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From Galway to Soho

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FROM GALWAY TO SOHO

This is a ballad sung by Máirtín Mac ConIomaire, who contributed to the last issue. The notes explain all.

As I was scanning the Bill of Fare,¹
The waiter hovered beside my chair,
'We've Galway salmon', I heard him declare.
And then in a local confident tone,
'we've turbot, halibut, and sole on the bone
But our salmon is best and widely known.'
He walked away with his step so light,
His folded napkin gleaming white,
I knew, of course, he was perfectly right.

But what could a London waiter know
In a crowded café in Soho,
Where the shaded lights were dim and low.
Of the Salmon Weir and the Claddagh fleet,
In the city where bay and Corrib meet
In the twisted length of a Galway street.

And how would those tails that he wore compare
With an Aran Jacket in old Eyre Square,
Or a Báinín² seen at a Galway fair?
What would he know of the purple and grey
Of an autumn twilight warped on the bay,
Or the magic scent of new-mown hay?
Of the things a man can never tire,
The open hearth and the big turf fire,
Or the lowing of cows in a village byre?

Disturbing my dreams as I sat in state,
He brought me the fish disguised on a plate
Garnished with sauces up to date.
In cantankerous manner I began,
'I'd rather it fried on a sizzling pan
Or grilled with butter; I'm a country man.'
He served me the fish in Soho style,
Fidgeting there by my side a while,
On his face the ghost of a quizzical smile.

He said 'that's how I'd like it myself tonight,
In a nest of mushrooms, am I right?
In the flickering rays of the candlelight.'
'No booking of tables in advance,
No dazzling menus worded in France,
No one to give me a curious glance.
But turf sods blazing under the pot,
Potatoes flouring and piping hot,
A second helping, like it or not.'

Was he assuming the brogue of the West;
Making of me the butt of his jest?
I waited until I heard the rest.
'I played as a child by the Corrib Weir
And I watched the salmon many a year
When the day was bright and the water clear.
I saw the Cliffs of Moher in kindly weather,
The Aran Islands huddled together,
Each Currach³ passing light as a feather.
*Dún Aengus*⁴ battling through wind and rain,
A blackbird's song in a Galway lane,
I often think of these days in vain.'

He walked away in his black and white
With a step that seemed no longer light,
And a mist came up and clouded my sight.
When I cross the Weir in the sunset's glow
I think of him shuffling to and fro,
In that crowded café in Soho.

¹ This anonymous poem is learnt from my father, Liam Mac Con Iomaire, who first heard it recited by the late Dick Brown while on holidays in the Aran Islands in 1971.

² A white homespun collarless and sleeveless jacket made from un-dyed wool, from the Irish *Bán* (white).

³ Traditional west of Ireland boat made from canvas spread across a light wooden frame and covered in black tar / bitumen.

⁴ *Dún Aengus* was the name of a passenger and cargo vessel which connected Galway city with the Aran Islands for many decades.