

The **CARLOW**

Journal



Called to Carlow

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Writing in Ireland: Magic Sojourn

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Part I: The Word

In his poem *To the Words'* poet W.S. Merwin speaks of the power of language:

When it happens you are not there

O you beyond numbers
beyond recollection
passed on from breath to breath
given again
from day to day from age
to age
charged with knowledge
knowing nothing

indifferent elders
indispensable and sleepless

keepers of our names
before ever we came
to be called by them

you that were
formed to begin with
you that were cried out
you that were spoken
to begin with
to say what could not be said

ancient precious
and helpless ones

say it



MERWIN comes close in this poem to capturing the Irish sense of words, the deep obsession with them, the sense that words are to be revered and to be played with, to be sung and to be spoken, that in all uses, even the profane, the words themselves are sacred, ancient vessels replete with secrets that they might tell us if only we could arrange them in just the right way.

Craic is the word that best captures the Irish love for words. Craic is hard to define, multi-layered. One cannot plan the craic, but one can hope for it. One can create the conditions that welcome the craic—the warm pub, the kitchen table set with mugs of tea with just a dram of whiskey, the open door when the wind is blowing up stories, the smell of the sea. If the conditions are just right, and if the company is right-minded, the craic occurs. Good craic is remembered forever. It occurred twice during our Irish residency, both times on the same night, both times imbued with magic.

The first occurrence came after our own Ellie Wymard was knocked down by the Gerard Manley Hopkins food flu. She had to leave our farewell dinner gathering; without her at the helm, dinner drifted down to dessert and then began to slew like a canoe without an oar. Sue Rumbaugh stepped in, directing Sue Shutter to do the necessary clerical business, directing me to get people reading. We did so. A few of our brave new members got up before the group and read their work. I asked if anyone else wanted to jump in. One or two people said their thanks and then I offered an old Irish story to honor our hosts. A few quiet minutes passed and then Nancy Ward Balderose stood and sang an Appalachian boar-hunting song. Rose Ashbaugh told a beautiful Seneca story about the advent of strawberries. Magic had gathered itself in the room; we all felt it. One after another, people stood to tell a story or sing a song, with Father Conn of St. Patrick's Carlow College at last singing, in Irish, so sad and evocative a song, that a number of people in the room were weeping. Just so, unexpected and subtle, the craic occurred among a mixed group of Yanks and Irish. How did that happen? How did the words shape themselves so that, for the rest of our lives, that room in that moment will be encased in light?

The second occurrence came two hours later in the Irishman Pub. We had been neatly divided, six or seven Irish fellows at the bar, the Yanks and their Carlow hosts tucked into the corner. Then, suddenly, one of the young fellows at the bar began to sing. His companions grew silent, as did

we. His song was full of longing, old and sad. When he had finished, all the Irishmen at the bar turned to us and one held out his hand, palm up. For a moment we were silent, more than a little afraid. Then Orlaith's giant husband, nearly seven feet tall with the huge hands on him, began to sing in a deep, tenor voice. Back to the bar, where they sang again. Back to us. This time, I sang one in Gaelic, then to the bar and back to us where James Heaney of St. Patrick's Carlow sang Johnny Cash's "A Boy Named Sue." At last the evening ended with all of us, Irish and American, singing "Take Me Home Country Roads." The bartender told us that the Irishman is not a singing pub and that in his twenty years there, he had never heard anyone, ever, sing a song. Yet, in tacit counterpoint, we sang back and forth to each other across the cultures for more than an hour. How did that happen? Why did the words shape themselves into a song? Why did it call to all the other songs to come forth? To possess us all? Oh you "ancient precious ones, indispensable keepers" why did you come?

I became a writer because of the "craic," because in my house and in my extended family, it was the pearl beyond price, the magical thing, so much so that my huge family sang songs across the dark waters of Lake Erie under the stars and stood at weddings and funerals and told stories until we laughed and wept, knowing surely and without saying so, that the water and the stars, the room, the story and the song, were sacred, are the always sacred things. In Ireland, I met myself and my dad, my mother, my Aunt Vivvy and my wild Uncle Frank. I knew the deep sense of belonging that says this is who I am and what I am and what I have always been and what I will be again. I and my people are about the words; we have always been about the words. Good craic.

Part II: The Writers

I LEARNED SO MUCH from our Irish writers that I still haven't gleaned it all, even over dozens of pages of journaling. I will say that, as a general observation, it is wonderfully instructive to learn from writers of another culture, probably any other culture, because they don't see things in the same way we see them in our culture. The Irish way of seeing the process and products of writing has been very freeing for me and I suspect that little gems of wisdom will continue to surface for months. However, I came away with



four immediately accessible lessons, all of which have already begun to benefit me here in America. They are:

- The flat playing field:* Fionn Mac Cumhail from the forest
- The words themselves:* order, humor and fearlessness
- Musicality in language:* sound as if song
- Theatricality in performance;* don't play dead yet

✧ The Flat Playing Field ✧

An Irish myth from the third century tells the story of Demna Mac Cumhail who has been raised in the forests of Ireland by his grandmother and a warrior woman. He has never seen a boy his own age, nor has he ever seen the sport of hurley (a kind of Irish ice hockey on grass). One day, Demna comes to the edge of a forest and sees a whole troop of boys playing at hurley. He observes the game from behind a tree; once he thinks he understands the basic principles he launches himself onto the field and begins to play for one of the teams. Soon he is winning every single goal; by the time he lopes back into the forest he has received a nickname—Fionn—the Light One—and his prowess has become a legend. He came from nowhere and played on the same field as all the well-trained boys of the Irish King's court. As I met our Irish writers, I was reminded of this myth several times.

For example, poets Vona Groarke and Conor O'Callaghan gave us a poem by Alan Gillis which makes fun of Seamus Heaney's idiomatic use of Ulster English.

"This is not about burns or hedges.
There will be no gorse....
Nor will you be set upon by cattle,
ingleberried, haunching and hunting"
(Gillis, "The Ulster Way")

While Conor indicated that Gillis' poem about Heaney was "brave," he also said that Heaney wouldn't mind it at all, would welcome the poem and the poet into his conversation, would think of Gillis as an equal. I found that astonishing, but found most of our poets—Conor and Vona surely, Deirdre Brennan, Pat Boran, to be utterly unaffected and approachable. This is not often the way the poetry establishment works in America, with even such a writer as Billy Collins, reading after Stanley Kunitz several years ago at the Geraldine Dodge Poetry Festival, saying diffidently, "I feel like a light dessert." This from the Poet Laureate and bestselling (for poetry!) author of *Nine Horses!* American poets tend to take the pecking order of poetry quite seriously, often with legitimate reason. In the American poetry establishment, such entrees, as academic degrees and tenured teaching positions, grants, and contests can often determine not only the hierarchy of reputation, but often the entire trajectory of the poet's career. This makes for an internal politics of American

poetry that one poet at a recent conference described as "internecine warfare." Writer Julie Larios called American poetics worrisome, because it can be so "incestuous—poets loving poets reading other poets who were quoting poets studying poets" (Larios, "From Mackerels to Ancient Lamentations").

Indeed, the July/August 2005 issue of *Poets and Writers*, the important analytical journal of American poetics, devotes an entire article to "Who's Doing What to Keep Them [poetry contests] Clean?" The article states that "what was once considered a mutually beneficial system for selecting, publishing, and promoting contemporary writing has been seriously questioned, as allegations of favoritism, and even of nepotism, are leaving many writers suspicious of the contests they once hoped to win" (Larimer 15).

At the base of this debate is a real American/Irish cultural difference with regard to poetry. Americans often see poetry as a vehicle for careerism, a way to win grants and positions in academe. Irish poets see the writing of poetry as a birthright and a natural daily practice; the answer to the question of whether one writes poetry in Ireland would likely be, "Of course." Vona Groarke and Conor O'Callaghan, who have been hired to teach in America next year, expressed their delight, saying, "The fact that they are interested in us as poets... well. And won't it be nice to put something back in the bank account?" Likewise when I commented to Pat Boran that so much of his poetry was available online, he said, "Well, but it's such a good thing for poets isn't it, because no one really cares to steal it and we don't have to worry about copyright violation so we can put up as much as we want." These examples indicate a much lighter attitude toward "positioning" than we see here in the States. (Even American fiction is not immune to this academic/popular dichotomy. Consider feminist scholar Carolyn Heilbrun of Columbia University, who hid her sidebar identity as mystery writer Amanda Cross, afraid that mystery writing would kill her chances for tenure). (Matthews)

Both "positioning" and the academic/popular dichotomy seemed to be absent in Irish writers. Perhaps this is the advantage of a very small country (or flat playing field). When we met playwright Michael West in Dublin, he had just written a play that had garnered every kudo in Irish theater and yet he began our conversation by asking me about my books because James Heaney had told him that I write on the ancient Irish cycles. I was so boggled by this exchange that I blurted out, "This would never happen in America."

"What?" they both asked.

"That a famous writer of the theater would discuss historical novels with an obscure midlist writer."

"Why not?" asked Michael West.

"Well, for one thing," I replied, rather lamely, the political explanation beyond me, "we would never even have the opportunity to meet."



“Oh well,” said James Heaney, “in Ireland everyone knows your aunts and your cousins and people from your hometown and mates you went to school with. We all know each other, really.”

Perhaps that universal knowledge, that sense of being related to everyone helps to flatten the playing field.

One of our colleagues told a story about an American writer who had corrected her in public regarding the proper formalities for his name and title.

“Oh you’d never be allowed to get away with that in Ireland,” said James Heaney.

✧ The Words Themselves ✧

my outtakes, the edges of completion,
still survive as leftovers from a cleaned-up
final version...

a door sighing shut; my mumbling junk like—

“I’m not sure I can do this anymore.”

(Conor O’Callaghan, “Outtakes”)

Our Irish writers give themselves permission to just love words, to revel in organizing them, in allowing them to produce emotion and music (more on that to come), in trying to master their use, in fully experiencing the frustration of not being able to wring precision from them. I think of Anne Enright writing an entire story around the single line “Wouldn’t you just like to know?” I think of Mary O’Donnell in her prim beige suit and perfect yellow shoes, her blond hair coiffed to a fare-thee-well, reading us a sex scene that left the room slack-jawed with... well...excitement. I think of Desmond Egan, whose eyes fill with tears every time the words are too much for him to bear. David Butler tells us:

By the time we reach *Ulysses*, Joyce has developed this use of language so radically that some critics argue that language itself, in its variety of forms, is the true hero of *Ulysses*. An episode set in a newspaper office is set out as a newspaper might be, a musical episode is structured as a musical fugue, a chapter set in a maternity hospital is written in nine evolving forms of English from the time of Chaucer to American slang (one for each embryo’s months), and consciousness is constantly invaded by the tumble of memory and sensation, song, quote, ballad, and advertising jingle” (Butler, “Joyce and Language”).

I tell a James Joyce story at my book signings. It seems that James Joyce and Samuel Beckett met in a café in Paris after a hard day of writing. Joyce was slumped over the table.

“Bad day at the writing?” asked Beckett.

“Well, I only got seven words out of it,” Joyce replied.

“Sure Jimmy, that’s a good day’s work for you.”

“But Sam,” said James Joyce, “I don’t know what order they go in.”

I asked David Butler if the story was true. He said that most of the details of who said what were wrong, but that the story itself was true. “Can I tell it as is?” I asked. “Absolutely,” he answered, “it captures the pure essence of Joyce’s obsession with language.”

Irish writers give themselves permission to play with language, to wrestle with it, to lose the match, to sing it, to see it as a sacred thing, a prayer cloth tied to a windy bush. As I watched our Irish writers do that, I gave myself permission to do the same thing, to just play at the language, to return to the way language was handled in my family in my own childhood, to forget the exigencies of the marketplace, of editorial deadlines, of academic necessity and just play. Why do Irish writers give themselves permission to do just that? Irish writer Thomas Moran says,

“Ireland has produced so many great writers because love of language was integral to Irish culture long before English was imposed on Gaelic-speaking Ireland. Perhaps the Irish response over many generations to that imposition was to introduce traditional Gaelic modes of expression into English, creating a fresh and invigorating Anglo-Irish, and thus outdoing the English in their own tongue” (Moran, Irish Authors Roundtable).

Whatever the reason, that ability to see language as a living entity, playful and frustrating as a child, but sometimes biddable and sometimes magical, has made for a literary tradition that has kept going in our Irish writers in the modern day.

✧ Musicality ✧

The Irish sing, at pubs and on street corners, at weddings and at wakes, when you want them to sing and when you want them to shut up. When I was a young girl, my relatives would always take me aside before any big family occasion. “Sit with Uncle Frank,” they would whisper. “You’re the one who’s most like him, so make him shut up. For God’s sake, don’t let him sing ‘Danny Boy.’” Invariably, it was a charge that I lost, much to my delight. In the middle of the most upscale wedding, he would stand and begin to sing in a huge tenor voice. He is legend now, gone across the water, but still singing in every family story. At the very last wedding, when he had begun the slow decline of Parkinson’s disease, they sat me beside him at the posh country club with the usual admonition. I leaned over during the most serious toasting. “Time for ‘Danny Boy,’” I whispered and I stood in the crook of his arm while he sang.

Our Irish writers sang; the song was for them the most important thing. Pat Boran told us with certainty, “If I had to choose between sense and song in one of my poems, I would choose song.”



In our workshop, Desmond Egan told us that Irish poetry is very assonantal and his own poem “Fionn’s Song” an excerpt from “Three Songs from The Story of Oisín” is a perfect example of the Irish linguistic song with its assonances, its half rhymes and sprung rhymes, its partial repetitions:

horse in the window
ashes of a dawn
whisper to the ceiling
someone’s gone

hoofbeats of morning
hollow as a room
birds of unknowing
someone’s gone

cold of old gables
where the wind waits
crystal on a table saying
gone away

past of a packed case
snapped a gate swung
o horse stone mornings –
gone

(Egan, *Selected Poems*, 46)

I like the music of the language, the cadence of it moving past my tongue and into the room with the hollow rhythms of an old Irish bodhrán, that atavistic drum. I like the permission to untie myself from the rigid line-break sentences that constitute too much modern free verse, to make the poems musical and lyrical, to let them sing.

✿ Theatricality ✿

It is that very musicality of language which allows Irish writers the theatrical performance, the permission to chant poetry the way the ancient bards of Ireland chanted it, rhythmically, full of stops and dramatic pauses, hand gestures and eye contact. Some of the workshop participants complained about this tendency in Pat Boran, but in truth I saw it in all of our writers: the ability to pronounce dialogue as if it came from different mouths in the case of Mary O’Donnell, the nuance of attitude in the characters of Anne Enright, the passion of belief in the reading of Desmond Egan, the theatricality of a duet with Conor and Vona, absolutely natural, but nonetheless Burns and Allen, Astaire and Rogers,

for all of its seeming ease. How I loved this; this is my family, my dad in the courtroom quoting Shakespeare and the Bible from memory in his James Earl Jones voice, my Aunt Lenore, soprano of the Cleveland Metropolitan Opera, my mother telling me stories of the Manitou, my Uncles Frank and Dick shouting each other down over a point of law or politics, waving their arms, angry and full of laughter at the same time.

American poets tend to do their poetry readings seated in a chair or standing behind a lectern, looking down at the words. (Billy Collins, Irish-American, is the hilarious and theatrical exception to this rule). Why? Perhaps Americans fear that we will “fancy up” the words, make them sound better than they are. Better that we stand before the classroom, heads down, scuffling our shoes? I think of Robert Frost, reading at the inauguration of JFK. Magic arrived when the wind took the papers, when Frost abandoned the reading and did the poems from memory, his voice chanting the lines like an old, sacred song. In our workshop, Desmond Egan told us to “get a speaking voice.” Our Irish writers had just that and I think we Yanks could learn a lot from them about literature as a performing art.

Part III: At Last, the Land of Ireland

THE FIRST TIME I CAME TO IRELAND I was a very young woman and Ireland was a very poor country. Both conditions have changed. Bustling Carlow filled me with happiness. I remember thinking on my first visit that I was lucky that my ancestors were starving so badly during the Famine that they were forced to get on the boat. There were no jobs and all of Ireland’s young people were forced to emigrate; many of the small towns we passed through then seemed shuttered up, abandoned. Now I wish that I had bought a little cottage in the countryside all those years ago.

Of course, I was carting forty American students with me on my first visit. On our first day in Dublin the hotel lost us all, so that I had to have my students farmed out in threes and sixes to Bed and Breakfast establishments all over Dublin, ferrying around in the bus early the next morning, a sleepless wreck, desperate to gather them all up and return them at last to a “safe” central location, which turned out to be the Ormond Hotel of James Joyce fame, where my forty promptly crashed an Irish wedding and were eventually invited—okay ordered—to stay. Our whole trip tumbled just like that, like a run-on sentence gone awry, in a series of absolutely uncontrollable events, from sick students for whom the young and handsome doctor came to the hotel door in the middle of the night, to crazy students, diving into the ocean off the Ring of Kerry, still clad in blue jeans and sweatshirts.



Photo compliments of Nancy Balderose



Carlow's MFA students take time out from their first-ever Ireland residency to pose for a group shot.

And so, probably because we were all a little crazy in Ireland, certainly because the land got down inside my soul, I fell in love with the place, the way one falls in love, just once, with the absolutely inappropriate boy, the one with long hair and a motorcycle who reads poetry under the trees, the one we never forget.

I returned each year for a time; Ireland became for me the place where my hand rested against history and that history charged down my arm like a lightning bolt and left me marked. From then on, I could write only those stories, the magical ones that came with the lightning. Ireland became Fionn Mac Cumhail, whom I love as if he were known to me, as if we have conversed a hundred times, as if he has not been dead for eighteen hundred years. Ireland became St. Patrick, who himself became Irish, who then became my own baptismal saint, who then became this place of magical residency.

This visit to Carlow called back up in me all magic that had been lying dormant, lost in the exigencies of parenting and transferring, publishing and teaching. From the day that Father Caomhaoin read to me in Irish on the windy druid hill, to dancing on the boards at the Uisean Hill, to disappearing into the soft sighing of the trees along the lane at St. Patrick's Carlow College, to hearing Father Conn sing the sacred Irish songs, I listened in every cell of my body to all those voices, all singing, all chanting, myself a vessel, waiting to pour it all into stories and poems. In one of our workshops, Desmond Egan told the poets to "let the thing glow with its own intensity, holiness, strangeness." The entire residency glowed like that for me and if I can catch it in words, I hope to give that shining strangeness, that very holiness back again to my readers. Oh you "ancient precious ones," "indispensable keepers" come to me again; oh "say it!"

Go raibh mile maith agat; a thousand thank yous to Carlow for the gift of this experience to my writing and my life. ❀



Photo by Joanna Martens

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