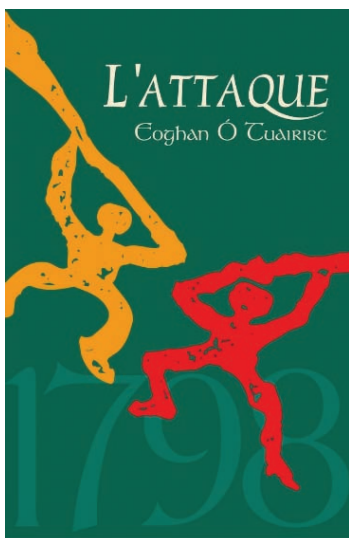


# Eoghan Ó Tuairisc's L'Attaque

## Iconic Leitrim Novel & Masterpiece of Historical Fiction

JOHN WOODS



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Eoghan Ó Tuairisc (1919-1982)



**The memory** of General Humbert's army marching towards Ballinamuck has endured over 220 years in Leitrim folklore. Still their path is traced across fields, pitied and admired. Soldiers' hungry figures become present once more as we lift their memory towards us, upwards though the deep seam of story. I have felt this presence in Tarmon, where I grew up. Leitrim Guardian readers will have felt it in their own localities.

Wonderfully, we hold on to stories of the Year of the French. But the language which first brought these stories to life is missing. In Eoghan Ó Tuairisc's *L'Attaque* (1962), Irish words make 1798 in Leitrim vivid as the present moment. This novel tells of a group of United Irishmen, from Sliabh an Iarainn, who set out on foot as far as Killala to join the ranks of Humbert's soldiers. To readers of Irish-language literature, *L'Attaque* is known as a classic novel. For Leitrim readers, this iconic book about our county remains largely undiscovered.

What I hope to do in this article is inspire recognition of Ó Tuairisc's brilliant achievement. To do that, I'll share some passages from *L'Attaque* in their original Irish, as

well as in translation to English. I'll also discuss how Ó Tuairisc expresses, in those passages, that our ancestors inhabited their time as the present moment. He was so skillful in the way he captured the hopes of his characters for what was yet to happen, and their vulnerability to it, that *L'Attaque* should be regarded as a masterpiece of historical fiction. In the opening passage of the novel, we get a sense of the hopefulness for their future which guides the actions of a newly-married couple, Máirtín and Saidhbhín:

*Tráthnóna i Mí Lúnasa bhí Máirtín Caomhánach ag cruacháil móna ag binn a bhotháin. Folt dubh air, malaí dúrúnda, a aghaidh faoi smúit ag allas agus ag smúdar na móna, is in airde ar thrasnán a bhí sé ag cur fóire ar an gcruach. D'oibrigh sé go cruinn dícheallach, é ag aimsiú na bhfód go hinnealta isteach ar éadan na cruaiche de réir mar a chaith a bhean chuige iad ina bpéire agus ina bpéire ag eitilt aníos.*

*Saidhbhín ab ainm di. Í óg, gearr, téagartha, béal fial leathanbhruasach na Mistéalach uirthi agus teaspach na hóige ina cuislí. Bhí seancheirt ghorm fáiscthe thar a cuid gruaige chun í a a shábháil ó dheannach na móna, bhí a dhá ghéag nochta go guaillí agus ionmhas donn na gréine le sonrú ar an*

*gcneas a bhí ar mhíne an tsíoda. Ní fhéadfá gan suntas a thabhairt do ghéaga na hógmhna, iad ag luascadh go rithimiúil trí bhogsholas an Fhómhair ag soláthar na bhfód dá fear thuas. Chuirfeadh sé an pósadh i gcuimhne duit: an bheirt, an fear agus an bhean, ag achtú a bpáirteanna ar mhaoileann sléibhe faoi luí na gréine Lúnasa. (7)*

*On an August afternoon, Máirtín Caomhánach was reeking turf at the gable of his small cabin. A fine head of black hair on him, and thick, secretive eyebrows. His face sweaty, sweaty and sooted. Standing above on a cross-beam, he shaped the reek beneath him. He worked with great care and energy, knowingly finding a spot in the reek face for the sods which his wife flung up to him two-by-two.*

*Saidhbhín was the woman's name. The young, stout woman, with thick lips that had long made beautiful the kindly mouths of the Mitchells. The hot exuberance of youth coursed through her veins. An old blue cloth covered her hair, so flakes of turf couldn't fall into it, and her two arms were bared up to the shoulders – skin, smooth silk, dappled with dark treasures from the sun. You couldn't but notice those arms, swaying rhythmically in the soft autumnal light, swinging the turf upwards. It would make you think of what it is to be married, the way they played those roles of man and woman, under the August sun, to make a home on the brow of Sliabh an Iarainn. (my trans.; 7)*

One thing that stands out in the introduction to *L'Attaque* is the close relationship between character and setting. Máirtín and Saibhdín are building a reek: their work is the material creation of their home. That work depends on energy, and energy is the focus of Ó Tuairisc's description of his characters.

Saidhbhín is energised by the 'hot exuberance of youth'. A potent



*John Woods speaking about L'Attaque at The Iron Mountain Literature Festival*

sexuality, which is made palpable here, is addressed throughout the passage. It gradually becomes amplified, and evolves. Language holds Saibhbhín under Máirtín's gaze: it's her hair, shoulders, and arms that are described. This is Saidhbhín, as seen from above. Language adopts the viewpoint of Máirtín, who stands on top of the reek. It communicates how, as he works, he is preoccupied with his wife's physical appearance. After Ó Tuairisc had illustrated attraction, to this extent, he then suggested its mutuality. Saibhbhín's moving 'rhythmically' signals that, through her actions, she willingly responds to an impulse beating in Máirtín as he places sod after sod in the reek face.

The attraction between Ó Tuairisc's characters is then put in conversation with some other quality, a more sentimental one. Since Saidhbhín is observed from Máirtín's point of view, the descriptive language that portrays her serves to reflect how Máirtín feels, and where his interests lie. When it is stated that Saidhbhín moves in 'soft autumnal light',

something delicate and beyond the purely physical is added to the intimate account of this couple's relationship.

Throughout the opening passage of *L'Attaque*, Ó Tuairisc's language invites us to consider the kinds of desires and cares which preoccupy a young couple, as they prepare for a shared future. Máirtín and Saidhbhín carry out this sort of preparation, building a reek of turf so they'll be able to heat their home. For now, they dwell in a position of possibility and hope, which is open to them because of their blindness to the future. But this blindness also makes them vulnerable. They cannot see the threat, to their vision of a fulfilling future, which may be lurking around the corner. This is the condition of living at the mercy of the present moment. Although to live at any time is to know this condition, it is obviously a lot more precarious at moments of political volatility. Its tragic potentials became the fate of ordinary Leitrim people in 1798. *L'Attaque* movingly conveys a sense of confusion and loss, stirred up by the word that the French had landed:

*Fothrom crúite capaill ar chlocha an bhealaigh. D'ardaigh sé a cheann. Bhí an marcach le díograis ag priocadh an chapail in éadan an chnoic. D'fhair Máirtín é. Giolla stábla ó Bhéal Átha Ghil. Ag gabháil thar braid dó mhaolaigh nóiméad ar an ngéarfhuadar a bhí faoi, d'ardaigh a chapín agus chuir de ghlaoch as, —*

*'Tá do chairde i gCill Ala!'*

*Phrioc sé an capall agus chuir ag seifidil agus ag bacadaíl i gcoinne an chnoic aríst é.*

*'Céard deir sé, a Mháirtín?'*

*Chuimil sé bas thar allas a mhalai amhail is dá mba thaom laige a bhuail go tobann é.*

'Na Francaigh. Deir sé go bhfuil na Francaigh tar éis teacht i dtír i gCill Ala.'

Baineadh stad de Shaibhdhín, an dá fhód leagtha ar bhacán a láimhe. D'imigh an ghile den tráthnóna uirthi. D'fhéach sí suas ar a fear céile. Bhí sé ag stánadh uaidh i gcroí an iarthair isteach mar a raibh an spéir ina haon bhladhm dhearg amháin.

'Téigh isteach agus déan greim bia a ullmhú. Leanfaidh mise isteach thú nuair a bhéas an sraith mhullaigh curtha agam ar an gcruach.'

Chuaigh sí uaidh gan focal a rá, go tromchosach trí pholl dorcha a mbothóige boicthe isteach ó uaigneas an tsléibhe. (11)

*The noise of a horse's hooves on the stones of the road. Máirtín looked away from the reek. The rider's eager prodding drove the horse on. Máirtín watched him. A stable boy, from Béal Átha Ghil. He looked frantic to continue on his way, but stopped a moment when passing the cabin. Raising his cap, he let a cry:*

*'Your friends are in Cill Ala!'*

*Then he urged the horse forward, to strain and struggle against the mountain.*

*'What did he say, a Mháirtín?'*

*He held his palm to his brow, as though faint, suddenly overcome.*

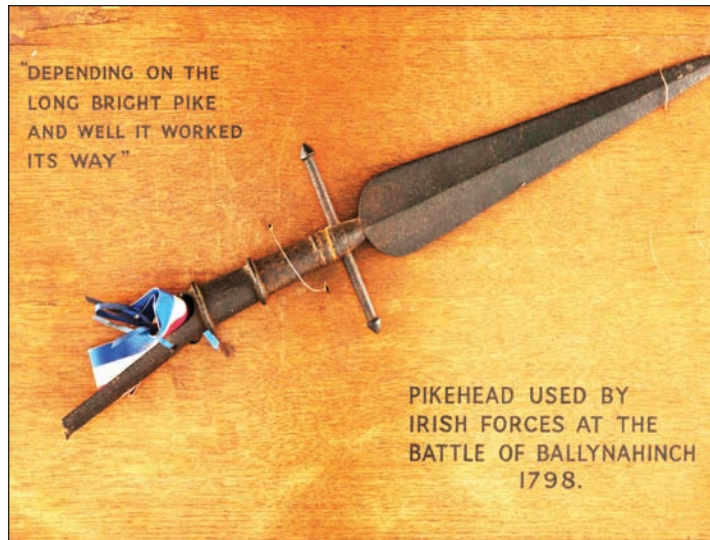
*'The French. He says the French are after landing in Killala.'*

*Saidhbhín was still now, two sods held in her arm. The afternoon darkened around her. She looked up at her husband. He was staring deep into the burning red blaze of the western sky.*

*'Go in and get some food ready. I'll follow you in when I have the reek finished.'*

*Silently, slowly, she left him. Through the dark entrance of the cabin, she stepped drearily in from a strange and frightening mountainside. (my trans.; 11)*

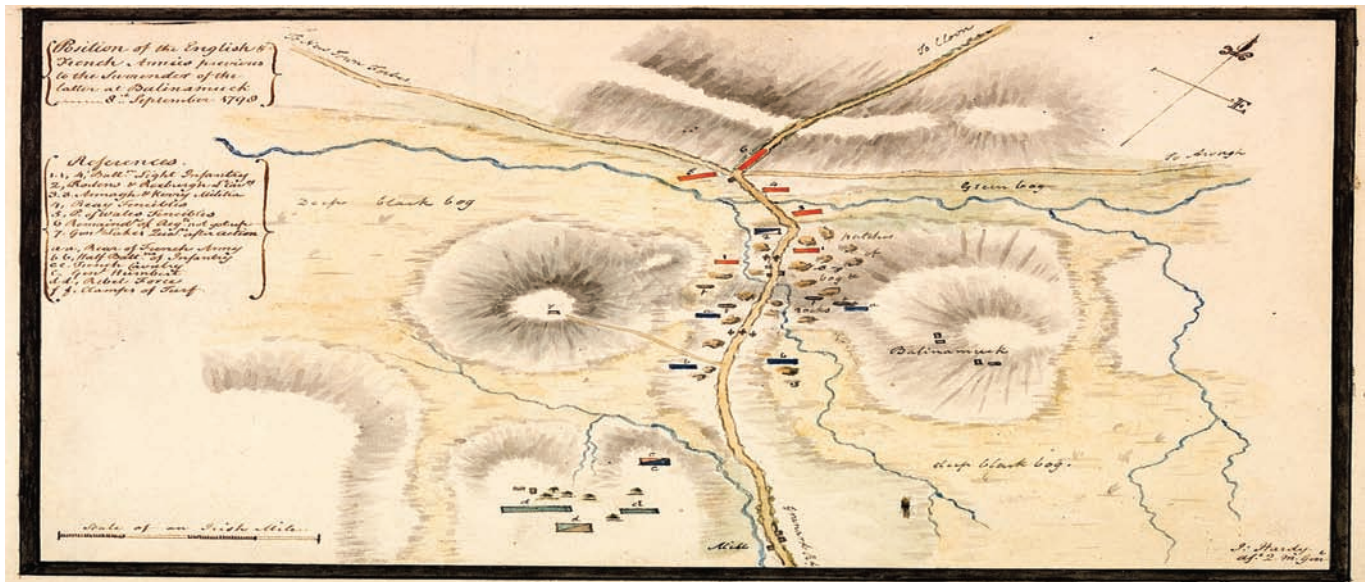
As soon as the messenger announces his news, the whole



*This pike, used in 1798, is on display in the Jackie Cleary Collection in Ballina, Co Mayo, along with much other material relating to the United Irishmen Rebellion*

atmosphere changes. What is interesting about this change is how language causes such a shock. The stable boy's message is the first piece of dialogue in *L'Attaque*. Subtly, but effectively, Ó Tuairisc indicates that this is a line of English. The stable boy cries out a very simple message, 'your friends are in Cill Ala!', but Saidhbhín doesn't actually understand it. She has to ask Máirtín to explain it to her: 'What did he say, a Mháirtín?' Béal Átha Ghil, where the messenger travels from, is a made-up place name in a novel that uses plenty of real place names. We can only know it as much as Ó Tuairisc allows us to. It's a town, and it has stables, so it stands in contrast to Sliabh an Iarainn's rural poverty. We should note at this point that, in *L'Attaque*, Ó Tuairisc captured a time when Ireland was bilingual. It was in spaces such as Béal Átha Ghil, urban and relatively well-off, that the English language's foothold was firmest. The suddenly-changing atmosphere of *L'Attaque* is a challenge to the reader. We are to imagine how aspirations of revolution, carried through the medium of English from a broader European context, could have transformed a home on Sliabh an Iarainn.

When Saidhbhín gets inside, she becomes painfully aware of Máirtín's pike, stored in the rafters. Máirtín's thoughts turn to the memory of his father, a hedge-school master who was hanged because of his involvement with the Whiteboys. In this development of his plot, Ó Tuairisc drew parallels between Máirtín and Lugh Lámhfhada, of the Tuatha Dé Danann. Sliabh an Iarainn has a strong association with the Tuatha Dé Danann, a mythological group of poets, musicians, and warriors. It was there, according to Leabhar Gabhála Éireann or The Book of Invasions, that they landed their floating ships when they first came to Ireland. Of their members, Lugh is the most famous. *L'Attaque's* allusions to Lugh begin in the opening passage I have quoted. At its beginning and end, there is the word 'Lúnasa'. That is the month of August, and the harvest festival with which the month begins, both named in Lugh's honour. Regarding the plot of *L'Attaque*, the significance of this mythological figure becomes clearer in light of war's immanence, and Máirtín's recollections of his father. Lugh went to his most famous battle, about twenty-five kilometres west



*The title heading on the top left of the map says: Position of the English and French armies previous to the surrender of the latter in Ballinamuck — 8th September 1798 (Wikipedia)—Contemporary plan of the Ballinamuck battle-ground, marking the positions of the opposing forces*

of Sliabh an Iarainn at Maigh Tuireadh, to avenge the death of his slain father. He was armed with a spear from the Eastern World, thought more powerful than any of the enemy's weapons. Moved by the memory of a murdered father, and the notional glory of battles fought in a distant land — that is, the French Revolution — Máirtín Caomhánach will go west with his pike.

To express how war disturbs the loving and hopeful relationship between Máirtín and Saibhdhín, Ó Tuairisc focused his description once again on Máirtín's gaze. Máirtín doesn't look at Saibhdhín anymore; he stares into the 'burning red' of the sky. This obvious disruption of his preoccupation with Saibhdhín draws on a common trope in Irish myth and popular belief. The trope in question is the connection between the colour red and the otherworld. For example, a widely-known superstition is that fishermen would be reluctant to sail if, on their way to sea, they saw a red-haired woman. In mythology concerning the Tuatha Dé Danann, we find a more literary example of supernatural significance attaching to the colour red. Saint Patrick is said to

have met Caoillte Mac Rónáin at Ráth Droma Deirg (The Ring Fort of the Red Ridge). Caoilte was a nephew of Fionn Mac Cumhaill, and the last surviving member of the Fianna in Ireland. Taking place at Droim Deirg, a townland just west of Drumshanbo, this meeting was only a few kilometres from the setting of *L'Attaque*. Caoilte explained to Patrick how he lived so long, which involved an arrangement with the Tuatha Dé Danann that they'd restore his health. At Eas Ruaidh (The Red Waterfall), they spoke to him from the sí, the fairy mound. Beneath these mounds is where the Tuatha Dé Danann survive as the lucht sí, the fairies, since they were defeated and fled underground. Both place names in this tale reflect the supernatural associations of the colour red. In *L'Attaque*, the description of a 'burning red sky' at the point when Máirtín's attention is diverted from Saibhdhín, implies that he is completely overpowered. It is as though he were under the spell of otherworldly forces that are associated with the area around Lough Allen, where *L'Attaque* is set.

Eoghan Ó Tuairisc's extraordinary skill as a historical novelist is

apparent in his use of mythology. The eeriness of that moment, when the red sky holds Máirtín's attention, is reflected in the way Saibhdhín sees the mountain. Something 'frightening' is perceptible, but also 'strange', unknowable. Such is the otherworldly. Her own vulnerability is clear now to Saibhdhín, and she is scared of what is to come. In this part of his novel, Ó Tuairisc created a gripping sense of foreboding. He foreshadowed a dramatic outcome, without any kind of reference to the eventual tragedy of 1798. Mythology was a way for him to immerse *L'Attaque* in its historical setting, while also grounding it more deeply in its geographical setting. In this way, Ó Tuairisc captured very richly the present of 220 years ago in County Leitrim. When we read *L'Attaque*, we come to know our past in a new way. It was once an unknown future that awaited our ancestors, exciting their worries, and their hopes.

*Works Cited:* Ó Tuairisc, Eoghan. *L'Attaque*. Mercier Press, 1962.