

2. “*It Is Important Not to Steal Their Lives*”: Interview with Dermot Bolger¹

In his play *The Townlands of Brazil* (2006), Dermot Bolger (*1959), one of the most acclaimed contemporary writers in Ireland, tells the story of an Irish girl, Eileen, forced to emigrate to England when she finds herself pregnant and out of wedlock in the 1960s, and contrasts it with the story of Monika, a Polish immigrant, who works in today’s Ireland to support her daughter. By drawing parallels between the experiences of the two young women, the playwright outlines a set of poignant observations on the similarities between Polish and Irish histories of migration. *The Townlands of Brazil* was first staged at the Axis Arts Centre, Ballymun, Dublin in 2006. The play was then performed in the Polish Theatre in Wrocław in 2008. The following year, it was published by New Island as part of *The Ballymun Trilogy*.

JK: What would you say was the most significant change that Ireland has undergone since the 1990s?

DB: Talking about the start of the 1990s, Ireland was just beginning to find its feet economically. Initially, it was not really much of a multi-cultural society, and not a very obvious place for migrants to seek work. When we started to achieve prosperity, the biggest change has simply been that we had this huge influx of people coming into Ireland. It happened for two reasons. One was that there was physical work here because of the property boom. I’ve even written a poem about that experience, which is called “Travel Light”. It alludes to the story of the army of foreign workmen who built the underground Port Tunnel that linked Dublin Port to the motorway. The title refers to the name of the bag that my own father carried with him when leaving home to work as a sailor on the ships that transported the same goods that would pass through that Port Tunnel. The other reason was a loophole in the Good Friday Agreement, which was a vital part of the Peace Process in Northern Ireland, and like all good complex agreements, the final text was a bit of a fudge. One of the agreement provisions was that anybody born on the island of Ireland was entitled to an Irish passport. The intent was that anyone born in Northern Ireland was automatically entitled to citizenship in the Irish Republic, but one unintended consequence was that, when word of this agreement got out, many women from Africa and elsewhere came to Ireland to have their babies here, in search of a better life for them. These new arrivals could claim citizenship for their child, and then apply for citizenship

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themselves as parents of the Irish baby. Therefore, you had these two very different movements of people into Ireland. One was an influx of often highly skilled workers from Eastern European countries, which had recently joined the EU or were on the cusp of doing so, with qualifications that addressed particular needs in the Irish economy at that time. These workers – from countries like Poland – sometimes wished to stay here or sometimes wanted to earn a certain amount of money before returning home or moving elsewhere. Then the second group consisted of people whose children were born here or who came seeking political asylum, and who hoped to settle in Ireland and make new lives for themselves and their families in the long term.

JK: How well has Irish society coped with the influx of immigrants?

DB: It is too early to say how the Irish people have coped with the influx of immigrants because it always takes a generation to grow up before you see how things truly pan out. For the moment, I think, they have actually coped reasonably well, to be honest with you. Because emigration was such a central part in the life of almost all Irish families, many people could recognise facets of the journeys of their own families in the newcomers. Maybe, that's why Irish people have in general been understanding and welcoming. It's also true that it is easier for the society to accept an influx of immigrants when the country is prosperous and, at the time, Ireland reached virtually full employment and had little awareness of the economic crash about to occur. Therefore, immigration never fermented into a big issue.

JK: Has the economic crisis changed this positive attitude towards newcomers?

DB: Some Irish people can possess two differing attitudes to migrants at the same time. One slightly cautious attitude, which relates to migrants in general on a depersonalised basis while, at the same time, the same person can feel a very different, more welcoming, attitude when it relates to newcomers, whom they know and like, on an individual basis. Unlike in the UK and on the continent, no right-wing party has emerged that tries to blame Ireland's economic disaster upon migrants, although there are undoubtedly individuals who feel resentment in a time when there are fewer jobs and who feel – wrongly in most cases – that sometimes foreigners get certain jobs quicker than Irish people because, out of desperation, they are willing to work for less. But this attitude does not pervade on a large scale. On the personal level, I don't think that Irish people feel any wave of anger towards immigrants, because nobody would be stupid enough to blame the foreign workers who are employed in restaurants or who built apartments, for the crash that occurred within the Irish economy. I haven't noticed any more resentment towards immigrants now than ten years ago, and especially not towards Polish

people who are probably the most popular of all the newcomers, in that both nations have a lot of similarities and links. I think that Polish people have integrated well in Irish society and have gradually become a part of their local communities. That knitting-in process wasn't a collective thing that happened overnight. It happened more through thousands of little interactions in small communities on a daily basis as people on both sides came to know and understand each other.

JK: Why do you think Polish people stayed in Ireland despite the crisis?

DB: Home is a very peculiar concept. It isn't necessarily a physical place, but it is more a state of mind. I know country people who have lived in Dublin for fifty years, but they still are talking about going home when they visit their birthplace in Roscommon for a weekend. But at the same time, their real home is in Dublin. At a certain stage, you get married and have children in whatever new place you find yourself in. Suddenly, your children go to school there and make friends. If you're a Pole in Dublin, then one night you go to bed and people in your dream speak English, not Polish, and likewise if you're an Irish person who has started a new life in Australia, then one day you discover that the bedrock landscape of your dreams is the streets of Perth or Sydney, not the streets of Galway or Cork, where you spent your childhood. Gradually, you realise that you feel more comfortable in this new country than you feel in your birth place. You've made an investment in the local community and developed a sense of belonging here. That is a huge psychological step. It can be very hard to go to a new country, but it can be even harder to go back to your old country that you think you still understand, without realising that it can change in your absence so that you do not truly belong in either place.

JK: Have you yourself ever lived and worked away from home?

DB: Ironically, I am the one of the very few writers of my generation who never lived abroad. When I was young, I made a terrible error of being a practical poet. If you are one, you simply do things. At the age of eighteen, when I was a factory worker in Finglas, I started a publishing company called Raven Art Press. I wanted to publish my contemporaries, the emerging generation of Irish writers. At that time, people used to think that the biggest division was between Irish writers who lived in the country and those who lived in the city. They saw an enormous difference between the country and urban world. I never agreed with them. The biggest division was between Irish writers who stayed in the country and those who left. I remember editing an anthology years ago, called *Ireland in Exile*, with the writings of Colum McCann, Eamonn Wall, Harry Clifton and Joseph O'Connor, basically a whole

generation of writers who had emigrated. They wrote about Irish experience abroad and I deliberately made a point of excluding all writers living in Ireland in it. In my twenties, I became so caught up in the business of running this publishing house and providing the forum for other writers that I have never actually had time to think about leaving the country. However, because I have had a huge number of family members who live abroad, I've always felt strong connections with the experience of emigration.

JK: What was it like for your relatives to move to a foreign country?

DB: My mother was from a family of eleven and my father was from a family of seven. With the exception of two uncles, everybody else emigrated. They all went mainly to England. They left Ireland because there was no work, and they were seeking a better life for themselves. Most of them planned to go only temporarily, just to make money, hoping to come back to Ireland after a year or two. But then they met someone there, often another Irish person, fell in love, and ended up getting married and having children. I have very few Irish born cousins but loads who have Coventry, Leicester, Wolverhampton and London accents. The reason why I possess a Dublin accent is that my father worked as a sailor. He 'emigrated' twice a week for forty-four years. Basically, the primary memory of my father, when I was growing up, was that of a registered envelope with pound banknotes coming in the post every Friday. Eighty per cent of Irish children born between 1931 and 1941 had to emigrate. From any group of forty pupils in a village classroom in 1950, only eight could expect to live as adults in Ireland. The others left to the unspoken relief of government ministers, who knew that emigration was a safety valve on social unrest, sluicing away the disaffected and allowing the government not to tackle fundamental problems within the Irish State. They left to the gain of successive Ministers for Finance, who were able to factor emigrants' remittances as an invisible export into their budgets. All those ten-shilling notes sent home from Birmingham and Manchester counted for more than loose change. At a time of low economic output, emigrants were subsidising the Irish economy up to the equivalent of over nine hundred and fifty million Euro every year in today's money. Therefore, it was a huge cultural change for Ireland to move from being a society which people left to becoming one into which people arrived. Ireland's population began to drastically rise again but this time it was a totally different and more varied type of population. It was people coming here looking for work. They were like replicas of my Irish uncles and aunts who had been forced to leave in previous generations.

JK: In your book, The Ballymun Trilogy, you talk about the issues of migration and portray a couple of Polish characters. What was the inspiration for the plays?

DB: The book is a trilogy of plays about a suburb of Dublin called Ballymun that was essentially a greenfield site in the 1960s, but later it was turned into a high-rise suburb of tower blocks, a housing experiment that went badly wrong. At the end of the twentieth century, it started to be knocked down and a new, better-planned suburb was built in its place – a process which has been generally successful but very slow to be completed. I wanted to tell the story of the area in three different plays. The first play, *From These Green Heights* goes back to the 1960s when the towers had been erected because of a housing crisis in 1963, when Dublin Corporation were forced to evacuate and condemn many old tenements, following four deaths caused by collapsing buildings. Housing waiting lists doubled, with some families forced to sleep on the street. Already in Europe high-rise schemes were being abandoned for becoming ‘vertical slums’ whose inhabitants were socially isolated. This did not deter the Irish Government from deciding that a prefabricated high-rise scheme represented “an exciting alternative to the squalor of Dublin’s tenements”. The original name for the towers – *Ard Glas* (Green Heights) – reflected official optimism. Impressive plans included an ultra-modern shopping centre and thirty-six acres of public gardens and play areas. The initial leases were handed out almost as a reward to model tenants. The flats were large and had central heating. What they lacked was a thermostat. Tenants baked or froze, unable to turn their own heating on or off. Almost from the start, the lifts malfunctioned, with young families facing an ordeal to simply descend from their flats. Once on the ground floor, there was nowhere to go. It was three years before the first shop was built. Indeed all the promised facilities were similarly absent. People had simply been taken from close knit city communities and dumped amid the tower blocks and fields. At the time that towers were built, there was a small, rural community in the area. The rural locals were terrified of all these Dubliners from the inner city coming out. The newcomers were different, and therefore local people were a bit apprehensive about them, in the same way as Dublin people felt a bit of initial uncertainty about the Polish and other immigrants, who began to arrive in Dublin forty years after the towers were built.

When I set down to write the second play, *The Townlands of Brazil*, my intention was to tell the story of my father’s and uncles’ generation, who all emigrated. But then I looked at most of the workers who were knocking down the old towers and building the new homes in Ballymun. Many of them were foreign migrant workers. I thought it would be interesting, as so much as an outsider could, to write about the lives of these Poles and other Eastern Europeans, who had come to seek work in Ireland. They followed the work in exactly the same way as my uncles and aunts had followed the work fifty years previously. I made it a point that no character in the second act of *The Townlands of Brazil* should be Irish; that everybody would be a foreigner. I was anxious to tell the stories because, as I make it clear in my

programme notes to *The Townlands of Brazil*, the only person who will ever be able to write a proper play about the Polish experience in Ireland will be a Polish writer. My play is like an intermediate, stopgap measure. It is an Irish person trying to imagine these contemporary emigrant lives that echo the history of his own family.

The last play, *The Consequences of Lightening*, talks about the future of Ballymun. It is centred around the death of an old man, one of the first people who moved into the Ballymun tower blocks. When his wife died, he drank heavily, unable to cope with his grief. One of his sons, ashamed of that, built himself a life as a very successful businessman and broke off all contacts with his father. Particularly after his younger brother, who was a junk, died in Ballymun. A Jesuit priest gradually affects a reconciliation between the father and son. It was almost like trying to bring to an end all the old wounds of Ballymun, all the great family tragedies. It is a play about letting go of the past and embracing the future.

JK: What audience were you aiming The Townlands of Brazil towards?

DB: The Ballymun Trilogy was a unique project. When Ballymun was built in the 1960s, it was supposed to be a paradise, but it gradually became synonymous with the urban depravation. My ambition was to tell the history of the place that hasn't been told in drama before, but also to tell it primarily to the audience who didn't necessarily go to the theatre regularly or who in many cases had never been in a theatre before. We brought in a non-theatre audience, who might have been sceptical about drama, by holding benefit nights in support of the local school, GAA Club, and Housing Association. These organisations sold tickets and received part of the box office takings. It was very much an experiment in building a new audience from local people. They weren't the standard middle-class theatre-goers. Eventually, people from the outside area were also beginning to come. Ballymun had a bad reputation, so it took a while to break down this prejudice and to get outsiders to visit Axis Arts Centre. I think that a lot of them came to see *The Townlands of Brazil* because they were fascinated by the Polish people around them but didn't quite know how to see into their lives. Finally, I wanted the emigrant workers, living in Ballymun and all over the city, to know that someone was trying to tell their story, probably in that very imperfect way which any outsider will do, but that at least the attempt was made. We wrote the programme note in Irish and in Polish. It didn't seem right to have an Irish woman playing the role of Monika so we brought over an actress from Poland, Julia Krynke, who drew a lot of media attention. *The Polish Herald* – a sixteen-page supplement stapled in the middle of the leading Irish newspaper *The Evening Herald* – and some websites wrote about the event. I couldn't give you the figures for how many Polish viewers we had

each night, because we didn't stop people on the way to the theatre to ask what nationality they were. But we did see faces coming in that we hadn't seen before. It was quite an interesting audience that was very different from the other Ballymun plays.

In 2008, we decided to use the play to forge links with Poland and so we brought *The Townlands of Brazil* over to the Polish Theatre in Wrocław. In turn, the Polish Theatre brought over a one-man show, *The Leash*, to Axis Arts Centre. It was staged in Polish and we had subtitles on it.

JK: Have you tried to play with language to mirror the way Polish immigrants speak?

DB: I tried not to put words or phrases in the mouth of Polish characters that they wouldn't necessarily say. At the same time, I didn't want them to speak Pidgin English. The level of English among Poles in Ireland is exceptionally high. What's distinctive about their language is that they speak in a more precise way, probably because they are anxious to be understood. When you use your mother tongue, you take it for granted that everyone understands you. You may use certain nuances and you believe that your listeners have the cultural framework to understand what you're actually saying. Whereas, when you speak in a foreign language, you cannot take it for certain that the person will understand you, so you speak in a more precise and careful manner. I don't know, however, just how many false notes I have hit in *The Townlands of Brazil* although I am sure that a Polish person would notice them very quickly.

JK: Were your Polish characters based on real people?

DB: None of my characters have ever been based on one true person. I talked to people, but I was very careful not to get too close to anyone personally when researching a novel or a play. I would be very cautious of sitting down and interviewing any Polish person and then transporting all they have said onto paper. It is important not to steal their lives. My characters are rather an amalgam of many Poles that I have met and different stories from different places. For example, I spoke to many men working on building sites here. Some of them were from Poland. They worked long hours on official building sites and then extra hours for cash in the evening, often coming home at midnight, and they would be up at six next morning, getting a bus or a Luas into Tallaght and working for the next eight-hour shift before going on doing casual work again. They were relatively young men who had no ties to homeland, except maybe for emotional bonds, and were planning to settle down here. And then there were people who had families at home and never intended to stay here. They simply tried to build a deposit on a better life back in Poland.

JK: Do Irish and Polish people have anything else in common?

DB: On the long list of Irish heroes, there are figures from mythology like Cúchulainn, but there is also a name of a Polish goal keeper, Jan Tomaszewski. In 1973, Poland kicked England out of the World Cup in Wembley, and they did this by Tomaszewski making an extraordinary string of saves. At the time, Ireland was a really unsuccessful football nation. We hadn't won a match in years. The game in Wembley was on a Wednesday, and the Polish team have arranged to play a friendly match in Dublin on the following Sunday. They arrived in Ireland on Friday like national heroes. They were brought on Irish television and were serenaded with Polish folk songs. Then, I think, they just got drunk for two days and so Ireland beat them one-nil at the weekend. The Irish fell in love with Poland at that moment because they had beaten England and then lost to Ireland. After that, the massive succession of friendlies was organised where the Polish and the Irish teams were forever playing each other. These links were forged long before the wave of Polish emigration to Ireland began. Apart from the sporting links, there were the religious links, and a great interest in Solidarity. Poland was very much on the news and in the consciousness of people at that time. Due to this awareness of their history when Polish people came to Ireland, they received a greater welcome and were able to integrate a lot easier than maybe other newcomers.

JK: What differences do you see between the Polish and Irish nations?

DB: Well, obviously there is the difference of the history. I've always had an interest in Poland and a hopefully relatively informed layman's knowledge of the country, in a sense that I tried to keep up to date with what was happening there. I had followed the Solidarity movement and the gradual struggle for a truly democratic state in the 1980s. Maybe I'm wrong, but I suspect that the older generation of Poles still feel trauma, arising from the fact that they were behind the Iron Curtain for so long. Like in many countries (including Ireland, but in a different way), there may be things that people still feel uncomfortable talking about to their children and grandchildren. To survive in an oppressive society, one occasionally had to do or say things to survive that seemed like the only option at the time, but taken out of the context twenty-five years later, can look bad. Every society that emerges into an independent state exists, for some period of time later, in a state of collective amnesia. But if you grew up under a repressive or puppet regime, I suspect that you learned very quickly that reticence was very important, that your own words could be taken out of context and used as weapons against you. Therefore, you become very careful and don't express yourself openly at times so that nobody knows what you are feeling. There would be certain, very slight, parallels with the Ireland where the mind-set was very controlled by the church. The consequences of speaking out were in no way as severe

as behind the Iron Curtain, but if you worked in the public service, teaching, broadcasting or other areas like this, you always knew that words could have economic consequences for you and your family. As a result, many people developed a similar reticence in keeping their real thoughts to themselves.

I don't think that young Irish or Polish people now would feel any need for such restraint in expressing their opinions or living their lives. The gap that existed thirty years ago between life in the two countries has now completely narrowed, and young Irish and Polish people would have a lot in common, although both obviously remain rooted in their national narratives. Even though this may not be visible or immediate to an outsider, it is always there.

JK: What is the image of an Irishman among Polish immigrants?

DB: That I don't know. The Irish for a very long time had an image of themselves as the nation of lovable rogues. We played traditional music all around the world and we had 'craic' as we call it. When we had no money, we felt that the world loved us. I think that some Poles, working for the Irish, may have had a different experience of us, though – as also happened with Irish workers in Britain in the 1950s, very often most cases of migrants being exploited here came within their own communities, especially in things like the restaurant trade. But when a relationship becomes that of employer and employee, it can sour any relationship. Then many Irish investors unwisely purchased vast numbers of apartments in Eastern European countries, which not only helped to cause the crash in Ireland – with many of them made bankrupt – but must have driven property prices well beyond the reach of local people in these countries, which can only have caused resentment.

JK: Do any of your other works refer to Polish culture?

DB: In the book *Night and Day*, which was my portrait of South Dublin, one poem, "On the 7am Luas to Tallaght", is translated into Polish. And at the moment, I am writing a novel with a band of workers from Eastern Europe in it, some of whom are Polish.

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