Two Short Stories by Dermot Bolger

We are very proud to include in this issue two previously unpublished short stories - ***Courttown Days*** and ***The Last Storyteller*** - by Dermot Bolger, one of Ireland´s most distinctive writers over the past two decades.

Dermot Bolger is perhaps best known in Sweden for his two novels - ***A Second Life*** (Ett andra liv) and ***Father's Music*** (Sången från Donegal). This latter work has its roots in a journey across Ireland made a quarter of a century ago by the author and in a never-to-be-forgotten meeting with Ireland's last great master Travelling Fiddler. In ***The Last Storyteller***, Dermot Bolger recalls that encounter with the reclusive genius, John Doherty, which inspired ***Father's Music***. The other story published here - ***Courttown Days*** - is based on the author's childhood memories of holidays, a wonderfully rendered vignette of the summer of 69 staying at Mrs Butler's Guesthouse in Courttown.

Born in Finglas, North Dublin, in 1959, Dermot Bolger has worked as a factory hand, library assistant and publisher. He is the author of five volumes of poetry, five novels and several plays. His earlier works include the prize-winning novels - ***Night Shift*** (1985), ***The Woman's Daughter*** (1987) and ***The Journey Home*** (1990). His critically acclaimed collection of new and selected poems - ***Taking My Letters Back*** - was published in 1998. Dermot Bolger is radically committed to the cause of Irish writing, something which has always been close to the heart of the editors of this journal. It is therefore a great privilege to be able to publish these two original stories written by such a distinguished modern Irish author.

DERMOT BOLGER

The Last Storyteller

There were no posters on the night I saw the greatest musician I've ever heard play. Indeed, only that someone in the youth hostel mentioned how "the last of the shanachie" was playing the fiddle in a small pub in the Donegal village of Carrick, I might never have stumbled across the astonishing music - and more astonishing life - of the Travelling fiddler, John Doherty.

Easter came early a quarter century ago when, as a fifteen year-old Dublin schoolboy, I set off hitch-hiking with a friend. Yet not even the optimism of youth can excuse our expectations that we could hike in one day up all the way to spend Easter Saturday night in a Donegal youth hostel.

Instead we made such pitifully slow progress that dusk only saw us passing Yeats' grave under Ben Bulben. As frost gripped outside, at midnight we huddled for warmth at a service in Sligo cathedral. In our minds we felt like medieval pilgrims and (as pilgrims go) we looked so cold and hungry that we convinced ourselves some good Sligo Christian would offer us a bed.

Finally a priest approached. "Have you nowhere to stay, boys?" he asked. We nodded and shivered. "It's a bitter night, good luck now," he said, cheerfully locking us out. We lay freezing in a shop doorway and yet such suffering, along with being kicked by a passing policeman, only made us seem more like adventurers.

As Easter Sunday dawned, our spirits rose. We were only forty miles from Donegal. But again no cars stopped, while a merciless sun burned down. We walked and walked. I was almost killed when, in an act of childish lunacy, I stepped before a speeding car, desperate to make it stop.

Night came and our feet blistered. Before a car stopped. Two Republican activists drove us miles out of their way to a hostel. It was closed, but whatever they said to the warden he made us welcome, with tea and hot water to soak our blistered feet in.

I'm not sure what we were searching for on that penniless journey. Perhaps we knew this was a last chance to encounter one of those transcending childhood moments after which the world appears irrevocably altered. Certainly, for me such a moment occurred several nights later when I walked into that pub to hear John Doherty.

Being under age, there was a thrill in simply sitting there. I was one of few outsiders present. There was just old men, like Doherty himself, or local women chatting before he began to play. Finally the woman of the house opened a door through which Doherty emerged, having been resting upstairs. He was an old man, sitting quietly on one chair set apart, making

minor adjustments to the fiddle she handed him.

A hush descended as he raised the fiddle and then Doherty began to play. His chin and eyes were the only still parts of him. It seemed impossible for any old man to play so fast and strong, with his bow hand drawing grace-notes and ornamentations between the notes. The sound was so rich it seemed more than one fiddle had to be playing. I'd never heard such playing before. Indeed at moments I wouldn't have been surprised if Doherty's fiddle had burst into flames in his hands.

During a break he spoke to me briefly, with the courtesy of a gentleman. Then he played on, while younger musicians sat at his feet to learn, until finally - long after closing time - the woman of the house opened the side door again. When he rose the bar rose with him, as if for royalty. He excused himself, saying he was old and tired. Nobody sat down until he had left the room.

The experience of hearing him was worth the trouble of getting there and, with it, our luck changed. Next morning the first car stopped, driven by that remarkable priest, Father McDwyer of Glencolumcille, who'd once been accused of communism for organising his famous co-operative. He left us in Donegal town where another lift took us straight to Dublin.

Yet for over two decades the memory of that master musician never left me, until the experience crystalised into one of the inspirations behind the character of Proinseas Mac Suibhne in *Father's Music*.

I had always known that, indirectly, I would write about Doherty, because his life seemed to me like an extraordinary episode of fiction.

John Doherty was born in 1895 into a famous line of fiddlers stretching back to the 1700s. His father set high standards for his sons, Simi, Mickey, Hugh and his youngest, John, which may have encouraged the gentle rivalry between some of them.

Although field recordings of them all exist, today John is the most famous. Yet he never owned a fiddle. From early in life he travelled around Donegal, keeping to a circuit of remote places, where initially he worked by day as a tinsmith and peddler for small items which he carried on his back. By night he played and taught music. Yet in a time when Travellers were an integral part of the seasonal rural economy, Doherty had strict lines of delineation about what work he did. Although proud of his Traveller background he was marked apart by the music he carried within him. To have a Doherty stay in your house was regarded as a special honour.

This was before television when every locality had "visiting houses". The arrival of a storyteller and musician like John or Mickey Doherty was a source of intense excitement and diversion. John Doherty walked everywhere, borrowing a fiddle in every hamlet. Yet although a local legend, he was little known outside Donegal, which - because of the Scottish influence of its music - was often not fully appreciated in rest of Ireland.

RTE's Ciaran Mac Nathuna vividly describes the near impossible task

of tracking down the shy, reserved Doherty in the 1950s, and of going, with a local doctor, from hamlet to hamlet until finally discovering him walking on a lonely mountain road. Field recordings from that time are remarkable, yet were often made in houses without electricity so that the only power source was a car battery left running all night outside.

When I met him at the age of eighty Doherty had never released a record. Slowly, however Irish Music was realising it had a master musician (and last living link to the tradition of wandering harpists) on its hands. Doherty himself knew how much history was held between his fingers and today, although he died in 1980, his music survives on several CDs, while his family's life is brilliantly observed in Caoimhin MacAoidh's Between the Jigs and Reels.

Fiction creates its own world and I'd hate Doherty's life to be mistaken for that of Proinseas Mac Suibhne in *Father's Music* - an old fiddler who fathers a child for a young English woman but returns to Donegal when her family prove incapable of understanding him. Certainly Doherty never married or went abroad and there are traces in Mac Suibhne of hosts of other musicians, like Seamus Ennis and Joe Heaney, from that extraordinary generation who kept Irish music alive, often living in poverty and neglect.

But I feel that it is Doherty's extraordinary playing which sings throughout the novel, and every time I hear his music I vividly recall being a boy that night in Carrick and feeling a sense of wonder which haunted me ever since until I finally tried to pass it on, in some small way, remembered and re-invented, in the pages of a novel.