

JIMMY THE HUN

Vincent Woods

THE STRANGE and sometimes bitter transition from Irish to English gave us many manglings of both languages, as well as a rich legacy of sound and linguistic duality and hybridism, and an immeasurable realm of loss and possibility. One of the more amusing details of this terrain came to me in August 2016, in a remarkable letter from a man I've never met. Jim Gammons from Uachtar Ard, Murmad, Virginia, Co Cavan, wrote to me on foot of an article I had published in the Irish Times about place and identity in rural Ireland. Jim told me that he had worked as a Housing Inspector for the Department of Local Government in the 1950s, and 'my territory was Leitrim, with an odd foray into West Cavan.' He went on:

"I spent a whole morning many years ago in Glangevlin inquiring for an Owen McGovern of Derrynanta. The ancient Kingdom of Glan was always McGovern country. They were hemmed in by the Maguires of Fermanagh whose territory flowed through Swanlinbar to the 'Black Rocks' in Dernacreive where they were crowned sitting in 'Maguires' Chair', a natural outcrop that you probably know. At the other end, in Blacklion, they are now cut off from Fermanagh by Neven Maguire.

Anyway, back to Owen McGovern of Derrynanta. I stopped a

man at random (this was over fifty years ago and there were lots of people and lots of houses around then). I asked for 'Owen McGovern of Derrynanta'. He said 'There are 13 Owen McGovern in Derrynanta. You'll need to tell me a bit more about him,' I said 'The only thing I know is that he has a bad house.' 'That narrows it down to nine,' he said. Coming up to lunch time and a dozen enquiries later, I found I was looking for 'Owenie Einy Atty' and his sister, 'Annie Einy Atty'. Everyone had nicknames involving their father's first name and their grandfather's first name. Owenie's father was Eoin (pronounced 'Ein', as in the Fermanagh one, and his grandfather was Matty (shortened to Atty).

Another time I was looking for a James McGovern and kept failing because I didn't know his nick name. I came across a postman leaning on his bicycle, talking to another man. I said to myself 'I'm in business now. Postmen know everyone.' When I put my question the postman answered 'Would it be this man here?' I said 'It might be, but I have no way of knowing.' Many different expressions crossed the postman's face and eventually he left it to his companion to sort out the situation. The companion said 'Is it about a grant for a house?' I said 'Yes'.

I had found my man. The postman didn't want to say 'Is it Jimmy the Hun you're looking for?'—in case the nickname might cause offence. It was, in fact, Jimmy the Hun I was looking for, and this man, was, in fact, Jimmy the Hun. I did my business and went away thinking Jimmy's father was probably in the British army in the First World War and came home full of stories about shooting Huns. The real explanation was completely different and I heard it from a woman called Eithne McGovern (from Glan, naturally). She said 'I know Jimmy Hun.' I think she said she was at school with him. She said his grandparents spoke Irish, his mother spoke a mixture of Irish and English and objected to old people calling her son 'a mhic'."

So the proud Glangevlin mother called her son 'A shon', adding a buailte or seimhiú to the English word. Who could have guessed that etymology, with its raft of humour and sadness? Sometimes the seemingly obvious is the blatantly incorrect. The easy answer can lead one down a blind boreen.

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