

For Richard Murphy

The driving keel, cut from the forest... travels the current
... and slides over the water like oil...

Opening of the "Song of Columbanus"; words, from the sixth century Latin; the current, of "the twin-horned Rhine".

When I translated the Song for the New Oxford Book of Irish Verse my memory, responding across the centuries to the rightness of the words, was of the keel of the heavy and graceful Ave Maria, sailing with Richard Murphy in the waters of the Atlantic around Inishboffin, early in the 1950s.

It was my first experience of such things, and it was clear immediately that the management of the craft needed strength with a delicacy of touch. And it was clear that Richard had these, and employed them with ease.

It is the same qualities that I have always valued in his poetry: a verbal strength, not losing itself in self-regard or display, but trying from the beginning to match the need exactly. As in the opening of "Sailing to an Island":

The boom below my knees lifts, and the boat
Drops, and the surge departs...
... the mast draws eight and eight across
Measureless blue...