



The
ISLAND
of
HORSES
EILÍS DILLON



Eilís Dillon

1920-2020

A Centenary Celebration

Eilís Dillon was an extraordinarily versatile writer, publishing 50 titles between 1948 and 1992. This richly illustrated exhibition looks mostly at her books for the young, highlighting themes such as island life on the wild Atlantic coast, her love of music, her knowledge of language and folk traditions.

Exhibition curated by dlr
Writer in Residence Sadhbh
Devlin in partnership with
Eilís Dillon's family.

10 March -
10 May 20



Eilís Dillon Bio

7 MARCH 1920▷

Eilís Dillon was born in Galway. Her father, Thomas Dillon, was a professor of Chemistry. Her mother, Geraldine Plunkett, was a sister of the poet and revolutionary Joseph Mary Plunkett.

1940▷

After boarding school in Sligo, Eilís married 37-year-old Cormac Ó Cuilleanáin, and moved to Cork, where he was a professor of Irish. Eilís had always written poetry and stories; now, while bringing up three children and running a student hostel for the university, she built a highly successful writing career, starting with children's books in Irish and English, later interspersed with detective stories, novels and plays.

1960s▷

Her husband's poor health prompted early retirement and a move to Rome. Cormac died in 1970.

1973▷

Her historical novel, *Across the Bitter Sea*, became a bestseller.

1974▷

Eilís married Vivian Mercier, a professor of English in the University of California, Santa Barbara. They spent winters in California until Vivian's retirement in 1987, returning to Ireland in springtime.

1989-1990▷

Vivian's death was followed by the death of Eilís's daughter Máire, a violinist with the London Philharmonic Orchestra. Despite these blows, and her own declining health, Eilís kept writing until her last months.

1993▷

Her last book, *Children of Bach*, was a young adult novel set in Hungary at the time of the Holocaust.

19 JULY 1994▷

Eilís Dillon died in Dublin. She had published fifty books, and been translated into fifteen languages.

LEGACY▷

A special memorial prize, the Eilís Dillon Award for a first children's book, is given each year as part of the Children's Books Ireland Book of the Year Awards.



Language

Although best known for her novels and her longer books for teenagers, Eilís Dillon started with books for young children, both in Irish and in English. Three of her earliest books were in Irish: *An Choill Bheo*, *Oscar agus an Cóiste Sé n-Easóg* and *Ceol na Coille*. Although she didn't continue to write in Irish, Eilís said in an interview: "Almost all of my books for children have a strong Irish background and have their source in my knowledge of the Irish language."

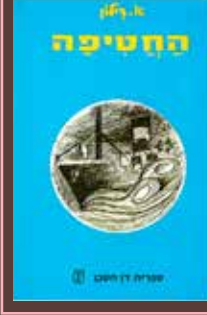
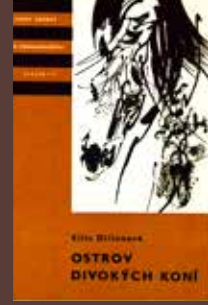
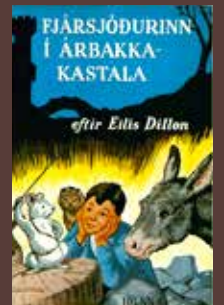
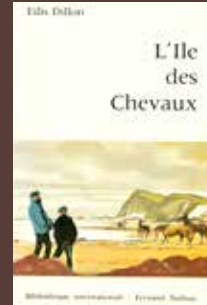
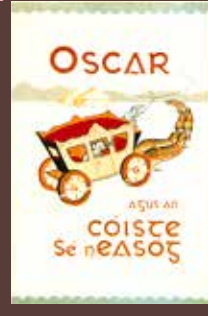
As many of her books are set on the West coast of Ireland, it is easy to see the influence of Irish on how her characters speak, but Eilís was also inspired by other lands, cultures and languages. Spain, Italy and Hungary are among the settings for her books. A fluent speaker of Irish, French and Italian, she translated texts from these three languages, and had some knowledge of several others.

Eilís wrote over thirty books for young people, published in Ireland, England and America and they were translated into at least fifteen languages. We say "at least" because her first Russian edition was unauthorised, while rumours of Japanese and Korean translations are still being investigated....

Apart from her own original writings in Irish and English, her "translated" languages thus include German, French, Italian, Afrikaans, Danish, Norwegian, Icelandic, Hebrew, Czech, Chinese, Russian, Swedish, Dutch, Finnish and Polish.



The 1995 Revenue Commissioners' calendar displayed six of Eilís's book covers in Irish, French, Icelandic, Czech, Hebrew and German



Sketches by Richard Kennedy for Eilís's book *The Key*, set in the Basque country



Books for Young Adults

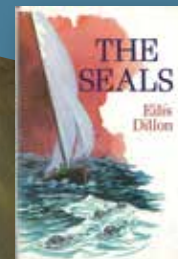
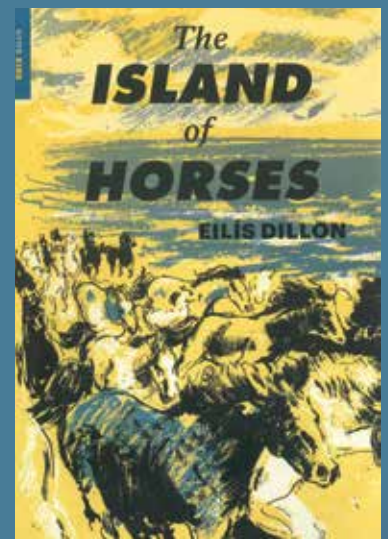
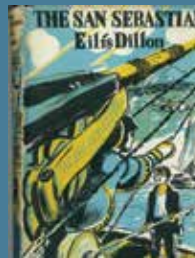
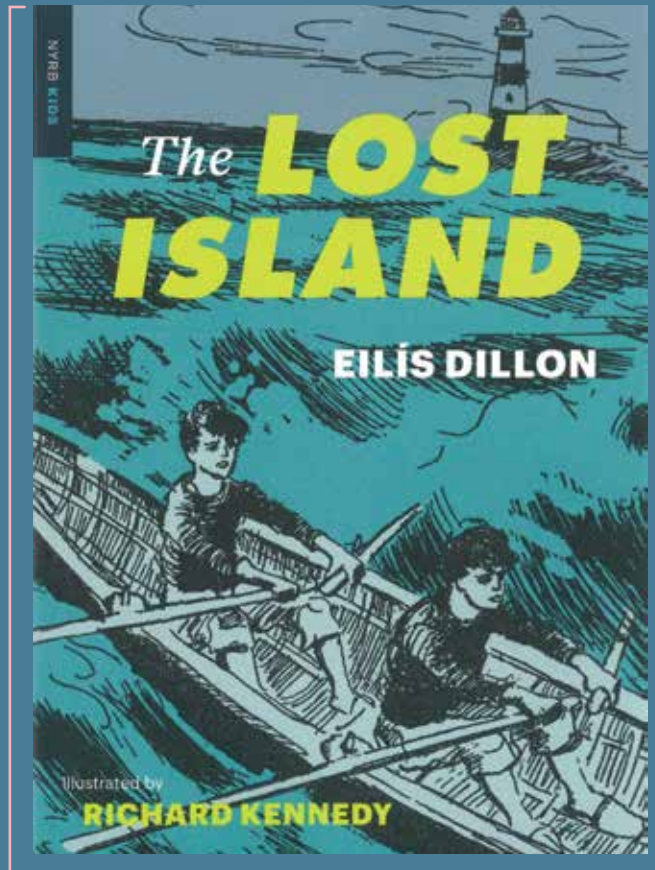
Eilís Dillon wrote fifteen books for Young Adults. The first of these, *The Lost Island* (which is still in print—68 years later) established her exceptional skill in creating a sense of place: the West of Ireland, on the wild Atlantic coast. This rugged landscape is inhabited by a self-reliant community that struggles across the generations with harsh conditions and an unsympathetic world. All of this is handled by Eilís with great warmth and humour.

Most of the books set in the West are classic adventures featuring brave young heroes, tough old men, and strong-minded, resourceful women. Two of the books recreate the classical world of ancient Rome, while the last one she wrote moves to a tragic location: Hungary during the Holocaust. Her stories show how, even in the midst of adversity, hope and community values can still endure.

Although the settings may seem 'historic' to modern adolescents, these works are as relevant today as they were to young adults when they were first published. They depict a way of life, a tradition, a kind of ecology based on survival in harsh but beautiful landscapes. The characters depicted have a deep connection to the natural world, and a necessary respect for their land and environment.

It is a way of life that we may have lost, but now need to rediscover for the twenty-first century. Young adults of today, leading the climate change movement, might well be inspired by these stories of a simpler, more connected way of life.

English and American cover designs for some of the adventure novels. The large picture, from *The Island of Ghosts*, is by Toby Gowing.



We will always have music

Music was a vital part of Eilís Dillon's life. In her younger years she played the cello (to the utter dismay of the family dog) and was a member of the Cork Symphony Orchestra. Her children received a musical education; her daughter Máire played in the RTÉ Symphony Orchestra, the Ulster Orchestra and the London Philharmonic. When Eilís was in her late fifties and living in Santa Barbara, she took up the cello again and, with lessons from a retired Viennese cellist, improved her playing beyond recognition.

Music often came into Eilís's stories, from simple songs and tunes to elaborate performances. So it was fitting that her final book was, in a way, a celebration of her lifelong love of music.

Children of Bach is set in Hungary during the Holocaust. The Second World War is drawing towards its end. The Nazis are occupying Hungary. When Peter, Suzy and little Pali find that their parents have been rounded up with other Jews and sent away, they embark on a perilous plan to escape into Italy. Not knowing whom to trust, they risk danger and betrayal, but their music will help them to embrace a new life.

The frieze of performing cats comes from *The Cats' Opera*.



© Orphan Annie

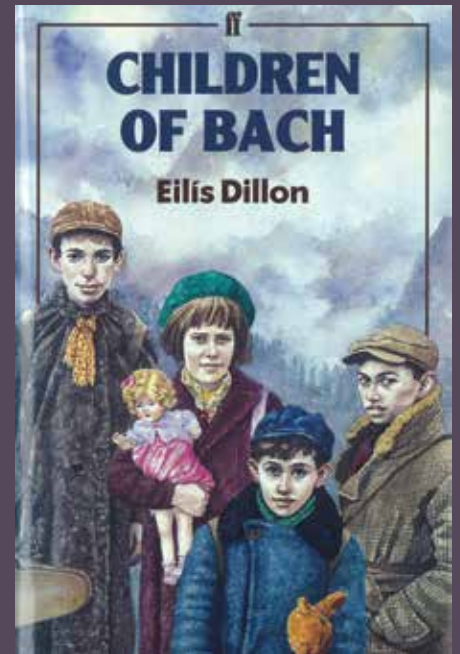
From *Children of Bach*:

"Music and painting and books are the only things that lift people above the animals and make them able to feel the presence of God," Papa said. "No matter what comes next, there will always be music."

"What will come?"

"I don't know. I only know what happened in other countries. Being born a Jew became a crime, and the punishment was prison or death. Why shouldn't the same things be done here? My friends say Hungary is too civilized, too cultured, but I don't believe it. Germany was the most civilized country in the world, in its day." He stood up and walked over to the window, where a few lights showed here and there. Most of them were blacked out, because of the air raids. After a moment he went on:

"We should get out, but I think it's too late."



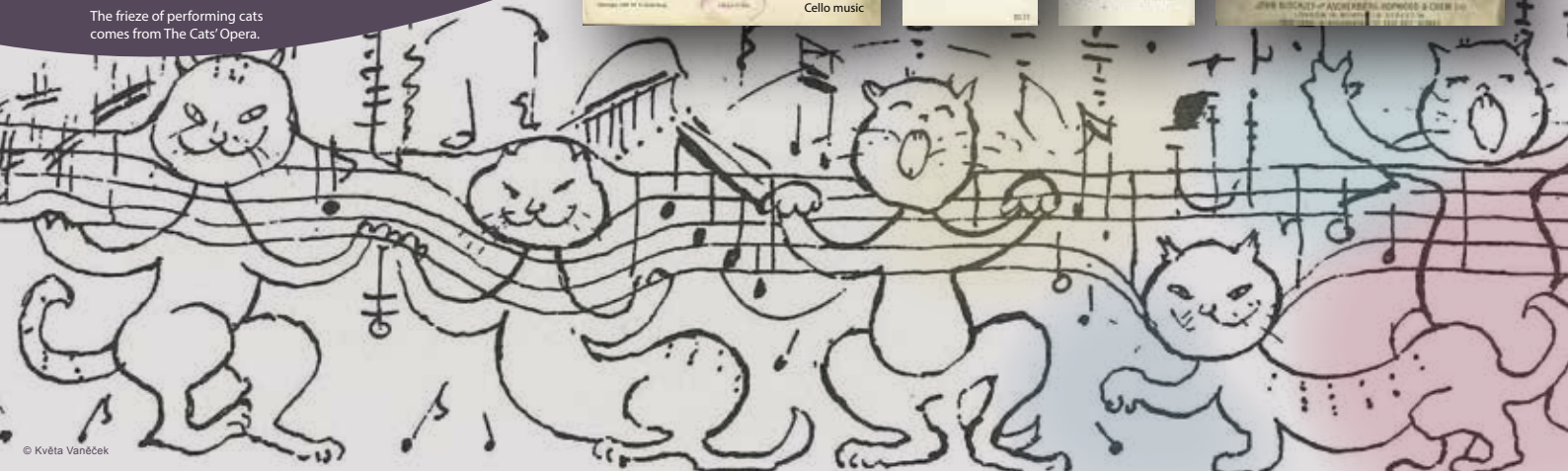
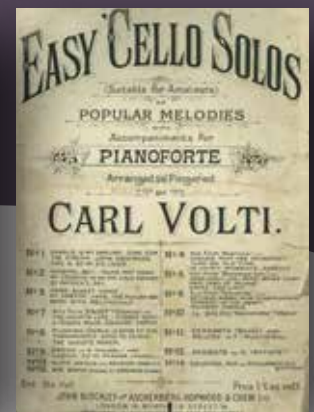
Cat and cello from *The Cats' Opera*



Young John learning the violin *The Road to Dunmore* (Illustration by Richard Kennedy).



Cello music



Great Illustrations:

Big Books for Small Children

Eilís Dillon wrote seven books for young children, three of them in Irish, recounting the adventures of rabbits, mice and weasels.

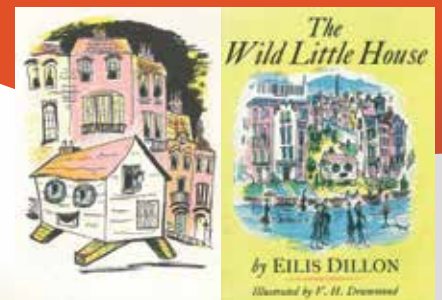
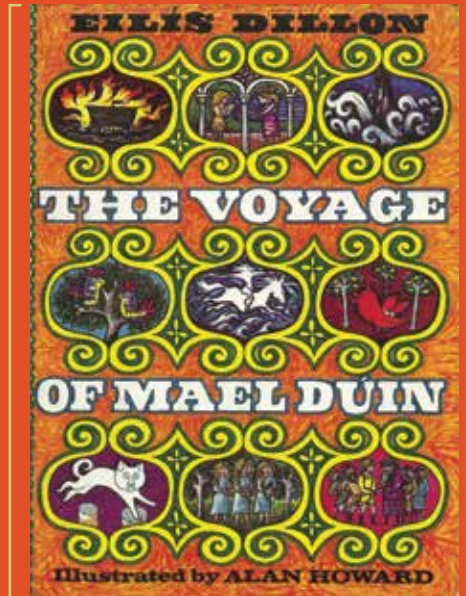
Her first English book for young children, *The Wild Little House* (1955) is about a little wooden house, standing on four stout posts. It gets tired of standing among the tall, stiff houses of the city. One night, it discovers it can walk and takes off for the seaside – with the family who live there still inside. The illustrator of this book, Violet Hilda Drummond (1911-2000) was an artist well known for her watercolour street scenes of London, and in 1957 a winner of the Kate Greenaway Medal for her work as a children's book illustrator. But she was also a children's author in her own right, with twenty books to her name.

King Big-Ears (1961), illustrated by Eilís's friend Květa Vaněček, is a proper fairy-tale featuring a cowardly prince, a cobbler's apprentice, a discerning princess, a dragon, and a witch who casts a cruel spell on a rather silly King. In short, a satirical Irish riff on classic themes.



The Cats' Opera (1962), was also illustrated by Květa Vaněček, a concert violinist with a great eye for music. Once a year, on Saint John's Eve, all animals can talk. Everybody knows that. But did you know that cats can compose, stage and perform an Italian-style grand opera, in a real opera house, all on their own? That's what John Mulligan and his family find out. A stage version of *The Cats' Opera* was presented as the 1981 Christmas show at the Peacock Theatre, Dublin.

The Wise Man on the Mountain (1969), beautifully illustrated by Gaynor Chapman, is a funny (and wise) story about a family that solves its problems by making them worse, and worse, and worse. This story can be compared to Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler's celebrated children's book *A Squash and a Squeeze* (1993). This is probably because they are both based on a (wise) old Jewish folk-tale from Eastern Europe.



Ages 8-12:

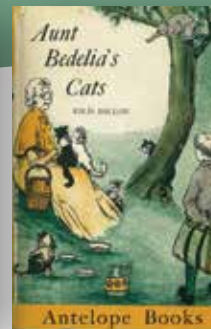
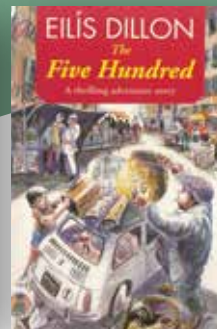
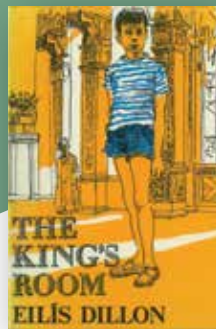
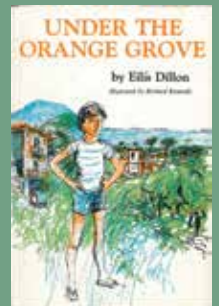
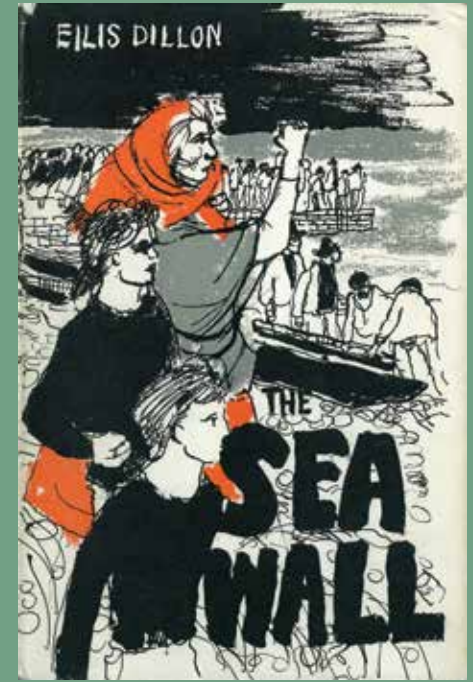
Tales of travel and adventure, young and old, trickery and magic, the sea, the city, and lots and lots of animals

"I began to write at a very early age and so unselfconsciously that it was almost inevitable that I should begin by writing children's books. I work on them exactly as I do on adult fiction, concentrating on character and background rather than on plot but usually find that a strong story soon develops."

Eilís Dillon wrote fourteen exciting books for young readers aged between 8 and 12 years. The settings range from Ireland to Spain to Italy. The stories are beautifully told, full of the wit and charm which appeals to this age group. Eilís always took her young readers seriously. "They miss nothing," she said, "and they savour every nuance and every detail." A reviewer for *The School Librarian* wrote about *The Sea Wall*, in which a group of islanders ward off the threat of a tidal wave: "The author's particular and near magical skill in evoking the atmosphere of Ireland and the attitudes and way of life of its people are nowhere more in evidence than in this superb story."

Her first book in English, *Midsummer Magic* (1950), tells how Brian, a little Irish boy, is given a magic soda cake that will make animals talk. From Malachi, a mouse, Mogue, a donkey, and Finaun, an otter, he learns of a secret treasure, buried in a nearby castle. In *The Lion Cub* (1966), Mark Ward and his sister Catherine visit the zoo. Mark smuggles one of the lion cubs out in a picnic bag and takes it home to the family farm.

One of her most popular tales for this age group is *A Family of Foxes* – a story about two shipwrecked silver foxes which four children decide to save and nurture, in secret, because foxes – all foxes – are the islanders' enemies. You can find out more about this wonderful story on the next panel.



A Family of Foxes

'They're our foxes all right. Whoever finds a thing on the sea has a right to it ever after. But if the men do see them, they'll hunt them for certain sure...'

Nobody on the island has a good word to say about foxes. They are evil creatures, with powers of witchcraft. Yet the half-drowned animals that Patsy and his friends haul from the Atlantic after a big storm seem innocent enough. How can the boys protect them and bring them to safety? How can the community learn to live with its fears? Eilís Dillon said: "I wrote the story in defence of foxes. I hope you will enjoy it. It was the first book that I really enjoyed writing, from beginning to end."

A Family of Foxes (1964) is one of Eilís' most widely published books. Inspired by superstition and traditional folklore, it is beautifully written, exciting and as enjoyable for children today as it was when it was first published.

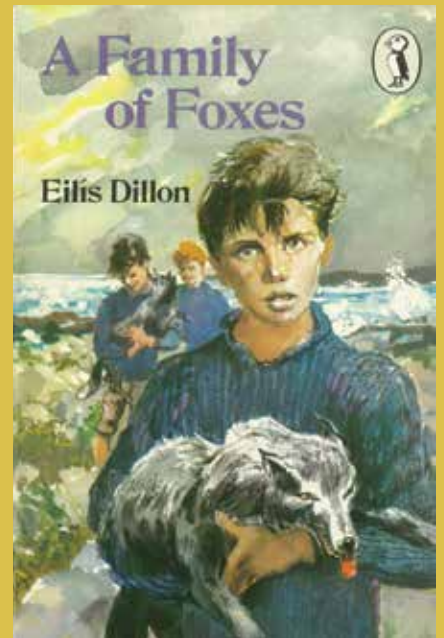
When Eilís was very young, she overheard a conversation about foxes stealing hens and, as she had never seen a fox herself, she believed they must be terribly fierce and frightening creatures. It wasn't until she finally did see one, and saw how beautiful it was that she thought the superstitions about them were very unfair.

Eilís' own childhood inspired other parts of the story, such as the children gathering food to give the foxes by visiting various houses on the island and being given a slice of bread in each one. This is typical of the warm hospitality that was found all over Ireland even when times were hard and life was a constant struggle. The author describes part of her childhood in Barna, Co. Galway like this:

"My mother made a habit of leaving a loaf of bread ready on the table so that she could quickly cut some for any passing child. Some of our school friends availed themselves of it before setting out on the long walk home, sometimes four or five miles." (ref: *Inside Ireland*)

Walt Disney Productions bought the rights to the book in 1967, with the intention of making a film of *A Family of Foxes* for their Sunday night show – *A World of Colour*. Sadly, the film hasn't been made – yet.

A special Centenary Edition of the book has been produced, and will be available at exhibitions, events and workshops.



Eilís (left) with her older sister Blánaid in the grounds of Dangan House, Galway, in 1923



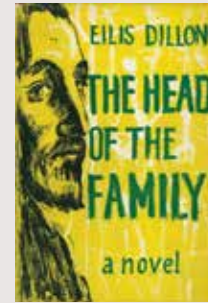
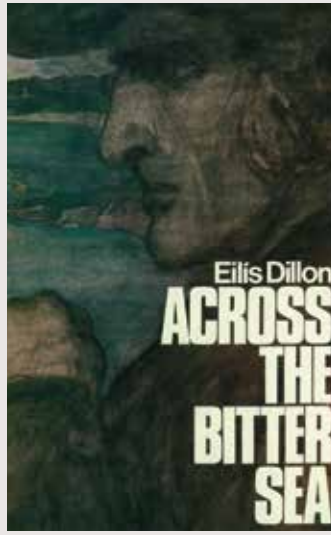
Manuscript pages of *A Family of Foxes* in Eilís's drafting book



Illustrations by François Batet for the French translation of *A Family of Foxes*



Novelist, Playwright, Translator

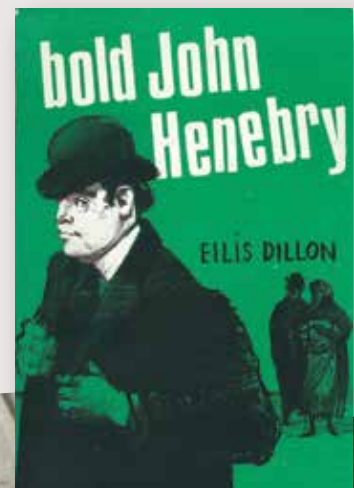
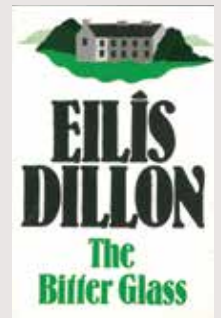


Growing up with the new Irish state, Eilís Dillon's work reflected many facets of a changing country. There were three literary novels, three detective stories, five historical novels, a play at the Abbey Theatre, poems and short stories, autobiographical essays, translations and radio plays.

Her novels attracted a good deal of critical acclaim, and featured in bestseller lists. Her most famous book remains *Across the Bitter Sea*, which together with its sequel, *Blood Relations*, explores the violent upheavals of the author's own childhood, and the historical roots of those events. Taken together, her books portray a certain idea of Ireland, the complexities of family life, and how people are shaped by the times they live in. The books also contain a good deal of dark humour and social comedy, satire and contrarian thought.

The three detective stories, published in the 1950s, were among the earlier novels of their kind to be set in Ireland, and still make enjoyable reading as vintage crime fiction. Reissued several times, most recently in 2009 by Rue Morgue Press, they are currently available as ebooks and audiobooks.

Widely read and widely travelled, Eilís had a strong sense of European culture. She translated from French and Italian, but her most important translation was "The Lament for Arthur O'Leary" a version of *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire* from the 18th-century Irish of Eibhlín Dhubh Ní Chonaill. This has been reprinted several times. Peter Levi, in his inaugural lecture as Oxford Professor of Poetry, stated his belief that the original poem was "the greatest poem written in these islands in the whole eighteenth century", and that Eilís's version was the best. He then read her translation in its entirety.



Eilís at Knocksedan House with Philip MacDermott's legendary sales and marketing team, before setting out on the book tour that launched *Across the Bitter Sea* on the Irish reading public.

