

Education in Ireland

By Diarmuid Leonard

The very first lecture in the programme of our study tour to Ireland was given to us by Diarmuid Leonard from the local College of Education. This lecture took place at the Ollscoil Luimnigh, which is Gaelic for University of Limerick, and the topic was: Secondary Level Education in Ireland.

As I hope the following brief account will show, education in Ireland is both typical and untypical of most western European countries of today. Since it is impossible to understand without some at least brief knowledge of its history, we begin by tracing some of its long educational tradition, then we look at some of the major concerns of Irish teachers today, and then outline the working life of Irish teachers.

From prehistoric times dim memories remain, enshrined in sagas and other ancient Gaelic literature which describe the long winters spent by the young aspirant poets at the schools of higher education of their time where the culture's most educated men, the ollamhambna, trained them in the arts of story telling and poetry composition prized by the Irish aristocracy. Hundreds of years later, in the middle ages, the families of the invading Norman-Saxons were quickly assimilated into a vibrant native culture, so that the proudest boast of a famous fifteenth-century seanghall ('former Englishman'), a lord based in Munster named Gearoid Iarla Mc Gearailt (or in English, Earl Gerard Fitzgerald) was his ability to compose celebrated verse in the native language of Ireland as well as verse in Norman French.

With the conversion of Ireland in the fifth century, the new religion introduced literacy but only clerics acquired the ability to read and write. (I hope the Danish visitors to Ireland in the summer of 1994 managed to see for themselves at Trinity College the beautiful Book of Kells which vividly illustrates the veneration of literacy in both the native and the Latin languages in the centuries of the dark ages.) In the oral tradition of the Irish poets, the ability to recite long passages from memory to entertain and to pass on lore (e.g. tales of deeds by a patron's ancestors) from

the past was essential. The arrival of Christianity brought a challenge, in which literacy opposed, but in Ireland never quite, until the twentieth century, beat the supremacy of the oral tradition in poetry and storytelling among the Irish people. An outstanding feature of early Irish Christianity was monasticism marked by love of classical learning and of native Irish lore which would have otherwise gone unrecorded. In the dark ages much of Europe had lost its classical traditions. But the ancient learning of Greece and Rome still flourished in the lonely places in islands, hills and lakes where Irish monks congregated, and increasingly survived in Charlemagne's Europe as the Danish and Norse incursions along the riverways and coasts of Ireland caused the Irish monks to seek refuge far from home in the safety of the Holy Roman Empire on the European mainland. Though little of older Irish culture and history survives in any obvious way in current educational structures, modern Ireland does still reflect an ancient popular respect for literary learning and for the idea of education.

A second feature of the story of Irish education is the extent to which English became the spoken and the educated language of the country due to changes of vast significance in the nineteenth century. The Irish language lost its dominance in the country as the native, rural, agricultural way of life collapsed under the pressure of rural over-population and the onset of a new commercial, urban, and technological culture best exemplified in Belfast's new shipyards and factories. Most dramatically, the failure of the potato crop led millions to their death in the Great Famine, and the emigrant ships to America promised to the survivors escape for a better life. The population dropped from

eight to four million following the famine and emigration that followed it. The social prestige of the still generally spoken Irish language plummeted, as English became increasingly the language of economic activity and the gateway to a more prosperous life for a people fleeing poverty and famine at home.

The misery of nineteenth century Ireland stimulated a huge educational response by several religious orders which founded institutions still important to this day in a very different, more secular country. Religious schools and colleges were built all over the country in a long wave of Catholic revival which saw a resurgence of religious belief, ecclesiastical organisation and personal and public practice of religion. Spiritual resurgence was mirrored by practical provision of churches, convents, schools, and colleges. Accompanying all this effort was a fervent parental attachment to the notion of education. Irish parents were keen to send their children to school. In an era when Catholic post-famine Ireland was unwilling to surrender to a Protestant ascendancy the only national mass institution it controlled (i.e., the schools), the mass of schools remained Catholic despite the efforts of British officials to open up the schools in order to solve, by what is now called in Northern Ireland 'integration' of children of the main religions and ethnic origins, the eternal question of split loyalties between, on the one hand, the loyal Protestant descendants of British 'planters', and on the other, the discontented, or even rebellious native Catholics.

By the late nineteenth century, the Irish school system of education depended on an often troubled mix of interests. State funds paid the lay teachers and determined the curriculum, the people supported the opportunities for advancement given by compulsory education (compulsory attendance was introduced in Ireland decades before it arrived in an often hostile England in 1870), religious orders provided many of the buildings and teachers, the teachers were highly respected members of the local community. There was a certain acceptance of

difference in a status quo of divided schools: the Catholic and Protestant churches saw the schools as part of their apostolic and pastoral work, both communities often saw in the schools an assurance of their own cultural identity.

The churches could not accept the no doubt benign British official belief, which was that little children, through the shared advantages of the three R's would somehow learn to ignore or eventually solve the vast social and political issues that divided their elders and permeated the entire social fabric of their society.(Admittedly I speak here as a former member of the beleaguered northern minority.) In the end, both the main churches maintained a strong presence in education, through ownership of schools or through the presence of religious teachers in the schools. Issues rooted in these times continue to rise frequently in the more secular Ireland of today, and few would claim that issues of control, school ethos, parental rights, state versus church rights in education, the boundaries of church and state responsibilities have been satisfactorily resolved. Currently in Ireland the Minister is working on an Education Bill which is expected to get to grips with such matters: obviously its publication will be a major event in a country where education is a highly sensitive matter. In large measure the face of modern Irish education was recognisably shaped by the end of the century: dominated by examinations, enjoying considerable parental support for the notion of education as gateway to social mobility, heavily reliant on texts, organised in didactic class teaching, strongly authoritarian in the Victorian manner, controlled by clerics, and heavily influenced by British regulations and practice such as 'payment by results'.

Independence in the early twenties brought little substantial change in the schools. An authoritarian British-run regime was replaced by an authoritarian Irish regime in which with wide public support Irish became a compulsory subject. For sixty years little changed in the secondary schools run by rather conservative clerics with little intervention by the government. A major

change was the introduction of a new type of school in the thirties: the vocational school, designed to provide a basic largely trades-based education aimed to enable young people to take up work in local trades or on their parents' farm. It was intended not to compete with the secondary schools, which were geared towards a certain view of liberal education, i.e. heavily classical, biased towards languages rather than science, offering little manual or physical education, well geared to the needs of an aspirant to higher education for the priesthood or the civil service or teaching, but not related to the workplace. The vocational schools have always had a higher working-class membership than the often fee-paying secondary schools, and many have signalled recently the broadening of their appeal by changing their title to 'community college'.

Not until the Sixties was there any official concern about the broader aims of education such as its contribution to equality, when free second-level education was introduced by a pioneering minister of Education. In typical European fashion of the Sixties, the comprehensive ideal led to a harmonisation of curricula in the vocational and the secondary schools. Yet the dominant 'liberal' (predominantly literary and academic) curriculum of the secondary school curriculum persisted in Ireland until Donal Mulcahy (1981) published a radical challenge to its basic assumptions about the purpose and relevance of education. The impact of this book confirmed the need to debate the future of Irish education, and a long process of reform in education began from 1984 with the beginnings of an official review of the entire education system. To date this has involved a highly consultative process in which parents, teachers, school managers, employers, the church, and various bodies have taken part. Numerous changes have been made in the secondary school curriculum, others are in prospect for the primary school and the 'thirdlevel' or higher education sector will undergo change also. As indicated earlier, the present government intends to bring in a comprehensive system of legislation for the system as a whole. We go on now to look at

everyday life in Irish schools.

Everyday Life in Irish Schools

Irish schools belong to a typical pattern. Children begin school at age four or five. State preschools are not provided for most young children. It is provided privately mostly for more privileged children. Most begin primary school, often colloquially known by its old historical name as 'the national school', at four or five. At usually twelve or thirteen, children go to the second-level school: this school may be a vocational school, a secondary school, or a community or comprehensive school. The third category was created to promote the comprehensive ideal and later modified to encourage local participation in school-based activities. The primary sector is currently experiencing a dramatic demographic change. As recently as a generation ago, average completed family size was four or five, now it is less than Sweden's, at 1.8 per family. Additionally a recent study of Irish demography asserts that the Irish marriage rate went into 'free fall during the eighties' (Liam Kennedy, *People and Population Change, Cooperation North*, 1994), and has now reached the previously lowest point ever recorded at the turn of the century, namely 5.8 per thousand. Shrinking class and school size are becoming real problems, though it is hoped that smaller classes in the anticipated prosperity of the nineties may help reduce the comparatively large pupil-teacher ratio. In the primary schools the average size runs between thirty and thirty-nine. Class sizes in the postprimary schools differ a little but the pupil-teacher ratio in general classes (that is, most classes not divided to meet the restrictions of workshops and the like) ranges around twenty-five to thirty, though the official teacher-staff ratio in most postprimary schools is 19:1. Senior classes are often rather small reflecting the smaller number of students opting for specialised senior courses in relatively small schools. Most schools in Ireland are by European standards small, usually of between three and five hundred students: gradually very small schools of less

than three hundred, or even sometimes two hundred, have disappeared over the past decade, often amalgamated with nearby schools. A common approach has been to amalgamate small, unviable schools e.g. vocational schools with small local girls' and boys' schools in new community schools, where management is shared between local representatives, ministerial nominees and religious teachers. Efforts have been made to encourage cooperation between schools in offering joint courses where student numbers are few, but it often proves difficult to overcome traditional reluctance to operate schools in any but traditionally isolated style.

Ireland by and large despite a long dispute that drove something of a wedge between teachers and parents some years ago considers itself fortunate in the generally high calibre of people it attracts into teaching. For example, primary schools in Ireland are among the few in the western world which are able to attract their teachers from among the top quartile of the school-leaving population. Since the seventies, teaching has been an all-graduate profession. A professional qualification is required of teachers in primary and most postprimary schools. The most common career preparation pattern is that intending teachers spend three years of study on their degree, then one year on their professional qualification known as the H. Dip. Ed (Higher Diploma in Education) which includes theoretical (philosophy, history, psychology, etc) and practical elements (supervised teaching experience in schools, microteaching, lesson preparation, etc.). In recent years, H Dip. Ed courses claim to have become less laden by theoretical material and more classroom-oriented. About fifteen per cent of all teachers are holders of honours degrees. Most teachers are able to teach at least two subjects of the postprimary examination syllabus. Three interrelated phenomena have marked the makeup of the teaching corps since the early Eighties: the rapid decline of the numbers of religious

teachers, the greying of teachers, and the decline in recruitment of intending teachers. Religious vocations especially among the teaching orders have rapidly fallen over the past twenty years, possibly reflecting erosion of religious faith, political changes that challenge the hitherto unquestioned Church role as provider and moral determinant of Irish education, new outlets for evangelistic endeavour in more challenging roles and places e.g. ministering to the poor of the Third World. One effect of the withdrawal of the religious from education has been to open up opportunities for lay teachers to obtain principalships previously held only by religious members in schools run by sisters, brothers or priests. At the same time pressures on principals have also intensified so that the universities have greatly increased their provision of courses in educational management to meet a burgeoning demand. Recruitment of new teachers was severely curtailed by the government in the Eighties when it became obvious that the teacher education institutes were 'over-producing' in terms of numbers that the system could afford to appoint to jobs in schools. Fairly quickly, staffrooms experienced a loss of new blood, and the greying process has for some six or seven years continued unabated: the average age of postprimary teachers is now in the mid-forties. In all, about forty-three thousand teachers work in Irish schools. Of these, twenty thousand are primary teachers, the remainder are postprimary teachers. The vocational schools are diminishing fast: most are small and unable to compete with the wider range of subject choice available at the other schools competing for student numbers. It seems that demography more than educational ideology poses a longterm threat to their continued survival. A current controversy is the dispute over the educational merits of single-sex versus coeducational schools: at the University of Limerick new research seems to show that girls do better academically in the long run than those who attend the politically correct mixed-sex schools.

The Irish Teacher's Work

It is a matter of concern among some that Irish children receive less education than the children of most European nations. The Irish postprimary teacher goes to work on fewer days (about 167) and has more holidays than most European counterparts. Yet the standards of Irish education compare favourably with those of other nations. Those leaving the postprimary schools are broadly educated. Participation levels are high; about 70% take the terminal Leaving Certificate examinations in English, Irish, mathematics, and usually three other subjects often including a varied mix of one science, or one additional language, or one business-related subject such as accountancy, or a social sciences subject such as geography or history. Fashion in the popularity of subjects changes from year to year reflecting job market changes: currently engineering and the arts are enjoying a revival of vocational interest. Competition for university places is extremely keen. Some twenty-five thousand students will enter advanced education straight from school next year. Educational critics of the examination system run by the

government have for many years complained of their over-reliance on memory and unimaginative reproduction of fairly standard material and procedures, but foreign industrialists claim to be attracted to Ireland at least partly because of its high national reputation for the quality of its education. Rather traditional whole class teaching tends to predominate at both levels. Though officially for over a generation the primary schools have operated a 'child centred' curriculum involving discovery, pupil activity and group and individual work in class remain uncharacteristic of life in most primary school classrooms.

Despite the high personal standards of achievement necessary to be admitted to teaching, Irish classrooms often reflect little of the teachers' creativity. Irish teaching traditions rely heavily on texts and examinations, in other words on the decisions of the higher echelons of education decision-making, to determine classroom activity and course content. Especially given the importance placed by most parents on examinations results, teachers work under considerable strain to secure the best results



for their students. In this atmosphere teachers aim, usually with much success, for efficiency in the examination preparation of their students. (As an outsider from Northern Ireland, I am often struck by the significance of the schools' preference for the term 'students' rather than, say 'children' or 'pupils'. Few teachers feel able to experiment in novel departures from the dominant examination-led didactic style rather than risk failing to prepare their students as examination candidates. Such social pressure and perhaps the authoritarianism of the system have led to the common phenomenon of high input of effort and creativity by teachers into many kinds of local enterprises such as sport, community enterprise, cultural events, etc. while local schools enjoy relatively little of such teacher enterprise. For example as a person involved in several curriculum projects I am often struck by the contrast between the almost total absence of drama as a classroom activity in a nation where, reflecting the attraction of teaching in a nation slow to develop the alternative openings available in other countries to able people, many of the most fertile, resourceful, and popular dramatists are schoolteachers: Brian Friel (author of Philadelphia, Here I Come to mention but one highly acclaimed play), Brian Mc Mahon (The Honey Spike), Roddy Doyle (The Family), and the latest discovery of 1994, Pat Mc Cabe, (The Butcher Boy). All of these dramatists are qualified teachers with at least some experience as practitioners. And don't forget that a giant figure in present-day English literature, Seamus Heaney, had another life as teacher of English in Belfast (I was his successor in that job) and he too wrote a successful play The Cure at Troy, sometimes known as Philoctetes. It seems to me that many creative Irish teachers have to work within a system designed to stifle not encourage their individual creativity, Yet things are changing. Following years of critical comment about the effects of the postprimary examinations system, recent reforms have introduced more imaginative approaches to the examinations. A more open, more varied style of classroom teaching

is encouraged in recent changes introduced into the junior certificate examinations taken by most young people at around fifteen years of age. Since then, according to research, two apparently contradictory things have happened: the postprimary teachers profess satisfaction with the greater freedom in decision-making now open to them, but teachers say they have not changed their methods of teaching. These findings suggest the strength of tradition in classroom practice, and perhaps – a common theme in Irish teachers' complaints about over-hasty innovation by the central planners – central neglect of the crucial job of preparing the people who were charged with actually implementing the innovation.

Teachers' Current Concerns

The major issues impacting on teachers' concerns are probably shared by most European countries. Obviously some are mutually reinforcing such as 2. and 3. below. The following are likely to be familiar to other European teachers:

1. The prospect of decline in the school population as the size of average completed size diminishes. Twenty years ago the average completed Irish family size was about four, now it is less than two. Implications for teachers are profound. Will there be mass unemployment among teachers? There are hopes that the prospect of favourable economic conditions will help lower the pupil-teacher ratio rather than compel teachers to leave the classroom teachers. Secondly the recruitment of new young teachers has virtually halted thus leading inexorably to their appointment as temporary rather than permanent staff and thus to the ageing of the permanent school staffs.
2. The impact on schools of rapid social change. Many social changes e.g. in employment patterns, in family life in social life generally from fashion to family relationships lead to new challenges for, or even to, teachers' professional roles. Teachers feel under pressure to modify their roles

quickly to be relevant to social changes. New pressures to undertake new, more pastoral roles may seem unfamiliar and strange to people whose identity as teachers had previously been in a rather academic context as, say, maths teachers rather than as carers of youth in second-level schools.

3. Growing popular expectations of the schools. As problems emerge in current society – lack of commercial enterprise, AIDS, heroin and ecstasy tablets in the inner cities of Ireland, the possibility of peace in a postceasefire Ireland, etc. – teachers are increasingly expected to resolve them. For example some schools claim to be teaching ‘enterprise studies’ to students, which though a questionable claim is one now sometimes introduced at the request of local communities. Technology education has already started in schools to pursue a political aspiration to provide access for all students male and female to the study of technology. Schools are increasingly expected by parents and society to undertake this task, though few teachers are trained to undertake new job roles in this area with new skills while their schools are equipped in strikingly different degrees (depending on whether the schools have offered such subjects as home economics, technical graphics, woodwork, metalwork or a science) to provide relevant curricular experiences of technology as designing and making.

4. The changing conception of schools continues to raise new questions about a highly traditional social entity such as the school and therefore about the profession of teaching. In 1992, the Department of Education published a Green Paper: it proposed what amounted to a response to a new way of thinking about schools. For example it registered the impact of frequent contextual change: it went to some pains to spell out aims such as the broadening of Irish education to equip students more effectively for living and working in an enterprise culture, and in Europe. But it also presents the school as an institution that needs to be

open and accountable to parents at local level. The school, it is proposed, must obtain the approval of parents for its school plans and its review of the school year. Henceforth parents are considered partners in school planning. Previously this was not the case. Only local and central management bodies had any real say over the work of schools and teachers. The full implications of such a change in public perceptions of the school have yet to be worked out and debated politically in the forthcoming legislation promised by the present government. Yet the warm public welcome of the proposed notion of the school as a partnership between parents and professionals represents a shift of power likely to generate major redefinitions of school and teacher effectiveness in ways that are not yet obvious and will probably not be initiated by teachers.

As was indicated above, the directions of change are in broad harmony. But the prospect of change sits at odds with a greying profession unless special efforts are made by central planners to manage the processes of large-scale change much more effectively than in the past where curriculum change was introduced more often by fiat than by consultation or participative discussion. It is no wonder that teacher morale is often said in Ireland to be low as Ireland’s teachers face into a new and unfamiliar future, more European, more streamlined in terms of a utilitarian harmony between education and the economy, more technological, more open to pressure for change from parents and others, in a word more demanding than ever before. Perhaps in these respects Ireland’s teachers share a fairly common European experience.

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Some Aspects of Women's Lives in Contemporary Ireland

By Mary Lane Kelly

Mary Lane Kelly is a researcher in the area of Women's Studies, and she is involved in the EC sponsored programme N.O.W. – New Opportunities for Women.

The election of Mary Robinson as President of Ireland was an extraordinary event in the lives of contemporary Irish women. Her distinguished legal career marked her as a liberal thinker. The kinds of landmark cases she had taken demonstrated her commitment to improving the quality of women's lives. Her political behaviour during her time as a senator in Seanad Eireann made her views absolutely clear. Here was a woman who believed in equal opportunity, freedom of choice and civil rights. In a country where traditional attitudes to women remain strong and where up to recently few women participated in parliamentary activity, Mary Robinson was unusual. She was a working woman, a mother and a partner in a "mixed marriage". She is a Catholic and her husband is not, in a predominantly Catholic country. In the light of Irish history the election of Mary Robinson is even more extraordinary and it provides a useful starting point for this short article.

When I addressed the visiting group of Danish teachers of English in Limerick in July 1994, my brief was to speak on the lives of women in contemporary Ireland. Women and the Church, Women and Europe and Women and politics were some of the themes listed. And there was much more. It was a daunting task and as preparation advanced, it became clear that only by telling a little of the past, could the present lives of Irish women be put into perspective.

For that reason we looked at the aftermath of the Great Famine of 1845, which will be commemorated next year. It decimated the population of the countryside, precipitating large-scale emigration of women and men seeking survival and a livelihood elsewhere.

Social structures changed as people struggled to keep smallholdings viable, using delayed marriage and inheritance by one son as a means of keeping tiny farms intact. During this period the Church strengthened its influence and focused particularly on women as key players in spreading its word and maintaining social stability. They were encouraged to be chaste and pure and to dedicate their lives to their husbands and children. Devotion to the Virgin Mary grew. Those women who could not marry – and they were many – often joined religious orders and became teaching nuns at home and on the missions abroad. Women's role was to submit to the accepted order which relegated them to the private sphere in a strongly patriarchal society.

In Ireland when we refer to "the Church" we usually mean the Roman Catholic Church to which the overwhelming majority of the population belong. While attendance at religious services has fallen and women appear to ignore the Vatican's prohibition of other than natural means of fertility control – the birth rate has dropped considerably – Church influence is a powerful factor in Irish life. Through its control of education and schools, particularly at primary and secondary level, its values and beliefs are easily spread and this has certainly been the case in the past.

Divorce is not legal in Ireland. We expect a referendum in the near future to decide whether it should be introduced. An earlier referendum on the same subject in the midEighties failed to bring in reform. In the meantime, marriages break up and the legal position of women and children is often

unclear and insecure. This is because the Church does grant annulments under its own rules and allows those whose marriages have been so dissolved to remarry. The state on the other hand does not allow remarriage of separated persons unless they have been divorced in another country or have been granted a state annulment, which is exceedingly rare. After all divorce does not exist within our jurisdiction. So a strange situation prevails. People do remarry following Church annulments of their marriages. Others who have not gone through that particular process survive in liaisons which have little legal standing particularly where children are involved. And the state seems to turn a blind eye to what could be considered bigamy!

Abortion is a controversial area in Ireland also. Despite two referenda the legal position remains somewhat unclear, with disagreement between eminent legal experts as to whether our laws give prior rights to the foetus or to the mother. In any case abortion is not carried out in Ireland and those women who seek to terminate their pregnancies must travel out of the country, to England as a rule. We may face another referendum on abortion in the future and it is a prospect which many dread. It is an area which has caused much bitterness in the past.

As in many other countries, the numbers of single women having children has increased and gives rise to great concern. The marriage rate has dropped also. Unemployment is a huge problem and affects women both directly and through the joblessness of their husbands, partners and adult children. These factors exacerbate the problems that poverty creates in women's lives. They tend to work in low-paid, parttime, service occupations and thus conditions of employment are frequently poor or non-existent. Better-off women tend to work mostly in teaching, nursing and clerical work. Even where they pre-dominate, men are in charge usually, teaching and nursing unions being cases in point.

Turning to the political scene, we now have twenty female members of parliament in the Dail and together with President Mary

Robinson, this gives rise to hopes for the future. In the early Twentieth century, Irish women participated in the struggle for female suffrage and also in the movement for national freedom. When these goals were achieved, they seemed to fade from the public scene and the few women in parliament were usually relatives of deceased male deputies. A move to industrialisation in the Sixties began a process of modernisation in a hitherto mainly agricultural society. Free secondary education for all, introduced in the Sixties has been a major change agent in Irish society.

The Sixties brought other changes as media developments exposed us to other cultures and ideas. This contributed in no small way to women's progress as we learned to think thoughts other than those traditionally prescribed. In a country where business, the professions, the civil service, the Church and all major institutions are dominated by men, change occurs slowly. Membership of the European Economic Community has been a of great significance in this regard also. It precipitated legal changes in the equality area, in particular the removal of the "Marriage bar", which meant that female public servants had to resign on marriage. This has contributed to the fact that more married women are now in paid employment. Nevertheless, there are fewer women in the workplace in Ireland than in most European countries and while the numbers of married working women has increased, they are still quite low.

All this reflects the fact that traditional values upheld in our Constitution of 1937 maintain the idea that women should adopt a chiefly private role. Male dominated institutions continue to make decisions which affect women's lives. For example one of the reasons given for low numbers of women at work is the scarcity of childminding facilities. There is little improvement to be seen in that area at present. It is hardly surprising that this is the case when we take all of the above into account.

Nevertheless, this is a time for optimism. Women are more educated than ever before and we have more women representing us in public life. Much remains to be done of

course. However, Ireland is a country of contrasts where despite public adherence to traditional religious values, private lives provide evidence to the contrary. Women are clearly beginning to think and decide for

themselves on issues which crucially affect them. The ability to choose a lifestyle and the possibility of choice are the keys to the future for Irish women. ♦

Recent Trends in Irish Writing in English

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Ireland, a small island on the westernmost edge of Europe, has in this century produced a body of literature which in quantity and quality is out of proportion to its physical size and political power. The last few decades, in particular, have seen an output which is as marked as that of the Literary Revival of the early part of the century. The material has been successful, too, on the international front. An Irish writer, Seamus Heaney, has been given the prestigious post of Professor of Poetry at Oxford University; Irish playwrights Brian Friel and Frank McGuinness have had highly acclaimed and long-running productions on London's West End and New York's Broadway; several Irish novelists have won the Booker Prize. However, to cover all the recent developments in Irish writing would require book-length treatment, just as the number of emerging authors has become too great to include them all. This article will therefore make a selection of some of the more noteworthy literary productions.

A sense of place has always been one of the most marked characteristics of Irish writing, whether urban or rural-based. The oppositions are now not so much city versus country, Dublin versus the West; more geographical areas are included, and the locales are more diffused. The city may now be other than Dublin, the country scenes may be located in the Midlands; sometimes the setting may cross boundaries of city and

country. The most prominent of these literary locates is the North of Ireland, those six counties that are politically part of Great Britain. It is also the scene of the greatest social and political activity: Belfast has become a name to put alongside that of Beirut and Sarajevo in world headlines since 1968. Recent months, however, have seen the declaration of ceasefires by the paramilitaries of both the Nationalist Catholic and the Unionist Protestant sides. This has come about as a result of intense negotiations involving political and religious leaders of all sides, and of the Irish and British Governments, with help from the United States.

This situation is a great deal more complex than that of a simple polarity of Faiths and opposings views of Fatherland. In the same way, the literature shows a rich interweaving of viewpoint and craft, as it struggles to express and understand the vital forces at work in what is euphemistically referred to as "the Troubles". Frank Ormsby claims that "any poem by a Northern Irish poet since 1968, on whatever subject, could be termed a Troubles poem, in that it may, consciously or unconsciously, reflect the context in which it was written" (1992, XVIII). This complexity underlies the images from archaeology that can be found in the poetry of many of these writers. When Heaney writes in his poem "Bogland": "Our pioneers keep striking / Inwards and downwards / Every layer they

wider issues of brotherhood. The same is true of his other plays, which deal with topics like broken hopes and immortality and dreams (*Carthaginians*), as a group of Derry people keep vigil in a graveyard waiting for their dead to arise. His latest play, *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* is also about the experiences of men under stress in a war-situation, but this time they are hostages in Beirut: an Irishman, an Englishman and an American. This play is psychologically very true to life as it mirrors the real-life testimony of Belfastman Brian Keenan in his book *An Evil Cradling*; but it actually predates the book.

Aside from their thematic complexity, what contributions have North of Ireland plays made to twentieth-century drama? Anthony Roche believes that they have marked dramaturgic features that may collectively constitute a new genre; in them no single character dominates but they are displaced from their original affiliations into groups where they jostle for prominence in various combinations. Structurally, too, they are different to the usual idea of the well-made play as they emphasise “discontinuity, fragmentation and juxtaposition”. And they challenge, as well, the claims of language to validate reality (1994: 216-217).

The fiction of the North of Ireland is not so prominent as the poetry and drama, but there are some compelling books by authors such as Jennifer Johnston, Benedict Kiely, Eugene McCabe, and Michael McLaverty. They deal with the social and political issues, but taken from the point of view of everyday simple lives; Johnston's *Shadows on Our Skin* portrays the friendship between a boy and a young teacher, and the disastrous consequences when he reveals to others the fact that she is engaged to a member of the British Army. A common preoccupation, too, is one which occurs also in the poetry: the innocence and ordinariness of the victims of sectarian violence: the carnage after a bomb in the peaceful village of Claudy (Simmonds' poem), is matched by a similar event in Kiely's novel *Nothing Happens in Carmincross*.

The second area on which Irish writers focus is one of the two poles of yore: Dublin, the capital city. O'Casey's strongly socialist

plays of the 1920s and '30s have been succeeded by James Plunkett's *the Risen People*, playing at present in Dublin in a revised form. Plunkett is better known for his novels, however, especially *Strumpet City*, which deals with the lockout of the workers on strike by their employers in 1913, and the misery which resulted. This strong note of stricture is also echoed in the social satire of the plays and newspaper articles of Hugh Leonard, and the poetry of Paul Durcan and Thomas Kinsella. Not many of the writers confine themselves to Dublin as subject and locale in the way that James Joyce did: the exceptions are Plunkett, Leonard and Roddy Doyle. Doyle's novels *The Commitments*, *The Snapper*, *The Van*, and Booker Prizewinner *Paddy Clarke Ha-ha ha*, all treat of Dublin working-class life in the suburb of Ballytown (in real life, Kilbarrack), and the first three are set in the 1990s. So, too, is his very disturbing TV mini-series *The Family*, screened within the past year, in which he seems to have set out to counteract the image of the comic, lovable working-class family of the earlier works, though Paddy Clarke had begun to sound a more sombre note.

The reasons why these authors do not confine themselves to Dublin alone is suggested by Richard Kearney (1992: 52-53). These poets, based in the capital, have a more cosmopolitan outlook than the Northern writers. Finding the myth of Irish Nationalism insufficient, they look across the sea to England, the USA, and other places to which Irish people have traditionally emigrated, and in these later decades increasingly to Europe. On a practical level, many of the better-known writers earn a supplemental income as lecturers and writers-in-residence at various universities and colleges, particularly in the USA – Seamus Heaney at Harvard, for example. This enhanced range of experience brings new contexts, alternative images and different landscapes of place and thought to their work. Paul Durcan rejects Ireland in *Going Home to Russia*; other collections of his have names like *O Westport in the Light of Asia Minor* and *Berlin Wall Cafe*. Poets such as Durcan, Eavan Boland and Thomas McCarthy attempt also to face the reality of

human domestic relations, love and sexuality, which are not endemic to the city, in their poems of the "suburban night" (Dawe 1992: 168ff), as Thomas Kinsella did earlier in "Nightwalker" (1968).

Mention has been made of Eavan Boland. She and Medhbh McGuckian form part of an increasing number of women writers coming to the fore, who treat of domestic issues and matters of relationships in a compelling way, though without being confined to these topics. They have been fostered very often by women's self-development groups, which has as a result that these writers are often based in towns or cities: like Paula Meelhan in Dublin and Rita Ann Higgins in Galway. Eavan Boland describes an experience of hers after giving a reading or a workshop, in "The Oral Tradition". As she sits there in the warm interior on a cold evening, she listens to two women tell a tale of an ancestor's ordeal, giving birth unaided in a field. This mother and child have gone in "to the archive/ they would shelter in/ the oral song/ avid as superstition/ layered like an amber in/ the wreck of language/ and the remnants of nation". Going home, the trainwheels sing "hints...of truth". Thus does the domestic and local become in literature the exemplar of a profound truth. Eavan Boland believes that women have not been made part of the new Ireland; in her poetry and essays she tries to relocate them there (cf Dawe 1992: 170ff). This view has been strongly underlined by the recent controversy over the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Literature*; its three volumes had no woman among the editors, and its entries were felt to have under-represented women's work. The omission is to be rectified by a fourth volume dedicated to the work of women writers.

The international dimension described earlier does not imply an exclusion of rural themes. Irish writers of recent decades tend to come from a wide range of areas in the country, and to feature their homeplace in their work. If one area, however, can be said to represent "the country" or "the West" of the earlier twentieth-century polarity, it is the small town of Listowel, Co Kerry, in the south-west. It has seen a remarkable literary output for its size: the works of George

Fitzmaurice (1877-1963), of Bryan McMahon, the former teacher now in his eighties and author of many excellent works of fiction, his former pupil and pub-owner John B. Keane, author of many plays about Irish rural life such as *The Field*, now released as a film, and the younger Brendan Kennelly, poet and professor of English at Trinity College Dublin. The town hosts every year the Listowel Writers' Week. Here workshops are presided over by established authors in the various genres, and prizes are awarded in the different categories.

Literary competitions, national and international, arts festivals and summer schools, have helped to foster new and emerging authors and to increase the popularity of the well-attended creative writing courses all over the country. Screenwriting and the film industry are thriving. The future looks good for Irish writing, therefore. At the present moment, the Government, in the person of Minister for Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht Michael D. Higgins, is an active, vigorous promoter of all the arts. A poet and storywriter himself, he is not afraid of controversy in carrying out his duties. Perhaps Longley's hopes for the future will be realised: "Imaginative Ulstermen (and by extension, Irishmen) could be the beneficiaries of a unique cultural confluence which embraces the qualities of the Irish, the Scottish, the English and the Anglo-Irish." (in Andrews 1992: 13).

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Brendan Kennelly

Brendan Kennelly was born in 1936 in Ballylongford, Co. Kerry. He was educated at Trinity College, Dublin, where he gained his BA, MA and PhD, and Leeds University. Since 1963 he has lectured in English Literature at Trinity College, and in 1973 he became professor of Modern Literature at Trinity. He has lectured at various colleges in the USA as well.

Brendan Kennelly has published several books of poems, one of his best known works is the controversial poem-sequence *Cromwell* published in Ireland in 1983, he has edited *The Penquin Book of Irish Verse*, and he has published two novels. Not only that, Brendan Kennelly is also a celebrated dramatist.

The poems brought here are both from his collection of poems called *A Time for Voices*, a selection of poems from 1960 – 1990.

Brendan Kennelly: "If a poem isn't shared, it's not alive" and, quoted from memory from Brendan Kennelly's lecture at Trinity College in Dublin in July 1994, 'You can't understand anything or anybody, unless you understand 'the otherness' of other people, of other things. And 'the otherness' in yourself."

Forsiden til A Time for Voices • Selected Poems 1960-1990 af Brendan Kennelly.



Baby

I find it interesting to be dead.
I drift out here, released, looking down
At men and women passing judgement
In the streets of that moneymade little town.
I enjoy the jokes about me, scribbled in the

Gents,

I like the lads in suits, their smart legal faces,
I follow them through every argument,
I note their gas antics at the Listowel Races.
There was a hope of love at the back of it all
And in spite of clever men making money
That small hope still survives.

Will I name the clever men for you? Yerra, no.
I smile to watch them prospering to their

ends

But thanks be to Jesus I won't have to live
their lives.

They're trying to find out who killed me,
A fascinating exercise.

If I were water I'd let them spill me
And I'd run out of their eyes.

If I were fire I'd burn books of law
And half-burn the men who study them.

If I were air I'd slip into their lungs
and out of pity revive them.

If I were earth – O now that I think of it
That's what I am or am becoming

A little more quickly than you, and
painlessly.

Tell me what you think it means to be alive,
I'd love you on that topic, expounding.

Being dead, I must find out, you see.

And yet, being dead, I may grow
To be a small, cheeky flower
Peeping through a veil of snow
On the scarred face of the earth
That never grows ashamed;
Or I may be
A blade of grass to nourish you;
Or a book
Wherein the nosey world may read
Of lover's luck
And what it means to bleed.

the Nurse, the Teacher (of Medea's and Jason's two sons) and the Chorus have been seen on stage. Medea has only been heard from within.

Medea

(to audience, looking also from time to time at the CHORUS)

Women of this city,
do not turn critical eyes on me.
I have come out of that palace.
Your eyes are full of judgement
but devoid of justice.
He's a snob! She's a whore! He's a drunkard!
I pitch judgement to the winds
and cry for justice.
I cry for justice though my life is over.
I who have tasted the sweetest moments life
can offer,
so sweet I knew they could not last.
Sweetness is brief, bitterness is long.
The man who was my world, my sun and
moon and stars,
my sacred rivers and holy mountains,
has proved himself not a man, but a
poisonous snake.
And yet he feels and thinks,
schemes, manipulates and plans,
handles emotions as if they were money
which he deposits safely in his pocket,
fingering them for comfort or for fun.
O yes, he feels and thinks.
And yet, of all the creatures
the fertile mind of Nature has conceived
there are no creatures who can
feel and think like women. That is why
we are the unhappiest creatures
on the face of this creative earth.
First, all dressed in white, for the most part,
we are the playthings of men's bodies,
the sensual toys of tyrants.
Men, the horny despots of our bodies,
sucking, fucking, licking, chewing, farting
into our skin,
sitting on our faces, fingering our arses,
exploring our cunts, widening our thighs,
drawing the milk that gave the bastards life.
And allowing for all that, there's another
problem—

is he a good man or a bad?
Till the day he marries,
a man can conceal his true nature
by the careful exercise of style.
Style – that elegant lie.
After marriage, his true nature begins to
emerge.
Marriage, happy, horrible, or dull, is
revelation.

If separation follows, the woman
is often the object of sniggers,
the man of sympathy.
If the marriage remains intact,
a woman needs second sight in order
to handle this stranger who is her
bedmate. What are his expectations,
his midnight tricks, his desires
to hurt or be hurt, his
terrified or savage ways, his
cold kindness, his savage
caresses, his lawful barbarisms,
the tragedy and comedy of
intercourse, his sudden loss of
interest in her body, his
turning his back on her as if
she didn't exist (does she? my friends)?
Does a woman really exist
apart from the "attention" a man
pays to her? Usually, this
"attention" happens in the warm
creaking of the bed, the rhythm
that leads to snores on one
side, and, often enough, tears
on the other. Tears and snores.
Silence and noise. Woman and man.
(Pause)

It is often said that
we women have a comfortable life
in the safety of our homes, while
men go out to sweat at work,
or risk their lives in the terrible
dangers of war. Nonsense.
I'd rather sweat it out
in some stinking hellhole, or
fight a war in a foreign land
than give birth to a brat
who will add to the pollution
of this befouled earth
where even the seas are thick
with poison. However,
women of the city, you and I

are not in the same position. This is your city. (.....) Now, dear sisters, dear women with whom I have shared my nightmare, there is one thing I must ask of you.

If any punishment falls on my husband's head, if he is driven naked and lunatic through the streets, screaming obscenities most citizens have never heard before or even dreamed could ever exist; if he should lose what is nearest and dearest to him in the world, and storm demented at the sight or thought of unbearable loss,

tearing the flesh from his bones; then, my sisters, I ask of you only one thing: your silence. Silence, the most powerful weapon of all. We women are known and proven to be gentle, warm, considerate creatures. But if there is something terrible to be done, a woman's gentleness becomes the most murderous weapon of all. And it is all the more murderous when the silence of women surrounds the deed. That is why I ask of you all, here and now, for the gift of your silence. When I take revenge on Jason let your silence be my strong approving witness.



The Killaloe Writers' Group

The Creel is a collection of poems and prose by a group of writers called The Killaloe Writers' Group. In the introduction to *The Creel* they describe their group as one of a number of 'small groups (that) gather to read each others' work in an atmosphere of constructive criticism'. They see this as 'a development of the adult education movement started (in Ireland) in the nineteen-sixties' and one of their tasks being '

to contradict the notion that literary endeavour is the prerogative of some cultural elite'.

The Creel contains recent work chosen by common consent and they have wanted to publish their works because this is 'one way of saving us from being nothing more than voices crying in the wilderness' and because 'it is fun to do'

PATRICIA-ANNE MOORE

Patricia-Anne Moore was born in Belfast Northern Ireland in 1951. Apart from a year in Paris as a language assistant she had spent her whole life – as a schoolgirl, student, and civil servant – in Northern Ireland until her husband's appointment to a Chair in the University of Limerick brought them bort to live in Killaloe, County Clare, formerly the ancient seat of the High Kings of Ireland.

Patricia-Anne Moore joined the Killaloe Writers' Group in September 1992, and finds that the spirit of constructive criticism within the Group, and the discipline of writing for the weekly meetings, has been enabling.

Apart from writing ,she is interested in travel,reading fiction,good food and wine, and 'networking'.



Cul de Sac

Three months ago, it must have been
two threadbare men stood on a doorstep,
declared that peace should break out
if everyone would fall into line
bite the bullet, sheath the sword
holster the Armalite, abandon the bomb
sit at the table and talk it through.

Nothing is agreed until everything's agreed.
Soundbites sit smugly no claptrap.
As the toll rises daily
Bodies fall nightly
Babysitting, taxi-driving or delivering pizza
They get the message without seeing the
executioner.

Intransigent Ulstermen, or as they say there
Dour and thrawn:
Damaged beyond knowing, weird and sad
Needing the loving touch: needing to see
Bulbs bloom in bowls, unsheathed tulips
tipped with flame
Crocus royal with purple, its stamens
showing saffron.

28.2.94

MICHAEL MURRAY

Born in South Wales of Scottish parents. Ex-dental technician and export executive. Now runs his own business and does most of his writing – according to the biographical notes in *The Creel* – in the seconds before group meetings and publication deadlines.

Stormy Weather

3 AM.

The last remnants of the pub
trickle surreptitiously into the street,
scattering in various directions.
The long walk hour from town
with the still night air like wine
against the carcinogenic fog of the bar.
A starlit sky illuminates the way home.
In harmony with the universe
and at peace with himself
he turns into his road.
The bedroom light is on.
He frowns.
Stormy weather.

MICHAEL DURACK

Born in Birdhill in 1949. His poems have appeared in 'Riverine', 'Limerick Poetry Broadsheet', 'Poetry Ireland Review' and other periodicals, and have been broadcast on RTE Radio 1. A collection, 'Nothing to Write Home About' was published in 1988. The following two poems are hand-outs from the poetry reading by the Killaloe Writers' Group in July 1994 in Limerick.

Waiting for Paddy

Must have slipped by incognito
amid the anoraks and the jeans,
amid the 'hi's' and 'good mornings',
amid the suits and the briefcases,
amid the sirens and the horns,
amid the fumes and the coffee smells;

though I was boggle-eyed with watching
for the shillelagh under his arm,
for the chip on his shoulder,
for the shamrock on his lapel,
for the guinness bottle in his pocket,
for the rosary round his neck,
for the jig in his brouges,
for the begorrah on his lips,
for the crock of gold in his fantasies,
for the old bog road in his memory.

March '93

In the Bag

In my shoulder-bag there are many treasures—
a thesaurus, a pocket Shakespeare, some wire
paper clips, The Koran, a lone
cufflink, The Songs of Leonard Cohen.
These inmates of my bag inspire.

Also sun glasses, shirts for leisure,
day-glo headbands – items of attire
to have about should azure skies
entice me to take exercise.
To these my bag and I perspire.

In secret pockets, made to measure,
I stash love letters, photos – the entire
catalogue, from first to last,
of my depraved, clandestine past.
In these my bag and I conspire.

And yet remote, elusive pleasures
tickle the palate of my desire –
the Lotto Jackpot, a Porsche, a rise,
that girl with Michelle Pfeiffer eyes.
To these my bag and I aspire.

August '93.

PETER ROBIN McARDLE

Peter Robin McArdle is a fairly new member of the Killaloe Writers' Group. He has returned to live in Killaloe "having lived there in a previous incarnation" (according to the bibliographical notes) An ex-temporary school teacher, clerical worker and retailer. Peter Robin McArdle started writing in 1992.

It Would Please Me

It would please me to be married four times
To a wife
To a lover
To a mother
To a mistress
But let then all be one
and that one be you.
Would that be easy?

If I could turn away, walk away, un-known
and forget you
Then yours would be the smile that would
stop me, again
To mirror mine.
Yes, that would be easy.

And what do you want?
A god?
A king?
To shake the earth?

A man?
A fool?
Me?
No, that is not easy.

And so.
Let us circle and close, and dip and swing
And dance the dance of life.
Put to one side what bars our way
And daily so.
Dear wife, and lover and mother and
mistress.
And daily so to know what we know.
That does please me.
I see does please thee.
Yes, we find that easy.

Ask not if I have a mistress
For 'tis cruel to make you guess
But if you press me in this business
Then the answer must be yes.
But she and you are one my love
As daily do you steal the round and rote of
yesterday
In newness to reveal?
Yourself.
And that does please me
as you tease me.
Oh yes, we find that easy.

August '93



Ciaran O'Driscoll

Ciaran O'Driscoll was born in Callan, Co. Kilkenny in 1943, and lives in Limerick. O'Driscoll has written several collections of poetry, the poems quoted here are all from the collection called "Listening to different drummers" from 1993.

Ciaran O'Driscoll gave a lecture on Irish

poetry and in the evening of the same day he read -among several other examples- from his own poetry the two poems below, giving his audience the impression of a poet full of humour and irony.

Last Known Sighting of Homo Sapiens: Achill Island, 24 February 1993.

Hijacked by teenage guerrillas escaped from school-
the prettiest one up front, on the ledge of the windscreen,
conveying the orders of High Command to the driver -
suddenly, megaphonically, the bus began to blare
the music of the Daily Late Afternoon Revolution,

and shards of mystic landscape fell around in my head,
crevasses opened in ripped bracken hillsides
swallowing sheep and cows, the solemn cloud-puncturing peaks
of mountains began to sweat blood and spew guts:
in a split second all was dementia,
and all that wasn't dementia was claustrophobia.

What's the matter with the Youth of Today? I asked myself
while the Youth of Today sat unabashed on one another's knees
as if sexual candour had only just been invented,
and compared notes on the latest release
by Hydraulic Drills or Black-and-Decker Convention;
You're getting to be a bit of an old fogey, I said to myself
It has crept up on you unbeknownst, this
eminently pensionable desire for beauty and peace,
for the sublime in nature and old-fashioned solitude.

But to tell you the truth, for the previous hour or more,
my enjoyment of the landscape had been marred
by an increasingly urgent desire to micturate
and that was how I came to be so privileged,
to be the only one who sighted once again,
after so many years, a specimen
of *homo sapiens*; because
when the bus pulled in to drop
newspapers outside a shop,
I got out of my seat and elbowed my way
through a thicket of adolescent foreplay
to ask the driver *An bhfuil cead agam dul amach?*
and sprinted down the footpath to a pub,
and there he was!
I caught my first glimpse of him as I opened the door,

an old creature with a hooked nose, who was seated
not in front of, but *under* the television,
and facing out towards an ambivalent audience.
He was talking loudly and gesticulating about God knows what
in competition with the Minister for Finance
who was lacing the thin gruel of budgetary rectitude,
no doubt, with a potent narcotic of buzz-phrases,
*Kick-starting the Economy and Putting Structures
in Place for Better Things in the Pipeline
which are not, however, Feasible at this Point in Time.*

I was in too much of a hurry to listen
to the old creature, but on my way back out
I confirmed the primal fact that he was not only *not
watching* television, but *competing* with it,

and while there are many species that don't watch television
such as seagulls, penguins, polar bears and tigers,
there is only one species on this earth that has been known
to be capable of actively competing with it, namely
the story-telling conversation-making species of *homo sapiens*
believed by many to be long extinct; but I can now aver
it still survives in at least one particular instance,
this king Canute trying to roll back the amnesiac waves
that lap the shores of our quotidian consciousness,
this Sisyphus forever pushing the boulder of truth
up the implacable slopes of Whizz-Kid Hill.

For the truth is that our whole mutated race
could be born again as human beings if only we tried
talking to one another, entertaining one another
in the places where we live; that culture, knowledge and ideas
are not things that can be pre-packaged and distributed
to the masses by patronizing central agencies;
and that television itself can and should be used to encourage
our participatory natures and not to lull and deaden us.

So there it is, the last known sighting of *homo sapiens*
on Achill Island, 24 February 1993,
Ash Wednesday and Budget Day, point of coincidence
between ecclesiastical and political calendars,
a day of belt-tightening in both secular and spiritual
realms and I was back in the bus, a bearded neanderthal,
impotent savant among the flower of hip *jeunesse*
qui pourraient mais hélas! ne savent pas, the door
of my privacy assailed once more
by a battering-ram of rock music
on the majestic fringes of the Atlantic,

heading to Heinrich Böll Cottage, Dugort, where now I am
writing it all down under a ghost's inspiration
for the lost honour of Katarina Blum.

Petals

On the mantelpiece of the marble fireplace
in our new house, an end-of-summer rose,
white on a thin green stem, sticks out
of a pale green miniature jar
with a few decorative brush strokes
on its squat belly. A few sprigs of leaves,
speckled with rust, are lower branches
beneath the head of this innocent triffid
inclined with a clumsy weight of petals
ready to fall from grace, to fall from the weight
of having no other place to go;
and a million blocked lives, and a million more,
are petals on waters going nowhere,
like the ones that have fallen into the bowl
I put beside the gas heater to keep
the air moist and the skin of my hands and face
from flaking. The petals of the white rose flake
away at the touch and plummet – yes, at least
in comparison with other ways I have seen
the petals of roses falling, they plummet –
past the curious *art nouveau* designs
painted in green and gold on the dark marble,
into the bowl of waters going nowhere.
Somewhere there's a word for you, even
a world for you, innocent griffins
who spring at me out of their redbrick sunsets
at the back of the house, laying me flat
as the latest rose out of the autumn
wilderness of our new garden, the city
in heaps of loosening bricks around me.



Maeve Kelly

Maeve Kelly was born in Dundalk in 1930. She qualified as a nurse in London, farmed with her husband, and is

now administrator of the Limerick Centre for Abused Women and their Children. She has published two novels, *Necessary Treason* and *Florie's Girls*, two collections of stories and a volume of poetry.

One of her short stories, *Orange Horses*, can be found in *The Picador Book of*

Contemporary Irish Fiction,
edited by Dermot Bolger.

The extract below is from *Necessary Treason*, which is a novel about a young woman who joins the women's movement in Limerick and her relationship with a man twenty years her senior who calls her work for a battered wives' refuge 'a hobby'. Reviewers have called the novel 'A landmark in Irish feminist writing'.

Adrian drove through the main street and turned at St Mary's Cathedral. A little further on was the Protestant graveyard where his grandmother was buried. He had promised his father that he would maintain an annual commemoration there.

'The Church,' his father had said, 'separated in death those whom they could not divide in life.'

So in a little green oasis, practically in the heart of the old town, with a chieftain's view of the river, his grandmother lay with her Protestant cousins, while the man she married, loved and bore children for lay at the other side of the city with his Catholic family. His grandmother had the best view of Limerick. There were moments, after all, when the city was quite lovely. Adrian admired the glimpses of the towers built to support huge cannon reaching down to the river's edge. The stone balustrades of the principal bridge were imposing too. Where the river flowed high and deep to become the long curving estuary, the effect was of elegance tinged with hints of a noble past. A famous actor had once described it in his melancholy tones as a lonely and beautiful widow. Perhaps, thought Adrian, he wasn't so far off the mark. There was something bereft about it, as if it could never quite understand its loss. The aged cathedral with its romanesque arches hugged the remains of the city walls. Here and there other fragments of the old walls straggled behind back streets, buttressed to withstand the attacks which had destroyed the city and the spirit within it. Of

all the places in Ireland, Limerick, and indeed the whole of Thomond – which in the old days stretched back to Hugh's house on the Shannon mouth, embracing virtually all of Clare – suffered as much from dissension within as from attacks from without. In a way Limerick epitomised that lack of unity and ability to compromise which had brought about the final destruction of Gaelic Ireland. Hugh, of course, would say that the same spirit still lived on in Limerick and in Ireland. Adrian had to agree that his native city had turned in on itself, become ever more insular and incestuous, lived and died licking its wounds. Other towns throughout the world had arisen again after worse defeats. Why should this one have lost its soul? Old tribal jealousies, resistance to change, all played their part. But was it more than that? Had the taste of defeat been so bitter that the people had lost the stomach for fight? The broken Treaty of Limerick and the ensuing penal laws left an indelible mark on each new generation. Bad government, poverty and famine compounded despair. Long memories and ancient history were impossible burdens. After all the fighting and the little uprisings, the wish for peace and a quiet life might very well have led to stagnation and apathy. Adrian sometimes fancifully compared the destruction of the spirit of the city (though in his more realistic moments he asked himself if such a spirit had ever come truly alive) with the death of the Inca civilisation. Limerick was the last frontier of Gaelic Ireland. There was no hope of recovering that Ireland. Yet

tantalising reminders were still there, in the language, in stone carvings, even in the faces of the population, who might have been the living models of those round-eyed, thin-mouthed images immortalised on abbey and church walls and on Celtic crosses. At times it seemed to Adrian that he walked through a doomed city, peopled by ghosts who had managed to acquire the outward habits and clothing of a modern age but who fretted constantly while they searched for their lost souls.

He was always glad when he left Limerick, and he rushed back to his tower with as much speed as possible, although his conscience pricked him because he used the city as a

(...)

In June, Adrian was in Limerick buying equipment for his home-made wines and found himself caught in a queue of cars in one of the narrow side streets. He could move neither forwards nor backwards. The source of the delay was soon apparent – a procession of people moving down the main street. Among them a group carrying banners sang hymns. On one of the banners was an image of Christ's mother painted in the style of a Russian icon. Another bore the words **NOVENA IN HONOUR OF OUR LADY OF PERPETUAL SUCCOUR**. Of course. It was the time of year for the nine days' prayer. He knew that in Limerick it reached particular fervour. An order of priests who had the imagination to employ a PR man ran the event with the aplomb of a highly efficient multi-national company. Each day of the Novena thousands flocked to the church to pray and sing hymns and listen to sermons. Out of curiosity and perhaps a touch of nostalgia he decided to participate. He followed the surge of traffic behind the procession, parked the car dutifully where he was directed and, self-consciously sheep-like, pushed with the crowd into the church.

It was a building of Gothic design with huge marble pillars and a high domed sanctuary. Splendidly triumphant, it reeked of majesty and authority. How was it, Adrian reflected as he was ushered into a seat by an

large warehouse, a place to purchase material goods. He had no feeling of affection for it. The clouds billowing up the estuary blocked out sunlight, excluding signs of the immense universe around. Nothing much happened in Limerick. No one was doing anything important or going anywhere in particular. But then, he thought, where in Ireland could you go? Ireland was the place you came back to, to die.

You could not enjoy a vital, purposeful existence here. Hemmed in by the implacable sea, you pondered on the meaning of life and became a poet or a priest. What country could afford such luxury? Too many poets, too many priests.

official, that Hugh never considered the great churches and cathedrals as expressing whatever it was he felt should be expressed? Far removed from the little beehive huts of the ancient Irish monks and the pleasant functional monasteries of the early Christians, this was surely a magnificent monument, a flamboyant celebration of the humble life of Christ, as proud and challenging as the pagan tomb of Bru Na Boinne. Built at a time of poverty and near starvation, such a building could be seen either as a justification for the people's suffering or a further symbol of exploitation. Adrian didn't care which it was. He sat back in his seat and wallowed in memories.

As a boy he had scarcely been aware of this church's architecture. He knew only that it was a place of quietness and peace where the faint smell of polish mingled with the scents of burning candles and incense. At night the glow from the sanctuary lamps outshone the flickering candles before the side altars, with their special dedications to special saints. When he accompanied his mother on her evening visits for prayer and meditation they shared a magic world of dreams and shadows. It seemed now, as he looked back in memory, that the warm glow of sanctuary lamps and candles pervaded his childhood. The religious certainty of that time was a happy taste of paradise. It was good to be able to reach out

and touch it with his thought.

Each evening he and his mother waited for the lay brother to extinguish, one by one, the altar lights and the candles until the soft dimness was overcome by the velvety smoothness of the dark. The single light in front of the tabernacle would never be extinguished. That was the light of the world. If that went out, evil captured men's hearts. As he left, he always turned to look again at the lamp while the lay brother stood patiently, rattling his keys to encourage their departure. Up at five o'clock each morning to practise the virtues of chastity and obedience, without any of the recognition given his priestly superiors, he must have thought their last reluctant walk was yet another cross for him to bear. Adrian used to watch him fearfully as he scurried out but there was never any response. His mother would murmur, 'Goodnight, brother,' and the pale long face would dip in acknowledgement. At home by their own fireside, his mother sighed for the lonely, cold life of all lay brothers, as they made their way through stone corridors to their bleak cells. His father would laugh and shock her by saying they were all probably rushing to tittle at the altar wine. As he sat packed with a thousand others in neat organised rows, the suppressed excitement of the audience was almost palpable. In the gallery above, the organ tuned up. The altar was vivid with flowers and, even in the bright sunlight shafting through the windows, hundreds of candles added their pale light to its magnificence. The light of Christendom battled with the light of the natural world. The organ pealed out a triumphant Ave and the congregation rose to greet the priest, who made his way quietly to the pulpit, wearing his long black soutane. The performance began.

Adrian was not interested in the words the priest used, or in the message they conveyed, but only in their great rolling sound. They echoed through the church, bouncing off the pillars, swooping in great curves to penetrate the hearts of the hearers. They filled every crevice in the arched ceiling, each corner of the side altars, so that the whole building became nothing more than a gigantic

receptacle for the words of this one man.

Adrian was overawed by the power invested in the preacher and every now and again he glanced furtively at his neighbours for evidence of inattention or even incredulity. There was none. Their attention was unbroken. They were admonished and exhorted and they took it with the utmost equanimity. The Mother of God was described in the glowing terms of rhetoric but the preacher never exceeded himself, never ventured too far into his flights of fancy.

His sudden swoops down to earth came with reminders of the practical favours granted by God's mother to her earthbound children. Examples were read out of exams passed, illnesses survived, even the grace of a happy death. The congregation was urged to pray for the safe return of some fishermen who had been missing off the coast for several days. Adrian, feeling that such pleading must be heard, silently added his own prayers to theirs. Willingly, he was swallowed up in the fellowship of common prayer, became part of the one great spirit, and abandoned without qualm his individual need. He was not even surprised when, just before the close of the service, a man ran up the centre aisle holding high a piece of paper and with great solemnity handed it to the priest. A hush of anticipation fell over the church. A woman sitting beside Adrian cried, 'Oh, Jesus, help us, Mary, blessed mother, succour us.' The man in the pulpit read out in quietly controlled tones, 'Our prayers are answered. The fishermen are safe in harbour. Let us give thanks' The congregation rose and sang the Alleluia.

Adrian's hands trembled. If he had cried no one would have noticed or cared. Around him noses sniffed. Handkerchiefs were everywhere. He was moved to love and being so moved wished to weep out loud. Memories of his mother taking him by the hand up to the altar, lighting the candles, encouraging him to insert the pennies in the slot, telling him about the love of Jesus in the tabernacle, overwhelmed him. ◆

Irland, 27. juni – 11. juli 1994

Lad mig sige det straks, dette var et vidunderligt kursus! Hovedæren for dette havde naturligvis Irland selv, men nævnes skal også, at kurset var umådelig godt tilrettelagt af vore to dygtige og rare danske ledere, Lene og Jørgen, og vore to irske skytshelgener, Linda, Rose of Ireland, og den pragtfulde, stærke, hjælpsomme, humoristiske Phil.

Oh hvad med kollegerne? Jo, tænk, det var en flok sprudlende, charmerende, excentriske individer at være sammen med (ved omverdenen det om engelsklærere?); så rart var det, at en del af os mødtes igen i september for at repetere det hele.

Efter denne indledning kunne læseren måske få mistanke om, at kurset foregik i Byzantium og ikke i Irland. Sådan var det ikke. For at vi skulle blive mindet om denne verdens ufuldkommenhed, blev vi allerede på andendagen ført til the Raheen Food Centre (those dying generations at their pong!), mens besøget i Limericks handelskammer og overværelsen af Kevin Keelan's "hilarious monologue" understregede kedsomhedens betydning i den faldne verden. Vores madpakker (chicken with stuffing) spillede en

vigtig kontrapunktisk rolle i forhold til de udsøgte retter, vi nød i the University Dining Room i Limerick.

Resten af turen var ren fryd! Foredragsholderne var spændende og fagligt meget kompetente, og politikerne, vi mødte, var skarpe og direkte. Det var en stor oplevelse at møde så mange forfattere: Maeve Kelly, som i solnedgangen læste sin novelle, Orange Horses, og the Killaloe Writers Group samt Ciaran O'Driscoll og Brendan Kennelly der læste egne digte. Irske folkemusikere og et regnvåd besøg på Aran lod os ane det gæliske Irland, og mødet med to excentrikere, den landlige Mary Angela Keane og den metropolitiske Joseph O'Gorman understregede landets mangfoldighed. Betydningsfuldt var det at dvæle i Joycetårnet i Sandycove (sørgeligt at Eccles Street blev glemt), men klimax for mig som Yeats-fan var pilgrimsfærden til Thoor Ballylee og Coole Park og chokket at se kun tomten af denne helligdom. Jørgen Wildt Hansen, Ordrup Gymnasium.

(med råd og vink fra Eva Christensen)



Plassey House
– her er universitetets officielle velkomstrum,
The University Dining Room i Limerick.

Hiberno-Danish Limerick Sequence

On the banks of the muscular Shannon,
downstream from where good Bishop
Flannan

once founded his church
and, left in the lurch,
Vice provoked Cromwell's Protestant
cannon,

there you see now the middle-aged Viking,
too effete perhaps for his own liking,
ascend Conway's coaches
while he restlessly broaches
a subject to him rather striking:

what is Irishness? Is it the keening,
the anguish and slow, painful weaning
from 800 years
of Erin's wild tears
at the havoc of English ill-meaning?

Is it shamrock or chicken with stuffing
or the west wind's perpetual huffing,
hot Irish on Aran,
apparently barren,
but rich if you don't mind the roughing?

It's all those, I expect, but it's more:
it's a friendly and wide-open door,
it's tea out of your hand,
a traditional band,
it is Guinness and whiskey galore.

It's a woman at first rather still,
but she soon shows her mettle and will,
her intelligent humour
will soon be a rumour
in Denmark, it's kindness, it's Phil!

Jørgen Wildt Hansen
Limerick, 6 July 1994



Plassey
Village.
*Studenterboli-
gerne.*