

Oxford University Press, Walton Street, Oxford OX2 6DP
Oxford New York Toronto
Delhi Bombay Calcutta Madras Karachi
Petaling Jaya Singapore Hong Kong Tokyo
Nairobi Dar es Salaam Cape Town
Melbourne Auckland
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Berlin Ibadan

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Introduction and compilation © William Trevor 1989

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

The Oxford book of Irish short stories.

1. Short stories in English. Irish writers,
1900-. Anthologies

I. Trevor, William, 1928-

823'.01'089415 FS

ISBN 0-19-214180-5

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

The Oxford book of Irish short stories/edited by William Trevor.
p. cm.

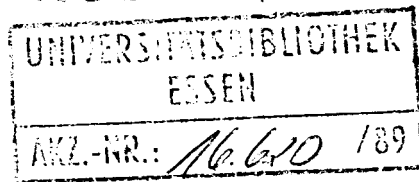
1. Short stories, English—Irish authors. 2. Ireland—Fiction.

I. Trevor, William, 1928-

823'.01'0889162—dc 19 PR8876.094 1989 88-28147

ISBN 0-19-214180-5

Typeset by Cambrian Typesetters
Printed in the United States of America



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INTRODUCTION

The modern short story may be defined as the distillation of an essence. It may be laid down that it has to have a point, that it must be going somewhere, that it dare not be vague. But art has its own way of defying both definitions and rules, and neither offer much help when examining, more particularly, the short stories of Ireland. In putting this anthology together, I was driven back, again and again, to a consideration of the part that storytelling has played, and continues to play, in Irish life. An Irish flair in this direction has long been recognized as a national characteristic. Stories of one kind or another have a way of pressing themselves into Irish conversation, both as entertainment and as a form of communication. For centuries they have been offered to strangers, almost as hospitality is: tall stories, simple stories, stories of extraordinary deeds, of mysteries and wonders, of gentleness, love, cruelty, and violence. And side by side with speculation about their source, the question has always been: why are they so delighted in, why do they so naturally form part of Irish vernacular?

Not long ago I had a little business with a police sergeant in County Mayo. I called at his remote roadside house at midday one Sunday only to be told by his housekeeper that he was not yet back from Mass and 'wherever else he may have called'. If I drove back along the road, taking it easy so as not to be too soon for him, I would meet him this side of the crossroads.

I drove slowly and before I arrived at the crossroads there he was, ambling towards me on his bicycle. He dismounted when I stopped. I passed on a message from a mutual acquaintance, and then he pointed at the distant hills and told me a story about a pedlar who years ago had sought refuge there after his elopement with 'a captain's wife' from Galway. Inspiration, loosened by the pints of porter that had followed the sergeant's devotions, gathered an unhurried momentum; the telling took twenty minutes.

The reason for our encounter shrank in importance; the story that had by chance come out of it mattered more. In detail it would have been different from the last time the sergeant told it, the circumstances being different, and parrot-like repetition being too