percy French and what he did and achieved, as distinct from the project that was taking place in Coole with Yeats and Lady Gregory.

Yeats for instance is wishing and seeking to create a kind of noble heritage for the peasantry. It is more complicated for Lady Gregory who was aware of some of the Irish translation but the language becomes if you like straightened to suit the ideological purpose. It is therefore of the utmost significance that Percy French decided to leave the language as he heard it. That is also of course a tribute to the people with whom he mixed in his cycling trips be it for the painting, the inspection of drains and so forth. That is very important because his ear remains open to these sounds.

It is important for a number of reasons, to listen closely to the run on the lines in *Beautiful Miss Brady's and their private ass and cart* you find that there is a musicality in the fall of the language. Percy French was born in 1854 and it is interesting what happened in Ireland in that period and in the decades before he was born. That century was very significant in the terms of the loss of the language and it is credible to suggest that the music was surviving through the new words and through the new language. Music, if you like, expressed a form of culture that had been driven down through the new language which is English. What happens in many cases is that one language does not neatly replace the other. The Irish liked English and particularly longwords, which they used to capture the language and in doing so they were inventing something entirely new.

It is splendid that a school has been inaugurated and these are very valuable themes that I think should be taken up into the future, themes such as the connection between music and words and between words and literature. Synge also allows his ear to work in relation to what he is hearing in language and it is certainly true of O'Casey particularly if you look at the original text of O'Casey plays where the language of the people is coming from the tenements. It is universal in the local and yet it is actual and it has a truth and it is incredibly important, not accidental that in O'Casey's work he occasionally bursts into song. In some of the finest work of Tom Murphy his own fine tenor voice carries into the plays so again it is a kind of music from the previous suppressed culture that is coming through.

* James N.Healy, *The Songs of Percy French*, Ossian Publications, 1996

It is a great tribute to Percy French that he had that intelligence to be able to relate to the musicality in the language around him. There was not of course any simple division in Ireland between land holding landlords and landless tenants. This was and is a complete fiction. There were as many distinctions between labourers who had nothing at all, who are most of the people that died in the famine, and those who had plots of land and were able to survive the famine. The poor law of course which comes in around French's time, he was born after the famine, but of course clearances had started long before the famine and the famine is just a development of it, but it completely eliminates the agricultural labourers and those who were without a plot.

Consolidation was in fact in progress before the famine and property ownership became a new reality which the song *The beautiful Miss Brady's in their private ass and cart* tells us. Another example is *McBreen*, who had two daughters decides to settle the barter in terms of heifers. Now when you look upon that and ask what is Percy French writing about here? In the 1870's he is writing about the circumstances that will create the land war (1879-1882). An interesting side to this is the fact that not only had agricultural labourers been cleared away but people had begun to own property so survivors now consolidated themselves. People have gone to America- *The Emigrant's Letter*-had taken his pen in my hand and so forth and remittances have started coming back. The remittances will build and clear the debts of the shop keepers, they will build churches, buy stock and so forth. So Percy French is writing about a property class on the land who as he says will have their own private ass and cart. He also has written a number of songs about motoring cars so you could say in a way he saw what was beneath the layers of pretension.

In this period as well I think Percy French had a kind of a mocking look at a new group that was arriving between 1896 and 1905 after significant changes through the Land Acts. That is why you get references to heifers and geese and so forth. I make all of this to say that French is writing not out of a bogus fictional classless society or that idealist version of the peasantry that Yeats had. He is writing out of the mixture of the whole thing and that is to his great credit. This could be explained by his Bohemian existence as there isn't any evidence that he ever drank excessively or smoked. There is this great freedom of the spirit in the image of him carrying his easel with him and his use of his years in Trinity College which would have been far more useful to someone with a business acumen. So when he emerges from Trinity after eight years, he has written *Abdul Abulbul Ameer* which is quite wonderful and his use of long word in this comic ballad, which occur again and again shows a degree of sobriety as well as an escape into a deterioration of the whole thing. This also shows his quality as a performer. He had this mixture of talents, and future schools should look at this in relation to the extraordinary contribution of one person who was all these different things-poet, singer, troubadour, musician, painter, essayist, writer and so on. His beautiful watercolours, one I remember in particular when I saw it first, is the view of New York from the Hudson. These watercolours, with the light breaking through the sky are of empty landscapes, landscapes that aren't peopled, a landscape that is constantly renewing itself are wonderful. Some people I think wrote wrongly of the fact that many of them looked the same but of course that is a very uninformed view as the changes in the light are important. He is one of the first great celebrators of the light and people have acknowledged that as the most significant aspect of his paintings. The paintings are very, very extraordinary beautiful. I think last time one went for sale at Whyte's it was for €44,000.

I think in wishing this school well into the future, that one should bring, what Richard Sinnott calls 'the hidden injuries of class' to the fore. There is this incredible need to draw if you like all of those forgotten people of history in to the text of our consciousness.

While the Gaelic league was started in 1893, I think Percy French was wise not to get trapped in the later prejudices, which have continued through its easy period. The contest that is in the song *Abdul Abulbul Ameer*, and the atmosphere of the song *Sweet Marie* when you take the verbs that are used and the language that is used, there is something going on which you might call an irony which is polite and indeed Percy can write from the two sides. In a way what he is saying that humour, life, humanity and the eclipse of people can take a language that was a foreign language and put it to their own circumstance and twist it and turn it, tear it to pieces and make something new. We can see the irony in his piece in the song about *Jim Wheelahan's Automobeel*.

There were at least 15 gradations of society, from the point of survival up to and including people with land. So the suggestion that you only had two classes that we were all the one people and we all shared the famine is absolute nonsense and always was. In an *Irish Mother*, which is a very fine piece, French shows how he understood these divisions and it is written entirely from the point of view of the family left behind, similar to Wordsworth's poem *Michael*. Percy French has an advanced sensibility in relation to the sense of loss that is involved in emigration. This is particularly highlighted in relation to the song *The Emigrant's Letter* - 'they will be cutting the corn in Criosle today'. Again he picks up all the name places in his songs, which at this point had been changed, however French could identify and pick what was left of the resonance and musicality of the original name.

But there is no doubt whatsoever that Roscommon can be really proud of somebody that had an advanced sensibility, who was deeply human, qualified in different ways, cycled all over the country and who never gave into any exclusion. I think that he would like in many ways that we would keep our sense of humour and see the irony of our existence, but also its positive humanity and remember as well that we not only belong to one small place but to a big world as illustrated in his paintings of Ireland, Canada, United States, Hudson River, The West Indies and Switzerland. I think there is something very beautiful in all of this and that is why I am so pleased the Percy French Summer School takes place in this wonderful setting, especially as it is in his native Roscommon. It's a great celebration and I hope as we go on later that we will think of him as we hear the songs and we will not be afraid to laugh at our pretensions exposed and for all those reasons it is a great pleasure to declare the school open.

President of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins