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The Amergin Step

Thesis presented by

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for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University College Cork

School of English (Creative Writing)

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Acknowledgements

I am primarily and enormously indebted to Eibhear Walshe and Bernard O'Donoghue, my supervisors over the course of this thesis. Their interest and understanding of – as well as patience with – a work that not only did not fit into a recognisable category, but was unsure from the beginning about the course it would take, has been and remains highly appreciated. Since this is a creative writing thesis and since I am primarily a poet, I would like to express this appreciation in two recent poems that relate to the sort of uncoverings the thesis itself attempts.

Here is the first:

Eagle

for Eibhear Walshe, with gratitude

(i)
It was only here and there the old roadway
Showed itself through the overwhelming bog.

Now and then centuries of disuse relented
And allowed hollowed-out passages or stone

Foundations lift themselves out of the heather
And furze. A line barely visible on an old map

Went astray in a tangle of roots, snagged itself
On rusting barbed wire fences before sinking

From sight as surely as it sank from memory.
Only on the higher ground, where the wind

Had flayed bare the shoulders of Mullach Beag
Did the road again assert its sinewy strength.

(ii)
We had walked up through ruined settlements
Where generations had scraped out survival

Before the lakeside road far below us was built.
Their hard-won houses and walls had years ago

Faded into anonymous rectangles on old maps.
High up now, as we approached Cnoc an Fhiolair,

Huge wings soared from their own extinct name
Over deserted townlands like some descendant

Of emigrants getting to know the old territories.
Too quickly for the binoculars, that reintroduced

Sublimity passed overhead, lost itself in clouds.
We turned, trying again to decipher the old road.

And this is the second:

Where the Words Bring Us

for Bernard O'Donoghue, with gratitude

(i)
Sometimes it's just the half-remembered
Words of a song that everyone half-knows

Will bring us out of doors: out of the kitchen,
Or the pub, even out of the drawing-room

With its arrangement for voice and piano.
So early one May morning we'll all rove out

And along the enchanted way we'll listen
To the thrush and the robin their sweet notes

Entwine, near where the maid and her lover
The wild daisies press, down by sally gardens

Long overgrown, then we'll roam the greenwood
To the Moss House where the birds do increase.

(ii)
It's there we will find it, we know sure enough,
Even though we're not sure what exactly it is

We're looking for, while the Moss House itself
Is just words in a song, an inscription on a map.

If we're lucky, we'll know where we should dig
To uncover the foundations, but we won't need

To dig to know they're there, because the song
Has told us what the place had told the song

Long before everyone half-forgot most things.
And we will stay still and listen and take the air

Of the place, and tune our ear and voice, that we
May sing a song that's antecedent to its words.

Insofar as archaeological enquiry and discovery is one of the most useful ways of entering into an imaginative relationship with landscape, I am greatly indebted in the first place to John Sheehan, who is now working in UCC, but whom I first met when he spent many years directing the comprehensive survey of archaeological monuments in Iveragh, which was published in 1996. John became a good and lasting friend, who, during and since his time in Iveragh, opened my eyes and imagination to the archaeological richness of the area by bringing me to innumerable sites and

patiently leading me along pathways, both actual and academic, the existence of which I knew nothing about. His assistant director and co-editor of the published survey, Ann O'Sullivan, and Michael Connolly, who later became Kerry County Archaeologist, were also helpful to me over the course of that survey. Tomás Ó Carragáin, also of UCC's archaeology department, has been unfailingly knowledgeable and helpful in relation to early ecclesiastical archaeology in Iveragh. John Crowley, of the UCC Geography department, who, with John Sheehan co-edited the cultural atlas of Iveragh, has contributed enormously towards environmental studies, in the widest sense, in the peninsula. Breandán Ó Cíobháin's encyclopaedic knowledge of the landscape and toponymy of Iveragh is matched by his generous willingness to share that knowledge. Pádraig O Riain, formerly of UCC, both in his published work and in talks which I have been privileged to attend, has helped towards an understanding of Fíonán as the embodiment of early Christianity in Iveragh. The extraordinary scholarly output of John Carey, of UCC, has done something similar in relation to Amergin and *An Lebor Gabála*, the myth that first drew me imaginatively into the landscape where I came to live almost half a century ago. He has also been helpful to me any time I sent him a query, no matter how basic that query might be. The demographic studies of Ray O'Connor and Carol Power of UCC have helped to focus my unsystematic observations, and Ray was particularly helpful in getting supplementary material to me. The cartographic excavations of Arnold Horner, formerly of UCD, in his beloved Iveragh have been fascinating. The O'Shea family of Tarmons, as becomes clear in the work, could be described as contemporary custodians of much of Fíonán's territory. It is no surprise that the work of two men who married into that family, Michael Moran and Eamon McCarthy, involves them in the custodianship of Derrynane House and Sceilg Mhichíl respectively.

Sceilg Mhichíl has been of fundamental importance to my perception of Iveragh and its heritage. I am grateful to various boatmen who ferried me safely there and back many, many times. Among them are Joe and Kenneth Roddy, Pat O'Neill, Des Lavelle and, above all, Eoin Walsh, with whose father I first visited the island, probably in 1975. For a memorable trip around the Bull Rock, I am grateful to John O'Shea. On Skellig Michael itself, I owe a huge debt of gratitude to the welcoming and dedicated staff of the OPW. Grellan Rourke recently retired from his positions as Chief Conservation Architect with the OPW. It was he who was chiefly responsible for managing the role of the OPW on the island, a role whose value I came to appreciate over many years. He facilitated my extended visits there many times, and the anthology I edited, which is called *Voices at the World's Edge: Irish Poets on Skellig Michael* and work from which features substantially in this work, came about as a result of his initiative. His exemplary and protective dedication to the island has established a basis for its continued protection, without which commercial commodification might have been given free rein. It is vital that such forces are restrained by such dedicated public

servants. The archaeologist Alan Hayden has also been dedicated and helpful. I am hugely indebted to the OPW guides and workers on the island, who have been unfailingly courteous, knowledgeable and helpful. They include Bob Harris, Claire O'Halloran, Catherine Merrigan, Eamon Lowe, Maggie Prendiville, Vera Orschel, Eamon McCarthy, Patrick O'Shea, Tom Kerrisk, John Lyne, Michael O'Connor and Colin McGorlick. The former lighthouse keeper Richard Foran was always welcoming and helpful. I am grateful for the literary and personal companionship of the writers who visited Sceilg Mhichíl with me on various occasions. They include John F Deane, Theo Dorgan, Kerry Hardie, Biddy Jenkinson, Seán Lysaght, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Bernard O'Donoghue, Cathal Ó Searcaigh, Macdara Woods, Marie Heaney, Greg Delanty and Liam O Muirthile. I am grateful too for the warm and valued company of the photographer John Minihan on a number of visits to the island. Catriona Fallon, granddaughter of Padraic Fallon was helpful to me in relation to his poem which I quoted. The film-maker Garret Daly and his crew were stimulating companions on the island, as were sound broadcasters Kevin Brew and Chris Watson. I am hugely grateful to the composer Ciarán Farrell, who set my long poem "Hopkins on Skellig Michael" to music which was played by the RTÉ Concert Orchestra, to Barry McGovern who voiced the poem, and to Eoin Brady who commissioned the work for RTÉ Lyric FM.

The landowners of Iveragh are the frontline custodians of many of the places I visit in this work. That I have never encountered any difficulty in visiting the places that interest me is testament to the largely benign nature of that custodianship. Among the many whose easy hospitality I have benefited from, I would like to mention especially Frank Donnelly, Owen Kiely, John Martin O'Sullivan, Tom and Neil O'Shea, as well, of course as, on Sceilg and in Derrynane, the OPW. Mícheál Ó Braonáin and Pádraig Ó Braonáin were knowledgeable and helpful to my explorations in The Glen.

On my numerous visits to Derrynane House and its surroundings, I have always encountered nothing but courtesy, help and attention. I have known James O'Shea, who is responsible for the wonderful gardens around the house, for many years. He has been enormously helpful to me, personally and professionally, in his own quietly informed and informative way. The seasonal guides in the house itself – Annemarie Moran, Declan Moran and Susan O'Connell – have gone out of their way to point me in interesting directions. Chris O'Neill from the OPW office in Killarney has taken an active interest in the somewhat unorthodox research I have engaged in, and has helped open doors that bureaucracy might tend to keep shut. In the wider field of O'Connell studies, I have been greatly stimulated by the work of researchers and scholars. The Daniel O'Connell Summer School, which takes place in both Cahersiveen and Derrynane, is a very valuable and stimulating occasion. Both in its first incarnation, under the guidance of Tom Barrington and Maurice O'Connell, and its current incarnation under the guidance of Maurice Bric and Ruth Barrington, it has benefited from the

energetic and efficient administration of Mary O'Connor. I am very grateful to them, especially to Maurice who gave me very useful pointers, and to the many fine talks and publications, by numerous scholars, which resulted from their dedicated work. Ríonach Uí Ógáin's books on the folklore surrounding Daniel O'Connell are a treasure trove, and her willingness to share her knowledge of folklore in general is evidenced by the multiplicity of talks she has given in Iveragh over many years. The same is true of Criostóir MacCárthaigh, the director of the National Folkore Collection, and I have enjoyed that institution's welcome and help. John Cunningham and Christopher Fitz-Simon, who, like the late Maurice O'Connell, are direct descendants of the Liberator, have been patient and informative in relation to my queries. The wonderful calligraphic artist Timothy O'Neill, who draws deeply from the springs of landscape, history, lore and literature in his work, knows Iveragh well, and has always been happy to share his insights. Seán Mac a' tSíthigh, folklorist and broadcast journalist, also knows Iveragh and its heritage well, and has been a valued and informative friend since he spent a number of years here in his early working years. The work and example of Mícheal Ua Ciarmhaic, or Michael Kirby, of Ballinskelligs, whose late-flowering creative work continued until his death in his 99th year, has been, and still is, inspirational, especially in its exploration of local heritage for creative purposes. Among others, the Cahersiveen singers Tim Dennehy and Seán Garvey did much to open up the richness of the Iveragh singing tradition for me. Billy MagFhloinn's familiarity with subjects varying from medieval musical instruments to Bronze Age myth in the landscape also nudged my perception of place towards greater depth.

I have worked with a number of visual artists over the years. Catriona O'Connor did a wonderful series of paintings to accompany poems I wrote when, together, we visited archaeological sites in the area. The layers of her perception run deep. The sculptor Holger Lönze and his partner, the painter Karen Hendy, have become friends and co-explorers since they settled here a number of years ago. Landscape and tradition are central to their work, and Holger's magnificent Amergin monument in Waterville stimulates me every time I pass it. I am especially grateful to Holger for creating the map which accompanies this work, a map which embodies his familiarity with both tradition and technology, and his ability to fuse both in a much-appreciated addition to the work.

For many years I have enjoyed the companionship of the Cahersiveen Walking Group on Sunday hikes in the mountains of Iveragh. I absorbed their familiarity with and love of the area to an extent I only now realise. On these trips, and on countless other explorations by ourselves of the area around where we live, I have usually been accompanied by my wife Fíona. She has not only been my walking companion for many happy years, but has also been my companion on the imaginative engagements with the place that came, sometimes before, often during and always after the physical exploration. She has, with inexhaustible patience, listened to and read all of this

work in its various incarnations, and made countless suggestions. There is a saying that *giorraíonn beirt bóthar:* two people shorten the way for one another. That is true. It is equally true that, for me, the pathways we have walked together – and will, I hope continue to walk for many years – have also been at times touched with something of the timeless. For this, I cannot thank her enough.

Paddy Bushe, Bá na Scealg, 21ú Aibreán 2021.

Abstract

This work is a creative act of *pietas*, of homage and of gratitude towards the place where I have lived for almost half a century. It is an engagement with aspects of the literature of the southwestern end of the Iveragh peninsula. All of the places I explore lie within a twenty-kilometre radius of where I live, in Waterville, on the shores of Ballinskelligs Bay/ Bá na Scealg. I use the term literature in the broadest possible sense. Essentially, I include anything that gives verbal – and occasionally non-verbal – expression to an imaginative engagement with place. I include, for example, mythology, folklore, toponymy, archaeology, hagiography, travel writing, historical writing, topographical description and other categories.

The work, however, is neither scholarly nor comprehensive. This is not only because I am not a scholar in any of these areas, but because I wanted to allow myself speculative and imaginative freedom of which scholars would rightly be wary. I do however have a respect bordering on awe for scholarly work, and I draw freely, in more than one sense, on the work of scholars, some of whom I am privileged to call friends. The work is not comprehensive because I wanted to concentrate on those aspects of the imagination of place which have engaged my own imagination, and my poetic work, for many years. At the same time, although this was not my intention when I embarked on the work, it is a contextual exploration and presentation of aspects of my own poetic output, in both Irish and English, over the last thirty-five years.

A further dimension that underlies the work is my belief that our engagement with and nurture of what I think of as the imagination and memory of place is an essential element in how we protect and nurture the place where we live, in both the global and local sense. An ecologically committed philosophy cannot be concerned only with the physical environment. Our very survival, it appears, depends on an urgent recalibrating of our relationship with our environment, a move from that relationship being exploitative to being sympathetic, in the fullest sense of that word. We are unlikely to effect this move unless we have an imaginative relationship with our surroundings. Hence my title, *The Amergin Step*. Just before Amergin uttered his incantatory statement of identification with his surroundings, he stepped onto the shoreline. A step into a renewed imaginative identification with our environment is, I hope, part of what happens in this work.

The work in its entirety consists of four main chapters, as well as a prologue and coda. For the purposes of this thesis in Creative Writing – which is limited to 80,000 words – the prologue, the first two of the main chapters and the critical commentary should be regarded as the thesis proper, with the remaining two chapters, the coda and my translation of *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire* then to be read as appendices.

The Amergin Step

Explorations in the Imagination of Iveragh

Paddy Bushe

for Éibhear, my grandson,

to hold in trust.

am gáeth i m-muir
am tond trethan
am fuaim mara

from *Lebor Gabála Érenn*

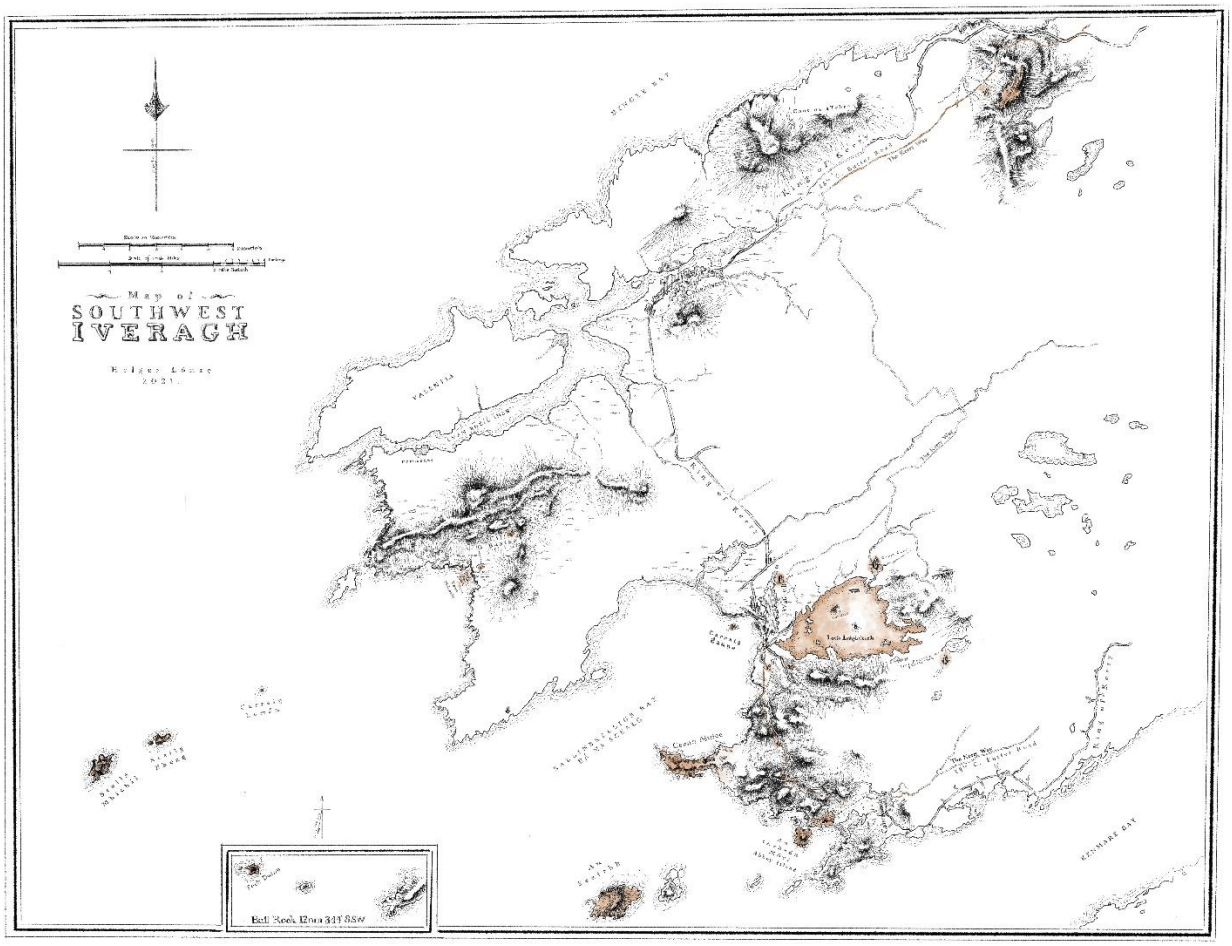
It is this feeling, assenting, equable marriage between the geographical country and the country of the mind, whether that country of the mind takes its tone unconsciously from a shared oral inherited culture, or from a consciously savoured literary culture, or from both, it is this marriage that constitutes the sense of place in its richest possible manifestation.

from *The Sense of Place* by Seamus Heaney

Who
is a breath
that makes the wind
that makes the wave
that makes this voice?

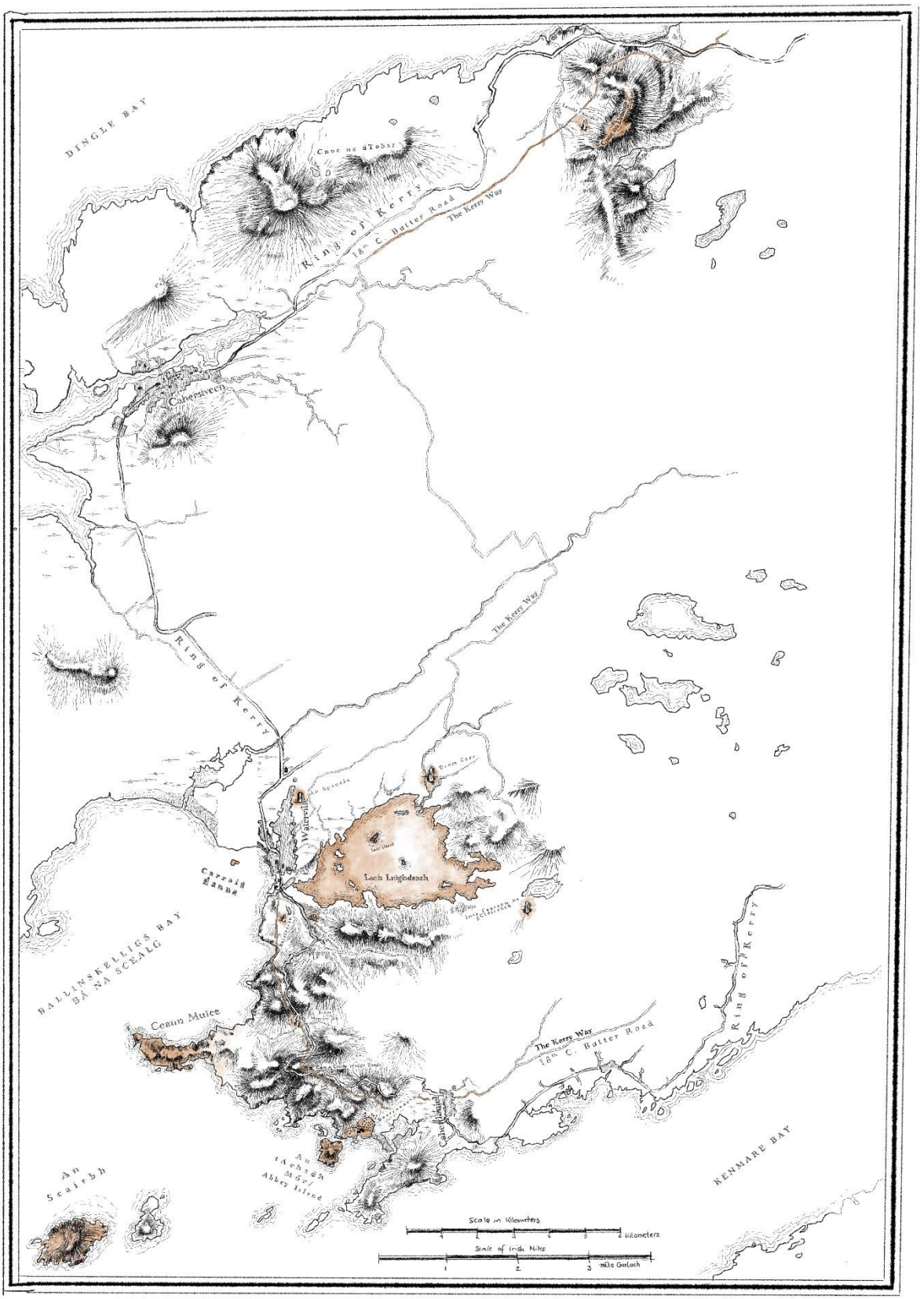
Who
is the bull with seven scars
the hawk on the cliff
the salmon sunk in his pool
the pool sunk in her soil
the animal's fury
the flower's fibre
a teardrop in the sun?

from *Finistere* by Thomas Kinsella



This map, which has been especially created by the artist Holger Lönze, has been stylistically inspired by Alexander Nimmo's 1811 map for his report on Iveragh for the Bog Commissioners. The report and map were edited and republished by the geographer Arnold Horner, who has longstanding links with Iveragh. Holger's map is intended to foreground places that feature in *The Amergin Step*. It is therefore highly selective, rather than comprehensive in its presentation, topographically and toponymically. The main population centres, and the Ring of Kerry Road, are shown purely for orientation. The version on this page is an overall perspective. To facilitate more detailed consultation, the two following pages show a split version of the map, the western side on page 14 and the eastern side on page 15. I am deeply grateful to Holger, not only for his artistic and technical skill and insights in creating this map, but for the personal and artistic companionship I have enjoyed since he and Karen came to live in Iveragh. *Gura fada buan inár measc iad féin agus a gcuid ealaíne.*


Scale in Kilometers
Kilometers
Scale of Irish Miles
Furlongs
3 Mile Outlook
Map of
SOUTHWEST
IVERAGH
Holger Lönze
2021.
DINGLE BAY
VALENTIA
CUAN BHEIL INSE
Portmagee
Cill Rialaig
Cill Mhic Ilchomhghain
Caherdaig
Lamb's Head
Scellig Mhichil
Scellig Bheag
BALLINSKELLIGS BAY
BÁ NA SCEALG
Tech Duinn
Bull Rock 12nm 344° SSW
An Searbh


DINGLE BAY
Cnoc na gTobar
Ring of Kerry
1st C. Butler Road
The Kerry Way
Cahersiveen
The Kerry Way
Ring of Kerry
Loch Luighdeach
Carraig Eamhe
BALLINSKELLIGS BAY
BÁ NA SCEALG
Ceann Muice
The Kerry Way
1st C. Butler Road
Ring of Kerry
An Scairbh
An tAcadh Mor
Abbey Island
KENMARE BAY
Scale in Kilometers
Kilometers
Small of Irish Miles
Mile Gorlach

Lines of Vision and a Stone Butterfly

A Prologue

You wouldn't notice this place from where I've parked on the road, a few hundred metres downhill. Indeed, even when you arrive here, it doesn't immediately impress. Sometimes visitors whom I have persuaded, with the promise of seeing something very special, to trudge up the hill for ten or fifteen minutes, will look around in a puzzled way, their expression indicating some scepticism that what seem like scattered heaps of stones have been worth their breathless while. Furze, rushes and briars reign here, only occasionally disturbed by the cattle down on the grassier land near the road. The views are extraordinary, but this is true from almost anywhere along the three roads that enter the valley by three narrow mountain gaps, and converge at the small beach and settlement a few kilometres away. It is certainly true from anywhere on the steep slopes and, lower down, the fields that overlook the valley. Landward, there is a series of sharply defined summits and rough slopes running down to a rocky shoreline where deeply indented fissures bear witness to the power of the Atlantic. The seascape itself is equally impressive, bounded on the southern side by Bolus Head and on the northern side by Puffin Island. All of this seems to have been hammered and shaped to frame the upthrust pinnacles of Skellig Michael and Little Skellig, on the horizon southwest from where I am standing just below the early medieval monastic site. The panorama, as I say, is available from anywhere in the valley. It is no more extraordinary from here than from numberless other places, many of which do not involve a climb, albeit a modest one. And yet, after many years climbing up here, I have gradually come to absorb it as a place of pilgrimage, as – in a literal sense – a place of vision, which I, an atheist, find more and more moving as time goes on. I have come to realise, too, that inherent in its significance is its siting and the consequent views it offers over much of Iveragh.

But first, I must orientate myself and the reader. I'm at the eastern end of the valley known as An Gleann, or The Glen, a remote and self-contained area of the sort that guidebooks usually call a "hidden gem". Lying just to the north of Ballinskelligs Bay at the tip of the Iveragh peninsula in South Kerry, it is an area rich in archaeology and folklore. Demographically and linguistically fragile, its community is nonetheless making determined efforts to hold on to its population, its school and its language. It has become known as something of a haven for surfers, who come here in search of a wave that, as we will see in a later chapter, breaks on the beach here because of a curse imposed in early medieval times by Saint Fíonán, who is, despite this, still celebrated here. This in no small part because of the miraculously curative role attributed to him in relation to the plagues which were so feared in earlier centuries, and which, even as I write this, have, in the form of Covid 19, so fundamentally undermined many of the societal and economic certainties our twenty-first century world thought it could depend on. Fíonán and his place in the imagination of Iveragh will fill many of the following pages. Indeed we will meet him down there on the beach. But now I come to

Killabuonia by myself, as so often I do, to try to establish – for myself and for my readers – a perspective and focus for what the following pages are about. And I come to this place in search of that perspective and focus because it is one of the places where this work began to germinate, and I began to somewhat reluctantly conclude that what was germinating would not find expression in the poems – of whatever length – that I have been writing for many years. And what is it that was germinating for so many years? Now the difficulty starts, and for now I will, wildly out of context, hide behind the words of Prufrock:

> Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"
> Let us go and make our visit.

Let us visit Killabuonia, then, which you don't really notice until you're right on top of it, and which, even then, only very slowly lets you in on how special it is. For many years, it was difficult to gain access to Killabuonia. Its present owner, Owen Kiely, a restorative builder from Cork whose love of the area, especially of the sea, brings himself and his family here very often, is affably open to visitors and the facilitation of archaeological investigation. It is largely due to this openness that interest in the site has grown enormously in recent years, and that a site survey, some clearance and essential conservation work on a rare type of stone shrine has taken place. It is to be hoped that this is a basis for much further work in the future.

Killabuonia is the Anglicised form of Cill Ó Buaine, the original name. The modern official Gaelic name is Cill Buaine, which might suggest that Buain was the founding saint. However, there is anything but agreement about who Buain was, if indeed there was any such saint. Local tradition has it that Buain was a saintly nun, and she is sometimes said to have been a sister of St. Patrick. In his monumental *A Dictionary of Irish* Saints, Pádraig Ó Riain suggests that 'the enigmatic Buain' may be a linguistic derivation from Mughain, a female saint from Kildare who was baptised by Saint Patrick. He further suggests that Buain may have been conflated with Dairearca, who, unlike Buain, was attested in a ninth-century life of Patrick as being his sister, and who was venerated in Valentia Island, two kilometres north over the hill from here. Another theory is that the name Buain is a version of Beoán, a disciple of Saint Brendan who was also associated with Saint Fursey, who was traditionally venerated at a holy well at the foot of the ancient Lughnasa site of Cnoc na dTobar just a few kilometres to the northeast. Leaving all this saintly jostling for position aside, it may even be that the monastic foundation was originally named for a family group rather than after a founding saint. Because, despite the local tradition of the female Saint Buain, the site is always referred to as Cill Ó Buaine, where the "Ó" suggests a family monastery, as in nearby monastic site at Cill Ó Luaig

(Killoluaig). It's more than confusing. Even if I really wanted to, I don't think I could begin to untangle who was who in all of this. And, to be honest, I'm quite happy to let all the possibilities make their arguments to one another as I climb the hill. Sometimes a range of possibilities is more stimulating than certainty, and the monastery I am approaching is one that hints at all sorts of possibilities and dimensions. I like to listen to the various arguments, and to find some truth in all of them, even when the truth may not be factual.

As I climb a drystone terracing wall, the first thing to attract my eye is the gable shrine, made of slate slabs, for which Killabuonia has become known. About a metre long and a half-metre high, it is shaped like a tent, or a gabled house-roof that has given rise to the term "gable shrine". It is one of only five or six in Ireland, of which two others are within a few kilometres of here. Just one of these has been dug, in the archaeological sense: that on Illaunloughan, a small island just off Portmagee in Valentia Harbour, just over the hill to the north. Carbon dating of votive scallop shells and bone fragments – presumably those of the founding saint – suggests that this reliquary shrine dated from the ninth century. Tomás Ó Carragáin posits an eight/ninth century date for this type of shrine. He also speculates that such reliquary shrines, including similarly shaped portable shrines in wood and metal, are a conscious echo of the biblical Ark of the Covenant. Cormac Bourke emphasises their tent-shape, also tracing biblical echoes such as the metaphor of "pitching a tent" for inhabiting a place. He finds this biblical dimension is echoed in early Irish writings concerning Saint Patrick, with references in the Life of Saint Patrick to *pupoll Pátraic*, Patrick's tent. I am conscious of these scholarly diggings as I admire this rare and fragile shrine, but, as always, I tend to leave aside the necessary restrictions of scholarship in favour of imaginative leaps and bounds. Here in Killabuonia, however, the imagination is well and stimulatingly served by the physical evidence strewn before my eyes. I said that I was climbing the terracing wall when this tent shrine (I have come to prefer this term to "gable shrine") attracted my attention. From the terrace itself, I walk just past the shrine to look down at the collapsed and briar-bound steps that would have formed the original entrance to the sacred space within the monastic settlement at Killabuonia. Were I ascending those steps, the western gable of the shrine would be on my right and, at the base of that gable, at about the same level that my hand would be at, a circular hole has been carved in the slab, just large enough for my hand to slip through. I look down into the shrine, and I see it contains a significant amount of white quartz pebbles. No shells or bones are visible, but, if the shrine were to excavated, there might well be such finds, as there have been at Illaunloughan. Indeed, I remember that my friend John Sheehan, the man who first led me to an interest in archaeology almost thirty years ago, bringing me to the other Iveragh tent shrine at nearby Killoluaig, and showing me what had remained there for more than a thousand years. These stanzas are the opening lines of a poem that resulted:

In the gable shrine,
its endpiece dislodged,
you can see the gleaming
of propitious quartz

among the discoloured fragments
of sanctified bones.
Yet what startles the eye
into searching for wonders

are the scallop shells,
their fluted and serrated
shapes frayed and cracked
yet elegant between the stones.

Are there such wonders below these white quartz stones? I resist the temptation to root; only a proper archaeological excavation can safely reveal what they cover. And does it matter what physically remains? It's enough, I think, to know that pilgrims came here to venerate saintly bones. I think of Walter Ralegh's poem "The Pilgrim". I do not have Ralegh's 'staff of faith to walk upon', but here, solitarily meditative beside a reliquary shrine on which generations of believers have inscribed and deepened a rough stone cross with their own scraping-stone, I find myself responding to the uplift of its opening line. 'Give me my scallop shell of quiet', I whisper, and I realise once more how necessary a spiritually imaginative dimension is to all our lives, whether or not that dimension is shaped by formal religious belief.

Unlike that at Killoluaig, this tent shrine has, incongruously enough, recently acquired a modern, clean-cut appearance. This is because, due to of an initiative of Michael Connolly, the County Archaeologist, an inner sleeve of fresh Valentia slate now supports it. A few years ago, the stresses and strains of a millennium had brought the shrine to the point where one side was broken and the other was in imminent danger of irreparable fissures splitting it asunder. This new slate is sharp-edged and monochromatic grey, unlike the worn and weathered slabs it supports. But the integrity, positioning and orientation of the shrine remain intact, and the simple functionality of the modern support is also a statement of veneration, albeit a contemporary veneration of the shrine itself rather than of the now anonymous corporeal relics once venerated within. Since the

conservation work, I have, to my surprise, come to see it as an integral and precious part of the shrine, an earnest that such things still matter. And its clean and sharp lines also help me to imagine how the monks who erected the original about 1,200 years ago probably delighted in its newness, its freshness, as they consigned canonised bones to eternity within it.

The juxtaposition of the worn and weathered original slabs with the precision-cut new supports reminds me in a way of an architectural drawing, a cross-section intended to show the structure of the shrine. I mentally supply a ridge pole, from which the two side slabs seem to hinge outwards. And this reminds me of a lovely linguistic chime I came across when reading an article by Cormac Bourke about these shrines. I mentioned that I have come to favour the term “tent shrine” over the more common “gable shrine”. This partly because I find the term more visually accurate, but there is another reason more related to etymology than to appearance. For many years, I have occasionally wondered what the origin of *puball* – the Irish word for a tent – might be. I was fascinated when Bourke’s article gave an explanation that has since taken flight in my mind. The word, like so many that concern Christian belief and practice, was borrowed from Latin. And in Latin, *papilio* means a butterfly, familiar to us in, say, the French word *papillon* and indeed in the originally tent-like English word “pavilion”. Looking down on this shrine from above, it is easy to see the basis for the metaphor, to imagine the stone slabs opening and spreading themselves like a tent in the wind. Suddenly light and airy, the shrine takes flight, as if awakening from centuries of hibernation. This is ludicrous, I know. But it is ludicrous in its own original Latin sense of being playful, or sportive. And so I let my stone butterfly sport in the sky above Killabuonia, and remind myself that a common trope in myth and folklore worldwide is that the souls of the dead sometimes transmigrate into the form of butterflies, and can function as intermediaries between this world and the otherworld, however that otherworld may be envisaged. Now my mind is full of the ludicrous in more than one sense.

But the visionary is to be found here without the need for the fanciful. I walk a few metres to the oratory that is orientated in the same direction as the shrine. Although at first sight it seems to be in a very ruinous condition, there is in fact a substantial amount of it that remains intact. Much of the apparently very low walls and gables is in fact obscured by their upper sections, which would have corbelled themselves to form the roof, having collapsed into and around the building. Even without excavation, the level of this collapse is evident because less than a half-metre of space can be seen under the door lintel at the western gable, leaving perhaps a metre hidden by rubble. Similarly, when I push away the briars and rushes at the eastern end, the lintel above the altar window can just be made out above the collapsed rubble. I inwardly reiterate my wish (my prayer?)

that an application that has been set in train for funding to excavate and consolidate this oratory will be successful, and that Killabuonia will become accessible and widely visited.

The visionary dimension to this site is discoverable regardless of the state of its collapse and overgrowth. I walk around again to the western doorway, and look out to sea. A wonderful early poem by Seamus Heaney about the justly celebrated Gallarus Oratory, near Smerwick Harbour on the Dingle peninsula, imagines worshippers coming out of the oratory's dark interior into the splendid light of the sea-and-landscape of that area. It ends with an image of God greeting them as they emerged into the light:

> And how he smiled on them as out they came,
> The sea a censer and the grass a flame.

Gallarus was a later development than the simpler structure here at Killabuonia, the ultimate flowering of a type of drystone unicameral oratory that is almost confined to peninsular Kerry. However, the details of this development are not what concern me here. What I am absorbing just now, as I have increasingly done over the years, is how much its builders envisioned Killabuonia – and I use the word very deliberately – as integral to the wider landscape and, crucially, the seascape in which it found itself. As a monk emerged from the Killabuonia oratory into the sunlight (I'll ignore the statistical probabilities in favour of the idealisation!) he would be greeted not only with the benedictory sea and grass, but with a direct line of sight out to Skellig Michael, a line of sight that would run from the altar window behind him directly through his own person and straight out to the *Ultima Thule* of early Irish monasticism. It is a perspective that never fails to engage me, indeed to elevate me. Now I root in my jacket for the compass I have finally remembered to bring with me. I wanted to check the exact orientation of the oratory and the tent shrine beside it. I could have done it with a map, without being here physically. But I want to see the needle shift, and to physically see the point where the arrow lands, rather than depend on disembodied mathematics. And the compass confirms what I have known approximately: the orientation of the oratory is 30 degrees south of west, rather than the east-west orientation that is the norm for Christian churches. Somewhat sacrilegiously perhaps, I take out my phone and ring Tomás Ó Carragáin, the author of *Churches In Early Medieval Ireland,* who confirms for me that this degree of variation is unusual, and, where a variation exists, it is usually as a result of some topographic feature. The inescapable conclusion is that the orientation towards Skellig Michael, and a line of sight towards its monastery, which, although I cannot see it, I know to be high on the landward side of the island, was of primary significance to the builders of Killabuonia. The line of sight runs from high ground down to the

shoreline and across more than ten kilometres of sea to make landfall again high up on the eastern cliffs on Skellig.

There is, however, more to this than meets the eye directed only towards Skellig. Because that spectacular line of sight is available, as I have earlier noted, from many places in The Glen. Indeed the foundations of an oratory quite close to the seashore, an oratory known as Cill Maol Mhúirne, which will feature in a tale of medieval monastic murder in another chapter, has a similar orientation towards Skellig. So also has the nearby twelfth-century church dedicated to Saint Fíonán. So why this remote spot, so unusually elevated that its siting leaves it exposed to winds from all direction? Why did the builders of Killabuonia go so far up the valley and, even more significantly, why build so high up? The answer lies almost twenty kilometres as the raven flies to the southeast, where there is an early medieval monastic site at a place called Loher. Rather than tell all immediately, let me retrace the steps by which I was led to what has become a fundamental element in how I apprehend landscape and imagination, and in fact was a deciding factor in my decision to embark on this work. I have a distinct memory, from ten or twelve years ago, of John Sheehan leading a field trip here at Killabuonia, and pointing out the orientation towards Skellig. As he did so, he noted that the oratory at Loher, in tandem with a beautifully carved cross slab, was also orientated towards the island. A participant called Gerry Enright (who, sadly, later died suddenly on a hiking trip in Galicia, from where Amergin left for Ireland) looked over towards Loher through a small v-shaped gap in the hills called Bealach na gCúl, and said 'you can actually see Loher from here'. Now let me be clear: if, like me, you know exactly where the site in Loher is, you know it is within the area of the coast at which you are looking. Even with a telescope with a magnification of 40x that I brought here recently, I could see only enough detail to verify landmarks close to the site. So, as with Skellig Michael, the line of sight has no practical function; still less would it have had any such function in the days before magnifying lenses. Nonetheless, this patch of ground is the only area in all of this long valley from which you can see Loher. Walk a hundred metres left, right or downhill from here, and the line of sight through that small v-shaped gap in the hills is no longer available. You have to make the climb up here to see it, and you have to come to this end of the valley to see it. In other words, the essential thing is not that you can see Loher and Skellig Michael, but that of the hundreds of possible sites in the valley, this is the *only* place from which you can see both. I have said that these lines of sight have no practical function. But they do, I believe, have an extraordinarily powerful symbolic function. Because without either paper or digital maps, or trigonometrical expertise, the monks were literally triangulating whole swathes of territory – sea as well as land – and claiming it for Christ. For me, then, what I used to think of as lines of sight become something else: they become lines of vision, in all senses of that word. They envision a landscape in

a way that goes far beyond what the bodily eye sees, and they see the soul as intrinsic to the place, the place as intrinsic to the soul. They were, and remain, a deeply imaginative appropriation of place. The gradual realisation of the depth of this relationship with the landscape was, as I have indicated, a primary motivation for my embarking on this work, whose purpose is to explore – for myself and others – how the imagination engages with landscape, and indeed how each of them in a way creates the other.

I lean up against the gable of the oratory, beside the doorway, and look outward and westward towards Skellig Michael, as the monks here must have done countless time. At the same time, I am looking inward, excavating in my memory. One of my rediscoveries is primarily auditory, although it is a memory of involvement in the making of a documentary, *The Edge of Europe*, which was filmed by Garret Daly in the area in 1998. For the soundtrack of that film, the wonderful Nóirín Ní Riain, accompanied by monks from Glenstal Abbey, recorded sacred music inside one of the monastic cells. I remember listening to it from outside, hearing the monks' chanted music, interwoven with Nóirín's soaring notes, through the drystone walls of the monastery, and watching the gannets wheeling and diving between Skellig Michael and Little Skellig. An otherworldly yet intensely physical experience, it floods over me again, so that these buildings become an auditorium, even a vehicle by which not only the inner eye, but the inner ear, are transported along that visionary axis out to sea. That axis runs, of course, in both directions. So not only can I be transported out to the island monastery, but the island monastery can make itself palpable among the far more ruinous remains of Cill Ó Buaine, and, through the memory of Nóirín Riain and the monks on Skellig more than twenty years ago, I can imagine snatches of sung or murmured prayer among the stones of this hillside monastery.

As usual, I try to ground my imaginative speculations in the physical context from which they arise. For me, this connection is how the speculative and the imaginative are most intensely realised and how, at the same time, the physical world around me can be infused with the spiritual. I have identified a visual connection between Skellig Michael and Killabuonia, which, because of its very precisely chosen site, can also be seen as visionary. I have just now imagined monastic voices common to both places. But these flights of fancy – if that is what they are – arise from many years of absorbing the physicality of Killabuonia and of its place within the wider landscape. When I first came here, I was struck by how traces of so much terracing were still visible. Terracing like this is unusual in Ireland, even on ecclesiastical sites. Although the monastery is on a steep slope, I sensed that the purpose of the terracing was allusive or symbolic rather than functional. To my untrained eye, the echo here of the elevated terracing on Skellig was resonant and lasting, and reinforced by the line of sight to the west. Later I came to realise that the narrow harbour to the north of the

beach I can see in the distance, known as *Caladh an Bháid*, would have been the nearest landing point available for the island monks. This was confirmed for me recently when I read *Brendania*, an exploration of the literature surrounding St. Brendan, written by Rev. Denis O'Donoghue and published in 1893. This is how he describes the harbour:

> From every side can be seen the bold and picturesque cliffs and headlands that surround St. Finan's Bay, on the east and on the west; while not far out in the offing, fully in view, tower up grandly the Greater and Lesser Skelligs, like two mighty ships sailing along majestically, "with every shred of canvas set", towards which the favourite port of departure, as well as the favourite landing-place on return, for all pilgrim visitors, from time immemorial, was the *caladh*, or the narrow creek that runs from Saint Finan's Bay into the middle of The Glen.

Furthermore, they would have needed a mainland farm to supply them with grain, wool and even firewood, that would not have been available on the island. The monks whose imagined voices I can hear raised in prayer, entered first into my mind as a result of an admittedly speculative engagement with a place, and with the practicalities of living in that place. Because, as a writer, I make no claim to scholarship or expertise, I am not subject to their restraints. Archaeologists, very properly, are subject to these restraints, and so it was with delight that I read the final sentence of a report of a survey conducted five years ago by the archaeologist Frank Coyne:

> Indeed, because of the enormous size of the site, the use of terracing and the view to the Skelligs, it is tempting to suggest that this may be a landward base for Skellig Michael.

There is so much that could be said this site, so much that must be lying beneath the overgrown surface of the 'enormous site'. Visiting The Glen about 1852 in search of material published much later in *Brendanania*, Rev. Denis O'Donoghue describes some of it:

> When I saw the place nearly forty years ago, the ruins of nine bee-hive huts could be traced, clustered around what had been a larger building in the centre, probably the oratory, of which only a small portion of a side-wall was visible.

Excavation, it is clear, would reveal so much more than can be seen today. For the moment, the only digging I can do is in my mind.

There is one more visit to make on this *turas*. About fifty metres away, just beyond and below a secondary terrace, I stumble and squelch through some uneven, waterlogged ground to where a few stone slabs are scattered near a pool somewhat bigger than the others nearby. This is *Tobar Buaine*, Buonia's Well, a holy well now sadly choked by vegetation, and waterlogged because its outflow is blocked, effectively making it inaccessible. This is where, in previous times, people came to pray for help with illness or other problems. A photograph taken by the folklorist Caoimhín Ó Danachair, sometime in the 1940's, shows two almost upright slabs near this pool, which is covered by a lintel and surrounded by dry ground. Around the same time, another folklorist, Tadhg Ó Murchú, who collected a huge amount of invaluable material in Iveragh, spoke to a man named Mícheál Ó Muircheartaigh about his recollections. About two years ago, I had the privilege of attending an illustrated talk the folklorist Ríonach Uí Ógáin gave in Ionad Lae an Ghleanna, The Glen Day Centre. It was fascinating to see the reaction of the people of the area to recordings made by forbears of theirs who were old in the 1940's. Here, in my own translation, is one poignant insight from Mícheál Ó Muircheartaigh into how significant a role such devotional sites used to have:

> A long time ago, I remember, the people who were going to America, young men and women, they came from far and wide, making a *turas* to Tobar Buaine, in the hope of luck, I suppose, and for good fortune on their journey. They would stay around here, too, spend a few nights, they'd come on a Friday, make the *turas*, then stay on Saturday and Sunday and do the turas again. They used to do the *turas* three times.

Ó Muircheartaigh also told Tadhg Ó Murchú that Buaine was a holy woman, and that the tent shrine, which he described as the 'leaca seasta/standing slabs', was her burial place. But it is the image of the young people, about to leave the close-knit community of the Glen for the emigrant ship, that fascinates me. I remember being told that it was customary for the people of The Glen to accompany emigrants as far as *Bealach na gCúl*, the gap in the hills through which the monks had seen, and envisioned, the monastery at Loher. I look towards that gap now, and see a tractor snaking its way down the bends towards the low farmland. Sightlines constantly change their focus.

There is something very moving in the image of young emigrants, who probably envisaged their journey to America as being a journey without return, seeking the protection of Buaine on their journey towards a new life. But it is an aspect of language that particularly engages me. I have very deliberately kept the original Irish word *turas* for the devotional rounds made at a well. Standing in the waterlogged mud around what used to be a devotional site, I contemplate that the primary meaning of *turas* is that of a journey. This easily moves into a more specific meaning, that of

pilgrimage. But it is a big metaphorical step to use the same word for the small devotional loops around sacred wells or monuments which were traditional. I love the metaphor, because the journey thereby seamlessly becomes an interior one, a journey around the soul that is at the same time, the culmination of a journey through the landscape. I recall pilgrims I have seen trudging for days along steep, Himalayan paths, before continuously circling a shrine, murmuring, beads slipping through their fingers. I am sad to see the choked well. It is liked a blocked artery, a closed eye, a covered ear. It requires no belief in afterlife or dogma or the supernatural to say that, in an age overloaded with data and guided only by satnav, we need to unblock the wells of our memory and make the rounds of the places in which we live.

I make my way back down to the car, renewed and confirmed in my belief in the importance of all this interweaving of place with the creative imagination. Over the following days, the visit grows into a poem, which I dedicate to the singer whose lifework has been dedicated to the exploration and celebration of heights and depths such as I have been touched by today.

At Cill Ó Buaine

for Nóirín Ní Riain

(i)
At Cill Ó Buaine, the probing roots of furze
Have subverted the stone-paved terrace

And split the gable-shrine whose carved
Round opening gifted pilgrim fingertips

A fleeting brush with venerable bones.
The stones of the oratory are held only

By the woven grace of ivy. A cell doorway,
Still standing, faces neither out nor in.

(ii)
Yet still the sightline out towards Sceilg,
That embraced the celebrant emerging

From where he had embraced mystery,
Embraces me. Yet another line of sight

Still bears me through a gap in the hills
And over the bay to Loher, its oratory

And cross also facing out towards Sceilg,
Triangulating this land, this sea, for Christ.

(iii)
The lines of sight intensify themselves,
Clarify themselves as lines of pure vision.

Now a light beyond time, beyond belief,
Animates the hills and gilds the ocean

Stretching itself towards the distant island
That clings to the horizon's shifting planes.

Here now are bells, voices lingering in prayer
Upon prayer for the redemption of memory.

Ic Tabairt a Choisse Desi in hÉrinn

Milesian Footprints

Carraig Éanna

Carraig Éanna. It's a strange place to begin my exploration of the Milesian myth in the landscape of Iveragh, this bare rock less than a kilometre offshore, battered by wind and wave. But begin here I will, because it is a place of beginnings. It's a seminal place for my own engagement with the imagination of Iveragh, and it is a place of importance in a story that has resonated significantly through Irish literature and history for the past millennium.

But I'll come back to the big stories later. For now, I'll sit on the rock awhile, looking back across the stretch of sea that I've kayaked over from the little beach below my house. The house itself is near the edge of a low cliff just above the beach, a cliff that is just clay and boulders, glacial drift down from the mountains and valleys that stretch off into the distance. This means that it is constantly eroding, particularly so over recent years. My back garden, in other words, is shrinking, and every winter storm, especially if it coincides with a full or a new moon with their attendant high tides, is a cause for concern. Climate change, with the consequential rise in sea level and increase in the frequency and intensity of wave-raising storms, has become personal. The house where Fíona and myself settled nearly a half-century ago, and where we raised our children, will, as the saying goes, see us out. But will it be there for our young grandchild, even as a holiday home?

It is primarily the past, however, which for now I want to probe, and so I return to the present, sitting here, resting my ageing bones on the ancient bones of this rock. More than a dozen seals, which had slithered off the rock at my approach, are circling the rock, constantly, watchfully. My kayak is on a ledge below me, pulled up out the reach of the rising tide. It was easy to land today. So often the rock can be unapproachable for weeks, buffeted and often hidden by waves that have swelled for thousands of Atlantic miles. But today it's unusually tranquil. It feels like a perfect vantage point, almost as if I were in some netherworld, seeing my homeplace from a strange and secret perspective. The rock itself is covered in hundreds of thousands of tiny mussels and equally tiny barnacles, blue-black and creamy white clusters, whose survival in this storm-swept bleakness embodies tenacity itself. Sea wrack and anemones cling on here also, and there are scatterings of periwinkles. Inevitably, I think of William Golding's *Pincher Martin*, the eponymous hero of which is cast up and survives for a while on a bleak rock which is 'one tooth set in the ancient jaw of a sunken world, projecting through the inconceivable vastness of the whole ocean.' Close as I am to the shore, to the ordinary world, I feel something of that existential separation, understand the need to claim territory, to cling on for dear life to where you land.

So what is it, this rock that absorbs me so much, and which I think of as a place of beginnings? The Ordnance Survey map doesn't help. Understandably, perhaps, but very misleadingly, it translates the name as "Bird Rock" because of the Irish *carraig*, a rock, and *éan*, a

bird. The rock is also often referred to simply as “The Black Rock”, like many other rocks seen from a distance. These misnamings do nothing to give the rock any specific resonance, nor do they suggest any particular story inhering in the rock or its environs.

But Seán Ó Conaill, an Iveragh poet writing around 1655, was in no doubt about its name and its importance:

Atá ag bun Choireáin fós gan traochadh
An charraig lér cailleadh go seachmallach Éanna.

I translate:

By the Coireán’s mouth there is still to be found
The rock where, through error, Éanna was drowned.

So the name of the rock I have revisited was significant to Ó Conaill, who was writing a political poem full of rage at the dispossession of the native Irish in the aftermath of the Cromwellian wars. Ó Conaill’s poem, *Tuireamh na hÉireann* or *Lament for Ireland* was in part a retelling of the story of the Milesian conquest of Ireland as told in *Leabhar Gabhála Éireann*, usually known as *The Book of Invasions*. This mythological history of Ireland places the successful landfall of the Milesian or Gaelic conquerors firmly on the shoreline off which Carraig Éanna lies. One of the Milesians, Érannán, was drowned when his ship struck a rock when he climbed its mast to gain a vantage point. His name, metamorphosed into Éanna, lived on in the local name for this rock.

But why was Seán Ó Conaill spurred to invoke this bare, apparently worthless rock as part of his polemic? From here, the answer is clear. I can see Caherbarnagh, the townland where Seán Ó Conaill lived. From where he was writing, therefore, he could see, and name, the place where he believed his ancestors landed. In contrast with the Cromwellian conquest, the mythological Milesian conquest is seen by Seán Ó Conaill as God-ordained, as being part of the natural order, an order which led to his people’s possession of the land. A century and a half later, a member of this family was to lead an extraordinary popular movement aimed at reinstating the rights and status of the dispossessed. But that is for another chapter. In the 1650’s, as Ó Conaill and his Gaelic coreligionists smarted under and raged against the Protestant English conquerors, he no doubt contrasted them with his Milesian forbearers. While both the rock and its mythological associations were obviously removed from the turmoil of mid-seventeenth century Ireland, nonetheless Ó Conaill was writing about contemporary events from a perspective which included a physical line of sight from where he lived to the accepted landing-place of those to whom he traced

the ancestry of himself and his Gaelic countrymen. It would be surprising indeed if this had not led to a political and emotional line of sight which he felt was being destroyed by contemporary events, and by these new, unwelcome, cruel and heretical invaders. This storm-swept rock was something far more than the sum of its physical attributes. Such things are for me the great resonance of place. This is part of what I like to think of as listening to landscape, listening for the stories it tells.

About a hundred years ago, there was a great storyteller from nearby who also listened to landscape, and to seascape, as well as to the stories he had inherited by oral transmission. From where I am perched on Carraig Éanna, I look west towards Bolus Head. High on the slopes of that headland is the village of Cill Rialaig, which is no longer inhabited but has been rejuvenated as a retreat for artists. This was once the home of a great seanchaí who was also called, coincidentally or not, Seán Ó Conaill, and whose stories, collected by Seamus Ó Duillearga in the 1920's, are one of the great repositories of traditional storytelling, one of international significance. Folklore has a way of cutting literary and mythological material down to size, and of making the grandiloquent local without losing its sense of wonder and strangeness. Here is how Seán Ó Conaill begins his story of "The Milesians", which was collected by Seamus Ó Duillearga in the 1920's and is here translated by Máire MacNeill:

> A long time ago the Milesians came here to Baile 'n Sceilg. At that time it was the Tuatha Dé Dainide who were in Ireland…..

He goes on to describe the Milesians taking to the sea for a second time and then

> ... the Tuatha Dé Dainide had a whole world of magic and through magic they made a gale and rain and a night of storm. The ships were driven out of the harbour, and blown on to Rinnín and Lóthair, and from there to Béarra. One of the ships struck Carraig Éanna and sank. Éanna was the name of the captain; and that is why the rock is called Carraig Éanna.

Almost three centuries after his namesake wrote *Tuireamh na hÉireann*, a non-literate traditional storyteller retells a simplified version of an origin-myth first written down more than five centuries before that again. Perched here on the shell-encrusted surface of Carraig Éanna, I am grateful to be able to listen to the same story, and to glimpse the same lines of vision, physical and imaginative, which animated the story in the first place, even though it is as an observer rather than a participant that I do so.

I am reminded too of another observer who heard the same story. In 1837, the writer Lady Georgiana Chatterton visited these parts, and recounted what she was told by 'a gentleman in the neighbourhood'. Having summarised the story of the Milesian landing, she added this:

> There is a rock in Ballinskelligs Bay, still called "Carrig Irrana" or Irr's rock, on which he is supposed to have been cast.

Here we have a mixture which in a way shows the vitality of the tradition. Not only are the drownings of two brothers confused, as the Milesian invader called Ir was said to have perished on Skellig. The names Ir, Érannán and Éanna, are also conflated into "Irrana" and the stories told by the monastic literary *Leabhar Gabhála* scribe, by the learned seventeenth century poet Seán Ó Conaill, and by the non-literate seanchaí Seán Ó Conaill who serendipitously shared his name, are given their own validation by Lady Chatterton's confused informant. The story which I mull over, as small waves lap around the rock, has crossed barriers of language, class and literacy, and still inheres in the place for anybody who is willing to listen.

I sit for a long time, listening to the repeated little surges of the water, the constant tricklings along crevices back into the sea, the evidence of erosion and change all around me. Ideas of what constitutes the natural order, divinely or humanly ordained, are no less subject to change, often violent change. Is it possible for us to evolve so that possession of place according to tribe, religion, language – and, most crucially, species – is seen as being *against* the natural order? I don't know the answer, but I am fairly sure that the survival of our planet – at least of our species as part of that planet – depends on that answer.

Now, on my way back to land, I rest my paddle across my thighs, balancing it as if to steady myself, close my eyes, and drift shoreward on the tide. It's early September, and although the sea is calm enough to allow this relaxation, there is a stir in it as if it anticipates the equinox and its attendant high tides. As I drift towards the little beach below my house, the gentle rocking of the kayak like a cradle, the rank smell of seals and bird droppings gradually fades. The snorting of the seals suggests satisfaction at my departure. I hear too the flurry of a flock of oystercatchers splashing into take-off when I drift close. Cormorants fly low past the kayak, croaking, reminding me that in Irish they are sometimes called *fiach mara*, the raven of the sea.

There is traffic-noise from the shore, cars and tractors and the occasional rattle and thump of a digger doing a drainage job on a nearby boggy field. Farming here is a continual struggle, and is becoming increasingly uneconomic, given the industrial scale and character of modern agriculture. Since farming has been not just the economic but the social driver of this peninsula for centuries, the

prospect of its disappearance is enormously troubling. This is intensified by the fact that tourism seems to be the only economic activity likely to replace it. Given the climate here, that tourism is seasonal. The logic seems to lead inexorably to a collapse in the permanent population, with transient and badly paid summer workers replacing it. The slight rocking of my kayak becomes apprehensive, mournful for the generations who worked the boggy land surrounding the bay, and fished for mackerel and salmon in the waters on which I drift, and who, in earlier times, traced their ancestry back to the mythological incomers I have been visiting.

As if to announce a new order, now and again the waspish buzzing of wealth being helicoptered in to play golf passes overhead. This is a relatively new but rapidly growing phenomenon, particularly since American vulture capital bought a distressed hotel and golf course, demolished the hotel and spent huge sums developing a new hotel and golf course for the super-rich. Visiting golfers are helicoptered in, and sometimes helicoptered a distance of about two kilometres to another golf course, an older and less elitist one. Both courses are American-owned. I try to keep my eyes closed, and sink back into the sea, the rock, the story. But, leaving aside the disturbing social and economic questions raised by all of this, I cannot help asking myself one question: can there be a more insensitive and sterile way to make use of a landscape such as this than to helicopter into it, play golf on artificially created and sustained stretches of it, and then helicopter out again? There are many ways to create deserts, social, economic and cultural. The Irish word *bánaithe* – literally "whitened" – comes to mind. It is a word that not only means destroyed and sterile, but also depopulated, empty, plundered.

Enough of that. Drifting still, I lose myself in contemplation of Carraig Éanna, of its mythology, of my memories of fishing around it, of judging the weather by it, of naming my son after it, of the way I look out at it, often to the point of distraction, when I am writing or working in the garden, of its sheer *presence* since I came to live here. And when I open my eyes, and begin to paddle the rest of the way in, I see my neighbour Éamon standing on the beach at the head of the *cé* in through the rocks, waiting to guide me in, just as his father Eddie often did, and occasionally his grandfather Edsie before that. Three generations with variations on the same name. And, although my kayak can land anywhere, unlike the heavier boat with outboard engine I used to have, I am careful to align my stern with the end of Hog's Head and paddle in along the course the previous generations had laid out when I settled here forty-five years ago, a course laid out for them since God knows when, a course that still demands respect. So too, I believe, it is important to rediscover and explore the imaginative courses that have been threaded through this landscape over many centuries.

The thread which initially led me into the narrative tapestry of the Iveragh landscape was the story of the Milesian landing, specifically and most resonantly the poem which has become known as “The Song of Amergin”. Of this poem Robert Graves, in his rather impenetrable book *The White Goddess*, wrote that ‘English poetic education should, really, begin not with the *Canterbury Tales,* not with the *Odyssey*, not even with *Genesis*, but with the *Song of Amergin*’. Many years after I first read this, even as I write, I look out my window down onto the shoreline where Amergin recited his poem, and I am still excited by the consequent immediacy of the words. Not wishing to write, as it were, in a vacuum about Amergin’s words, let me briefly recreate the context and the poem, in my own translation. The Milesians, having battled magical storms and other obstacles, finally made landfall. Amergin, their leader, lawmaker and poet, set his right foot on the land and said:

Am wind on sea
Am wave swelling
Am ocean’s voice
Am stag of seven clashes
Am falcon on cliff
Am sunlit dewdrop
Am rarest of herbs
Am boar enraged
Am salmon in pool
Am lake in plain
Am fortified hilltop
Am learning’s essence
Am sharpened spear dealing death
Am god who kindles fire in the head.

Who makes smooth the stony mountain?
Who elucidates the lives of the moon?
Who proclaims where the sun will rest?
Who leads the stars like cattle from the ocean?
On whom do those stars smile?
What troop, what god edges blades in a plague-struck fortress?
A poet of weapons. A poet of wind.

It's an extraordinary poem, full of lyrical rhetoric, ambiguous yet confident in what it asserts. I'll come back to the poem, and what I think is its contemporary importance. But for now, looking out my window on a wonderful morning that seems bright with beginnings, I just immerse myself in it, as I have done countless times. I hear the prow of Amergin's ship slide onto the sand and shingle of the beach below, and I see the curious but wary heads of seals in circling attendance at the landfall. I see the heads of Amergin's followers bowed in recognition of the solemnity of the occasion and of the words. Once again, I bow my own head in gratitude for the privilege of being able to listen to the words over and over again.

Graves's unambiguous assertion about the importance of the poem was given even greater resonance for me when I found out that Saint Michael's Church of Ireland in Waterville, which overlooks Amergin's landing place, was consecrated in 1866 by Bishop Charles Graves, the poet's grandfather. Ironically, Robert Graves, despite his admiration for the poem, and despite also his family connections with nearby Sneem, seems to have had no knowledge of, or interest in, the actual geographical setting of the poem he saw as so seminal. Perhaps his barbed comment about his Irish-born father in *Goodbye To All That* that 'he broke the geographical connection with Ireland, for which I cannot be too grateful to him' gives a clue to what otherwise seems puzzling. In any case, looking at the landing-place and at the small sturdy church his grandfather consecrated, and which still throws off the salty Atlantic wind, I imagine the restoration of a geographical connection which adds vitality to Graves's judgement of the poem.

I think I remember – and memory inevitably becomes the actuality of what happened – how I first found myself entering into the world of Amergin and his Milesian brothers. I was walking with Fíona, on the Inny Strand, a barrier of dunes containing the small estuary made by the river of the same name that then breaches the dunes to flow into Ballinskelligs Bay. This is the south-western tip of the Iveragh Peninsula, at the south-western tip of Ireland. It was a late autumn afternoon of high boisterous clouds and squally north-westerly showers borne by a wind that made us squint as it beat into our faces, now and again with stinging flurries of sand. We walked to the end of the beach, where at the mouth of the river, the skeletal ribs of a wrecked ship reach up like a memory out of the sand. These are the remains of the *Eliezer*, a Danish schooner wrecked here in 1916 with the loss of all her crew. Perhaps the seemingly imploring silhouette tugged at me, edged me towards perception, or rekindled something waiting in my subconscious. In any case, when we turned back, the wind now to our backs and our eyes open in relief, I was held by the drama of a shower out to sea, towards Scariff Island, being drawn like a curtain along the horizon and spotlighted, as it were, by the watery rays of the declining sun. The effect was cold, and sharp like a series of blades. A line

came to me across the wind-whipped bay, “shafts of rainsoaked light”, which later became part of a poem, and a whole confluence of memories, obsessions, family, reading and landscape began to coagulate, began to be moulded into an imaginative holding where I have spent much of my writing life over the intervening thirty-five or so years.

Oddly enough, it was another totally unrelated poem that sparked the connection. Some time before I came to live here, I had read Geoffrey Hill’s poem “The White Ship”, and a few lines from it had stuck in my mind:

> Where the living with effort go,
> Or with expense, the drowned wander
> Easily: seaman
> And king’s son also
>
> Who, by gross error lost,
> Drift, now, in salt crushed
> Polyp and mackerel-fleshed
> Tides between coast and coast,
>
> Submerge or half-appear.

I didn’t then, nor do I now, understand what I call the “prose meaning” of Hill’s poem. But its dreamlike images and rhythms suddenly recalled the very differently styled lines of Seán Ó Conaill which I wrote about earlier:

> Atá ag bun Choireáin fós gan traochadh
> An charraig lér cailleadh go seachmallach Éanna.

Here a son of Milesius was drowned, according to Ó Conaill, by misjudgement, on a rock after which I had named my own son, and Hill’s ‘king’s son’, who was by ‘gross error lost’, seemed to echo the Milesian story around the bay. What I had read about before with detached interest now became something which inhabited my imagination in a vital and resonant way, and has done so ever since. I cannot explain this in rational terms; I simply accept it as a gift received while being open and receptive to the landscape and its story. And it is a story to which, like a young child, I continually return.

At the Galláns

You can see them clearly from the Ring of Kerry road (or, to use its current branding, The Wild Atlantic Way), on a low hill just outside Waterville as you head south: four megalithic pillars aligned towards the southwest. Silhouetted as they are against the sky, they attract attention, speculation even. But their appearance from the road gives no idea to the passer-by of the significance of their positioning within the landscape, and certainly no idea of their significance in the stories that landscape has to tell.

Today, nearing the winter solstice, there is a skinning wind as I climb over the farm gate and up the low hill towards the alignment. I have left the main road, travelled just a few hundred metres up a narrow lane, and am crossing (with permission!) a well-grazed pasture that goes up and over the ridge where the alignment stands. And, just that small distance from the road, I am rivetted once again by something that the tourists in buses and cars, which for months on end clog the programmed treadmill that is the Ring of Kerry/ Wild Atlantic Way, pass by without ever seeing, not to mind absorbing. The lake I am admiring once again is Lough Currane, or, to give it the older name, Loch Luighdeach, one of the glories of Iveragh, stretching itself for miles in from the coast towards the higher mountains of the peninsula, overlapping themselves beyond the lake. It is a prospect which entrances me no matter how many times I see it. And to look at it from this low hill is also to remind myself of how varied have been the perspectives and angles from which I have seen it, from dozens of different vantage-points the ridges and peaks that now form an encircling backdrop. And there are nearly as many imaginative or cultural perspectives from which to examine the lake – historical, mythological, poetic, folkloric, economic and many more. The lake is of primary significance in the mythological account of the Milesians, and consequently of primary significance in the story the Gaelic Irish told themselves about themselves. As a lake rich in salmon and seatrout, it was of primary significance in the economy of Iveragh up until modern times. Inis Uasal (The Island of the Nobles, now usually known by the dull, generic title of Church Island), lies in the distance. It is a place ripe for discovery. A few hundred metres off the lakeshore just below me, there is what looks like a small, rocky island. Locally, it is known as The Sunken Castle. The stuff of folklore, you might think. But sometimes folklore tells stories that history never got around to recording. I'll explore there later, but for now I turn my back to it, and make my way up towards the galláns.

I have come here in all weathers, all seasons. Many years ago, I recall, I came with Fíona on an *oíche sheaca spéirghealaí*, a clear intensely cold night. A full moon flooded the frost-bound fields with light, and the extraordinary resonances of the place, of which I had then just an inkling, inscribed themselves into my imagination as if they were begging to be explored, to be allowed to

speak to what was then the twentieth century. Lines from “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven”, that extraordinary poem by Wallace Stevens, came to mind:

> It is fatal in the moon and empty there.
> But, here, *allons*. The enigmatical
> Beauty of each beautiful enigma
>
> Becomes amassed in a total double-thing.

It’s about thirty-five years – half of my lifetime – since I internalised the exhortation of those lines. In the meantime, the stone alignment has appeared on the covers of three of my poetry collections, and has featured, acknowledged or unacknowledged, in many of my poems and in a number of filmed interviews I did. Yet here I am again, trudging my way up to it against a biting wind, feeling the same shiver of excitement. This time – and I remind myself again that my task is ambitious – I am hoping to integrate the alignment into a more inclusive, less fragmentary narrative than heretofore. So here, *allons*, this time in fading midwinter daylight, to this most enigmatic of places.

It is only when you arrive at the alignment itself that you realise the significance of its positioning. I know of no better place from which to survey this part of Iveragh, not just topographically but also historically, mythologically, archaeologically, folklorically and geologically. It’s just a low hill, overlooked by the mountains I’ve mentioned, yet it dominates over its immediate surroundings, and over the length and width of the lake. Crucially, you can also see Ballinskelligs Bay, Carraig Éanna and Hog’s Head, all of which feature in the *Leabhar Gabhála* narrative. The antiquarian writer P. J. Lynch, who at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, did so much field-work and scholarly research on the integration of the mythology of Iveragh with its landscape, wrote of its “magnificent prospect, Lough Currane, with all the scenic effects and enchanting beauty of an inland lake on one side, and Ballinskelligs Bay, resounding with the monotonous roll of the ocean, equally close to you, on the other”. The alignment of the standing stones is towards the serrated summit of the last hill on Hog’s Head, *Ceann Muice* in Irish, a prominent feature which my neighbour Eddie used as a landmark to align the stern of his boat when heading home, and which he always referred to as “The *W*”. It was also a landmark four thousand years ago when this alignment is generally thought to have been erected. Because, although typical midwinter skies occlude it today, the setting sun at the winter solstice seems to rest on the hilltop for a few moments, before dropping out of sight. But when you do see it clearly, usually once every four or five years, these standing stones, and the adjacent platform of raised earth inside a low

stone circle, are all at once infused with a sense of ceremonial intent, of marking something of importance, even if that importance is only vaguely understood. Visitors here often touch the stones, as if trying to appropriate some of that understanding. And I've seen the same people return midwinter after midwinter, even when the weather is at its gloomiest and offers no chance of spectacle. Our imaginations seem to supply what the weather refuses. A place of ritual, certainly. But what rituals? I've always felt that the idea of sun-worship is too facile, indeed patronising. Does Western celebration of Christmas as the birthday of Christ imply a modified form of sun-worship? That the society that erected the stones was agrarian, and consequently likely to mark the seasons, is presumably relevant. But was this seasonal marking practical or spiritual? Both? Communal? Hieratic? Sometimes we discuss these things, half-embarrassed.

But this is a few days before the solstice, and I'm alone. Deliberately so, to try to hone my perception. As always, when I come close to the monoliths, I am delighted by the lichens that thrive on them, clinging to them almost like animal pelts evolved over millennia to suit their environment. Some are long, almost hairy, others are close and cropped. The colours range from a creamy white, through variations of grey that blend seamlessly into green. I am reminded of the linguistic, even cultural, basis for the way we perceive colour. In Irish, grey and green merge into one word: green grass is *glas*, and so is a grey horse. The word for a deeper, warmer green is *uaithne.* Scottish Gaelic's palette is even more fluid, with grass sometimes being *gorm*, or blue. But before I digress into bluegrass fiddling, there are some other linguistic resonances which I like to dwell on when I come here, resonances which illustrate the shifting metaphorical basis which I believe to be the fundamental dynamic of language and its evolution. Locally, these standing stones are known as The Gallauns. This is common in Ireland. In modern Irish, the word *gallán* means a stone pillar. But in modern Scottish Gaelic, its basic meanings are a branch, a straight young tree or a tall young man. When I turn to the alignment with this in mind, and thinking also of the perhaps archaic "dashing young gallants" of the apparently unrelated English language, the stones seems less monolithic, more enigmatic than common sense allows. So I direct myself back, *via* the early twenty-first century, to the Bronze Age.

And it is in the Bronze Age that conventional archaeological opinion firmly places the Eightercua alignment (*Íochtar Cua: the lower part of the slope).* Other books or articles far more scholarly than mine will give a context and chronology for this type of alignment. It was the archaeologist Anne Lynch who first documented the winter solstice sunset aspect of this alignment. And when you see it clearly, if you are lucky enough, it is awe-inspiring, shiver-down-the-back sort of stuff, the orange globe of the setting sun resting on the summit of Hog's Head, being tracked, as it were, by these great monoliths darkening in the fading light of the day and of the year. I recall one

particular sunset that I was here, one given an enhanced resonance in that it was 1999, the last solstice of the millennium. Rationally, or indeed in cosmic terms, this was irrelevant: simply a human construct of time arising from the fact that we count in tens because of the number of our fingers and toes. And yet we build so much of our perception and organisation of our place in the universe around this decimal convenience. Decades, centuries, millennia: this is how we calculate our lives and our history, imposing our fingers and toes on how time passes. In any case, I vividly remember that the twenty or so of us who, on that frosty evening, witnessed a wonderfully fiery and fluid sunset, were impressed into a reverent silence, and that we murmured respectfully of the four or five-thousand-year span that seemed to link us, like a bridge, to the society who erected these stones. Most of us, before we turned to go to our firesides or televisions, touched them, as the darkness of the longest night of the year was claiming them for itself, hoping, perhaps as those ancestral figures did, that they were an earnest of a renewal of light and days in the coming months. That spectacular evening, I felt I understood how the concept of millenarianism can take hold of the imagination, both individual and communal. The rational part of my mind laughed at the idea – and still does – but the light in the sky was not easily confined to the rational.

Predictably enough however, the setting sun is, more often than not, invisible. Usually, wintry rain and wind mean that the imagination must supply what the eye cannot– which sounds a bit like the definitions of religious faith many of us grew up with. And of course it is important to remember that, as with better-know monuments like Newgrange, a solar alignment such as Eightercua is not dependent on, or limited to, just one day of the year. It is reasonable to assume that the alignment was the site for a ritual period of perhaps up to twenty days, during which the weather could be expected to be suitable at least once or twice. We whose engagement with solar phenomena is usually dictated by the calendar, or more likely today by Google, concentrate on a particular, externally ordained day. A society whose engagement was observational and integrated with the seasonal realities on which it depended, would have been much more fluent.

In this context, I remember a recent occasion a good crowd gathered at the Eightercua alignment. It was 21st December 2017, and as miserable an evening as you could imagine. A damp, penetrating wind, which regularly squalled itself into harsh, driven rain, accompanied us up the hill. We had a double purpose: the usual annual pilgrimage, and also, optimistically, the launch of the inaugural Amergin Solstice Poetry Gathering, which was planned for the summer solstice of the following June. We had a portable amplifier and microphone, intending to have an open-mic reading at the alignment. But horizontal salvoes of rain both deafened and drenched us, and I barely managed to splutter the Amergin poem bilingually into the microphone before a spontaneous and unanimous decision sent us to the pub, hot whiskies and mince pies.

I'm glad to say that we also had a great open-mic session, and a wonderful festival six months later. But the short time we had spent in communal activity at the standing stones, and our retreat from the site in the face of wind and weather, brought me to some realisation of the existential anxiety of those for whom such retreat was not as easy, or as much a matter of choice as it was for me and the others who had gathered there for just long enough to decide that we neither wanted nor needed to be there. What of those early farmers and their families for whom seasonal variation would have been literally a matter of life and death? As we had walked the few hundred metres to our cars, I kept repeating the word *dúluachair* to myself. The word has always fascinated me. It is translated nowadays as "midwinter gloom", although the original doesn't mention either winter or gloomy weather. Its long, heavy *u* sounds are inherently sombre. But its darkness isn't just phonetic. Originally *dubhluachair*, the word might be translated literally as "black rushes". But there are also echoes of *luacháir*, meaning "happiness" and *lóchrainn*, meaning "torchlight". And there is an archaic word *luchair*, meaning "flame" or "brightness". So the *dúluachair* from which we retreated would appear to have the existing darkness tempered by the hope of brightness within it, or perhaps the fear of brightness being overcome by the darkness. The "black rushes" becomes "dark brightness" or perhaps "black flame". And then I recall that rushes had for many centuries served as candles when coated with fat, and the different elements came together in my mind as the rushlights that those who gathered here thousands of years ago might have clutched in fear and hope against the winter *dúluachair*, which now has brighter seeds within it than might germinate within midwinter gloom.

Isn't it this celebration of the light at the darkest time of the year that animates the celebration of Christmas, whether or not we regard the Birth of Christ story as central to that celebration? Over Christmas and into the 2018 New Year, a poem took shape. Poetry also can be, I hope, a defence against encroaching darkness. When, as sometimes happens at this time of the year, this *dúluachair* threatens me with debilitating depression, I crave some ritual lifting of my inner darkness, much as, I imagine, the communities that gathered here craved a renewal of the light.

Solstice

Dúluachair. Thin rushlight barely
Enough to huddle around a word
That bears such a weight of darkness.

Black rushes. Dark light of the year

Whose turning is fearfully hoped for.
The dark of this stone row marks

The sun's deepest down descent
Behind the mountain horizon distant
Beyond any measure that we know,

Who know only to gather around hope
And hold close our circled rushlights
Finding little spurts of warmth in words.

Before I leave the galláns on this monotonous grey pre-solstice evening, I should explain why we chose to launch our Amergin Solstice Poetry Gathering here at a Bronze Age solar alignment. The solstice connection, obviously, the winter anticipating the summer. But there are other resonances around me, echoes of the Milesian myth. The lake I face again as I turn to go is the most definitive evidence that the *Leabhar Gabhála* story of the Milesian landing was set here. I have said that its older name was Loch Luighdeach, a name which still survives in modern Irish as Loch Luíoch. Linguistic scholars agree that the name is probably derived from the god Lugh, the Celtic god who gave his name to such places as Lyons and Leiden. But the *Leabhar Gabhála* narrative typically presents a derivation that enhances the story of the Milesian Gaelic appropriation of Ireland at this place. Lugaid was the son of Ith, who had seen Ireland from a tower in Galicia. He, with his wife Fial, was part of the invading force which Amergin led. Three days afterwards, the Milesians defeated the Tuatha Dé Danann. And then, the *Leabhar Gabhála* tells us, in John Carey's translation:

> Lugaid son of Ith washed himself in Loch Luigdech. Lugaid's wife Fial, however, washed herself in the river, which flows from the lake. Her husband went to her naked, so that she saw his private parts and died of shame. *Unde* Loch Luigdech and Fial and Inber Féile *nominantur*.

I don't know if Fial's shame was part of the Christianised telling, or was an older Celtic taboo. In any case, a collapsed dolmen, traditionally identified as Fial's grave, can be seen from here, in a large field near Waterville House. This was a fine eighteenth century manor house, complete with a walled garden, that was owned by a branch of the Butler family until about 1970. It then passed into private hands, much to its architectural detriment, with the addition of a rather brutalist extension and the

destruction of its walled garden. The environmental insensitivity of that particular transatlantic golf-and-hotel development, however, is dwarfed by the more recent development I've written about, another transatlantically capitalised monument to mega-wealth, complete with its own helicopters. The clubhouse, a Trumpian structure whose only architectural or environmental imperative seems to be to announce its own crass dominance over its surroundings, especially by means of a vacuous glass tower-like frontage, is highly and hideously visible from here. The role wealth has played and continues to play in this colonised landscape, from eighteenth century manor-house to twenty-first century vulture capital temple, is clearly visible from this prehistoric vantage-point. It is not an uplifting prospect.

But let me return to less abrasive things. I love that *unde nominantur* (from which are named), the declamatory roll of assertion, which, along with *unde dicitur* (from which is said), echoes and re-echoes through the *Leabhar Gabhála*. The use of Latin seems to give clerical and legal authority to placenames which were, in all probability, just part of a retrospective pseudo-etymological process that gave toponymic validation to a territorial appropriation that was most likely completely imaginary. And yet that appropriation, that imaginative entering into the landscape became an origin myth that attained the status of history, and was indeed treated as a historical account for centuries, in some cases even into the twentieth century. And this lake, together with Lugaid, *unde nominatur*, was and remained central to that origin myth, as we will see. But the Galláns are what are of most direct concern here.

The Íochtar Cua alignment has another direct link to Amergin, leader, poet and lawmaker of the Milesians. The *Leabhar Gabhála* tells us that Scéine, Amergin's wife, had died during the course of the voyage. Érannán, his brother drowned, as we have seen, on what became known as Carraig Éanna, which also can be clearly seen from here. The account goes on:

> His grave is in Inber Scéne, and the grave of Amairgen's wife Scéne is on the other side [of the estuary]. She died when they were at sea, so that Amairgen said 'The port where we land will be named Scéne.

P.J. Lynch, whom I quoted just a while ago, argued persuasively that the text here refers to the stone alignments at Cill Rialaig and here at Íochtar Cua as the burial places of Érannán and Scéine respectively. Archaeologically viewed, of course, these alignments are not burial places at all, and the chronology, if there ever was such a thing as a Milesian invasion, is all wrong. But what we have in the *Leabhar Gabhála* is a storyteller, who was very familiar with this area, weaving landscape, placenames and monuments into a story of conquest which may or may not have carried some

factual basis into a collective memory. One way or another, it is a narrative which now inheres in the place itself, and which continues to fascinate me the more I listen to its various tellings. I remember with particular gratitude and pleasure the vibrant sunset I saw here at the turn of the millennium. I remember imagining, almost to the point of actually hearing, the voice of Scéine responding from the megaliths to her husband's poem. I imagined it as a love-poem, Scéine using the words and structure of Amergin's poem not only to sing her love for him, but to tease him a little, to modify his somewhat bombastic masculine utterances with softer lines. Above all, combining the mythological association of the galláns with the modern rediscovery of its ritual solar function, I imagined Scéine positing love as a defiance of the passage of time, the same glorious fiction with which poets and lovers have consoled themselves down through the ages, a necessary consolation which is no less true for being an imaginative construct. I remember that I wrote the poem quickly, exuberantly, in the afternoon of the following day. I wrote it in Irish, because that was how it flowed to me as I listened to Scéine responding to the medieval Irish of Amergin. The next day I translated it, equally quickly.

Scéine's Reply to Amergin

If you are the wind on the sea
    I am the water tingling under your breeze.
If you are a wave in flood
    I am an empty shell dreaming of your coming.
If you are the roar of a storm
    I am the tide lapping in the noon heat.
If you are the stag of seven horns
    I will pick my way to you gracefully through furze.
If you are a hawk on the cliff
    I will bless you with lyrics of larksong.
If you are a dewdrop in the sun
    I will bruise the morning grass with you.
If you are the fairest of flowers
    I will blossom year upon year with you.
If you are a maddened boar
    I will charm your tusks into laughter.
If you are a salmon in the pool

I will lure infinities of insects to you.
If you are a lake in the plain
I will plumb your very depths.
If you are the essence of poetry
I am all of your muses.
If you are edging towards a fight
I will bewitch you to bluntness.
If you are kindling inspiration in the mind
I will blow on the seed of the fire for you.

I know in my heart who made the way smooth for me,
Was a star of knowledge for me, gave the sun and moon to me,
And though the stones close in, and light moves towards its end,
We will shadow one another, word for word with the wind.

Two poems suggested to me by these unspeaking, eloquent stones. Two solstice visits separated by almost twenty years: one on a magnificently theatrical, celebratory evening, the other on an evening of wind-and-rainswept abandonment. I wouldn't be without either.

There is much more I want to say about the Milesian appropriation of this place, and much more to explore in Amergin's poem. But there are other vantage-points from which to do this.

On the Pig's Back

I'm sitting back into a fissure in a large rock at the summit of Hog's Head (Ceann Muice), the promontory which is the southern enclosing arm of Ballinskelligs Bay (Bá na Scealg). This is the serrated summit where the midwinter setting sun appears from the galláns at Íochtar Cua to momentarily rest before it yields to the longest night of the year. It is also the *W* my neighbour Eddie taught me to use as a landmark when I, a clueless blow-in, ventured out to sea almost half a century ago. But the reason I have come here today, a relatively mild but windy early January day, is that it is a one of the great vantage-points from which to trace the Milesian myth in the Iveragh landscape. It is also a stunningly beautiful place, exposed, elemental, rarely frequented either by locals or by tourists. It is a favourite short and easy hillwalk of ours, and one which the visitors we bring there always find hugely stimulating.

It was a steep but short walk up to this summit, something less than two hundred metres above sea-level. When I had opened the door of my car, where I parked at the end of a narrow, twisty road, I stood and looked south towards Dursey Island and the Beara peninsula. As always, I was struck by how close the peninsulas are, together with the peninsulas further south, and how essentially *maritime* this part of Ireland is. Its shape and character have been hammered and chiselled by the Atlantic since time beyond memory. It is only since roads and motorised travel redefined geography over the last two centuries that these southwestern peninsulas have separated to their present extent. And when you look across the narrow bays that separate Iveragh from the Dingle and Beara peninsulas, a short boat-journey in many places, and think about how long, even today, it takes to drive from the tip of one peninsula to the tip of another, you realise how fundamental a change the car has brought to how we think about landscape and place.

Between the two peninsulas, but much closer to where I am, looms the bulkiness of the islands called Scariff and Deenish (*Scairbh* meaning "rough" and *Duibhinis* meaning "dark island"). Inhabited until the twentieth century, they are now left to grazing sheep and a salmon farm. But they have their stories, one of which jumped to mind as I thought about the proximity of these peninsulas. The great seanchaí Seán Ó Conaill of Cill Rialaig on Bolus Head was no traveller, but he knew his landscape – and his seascape. He had a number of stories about three sisters, whom he called Cailleach Bhéarra, Cailleach Bhóluis and Cailleach a' Daingin. Briefly, out of pity for the sister in Beara, the sister in Dingle tried to tow Scariff and Deenish south to her. In a lovely touch, he said that they used a rope made from twisted spume, but the islands snagged on the seabed just south of Hog's Head, and have been there ever since. And I remember, when I was teaching, being told a version of this story by a boy who had little or no Irish, had never heard of Seán Ó Conaill, and who told me that he had heard the story from his father.

Here you have not only the three neighbouring peninsulas grouped together, as was the case for this isolated maritime area, but also grouped in a very profound way. They are grouped under the tutelage, as it were of the *An Chailleach* – a figure often unsatisfactorily translated as "Hag" or "Witch". And, in modern Irish and Scottish Gaelic, the word *cailleach* can indeed mean an old woman, sometimes a witch. But what we have here is the folkloric memory of what I think of as "The Earthwoman", a kind of goddess figure like James Lovelock's *Gaia*. The folklorist Gearóid Ó Crualaoich published an inspirational book called *The Book of the Cailleach*, tracing this figure through the literature, folklore and placenames of Ireland and Scotland, and the *Cailleach* will reappear in this work. But for now, as I once more absorb this extraordinary land-and-seascape, it's enough to contemplate how Ó Conaill's narrative, although in much simplified form, attributes the formation of that peninsular territory, and its essential unity, to a pre-Christian deity. I closed the

door of the car, humbled, realising once more how much I need to listen to the landscape, and to the varying voices which give it utterance.

As I began the short, steep climb, I recalled another, more historical story about Scariff Island. On 23rd of June 1653, Father Francis O'Sullivan, a native of Iveragh, the Provincial of the Franciscans in Ireland, was captured on the island by Cromwellian soldiers and put to the sword. His name lived on in the Iveragh, and he became known as *Bráthair Rua na Scairbhe*, the Redhaired Friar of Scariff. Did the date of his execution – Saint John's Eve, a date when midsummer bonfires would have blazed all over Iveragh – contribute towards the almost hagiographical nature of the way he is remembered? In any case, it is said that fishermen used to invoke his protection against stormy weather, and, even today, his story is very much in the public consciousness. In recent years, a commemorative mass has been celebrated on the island in his memory, and I have seen more than a hundred people participate, climbing up a steep rocky path to do so.

But it wasn't just reputationally that Father O'Sullivan lived on. In a strange, almost medieval ritual of veneration, the O'Connells of Derrynane – a family whose name over many generations is the most resonant of all among those who have raised imaginative voices in Iveragh – kept the skull in their possession for over two hundred years, and it is said that they used it as an earnest of good faith when important business was afoot. William J. O'Neill Daunt, in his *Personal Recollections of the Late Daniel O'Connell*, quoted O'Connell in an after-dinner conversation in Derrynane:

> … in Cromwell's time, a friar was murdered for saying mass at Scariff by some of the Protector's soldiers. A sword-cut severed the top of the skull, and the piece has been ever since preserved in the O'Connell family.

A backward glance over my shoulder at the island was also a backward glance at how the power of perhaps the most significant political figure of his era was also the power of a Gaelic clan chief who embodied the mind and culture of a people whom he was to fashion into a political machine. But that was for another chapter, the talismanic skull that is a relic of the religious and political upheavals of seventeenth century Ireland now rests peacefully in the Franciscan Friary in Killarney, and I needed to head towards the summit.

So here I am, perched on the summit, a little breathless and with slightly aching legs, having followed the sheep-paths up through the dwarf furze and rough mountain-grass which is all the thin soil of this mountain seems to support. Yet the stone walls that divide up what is now rough grazing, walls that are stronger and higher than most, are testament to the hard work that went into creating a hill-farm like this, with fields that were once fertile, despite being open to the full force of

southerly Atlantic rain and gale. The ruins of a stone house are tucked into the lee of the hill, slowly becoming indistinguishable from the surrounding rocks. The low-growing furze or gorse that clings to the rocks is the native *Aiteann Gaelach*, as opposed to the imported *Aiteann Gallda* that can raise its head higher in more sheltered places. The rough grass is known as *fionnán* or *feideog*, a high light grass that turns almost white in winter, when buffeting winds strew it around the mountain like tumbleweed in a Western film. It used to be an affordable and easily available material for thatching a roof, although it was not very strong and needed frequent renewal. It also fed animals in hard winters. In the middle of winter, its dry blades whisper of poverty, and it can be hard to believe that early summer will see it green and moist and vibrant.

When I get my breath back, I stand on the very highest point of the rock and marvel again at the panorama I am seeing. At prospects like this the Spanish – and, serendipitously in this case, the Galician – word *mirador* always jumps into my mind, although my knowledge of Spanish or Galician is minimal. I know it simply comes from the word *mirar*, to look, but when I encounter the word in touristic context, I always feel that I am being invited to ad*mire* the *mir*acle that lies before my eyes, and to *mir*ror that sense of wonder within myself. And I am further reminded that the *dor* element of the word means *of gold*, so a *mirador* metaphorically offers a *golden view*. Etymology, I find, even at my unscholarly level, inevitably leads to the realisation that all language is metaphor, and that metaphor is perhaps the primary characteristic of how we humans perceive the world. So here I am at my *mirador*, surveying the geographical setting of an invasion that probably never happened, but in the light of which Gaelic Ireland, through the work of Christian monastic scribes narrating a pre-Christian saga, created a Biblically validated identity for itself that was widely seen as credible history into the twentieth century. Can you get any more metaphorical than that?

So let me establish the local cartography of the Milesian imagination. Roughly five kilometres to the northwest, Lough Currane, the *Loch Luighdech* of *An Leabhar Gabhála*, lies just inland. From here, you can clearly see how the village of Waterville is situated on a narrow moraine, a deposit of sand and gravel that was formed when the glacier that gouged out the lake melted when it reached the sea. It never fails to remind me of Tennyson's lines from *Morte d'Arthur,* another mythic narrative that could be described as pseudo-history.

> On one side lay the ocean, and on one
> Lay a great water, and the moon was full.

I can make out, just, the stone alignment – the Galláns – that have become identified with the grave of Scéine, Amergin's wife. A little more to the north, and just offshore from my own house, I can see

waves breaking on Carraig Éanna, where I paddled out in search of Éanna, or Érannán, the drowned brother of Amergin. This rock, after which we named our son before we really understood the context, was how I was first drawn into this whole story, and it remains a lodestone for me. Other toponymic and topographic associations literally encircle me here. When I turn left and look westward towards Bolus Head, the other enclosing headland of the bay, the horizon beyond is dominated by the jagged silhouettes of Skellig Michael (Sceilg Mhichíl) and Little Skellig (Sceilg Bheag). Today they are enclosed by a wonderful elliptical halo etched out on the sea below them and sky above by evening sunlight spilling itself from behind the clouds. It is breathtaking, suggestive of the work of an artistic cartographer who is aware of the significance of Skellig and wishes to highlight it accordingly. It would have been remarkable if the scribal author of the *Leabhar Gabhála*, someone who was obviously familiar with this area, had not included such a physically and culturally prominent landscape feature in its narrative. Here is what the narrative tells us, in John Carey's translation:

> Then the oar that was in Ír's hand broke, so that he fell over backward; and he died the following night, and his body was taken to Sceillec, west of Irrus Deiscirt Chorco Duibhne.

I should note here that while the name *Corca Dhuibhne* is now used exclusively about the Dingle peninsula, it originally applied also to the Iveragh peninsula, hence the use of *Irrus Deiscirt* (southern peninsula) *Chorco Duibhne.* Here is the sort of peninsular unity that was also evident in the seanchaí Seán Ó Conaill's story about the migration of Scariff Island. And before we leave Skellig and the Milesian story, let's hear again from the same Lady Chatterton who, in her 1838 book, wrote rather confusedly about Carraig Éanna and the drowning on that rock. About Skellig, however, there was no confusion in what she wrote:

> The following interesting account of these curious Islands is given by a gentleman in the neighbourhood: "The first mention of the Skelligs in Irish History, occurs at the period of the landing of the sons of Milesius; when Irr, one of the brothers, who was drowned, is stated to have been buried there".

Let's go further south again. On the far horizon, almost due south from where I stand, framed between Deenish and Scariff Islands, I can make out Bull Rock. Two smaller islands are known as the Cow and the Calf. Bull Rock is a fearsome mass of rock that rises vertically from the sea, with – although I cannot see it from here – a large arched opening that pierces right through the

middle of it. Surmounted by a lighthouse, its surrounding waters are notorious, and traditionally avoided by fishing-boats. It was no less fearsome or notorious in the mythological world, and the shifting parameters of its nature, of the deity or mythological figure associated with it, and even of its physical location, have added to its sinister mysteriousness. I'll come back to these shifting perceptions later, but for now I'll confine myself to the Milesian story. Donn was the eldest of the sons of Míl. His name means "brown" or "dark", and the Milesian Donn is often conflated with a deity of the same name who was associated with death and the underworld. The Donn in the Leabhar Gabhála had an abrasive personality which invoked a curse from the three Tuatha Dé Danaan goddesses Ériu, Banba and Fódhla. His jealousy of Ír's prowess at rowing had been a cause of acrimony among the Milesians, and it is implied that the broken oar which caused Ír's death was a consequence of this. Donn subsequently vowed that he would 'bring under the edge of spear and sword all that there is in Ireland'. Presumably because of this bad *karma*, Donn was drowned off the Bull Rock, and was buried there. Hence the island was called *Tech Duinn* (House of Donn), and indeed is still known in Irish as *Oileán Doinn* (Donn's Island). There is much more to be said about the other aspects or manifestations of Donn and his otherworld habitations. This involves combat between brothers, between light and darkness, between a brown bull and a white bull. It involves sandhills and galloping horses and a hill in Co. Limerick. But I'll wait for another *mirador* before engaging with these wider aspects.

Before I leave this vantage-point, I'd like to think about what's under me, rather than what I can see. I have called this particular section "On the Pig's Back", half-joking, all in earnest. Of course, as Irish people will recognise, that's a direct translation of the expression *ar muin na muice*, which is a metaphor for being well-off. The expression is also common in Hiberno-English. But there is a Milesian context for my choosing the title. This, in R.A.S. Macalister's translation, is what the *Leabhar Gabhála* tells us happened, immediately after the drowning of Ír:

> Every time that the Sons of Míl came up with Ireland, the demons would frame that the port was, as it were, a hog's back [*druim muice*]; whence Ireland is called "Hog Island" [*Muc-Inis*]. They skirted around Ireland three times, and landed at last in Inber Scéne.

Now I know the text talks about "Ireland" rather than a headland, but I think the name *Ceann Muice* for the headland on which I am standing cannot be simply a coincidence. Whoever composed or scribed the Leabhar Gabhála certainly envisioned the metamorphosis of the harbour landscape in terms of the hill where I am standing. And as I face northward again, towards the lake named after Lugaid and the shoreline where Amergin uttered his incantatory lines, I feel the place itself telling its

story: I see Míl's youngest son drowned on Carraig Éanna; I imagine Ír's interment on the rocky pyramid to the west which was to become a place of eremitical Christian worship for six or seven centuries, and, far to the south behind my back, I sense the malevolence of Donn and the ominous drumbeat of his horses' hooves. The following poem was originally written in Irish; here it is in translation:

Donn Speaks

I am the darkness of my own name,
The far side of the moon,
The final end of brightness,
The narrowing *cul de sac*.
It is I who choke off the last breath.

Envy of my brother, they said,
Brought bad luck to both of us,
Yes, and an inordinate bloodthirst
Meant no part of Ireland was for me.
Bullshit. Hatred towards all living beings
And a thirst for the feasting of worms
Is my right of kingship. And look!
The whole of Ireland travels towards my house.

Donn of the Dunes. Donn's House.
The name of the island is not liked.
I am known as a bull; the cow, the calf close by.
Let them graze awhile.

Fishermen do not approach
For fear they'd be swallowed whole
In the maelstrom around me.
But I have trammels of patience
And cords that will not break.

There is a lighthouse on the island
And a horn that trumpets fog.
But I swallow the dregs of all light
And I flow like a mist through the nostrils of the dead.

You have heard my horses
In the dead of the night. Come with me soon
To ride on the dunes.

Echoes and Explosions

The section of the Kerry Way walking route that runs between Waterville and Caherdaniel follows the old eighteenth century "butter road" along which packhorses carried butter to the Cork Butter Exchange for sale and export. The walk is dramatically beautiful, an easy yet exhilarating escape along a route that often runs within a hundred metres of the Ring of Kerry Road, sometimes crossing it, yet seems to be worlds away from it, chronologically, geographically and culturally. This is especially true, for example, if you're perched on a rock high above the main road, eating your lunch, perhaps, while buses and cars snake along below you in the process of "experiencing" the Ring of Kerry, as the brave new world of marketing likes to call it. The route I am walking, being made originally for packhorse and pedestrian traffic rather than wheeled carts, usually takes the straightest way through the landscape with all the ups and downs that implies. On the other hand, the main Ring of Kerry Road, built in the 1830's with heavy wheeled carts in mind, tends to follow the contours of the hills and valleys it passes through, so that its ascents and descents are much more gradual, and the road consequently much more winding.

Timothy O'Neill, the wonderful calligraphic artist, recently brought my attention to a long article about the folklore of this area in a 1945 edition of *Béaloideas*. In this article Domhnall Ó Súilleabháin (often known as Domhnalll na mBróg) writes of the difference this had made to commercial transport. I translate:

> The old roads were rough and uneven, going straight up the high and straight straight down the low, often by difficult rockfaces, through swamps and bogs with causeways through the narrows and streams where often horses sank in the soft ground.

Along these sometimes very steep roads – by later standards just drained and reinforced tracks – a packhorse might carry just two or at most three firkins of butter, the article tells us, a firkin being a

barrel that would hold about twenty-five kilos of butter. The wheeled carts that the new contour-following roads followed, on the other hand, could carry up to fifty firkins. To look down from the old butter road on the enormous weight of vehicular traffic carried still by that road – more than a hundred tourist buses, articulated trucks and countless cars every day in summer – is to realise what an engineering achievement it was when it was opened in March 1839. Domhnall na mBróg tells us that the stretch between Waterville and Caherdaniel cost £1,000 per mile, an enormous sum at the time. Born in 1860, and so aged eighty-five when this article was published in 1945, he says he came to know many of the men who had worked on the road in their youth. I think of this as I walk, think that the article was published just three years before I was born, an article written by somebody who spoke to men who had worked on the road below in the 1830's. All at once time telescopes, the historical becomes contemporary, and the day sheds the distancing effect of two centuries.

Until its development as the Kerry Way, this section of the route was colloquially known as Daniel O'Connell's Road, and it was by that name I got to know it when I moved to Iveragh almost fifty years ago. In Irish, I discovered, it was known as *Bóthar an Chúnsailéara*, reminding us that O'Connell's initial celebrity among his own was characterised by his spectacular and popular success as a barrister. The 1830's road was known as *Bóthar Kearney*, after the engineer responsible for its construction. I'll come back soon to Kearney, and to how his name still lingers in a much-quoted verse couplet, but just now I stare out at Skellig along an axis that includes a ringfort, an early medieval oratory and a carved cross. I'll also be returning to this monastery and this strategic line of vision, and to what it says about the landscape through which I'm walking, on another day's trip. Today, I left the car just a couple of kilometres back, where the route leaves the tarred road at the high walls of "The Pound", where stray livestock were once impounded until the appropriate fine was paid. I walked south along the now grassy road, satisfyingly soft underfoot, that climbs the slope in a straight line the way old roads do. A little way up this road, curious sheep were climbing around the ruined stone walls of *Tigh an Phíobaire Bhuí*, where, according to tradition, lived the piper who heard and was enchanted by fairy music, but couldn't recall it in the clear light of day. There are variations on this story all over Ireland – perhaps all over the world – and it is certainly a trope that poets will recognise from their own sporadic and often unsuccessful nocturnal 'raids on the inarticulate', as T.S. Eliot put it. And here am I, staring out to sea, trying to articulate a relationship with landscape which resists any such articulatory raids on its largely wordless presence. And yet there are murmurings, snatches of speech here and there that seem to beg audition. Willing my imaginative ears open, I walk on.

As always, I am particularly on the alert for murmurings of the Milesians, whose imagined landfall here is so resonant in the landscape. As I pick my steps through a boggy stream that's doing

its best to reassert itself over this old road that was laid across it, I glance up to my left towards a monument, a Bronze Age boulder-tomb which I discovered a few years ago. And the Milesians, along with the nineteenth century traveller Lady Chatterton whom I invoked earlier about Skellig and Carraig Éanna, were in the investigatory mix which led me there. I'm actually following in her pony's hoofprints as I walk here today, the best part of two centuries later. She had visited Skellig Michael, and was on her way to Daniel O'Connell's famed Derrynane House. This is how she describes her journey along the same roadway I am walking, up through a valley known as Cúm a' Chiste:

> We gradually ascended, having a fine view over the Bay. On the mountain before us, numerous workmen were busily employed in making a new road between Waterville and Darrynane; in the prosecution of this fine work gunpowder is made use of to blow up the rocks, and the frequent blasts resounded finely as we proceeded.

When I read this, the resounding blasts I can almost hear are not just those of the gunpowder; there is also a translingual echo in a fragmentary couplet which is still quoted in the area. Tomás Rua Ó Súilleabháin was a contemporary, protégé and eulogist of Daniel O'Connell, and I will return to some of his more substantial poems. But this stray couplet must have been composed around the same time as Lady Chatterton noted the roadbuilding explosions, in the year 1838:

> Cúm a' Chiste brúite briste
> Ag púdar buile Kearney.

This can be translated as

> Coomakista is bruised to bits now
> By Kearney's demented powder.

Tomás Rua and Lady Chatterton may have been separated by class, nationality, politics and language; nonetheless the same explosions still resonate in their words. And, as we will see, so did the Milesians.

Let me follow Lady Chatterton and this thread. After she had crossed the highest point of the road, overlooking Derrynane Harbour, Lady Chatterton noted 'a perfect Pagan Altar, which we examined and sketched'. This is the term she consistently uses for what today we could call boulder burials or wedge tombs. The particular wedge tomb she refers to here is a spectacularly sited one

which was re-erected about twenty years ago by the OPW, after it had been left dismantled by archaeologists who neglected to either record or restore it. I'll pause here in my own walk in due course, but for now I'll recollect my way through Lady Chatterton's return journey. Having visited O'Connell in Derrynane, she came back the same way, and, on her descent towards Waterville, came across

> … another Pagan Monument, which has also a fine view over the Skelligs and Ballinskelligs Bay, and of the rocks near its mouth, where according to the traditions of the surrounding peasantry, Irr, the son of Milesius, was drowned in attempting to land. Hence they say that the name Ireland has originated; that the other brothers, with their followers from Spain, succeeded in landing, and subsequently obtained possession of the country: and that from gratitude for their conquest, they erected these altars, which are so often seen in this part of the island.

It may be nonsense archaeologically, impossible chronologically and garbled mythologically, but it is very clear evidence of how the Milesian myth was still invested in the landscape and in the popular mind – or as Lady Chatterton puts it 'the traditions of the surrounding peasantry' – centuries after a literary scribe put quill to vellum.

It was Lady Chatterton's account of this monument that aroused my interest and led me to the discovery I alluded to earlier. There are a number of Bronze Age burials close by, but they are in the townland of Coomatlouckane. Lady Chatterton's account placed this particular monument in the area of Cúm a' Chiste. Nowadays that name is used for the mountain gap at the highest point of the Ring of Kerry road. But the word *cúm* (cognate with the Welsh *cwm*) refers to a three-sided valley, not a gap. Even more significantly, while the word *ciste* nowadays usually signifies treasure, it has an older meaning associated with coffins and box-shaped graves, a usage still current in Scottish Gaelic. This was all nagging at me when I read Lady Chatterton's words:

> Fortunately, the peasantry entertain much respect for these remnants of the olden time – these interesting labours of a race of people long gone by. This second altar is larger, though less perfect than the first. Unfortunately, it is just under the new line of road which is now making; and the engineers do not seem to be influenced by any respect for this fine memorial of ancient days, for it has suffered much injury at their hands.

I decided to look for this larger, less perfect and somewhat damaged monument. And I found it, as described, just below the main road, a relatively crude boulder-burial in a somewhat collapsed state. And just above the main road, the steep slope of Farraniaragh mountain still bears the scars of the blasting that Lady Chatterton worried about in relation to the tomb, and about which Tomás Rua expressed such bemusement. Walking here, you can still feel those explosions in the landscape, even as sheep graze unconcernedly among the still recognisably sliced-open and shattered boulders that today bear witness to them.

At the same time as those explosions were echoing around here, a local man was continuing to cause political earthquakes in the broader political landscape of what was then the almost forty-year-old United Kingdom, with a centuries-old imperial relationship before that. Daniel O'Connell, after whom the old road I am walking was popularly named, would have travelled the route countless times. He is arguably the most significant figure in Irish political life in the last three centuries, despite the hostility towards him and subsequent airbrushing out of the national narrative of him by the narrowness of the violent romantic nationalist ethos which replaced his peaceful, broad, inclusive vision for his native country. But that's for another day; today I want to see him through the eyes of the same Tomás Rua who was deafened by the roadbuilders' dynamite. Tomás Rua, a number of whose poems are still commonly sung in Iveragh, can be seen as perhaps the last manifestation of the bardic tradition which saw it as the poet's function to compose poems in praise of his clan chieftain. Certainly, he was a protégé of O'Connell and wrote a number of poems in praise of him. It is said that some of them were recited somewhere here along this 'high rocky road', to welcome O'Connell home after an election or some other parliamentary achievement. And while Lady Chatterton was aware of 'the traditions of the surrounding peasantry' about the Milesians, Tomás Rua, one of that same 'surrounding peasantry' saw in his own hero-chieftain a contemporary embodiment of that mythological tradition. In one poem he refers to 'Ó Conaill geal de phór Mhílésius', giving O'Connell a genealogical connection to the Milesians, and in another poem he makes exactly the same claim: 'De scothaibh Chlanna Mhíleadh agus fíor-Chonaill chóir'. There was more going on in the local consciousness of the mythological past than Lady Chatterton, I imagine, was ever aware of. And lest it be thought that this was simply folk tradition, let us look at how a historian of the O'Connell family, Mrs. Morgan John O'Connell, in *The Last Colonel of the Irish Brigade*, writes about the O'Connells' own view of the Milesian myth. Daniel O'Connell's grandmother, Máire Ní Dhuibh, a poet of some reputation, wrote a poem lamenting the emigration of some of her family. In the poem, which I have only in a translation from the original Irish, she called them 'noble scions of the Soldier of Spain'. The 'Soldier of Spain' is a reference to the Latin term *Miles Espanus*, from which, *An Leabhar Gabhála* tells us, the Milesians were named. In other

words, the O'Connells themselves liked to trace their ancestry back to the Milesians who had landed not from where they lived in Derrynane. Here was mythology which was intensely local being used to elevate a local family, and one of the last of the Gaelic chiefs. Here too was a local myth with national significance, a significance of which Daniel O'Connell was shrewdly and strategically aware. The mythology of the Milesian invasion in *An Leabhar Gabhála* informed the narrative of Irish nationalism from Cromwellian times right up to independence and beyond. Daniel O'Connell, reasonable and rational man though he was, was also intensely aware of the power of the myth. This is from an article by Gary Owens in the periodical History Ireland:

> O'Connell's most well-known item of clothing, however, was his celebrated green velvet and gold 'milesian cap' or 'cap of liberty' which the artists John Hogan and Henry MacManus created and which they presented to him at the famous 'monster meeting' held on the rath of Mullaghmast in 1843. O'Connell was seldom without this cap during the remainder of his life, even in private, and he publicly declared that he would wear it to his grave.

Perhaps the famous Healy Rae caps took their inspiration from this. Like the Healy Raes, O'Connell was a genius at creating and maintaining an image. Be that as it may, what is certain is that Daniel O'Connell together with his family, Lady Chatterton, Tomás Rua – all from very different perspectives – were aware of the power of the Milesian myth as it rolled around these hills amid the echoing explosions of Kearney's roadbuilding gunpowder. And so am I, as I stir myself back into the present, and begin the walk up to a prehistoric tomb which will bring me back to Donn in his various mythological aspects and manifestations.

A Bronze Age Mirador

I'm wedged into a Bronze Age tomb, sheltering from the tail-end of a squall that swept northward from the Beara Peninsula across the narrow bay rather strangely called the Kenmare River, and drove hailstones almost horizontally along the ridge I crossed a short while ago. Crossing that ridge, the highest point of this section of The Kerry Way, brought a change of perspective. Where I was musing on the imaginary echoes of roadbuilding explosions, on Lady Chatterton and Tomás Rua Ó Súilleabháin, the sea-and-landscape was that of Ballinskelligs Bay, Skellig Michael and the wider Atlantic. Now it is Derrynane and the southern side of the Iveragh Peninsula, with Beara's silhouetted peaks looming up then disappearing out of the alternating blacks and greys, with the occasional gleam of pewter like a tankard in a gloomy inn, all borne in quick succession by the squally southerly winds.

And it's a wedge tomb that I'm wedged into, a type of monument so named because its box-shaped chamber, which would once have been covered with a mound of clay and stones, narrows itself towards the northeast both horizontally and vertically, leaving its wide entrance aligned towards the southwest and the setting sun, especially the midwinter setting sun which is so significant in this and neighbouring peninsula. The liminality of this setting, just on the southern side of the ridge I mentioned that divides sea-and-landscapes, is typical of the siting of these tombs, which archaeologists believe may have also functioned as territorial boundary-markers. And, as we will see, liminality is primary to the positioning of this monument, a liminality that applies to its positioning in the physical landscape, the cultural and spiritual landscape, and, today, the recreational and touristic landscape of the Kerry Way walking route. It stands right beside the route, almost as if it had been placed as a waymark. And, indeed, even though it involves a chronological jump of more than four thousand years to see significance in this, the eighteenth-century road follows an obvious straight-line path through the hills, a path that was therefore a likely route for the Bronze Age inhabitants of Iveragh. The positioning of this tomb – near a territorially dividing ridge, along a natural route – was surely not accidental. Neither was what could be seen in the far distance from this spot, something that gives a resonance of which she was evidently unaware to Lady Chatterton's account of tombs like this, '…. that from gratitude for their conquest, they erected these altars, which are so often seen in this part of the island.'

As I emerge from the tomb (what a thing to be able to write!) the skinning hail-showers are lightening off, dark curtains of cloud are dragging themselves northward behind me, and an unearthly bronzed light is silhouetting the great bulk of the humpback islands of Deenish and Scariff a few kilometres offshore. Small shards of porcelain-blue sky are struggling to establish themselves. Here and there, moving shafts of soaked light are pure theatre against the backdrop of the Beara Peninsula. There is renewal, an elemental rinsing, a cleansing in the air. I recall Lady Chatterton's account of what she looked at from this same place almost two centuries ago:

> From the summit of the pass there was a noble view of Darrynane Bay, the Isle of Scariff and some rocky islets between it and the shore; farther on, the Kenmare River with the Cow, Bull and Calf, the Allihies mines, and in the far distance a glimpse of the ocean beyond Dursay Head.

I'm looking of course at the same panorama, and it is stunning. But its spectacular physical presence is only part of what fascinates me. I am also looking at it in the light of what I have learned about a high, rocky island with sheer sides that Lady Chatterton mentions in passing, between the Cow and

the Calf. The Bull Rock, as it is usually called, is one of a group of three islands on the horizon which have acquired this pastoral name. But, especially in the case of The Bull, this is no whimsical or sentimental nomenclature; it is, as we will see, residual toponymic evidence of ancient beliefs and practice which were embodied in the landscape which is so dramatically spread before me. This is how Dáithí Ó hÓgáin introduces the rock in *The Sacred Isle,* his exploration of pre-Christian belief in Ireland:

> That island, known as *Tech Duinn*, is in fact nothing more than a rock, but has an unusual formation, being in effect a natural archway under which the sea flows with tremendous force.
>
> ……
>
> ……
>
> In its most symbolic form, it would appear that the departure of the spirits of the dead was envisaged as following the course of the sun as it passed under the archway of Donn's dwelling into the sea and from thence to the nether world. This has the marks of a survival in Ireland of the idea of otherworld portals borrowed from Continental Celts from the Greeks Many centuries before. The dolmen-shaped Bull Rock would have been an obvious identification for such an entrance to the world of the dead.

Lady Chatterton doesn't mention Donn, but his presence is strong here for those familiar with the mythology of the landscape. It will be remembered from a previous section that, according to the *Leabhar Gabhála* story, Donn, the rather sinister brother of Amergin, was drowned off Bull Rock, and that the island was thereafter called *Tech Duinn* (House of Donn), and indeed is still known in Irish as *Oileán Doinn* (Donn's Island). So from this "pagan altar" that Lady Chatterton associated with the Milesian invasions, she could actually see the legendary burial place of one of the major protagonists of that invasion, albeit one of whom she seemed to be unaware. However, it seems that the Milesian story, and specifically the story of Donn, brother of Amergin, was grafted on to an older story with links to Europe and beyond, and which also endured in legend and folklore, in various forms, right up to our own times. The tomb is positioned so that, if you are following the route I have just walked, Bull Rock, known in Irish as An Tarbh or Oileán Doinn, comes into view on the southern horizon after you cross the ridge just before you arrive here. This is unlikely to be coincidental, especially when we consider that Donn, Amergin's brother, is also identified with an afterlife, underworld deity, who, according to a ninth-century poem, invites the dead of Ireland to his house, Tech Duinn, identified by scholars such as Proinsias MacCana and Dáithí Ó hÓgáin with

that island on the horizon. This is the account of the poet Mael Muru of Othan, who died A.D. 887, as quoted in a fascinating article by Bruce Lincoln, first published in *History Of Religions*, a journal of comparative religion:

> A stone cairn was raised across the broad sea for his people,
> A long-standing, ancient house, which is named the House of Donn after him.
> And this was his mighty testament for his hundredfold offspring:
> You shall all come to me, to my house, after your death.

And here is the original, which I found on the very valuable University College Cork website CELT:

> Co tuarcbad carn la lia a cheneoil as lir lethach
> sentreb tontech conid Tech Duinn de dongarar.
> Ba hésin a hedacht adbul dia chlaind chetaich.
> cucum dom tic tissaid uili iarbar n-écaib.

So while my physical eyes absorb the whole panorama, the lens of my imagination is focusing not just the island itself, but all its shadowy associations, contradictory and vague as they may be, and on the other manifestations of Donn, who refuses to confine himself to his island mausoleum.

I recall very vividly when all of this was fully opened up for me. A group of artists interested in Bronze Age casting methods had their annual gathering locally, hosted by the sculptor Holger Lönze, who created the marvellous Amergin-inspired bronze sculpture now gracing the seafront in Waterville, a monument I will visit soon. One of the visiting artists was Billy MagFhloinn of Corca Dhuibhne, also a musician, archaeologist and folklorist. When I asked him to talk about wedge tombs, at the place where I now stand, he first looked all around, then asked was it Bull Rock that was visible on the horizon. When I confirmed this he spoke for ten or fifteen minutes without drawing breath, first pointing out the visual significance I have just written about, then ranging from Indo-European proto-myths, through various bull-cults, societal cattle-raiding, *An Leabhar Gabhála* and many other elements right up to modern folklore. Billy's enthusiastic torrent of words was revelatory, truly an epiphany for me. As he spoke, and indeed when I come here ever since, landscape becomes an embodiment of story, of belief and indeed of creative art. And such abstractions absorb into themselves the physical world so that duality fades and, to misquote Yeats, you cannot tell the dancer from the dance.

And of course one of the keys to it all is in the name Donn, meaning brown or dark. It is also the name of The Brown Bull of Cooley, Donn Cuailgne, jealousy of which on the part of Medbh led to the epic story of *An Táin Bó Cuailgne*, which was to figure so prominently in Irish literature in both languages and, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in the revolutionary nationalist climate which led to the 1916 Rising. It had taken Billy's talk, and the scholarly articles like that of Bruce Lincoln to which he steered me, to open my eyes to what had been staring me in the face: the name *The Bull Rock* was not, as I had always thought, an unconnected and sentimental whimsy, but went back far and deep into the belief-systems which had animated this whole place since time immemorial. And Donn, the mythological brother of Amergin is not only linked with an earlier God of the dead, whom scholars have linked with the *Dis Pater* whom Julius Caesar identified as a Celtic Pluto, but also linked with cults and myths of bull-worship and cattle-raiding found in southern Europe and beyond. And let's take it further. At the end of the Táin, the bull Donn Cuailgne engages in an epic combat with Findbheannach, the Whitehorned Bull, a combat which ranges all over Ireland. In the course of this combat, Donn Cuailgne scatters fragments of his rival's body far and wide, literally *creating* places such as Athlone in the process. So one of Ireland's mythological ancestor-figures, linked with a mythical bull and with a death-god figure, is also seen as a creator of landscape and of place. And his dwelling, with all its multi-layered associations, is the island I am looking at on the horizon, in this uncanny *Götterdämmerung* light. Again, as always, shivers run down my back. From here, obviously, I cannot see The Bull Rock except in silhouette, and certainly cannot see the arched fissure that runs right through the centre of island, causing the currents and swirls that kept fishermen away from it, if a more ancient fear was not enough to do so. But I can and do see it in my mind's eye, and I am struck again by the way it is echoed in the nineteenth-century painting *Die Toteninsel/ The Island of the Dead* by the Swiss artist Arnold Böcklin. In that painting, although the artist's island of the dead is tamer than Donn's island, with cypress trees concealing the central opening towards which a boat with hooded figures is being steered, I feel, perhaps irrationally, that the same archetypal dream image animated Böcklin's imagination as animated the long-ago inhabitants who imagined Donn as Lord of the Dead in his remote, fissured island in the southwest.

I am overwhelmed and awed by all of this, even though it is not the only story that inhabits this peninsula and its sister peninsula to the south. There are others which I will explore. Neither do I suggest that we should suspend disbelief, as Coleridge might put it, in favour of older animistic belief in any literal sense. My own atheism extends far beyond the religion in which I grew up, and what used to be called pagan beliefs do not offer me anything more convincing, or even necessary. But I am convinced that it is necessary to rediscover story and myth in our surroundings, to animate –

perhaps reanimate – the places we live so that we may respect them and value them in a way that goes far beyond their value as commodities. This is necessary, I think, in the long term, to survive, and, in the immediate, to enhance and enrich our lives. For now, I'll head back for lower ground, not least because more ominous clouds are gathering to the south, and sometimes the ordinary light of the quotidian is more attractive than the twilight of the gods.

At the *Árthach Dána* monument

The lowering sun raises a gleam on the gold-leaf tip of the sculpture that rises almost six metres off the ground, on the open seafront space in the middle of the village of Waterville. From where I pull in my car to the kerbside a short way to the southeast of it, the piece looks abstract, a spire reaching out of a vaguely pyramidal base up into – even *aspiring* towards – the evening sky. I can see that it's bronze, with a blue-green patina that looks like oxidation, but which I know to have been applied by the sculptor, Holger Lönze, a recent arrival to Iveragh after many years living in other parts of Ireland. And even though from here I see only a silhouetted spire rising from its base, my memory and imagination allow me to see its humps and hollows, to identify its portrayals and representations, and to recognise the shapes it shifts between. I know this monument intimately. I saw it being fabricated and assembled, being worked and reworked, being hammered and textured, being cast and being conjured into the shape reaching up before me. Even before all the craft and process began to shape it, I knew its outlines, its genesis. I feel I have been privileged to have been a witness to all of this, with a sense of privilege that remains with me as I open the car door to visit it once more.

As I approach and stand southwest of the monument, its more representational aspects become clearer. The spire which a passer-by first notices is the stylised raised prow of a boat, a beached boat emerging from its plinth. The planking of the boat sinks into the plinth. But wait, the planks can also be seen as waves, with what seems like golden foam being thrown off from their crests. And, especially from this angle, you can see that the pointed prow also suggests the beak of a gannet, a species of which one of the biggest colonies in the world graces Little Skellig (*Sceilg Bheag*), and a few dozen of which are circling and diving just offshore from here. They are white like no other seabird I know, with power and grace beyond words. They circle and gleam in the lowering sun, catching its rays as does the gold tip and various protrusions of the monument, and every so often they twist and dive from a height, hitting the water with great force as they fish. It is wonderful to see them celebrated in bronze, lending it their grace and power. The bulbous base of the prow is their skull, and a hollow in that prow is an eye, the eye of a bird that is reputedly as sharp as that of an eagle in search of prey. And when you look into that hollowed-out eye, there is a

dotted pattern that turns out to be the pattern of the Pleiades, The Seven Sisters, the constellation whose appearance in the morning sky was taken by ancient Mediterranean peoples as announcing the opening of the navigation season. The idea of a navigational constellation being reflected in the eye of a seabird which migrates along the same axis that the Milesians mythologically navigated, is both inspired and inspiring. It is no surprise that Holger, as well as being an accomplished sculptor, is also a seaman, who has made his own *naomhóg* or currach, and who has a deep interest in traditional boats and maritime history.

And the prow has yet another function, a wonderfully resonant one. Around a segment of the semi-circular perimeter of the plinth are nine Roman numerals from IX through XII to V. The spire/prow/beak, which is inclined due north, the bearing which the Milesians would have followed from A Coruña, is in fact also the gnomon of a sundial. I love the word (which I of course had to look up), its roots in the Greek word for knowledge, its usage in relation to a carpenter's square, to measurement and alignment and therefore to navigation. The various perceptions of voyaging and arrival that inhere in this monument are deep, rich and enormously varied. Its positioning and context encompass land, sea and sky, and it creates visual and material links with all three elements, as well as with the sun and the stars. It is immediately and intensely aware of its surroundings and of the cultural context of those surroundings, something which I hold to be a primary function of art. I am, quite simply, awestruck by it. So when Holger asked me for suggestions about how the monument might be named, we came up with *Árthach Dána* as a title. The word *árthach* means "vessel", both in the sense of a ship and a container for liquids. Obviously, the ship element is strongest, but there is also the idea of the sacred cauldron of Irish mythology. The word *dána* is multi-layered. As an adjective it means "bold, daring"; as a noun *dán* can mean "art" or "poem" and can also mean "destiny". A sculptural work so deeply layered both physically and metaphorically justifies such a layered title.

In the presence of such monumental and rooted art, I am and was aware of what can be the fragility and ephemerality of words. Nonetheless, words being what I practise, this is my tribute:

Amergin's Ship

for Holger Lőnze

Because he wanted simply to be as one
With the swelling wave and the wind

With the salmon and with the stars

Clustered in the eye of the gannet

He sailed north when the four winds
Blossomed together in a compass

North being the petal that trembled
Towards the grey ambiguous headlands

The elder swore he scried from the tower
Infinitely far beyond the salty horizon

The ship's skin-lined planking breathed
Brine and wind, welded gust and swell.

In a coupling that surpassed navigation
Sea and ship hammered one another

Into one another's shape, shaped
Wind and weather to the poet's will

To be the voyage, to be the landfall
And the words that marked the landfall

To be the land and the land's creatures
To be the stones raised in commemoration

To be the ship beached forever on the land,
And the words singing themselves into bronze.

The next day, at around midday, I come back to the monument to check the details of the sundial. Having done so, I sit on a seafront promenade bench, my back to *Árthach Dána* and my face to the sea and the circling gannets. It is as good a time and place as any to briefly contemplate *An Leabhar Gabhála*, its relevance both past and present, and above all, to be open to its resonances in the surroundings. The village is busy today. It is late May, and the Ring of Kerry buses are on their

flying visits, their passengers photographing themselves beside the Charlie Chaplin statue alongside the main road, the slightly more adventurous ones finding their way to the shoreline. The place is crowded, buzzing. The tourists no doubt see a busy village, with lots of houses in the surrounding area. The impression would be of a thriving population, a stable economy, an assured future.

The reality, I'm afraid, is diametrically different. The few visitors who come here in January would find it difficult to find a restaurant open, and would be struck by the emptiness of the village and the number of houses which are dark and empty. They might notice that among the relatively few people they would see, young adults are rare. The population of the Iveragh peninsula has been falling for the past one hundred and fifty years, a fall that has become exponential in the past half-century. Smallholder farming, which was the social and economic backbone of the area, has become marginalised, its practitioners demoralised, and young people have largely and understandably abandoned it. Inshore fishing tells a similar story. The term "economies of scale", soothing and reassuring as it sounds, has an ominous ring here. In short, the peninsula, apart from the towns of Kenmare and Killorglin, sixty or so kilometres away from this southwestern extremity, is a demographic disaster area whose survival as a viable social and economic entity is under immediate threat.

Even over the period I have lived here, say just short of two generations, the population of Iveragh has been devastated. When I started teaching in Waterville Vocational School in 1973, there were still, despite closures and amalgamations in the late 60's, seven primary schools feeding into the school. There are now four in that catchment area, all feeling the pinch of numbers. There were four second level schools in this part of the peninsula, where there is now one. That particular amalgamation was inevitable and probably for the best, but the fall in numbers since it opened in 1999 has been ominous. Over that twenty-year period, the amalgamated Coláiste na Sceilge in Cahersiveen, the only second-level school in the peninsula, has seen its enrolment fall by almost half. And that fall in enrolment was systemic, before the migration that resulted from the 2008 crash and its aftermath, of which the longer-term demographic effect – in simple terms, the children who will not grow up here – are only now becoming clear. In other words, unless there is some dramatic and unforeseeable change, the next twenty years appear to be even more bleak.

As I said, the fine houses scattered around the area, especially along the coastal strip which is all that most tourists see, suggest a thriving population. This suggestion, however, is misleading. Many of these houses were built specifically as holiday houses, especially during the so-called Celtic Tiger boom, or else now function as holiday houses. There is one particular coastal stretch a few miles south of Waterville, lying between the Ring of Kerry road from Ard Caorach Cross to Cúm a' Chiste, and running down from that road to the sea. I remember looking down at it from Cúm a'

Chiste in the late 1950's as a child on holidays from Dublin, and being shown the patchwork colours of then intensively worked fields. The farms were and are small, but the land is reasonably fertile. There is a small slipway here at Rinnín, where there used to be mackerel-curing sheds, the produce of which was exported to the United States. There is no commercial fishing here now, not even tourist angling. Most of the land is grazed, and some cultivated for silage, but a considerable part of it is fallow or shows minimal signs of active farming. When I came in 1973, a two-teacher primary school, located just below the church on the main road, served this particular area. The school closed quite a few years ago, and even the future of the church is now in doubt. Even more starkly, this beautiful area, although dotted with attractive houses, is largely inhabited by an ageing population, augmented over holiday periods by their visiting children and holidaymakers who own or rent many of the newer houses. The primary school, now converted to a house, had two teachers up to 1984. Now, if I look down from Cúm a' Chiste, I can identify many houses from which I taught children over almost twenty years in the Waterville Vocational School. But I can identify only one house where there are currently children of school-going age.

The demographic devastation I can see from Cúm a' Chiste is just one of many specific perspectives from which you can see the scale of the crisis facing this area. The overall perspective, statistical rather than visual, is equally daunting. Carol Power and Ray O'Connor, geographers from University College, Cork who are very familiar with the peninsula, have starkly charted a population decline from 1926 to 2006, say three generations. The western end of the Iveragh peninsula has lost two thirds of its population over that time. Even more significantly, this peninsular end (as opposed, that is, to the areas around Kenmare and Killorglin) continued to lose its population in the fifteen years leading up to the 2006 census, the years of the Celtic Tiger boom. Upland areas have suffered the worst losses, and continue to do so. But, unlike other rural areas, those who leave the upland areas are not moving into local towns and villages; they are leaving the peninsula. It is a commonplace of local conversation that Cahersiveen, the peninsula's principal town, is in imminent danger of losing its urban recognition, and being classified as village. The nomenclature may not be important, but the closed shops and empty houses are like open wounds on its streets. And if Cahersiveen is in trouble, then the whole peninsular region of Iveragh is in serious and immediate trouble. I'll offer just one final statistic. The Gaeltacht area of Iveragh, during the sixty years from 1956 to 2016, according to a recent survey by the social geographer Brendan O'Keefe, saw its population fall from 3036 to 1808, a fall of 40%. This was by a long way the worst demographic of any Gaeltacht area in the country.

Of course this is not the same personally and familially traumatic migration which became so much a part of Irish life from the time of the Great Famine. The young people who migrate are in

constant touch with family and friends, and come home regularly, very often a few times every year. Parish football clubs are familiar with the idea of many of their players coming home for matches, sometimes from abroad. Summer festivals are sometimes geared towards holidaying migrants rather than visiting strangers. Grandparents use Skype and Facebook to keep in touch with their extended family. The Atlantic is perhaps no longer salty with the tears of emigrants. The finality of the "American Wake", the flood of sentimental or bittersweet songs that are engrained into Irish psyche, the "American parcels" of clothes, the envelopes of dollars sent back to impoverished communities – all of these are a thing of the past, except perhaps psychologically. Nonetheless, the attritional erosion of social infrastructure – schools, post-offices, shops etc. – has taken and continues to take its toll. The irony is that as a fairly comfortable standard of living, although not affluence, has become established in places like Iveragh, the fall in population has continued, so much so that migration from the area by young people is now for reasons that are as much social as they are economic. Of course there are cyclical patterns, and things may change, but in recent years there seems to me to be a general recognition that southwest Kerry has reached a demographic tipping point, after which cyclical adjustment might no longer be possible. It will not happen in my lifetime, but it is not farfetched to see the western end of this peninsula becoming a place for the seasonal pursuit of leisure, rather than a place in which communities live. Depopulation is now an existential issue.

This is a sobering and sombre focus of contemplation as I sit here on the seafront, perhaps even an affront to the bustle and excitement around me, the children playing around Holger's sculpture, the groups from the buses queuing to photograph themselves beside Charlie Chaplin, the freer spirits creating the small pillars of sea stones on the shingle beach below, new and welcome touches of the oriental that often now spring up like mushrooms. I understand how Shelley felt, watching the sea one sparkling day in Naples, a day

> Which my lost heart, too soon grown old,
> Insults with this untimely moan;

I have indeed often empathised with Shelley's feeling of depressive isolation. But today I think I can honestly say that it is a love for and a concern for my adoptive homeplace that allows these shadows to throw a measure of gloom over the day, over the place and over Amergin's story. So let me try to draw those elements together under a more benign light, even if that light is to be found in the realm of myth and the imagination rather the more immediately practical realm of statistics, sociology or economics.

The twenty-first century demographic problem I have outlined may seem far removed from the narrative of *An Leabhar Gabhála*. The fact that the whole story may be completely fictional, without any historical basis, may apparently remove it even further from the reality of both the summer's bustle behind me and of the winter's empty street, closed restaurants and dark houses. The sustainability of Iveragh is a real, measurable and urgent crisis, not an imaginative construct of historical, literary or academic interest. *An Leabhar Gabhála* is very definitely an imaginative construct. According to the scholar T.F. O'Rahilly, it 'may be described as a deliberate work of fiction'. Its first editor/translator, R.A.S. Macalister, says that it 'not only possesses no historical value…. in the form in which it is presented to us it has next to no importance in the general field of Anthropology, except in so far as it may throw some sidelight rays upon magical beliefs and practices, or the like'. Eoin MacNeill, Proinsias MacCana, Dáithí Ó hÓgáin and others have used the term "pseudo-history". But perhaps the most useful short description of *An Leabhar Gabhála* is that of Professor John Carey of UCC, the foremost contemporary authority on the work, and from whose translation I have already quoted. He describes it as "literally 'Book of Taking' or 'Book of Settlement', but usually rendered as 'Book of Invasions': a legendary history of Ireland and the Gaels, of fundamental and enduring importance to the shaping of Irish historical thought". It is especially that 'shaping of Irish historical thought' that resonates with me, its pinpointing of the relationship that exists between myth and our perception of history, often without our being fully aware of it.

And this is why I find myself looking out to sea, with, perhaps counter-intuitively, a backward glance at the pseudo-historical story which is integrated with the landscape of this immediate area. Because myth, and particularly mythologised history, for good or evil, can be at least as powerful as history in informing how we see the past, the present and indeed – arguably most importantly – the future. Think of the use – or abuse, depending on your point of view – that Patrick Pearse made of the heroic mythology surrounding Cúchulainn in framing his own and the country's progression towards violent revolution in the early years of the twentieth century. Think of the armed and rugged individual struggling against tyrannical government which is an archetypal and highly potent myth to this day in the United States. Think of Homer's Troy, think of most religions, and, increasingly and worryingly important today, think of most nationalisms. Myth may or may not be based on fact, but it has its own very powerful message that has the force of truth. Even when it is fictional, myth can embody beliefs and perspectives which have their own emblematic reality. And this is essentially what happened in the case of the Milesian myth. I have touched on its symbolic importance for O'Connell and Irish nationalism in the nineteenth century. It was especially during the seventeenth century, and particularly after Seathrún Céitinn (Geoffrey Keating) used the myth in

his history of Ireland , written from the perspective of the colonised rather than the coloniser, and which he called *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn*, that the Milesian myth became a polemical national and subsequently nationalist narrative. Indeed I can recall, in the fifties and early sixties, being taught it at primary school as being essentially historical, even if the details had been rendered somewhat vague by the passage of time. I have already described how the seventeenth century Iveragh poet Seán Ó Conaill used it to great effect in his long poem *Tuireamh na hÉireann* to contrast the oppressiveness of the Tudor and Cromwellian conquests with the Biblically validated Milesian conquest. We have seen how Daniel O'Connell, the Liberator, whose family claimed kinship with the author of the poem, and referred to it as "The Dirge for Ireland", wore his "Milesian Cap" both in public and in private. In short, the Milesian myth was – not surprisingly – adopted by Gaelic, Catholic and Nationalist Ireland right up to modern times.

Today, as I sit looking out at the landing-place of this group who probably never existed, I contemplate other aspects of *An Leabhar Gabhála* and how they might be relevant in some way to the contemporary world of Iveragh behind my back, a world that is threatened demographically and economically. And I recall that while the narrative is concerned to record and validate the Gaelic appropriation of Ireland, and to place that appropriation within a Christian historical narrative, there is also within it a consistent awareness and an account of other ethnicities and cultures. Let me return to its text, in relation to another occupation:

> It was he (Partholón) who first took Ireland after the Flood, on a Tuesday, on the fourteenth of the month, in Inber Scéne. (For Ireland was taken three times from Inber Scéne)

So the origin-myth adopted by the native Gaelic Irish literally saw Inbhear Scéine as what we might today call a port of entry. Nowadays the name Inbhear Scéine is usually applied to the Kenmare River. However, scholars such as John O'Donovan and P.J. Lynch in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, and most recently and definitively Breandán Ó Cíobháin in an essay in *The Iveragh Peninsula: a Cultural Atlas*, the indispensable volume edited by John Crowley and John Sheehan, have established that its usage in *An Leabhar Gabhála* applies to what is now known as Bá na Scealg, which I am now contemplating. So these various ethnic groupings came into Ireland, the mythology tells us, by way of this bay. The Milesians, or Gaelic people, were the last of the invading groups that *An Leabhar Gabhála* deals with. The extract I've quoted tells us that Partholón and his followers also came through this particular port of entry. The narrative is not clear as to who the third group was. My own unscholarly theory is that it was the very first group, that led by Cesair, the granddaughter of Noah. Here is the narrative:

> A query, then: who first took Ireland after the creation of the earth? Not difficult: Cesair daughter of Bith son of Noah, forty days before the Flood. For Noah said to them 'Arise, [and go] to the western edge of the world. Perhaps the flood will not reach it.' They came in three ships to Dún na mBarc in the territory of Corcu Duibhne. Two of the ships sank.

Now there is no Dún na mBarc in Bá na Scealg, and the place is usually identified with Dún na mBarc near Bantry. But what Macalister calls the First Redaction of *An Leabhar Gabhála* definitively states that 'the crew of three ships chanced upon Dún na mBarc in the Southern Promontory of Corcu Duibhne'. The Southern Promontory of Corcu Duibhne here of course, as Breandán Ó Cíobháin points out in the essay I mentioned, is Iorras Dheiscirt Corcu Duibhne, that is the Iveragh Peninsula. So let me tentatively put forward another possibility. Dún na mBarc translates as The Fort of the Ships. A little offshore from the clay cliff just south of Waterville lies a dangerous reef called *Carraig na mBarc*, where I can see right now the sea-swell breaking in white foam. It is a tidal reef which my neighbour Eddie used to warn me about when I first started to take a boat out in the bay in search of mackerel. The cliff it lies offshore from is just a clay cliff, subject to constant and severe erosion. If, as is quite possible, a promontory fort had been situated here around the time the *Leabhar Gabhála* narrative was being shaped, it would have long since fallen into the sea, and the name Dún na mBarc with it. Might *Carraig na mBarc* be a small echo of a *Dún na mBarc* which was in Iorras Dheiscirt Corcu Dhuibhne, where Cesair's ships made landfall, and where two of them were wrecked? I know that such a theory flies in the face of received opinion, but it would fit with the *Leabhar Gabhála* narrative of there being three Inbhear Scéine landings, and would place *Dún na mBarc* firmly in the Iveragh peninsula, as *An Leabhar Gabhála* does.

Whatever the geography – and it's all unhistorical fiction anyway – I would like to foreground the other point I touched on. Ireland's first, and temporary settlers, led by a woman called Cesair, a granddaughter of Noah, were refugees fleeing from the Biblical Flood. In the context of climate change, and, as Mary Robinson tirelessly argues, in the context that it is the poorest countries and their poorest people that are already suffering most from its effects, this particular story is something we might want, even need, to contemplate. And indeed some accounts of the Milesian conquest relate that they first decided to seek a new home in Ireland after an extended famine caused by twenty-six years of extended drought. It is not a great leap of the imagination to change our traditional perception of the first Gaels in Ireland from being conquering God-ordained invaders to being migratory refugees whose voyage to and subsequent appropriation of Ireland was brought about by something we might today classify as climate change.

There is another aspect of the Milesian story worth looking at in this context. When Ith, Lugaid's father, came to Ireland on a scouting mission, he encountered three Tuatha Dé Danann kings dividing riches and being acrimonious about it. The narrative tells us that Ith

> …. righted every complaint and contention that there was among them, and he said: 'Enact rightful law, for you dwell in a good land. Abundant are its mast and honey, and wheat and fish. Balanced are its heat and cold'.

In Lady Gregory's version of the story, she adds that there was *'*room enough for them all'*.* Of course it is always easier for the colonist to say this than the colonised; nonetheless *An Leabhar Gabhála* often suggests that ethnic diversity, and an acceptance thereof, lay behind the Gaelic civilisation the origins of which its function was to establish. And there are other hints that that tolerance and integration were well-regarded by its authors. When Amergin encountered the three Tuatha Dé Danann queens Éiriú, Banba and Fótla he agreed to their request that their names would always remain as names for Ireland. His brother Donn, who was the villain among the sons of Míl, protested against this and thereby contributed to his own doom and identification with the dark underworld of Tech Duinn, the Bull Rock which I contemplated from the wedge-tomb above Cúm a' Chiste. And, very significantly, I think, his last words before he perished were 'Now I will bring under the edge of spear and sword all that there is in Ireland'. The clear implication is that Donn's intransigent refusal to accept the rights of other ethnic groups is a dark and destructive force, in contrast to the measured and inclusive vision of Amergin. And Amergin's famous shoreline incantation, together with his invocation of Ireland and his poem to charm salmon into the sea and lake, are poems of identification and praise, not of ownership or conquest. They can also, I would argue, be read as ecological manifestoes for the changed relationship with the natural world which the existential crisis we are living through demands.

So, *An Leabhar Gabhála* very deliberately shows an awareness of ethnic diversity. For example, the sons of Míl were variously born in Egypt, Scythia, Thracia, the marshes of the Middle East and Galicia in north-western Spain. This awareness of ethnic diversity was mirrored by an awareness of linguistic diversity. Gáedel Glas, an ancestral figure who never came to Ireland, 'fashioned Gaelic from the seventy-two languages'. One of the poems interspersed throughout the prose narrative lists those languages, everything from Greek to Spanish, from Hindu to Saxon, and concludes by telling us

> From these languages, without corruption

Gaédel extracted Gaelic.
Familiar to him, thanks to his learning,
Were the families of the many languages.

Geographically, ethnically and linguistically, the world-view of *An Leabhar Gabhála* was global rather than insular. While I suggest that this is something well worth our contemplation, let me clarify that I do not claim that the main thrust of the *Leabhar Gabhála* narrative is towards a liberal pluralistic view of Irishness. What I am contemplating, as I sit near the monument which so wonderfully commemorates the narrative, is only a subtext in that narrative. I believe, nonetheless, that the subtext is real, is worthy of our attention and, in the context of the demographic crisis it faces, is of special interest and urgency to Iveragh.

Before I leave my contemplation, and my seat, I remember another section of Seán Ó Conaill's mythological and historical poem, a section which deals with the Norman conquest of Ireland over the centuries preceding the Tudor and Cromwellian conquests. The tone and content is fundamentally different from his description of the later invasions. For those of us brought up on the eight hundred years of oppression myth, it may come as a surprise to come across lines like these:

Do bhíodar caoin sibhialta tréitheach
Ba mhaith a ndlithe, a gcreideamh 's a mbéasa.
Gach duine d'úmlaig, do bhí a chuid féin leis.
Do bhíodar ceansa mar cheann cléire.
Do shíolraig a bhfuil trí na chéile,
Do bhí an Gael Gallda 's an Gall Gaelach.

There is much that can be argued and counter-argued about these lines, and I am no historian. But, thinking about the population crisis Iveragh faces, I translate this passage, with that final couplet especially ringing in my mind:

They were civilised, benign, accomplished,
Good were their laws, religion and customs.
All who obeyed retained their possessions.
They were gentle at the head of the clergy
Their blood and breeding mingled in common
Foreign became Irish and Irish became foreign.

In our fraught world, climate change, war and famine are driving migration to unprecedent levels. But they are not new phenomena, and human needs remain fundamentally the same. Perhaps we can learn from origin-myths. As I walk back to my car, pausing again to admire Holger's sculpture, I wonder about the possibility that if Iveragh is to survive as a viable community, it may be because people a century or so from now will be able to look back and be glad that in the twenty-first century we were open enough and far-seeing enough to allow the *Gael* to be *Gallda* and the *Gall* to be *Gaelach*, and that this far-seeing openness brought them to welcome migrants and refugees to Iveragh and thereby saved it as a living and vibrant community.

China Across the Bay

'And the dawn comes up like thunder out of China across the Bay!' Rudyard Kipling may well be outmoded and politically out-corrected, but this line from "The Road to Mandalay", as so memorably sung by Kenneth McKellar, floods into my mind on a miraculously beautiful morning as I stand at the edge of my back-garden cliff overlooking Ballinskelligs Bay. To the east, layers of mist are rising slowly off blue-grey hillsides, coaxed up by an unseasonably warm sunrise. Wonderfully delicate and mysterious, the familiar slopes are somehow magnified and exoticized. It seems to me that this boggy mountain landscape has been orientalised, that I am looking at a scrolled landscape, with perhaps a Tang Dynasty quatrain calligraphed along the side. A flight of oystercatchers lifts off the mirroring sea and catches the light as it banks in brilliant black-and-white into a porcelain blue sky wispy with white clouds. The kind of beauty that is so intense that it lifts and breaks your heart all in one intense pang.

I sit on the concrete stool that I've placed beside my plaster-cast garden centre Buddha. Before I left the house, I paused to watch a robin perched territorially on the statue's head. For ten minutes it surveyed its domains, taking off only when I approached the edge of the cliff. The Buddha took up residence there about a dozen years ago. I am not an adherent of Buddhism, although if I did feel the need to practise a religion, I think I would find it more relevant and attractive than the dogmatic, patriarchal and afterlife-focused faith I grew up with. Whatever about adherence, my limited encounters, in China, Korea, Thailand and Nepal, with Buddhism's various external manifestations, left me relatively comfortable with its images, flags and thangkas, and indeed with its poetry. I was half-joking, all in earnest, when I positioned this particular Buddha:

It's to keep the bay level, I joked,

As I nudged him into balance
At the edge of the cliff, his bland
Garden-centre smile facing out to sea

And to Carraig Éanna, its silhouetted
Birds, and its occasional almost-strain
Of old stories recounting themselves
Among the indifferent heads of seals.

The poem became a series, eight poems in all, and this poem became the title-poem of a collection titled *My Lord Buddha of Carraig Éanna*. I found that using this simplistic statue as a persona, both to listen to and to address, was poetically liberating, allowing me to explore areas somewhat tangentially, perhaps, as Emily Dickinson advised, to "Tell all the truth but tell it slant". This allowed me a latitude to explore and express feelings in a way that a more directly personal voice might have inhibited. And so the statue, even in this diluted mass-produced incarnation, spoke for me about Amergin perhaps, but perhaps even more about myself:

Buddha and Amergin

It was, they tell me, just here below,
On the sand and shingle whose tang
Has entered my pores, that Amergin
Beached, and stepped ashore, and sang
The beginning of the story. Just about
The time, they say, my own story began
Far away under a far inland tree. The words
Of his beginning have also entered my pores:

Am gaeth i mmuir	*Am wind on sea*
Am tond trethan	*Am wave swelling*
Am fuaim mara	*Am ocean's voice*
Am dam secht ndirend	*Am seven-horned stag*
Am seig i n-aill	*Am falcon on cliff*
Am der greine	*Am sunlit dewdrop*

And so much more. I recite them to myself here
On the clifftop, easing myself into the place,
The place into me. Sea. Shoreline. Mountains.
The lake, just inland. All the growth, the loss.
The comings and goings. Stories voiced and unvoiced.

How that *Am* exhales itself as my familiar *Om*
From every grain rock and drop and leaf around
And echoes across the bay between headlands!
Words swell up as water swells in the bay
Rebirth Recreation Reincarnation Renewal
And collapse as waves collapse under their own weight.
Words are water discovering its own shape. I pour
The words of Amergin votively, tentatively:
Who makes smooth the stony mountain?
Who elucidates the lives of the moon?
Who proclaims where the sun will rest?

I could live with those words. Many times. Over
And over again I could live with those words.

I am not, as I have said, a believer, occidental or oriental, and I certainly have no literal belief in reincarnation. But this gilded morning, this orientalised landscape, the origin-myth embodied in that landscape and an atheistic poet sitting beside a plaster statue, are all infused with immortality.

So this is as good a time and place as any to consider the words of the poem supposedly uttered on the shoreline below me by a poet and judge who is probably fictional, as is the legendary voyage and landfall of the migrants whom he led. This is the poem, these are the words, which have been a lodestone for me since I discovered them, and which I think could be a lodestone for our world as it faces into a global existential crisis. In my English translation of the original medieval Irish, I used the repeated “Am” rather than “I am” for three reasons. Firstly, I feel that the poem can be read – and heard – as a communal rather than an individual identification with place, an expression of a universal consciousness. Secondly, the original Middle Irish poem uses the Old Irish synthetic form *Am* rather than *Is mise* or *Is mé*, and I like to be able to echo this. Thirdly, that “Am”, as I have the Buddha also use in that last poem, reminds me of the sacred syllable “Om” of Hindu and

Buddhist mysticism. This may – or may not – be purely coincidence, but, if so, it is at least a very serendipitous coincidence which I wanted to foreground. And in this regard, it has been pointed out by commentators such as Alwyn and Brindley Rees, as well as Proinsias MacCana, that Amergin's poem has strong echoes of Krishna's statements of universality in section X of the *Bhagavad Gita*. Wherever it originated from, the poem Amergin recited on the beach just below has sources that long predated the beliefs of the monastic scribes who wrote it down a thousand years ago.

Sitting here on the cliff-edge, my hand resting on Buddha's head, watching a seal with raised head and tail absorbing the sunlight on an offshore rock just under the surface, I am also very aware that whoever created the Amergin poem was also intensely conscious of his power and status as a poet (I think it is chronologically correct, although not perhaps politically so, to presume a male author). This power and status of the poet, and of poetry, are embodied – confidently, even boastfully embodied – in the language and structure of the poem itself. John Carey, whose expertise on the *Leabhar Gabhála* I have previously adverted to, has pointed out that the poem's series of rhetorical questions in its second part have already been answered by the poetic persona's declarations in the first part. He has also pointed out something which had been, for the forty years or so that I had been reading the poem, hiding from me in plain view. This is how he put it in a scintillating talk he gave at the 2019 Amergin Solstice Poetry Gathering in Waterville:

> For in the first line, *Am gáeth i mmuir*, we have not only the first syllable of Amairgen's name, *Am*, but also the second syllable*, muir*. The third syllable of his name, *gen*, is like a word meaning 'birth' or 'being'; in the poem, there is instead the word *gáeth* which means 'wind', but also 'wise', or 'wise person'. The line is like Amairgen's riddling signature, within which he has inscribed his wisdom. And in naming himself as a wind in the sea he recalls the story of Genesis, which tells how the breath of God moved upon the face of the waters before the words that summoned the first light. Amairgen is identifying himself with the creative power of the Divinity.

I vividly recall that I heard these words, with a tingle of excitement down my spine, as one of those extraordinary insights which become blindingly obvious once you hear them, and seem to confirm something you have always half-known but not been able to articulate. And for me John's talk was given added resonance by the fact that it was delivered in Saint Michael's Church, which was, as we have seen, consecrated by the grandfather of Robert Graves, whose enormous – if often eccentric – claims for the poem in *The White Goddess*, had introduced me and so many others to Amergin's seminal work.

Of course other poets have fallen under the spell of what Benedict Kiely called 'Amergin's mysterious, runic poem'. Perhaps poets are flattered, or feel validated, by the human and divine power which Amergin arrogates to himself. In any case, Robert Welch, poet, novelist and critic wrote that Amergin

> then utters his famous hymn, which unites nature, human perception, language, energy, force, conflict and beauty into one forceful declaration. At the same time it asserts the potency of poetry to be the means whereby we can experience the huge energies of nature in a way that can bring about some small understanding of it. Irish literary tradition, in the hymn of Amergin, is making it very clear that poetry, and the institution of poetry, is of primary importance in human society, that it speaks of ancient and original things.

This large claim was echoed by Seamus Heaney, when speaking about Thomas Kinsella's use of the Amergin poem

> In his work, we can watch the ancient correspondence between the nation's possibilities and the imagination of its poet – represented originally by the Milesian bard Amergin – discover itself again.

Kinsella himself used Amergin's Song, and the story behind it, as a direct model for some of his own poems. This inspiration is a constant presence in his collection *One*, especially the poems "The storyteller's face ...", "Finistere" and "The Oldest Place". Paul Muldoon has also written about Amergin and his poem as being prototypical

> I'd like to suggest that the figure of Amergin is crucial to any understanding of the role of the Irish writer as it has evolved over the centuries …. his essential liminality …. the urge towards the cryptic, the encoded, the runic, the virtually unintelligible.

Especially here beside my Buddha, I don't want to overload Amergin's poem with the poetic or academic weight of the centuries that followed his recitation, imaginary or real. But I am very aware of the weighty and various roles, national, nationalistic and poetic, that have been allocated to him and his Milesian followers over the course of those centuries. And I feel that the shoulders of that story are broad enough to take on another burden, and the words of the poem fresh and intense enough to bring a new and necessary urgency to way we experience and express our world.

So let me return to the present, or, more importantly, the future. Our planet is faced with an imminent existential crisis, socially and environmentally. Our world will survive only if we recognise that the exploitative ownership and possession paradigm we have followed has failed, and on foot of that recognition, we begin to act as if we and other forms of life are part of a universal organism in which all the components are interrelated and interdependent. This means that we must identify ourselves with the other life-forms of the earth, the sea and the sky. And this is what Amergin's poem does: the poet, on behalf of his people, proclaims that he *is* the wind, *is* the sea, *is* the falcon, *is* the flower, *is* the salmon, *is* the lake and so forth. In other words, his claim can be heard as a statement of identification and common interest at least as much as a statement of ownership and possession. If we can arrive at that level of consciousness – and act accordingly – we can begin to stop destroying the basis our own existence. I do not, of course, assert that this was the intention of the individual or community who framed the poem. The primary purpose of the poem and its context in *An Leabhar Gabhála* was to validate the Gaelic appropriation of Ireland. But I do assert that we can also discover, in both poem and narrative, elements of a consciousness and a relationship with the natural world that we have lost, but not lost beyond redemption. Redemption and salvation can have resonances and meaning beyond religious mythology, and we are in need of both.

For years, I had read Amergin's poem as a statement of claim, of ownership of Ireland. Such appropriative claims are indeed an element in the narrative of *An Leabhar Gabhála*, an element that has been simplified and strengthened since Keating's retelling in *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn*, especially the nationalist narrative that dominated most of the twentieth century in Ireland. And yet the poem itself does not necessarily lend itself to that narrative. When I first published my translation, I called it "The Claim". In subsequent publication I called it "Amergin's Manifesto", having an ecological manifesto in mind. Now, and especially as I contemplate the very place where the mythological poet was, I would guess, conjured into being by somebody familiar with the place and familiar with versions of a much older poem, I think of the poem also in spiritual, mystical terms. Simultaneously, I am very aware of the physical step Amergin took, just before he recited the poem, *putting his right foot on the land*. So I have renamed my translation "The Amergin Step". A poem, too, can shapeshift. In "Finistere", his wonderful reimagining of Amergin's poem, Thomas Kinsella was also aware of the significance of Amergin's step, and of the integration of that step with the simultaneous poetic utterance:

> They fell silent. I chose the old words once more
> and stepped out. At the solid shock

a dreamy power loosened at the base of my spine
and uncoiled and slid up through the marrow.
A flow of seawater over the rock fell back
with a she-hiss, plucking at my heel.

Who
    is a breath
that makes the wind
that makes the wave
that makes this voice?

Later that same magical, orientally infused day, I kayak out to Carraig Éanna on what has become for me almost a ritual, albeit an occasional one. For an hour or so, I have been listening to the otherworldly voices of the seals singing there, a call across the water that can sound so ethereal and disembodied that you're never quite sure whether you're hearing or imagining it. Today it presents itself almost as a call to prayer. It's perhaps unreasonable to dignify a fifteen-minute paddle out to an offshore rock by thinking of it as a pilgrimage, but when I arrive at the rock, I somehow feel I have traversed much more than the kilometre or so offshore that it lies. It seems far longer, a kind of Amergin Step in reverse, back into another way of experiencing the world, a different way of appropriating the world we live in, physically and imaginatively.

This afternoon, the sea is calm as I paddle out, but, as often happens, there is a swell stirring around and especially outside Carraig Éanna, not a threat but a warning, a muttering of boundaries and of liminality. I paddle around the outer fringes, my timidity keeping me out from the white water around the little inlets in the rock itself. Then as I round the rock to its landward side, the inlets are calm, their fronds of bronze seaweed waving languid invitations. I pull in to one, startling a few oystercatchers into a cheeping flurry of black-and-white wings powering the orange arrows of their beaks. A huge bull seal also seems startled, and flippers his bulk surprisingly quickly into the water. He snorts and splashes his way out to the smaller seal-heads which have tracked me since my approach to the rock. The remaining cormorants – most of them, to my inexpert eye, this year's young – clatter off, dragging their webbed feet along the surface as they gather momentum enough for flight. I lift the paddle and let the freshening breeze and the rising tide push me up against an outlying reef, and reach my hand out to hold on to an outcrop and keep the kayak steady.

Drawing everything I can see deep into myself, I lean back and close my eyes, letting the controlled bobbing of the kayak lift me into contemplation. I become intensely and acutely aware of

the tiny barnacles that texture the outcrop I am holding onto. I inhale the tangy rankness of seals, seaweed, brine and bird droppings. My eyelids quiver under the heat and light of the sun. And I am once again surprised at how full of sound the silence is – the small waves pushing and sucking under and into fissures and ledges, the regular and reassuring bumping of the kayak against the reef and the occasional indignant squawk of a gull overhead. Every so often a splash that is more sudden and localised than the sound of the waves tells me that one of the seals whose territory I have invaded is throwing shapes, the import of which I am left to guess at. I can only guess, too, at the crawling and darting of lobster and crab underneath and around me, and the silver and blue-black shoaling of the mackerel which used to be the reason I came out here.

Time passes – but passes almost *sub specie aeternitatis* – until a more abrupt lift of the kayak and a more peremptory surge of a wave into my little inlet signal a change in the weather – nothing serious, but time for unadventurous septuagenarians like myself to head back in. The seals are still circling, as if to reinforce this. The breeze is southwest, from Bolus Head, and will push me more or less towards my own landing-place on the beach. I paddle northwest for a while, adjusting for the wind. Then I let wind and tide bring me in, just occasionally using the paddle like a tiller, coaxing the bow homeward. I see Fíona coming down the *briseadh* in the cliff that leads down to the beach. She must have been watching me from the house. Every so often a small swell lifts the kayak. I am almost sitting on the water, being conveyed ashore by benign wind, a gentle tide. I recall the opening words of Amergin's poem: *Am gaeth i mmuir ….. Am wind on sea.* Once again, as if for the very first time, I feel and understand.

Fíonán Locha Luíoch, mo Naomh-sa

Sanctifying the Landscape

The rain and low cloud were relentless, the wind just a little less so. It was 11 am on Thursday, 2nd May 2019, National Poetry Day. Someone, perhaps more inspired by marketing than meaning, had come up with *Truth or Dare!* as the theme for the day. But, in truth, it did feel somewhat daring to be ferrying more than fifty people, accompanied by a television crew and a press photographer, out on a lake to listen to poetry, music and song on an island associated with Fíonán, a 6th century saint who is the patron saint of Iveragh. And yet, as the rain rattled of our waterproof hoods and the wind occasionally reminded us of our existential fragility, we pushed off, confident that we were about to participate in something special. And I can still feel in my bones – despit how soaked and chilled they became over the next couple of hours – how much that confidence became realised.

As our boats approached the island, we could see we weren't the first. Indeed what we saw appearing out of the greyness seemed like a visitation from the past. It clarified itself as four people in a *naomhóg* (the Kerry name for a *currach*), three rowing and one in the bow holding aloft from his lips a long horn from which deep quavering monotones welcomed us to the island. This was Holger Lönze, the sculptor of the *Árthach Dána* Amergin monument in Waterville, playing a replica Bronze Age horn of his own casting (the naomhóg was also of his own crafting). Unearthly, weird in the older sense of the word, suggestive of a Tennysonian medieval narrative – the sense of slipping into the past was being established even before we landed. And when we did land, and I began a brief introduction for newcomers to the place, I suggested that we were not coming to Church Island on Lough Currane as most people would now say, but to *Inis Uasal* – the Noble Island – on *Loch Luíoch*. These are the names by which the monks who lived here until the sixteenth century would have known their local habitation, before religious and political upheaval deprived those names of their cultural primacy. In relation to the older name, the archaeologist Tomás Ó Carragáin, who has extensively studied early medieval ecclesiastical settlement in Iveragh, points out that *uasal* was often used to indicate ecclesiastical status. The historian Paul MacCotter has described Inis Uasal as 'clearly, in pre-Norman times, an important ecclesiastical centre'. Our business today, however, was more immediate than all of this, and indeed more immediately urgent because of the weather and the waiting television crew with their schedule, and so we hurried into the relative shelter of the roofless 12th century church.

Inside the church we gathered for a short talk, readings, music and song. Our focus was a wonderfully realistic replica of a stone carving of a musician playing a stringed instrument like a violin. Locally known as "The Fiddler", the original is now in the safekeeping of the Office of Public Works, the body in whose care the monastic remains have been for many years, and which is engaged in long-term conservation of the site. The carving, which is unique in Ireland, shows a

rectangular instrument being played with a curved bow. The marvellous Galician piper Carlos Nuňez had been delighted, when he visited Waterville for the inaugural Amergin Solstice Poetry Gathering the previous year, to identify the instrument as a *fidula*, a medieval ancestor of the violin, a carving of which is to be found on the 12th century *Porta de la Gloria* of the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. So it was to celebrate this unique and mysteriously arrived troubadour – in his replicated incarnation – that we were gathered in the rain. And under a wide umbrella, the great Cahersiveen singer and musician Seán Garvey brought out a wooden replica of the fidula being played in replicated stone behind his head. The replica fidula had been made by Billy *Ildánach* MagFhloinn – I prefer the Gaelic, which means "multi-arted", to *polymathic* – whom I have already introduced when writing about Donn. Seán played Billy's fidula to accompany his own resonant singing of *Deus Meus Adiuva Me*, an 11th century macaronic (Latin and Irish) poem by Máel Ísu Úa Brolchán set to music in the mid-20th century by Seán Óg Ó Tuama. A wooden replica of a medieval instrument used by European troubadours, based on a synthetic replica of a stone carving unique in Ireland, to accompany a 20th century musical setting of an 11th century poem in Irish and Latin, and all this happening in the roofless ruins of a 12th Hiberno-Romanesque church – even as we stood dripping and chilled, we knew that we had indeed participated in something very special indeed. The barriers of time and history, of geography, of language, and even of artforms, silently disassembled themselves. We read or recited our own poems, sang some songs, warmed ourselves around flasks of tea and coffee, and made our way back to the boats. The television programme and the newspaper coverage afterwards were a reminder of how precious that day was. For myself, although I had visited Inis Uasal many times, and would do so again, I knew the day's experience would lend all my past and future visits another perspective. *Súil eile:* another eye, one that I hope to keep open, like Janus, always looking both towards the past and the future.

Before I leave that day behind, I'd like to look particularly at one poem that was read that day, a poem written by a member of the family who now own the island, apart from the area immediately around the church, which is owned by the state. Kathleen O'Shea, a former pupil of mine and a sensitive poet, knows the lake and the island very well. Further on in this chapter, I will be talking to her brother Tom about the family connection with the whole Fíonán tradition. For now, I'd just like to present the poem she read on our poetry trip to Inis Uasal, a poem which was a very special part of the day:

> The boat glides through the water,
> Its bow crunching on the gravel signals my arrival
> Grounded now, on this sacred sod.

Each step sinking back through time and memory
Not for the first time I enter this church.
To the east the rich colours of Binn
Are a rich tapestry of Christ's creation
The altar stands vacant but for a few token coins under a flat stone;
They are the mixed Heads of State that mingle and rust as they too await Brexit.
No bountiful tabernacle, no hymns sound.
The stone fiddler is silent too,
Only the birds sing the matins now.
A soft breeze whispers through the slender rushes,
A single greylag's egg waits to hatch.
Sitting on the hard stone I imagine the last coffin coming here by boat.
I imagine murmurs and sobbing as the priest prayed for the souls of the dead.
Some bones are visible and insignificant through the cracks of the large stone tombs
St Finian now is quiet, as God's children rest easy in this special place.
A black-faced sheep lifts its head from grazing
And catches the glistening reflection of the lapping wave,
A window to heaven on this island paradise.

Listening again to the Fiddler

I'm here again, on a lovely day in early autumn, blue-grey skies and a wind that made just an odd pull and tug at the lake's surface as I kayaked over. And, again, I'm here at the Fiddler, my *súil eile*, I hope, wide open. I've been here a few times over the summer, but always with visitors. Today I want to spend time by myself on Inis Uasal, to renew my familiarity with it, and especially with this carved figure, in the light of fidula music, of poetry, of the kind of imaginative traversing of time and space, of culture and belief, the reaching out to otherness which I find enriching and enabling. This is why I, an atheist, feel no discomfort using the title "Fíonán Locha Luíoch, mo naomh-sa" for this chapter. The phrase, which translates as "Fíonán of Loch Luíoch, *my* saint" – and the emphatic *my* is in the appended *sa* of the original – is from Seán Ó Conaill's 17th century poem *Tuireamh na hÉireann*, which we have encountered before. It comes at the very end of the poem when, having invoked the evangelists and a list of Irish saints to witness and ameliorate the plight of Gaelic and Catholic Ireland in the aftermath of the Cromwellian wars, Ó Conaill, who lived in Caherbarnagh, a townland bordering the lake, especially invokes Fíonán, *his* saint who lived on *his* lake. The place

seems beatified as well as the person. A thousand years after Fíonán lived there, he was a powerful and valuable presence for Ó Conaill, a part of the place inhabited by both. Four and a half centuries later, I don't find it necessary to subscribe to a particular religious or political belief to imagine myself into that power and presence. Here also is *my* saint, *my* lake.

It's about forty years since I first saw this carved figure. I had vaguely heard people talking about The Fiddler, but knew nothing about it. Neither of my children remembers it, but Fíona, myself and our two then small children were rowed out to the island by Mícheál Donnelly, with whom I had become friendly soon after we settled in Waterville, through being captivated by his *sean-nós* singing. A ghillie, he was the only boatman who still held out against outboard engines, believing that they had ruined the fishing in the lake. I remember his slow methodical oar-strokes on the long trip from the southern side of the lake where he lived, his stories of dispossession, of "grabbed land" and the curse which followed the grabbers down generations, his singing for the rather bemused children. And, perhaps shockingly by today's standards, there wasn't a lifejacket worn, or indeed thought about, on that lovely day.

Of course the carved figure I saw that day wasn't the replica I am looking at now, clamped onto the northern wall along with some of the island's rich trove of cross-slabs, but the original, cemented into southern wall at the base of a now vanished arch which once divided the nave from the chancel. Strangely, I don't find that there is an abrupt break in continuity. It's really a reincarnation, the way Tibetan Buddhism regards the change from one lama to the next as a reincarnation, a regeneration of the original. I recall a visit about fifteen years ago to a monastery in Zhongdian on southwest China, and how our taxi driver told us that the lama, whom he had earlier pointed out, had rebuilt the monastery after it was damaged during the Cultural Revolution. When we said he seemed far too young, the driver matter-of-factly explained that it was the lama's previous incarnation who had done so. It may seem a trivial comparison, but I feel the same connection with this replica resin carving as I do with its 12th century stone original, now in the safe hands of the OPW to protect it against erosion and, sadly but realistically, the possibility of theft. So the Fiddler has more than one incarnation. Indeed I have another incarnation on the wall of my living-room, in the form of a painting by Catriona O'Connor, an artist originally from Killarney, with whom I have had a long and fruitful collaborative relationship. We worked together on a book of poems and paintings called *To Make the Stone Sing*, which grew out of visits to archaeological sites in Iveragh. Here in the Fiddler's home, I am conscious of him in my own home and in official safe custody.

The carving is quite low relief, on a small square slab, with the figure of the musician appearing in profile. When I move in close to the wall, to examine the narrow view of the musician's

face, I am again struck by the serenity of the face and of its closed eyes. Whether by accident or design, there is an air of quiet ecstasy about the face, such as you see on the faces of some musicians. I think particularly of the master fiddler Martin Hayes in full flight, how he is at once both the focal point of his audience and faraway in time and space. And this is perhaps the Fiddler's most significant incarnation for me: a real musician, playing real music for real people. And the real people may be earthly or heavenly. Here is how I saw him, in a poem from about twenty-five years ago:

The harmony of the small
ruined church remains
like deconstructed musical
instruments in paintings.

Its east to west
axis is a string
played from the altar window
to the roman doorway.

Between the roofless nave
and chancel, the imagined
mediation of an arch
rests on its broken pillars

where carved sitting snug
(always one who'll refuse to go!)
a stone fiddler is playing
away by the new time.

God know his friends
and relations probably spread
themselves over the arch,
making for an almighty session.

Blank-faced, intent on music,
he has for centuries

repeated his noble call
to make the stone sing.

His music is the constant
plainsong of water
graced by matins, lauds
and nones of larks.

It is only now, as I read this poem from a quarter of a century ago, that I recognise the wordplay inherent in the fiddler repeating his 'noble call'. When I wrote that, I probably wasn't aware of the older name Inis Uasal, or Noble Island, for what I knew by the rather dull generic title "Church Island". I simply meant to use the phrase 'noble call' in the sense that a singer or musician who has just performed at a session can choose who to call next. Had I been aware of its additional resonance, I would have been delighted with it. Discovering it now, I am even more delighted with its serendipity.

As I leave the church, I turn to admire once again the lovely Hiberno-Romanesque doorway, which is now very much eroded by time and weather. But in part due to ongoing and non-intrusive conservation work by the OPW, it is possible to imaginatively reconstruct the impressive entrance this was in the 12th century, complete with chevrons, spiral pillars, carved heads, and stylized animal figures. I remember Micheál Donnelly, on our first trip here, teasing us towards recognition of the two swan-like figures facing one another, head to bowed head, and our children's delight when living creatures assumed vague shapes on the lichened and eroded stones. The impressiveness of this doorway, even if it has to be retrospectively imagined, reminds me of the older name, *Inis Uasal* that attests to the monastery's status in medieval times. A slate cross slab, now attached to an inside wall close to The Fiddler, also attests to that status. The inscription in tiny lettering, although now very difficult to read, has established that it was the gravemarker of *Gille Conded I Buicne*, who is identified as being *adbur ri Ciarraide* – in modern Irish *ábhar rí Chiarraí* – signifying that the grave was that of the heir to the throne of the then kingdom of Kerry. And as I climb over a stone stile to the northern side of the church, I see another reminder, a lovely cross-slab that Richard Hayward, author of the wonderful *In the Kingdom of Kerry*, describes as 'this priceless monument', and which is beautifully recorded in a drawing by Theo Gracey in Hayward's book. Along the shaft of the beautifully designed "Celtic" cross, is the inscription *beannacht f anmain anmchada*, which translates as *a blessing on the soul of Anmchad*. I always loved the way *anmchada* was carved outside of the shaft, almost as if it were tucked underneath the arm of the cross. The Anmchad

whom the cross commemorated remained anonymous until the archaeologist John Sheehan traced him in an entry in *The Annals of Innisfallen* for the year AD 1058 which recorded that 'Anmchad Hua Dunch[ad]a, ánchara Dé, quievit i nInis Ausail', which tells us that Anmchad Ua Dunchada, described as 'the anchorite of God', was laid to rest on 'Inis Ausail' (sic). I love that *quievit*, its literal quietude and sense of well-earned, eternal rest. That a member of such an eminent family of the O'Donoghues of the Glen, near Killarney, important enough to have his death recorded in the annals, would find his *quiescentia* in this lovely setting, is indeed further testament to the status of Inis Uasal. I remember finding out about this sometime in the late 1980's. What had been a relatively anonymous grave now, like the carved swans taking shape, assumed some sort of identity, and a specific date. I was also fascinated by the somewhat arcane language of the archaeological report that describes how the inscription was carved. In the years before I wrote the poem, conflicts along sectarian lines in Northern Ireland and the Balkans had seemed intractable, and the appalling term "ethnic cleansing" had gained frighteningly familiar currency. So the contrast that I – probably unrealistically – imagined between the island and what was in the news at the time, led to a poem, the epigraph to which reads: *A vertically disposed inscription commences on the shaft of the cross and continues on its dexter side* (Archaeologist's Report)

In the Annals of Inisfallen
he was *God's anchorite*.
On the island, his inscription
is simpler in stone.

Beannacht for anmain Anmchada
the slab implores.
But the blessing on his soul
(the sculptor misjudging space)

edged Anmchada off the shaft,
to rest like a tender afterthought
tucked, almost embraced
between the arm and body of the cross.

God's anchorite hugged by God,
helpmate in the eternal

protection of God's right arm.
My boat rocks in small waves.

If I open the newspaper
with the picnic in the boat
there will be familiar stories
from north and east

of killings and cleansings
in the name of one
group or another for
or against some cross.

A blessing indeed on Anmchad
whose island never discovered
in inquisitions or holy wars
the sinister side of God.

That was written about a quarter of a century ago. The particular conflicts which formed the background to that poem have eased, even though that easement is not definitive. But other conflicts configuring themselves around religion and ethnicity have surfaced, and the sinister aspects of religious belief and ethnicity are at least as disturbing today as they were then. Now, having crossed the threshold of old age, I trace the letters of this anchorite's name, apprehensive about my grandchild's future. None of this, however, can spoil the tranquillity of the evening. I have just time enough to walk the two hundred metres or so along the dry and elevated pathway along the north shore of the island down to the large but drystone corbelled building down towards the western end of the island. This, by tradition and marked as such on the original Ordnance Survey maps, is Fíonán's Cell. At first sight, it is not very prepossessing, or indeed interesting, and for many years this was how I regarded it. By now, however, it has become for me a place of pilgrimage, of wonder, indeed of reverence. Let me explain.

I can still clearly recall and recreate the excitement, the anticipation surging up and down my spine. It was about a quarter to four on the afternoon of the 19th of December, 2016, two days before the winter solstice. But the forecast for the actual day of the solstice itself had been bad, making it unlikely that I would be able to take my boat out to Inis Uasal, never mind to see the

sunset itself. So here we were, Fíona and myself, two days early, anxiously watching the cloud-cover now and again lifting for intervals of sunshine, hurrying from the landing place down towards the western tip of the island and the drystone building traditionally known as Fíonán's cell, anxious to see if a hunch would bear fruit. I recall the squeak of the swing metal gate into the roofless building as we entered, and my almost reverentially whispered *Jesus Christ* to Fíona as we took in the shaft of light, perhaps two metres long, that stretched its way across the floor of the building from the small opening, a little more than half a metre square, into a passageway at floor level on the building's far end. A narrow band of light, contained and concentrated, that, even in a roofless building a full half an hour before sunset, illuminated the stony interior in a remarkable way. The ferns and grass, the moss and wort that cling to the stones of this building all seemed entranced by it. We whispered, trying to imagine the physical and imaginative illumination that would attend on this shaft of midwinter light if the roof were still intact and if it were sheltering a huddle of cowled figures anticipating the imminent feast day of the birth of their god and saviour. Here was – we were beginning to realise – belief written in letters of stone and light into the landscape which monastic adherents of that belief had appropriated on its behalf. Reverence, awe, wonder – all of these tumbled around us.

But I must go back awhile, establish a context and a narrative for all this tumbling. The previous summer, we had been visited by the poet Seán Lysaght, much of whose work is informed by a sensitive and knowledgeable engagement with landscape in its diverse aspects, especially its natural and its cultural richness. He was just finishing up research for *Eagle Country,* his wonderful prose work on eagles in the Irish landscape. I brought him out to *Inis Uasal*, and into Fíonán's cell, where I showed him the floor-level passageway which, five months later would light up my mind and imagination so dramatically. As I had often done with visitors, I outlined the arguments I had encountered about whether the building was a cell or not, most of which had centred around this passageway. If the building was a cell, ran the argument, why was this passageway built into it? Facing into the prevailing southwest wind, but too low and long to be a window in any practical or functional sense, it had given rise to theories about ventilation for the purposes of food storage, and that therefore the building was not a cell, but a granary of some sort. This, however, did not take into account what appeared to be some sort of roadway from the building along the perimeter of the island as far as the 12th century church at the other end. On a small island, such a roadway could have had no practical function; a ritual purpose was much more likely. But a ritual roadway between a church and a granary seemed unlikely. Furthermore, a stone passageway almost two metres long seemed a rather elaborate ventilation system. The purpose of the passageway, and therefore of the building, I unhelpfully declared, was a mystery.

It was then that Seán, in his characteristically quiet and unassertive way, suggested that an answer might be sought in examining the orientation of the passageway. Was it aligned on some natural feature? Might there be solar or astronomical significance? That's when my surge of excitement and anticipation started, a surge that was to culminate a few months later at that midwinter sunset. Because as soon as Seán raised that possibility, I remembered that I had often remarked that as well as their primary alignment on the midwinter setting sun, the Íochtar Cua standing stones secondary alignment was towards Inis Uasal. The urgency to check this new possibility began to surge. Seán and myself went outside to make a rough visual check on the standing stones. Sure enough, the outside opening into the passageway faced towards the alignment, on a hill two kilometres southwest from us. But such a rough and imprecise visual check was not evidential. We could see just a silhouetted blur of upright pillars; their actual alignment was unclear from this distance. A more detailed perspective was necessary, and indeed available. Always an avid birdwatcher and nature poet, Seán had a good telescope back at our house. A quick boat-and-car trip back for the telescope, and out again to the standing stones, and we were ready for a somewhat more precise exploration. We aligned the telescope as closely as we could with the alignment of the stones, and then focused it along that alignment. With no more than a couple of degrees adjustment, the dark square of the rectangular opening, where we had stood less than an hour before, jumped into focus. It was an opening into a passageway as tantalising as it was enigmatic. Could there be a ritual connection between the Bronze Age stone pillars we were standing at and the medieval Christianity embodied in the monastic ruins we had just left?

And so, about five months later, as close to the exact day of the winter equinox as the weather would allow, here were Fíona and I breathlessly watching a shaft of light stretching across the floor of a cell and so making exactly that connection. This cell is thought to have been built about the year AD 1,000. Given this millennial date, it cannot have been the cell of the sixth century Fíonán. Who can say, of course, that it did not replace an earlier cell which may well have been the place of prayer and residence of Fíonán? In any event, the low passageway which Fíona and myself observed functioning as a conduit for the light of the midwinter setting sun was incorporated into the structure of the building for that specific purpose. I had been in that cell countless times, in all weathers, and almost always in the summer. I had never before seen a path of light like this. What we were witnessing was not a random or coincidental phenomenon. The passageway itself is almost two metres long. This means that only direct rays will penetrate the cell interior as I have described. And its ground-level position, combined with its south-westerly orientation, means that this will happen only in the days immediately before and after the winter solstice. Here was a Christian adaptation of a ritual marking of the winter solstice sunset that has been noted by archaeologists as

being part of the ritual landscape of this southwestern part of Ireland over a number of millennia. Furthermore, if the phenomenon was in plain view in the roofless cell, then how much more impressive must it have been when its roof ensured total darkness for the monks inside? All at once terms like "pagan" and "sun worship" began to lose their meaning, their sense of being in binary opposition to Christian belief which, I had always been told, had triumphed over and banished such superstitious practices. Of course the proximity of the 25th December to the midwinter solstice – a date which surfaced almost four centuries after biblical accounts, which specify no date – should have itself banished such binary opposition long ago. Myth, however, especially myth disguised as history, is not easy to displace.

Here before our eyes was the evidence a Christian monastic community, about five hundred years after the establishment of Christianity in this area, integrated a nearby Bronze Age stone alignment, and the midwinter setting sun which it marked, into the fabric of its own ritual and even into the physical fabric of its own principal place of habitation. It seemed like a complete shift of perspective and perception. And yet the "new" perception had been all the time, as the saying goes, hiding in plain view. In my contemplation of this solstitial aspect of Fíonán and his monastic community, I recalled accounts of his conception and birth as found in various *Lives*. Here is how Pádraig Ó Riain translates from the Latin:

> Holy Fíonán belonged to the family of Corca Dhuibhne; his father's name was MacAirdhe and his mother was called Beagnaid. This is how he was conceived: his mother saw a fish of reddish colour airborne from the direction of the rising sun, which entered her womb from her mouth, and she conceived from this.

This version mentions a rising sun. However, in *Félire Oengusso*, a ninth century long poem with a quatrain for every day of the year dealing with the saint(s) associated with that day, a note on Fíonán is translated from the Old Irish as follows:

> A salmon of red gold came: it went in the west after sunset
> against the womb of white Beccnat so that it became her husband.

The light of the setting sun that I saw in Fíonán's cell took on another dimension when I read these lines again. Because now, the salmon which Amergin was said to have conjured into the harbour and lake, the Bronze Age ritual observation of the midwinter sun which is especially associated with the southwest, and the miraculously conceived Christ whose birth became a midwinter feast day as well

as the miraculous conception of the patron saint of Iveragh, all became fused together into that shaft of light that has intensified in my imagination ever since, its intensity no less illuminative for being the manifestation of nothing in which I am a believer in the ordinary sense. For me, the illuminative value is the insight I feel it allows me into the lives and beliefs of those shadowy figures who inhabited this landscape over the centuries before I came to live here.

After I had initially, and only partially, absorbed all of this, I followed another hunch, and opened *Félire Oengusso* at the quatrain for December 25th, which by the time of its composition had been decreed by Rome. This is how the quatrain translates:

> At great and marvellous Christmas
> Christ from white-pure Mary
> Was born with the ruin of darkness
> The luminous king of Adam's race.

Of course this is not directly connected to Fíonán or Fíonán's cell. Nonetheless, it seemed to me that the way the solstice light was channelled into the cell embodied in its very architecture the synthetisation of light and darkness embodied in those four lines of poetry. And when I went to the quatrain for the 16th March, the feast day of Fíonán, I found a single line about the saint, a line containing just a single adjective to describe him. That adjective is *laindrech*, which in modern Irish would be *lonnrach*, from the noun *loinnir*, and which can be translated as "gleaming", as in *loinnir na gréine*, "the gleaming of the sun". That Fíonán was specifically associated with light is further attested in a *Vita* of one of the greatest of early Irish saints, and certainly the most illustrious of Kerry saints. In the life of Brendan as recounted in Charles Plummer's edition of *Betheda Náem nÉrenn*, this is the final sentence of a description of the angelic light which shone from the saint's face:

> And from that day forth no one could ever look upon the face of Brendan for the greatness of the divine grace which he had, save only Finan Cam (the squinting) for he was full of the grace of the Holy Spirit; and it was this which enabled him beyond all others to look upon him.

Fíonán 's squint, combined with his inner grace, allow him to literally see the light 'beyond all others'. On an island in a lake that owes its name to the pre-Christian Lugh, and around which Fíonán 's life centred, I felt this light entering my mind. The shaft of light Fíona and myself had

discovered in Fíonán 's cell had become endlessly illuminating. Later again, in John Carey's marvellous *A Single Ray of the Sun*, a short book of three essays on religious thought in early Irish literature, I came across the quotation from the Latin life of Colmcille which had given him that resonant title:

> …. the mind's limits being miraculously loosed, they clearly and most plainly behold the whole of the earth, together with the circuit of the oceans and the heavens, in one single moment, as if beneath a single ray of the sun *[quasi sub uno solis radio]*

Again, I felt my own "mind's limits being miraculously loosed", not in an intellectual sense, but in an imaginative sense, a sense of the sacred being invested in the natural world and of the natural world being incorporate in the sacred. That *uno solis radio* that I had been privileged to see had thrown new light on places I thought I knew, and on the contexts in which I thought I knew them. *Laindrech*, I kept repeating to myself, as I left the cell and walked out onto the ritual roadway leading to the medieval church. Somehow the roadway, even in the failing light, seemed illuminated to me, with insight if not with belief. *Laindrech.*

And now, as I head towards my kayak, that same ritual roadway is still *laindrech* with insight, infused with imaginative empathy, an empathy that somehow isn't out of harmony with my bright yellow plastic kayak that's pulled up on the grass beside the landing. Earlier, at this spot, I met two fishermen from the north of England, both retired, one from the judiciary and one from the police force, who have been coming here to fish, they told me, for over thirty years. Half-joking, all in earnest, they wondered aloud how much longer they would do so, because they cannot agree about Brexit. As I push my kayak into the water, I wonder too what unforeseeable conflicts may arise between individuals, groups and countries who now see themselves as joined in common interests. For now, however, I am anticipating how I will try to follow the footsteps of Fíonán away from the island, and into the surrounding landscape where he left so many traces. Because I think it is possible to see Fíonán's traces, and to hear his echoes in the place as the embodiment of the Christianisation of Iveragh. I am anxious to get started on that search and, even though the search will be for other days, I paddle quickly towards the mainland. However, before I return to my everyday world, there is one further moment of epiphany, an epiphany that, although not religious in the normal sense, might not be foreign to the anchorites of God – occasionally, and often memorably, poets – who made their homes in such rare and liminal places as Inis Uasal.

Just as my kayak

Back from the island
Noses towards the gravel
Down from the carpark

A grazing hare raises
Its head to evening air
Balanced on the instant
Between flight and stillness.

Yards from the landing
I slowly lift my paddle
And drift between elements
Inhaling the hare's breath.

Tearmann Fhíonáin

I had thought there must be an etymological connection, a wise and wonderful thread between the traditional curative powers of the holy wells that are to be found all over Ireland, many with very active devotional followers and practices still attached to them, and the *well* in words like *wellbeing* and *wellness*. But some basic research and enquiries to people far more scholarly than myself persuaded me to reluctantly accept that the coincidence is no more than that: a resonant and serendipitous coincidence, but a coincidence nonetheless. Ah, well. Where I am now, however, about three kilometres northeast of Waterville, the resonance and serendipity of the coincidence, although not reflected in *tobar*, the Irish word for a well, is strong enough to temporarily replace scholarship, and to allow coincidence to blossom for a while with the authority of something which has been ordained. It is the place where the term *tearmann*, or sanctuary, echoes most strongly in the landscape for me, and where the Fíonán is most palpably present, in manifestations that are at once religious, folkloric, geographic, hagiographic and historical. This is really just a somewhat overblown way of saying that it is the place I am most likely to encounter Fíonán in a way that feels to some degree experiential. Fanciful, yes, but as I drive up the hidden *bóithrín* leading to Neil O'Shea's farmhouse, where I have arranged to meet his brother Tom, I feel once more that I am traversing a far greater space than the few hundred metres leading up to this yard and to the holy well that adjoins it.

Tarmons, the name of the townland immediately onshore from Inis Uasal, evolved from *terminus*, a Latin statement of boundaries, of ownership, to *tearmann*, which in modern Irish means sanctuary. Although this particular *Tobar Fhíonáin* is in the adjoining townland of Caherbarnagh (*An Chathair Bhearnach: the gapped ringfort*), the well is central to how the presence and significance of Fíonán evolved over the fifteen or so centuries since he founded his island monastery. And for how that presence and meaning embedded itself in the Iveragh landscape, we are indebted to the folklore collector Tadhg Ó Murchú, whose work in the area during the middle decades of the twentieth century remains of enormous significance, and indeed merits a far more detailed account than the scope of this work allows. The older of the two houses built near the farmyard I have pulled into is one of the houses Tadhg Ó Murchú visited in the early 1940's. Today, its neat, bright frontage is deceptively modern, but Tom tells me that the refurbished house is at least 150 years old, with three-foot thick stone walls in the oldest part. This immediately imprints itself on my mind as a metaphor for the O'Shea family. In my long-ago incarnation as a teacher, I taught Tom, his two sisters Ann and Kathleen (whose poem about Inis Uasal I have quoted), and his brother Neil. In the way that a small school in a small place allows, I came to know the family, where they live, their interests, even their politics. It was a normal enough family, but over the years I came to realise that one thing about them stood out. Uniquely for this area, I would think, three of them still live within a kilometre from where we stand, and the fourth lives perhaps fifteen kilometres away. Where we stand now is Tom's mother's old home. Tom's own home, where his mother married into, is less than a kilometre from here. A covered well near where we stand – not the *Tobar Fhíonáin* which brought me here –supplies four of the extended family's houses, as well as a fishermen's hut on the lakeshore. The three siblings who are married are all married locally. In area that is ravaged by depopulation, and where most families are scattered over the globe, this is extraordinary. But I am not recounting this simply as a demographic exception. The family, like the house, has for me become a metaphor for continuity, for stability and for tradition, in a time when all of those seem threatened. Furthermore – and I know I have a weakness for serendipity – various family members and spouses are employed at heritage stonework, heritage gardening, farming, lake fishing and other areas that involve sensitive engagement with place and with what place has to tell us. It was no surprise, therefore, to learn that Tadhg Ó Murchú's informant about Fíonán and the well – *informant* being an official term which, in Ireland, it is very important not to confuse with *informer* – was Pádraig Carrúin, or Paddy Carey. This was the grandfather of Tom's maternal uncle, also Paddy Carey, from whom this house and farm were handed down to the present generation, and whom I came to know as a rich repository of lore and information, especially about the lake. Of course, I now regret not having mined that repository more deeply, just as I do in the case of other tradition-

bearers who have passed on. While Paddy was still alive, I used to notice that Tom was his constant companion, even accompanying him to the pub although Tom doesn't himself drink alcohol. For all of these reasons, here I am now picking Tom's brain and memory in order to flesh out what I have gleaned from my own sketchy research.

He points out the circular wall, built around the well by his maternal grandfather, Tom Carey, about 1960. I have already checked the nineteenth century 25-inch Ordnance Survey Map, where a circle around the well is clearly marked, so this wall presumably follows that older circular path. This is the physical manifestation of the old custom of doing repeated rounds of holy wells, each round with its own local customs and prescribed devotional exercises. The one constant, as Tom reminds me, is that the round is always made in a clockwise direction. I think of the great crowds of devotees I have seen at Boudinath, the wonderful Buddhist shrine in Kathmandu, and of Tibetan pilgrims in Xiahe in western China, all walking clockwise around the shrine, murmuring prescribed prayers while running their beads through their fingers. And I think of the clockwise cross, the swastika, which decorates Buddhist temples in the east, and versions of which can be found on early medieval cross slabs not far from where I stand. Indeed, it strikes me that the traditional Saint Brigid's cross is based on this idea of being in harmony with how the sun moves. It is perhaps because of the horrific and deadly use of the symbol by the Nazis that it is invigorating to learn that the etymology of the word swastika is life-enhancing. It comes from the Sanskrit *svastika*, from *svasti* 'well-being', from *su* 'good' and *asti* 'being'. I hope it is not trivialising of the horrors perpetrated under that symbol to feel something redemptive in that etymology. It would be perhaps more immediate for us to think of *sunwise* – giving weight to both elements of that word - rather than *clockwise*. I think of the Irish word for clockwise, *deiseal*, which has no connection with clocks or time, but in various forms, with the idea of rightness, of skill, of warmth and even of the southerliness associated with warmth. Its opposite, *tuathal*, is associated with awkwardness, with wrongness, with roughness and with northerliness, from where cold and harsh weather can be expected. So the devotees who circumambulated this well over the centuries – and all the other holy wells, irrespective of the saint involved – were, consciously or not, embodying an aspiration towards harmony, towards comfort, towards what, in our post-devotional smugness, we imagine we have discovered, and call *wellness*.

Tom remembers, from his childhood of a half-century ago, being initiated into the rituals surrounding visits to the well by his grandmother, a daughter of the man to whom Tadhg Ó Murchú came collecting folklore about thirty years before that. What Tom relates to me now correlates almost exactly with what his great-grandfather told Tadhg. Devotees came to do their rounds on March 15th and 16th. On each of those days, they did nine rounds of the well, saying a complete

rosary during each round. Interestingly, the custom was to do three rounds of a small inner circle around the well, and six rounds of the outer circle, which is now delineated by Tom's grandfather's wall. I don't know if this custom existed in other places, nor can I think of an explanation for it. But as Tom describes it for me, I imagine ripples spreading concentrically from the well, as they might spread from a salmon breaking the surface in the lake below. And, if I were to lose the run of myself, I might even think of Basho's frog making ripples in a pond on the far side of the world. Instead, I concentrate on Tom's account of how pilgrims used to gather nine pebbles before they started their rounds, and drop one into a little heap each time they completed a round. I ask about contemporary observance of the pattern (from *patron*). Tom remembers that perhaps thirty years ago up to a dozen or fifteen people came to do rounds on pattern day, but he has seen nobody doing so for the past ten years apart from his own family members. On the other hand, to this day he knows of people who come to take away water from the well for its curative power. Admirably protective of their privacy, he prefers not to identify those who do this. In most cases, he said, people rub the water onto affected parts of their bodies, and believe that, even if it doesn't cure an ailment, it can relieve pain. I look down at the well, the lichened stones surrounding it, one slab with a simple cross scraped into it by the generations who have visited it. Tom explains that after each round, the devotee would scrape into the grooves of the cross with a sharp stone left there for the purpose, each infinitesimal incision incrementally deepening the cross, a simple communal and generational assertion of faith. And we remark that, although the pattern itself may have died out, the cross shows signs of recent scraping, the fresh purplish colour of the stone as yet without weathering or lichening. Also new and shining – perhaps surprisingly – are quite a lot of the coins that have been left here. Even more remarkable is the cruciform arrangement of stones to the right of the well, a tasteful, considered arrangement that includes rounded white pebbles and a considerable number of seashells, both limpet and periwinkle. The old pattern of the 16th March may be in abeyance, but believers in something still come here, individually and in general anonymously, and they leave their offerings. Belief in nurturing wellness takes many forms.

Even in Tadhg Ó Murchú's time, the pattern was seen as very much weaker than in previous times. His account of the numbers doing the rounds is blunt and bare: '*ní mór ar fad anois é*/ there's no great number now'. Like almost all of the collecting done in those crucial decades in the early decades of the independent state, his work was seen as recording declining traditions before their disappearance, especially in the context of a language-shift that would greatly accelerate that disappearance. But what he gleaned from, among others, Tom's great-grandfather, opens up a perspective that might otherwise have vanished into the darkness, the remnants of a folk-tradition wherein survived a version of what had been written in manuscripts by learned monks a millennium

or more ago. The folk-tradition preserved and even amplified and familiarised this material. I have already adverted to the 17th century *Tuireamh na hÉireann* describing the patron saint of Iveragh as "Fíonán Locha Luíoch, mo naomh-sa". The next line makes a great claim for Fíonán, for it continues "*Do rug Uíbh Ráthach saor ón bpláigh leis*" which translates as "Who delivered Iveragh safe from the plague". After Tadhg Ó Murchú visited Pádraig Carrún's house in the early 1940's, he wrote that it was believed that Fíonán had originally come to the parish from Ballinskelligs, at a time when the parish had been devastated by plague. The people of the parish went to meet Fíonán to implore him to lift the scourge of the plague from the parish, and the place they met him is now Termons. So the sanctuary the folk-tradition understood was a sanctuary from sickness. And Tadhg recorded a prayer, a verse which was recited by those seeking Fíonán's help in seeking relief from their illness:

> Beannuíghim duit a Fhíonáin Naomhtha
> Go mbeanna Dia Dhuit is beannuíghim féin duit
> Is chugat a thána a gearán mo phéin leat
> Is a' lorg mo leighis i gcúntas Dé ort.

This is how I translate the quatrain:

> My blessings on you, holy Fíonán,
> God's own blessing and my blessing also;
> To you I've come bemoaning my pain
> And seeking its cure in God's holy name.

The well where Tom and myself are standing came to embody that tradition, a tradition which, as I have described, survives today, even in an attenuated and more individualistic form.

Tadhg Ó Murchú recorded an aspect of the pattern at the well which has fascinated me since I first read it more than twenty years ago. He was told that in previous generations, devotees of the pattern used to go to Inis Uasal on the second day, although this long since had died out. I ask Tom if his grandmother had mentioned this, but he has no memory of it. Then I mentioned how Tadhg's account of what Pádraig Carrúin had told him included this:

> Ba bhéas leis na seandaoine nuair a bhíodh turas á thabairt acu, féachaint amach i dtreo Oileán a' Teampaill [Inis Uasal] agus umhlú d'Fhionán gach aon uair a thagaidís ar aghaidh an oileáin sa timpeall dóibh

I translate:

> It was the custom of the old people when they were doing the ritual to look out towards Church Island [Inis Uasal] and to humble themselves towards Fíonán every time they faced the island during their round.'

This did not at first strike a chord with Tom. I explained that I wasn't sure how *umhlú* should be translated; literally it means to humble yourself, and in this context that it probably meant either to bow or to genuflect, probably the latter, given the Catholic norms of the time. Tom immediately made the connection: his grandmother had always told him to genuflect when crossing the small stream that flowed from the well. Perhaps for her the connection with Inis Uasal no longer resonated, and she felt the genuflection as something connected with the sanctified water that flows from the well. In any case, we orientated ourselves and, sure enough, the small stream is the point in the round when, moving *deiseal*, you would face Inis Uasal. I look out towards the island I have visited so often, and, as always, I feel energised with the renewed realisation of that line of vision. The ritual visit to Inis Uasal had declined, probably in the nineteenth century, but the symbolic connection with Fíonán of Inis Uasal was embodied in the physical form the rituals at the well ordained, almost as if the pilgrims genuflecting out towards the island were establishing their own spiritual passage from Fíonán's holy well to Fíonán's sacred island to Fíonán's grave.

In these customs and beliefs in relation to Fíonán, we see that he became part of the landscape – the topographical landscape, the toponymical landscape, and the spiritual and cultural landscape. Here at Tobar Fhíonáin is one of the places I can feel this presence most strongly, especially in the company of someone like Tom, whose maternal ancestors have been custodians of this place and its traditions for generations. And I am even more eager now to explore some of the other places in the landscape of Iveragh which still retain the presence of Fíonán.

Marking Stones

The walk up to *Cloch an Aifrinn*, uphill from Spunkane, just north of Waterville, is an easy one, because for most of the way you follow an old farming road that dates back to at least the early part of the nineteenth century when the Ordnance Survey began. More recently, a renovated water supply on the hill has led to a tarred road climbing halfway up the hill. Beyond this point, just as at the Íochtar Cua galláns, where there is also a waterworks, the relatively modest height-gain allows visual entry into a landscape very different from that of the main road below. Once again, and with dramatic suddenness, the lake spreads out before me, its basin encircled by steep uplands. It is

dappled with islands, and as I veer left and arrive at a level space on the shoulder of the hill, I find myself overlooking Church Island, *Inis Uasal*, its shape changed by the unusual perspective. Because of the height, Fíonán's cell, on the near end of the island, is no longer silhouetted against lake or sky, and the island itself is wedge-shaped, rather than the familiar low silhouette. The ruined church at the far end now stands out prominently against the evening silvering of the lake water.

The low upright slab a little to the left of where I have arrived is neither prominent nor, at first sight, very impressive. It is the view that announces itself, an enormous presence of lake and islands, of a narrow surrounding ring of farmland and of amphitheatrical mountains rising steeply all around. The significance of this slab is in its placing, which makes it another *mirador*, a place from which to look, to admire, and, for the believer, to give credence to the miraculous which is embodied in the landscape which this stone is intended to mark. I make my way over to it. It faces northeast-southwest, and there is a fairly simple Latin cross on both sides. The important thing is that northeast is the direction in which Inis Uasal lies, the island of Fíonán, who – whatever the factual history may be – can be said to embody the Christianisation of Iveragh from the fifth century on. And this slab marks a statement of Christian appropriation of the landscape of Iveragh, both symbolically and actually. For the crosses effectively Christianise the landscape over which this elevated spot dominates, but also mark the actual territory that was in the possession of the Inis Uasal monastic settlement itself. From the ridge on which I am standing, substantial acres of relatively good land sweep down to the shore of the lake. Significantly, the cross stands on what is still a townland border. Even more significant is the name of the townland which encompasses that stretch of land. I have walked up through the townland of Spunkane (*Sponcán:* a small hill), and I am looking down into the townland of Tarmons (*Na Tearmainn:* sanctuaries). And this name, which occurs in many places in Ireland that had ecclesiastic settlements is for me enormously significant. It comes from the Latin *terminus*, meaning border or limit. So along with the cross I am standing near, the modern townland name tells me that I am standing at the border or limit of the monastic lands of Inis Uasal. The name therefore goes back for many centuries. Having examined a range of historical, archaeological and linguistic scholarly research, Tomás Ó Carragáin puts it succinctly: 'Archaeological and toponymic evidence suggests that this primary territory constituted the *termon* of *Inis Uasal*.'

One of the most fundamental ways by which landscape is appropriated is in its naming, or its renaming as the case may be. This particular appropriation always resonates with me, but not just for the way it philosophically and legally claims a territory. I am also fascinated by how the word itself has evolved. The Latin that meant a border or limit was Gaelicised, and that Gaelicised word over the centuries evolved into its modern meaning of a sanctuary. Indeed this is similar to how the

word “sanctuary” evolved from the Latin *sanctus* (holy). In both languages, a word that carried the sense of the border of holy ground and possession in a quasi-legal sense evolved into a word that carried the sense of safety, of refuge, of relief. A story from a Latin *Vita* of Fíonán, translated by the hagiographical scholar Pádraig Ó Riain, embodies that range of meaning:

> On a certain day, as Fíonán was out walking, he happened to meet up with a captive being led off to be killed. He requested that the captive be handed over to him but did not obtain this. When the captive’s enemies had raised their hands to kill him, they could not use them. The captive was then released to Fíonán.

I muse how, in contrast to the open invitation of *tearmann*, anglicisations from *terminus* offer the abruptness of *termination*, or the finality of *terminal*. And then I remember that, nowadays, an airport terminal offers arrival and departure in the one word, beginnings as well as endings. Language is infinitely and irrepressibly flexible. I turn around to look towards the shoreline where Amergin and his fellow migrants came ashore. I think of the Mediterranean with its boatloads of refugees, of Donald Trump’s obsession with building a wall at the Mexican border, of the barbed wire fences beloved of such right-wing political figures as Hungary’s Victor Orban. I am very conscious that etymology is not sociology or politics, and that Christian Churches were often in unseemly competition with secular authorities for power. I am also increasingly and depressingly conscious that the perhaps naïve liberal progressivism that, during my young adulthood, seemed to be the natural and inevitably unfolding order of things, is being continually and indeed increasingly challenged in many parts of the world as I progress through my 70’s. Nonetheless, as I turn back to face Inis Uasal, I cling to the hope that if the human imagination can metaphorically transform a border, a statement of possession, into a place that affirms openness and refuge, the same imagination can transform political and social landscapes so that actual borders are places of welcome rather than hostile statements of obstruction and exclusion. If not, the future of our world looks very bleak.

Perhaps as an escape from this bleakness, I broaden my perspective, looking beyond Inis Uasal to the farthest shore of the lake. And I know that over there, about three miles away as the eagle flies, another townland, now unpopulated, still retains the name that shows it to have been part of the same Christian appropriation beside whose residual border I stand. The apparent unintelligibility of the Anglicised name *Inchfarrannagcleragh* easily repossesses its original significance, and its dignity, in *Inis Fearann na gCléireach:* the river-meadow in the land of the clergy. The name, like that of the place where I stand, traces out further ecclesiastical possession of the

panorama before my eyes. And, like the place where I stand, it has its stone monument marking that ecclesiastical appropriation. I can visualise it now: a tall slab, perhaps two metres, in a field on the flat ground below steeply rising hills. The fields are bordered with holly, birch and rowan. The cross slab stands not far from the narrow road that winds along the southern shore of the lake until it comes to a full stop in the face of a wall of mountains a few miles further on. It lies close to the far border of the townland of *Inis Fearann na gCléireach*, so claiming it for the monastic island. The site itself, being much further inland than where I am now, is very sheltered. The surrounding hills add to the sheltered atmosphere, the quietude that I always associate with the place. The shoulder of one of those sheltering hills means that there is no view of the lake, or of Inis Uasal, from the site itself. But the elegant cross with square expanded finials carved on north-western side is facing towards Inis Uasal, and echoes the smaller cross, also with expanded finials (although they are not square), beside which I stand. What the monks could see was not always limited by the physical power of their eyes.

Each of these cross slabs, in its own very different setting, has its own physical presence, its tangible statement of ownership. But as I stand at one and visualise the other, it is a more intangible, more conceptual aspect of that statement that begins to flow through my mind. The cross slab beside me has a line of sight on Inis Uasal. That at Inis Fearann na gCléireach, as I have said, does not. But between both crosses there is what I can only describe as a line of vision, using that word in the broadest sense. Because if I draw a line on a map between the two crosses – or, preferably, envision a bird-path in a straight line from where I am to the other cross – the line would pass straight over, or through, Inis Uasal. Although I have been aware of this for years now, when I stand here, or at the other cross, it never fails to move me – even, dare I say, to exalt me – when that realisation enters into me. And yes, I know that the line is a statement of legal possession and possibly even jurisdiction, but I feel that it also transcends that limiting function, as does the linguistic evolution of *tearmann* from *terminus*. I am reminded of the shiver of excitement I felt when I was brought to Buddhas carved into the rock in mountain hermitages in Korea, or when I saw prayer-flags webbing certain peaks of the Himalayan foothills in Nepal. I am not a believer in lines of spiritual force inhering in a landscape, something to be discovered by intuitive exploration by New Age souls. Neither am I a believer in an afterlife, divine judgement or reincarnation, or in any of the other supernatural or dogmatic characteristics of religion. But I do find that to be aware of the spiritual investment humankind has, over time, made in the various landscapes in which it lives is enormously enriching to the imagination as well as to the understanding. Landscape itself, as writers such as Simon Schama have shown, is essentially a human construct that depends on perception and

imaginative input. And that can include investing belief and aspiration, even if only on a symbolic level, into the places in which we live.

So far I have contemplated an essentially linear, two-dimensional appropriation of the physical landscape. Now, as I have done many times, I expand that perception and – with my rational self recognising that my imaginative receptivity is in a heightened state – add space and rotundity to the line of vision I have been traversing. When I look diagonally left, to the lakeshore northwest of Inis Uasal, I can make out the outlines of sheds in woodland that I know, uncomfortably, to be a mink farm. And I know that in a patch of woodland near the entrance to the farm – an entrance whose security arrangements reflect the controversy around mink-farming – lies one of the loveliest church sites I know. The monastic settlement at Dromkeare (*Drom Caor:* the ridge of berries) is now completely overgrown by some of the largest holly trees I have seen. Scattered around it lie many small uninscribed stones, the sad orthography of the anonymous graves of a *ceallúnach*, a burial-ground for unbaptised infants and other unacknowledged victims of poverty and puritanism. The now disavowed Catholic doctrine of Limbo is one element in the cruel rationale of these burial grounds, which can be found all over the country and which are elsewhere called *cillín* or *cealtrach*. The high rate of infant mortality which was a corollary of the grinding poverty of a huge proportion of the people in nineteenth-century Ireland, combined with the prohibitive expense of funerals for the poor, is another. And Heaven knows what dark secrets were also buried in such places when the Jansenism that gripped Ireland until recent times was at the harsh and unforgiving height of its powers. Like so many of these burial grounds, this one was chosen because communal memory knew it to be holy ground, and therefore a substitute for the consecrated ground which poverty and puritanism denied to those buried here. When I first came across such places, I wrote a poem simply called “Ceallúnach”:

These blank and scattered
headstones spell out
a gospel of rejection.
Here among the vestiges

of an early Christian site
numbed hands gleaned comfort
in gathering the stones
of a crumbling oratory

to mark the graves
of infants, dead without
the words and incense
and sprinkling of salvation.

This was their limbo,
a furtive alliance
with suicides and the odd
drowned, dark sailor.

Against whom the Fathers
sitting in gravest council
locked the huge gates
of their high, new Church.

It should now be known
among these outcast bones
that this ceallúnach
is just an anachronism,

because the robed men,
gathering again in conclave,
pronounced that their Church
had changed her mind.

Yet here still, Fathers,
read the stone letters,
although your hard words
were written on water!

Dromkeare is also an early ecclesiastical site marking the territory of Inis Uasal. It is wonderfully atmospheric, the light coming and going through the trees, the Cummeragh River (*cumarach: with ravines*) making stony music to accompany the birdsong from the branches, the moss that thrives in the shade of the trees softening the grey stone, the whole feeling of benign

enclosure. The cross slab that stands here seems almost to glow, a mossy green glow that makes the cross, which is almost two metres high, seem as if it has grown organically from the earth. Every time I visit the site, I am reminded of Coleridge's lines in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* about a 'hermit good':

> He kneels at morn, and noon, and eve—
> He hath a cushion plump:
> It is the moss that wholly hides
> The rotted old oak-stump.

Or I think of Marvell's garden,

> Annihilating all that's made
> To a green thought in a green shade.

Here it easy to imagine yourself into the mind of the early monastic scribe-poets who wrote their celebratory nature poems in a complementary space to that of their ordained scriptural formalities. Many years ago I wrote a poem in Irish about this site, and the hermit monk I imagined living an idyllic life in this idyllic place. Here it is in translation:

> You are not ingrained
> In this hardness of stone
> Or the anonymous art
> Chiselled on your cross.
>
> But your blessing emerges
> From its nest in the moss,
> Tendering green softness
> In a sudden gleam of sun.
>
> And the air is insistent
> That you're not alone here
> While bees concelebrate
> And birdsong invokes you.

I still more or less like the poem, but my perception of the site has broadened and, I hope, deepened. Certainly the immersion in the natural world which I first associated with Dromkeare is still palpable there, but I can no longer see the cross as being carved by an isolated hermit, nor the site itself as being simply an eremitical one. Because the carved cross itself so much resembles the one at Inis Fearann na gCléireach, the size of the slab is so similar, and the face of the cross (although the perspective is now blocked by woodland) is orientated towards Inis Uasal, coupled with the fact that it stands beside a natural river-boundary and also near a townland boundary, it seems to me that here also we have a boundary marker, a physical and philosophical appropriation of the territory surrounding the island monastery Fíonán founded. The fact that the river here is walled, although the walling is much eroded, and that the remains of a horizontal mill have been identified here, also suggest a relationship with a larger institution, Inis Uasal being the most obvious connection. Here, perhaps, lived a monk whose prayerful work was milling grain for the monastic community towards which the cross beside him was orientated.

And standing at the smallest and least elaborately carved of the three boundary markers I've described, but the one with the clearest and most panoramic view of Inis Uasal and its hinterland, I turn to my right and have a clear view towards a site I just recently visited for the first time. The townland name of Baslickane (*Baisleacán*), which lies immediately south of Waterville, is derived from the word *basilica*, and this diminutive form usually denotes an ecclesiastical site that is a subsidiary of another church. The site itself is now almost completely overgrown and, like Dromkeare, was used as a *ceallúnach*. The archaeological survey of Iveragh, which was done over thirty years ago, described the remains of an oratory, and 'a rough broken stone cross, with only the eastern arm surviving'. Even that arm no longer survives, but the site overlooks the lake and Inis Uasal. Once again, we have an ecclesiastically derived townland name. So the most vibrant resonance here is verbal, and it resonates across time, geography and language. *Acta Sanctorum* was serially published by the Jesuits, from 1643 on, in Antwerp and Brussels. It drew on previous *Vitae* for its information on Irish saints. When *Finanus* became a subject, the authors encountered the confusion that resulted from there being more than one saint of that name. Fíonán Lobhar of Swords, who is the saint named in the account, is often confused with Fíonán Cam of Inis Uasal, with even their feast-days being at times interchangeably confused. I won't go into detail, not least because of my lack of hagiographical scholarship. Suffice it to say that the account acknowledges the '*genealogia incerta*' of its *Finanus*, and that it includes a number of elements that are definitively connected with Fíonán of Inis Uasal, such as his being a pupil of Saint Brendan. And in the section that is now ringing like a monastery bell in my imagination, Fíonán goes to the southern part of

Ireland – *in australes partes Hiberniae* – where, beside a lake, we are told, *fecit ergo coemeterium et basilicam*. There is only one townland called Baslickane in Ireland; it contains an ecclesiastical settlement with a cemetery, a small oratory, and a cross overlooking Inis Uasal, the monastery founded by Fíonán Cam. As I look over towards the site, a mile or so away, I feel that that my line of vision in some way cuts through the '*genealogia incerta*' that confused the continental Jesuit biographers.

And let me trace lines of vision further. After I visited Baslickane, I went on my computer, again tracing lines on the wonderful website and maps of the National Monuments Service. And again I felt my spine tingle when a line drawn between Dromkeare and Baslickane, like that between where I stand and Inis Fearann na gCléireach, passed through the monastic island of Inis Uasal. Even more excitingly, I found that the two axes, crossing one another at Inis Uasal, are close enough to being at right-angles to one another to envision them as forming a cross, the longer, as it were vertical shaft running from where I am to Inis Fearann na gCléireach, bisecting the horizontal shaft at Inis Uasal. Of course I acknowledge that all of this may be coincidental, and that the landscape I perceive will tend to reflect what I invest in it. And I am very much aware that my archaeologist friends are reasonably and rightly wary of the impositions of overactive imaginations on the fragmentary remains they painstakingly interrogate with lawyerly evidential standards. But isn't it better that we converse with the landscape in active and varied ways rather than all being on the one received word? Standing here overlooking the lake, I do not feel constrained by the need to accept only what is beyond reasonable doubt, any more than did the monks who appropriated this landscape for their faith. No longer responsive to the tenets or practices of that Christian faith, I find myself responding almost physically to the crosses, stone and visionary, with which Fíonán or his followers laid claim to this place, centring on Inis Uasal, which the nineteenth century antiquarian Earl of Dunraven described in rich Victorian prose as 'lying towards the east end of the lake where it is embosomed in an amphitheatre of mountains'. Contemplating this amphitheatrical setting, its lines of vision crisscrossing one another, I imagine that for its monks it was a whole world, and the cross slabs marking the borders of its sanctuary were the four corners of its earth. Now I see the lines not flat on a map, but arching over Inis Uasal, rounding out a hemisphere of belief overhead. Uninvited but welcome, lines written in a very different context by John Donne announce themselves to me, lines which my rational mind might resist, only that I no longer fear the weight of what they convey:

> At the round earth's imagined corners blow
> Your trumpets, angels, and arise, arise

From death, you numberless infinities
Of souls and to your scattered bodies go!

Grateful for the freedom to delight still in such superb poetry, grateful for the mirador I am at and for the perspectives it has opened for me across the lake, across time and across belief, I turn and walk down towards the main road and traffic and the ordinary world.

Tobar Fhíonáin

Although summer is well gone the afternoon I pull into the carpark overlooking the beach in The Glen, a few kilometres northwest from Ballinskelligs, shafts of light from a lowering sun are knocking sparks out of the sea. I am taken aback to see what seems like dozens of seals, their raised heads rising and falling on the considerable swells that roll in from the west. Of course the vans and hatchbacks in the carpark should have told me immediately: the sea is full of surfers bobbing and manoeuvring towards what I imagine must be an exhilarating rush back to the beach, the gleaming wet hoods of their wetsuits sleek and rounded like the heads of seals. This beach is a magnet for surfers, its strong swell and breaking waves offering adventure in the most spectacular surroundings. There is also a formidable rip here, spicing up the experience for the faithful who regularly flock to this beach. I envy their youth and energy, if not necessarily their immersive commitment on a late autumn day like this.

I look out to sea. A few miles out lies Skellig Michael. But from here, its jagged and towered shape looks different, unfamiliar, and looms larger than it usually does. This is partly because I am looking out from one of the closest places on the mainland to Skellig, but what I am seeing from here, looking southwest, is the combined silhouette of Skellig Michael and Little Skellig which, from here, merge one into the other, widening the base of the familiar outline of Skellig Michael and adding some rocky pinnacles to its flanks. But, as always, the needle-top of its South Peak, perhaps the ultimate religious retreat of not only early medieval Ireland but of early medieval Europe, towers over its stony isolation. That is for another day, a more fearsome exploration than this shore-based search for Fíonán.

Because Fíonán is all around me, even as I am for a while entranced by the surfers on their boards in search of escape from the humdrum, moving easily from crest to trough in the kind of iridescent sea that Shelley, gazing at the Mediterranean, described as ‘light dissolved in star-showers’. I remind myself that the bay which is right now so dazzling, is *Báigh Fhíonáin*, the beach and the bay having absorbed the presence of the saint into themselves over the centuries. I remind

myself, too, that although the saint's name is officially (and badly) Anglicised as *Finian*, the people of this immediate area refer to him in English as *Finan* (to rhyme with *island*), somehow thus appropriating his earlier persona to themselves. Indeed when the antiquarian P. J. Lynch wrote about the area in 1902, he called his article "Some of the Antiquities around Saint Finan's Bay". Naming, of course, is perhaps the primary form of appropriation, and Fíonán has been a presence in this parish (*Cill Imleach: Killemlagh,* suggesting a church site bordering on the sea) for many centuries, in name, in story and in devotion. Tradition as well as references in versions of the late medieval written *Vita* of Fíonán associate him with a church of that name. When, in 1756, Charles Smith published *The Ancient and Present State of the County of Kerry*, he wrote that 'the parish of *Killemly* hath some very good land near the church, which is in ruins, and was dedicated to St. *Finian*.'

I walk just a few hundred metres northwest from the beach, across an open grassy area, to *Tobar Fhíonáin*, another holy well dedicated to the ubiquitous patron saint. Like the well at Caherbarnagh, rounds were traditionally done – or "paid" to use the older term – on 16th March. The well is tastefully framed within a cuboid stone construct, somewhat like an ornamental fireplace, the water lying where the fire might be set. There are two arches, one over the well itself, with a lovely white quartz keystone reminding me that such white stones are traditionally "holy stones". Above this arch, on a natural slate surface, the words "Tobar Naomh Fhíonáin" are carved. Just above the water in the well, a stone shelf carries coins, seashells and pebbles, as does the floor of the well. As usual, there is a piece of slate where pilgrims incise a simple cross, some of the scraping fairly recent. It is obvious that the people of the Glen value the well and its traditions, even though the devotion and belief attached to all holy wells has waned enormously over the past century. At the very beginning of the twentieth century, however, P.J. Lynch wrote as follows: 'At Killemlagh Church Father Arthur Murphy informs me that rounds are paid by people afflicted with diseases of a scrofulous nature, and a fern that grows in the walls is used as a cure.' It is a short imaginative jump from this to the Fíonán who, according to the seventeenth century *Tuireamh na hÉireann*, 'do rug Uíbh Ráthach saor ón bpláigh leis/ freed Iveragh from the plague'.

But you do not need to subscribe to religious belief or practice to feel the force of that belief, and here, as at *Tobar Fhíonáin* at Caherbarnagh, Fíonán has become part of the landscape. A short distance eastward, I can see the ruined bell-tower of the church dedicated to him that Charles Smith noted as already in ruins more than 250 years ago. And, believe it or not, I can actually *hear* the presence of the saint here, a constant sound which, like that of traffic on a busy roadway, remains in the background, only occasionally insisting on your attention. Furthermore, although I'm fairly sure they don't know it, the surfers now and again careering in on the foaming wave for which

this beach is well-known among their community, have Fíonán to thank for its power. Because that wave, so coveted by the surfers, is traditionally known as *Tonn Fhíonáin*, identified as such by generations of local fishermen in their small boats, men who would have avoided rather than sought out its power. The story is well-known in the Glen, and versions of it in both Irish and English have been collected by folklorists. Here is one in Irish, from Domhnall Ua Cúrnaín from Málainn, about ten kilometres east of here, written down in the 1940's when he was forty-eight years of age:

> Nuair a bhí Naomh Fíonán thiar sa Ghleann i gCill Imleach bhí sé ag dul isteach i mbád lá is tháinig tonn mhór – Ré Sac is dócha, is do fhliuch san an Naomh go croiceann. Bhí sé ana mhór tré na chéile is dubhairt sé de phléisg "tonn briste go bráth ionnat" is tá tonn briste i mBágh Fhíonáin riamh ó shoin is beidh go bráth.

I translate:

> When Saint Fíonán was back west in the Glen in Killemlagh he was getting into a boat one day and a big wave came – a spring tide probably, and that wet the saint to the skin. He was very upset and he burst out "[there will be] a broken wave here always" and there is a broken wave in Fíonán's Bay ever since and there always will be.

I always find that the phrase in Irish with which Fíonán angrily cursed the sea that offended him – *tonn bhriste go bráth ionat* – with its plosive t's and b's, seems echoed in the roar and hiss of the waves on the beach. The story has the force of myth, and resonates here today in the waves. This idea of a personage being in some way responsible for natural phenomena goes far back into pre-Christian belief, and indeed echoes the ancient personage of the *Cailleach*, the ancient earth goddess and life-force, or, as I choose to think of her, the Earthwoman. As I remind myself of this, I look over towards Bolus Head to the southwest, with the two rounded summits of Bolus and Canuig mountains dominating over its recumbent form, and the headland transforms itself easily into a reclining female nude. And I am again reminded that the seanchaí Seán Ó Conaill, who lived just the far side of Bolus, the hill whose breast-like form I am contemplating, used to tell stories of *Cailleach Bhóluis* as being a sister-figure to *Cailleach Bhéara*, the best-known manifestation of the *Cailleach*. The well-known ninth-century poem ascribed to her is one of the great glories of early Irish literature. And there was indeed an overt connection made between Fíonán and the *Cailleach*, a connection that never fails to excite my imagination, and to enhance my understanding of how Christianity, in the real or imaginary person of Fíonán, developed previous appropriations of the

landscape. The earliest known manuscript of the *Is mé Caillech Bérre Buí* poem, has a prose introduction that tells us she, like Fíonán, was of the *Corcu Duibhne* people. And it goes on: 'Fíonán Cam has bequeathed to them that they will never be without some *cailleach* among them … She passed into seven periods of youth, so that every husband used to pass from her to death of old age, so that her grandchildren and great-grandchildren were peoples and races.' Here we have acknowledgement and indeed validation by Fíonán of the role of the *Cailleach* as an earth-and-life-force compatible with Christianity. Standing here by Tobar Fhíonáin, the roaring of his wave in my ears and the ruined bell-tower of his medieval church in sight, together with the visual presence of the Earthwoman in the headland just across Fíonán's bay, is for me a heady experience. I hear the wave also as a repetition of the call to recognise the landscape, the earth and sea, the planet, as a living force, a sovereign being to whom (or to which, if you prefer), for our own protection, we owe both reverence and care rather than the wounds we have inflicted. I feel I must pause here to again sing praise and gratitude for the wonderful book by Gearóid Ó Crualaoich, *The Book of the Cailleach*, one of the most scholarly and enlightening books I have read.

Standing here with Fíonán's "broken wave" reverberating around me, I cast my imagination's eye over Bolus Mountain, past the seanchaí Seán Ó Conaill's village, straight across the few kilometres of Bá na Scealg to the side of a mountain on Hog's Head. At a bend on a zigzag track up towards the ruined Napoleonic war coastal lookout, where now there is a holiday house there used to be a small old house inhabited by a lovely old couple I knew – Crohan Sigerson and his wife Molly. In the same house, Crohan's father Seán was a rich source of folklore for Tadhg Ó Murchú and others. In fact, Tadhg Ó Murchú brought the writer David Thomson to meet with Seán when Thomson was researching for *The People of the Sea,* his fascinating book about seal legends among Scottish and Irish coastal communities. In November 1942, Tadhg Ó Murchú was asking Seán about stars. Seán pointed out one bright star that he called *Réilthín Fhíonáin*, adding that it was one of the first stars God had created in the heavens. The sea, the stars: part of Fíonán's mythic powers. Amergin's poem suggests a godlike power over and knowledge of the stars and the waves of the ocean. The folk imagination invested Fíonán with elements of the same supernatural functions, far beyond the conventional attributes of sanctity. Apart from his gender, he is a Christianised Cailleach.

I walk a few hundred metres inland from the well, across a couple of fields, to where I know there are material remains that fasten Fíonán even more tightly into this corner of Iveragh. Less than a hundred metres south of the medieval church and the attached nineteenth century church, a rectangular foundation of upright stones, about four and a half metres in length and running east-west, is clearly visible. Only excavation could definitively establish that here are the foundations of an oratory, but its east-west orientation and dimensions would suggest that it is. Also, the first

element of its name on the original Ordnance Survey six-inch map, *Keelmalomvorny*, in Irish *Cill Maol Mhúirne*, would suggest an ecclesiastical site. I stand inside it, facing the direction I would face if it was indeed an oratory and I was going out its western doorway. As I walk through, I lift my eyes and I am looking straight at Skellig Michael. If it wasn't an oratory – literally a place of prayer – before this, well, it is now. The island, a focus of so much monastic and pilgrim activity in this area, lies gleaming in sunlit splendour out to sea. I imagine coming out of a windowless oratory on such a day as this, and I think of the ending of Seamus Heaney's poem, about Gallarus Oratory on the Dingle peninsula:

> They sought themselves in the eye of their King
> Under the black weight of their own breathing.
> And how he smiled on them as out they came,
> The sea a censer and the grass a flame.

But back to Fíonán. One of the most widely told stories about Fíonán and his association with the Glen is directly related to the foundations of this oratory where I am standing. This is how P.J. Lynch recounted it in 1902:

> It is said that, at the time St. Finan lived in the Glen, a pagan named Maol Mourna, who also lived there, disliked the saint, and hired a man to murder him in the early morning as he entered the church to celebrate mass, and instructed him to be prepared with a dagger at the church door and stab to the heart the first man who would enter, and who would be St. Finan. It happened that on that morning his attendant put on the saint's boots in mistake for his own, and so delayed him. Maol Mourna, anxious to see his design executed, hastened to the church, and, entering first, received the dagger thrust of the assassin, and was killed. Some time after, it is said, St. Finan left the Glen for Lough Lee (Currane) on Ballinskelligs Bay.

This last sentence ties in with what Tadhg Ó Murchú was told in the 1940's, in a house overlooking Lough Currane, and is another strand of the thread that ties the two areas and their wells together through the personage of Fíonán. A longer and conversationally stylized version of the story in Irish, obviously written verbatim from an oral narration and adorned with the stock phrases and repetition of the genre, was published in *An Claidheamh Soluis* in August 1905, and other versions in Irish have been similarly recorded. But let me pivot back to the present, to these foundation stones

of what I believe is an oratory. It's the ending of P.J. Lynch's 1902 version that particularly resonates with me as I stand here: 'The Pagan lies buried in a rectangular enclosure of standing stones, marked Keelmalomvorny on Ordnance Sheet No. 96.' As I have said, what seems like the gobbledygook of that Anglicised name is in fact *Cill Maol Mhuirne*, as the seanchaí Seán Ó Conaill called it in telling his version to Séamus Ó Duilearga sometime in the 1920's. Ó Conaill also identified *Cill Maol Mhuirne* with the spot where I am standing. A version in English which shows the longevity and the flexibility of the oral tradition was recorded in 2005 from John Dálaigh of The Glen, now deceased, who was eighty-eight at the time. It was recorded by Seán Mac a' tSíthigh, who was at the time working in Iveragh as a heritage officer. In other versions Maol Mhúirne is variously described as a rival saint, a pagan enemy of Fíonán or – perhaps influenced by parochial infighting at the time of the telling – as the bullying parish priest for whom Fíonán is curate! In John Dálaigh's version Maol Mhúirne is actually a "Viking landlord" (which must be as bad a combination as you can get!) In any event he sends a servant to hide inside the door of Fíonán's oratory and to kill the saint with an axe as he enters. Fíonán, however, is delayed because he cannot find his shoe. Maol Mhúirne, impatient for news, comes to check the situation and is killed by the servant who assumes it is Fíonán entering the oratory. When Fíonán finally arrives, he understands what has happened, "and he caught the other shoe and he threw it out in the sea, and he said there will be a broken wave on that strand forever again and that any boat would never come in there. And they didn't come in there. And there is a broken wave there." So now these ruined foundations can be seen as the scene of a folkloric whodunit set in the golden age of Irish monasticism. It's also interesting that John Dálaigh's version combines two stories: the attempted murder of Fíonán and the "broken wave" he cursed into being.

But there is one constant in all the versions of the story, like a clue dropped into a modern murder mystery. The recurrent clue is the shoes. And it is a clue that leads us back to the twelfth century *Vita* of Fíonán, and of the political context of the time in which the *Vita* was written. Here is an extract, translated by Pádraig Ó Riain:

> Fíonán also cured another man, by the name of Cárthach, who, while suffering from severe pain and lack of sleep for a year and a half, could not be cured by the doctors. After Fíonán blessed him, he slept for three days and nights and, though cured, pain remained in his foot so that he would fear God always. Fíonán made a sandal for him and said to him: 'If it were to be about your foot every day, it would not fail all your life, but know this; on the day you cannot go out with the sandal about your foot, pray to God, for the day of your death will be approaching'. It turned out as Fíonán had foretold.

So the shoe, or sandal, or "golden boot" in Seán Ó Conaill's version, seems to trace itself back to a twelfth century monastic scribe. But Pádraig Ó Riain's note to this particular paragraph in the *Vita* adds further resonance. Not only is Cárthach 'the name of the eponymous ancestor of the Mic Cárthaigh' who were at the time the ruling sept in Iveragh, but 'a single sandal represented a symbol of sovereignty'. And the wise and wonderful *A History of Ireland in 100 Words* tells us that in early Irish tales, 'Otherworld visitors sometimes appear wearing one shoe', and, furthermore, notes that in a fifteenth century royal inauguration in Connaught, 'the king's main ally brought a single shoe and placed it on the king's foot during his inauguration.' Fíonán, therefore, was being formally associated with secular and otherworldly power as well as religious. And the sandal that tied him to secular and otherworldly power in the twelfth century survived in folkloric shoes and golden boots into the twenty-first century, saving him from being murdered and giving him power over the sea. The multi-layered presence of Fíonán in the landscape here is an admixture that lends new layers of meaning to the idea of a patron saint of place. And now I will go in search of other layers, other presences.

Drung

The viaduct at Gleensk (from *Gleann Eisce*, the Valley of the Ravine) overlooking Dingle Bay on the northern side of the Iveragh peninsula, is still an impressive piece of engineering, over fifty years after the railway it was built for was closed down as part of what passed for rationalisation at the time. Massive rectangular pillars of cut sandstone, narrowing towards their tops, support a metal bridge spanning the ravine that gave the townland its name. As I write, a plan to make a cycling and walking roadway along the path of what must have been one of the most spectacular rail journeys in the country, is in the balance because of some landholders' objections. I find myself hoping it will come about, as I walk up the gravelled roadway that serves a few houses further up as well as the forestry plantations that lie between the modern Ring of Kerry road, and the 18th century road, much higher up, that is now the Kerry Way walking route. When I meet this road, I will turn left and northwest onto it, before leaving it again to find traces of an older road that is higher again, and where I will meet Fíonán one more time, in a setting that once again ties him in with the landscape, this time a setting that is in some ways definitive of Iveragh itself, and also reaches back into pre-Christian and indeed prehistoric times and societies.

But I'll take my time getting there, and use that time to muse over not only the physical beauty of where I'm walking, but also its historical, mythological, folkloric and other associations. Because Drung Hill, whose flank falls steeply into Dingle Bay, interrupted only by the three roadways

I mentioned, as well as the disused railway and maybe-to-be cycleway under which I have passed, carries a name that conceals its resonance in its monosyllabic Anglicised version as effectively as it conceals its physical prominence from those who know it only from the Ring of Kerry road that hugs its lower slopes. In Irish, *Cnoc na Droinge* still manages to carry within it an echo of the importance that name once bore. As I climb further and higher up the gravelled road, the mountain coming into clearer view to my left reveals its two summits and the long ridge stretching between them, its shape, as always, reminding me of a tent or, more exotically, of an oriental bamboo roof that dips in the middle, making a lovely, harmonious curve. But onwards and upwards, and back to the name.

The word *drong* in Irish, although now largely archaic, has enmeshed itself in my imagination for many years. A quatrain by the 17th century poet Dáibhí Ó Bruadair, especially its last line, has long fascinated me as beautifully expressive of loss of language and/or the literature and culture of that language. When Ó Bruadair wrote these embittered lines, he was mourning the loss of a particular type of poetry, and of the Gaelic patronage and power that had underpinned it.

> D'aithle na bhfileadh dár ionnmhas éigse is iúl
> Is mairg do-chonnairc an chinneamháin d'éirigh dhúinn:
> A leabhair ag titim i leimhe is i léithe i gcúil
> Is ag macaibh na droinge gan siolla dá séadaibh rún.

This is how Thomas Kinsella has translated the quatrain in the great anthology, *An Duanaire*:

> After those poets, for whom art and knowledge were wealth,
> Alas to have lived to see this fate befall us:
> Their books in corners greying into nothing
> And their sons without one syllable of their secret treasure.

Ironically, it is especially the word that is most relevant here which has been unavoidably lost in the translation. Ó Bruadair's *macaibh na droinge*, translates literally as "the sons of the group", which is relatively meaningless in English. In this case I think he means primarily the *aos dána*, the poet-class whose passing he mourns. But it also means "the sons of the race/tribe/ sept". A poet of the calibre of Ó Bruadair, writing in the latter part of the 17th century, would doubtless have wished to suggest both of those meanings, and possibly more. But I must not stray too far from my subject, and, as I trudge up through the forestry, where, in places, the aftermath of machine-harvesting is suggestive more of a battlefield than of woodland, I bring my mind back to the word *drong*.

As I have said, the word can mean a specific class, group or race. But there are also older meanings, meanings which always invigorate the way I connect with this mountain when I walk here. The medieval historian Paul McCotter has written an essay whose title puts these older meanings very succinctly: "*Drong* and *Dál* as Synonyms for *Óenach*". A reader reasonably fluent in modern Irish will immediately recognise that the word which fascinates me, the name of the mountain that has drawn me here, can be synonymous with a word (modern Irish *Dáil*) that means a parliamentary assembly, and also a word (modern Irish *aonach*) that means a cattle-and-sheep fair. So the name of this steep mountain which, like Percy French's *Mountains of Mourne*, sweeps down to the sea, carries a range of meanings that, far from implying remoteness, inaccessibility or loneliness, all have in common the idea of social connectivity, organisation and communality. It is enough to quicken my step, even if a small herd of sheep and two pairs of croaking ravens are the only communal groupings in sight. Linguistic scholars, MacCotter points out, have traced the word back to an Indo-European root **trenk* which, among other things, means *to press, to pass through, to drive, to gather*. It is related to the word *throng* in English and the German word *Drang*, a strong urge, or stress. So community, legislation, gathering, identity, energy, buying and selling – any or all of these lie behind the enigmatic appearance of the mountain whose western summit, as well as the craggy descent from it which was often tested my creaking knees, loom in front of me as I emerge from the trees and onto the old road.

To walk this part of the old roadway, the highest, most exposed and perhaps the most spectacular stretch of the Kerry Way walking route, is a very different experience from driving the lower Ring of Kerry Road. This is when you realise what a border Drung was, how its height and bulk had to be overcome if you wished to gain entrance to Iveragh along its northern side. The modern roadway far below you affords the traveller no idea of this. Even now, I can only get a glimpse of the difficulties that were inherent in travel up here two or three centuries ago. My car brought me to the viaduct, and I will go back to it within a few hours. I have the luxury of weatherproof clothing, a map, a compass and a mobile phone. For the eighteenth-century traveller, the absence of houses along here, of lights, of the sort of clothing we take for granted today, of the prospect of hours and hours of walking or riding in all weathers, all of this must have made a journey along here an intimidating prospect, not to be lightly undertaken. Charles Smith described the journey in the mid-eighteenth century

> The road from the other parts of *Kerry*, into this barony [Iveragh], runs over very high and steep hills, called *Drung*, and *Cahircanaway*; which road hangs, in a tremendous manner, over that part of the sea that forms the bay of *Castlemain*, and is not unlike the mountains

> of *Penmenaure* in North Wales, except that the road here is more stony and less secure for the traveller. There is a custom among the country people, to enjoin every one that passes this mountain, to make some verses to its honour, otherwise they affirm, that whoever attempts to pass it without versifying must meet with some mischance: the original of which notion seems to be, that it will require a person's whole circumspection to preserve himself from falling off his horse. They repeated to me several performances, made in Irish and English, for this occasion; but this mountain is not, like that of Helicon, consecrated to the Muses, for all the verses that I heard were almost as rugged and uncouth as the road on which they were made, for which reason I shall not trouble the reader with them, although I had several copies given to me for that purpose.

I don't know of any examples of the type of poetic toll demanded by Drung that Smith refers to so disparagingly. But there is perhaps an echo of this custom in the last stanza of a song composed by an anonymous *spailpín*, or wandering labourer, which was collected in the mid-twentieth century from Pádraig Ó Conaill by Maire Bean Uí Shé, a much loved schoolteacher in An Gleann Mór, near Waterville, whom I knew well and who did much to preserve and transmit the oral heritage of her native place:

> Ach dar fáinne na hóige, is dar Bóthar an Rí,
> Dar bláth na sceachóidí ní gheobhad chugaibh arís
> Ag baint coirce ná eorna, táim dóthanach díbh:
> Ragham ar chóngar Chnoic Droing' go hUíbh Ráthach.

The words are light-hearted, and indeed the preceding stanzas relate a conventionally comic story. But those who can hear the rhythm and vowel-rhyme of the original Irish will hear that it is anything but 'rugged and uncouth'. I hope my translation carries some flavour of the original:

> But by the circle of youth and the Road of the King,
> By the flower of the hawthorn, I'll not go again
> Reaping barley or oats, for I've had my fill,
> And I'll take the Drung shortcut to Iveragh.

What brings this stanza to mind, on this roadway traversing the steep slope of Drung, is the sense of Drung as a portal into Iveragh. We will never know whether or not the anonymous *spailpín* who composed it was responding to the tributary challenge Smith recounts, but the consciousness of Drung being a gateway between the wider world in which he had worked and his home territory

where contentment awaits him is very noticeable in the song. Samuel Lewis, whose *Topographical Dictionary of Ireland* was published in 1837, also thought of Drung being a place of liminality, and indeed a liminality that is more than the simply physical:

> The highest of the mountains are the Drung and Cahir-Canaway, over which the old road passed into the remoter boundaries of Iveragh and Dunkerron, along a range of precipitous cliffs overhanging the bay. The situation is picturesque and romantic, but its aspect is wild and savage in the extreme; and previously to the commencement of the present improvements, the glen was the inaccessible and secure retreat of lawless violence and the abode of misery and destitution.

This sense of the portal nature of Drung Hill is one that has wound itself into my consciousness over many years.

Before going higher up to encounter Fíonán – whom I haven't forgotten – let me pause here awhile, sitting on a large flat rock that was part of the containing wall of the old road along its highest stretch, where, as Smith wrote it hangs over the bay 'in a tremendous manner'. What I am engaged in, before I go up to that higher level, is an attempt at physical and cultural scene-setting, because it is no accident that Fíonán came to be associated with that higher place. Even at this halfway level, the sense of dominance over the sea is strong. I remember walking here once on an autumn day. At sea-level, there was dense fog. But our group was walking above the clouds, in bright sunshine, for all the world as if we were in an aeroplane. It was magical. Dingle Bay was completely covered in rolling white clouds, out of which Cnoc Bhréanainn, Cathair Chonraoi, Barr Trí gCom and other summits on the Dingle Peninsula reared their sunlit heads. Today, the sea is quite clear, although rather grey and windswept at times. This is the usual mix of cloud and burst of sunshine you come to expect here. I look down at the cars snaking along the main road below. What they see from down there is indeed beautiful. The lay-by, with three buses and a dozen cars packed into it, is testament to that. But it is of a completely different order from what can be seen from up here, either physically or imaginatively.

I first became aware of the ancient importance of Drung through the monumental work by Maire MacNeill called *The Festival of Lughnasa*, an investigation of the survival of pre-Christian harvest festivals in Ireland. Lughnasa, along with Imbolc, Bealtaine and Samhain, was one of the four great season-defining festivals of pre-Christian Ireland. The word Lughnasa – the same as in Brian Friel's play *Dancing at Lughnasa* – is the Irish word for August and is named after the God Lugh, a pan-Celtic multi-skilled god from whom Lyons in France and Leiden in Belgium took their name.

MacNeill traced how festivals honouring Lugh survived as harvest festivals and cattle-fairs all over Ireland. The best-known of these is the mountain overlooking Clew Bay in Mayo, which was Christianised as Croagh Patrick. The pilgrimage to its summit, which still attracts thousands every year, takes place on the last Sunday in July. The same Sunday, MacNeill writes, was when a pilgrimage climb took place on Drung. It appears the pilgrimage had died out by the end of the nineteenth century, but, in MacNeill's words 'Drung must have been a place of importance in the past'. It is that past importance, especially its whispered echoes that the attentive listener can still hear on the wind today, that I am in search of.

I have dwelt on the border attributes of Drung Hill in the context of constituting a physical barrier. It is no coincidence that it is often named as being a border portal. The maps that accompanied the Clancarthy Survey of 1598, which documented the appropriation of McCarthy lands in the wake of the Elizabethan conquest, showed "Dring" directly on the border between the baronies of Iveragh and Dunkerron, although it identified almost no other mountains. Charles Smith's map that accompanied his 1774 Ancient *and Present State of the Kingdom of* Kerry clearly shows and names both Drung and Cahircanaway, as well as the road between them which he described so vividly. Cahircanaway is not marked at all on modern Ordnance Survey maps, yet was still significant enough to be mentioned by Charles Smith in the eighteenth century and Samuel Lewis in the early nineteenth. What was its significance, a significance which has now diminished so much that the name has disappeared from modern maps? In order to tease this out further, and to search further cultural and historical echoes, it is time to leave this eighteenth century road, and to make the steep climb up the shoulder of Drung towards a much older road that rises to more than 400 metres. My lungs and legs can vouch for the steepness of the slope, as can the thin soil and the traces of landslide that can be seen here and there amid the heather and bracken. Higher up again, on the scree slope below the ridge, I can see a dozen or so wild goats making the most of the thin pickings there are up there. I'm glad I don't have to join them; my destination is in sight, a hundred metres or so to my left along the high, ancient roadway. I swing left onto this road, which is still quite clear at this height. As I approach its highest point, there is a huge cairn just to the lower side of the road, a great spread of stones collapsed under its own weight, surmounted by a single stone pillar. The cairn is about thirty metres in diameter and hardly more than a metre in height, indicative of extensive collapse over a prolonged period. This is a burial mound of considerable antiquity. The pillar is very much eroded, with remnants of an ogham inscription, deciphered by R.A.S. Macalister as MAQI R …, telling us nothing except that is a grave-marker. There is also a small cross enclosed by a circle, telling us that at some stage – and I emphasise that uncertainty – the cairn and pillar had a Christian function.

There are relatively few people who know the monument today. The Kerry Way walkers don't see it unless they divert. Charles Smith or Samuel Lewis or other travellers for the past three centuries would not have passed by it unless they too diverted. But for travellers before that, this cairn was beside the roadway into Iveragh. Even more significantly, it was – and indeed still is – on a border. Even today, this place lies on the border between the modern parishes of Glenbeigh and Cahersiveen. I have already noted that the Clancarthy Survey map shows Drung on a barony border. The authors of that survey and map were concerned only with McCarthy lands at the end of the sixteenth century. But Paul McCotter looks much further back, to a time when Corca Dhuibhne was not just the Dingle peninsula as it is today, but also included the Iveragh peninsula and the area around Castlemaine. In this extract from the essay from which I quoted earlier, "*Drong* and *Dál* as Synonyms for *Óenach*" the name Áes Irruis Deiscirt (southern peninsula) refers to the Iveragh peninsula, and Áes Irruis Tuascirt (northern peninsula) refers to the Dingle peninsula:

> Drung Hill lies exactly on the boundary between the early modern baronies of Iveragh and Dunkerron, and I believe these spatial units derive from earlier leth-tríchas (half-cantreds) of Áes Irruis Deiscirt . Its location made it accessible by land from all of Áes Irruis Deiscirt and Áes Coinchinn and by sea from Áes Irruis Tuascirt (the three internal sub-divisions of Corcu Duibne).

These measured and scholarly words leap into focus from where I stand at the top of this cairn. All of the Dingle peninsula is in clear view to the north. To the southwest, the peninsula stretches past Cnoc na dTobar, another Lughnasa site, past the estuary of the Fertha River and Cahersiveen and out beyond the mainland to where I imagine – and imagine I must – I can see the utmost summit of Sceilg, and out into the Atlantic. To the northeast, when I walk just a hundred metres or so, I am looking down towards Glenbeigh and beyond towards the Laune River. I remember that when I drive west along the southern side of the Dingle peninsula, the dominance of Drung (and of Cnoc na dTobar to the west of it) is very apparent. Paul McCotter's historical insight is embodied in what I see before me and, most importantly, for a long distance to my left and right. I am reminded of how Máire MacNeill described the peninsula when she visited here:

> Cnoc na dTobar and Drung are hilly ramparts of a peninsula which in historic times was difficult of access from the interior ….. but its comparative obscurity in historic times is compensated for by a wealth of remains from various epochs of the remote past, proving that it was on a main current of incoming cultural influences, a concentration base and a

> place of diffusion….. from very early times the peninsula was well populated by active and articulate communities, a fact which probably has some bearing on the mountain assemblies on the hills of Drung and Cnoc na dTobar.

I find that this extract from Máire MacNeill's great book strikes a chord with me, a chord that is in tune with everything I see and feel as I stand here and absorb the place in the light of her scholarship. I think of her describing, more than a half-century ago, the privilege of visiting this and other Lughnasa sites. I too feel privileged, full of gratitude for her sharing of that privilege.

Just now I raised the question of the former significance of Cahircanaway, a significance which now seems to have faded. The redoubtable Maud Delap, best known as a pioneering marine biologist but also as an antiquarian, suggested an answer which has certainly caught the attention of the contemporary scholar Elizabeth Fitzpatrick. In the year 1600, just a year before the battle of Kinsale and in the wake a savage colonial war in Munster, one of the last inaugurations of a Gaelic chief took place, when Finghín Mac Donncha Mac Cárthaigh, usually Anglicised to Florence McCarthy, was inaugurated as MacCárthaigh Mór, the overall chief of the McCarthy Clan. The inauguration was rushed and strategic, and involved the northern clan chief Hugh O'Neill switching his support from another claimant to Florence. Florence eventually ended up spending twenty-six years in the Tower of London. However, I am not concerned here with these larger events. What engages my attention and imagination here and now is the suggestion – and it is no more than a theory – that the inauguration took place here. To be precise, the suggestion is that it took place on Cahircanaway, which stands less than 250 metres north of here. This is how Maud Delap put forward her theory more than a hundred years ago:

> Somewhere near was Cahircanaway, "the place of jurisdiction of the Yellow Heads," or yellow haired McCarthys. In the year 1600 Florence McCarthy went into Desmond with 500 men, and there on Parley Hill had a rod given him by O'Sullivan Mór, after the Irish custom, and so was made McCarthy Mór, (King's Hist. of Kerry, Vol. IV., Annals of Kerry.). To the north-west of the Penitential Station on the spur of the hill is a large cairn of stores. Can this be the remains of Cahircanaway? There is not much trace of building about it, the boulders being piled up loosely, but it is certainly artificial.

I have not been able to trace how Delap placed the inauguration at a place called Cahircanaway. But the accounts of Charles Smith and Samuel Lewis, and most definitively Smith's map, leave no doubt but that the cairn I am looking at less than a quarter of a kilometre away is the place in question.

Furthermore, Elizabeth Fitzpatrick has identified this place as a royal inauguration site, while Paul McCotter writes:

> Such sites were usually located on royal land, normally on hill-top locations which often featured pre-historic burial mounds and other indicators of long usage as assembly places.

And back in the early nineteenth century, almost two hundred years ago, John O'Donovan, the great scholar who worked with the Ordnance Survey and who – *pace* Brian Friel's *Translations* – did so much to identify, preserve and elucidate placenames and their cultural context, wrote this in the Ordnance Survey Name Book for Iveragh:

> Drung Hill: Cnoc Druinge, hill of the sept or clan

It may not be possible to establish whether or not this was indeed the site. Yet there is something very stirring – sadly so perhaps, but nonetheless stirring – to think that the last inauguration of a Mac Cárthach Mór, the royal family mourned and idealised by such literary giants as Aogán Ó Rathaille, may well have happened right here. I have been here many times. Each time I come, the whispers I imagine – and yes, I know I am imagining – grow louder and stronger. Sometimes they even approach coherence.

Paul McCotter and others have pointed out that the name Drung, in old manuscript texts, is sometimes used as a synonym for a kingdom. The fourteenth century *Leabhar na gCeart* or Book of Rights, specifies that *Rí Druing*, the King of Drung, must pay thirty cattle as tribute to Cashel. The late medieval poem *Cath Maighe Léna* (The Battle of Maighe Léna) describes a nightmarish cloud of fire over West Munster from Sliabh Luachra to Drung and Loch Leane in Killarney:

> ….. tar Iar-mumain
> ó Luachair go Droing & co Loch Léin bud dhes

Indeed, as Máire MacNeill pointed out, this is echoed in the proverbial description of a wide range of territory as stretching *ó Loch Léin go Druing*. These old manifestations of the physical and symbolic importance of Drung survived into the twentieth century, when the folklorist Séamus Ó Duilearga collected a huge corpus of lore from the monoglot and non-literate seanchaí Seán Ó Conaill, whom we have encountered before. In a story that stretches to almost thirty pages of the extraordinary *Leabhar Sheáin Uí Chonaill*, the seanchaí relates that the King of Spain invaded Ireland (an echo of

Amergin and the Milesians?) and appropriated *Éire ar fad bhuaig ach a' méid a bhí ó Leacht Fhíonáin anuir* (all of Ireland except what lay west of *Leacht Fhíonáin*). The seanchaí, who up to that point had left his home area only once, told Ó Duilearga that he didn't know where *Leacht Fhíonáin* was. The oral tradition on which his story drew, however, was aware of both its significance and its siting.

For the purposes of this chapter, of course, I have come here to encounter Fíonán. And I do not have to stir from this spot. Because Fíonán's name has been attached to this place for centuries. When I came here with a walking group many years ago, it was as *Leacht Fhíonáin* it was pointed out to me. John O'Donovans Ordnance Survey Name Book notes it as

> Laghtfinnaun: Leacht Fionnáin, Finan's monument. Situated on the boundary of the Parish of Killynaan and Kilkeeig in the Parish of Glanbeagh.

And Maud Delap wrote:

> On the northern side of Drung Hill, in the Barony of Iveragh, Co. Kerry, where the Parishes of Killinane and Glanbehy meet, there is a "Penitential Station" marked on the Ordnance map (Sheet 63.6"). It is called locally "Laght" or "Leac Fineen," Finian's slab or monument, and was a place of pilgrimage in old times.

Here in a specific, local manifestation, is the Christianisation of the ancient harvest ritual of pre-Christian Ireland that *The Festival of Lughnasa* traces. By the time Máire MacNeill made her study, even that Christianised pilgrimage-cum-festival was a dim memory, traceable only in the hearsay recollections of two elderly farmers that were written down in 1942. Neither is there anything here that cannot be found also in other places. But to know this is not to in any way to devalue the rich and enriching traces that are still in the air, earth and stone in this place. So let me follow just some of those traces. The two farmers who gave their remembered accounts in 1942 told a story, in Irish, about three nuns going up the hill on the last Sunday in July. At the top of the hill they saw a rounded flagstone rise from the ground and tumble down the hill. They kept it to themselves at first, but having seen the same thing for three years in a row, they told their story to all and sundry, interpreting it as meaning that a Christian had been slaughtered, a priest murdered or some similar foul deed committed. They said that a pilgrimage should be made every year on that day to the mountain-top.

The Christianisation of the pagan festival is very clear in this fairly straightforward story. That Fíonán should be the personage to embody that Christianisation in this peninsula is almost

inevitable. The aspect of the story that fascinates me is the agency of the three nuns in that Christianisation process. To fully appreciate it, I find myself having to consciously forget the modern image of nuns, perhaps social activists or other public figures, and remember the nuns of my childhood: veiled, mysterious figures who glided rather than walked, women who seemed almost otherworldly. And that image of a veiled figure reminds me that the word *Cailleach*, which insists on its presence on the topography, the folklore and the toponymy of Iveragh, comes from *caille,* which means "veil" in modern and old Irish, and was, in fact, sometimes a synonym for a nun. Indeed the famous ninth-century *Cailleach Bhéara* poem implies in some quatrains that the speaker is a nun. In relation to the *Cailleach* figure as feminine life-force figure, Gearóid Ó Crualaoich has pointed out that she sometimes takes tripartite form. Earlier, I referred to stories from the seanchaí Seán Ó Conaill (the same man who knew of this place but not its location), that spoke of three *Cailleach* figures in three peninsulas of this area. The imaginative road back from the three nuns who Christianised a Lugh festival to the tripartite earthwoman figure is not a long or challenging one. I referred earlier to the fact that the earliest known manuscript of the *Is mé Caillech Bérre Buí* poem, has a prose introduction that tells that 'Fíonán Cam has bequeathed to them that they will never be without some *cailleach* among them'. In that case, Fíonán allows the older belief to continue, with his blessing. In the two farmers' story about the nuns on Drung, it seems the roles are reversed. The Cailleach, in the form of the three nuns, acknowledges the Christian role of the sacred mountain; in fact, she orchestrates the change.

It is here at this monument that Fíonán's elevation and status is made clearest, as well as his identification with the landscape of the peninsula of which he is patron. It is at once a place of passage and a statement of possession. In what I think of as a mythological dreamtime, it was the haunt of both male and female divinities. It became this haunt in large part because of its dominance over two peninsulas, especially the Iveragh peninsula. It was also a portal into this peninsula, a liminal passage watched over by a burial mound, a declaration of ownership by a group of whom we know very little. In historical times, it was a synonym for a political entity, and a landmark in both the physical and cultural landscape. Of assembly sites, Elizabeth Fitzpatrick has written:

> Open-air assembly in medieval and early modern Ireland to ca. 1600 exercised elite collective identity more than any other institution of Gaelic society. It was at the assembly site, often situated in a territorial boundary zone and distinguished by an ancestral burial, real or imagined, that the concept of people and place as indivisible found its greatest expression.

Drung was such a place of an assembly and of royal inauguration until the final destruction of Gaelic political power-structures in the sixteenth century. It was a place of pilgrimage and festival until the mid-nineteenth century. But in the name *Leacht Fhíonáin*, the Iveragh saint has taken the place of pagan gods and secular kings. The territorial claim is now in his name.

Cnoc na Droinge can, I think, be validly translated as *The Hill of the People*. As well as the sense of tribe and of assembly inherent in this, there is also, as I have tried to show, the sense of a multitude of different voices to be heard if only we open ourselves to them. I walk a little way northeast so that I can experience once more the feeling of passing by *Leacht Fhíonáin* as did earlier travellers. I look down towards Glenbeigh and beyond. I see how this older road disappears into modern field-systems down towards the modern road. I know that when I turn back, the old road will merge into the Kerry Way about a kilometre downhill. But before that, I pause at the monument that would have greeted travellers for many centuries. I see the Iveragh peninsula stretching far out into the Atlantic. As I pass through a border that exists only in my imagination, I hear a whisper: *you are now entering into the territory of Fíonán.*

Most Fantastic and Impossible

Skellig Michael as an Island of the Mind

As I come to write about *Sceilg* – for this unadorned form of the name, *Scelec* in its original form, its sharp sound echoing the *splinter, reef, rocky islet, pinnacle of rock, crag* that Dineen's dictionary offers as an explanation, is usually the way Skellig Michael announces itself to my imagination – I find myself having to change my approach. So far, I have written about places on foot of a visit or a number of visits made for the purposes of this work, even though I have been writing about places which I have visited many times over many years, and thought about many times over many years. This is because I want place, and the physical presence and perception of place, to be integral to what I write. Until now, only constraints of time and weather have been an obstacle to my revisiting relevant places, or sometimes, I must confess, a laziness that persuades me that I have all sorts of other priorities. In the case of Sceilg, its seasonal and weather-bound isolation has always been a barrier. In recent years, however, the influx of tourists who want to Instagram themselves from a *Star Wars* movie set has made access difficult for those who, like me, want to visit a relatively unchanged early Christian monastery in one of the most otherworldly and beautiful settings imaginable. Over the last two years, I have managed just one two-hour visit out of the four I had booked far in advance, bad luck in the shape of rough weather snapping at the heels of my plans. Now as I write, Covid 19 has closed the island for the foreseeable future. The exploration of the imagination of Sceilg which I am beginning will have to depend on my memory for the actual presence of the island.

But in truth, Sceilg offers me a deep and rich vein of memory to explore, one which has yielded rich ore for many years. Over the forty-five years since I first went to the island, I have gone there again possibly a hundred times. I have had the extraordinary privilege of staying there quite a number of times. I have visited with archaeologists, broadcasters, writers, visual artists, musicians, naturalists, priests, atheists, acrophobes, adventurers and many others. I have twice helped frail, nervous and elderly nuns from the pier all the way up to the monastery, and have felt blessed by the grace of their gratitude. I have been stranded there in stormy weather – voluntarily, I hasten to add, with company and plenty of food. I have seen fiery sunsets from its western precipices and seen *The Wailing Woman*, an eroded cross fashioned from a natural stone outcrop, silhouetted against the dawn glow over Hog's Head to the east. I have giggled at the comical appearance of puffins, and at the buzzing call they make, for all the world like the buzz of a mechanical hedge-trimmer being pull-started. I have come to marvel at how these birds, so ludicrously frail-looking, are in fact hardened seafarers, spending their winters on the Atlantic and coming back just for the breeding season. I have seen those chicks which were not ready for the great departing flight at the beginning of August, scrambling and sliding desperately towards the water in pursuit of their more advanced siblings, exposed and vulnerable targets for the predators overhead. I have seen silver-plated

moonlit seas and felt my hut battered by storm-force winds. On calmer nights I have been terrified by eruptions of the wingbeats of shearwaters accompanied by their unearthly cries, and I have been entranced by the tiny, quivering bodies and starlit eyes of storm petrels whose gurgling I had heard from stone buildings and steps by day. But I'm getting ahead of myself, and I must sift through and try to find some pattern in the kaleidoscopic multiplicity of memories that are all clamouring to crowd into my narrative.

Because I have been there so often, I can reconstruct approaching it in all sorts of conditions. The bow of whatever boat I'm in can nose into the small pier's landing steps with a gentle, almost imperceptible nudge, or a three-to-four-metre swell can add a stomach-churning rise and fall to the experience. Sometimes I am huddled in a waterproof, the hood pulled tight, my head bowed against the spray. At other times, shorts and tee-shirt can risk sunburn, a risk magnified by the glare of the sea and the salty breeze. Always there is excitement, anticipation and. above all, wonder. There is wonder at the elemental beauty of Sceilg, at the sometimes cacophonous screeching of *kittiwake, kittiwaake, kittiwaaake, kittiwaaaaake!*, a screeching call that serves to name the species that has colonised the cliffs overlooking the landing place. As I imagine myself standing on the small pier, I recall that I will have seen from the boat the long twists and turns of the stone steps that snake their way from this landing place steeply up to the monastery. I say *this* landing place because it is just one of three the monks gradually constructed, so that they could choose the best one according to whatever wind and weather obtained at any particular time. This particular set of steps – the east steps – has been uncovered and restored in relatively recent times by the Office of Public Works, part of ongoing maintenance and restoration under its stewardship, a stewardship which, overall, has been benign and dedicated. Unfortunately, due to political turf wars, its stewardship in recent years has not included ownership. Had it done so, it is unlikely that its dedicated staff, especially those dealing directly with the island, would have been complicit in the tawdry and secretive decision to turn this UNESCO World Heritage site into a multibillion-dollar-driven movie set. The philistinism that led to this happening was perhaps best illustrated when the same mentality led to the *LE Samuel Beckett*, then the pride of the Irish Navy, patrolling an exclusion zone around the island during filming, under the legal cover that it was protecting wildlife. You couldn't, as they say, make it up. It was an episode that was both crass and shameful at a Trumpian level. At the time, I vented my disgust in satiric quatrain in traditional mode. I hope it's my last word.

Sceilg Mhichíl ar reic is ar díol
Trí chamastaíl ghiollaí an stáit seo,
A chúlaigh go rúnda ó chúram an dúchais

Ar son scillingí suaracha *Star Wars*.

This translates as

Sceilg Mhichíl's just a rock-bottom deal
Through the devious schemes of its guardians
Retreating in secret from their vow of safekeeping
For the miserable shillings of *Star Wars*.

Now let me forget all of that, try to imagine myself again at the landing place. Better still, let me rewind a little through my own memories and through the work created by others. In fact, I'll go back out to sea for a while.

The sea-journey itself, even if you were never to land in the island, is wonderful. And one of the writers who has brought Sceilg most memorably to life, George Bernard Shaw, wrote about that journey in September 1910:

> Yesterday I left the Kerry coast in an open boat, 33 feet long, propelled by ten men on five oars. These men started on 49 strokes a minute, a rate which I did not believe they could keep up for five minutes. They kept it without slackening half a second for two hours, at the end of which they landed me on the most fantastic and impossible rock in the world: Skellig Michael, or the Great Skellig, where in south west gales the spray knocks stones out of the lighthouse keeper's house, 160 feet above calm sea level. There is a little Skellig covered with gannets — white with them (and their guano) — covered with screaming crowds of them.

And he wrote even more lyrically about the return journey:

> Then back in the dark, without compass, and the moon invisible in the mist, 49 strokes to the minute striking patines of white fire from the Atlantic**,** spurting across threatening currents, and furious tideraces, pursued by terrors, ghosts from Michael, possibilities of the sea rising making every fresh breeze a fresh fright, impossibilities of being quite sure whither we were heading**,** two hours and a half before us at best, all the rowers wildly imaginative, superstitious, excitable, and apparently super-human in energy and endurance**,** two women sitting with the impenetrable dignity and quiet comeliness of Italian saints and Irish peasant

> women silent in their shawls with their hands on the quietest part of the oars (next to the gunwale) like spirit rappers, keeping the pride of the men at the utmost tension, so that every interval of dogged exhaustion and drooping into sleep (the stroke never slackening, though) would be broken by an explosion of "up-up-upkeep her up!" "Up Kerry!"

A century later, Shaw's letter to a friend, written to his friend Frederick Jackson from the Parknasilla Hotel in Sneem, remains one of the most vibrant and insightful pieces of writing there is about Sceilg, and his characterisation of the island as 'the most fantastic and impossible rock in the world' one of the most quoted.

Shaw mentions 'a little Skellig covered with gannets – white with them (and their guano) covered with screaming crowds of them.' As I write, I bob in memories of this same *Sceilg Bheag*. I love to revisit a cove on the northern side, where I have often spent time watching the gannets and other birds. Seals stir themselves from their sunlit basking, and, probably not too pleased at being disturbed, slither and slide into the water to circle the boat, their curious heads raised. The western end of this cove is shaped by an enormous sea-arch, for all the world like the flying buttress of a Gothic cathedral. I am reminded once again of the light and airy architecture of *La Merveille*, the monastic complex on the tidal island of Mont-Saint-Michel off the coast of Normandy and Brittany. I always think of it as the rich and privileged cousin of Sceilg Mhichíl, each sharing in the miraculous patronage of Saint Michael. I don't know when Mont-Saint-Michel was named. But Sceilg kept its own unadorned name in the annals for three centuries, until the Annals of the Four Masters record the death, in 1044, of 'Aedh of Sgelic-Mhichil'. Bits and scraps bob in my mind as the boat bobs in the sea. Sunlight through the arch, and the reflected brightness of the sea, creates an extraordinary aura, often tinged with the golden light which that word *aura* embodies. And Seán Mac an tSíthigh, a mine of information on such things, tells me that the name of the cove was *Cuas an tSolais,* meaning Cove of Light. I feel my memory being gilded and enriched as I write. Ledge after ledge is covered with gannets, raucously territorial, but to all appearances quite harmoniously organised. Countless more birds wheel in great circles overhead, their patterns occasionally punctuated by bursts of diving for fish – graceful, controlled, deadly. From heights of up to thirty metres, they peel off and dive, flicking themselves on-course and folding their wings as they enter the water. Their colouring seems preternaturally intense – the white plumage gleams brighter than any other seabird I know, their yellow heads and black-tipped wings a foil for this whiteness. It's little wonder that they are often metaphorized into angels. There are, of course, less celestial aspects. Shaw politely mentions their "guano". When the weather is calm enough to approach the rock, and the wind is in the right – or perhaps wrong – direction, the smell is indeed quite overwhelming. But it is the power and grace

of their flight and diving that lingers. The poet Moya Cannon was captivated enough to make the experience live in a marvellous poem named after Little Skellig:

> It is not difficult to believe,
> a little, in archangels here
> as golden-headed gannets swoop
> around our lurching boat.
> They are poised
> as spray-blown row upon row
> of cherubim,
> along the ledges
> of a tooth of sandstone
> which, for centuries,
> had been whitewashed with guano
> until its galleries are luminous, clamorous
> as New York or Singapore.
>
> The boatman in his yellow coat
> Restarts the engine and twists for home.
> Salt water sloshes across the deck
> then one gannet plummets
> and there is something
> about the greed and grace
> of that cruciform plunge
> which shouts out
> to our unfeathered bones.

I love that yin and yang of the 'greed and grace' that our 'unfeathered bones' yearn for, love the salt water sloshing while cherubim and archangels inhabit the ledges above. The poem has that mixture of the physical and the spiritual that informs so much of the literature of Sceilg and Sceilg Bheag. And those ranked angelic birds in the poem, reminiscent of a medieval theological imagining, also led to one of the most imaginative collaborative artworks I have seen. The calligrapher Tim O'Neill is an artist who is highly sensitive to landscape, poetry and tradition. When, in 1997, *An Post* issued a 2p stamp featuring a gannet, Tim bought quite a lot of them, knowing that they would one day be

useful. And, twenty years later, Moya's poem was the perfect match. Tim calligraphed the poem with characteristic grace and clarity, and framed it with lines of the gannet stamps, the left side justified as in the poem, their lines and ledges on the right side determined by the length of Moya's lines. The whole work is a light-hearted yet deeply serious embodiment of an experience that has become for most people an integral part of a trip to Sceilg. I conjure up Shaw, also bobbing around Sceilg Bheag, and I show him Tim's piece. He looks from the ledges to the piece, reads the poem, looks back to the ledges lined with gannets. He laughs approval, a kindly, crackly laugh. And while I'm still here in the lee of Sceilg Bheag, I remember another lovely description of this cove in prose and poetry, an extract from Bernard O'Donoghue's considerable contribution to *Voices at the World's Edge*, a book to which I will return. He is being ferried out by Eoin Walsh, the OPW boatman of many years, and Eoin pulls in close to Sceilg Bheag. This is how Bernard describes the interlude:

> The first extraordinary thing in this day full of extraordinary things is that Eoin takes us right in under the lee of the Little Skellig with its 20,000 gannets above us. We had started to see the odd gannet from the shore – 'like a blown outrider from a beehive', I have called it in a poem; but their density here is hard to believe as you watch it. But no matter how many of them there are, one by one they never fail to make your heart beat faster, more than any other bird.
>
> Gulls can't contain their loud excitement,
> shrilling, bickering away at anything.
> The oyster-catchers are as bad, punctuating
> their anxious cries with sprints along the shore
> or suddenly flocking to find a better pasture.
> But the gannet's above all that. He wings alone
> and silent, jet-powered in an age of turbo-props.
> Like the single bee, a blown outrider
> from the crowded hive, he takes his time to it,
> winging his own way home to the Skelligs.
>
> Paddy points out to us the channel by which an earlier Ballinskelligs boatman used to steer through the base of the island. We are accompanied on the boat by a group of excited Japanese women of my kind of age; they are charmed and giggly when Eoin ('a handsome boatman', to quote 'Carrickfergus') asks them for their passports as we draw in to the island. Paddy tells me he was on the boat during the drawn Cork-Kerry Munster football semi-final and Eoin's steering became precarious as the match approached its nail-biting climax. Also

on the boat is a black-and-white sheepdog which stands by the rail, tongue lolling and beaming at the sea, like our farm dogs in the car in the 1950s.

Delighted again by the warmth and evocative accuracy of Bernard's description, I swing the bow of memory around, open the throttle, and head back the sea mile or so that stretches towards Sceilg Mhichíl.

The crossing to Sceilg as transition, as a passage not just across a dozen or so kilometres of water, but as a transition between worlds and world views, is presented by Harry Clifton in his poem "Skellig Michael", a poem whose immediacy and physicality – down to the seasickness buckets on the boat – is a strong grounding for its philosophical and historical references. It manages to simultaneously capture the otherworldliness of Sceilg, its historically Mediterranean eremitical provenance, its isolation and the difficulty of getting there, with his characteristically clear-eyed and unsentimental exploration of himself and the contemporary world. Back on the receding mainland, he writes as he approaches the island,

Is Ireland, life, temptation,
Sloping green, through its stone-walled fields,
Its solid yellow farmsteads.
Too much milk and honey
The eremite said,

And yes, our crossing was wild
In a blown spume
Of backwash, diesel fumes,
As the sick-bucket's stomach-trash
Went over with a splash

And the croaked-up devils
Spat themselves out
And the world turned medieval.
Beehive huts, on their own high redoubt
(They grew their own evil),

And the six-hundred-odd steps

Of slabbed atonement
To get there …
No, as the engine stops
And the pilgrims stuffed with Quells
In the oily swell,

The guilty, the inadequate,
Each with his middle-aged dread,
Are lifted up, and gently swung ashore,
I feel I have been here, in my head,
Too many times before.

In making that same approach – as I have done so many times – I encounter boats other than the tourist boats moored off the island. There may be a small coastal cargo boat chugging its unobtrusive way from Limerick or towards Galway. Depending on the weather and season, there will be fishing boats about their ordinary business, usually lobstering. This recalls to mind a fine writer whose everyday life and work brought him into contact with the island. Mícheál Ua Ciarmhaic (Michael Kirby), was a late-flowering writer whose first book, a memoir published in 1984 when he was 78 years of age, was called *Cliathán na Sceilge*, later translated by himself as *Skelligside*. He was born and raised in Ballinskelligs and spent all of his life there apart from a brief spell in the United States. That he chose to invoke the island as the title of his first book, at a time before "Skellig Coast" became a marketing brand for a peninsula, shows how large it loomed in his imagination, as it continued to do throughout his twenty-year writing career. And this imaginative experience was informed by his experience as a boy and a young man inheriting the fishing tradition of his family, as well as by the eye and knowledge of a born naturalist. Ua Ciarmhaic's writing in Irish is linguistically extraordinarily rich, reminding us that it was the language through which the monasticism of Sceilg flowered and flourished, and indeed through which a significant part of its literary existence still flourishes. For the purposes of this chapter, however, I will quote from the author's own English translation:

> Sea-pinks grow thick and heavy on the south-western side of the rock and offer shelter for nesting to the different species of sea-birds. Petrels, shearwaters and puffins burrow beneath the deep accumulation of turf-like soil, created by the centuries-long growth and decay of sea-pinks and campion. These birds must go underground to avoid that most

> murderous predator, the great black-backed gull, whose own nest hangs precariously on a few inches of space, wedged in between hundreds of other nests …… The sea around the Skellig was alive with different species of fish in my young days. May God be good to Paud Jack O'Sullivan, that king of fishermen: I wish him a little boat in some lovely harbour amid the Isles of Heaven. I still seem to hear him say to me, 'A great place to wake in the morning, Michael, west of the Great Skellig'. Many a moonlit night we spent at anchor with our captain, Jim Fitzgerald, sleeping peacefully, our lobster traps ready for hauling at the dawning of a new day.

It's good to be reminded that Skellig Michael is not just "fantastic and impossible", that it is also a place around which, and sometimes on which, many generations have gone about their ordinary daily business. And the practical business of boats and the seamanship required in getting to Sceilg is reflected in a thirteenth-century Latin text from an Irish monastery at Regensburg in southern Germany, which deals in part with *Silex Sancti Michaelis*. Here is an extract, in Diarmuid Ó Riain's translation:

> For that crag or rock is so far from land, that it can take as long as one day to reach it by sea in a favourable wind. In the same place the ocean constantly resounds with so great a dull, roaring sound that no wooden ship could withstand the clashing of the waves there, without being dashed to pieces. Nor would it be possible to go from Ireland to the afore-mentioned island or return at any time of the year, but only between the feasts of Saints Philip and James and Saint Michael, and this in ships made of hide, glued together by a most retentive pitch.

In that 'ships made of hide, glued together by a most retentive pitch', we get a foretaste of the flexibility of Tim Severin's *Brendan Voyage* boat and of the *curach* or *naomhóg* that was developed to allow fishing and travel in the moody and unpredictable coastal waters of Ireland's Atlantic coast. And the logic of the sea hasn't really changed all that much. The phrase 'between the feasts of Saints Philip and James and Saint Michael', that is from May 1st until September 29th, is consistent with the contemporary practice, as the licensing period the OPW grants for ferry boats to bring tourists to Sceilg more or less coincides with those dates.

Before I actually land on the island, I think about two poets who wrote about *not* getting to Skellig because of stormy conditions. The voice of Tomás Rua Ó Súilleabháin, a nineteenth-century Gaelic poet whose work is not known to have been written down until the early years of the

twentieth century, is one that is ubiquitous in Iveragh. A number of his poems – or, more properly, his songs – are still current here, none more so than one usually known as "Maidin Bhog Álainn i mBá na Scealg". It tells the story of an attempted pilgrimage trip from Ballinskelligs to Sceilg Mhichíl on St. Michael's Day, a "pattern day" that is still celebrated in Ballinskelligs. It begins with a *maidin bhog álainn* – a lovely soft morning – on Ballinskelligs Bay, the boat then being threatened by sudden and unexpected squalls, a run for shelter towards Valentia Harbour and, and, after a hazardous passage, a safe berthing at Portmagee. The poem has marvellously physical and immediate evocations of the sea, from the '*maidin bhog álainn*' of the opening line, through singing the praises of the boat when the twelve oarsmen have her '*ag rás mar philéar'*, to a bare sea-rock screaming like a voracious pig, to their safe passage into 'an Góilín thíos go mín, tais, calma'. In 2009, the late and much lamented Derek Mahon was prevented by rough weather from landing on the island, and he wrote this in a poem which was the concluding bookend for *Voices at the World's Edge*, a poem which shows he had indeed visited Skellig imaginatively. These are its final lines:

> Strong winds continue, so no trip this time.
> Still, it could be predictable to climb
> to the immense height and the whole shocking
> reach of the Atlantic (with special care
> since there's no handrail there).
> No going back,
>
> is there, to that wild hush of dedication,
> to the solitude, the intense belief,
> the last rock of an abandoned civilization
> whose dim lights glimmered in a distant age
> to illuminate at the edge
> a future life.

Derek's disappointment lent that very fine poem to the anthology. There was, however, no disappointment attendant on the other bookend he contributed to the anthology. Because the initial bookend poem in the anthology is Derek's vibrant translation of Tomás Rua's "Maidin Bhog Álainn", a translation which is not only faithful to the narrative and language of the original, but also manages to capture the descriptive energy and imagery of the Gaelic original. Here are the three opening stanzas:

One fine, soft morning – St. Michael's Day –
Communion-bound on the Sceilg Bay,
we watched as the breakers multiplied,
rain threatened and a strong wind blew.
We wisely decided on turning back
and finding harbour beyond Bray Head;
starting up when I heard the crew,
I who'd been dozing was wide awake.

Our seine-boat was a delight that morning,
high in the waves, six oars at work,
the sail full and the rowlocks slick,
every board was alive and singing.
We'd held her fast in the flying foam
surging and sparkling beneath the beam;
no stir on the water from here to Dingle
until we made for St. Michael's Rock –

when Sow Cliff there on the port side
shrieked fit to be tied, Gull Sound
roared aloud like a bull in pain,
the Groaner groaned in the howling wind.
Thanks be to Christ that we weren't drowned
and stretched in the dark depths of the tide
but spared for another, quieter run
when, please God, we might try again.

I have on many occasions been disappointed when weather conditions have prevented planned visits to Sceilg. But these poems of Tomás Rua and Derek Mahon, something of value has been created out of such disappointment. And when "Maidin Bhog Álainn" is sung and I have heard it sung countless times – it becomes one of the glories of traditional song in Uíbh Ráthach. Now, however, it is time to go ashore and join the many writers who have succeeded in landing, and whose creativity has blossomed accordingly.

I nose into the landing place and look up at the steps I described earlier. I try to recreate what the island must have been like when the first monks who settled here, probably in the sixth century, approached it. No pier, no steps, no lighthouse road. In fact no level ground whatsoever; any level ground on the island is manmade. There is one work of Sceilg literature that I often turn to, a book which goes a long way in this process of imaginative reconstruction. The historical writer Geoffrey Moorhouse was one who absorbed Sceilg into his creative imagination by experiencing its physical reality. He spent more than a week on the island in the company of Richard Foran, a principal keeper of the lighthouse in the days before automation. This privileged access, combined with imaginative research, has given us one of the best books there is about Sceilg. *Sun Dancing* is a recreation of the story of the island, and although it is fictional, it is created around fragments from the annals, from folklore, from archaeology and from other sources. For example, *The Annals of Innisfallen* have an entry for the year 824 A.D. that states 'Scelec was plundered by the heathens and Etgal was carried off into captivity, and he died of hunger on their hands'. From this fragmentary information, Moorhouse has constructed a whole chapter, grippingly narrated, in which he details the abbot's kidnapping and describes the "Leaning Rock" – easily identifiable just offshore from the bottom of the main steps – on which Etgal is deliberately starved to death by the Vikings because he refuses to reveal where the monastery's precious vessels are kept. And, unusually, having given us the fiction, the work's second half presents the research – in a very readable form, on which the fiction was built. What both parts have in common is a deep knowledge of and respect for the island, and an imaginative engagement with it that is at once fascinating and deeply moving. It is a book crying out for lengthy quotation, but I will confine myself here to a few sentences recreating the monks' first landfall on Skellig:

> Cliffs came down to the water's edge so steeply that for long they could not see how or where they might land. But between two surges of the gentle swell the top of a much larger ledge became just visible above the level of the sea …… They tethered the curach to a less dangerous spike, and clambered stiffly onto the wet rock, passing bags, waterskins, bundles, oars, the vial of holy water, all that they had, from the boat to their new anchor-hold …... Then the monks turned back to face the great precipice, which reared above them overwhelmingly, invitingly. It was nothing less, thought Fíonán , than the very ladder on which they would begin their ascent to heaven.

The reference here to Saint Fíonán , although it mirrors folkloric stories and beliefs about Sceilg, is not historical. Charles Smith, in his *The Ancient and Present State of the County of Kerry*, published in

1774, appears to be the first written reference to Fíonán and Sceilg. The same retrospective dedicatory reference applies in relation to St. Michael, whose first written attribution relates to the year 1044. Nonetheless, Michael and Fíonán have become presences on the island, however ahistorical that presence may be. Now, sitting in my study, I recreate my own landing onto the pier and the roadway I know so well – a landing immeasurably less daunting, less inspired, less faith-driven, less daring. Nonetheless, it is a landing that has many times brought immeasurable riches to me, both when I landed there in what is inadequately called "real time", and when, like now, I listen to the raucous kittiwakes of memory. Their cry of *kittiwake, kittiwake* I now hear as *welcome back, welcome back*. Self-indulgent and self-centred perhaps, but my remembered self takes the stone steps up to the pier with a spring that my actual septuagenarian self might find challenging.

Again, I remind myself that almost everywhere I will walk while I'm here is manmade: the pier, the lighthouse roadway, the steps, the overhanging terraces where the monastery was built, even the tiny area on the South Peak where a lone monk made his home. Without human intervention, there would have been hardly a square metre of level ground on the island. Without that intervention, it would be as inaccessible as Sceilg Bheag is today for most of us. As I move along up the roadway, grateful for the beautifully made wall constructed by the lighthouse builders, I can pick out the cylindrical hollows in the cliff where the rock was dynamited to make the passage. Above and below are rockfaces that would have formed a barrier to all but the most intrepid. And yet the island, so dominant on the horizon from the mainland, its dramatic outline, even at a distance, literally aspiring towards the sky, must have tugged at the imagination of the most landbound of scribes and storytellers.

So I'm going to jump from those twentieth century pieces back towards the beginnings of Irish literature; the timelessness of Sceilg does not lend itself to a simple chronological organisation, nor indeed to any schematic approach. I have already recounted how *An Lebor Gabála* tells how the Gaelic invaders journeyed from Galicia in northern Spain, and landed in Iveragh, offshore from which Sceilg lies. It would have been surprising if such a dominant feature of the physical and spiritual landscape of the place had not figured in the narrative, and indeed it did. Here again is what the narrative tells us, in John Carey's translation:

> 'Then the oar that was in Ír's hand broke, so that he fell over backward; and he died the following night, and his body was taken to Sceillec, west of Irrus Deiscirt Chorco Duibhne.'

The island also figures in the story of *Cath Finntrágha* , a tale of the Fionn cycle, dating from the twelfth century. Daire Donn, the king of the world, was on his way to do battle with Fionn and the

Fianna. They eventually did battle at Ventry, in the Dingle peninsula. On the way there, they took shelter at Sceilg. I include these references not because Sceilg has any central part in the stories, but because they show that from the earliest times, the island had entered into the imagination of storytellers and poets, and that 'Sceilg na Scál', or 'Sceilg of the Warriors', the term used by Geoffrey Keating in his seventeenth century history of Ireland, had the power to stimulate the creative process. Indeed *Sceilg na Scál* is the title of a wonderful recent collection of poetry in Irish by Biddy Jenkinson, a writer whose prose and poetry has absorbed the island and reimagined it in various ways, and to whose work I will return.

The medieval scribes who included Sceilg in their narratives probably never visited the island, and it is testament to its magnetism that, right up to our own times, other writers wrote about it also without going there. In the late twelfth century Giraldus Cambrensis, without naming the island, never mind visiting it, wrote:

> In the south of Munster near Cork there is a certain island which has within it a church of Saint Michael, revered for its true holiness from ancient times. There is a certain stone there outside of, but almost touching, the door of the church on the right-hand side. In a hollow of the upper part of this stone there is found every morning through the merits of the saints of the place as much wine as is necessary for the celebration of as many Masses as there are priests to say Mass on that day there.

The thirteenth-century text from an Irish monastery at Regensburg also has this story. Firstly, water is made abundantly available when, instructed by St. Michael, a monk strikes a rock and 'most plentiful waters came forth and they flow quite abundantly until the present day.' The miraculous stone to convert water to wine came soon after, again thanks to St. Michael, and, the manuscript tells us 'the power of the stone remains even now, having been in no way diminished, and in that very place, however often it is necessary, that ancient miracle is repeated daily'. This obviously invites modern scepticism, but has a basis in fact. There is no freshwater supply on Skellig, but there are two stone cisterns near St. Michael's Church, which are fed by rainwater channelled along carved grooves under the monk's cells and which, their engineering being invisible, had entered folklore as being miraculous wells; hence the Welshman's armchair traveller's tale, and the German manuscript account. But I'm afraid there is no engineering explanation for the water-into-wine element of the medieval accounts. The same "miraculous" wells are remarked on by Charles Smith in *The Ancient and Present State of the County of Kerry*, although, rather than see them as miraculous, he imagines seawater somehow percolating up through the rock, and being purified along the way.

Again, Smith never visited the island, although you would never guess it from his dramatic description: 'This place is surrounded with high and inaccessible precipices that hang dreadfully over the sea, which is generally rough, and roars hideously underneath'. Sceilg is one of those places which can become part of people's mental and spiritual geography, although, thanks to its frequent inaccessibility, even today, they may not ever get there.

In this context, I am continually fascinated to imagine the conversation between Seamus Heaney and the Belfast novelist Brian Moore when, in 1971, Heaney and his wife Marie paid what he later called a "luminous visit" to Moore and his wife at his home and writing retreat at Malibu Beach in California. In the following year, Moore was to publish *Catholics*, a novel whose action takes place in an island monastery off the southwest coast of Ireland. The island of that novel is obviously suggested by – although certainly not accurately based on – Skellig Michael. As a result of his visit, Heaney wrote "Remembering Malibu". Skellig is central to that poem, and indeed to Heaney's later commentary on it. In an obituary piece on Brian Moore, he wrote:

> This poem is about the windblown day on the beach at Malibu when we visited Brian Moore in 1971. It was a truly Pacific experience. Obviously we were talking about Belfast and the whole Northern Irish Catholic culture that we shared – asceticism and repression and self-denial and all that. About how we were more prepared by our background to go barefoot on a pilgrim's path on, say, the Skelligs, than to go barefoot on a pleasure beach in California.

In the poem itself, recognising that Moore's writing retreat was very different from Sceilg – 'no beehive huts for you/ on the abstract sands of Malibu' – Heaney goes on to write of himself:

> Atlantic storms have flensed the cells
> On the great Skellig, the steps cut in the rock
>
> I never climbed
> Between the graveyard and the boatslip
>
> are welted solid to my instep.
> But to rear, and kick, and cast that shoe –
>
> beside that other western sea
> far from the Skelligs, and far, far

from the suck of puddled, wintry ground,
our footsteps filled with blowing sand.

Heaney has written that what he calls Moore's 'scriptorium on the edge of a western sea' was 'as monastic a setting for this late twentieth century artist as the beehive huts had been for monks on the Skelligs a millennium before'. The picture of these two Irish writers sitting on a beach in California, talking about Sceilg as an embodiment of the austere Irish Catholicism that was still very powerful in 1971, is fascinatingly emblematic of the imaginative hold Sceilg can have. I don't know if Brian Moore ever visited Sceilg; his novel certainly doesn't reflect any such visit. I do know that Seamus Heaney never went there physically, but that it was very real in his poetic psyche. When George Bernard Shaw wrote that 'whoever has not stood in the graveyards at the summit of that cliff, among the beehive dwellings and their beehive oratory, does not know Ireland through and through', he was only half-right. There is more than one way to visit Sceilg, and far more than one way to write about it.

I sometimes wonder if Heaney's use of Sceilg as a metaphor for the puritanical side of Irish Catholicism was suggested by a poem called "The Skellig Way" by Padraic Fallon, whom Heaney admired, and of whom he wrote that his sensibility 'has been tutored by a landscape at once elemental and historical'. It is an insight that is relevant to Fallon's poem, which recalls the arguments between Oisín and St. Patrick about the respective merits of a pagan closeness to Nature and of a Christian ascetism, and includes a nod to the tradition that Sceilg clung to the older date for Easter after it had been changed by the rest of Christendom. Fallon's family have told me that he never visited Sceilg. Perhaps he had never even seen the island, except in his imagination. And yet, from a distance, in a contrasting woodland setting, he harangues its monks:

The March crow furnishes his twig
In the knowledge that a bigger bird
Above the blow
Is hatching out the whole raw yolk of Spring.

There's no Lent in the twitching rookery;
Pair by pair they go,
Feather to feather married;
Easter the nodal point in earth's revolution.

Listen, you dumb stone faces to the West,
You on Skellig Michael,
White hoods of God,
Hermits abounding in the unseen graces,

Matins, and Lauds and Vespers are sung here
In a loud vernacular
Above the trees;
Can you do better down on your knees?

Sitting on the lighthouse men's wall at the bottom of the main steps, and contemplating the climb that that these two poets never made, I take pleasure in the imaginative grip that Sceilg had on their respective imaginations, even as I regret that neither poet actually came to the island. I can only speculate how the grim ascetism they envisaged might have also flowered into other visions, other poems.

It's time to start climbing, more than six hundred steps to the monastery 180 metres above the main landing place. And for every writer who had to imagine themselves into Sceilg, there were many others who revelled, like Shaw, in their actual physical presence on the island and its materiality. The climb up is so spectacularly memorable, and engages most visitors so much, that it has become one of the things everyone talks about, with varying degrees of awe. But let me be honest rather than dramatic: the climb, for most people, is not really difficult. Neither is it dangerous, if reasonable care is taken, and you watch where you are putting your feet, especially on the descent. However, if – like me – you have an irrational fear of heights, some sections are challenging, and you must decide for yourself how you will manage it. I have brought some people to the island only to have them balk at the sight of the steps. But there is nothing in the experience that most reasonably fit people will not manage without any great difficulty.

Having said that, I must admit to a sort of *schadenfreude* comic pleasure when reading the account of a climb and descent made by the Cork antiquarian John Windele, who visited Skellig in 1851. His nervousness about the climb is refreshingly honest, even when it becomes comical. Terrified by 'the vast and frightful depths below and the total want of protection', he tells us that 'my best course was to shut out the view in that quarter by closing my seaward eye and looking only at the rock inside me and the steps before.' And having calmed himself enough to survey and record the monastic buildings, he found himself again terrified on the descent:

> The descent was far from agreeable. It was only then that the vast elevation above the sea and the almost vertical character of the precipice along the face of which wound the narrow stairs presented themselves in all their appalling reality. A few steps downward even with a face averted from the chasm to the left only increased a tendency to dizziness. For safety I quitted my upright position and made the remainder of my way in a seated posture – an inglorious spectacle to a party of ladies and gentlemen with better nerves whom I met ascending as I approached the Valley.'

It may well have been comically inglorious, but Windele's terror is by no means unusual; I have myself been among the many who have been similarly overwhelmed, and it took a number of visits before I completely overcame the terror, irrational though it was, that Sceilg often induced in me. I remember the poet Liam Ó Muirthile – whose untimely passing was such a loss to Irish poetry – having been unable to move for perhaps a quarter of an hour, being taken by the hand across the last high, open steps to the monastery by my wife, Fíona. Some months later, he dedicated a poem to her, "An Manach a Léim thar Falla", that began with this helping hand:

> An lúcháir a dheineas
> ar bharr Sceilg Mhichíl
> tar éis don lámh chúnta
> mé a chur im sheasamh,
> n'fheadar ar le faoiseamh
> nó leis an léargas é, ach táim
> buíoch im chroí ó shin.

This is how I translate the extract:

> The exuberance I felt
> at the summit of Sceilg
> after the helping hand
> had raised me to my feet,
> I cannot say whether it was relief
> or enlightenment caused it, but since then
> my heart is warm with gratitude.

I take delight that Liam's vertiginous fear, which I understand so well, did not prevent him from hugely enjoying his trip, and celebrating it afterwards with this poem.

I trudge upward, past The Wailing Woman, and past another, nameless cross fashioned from a natural outcrop and almost camouflaged by grey-green lichen. I am, as is so often the case even on my real visits, accompanied by the works of writers. One of these is Gerard Manley Hopkins, who not only never visited here, but never gave any indication of having even heard of the island. He came here not in his own imagination, but in mine. About twenty-five years ago, I had just finished an MA dissertation on Hopkins. I came out to the island, and, while taking a break at Christ's Saddle, was contemplating one of the sheer, ledged cliffs of the South Peak, and its 220-metre plunge into the cove from which the remnants of north steps ascend. My fear of heights made the prospect existentially fearsome for me, even though I was looking at them while stretched on the grassy patch that is the Saddle. Lines from one of Hopkins's Dublin Sonnets came to me:

> O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
> Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap
> May who ne'er hung there.

The lines continued to haunt me, embodied as they became for me in the looming cliffs of Sceilg. I began to imagine Hopkins on Sceilg, began to see it as correlative to his dark and depressive existence, his fear of God and eternity, began to imagine a redemptive visit to Sceilg for him. The result was a long ten-part poem called "Hopkins on Skellig Michael", which was later set to wonderful orchestral music by the composer Ciarán Farrell. This piece, commissioned by RTÉ Lyric FM, was broadcast in November 2007conjunction with a wonderful reading of my poem by Barry McGovern. Perhaps a little audaciously, then, Hopkins has for me become a literary presence on Sceilg. I once also felt his terror of God and eternity; I hope it is not presumptuous to invoke his poor tortured soul now, in a kind of compassionate solidarity:

> Steps.
> Stone steps.
> Steps
> Cut into stone.
> Step
> After stone step.

Steps
Of stone slabs.
Slab
After worn stone slab.
Edge
Of stone.
Step
The edges of stone.
Step
The edges of soul.
My soul
Is stone, is splintered slate.
O let my slow
Plodding
Hone me,
Edge me with brightness.

Up and up the high steps I go, then stop, panting, for a breather at a dog-leg on the steps that is about halfway up. Just off the path, I find a rock near where a puffin pauses beside its burrowed nest with a multicoloured beak full of sprat. I sit and watch. I know its anthropomorphic, but puffins always seem happy to pose for the tourist cameras which universally zoom in on them, or even, I can't help thinking, just for the pleasure of the pose. They would, just themselves, be worth the trip here.

I sit, look, inhale, remember. Perhaps the most enriching literary experience Sceilg has given me is a project I undertook with the OPW as a result of an approach by Grellan Rourke, whose personal and organisational commitment to the island for many years has been exemplary. The project resulted in an anthology called *Voices at the World's Edge: Irish Poets on Skellig Michael*. It is a book of which I am immoderately proud, and the excitement, pleasure and satisfaction which the whole project brought me still animates me. Briefly, the project consisted of eleven of Ireland's foremost poets staying on the island in groups of two or three, usually for two nights, and writing poems, stories, or whatever, arising from their visit. The eminent literary photographer John Minihan was also enlisted, and his photographs of both the island and the participating writers are wonderfully complementary to the text. What I loved about the anthology was that all of the work was written especially for it. Of the eleven poets who made the trip, three were Gaelic poets and I

was a bilingual poet. Of course I was privileged many times over because I got to accompany all of the writers who went to the island, a privilege of extraordinary depth and duration. I think of it now, and of one writer in particular who in one of his pieces mentioned the dog-leg where I am now, as I always do, taking a break. The aftermath of a fall on an escalator in an Italian airport led to Macdara Woods – another whose death was such a loss to Irish poetry – being unable to realise the poem he had envisioned during his visit to Sceilg. After struggling for some time with this, he turned to prose. And what prose! Only a sensitive, cultured and wide-open imagination could have climbed the steps to the monastery with words like these:

> The steps of Sceilg Mhichíl are an amazement. A drunkenness of steps akin to the drunkeness of the deeps. Never before have I been so conscious of stone, layers of stone, reshaped stone reset into the very stone from which it has been cut. Appearing to become lighter and lighter until it is all a weight-bearing filigree of engineering, a functional lattice-work of improbability. …… How can it be? The swelling chambers of the heart, the strain on the knees; it is all shoring and wall, and untouched rock with loose surface soil of pinks, sea campion and sea spinach, of sphagnum moss and wind and birds. The only way to deal with it is to become part of it …… and in so becoming we begin to realise other dimensions of breathlessness as we toil upwards bent over, nose to stone, begin to see the zig-zag paths of ancient steps as antic in themselves, young frisky oxygenated walls, or – credible enough in this landscape of primaeval untouched slabs – as walls that have simply taken to walking about …… Up the first and second sections, past the Crying Woman, swinging about across the haunch of hill slope and then past the dog-leg turn, sharp as a hare's change of direction pursued by hounds, up through a different orientation to the grassy space on the saddle, and from there, like the sudden shocking primal invitation of Courbet's *Origine du Monde* on the wall of the Musee d'Orsay, the almost-last stretch of steps that seem to hang suspended, swaying almost, on an invisible chain anchored by wind-carved pillars of rock, and then the final reach up to the unseen place above. The little garden enclave, the beehive cells that seem so big, so much an elemental shape, a shape only, until you become aware of, and enter into, the sheer urban cohesion of it, in the same way as when you enter into one of those walled Italian hill-towns that from below look as tight and impregnable as an oyster.

Macdara's exhilarating description of the climb brings me to my feet again. As I urge my creaking knees upwards, I'm reminded of the proverb *giorraíonn beirt bóthar* (two shorten the road) and I call on the company of another writer climbing these steps. Greg Delanty, now resident in the United States, visited the island during extended stays at nearby Derrynane, where he now has a second

home. In a series called “The Splinters” he both physically explores Sceilg, and uses it, as Seamus Heaney did Lough Derg, to invoke literary figures, many with a Kerry connection, and enter into dialogue with them – Amergin, An Chailleach Bhéarra, Spenser, Aogán Ó Rathaille, Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabhaín, Robin Flower and others. But these poetic and philosophical exchanges are framed within the island’s rocky verticality:

> We forget speech, hypnotised by the climb,
> concentrating on narrow, rock-hewn steps
> that spiral like the gyres
> of the Book of Kells, whirling in the labyrinths
> of knowledge, turmoil and eternity.

That ‘knowledge, turmoil and eternity’ Greg Delanty discovers in the hyponotic climb is exactly what I envisaged Hopkins discovering on his fictional visit to Sceilg. I am in stimulating company.

The steepest part of the steps, and the part where the steps themselves are highest, is the stretch just before Christ’s Saddle. The Saddle – I don’t know when it was named or by whom – is a favourite place for lunch. It has been necessary to fence off much of it from visitors who want to photograph themselves at the exact spot where Luke Skywalker did whatever skywalkers do. This cuts off much of what used to make the lunchbreak there special, including access to the base of the South Peak and a stunning view over Seal Cove and the lighthouse from a somewhat higher saddle. My memory, however, is unconstrained by such barriers, and I wander at will into the little natural cave made by collapsing rocks, where some anonymous monk carved a cross into the cliff-face. I scramble, too, up the grassy slope to where I can – with my dizzy heart in my mouth – look down the almost sheer drop to the lighthouse, and the collapsed roadway up to the higher, long disused lighthouse sometimes called “the old lighthouse”. In fact, it was built at the same time, the two lights at different heights intended, at a time when navigation was far less precise than now, to avoid confusion with other coastal lighthouses. However, the technology of revolving lights, that allowed every lighthouse have its own easily recognisable signal, rendered the idea of double lighthouses obsolete. Hence the derelict but dramatic ruin on the north-western cliffs of the island. As I write this, I finger a piece of the thick glass that litters the ground around the lighthouse, a treasured souvenir of many visits there. I wander also over to the top of the steps that cling and curve their way down to the cove below. The Saddle is where they joined with what are now the main steps, before the short steep climb up the final flight of steps to the monastery enclosure. There is something wonderfully liminal about Christ’s Saddle. It takes no more than a dozen steps to

cross from the south side of the island to the north. It is also a kind of hiatus on the climb to the monastery, a natural break on the journey between the secular and the sacred, between the relatively ordinary and the absolutely extraordinary, a place of wonder and preparation on the way up, a place of absorption and reflection on the way down.

Most of all, however, it is the Saddle that separates the two summits of the island – the rounded summit northeast of it, and the bare, angular and much higher South Peak to the northwest of it. I have never understood the name South Peak; if anything, it should be the West Peak. I presume there was some logic behind it, but it has so far escaped me. In any case, it dominates over Christ's Saddle, where I usually have my lunch. Above me, a sheer dark cliff, alive with fulmars and, if I'm lucky, a glimpse of a peregrine falcon, broods over the waves echoing in the cove below. I have always found it absolutely forbidding, frightening even from below. It always evoked an existential dread . But still, for over thirty years I was fascinated by it, and ached to go there. This was not for the thrill of the climb. It was because I knew of the hermitage that was built around that summit, had it described to me by people who had been there, had read about and seen photographs, drawings and diagrams. One of the most beautiful books about Sceilg is *The Forgotten Hermitage of Skellig Michael*, by Walter Horn, Jenny White Marshall and Grellan Rourke. It beautifully describes and documents the oratory and terraces that cling around the peak, and the dramatic climb to get there. All of this has been painstakingly restored by the OPW. I became absorbed by all of this, and, at the same time, was quite sure I would never go there. Although a competent rock-climber would think nothing of the climb, there are places where a wrong step or a slip could be fatal. A card-carrying acrophobic coward like me, I thought, had no chance of ever going there. And yet I used to sit and look up and just make out the walling of the terrace, and yearn. I imagined myself there, imagined myself into a philosophic mindset which I had long abandoned, insofar as you can abandon beliefs which have been ingrained for generations. This imagined believer wrote a poem about his imagined summit dwelling:

Questions become my certainties
Each day on the bare peak
Scaling hand over hand
Over foothold to God.

What is this sheer rock
Plunging and rising
To and from the abyss?

Upon this rock I will build.

What is the air's true voice?
Gales lash my oratory, but seabirds
Land gently on warm wings.
There are many voices.

Where is the fire on the rock?
In the soul's forging, hammered
Bright to outlast the flames
That burn the untempered soul.

What is the surrounding water?
In the soft-noted woods
We coveted chastening deserts.
This is my salty waste.

In the name of the Father, hidden
In clouded skies, of the water
Flowing in the baptism of the Son,
And of the fire of the Holy Spirit,

I will cling to this hard rock
Until I become no more
And no less than a syllable
In the breath of the Word.

And then came my editorial role in *Voices at the World's Edge*. Grellan Rourke of the OPW, who instigated the project, and whose years of dedicated work on and for the island I greatly admire, told me that a system of bolted anchors and safety ropes that were still in place following conservation work would make possible to bring some participating poets to the South Peak. My imagination and my stomach lurched with excitement and fear in equal but competing measures. From then on, I began to envisage getting to the place that had been like a magnetic pole pulling me for years. Over the following months, a possibility gradually became a decision. Serendipitously, while on a walking

holiday in Spain with our local walking group, there was a choice one day between a walk and a rock-climbing lesson. The choice was straightforward: I calculated that if I could do this training climb of about 30 metres, I could climb the South Peak. I did, and I did.

In fact, I did the climb twice, with both groups who got the chance to go there. The system of bolted ropes was absolutely safe, and yet a few of the poets who went there, I discovered, were also quite terrified. Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill was one of us who did not hide her fear. And yet, as one element of her response, she wrote a marvellous annalistic pastiche, "Annálacha Díseart na Sceilge", integrating history (again, Etgal is in there), legend, contemporary archaeology, imagination and, finally, her own ascent to the hermitage. Here is the relevant section:

> *A.D. 2008*. Le rópaí ceangailte dem chabhail is le caoin-chabhair ós na heolaithe, do dhreap an t-oilithreach bocht seo suas an Binn. Ba pheata lae é, is bhí solas gléineach ar an aigéan. Ba dhóigh leat gur sciath airgid é ag frithchaitheamh solas na gréine. D'imigh an t-uamhan agus an t-eagla díom, an t-anbhá is an sceimhle. Cé go raibh gach coiscéim suas mar choiscéim i dtreo mo bháis agam thángas anuas ar nos cait. Bhíos mar bháirneach ar an gcloich. Thuigeas na díseartaigh, a ngáirdeas is a mbioth. Thuigeas a n-uabhar chomh maith.

I hesitate to translate such luminous prose, but here goes:

> *A.D. 2008*. With ropes attached, and calmed by the support of the initiates, this poor pilgrim climbed the South Peak. It was a pet day, and light gleamed on the ocean, a silver shield reflecting the sunlight. Horror and fear fell away from me, panic and terror left me. Although each step I climbed up was like a step to my own death, I came down like a cat. I could cling to the rock like a limpet. I understood the hermits, their celebratory universe. Their pride, too, I understood.

I should add that there is no poetic licence here. Nuala, I think, was as terrified as myself before and during the ascent. But, even as my own fear was, if anything, more overwhelming on the descent, I could see that Nuala was transformed, almost giddy with elation, and came down as if she were descending, regal and feline, a ceremonial palace stairway.

But back to the climb. When you leave Christ's Saddle, you edge along a rock-chiselled ledge that traverses a sheer cliff towards the rock-chimney that has become known as the Needle's Eye. I remember Theo Dorgan's calming voice easing me along this traverse as my nervous fingers opened one shackle and closed another every few metres, the twin-lock that guaranteed our safety. The guarantee, of course, was meaningful only to the rational side of the mind; the non-rational insisted on plunging towards the abyss. Theo made the climb on a day there was a storm forecast, sense and

spirit awake and open. This physical experience of the island, in Theo's case vividly animated by his marine sensibility, combined with awareness of the spiritual impulses and beliefs that still infuse the air around the stone of Skellig, was crucial to the whole project.

> We climb to the South Peak, privileged, on ropes,
> belayed on each steep pitch, alive to danger,
>
> and there on the high hermitage we turn to the west,
> fearing to see God knows what. Beneath us, cliff edge,
>
> a ledge of prayer. Monks would kneel here,
> hands uplifted, for hours on end.
>
> Fulmars and petrels barrel past, scanting the wind.
> That ancient, light-packed trope — the soul as bird.

Kerry Hardie climbed the peak the same luminous day as did Nuala. She also wrote of the help of the "initiates" Nuala had recognised, but in her poem "Strange Company" the help they give becomes mysterious, almost supernatural. This is the opening stanza:

> Someone moved my hands into known holds carved in the rock.
> Someone eased my feet into the pocks.
> Someone's laughter bubbled in my throat.
> Someone's fearlessness erased my fear.

And by the last stanza there is a visionary transcendence at work:

> Someone used my eyes to look.
> Someone used my heart to soar.
> No one spoke to me of death.
> Death belongs with time and time was not.

Of course the "initiates" who formed this "strange company" were Grellan Rourke and the archaeologist Alan Hayden. They guided us to every necessary foot-and-handhold, sometimes having

to coax terrified eyes open. Their patience with sometimes wimpish poets was as wide and deep as their knowledge of and commitment to Sceilg, especially the monastic remains around the South Peak, the restoration of which had been the work of many years for them.

As I recreate this climb in my mind, I find I skip fairly quickly up through the Needle's Eye – perhaps my subconscious is being benign – and out into the blustery sunlight at the next stage. As I write, I relive the exultation I felt as I pulled my self onto the flat rocks at the upper opening. My particular guardian angel on the climb was Alan Hayden, and I afterwards dedicated these lines to him:

> The Needle's Eye, already well threaded
> With safety-ropes, opened like a sleeve
> Above us. Could I pull myself through,
> Draw the world inside out and discover
> The light beyond, like that long-ago child
> Daring the darkness of his huge pullover?
> The sea, dizzily beneath us, heaved disbelief.
>
> Here was the *hand over hand over foothold*
> *To God* I'd written achingly about. Now I recall
> Only the coming up and out, the sunlit terrace
> Trembling all over in the windy brightness,
> And my whole self slipping easily through,
> Some old saint's arm giving its reliquary
> The slip, punching the air with delight.

Now I move, dreamlike, a few steps from the top of the Needle's Eye and into one of the most extraordinary spaces I have ever entered. Although I know I was with others both times that I have been there, I am always alone when I recall those occasions. It is a very simple structure: a small quarried rectangular platform, with a low drystone perimeter wall. The quarried floor of the platform is of white quartz. Even now, centuries after that quarrying, the quartz floor is impressive. When it was newly uncovered by its makers, it must have gleamed like a reflection of heaven. I use the words advisedly, because the meditation platform, as I think of it, was surely intended, if not to reflect a divine world, then at least to aspire towards such a reflection. It is only when you kneel – or sit if you prefer – on that quartz floor, with your back to the island, that the full intent of its

construction becomes clear. Although the platform is surrounded by cliffs and crags, the low parapet now obscures everything except the quartz floor, the low wall, the sea and the sky. I can neither remember nor imagine any other place where believers, on their knees with eyes wide open, could be transported into such an ethereal and unworldly space, while at the same time being intensely and perhaps painfully aware of the harsh surroundings in which they spend their days. But this space of spiritual vision was made possible only by the engineering vision of those who conceived and built it, by the ability of one or more monks to see a vein of quartz running horizontally through a vertical outcrop of rock and to envision from that the possibility of this place of prayer and meditation.

A photograph I took here, showing the perspective I have described, is now the desktop background for the laptop on which I am writing this, a monochrome in shades of steely grey softening towards blue. The monks who knelt here, perhaps with arms outstretched for long periods in the cruciform position known as *crosfhigil* or *crucis vigilia* could never have envisioned this. Or could they? In any event, my contemplation of this photograph, and my delighted memory, resulted in this poem:

It's nothing really, and everything,
Once you grasp the lightness
Of stone in air; once you see
Between the great layers of rock
A seam of white quartz aching
For release into the sunlight;
Once you choose your terrace
Or have it choose itself, in a pause
Halfway to the summit, hanging
High over the drop of the cliff;
Once you hammer and chisel
(here's the strain, here's the groaning)
And lever off the weight of slate slabs
To discover the gleam of your floor,
It's grain urgent with light and air;
Once you gather your slate fragments
(how easy this is, how easy!)
To build the low wall that contains
Your small terrace, so that, kneeling,

You see nothing of the whole island,
Nothing at all of what is behind you,
But are wrapped, if the light is right,
In a seamless, blue robe of sea and sky:
That's all it is. All there is. The whole thing.

Kerry Hardie has her own perspective on what she called "Sky Station", an intense and minimalist poem that beautifully mirrors the intense simplicity combined with visionary power that inheres in this most extraordinary place:

Who kneels on the quartz
watching the place
where the sea meets the sky?

Who has the body that's cold in the wind
that blows from the place
where the sea meets the sky?

Who is it who worships,
who is it who's worshipped,
But he-who-is god,

praising god?

I revel in the way the questions that animate Amergin's poem echo through these visionary lines, and I am reminded that sometimes the most fruitful way to respond to a question, poetically and philosophically, can be with further questions, a whole series of questions strung together like contemplative beads stretching towards eternity. I must be careful that my atheism does not veer into the dogmatic.

It is a relatively easy climb the rest of the way up to the oratory terrace. Even as I write, I feel as if I haven't really been there. The vividness of my remembered experience is that of the surreal. The photographs I have of poets wearing safety-helmets and industrial safety-harnesses are testament to the actuality and physicality of being there. But the faces in those photographs are infused with the wonder and exhilaration which I felt then and which has not left me over the

intervening years. Although his letter does refer to it, Shaw did not climb the South Peak when he came to Sceilg in 1910. But what he wrote about the island, in another of the most quoted extracts, encapsulates for me the way I remember the couple of hours overall that I spent there:

> I tell you the thing does not belong to any world that you and I have lived and worked in: it is part of our dream world.

I look down towards the Saddle we left a short time ago, and am amazed by its relative tameness, by the ordinariness of the final flight of steps to the main monastery below and east of us. And I realise that at the eastern end of the small oratory remains, where the altar would have been, is the top of an almost sheer ravine that runs between this terrace and the Saddle. The official OPW report on the island's conservation works puts it quite soberly: 'The main structure is a corbelled oratory with a narrow entry midway along the west wall and its east wall partially built on a stone slab bridging a cleft in the rock.' What is so understatedly described here is a monk or monks choosing to build their altar by laying a thin slab of slaty rock over an abyss, and building the corbelled oratory around it. For once, the word "awesome" seems appropriate, especially when I think of its original meanings of "profoundly reverential" or "inspiring dread". Like the meditation platform, here is visionary engineering, an embodiment in stone of a spiritual aspiration which, although I do not share in it, nevertheless amazes and energises me. It also energised Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill into poetry, although she also does not share the belief that lay behind the engineering:

> Tá loinnir ar an uisce
> a chuirfeadh tú ar meisce.
> Níl aon ní os mo chionn in airde,
> nil éinne (da mbeadh sé ann) ach Dia amháin.
>
> Tá folús glan im' aigne
> nach dtuigeann beo nó marbh,
> nach mbraitheann ach an noiméad
> síoraí seo ina iomláine.
>
> Cé thóg an struchtúr cloiche,
> an falla seo ar crochadh
> os cionn an duibheagáin

is neamhní uafar an spáis?

I translate:

The water gleams
intoxicatingly.
There is nothing over my head,
nobody but (were he there) God.

An emptiness in my mind
comprehends neither quick nor dead,
absorbs only this moment,
eternal, whole.

Who built the stone structure,
this wall suspended
over the abyss
and the awful nothing of space?

A somewhat less ascetic aspect of the site is that the altar window which was presumably incorporated into the structure would have offered the celebrant in this isolated oratory a view not only towards the eternal but towards his less isolated brethren in the main monastery on the far side of Christ's Saddle. And, as we will see when I get over there, that intervisibility was mutual.

But for now, it is time for the descent, helped again by the "strange company" of "the initiates" without whom none of the group I call "Filí na Sceilge" in my computer folder would have been able to get here. As I now retrace that descent, again eliding the intervals of terror-filled clinging to the rock – almost, if I remember correctly, to the extent of being tempted towards religious faith again – I realise that I do not feel the urge to go there again. The progression of age and a continued fear of heights is only part of this. The main reason is that, to use Shaw's expression, the South Peak has become part of my dream world. It has become a place I can revisit, if not at will, then with a not very burdensome measure of imaginative preparation. And probably the best and most accessible *vade mecum* I can call on to *go with me* to that dream world is the poetry, my own and that of others, which was written out of encountering its awesome heights and

dizzying depths, the gritty surface of its slabs and outcrops and the sublime visions in stone and air of those who created the tiny, airy structures of its hermitage.

Back at Christ's Saddle, I climb the final flight of steps towards the main monastic settlement. As I have said, there is a feeling of transition here, a movement into higher, different spaces. This last steep flight – the word "flight" seems apt in many senses – ends at a flat, open pathway with a steep drop on the seaward side. While it is quite safe, being more than a metre in width, it can be challenging for the acrophobic. What occasionally can be dangerous here is the wind, as this high, open section is very exposed, especially to southerlies. I remember coming all the way up here with Bernard O'Donoghue one blustery day. We were in boisterous control until this point. However, after crouching flat for a few minutes in the hope of a lull to enable us to get to the safety of the enclosure, we decided to act our age and made our way down again. But the way I remember it as I write, with the monastery entrance in sight, the pathway now becomes processional and anticipatory. John F. Deane is a poet who brought his strongly Christian sensibility to the island. He also had written about Sceilg before he went there for the first time, as a contributor to *Voices at the World's Edge*, further testimony to how much the island has woven itself into the imaginative fabric of Irish literature. Indeed it was because of a poem he wrote perhaps thirty years ago that I invited him to participate. Now, on the island, that anticipatory poem flowers experientially into a poem I always situate, perhaps presumptively, as moving along this pathway into the monastic enclosure. This is how it opens:

> This is procession, across packed dirt,
> the bodies, cowled, moving
> to a stooping, apostolic, down-and-in
>
> dampness of the oratory, procession
> that goes on for ever,
> high over the world in an embraced, embracing grief.
>
> A process. Eucharist. Of mourning. Of rewriting
> lives in a testament of rock.
> Who are become priests of stone: this, too, my body – here,
>
> my blood. Gannets amble on the air
> in the surplice-white of body,

sacred black wing-tips, and suddenly a lance-dive down

until you know this, too, is slaughter, faster than stroke
or coronary, this the process, too, disturbing.
Fulmar soar from high-brow ledges, easy as sighing,

easy as prayer; the wind-honed, entrenched will,
love ultimately, over
(with a horror of height, and the midriff astrain. . .)

soaring lauds-birds and the far-below insistent
murmurous ocean.

That mixture of human fear and frailty with a yearning towards the supernatural, the physicality of Sceilg and its wildlife combined with and expressed in the language of the sacred, is something that seems to me to run through so much of writing about Sceilg, whether written by believers or unbelievers. In Deane's resonant phrase, the island is 'a testament of rock'.

That testament can be most clearly read once we enter the monastery itself. Every time I bow my head going in – not especially in reverence, but because I have more than once grazed my head on the low lintel – I have to remind myself that its level, sheltered and harmonious interior is an artificial construct. Once again, visionary engineering embodies spiritual vision. The extensive terrace and its buildings, with carefully stepped levels, was created over six centuries, say twenty generations, by the monks who lived here. I have come in through the modern entrance, from Christ's Saddle, through the Monks' Gardens. A medieval visitor would probably have come straight up from the main landing place, commonly known as Blind Man's Cove. Today there is no access to that stairway from the cove. The lower part of the stairway was destroyed when the lighthouse men dynamited the rocks to make their roadway – another visionary and beautifully piece of engineering, although inspired by a very different vision than that which animated the medieval constructions of the island. Most of the stairway above the road, however, has been uncovered and restored by the OPW. I have had the opportunity, on a number of my extended stays on the island, to go down these steps, precipitately steep in places, and then turn to ascend to the monastery in the way it was meant to be approached. This is the approach I imagine myself into as I write. The changed perspective is a revelation. No longer do I see a back entrance through a garden. Huge walls rear themselves above me. The doorway I approach is as monumental as the walls. As the stairway winds

towards it, I can see once again that in places the massive walls lean outwards, that they are not simply demarcating the sacred monastic territory, but are creating and supporting the terraces themselves. Without them, there would be nothing but steep or even sheer rockfaces. I remind myself that the monastic buildings that we see today are the end result of six centuries of building and rebuilding, and that the main oratory, up to which I now climb from the tunnel-like entrance to the monastery, is built on the remains of two earlier churches. It is far beyond my competence to try to trace the sequence of collapses and reconstructions that archaeological investigation has uncovered. The details are not important to me; it is enough to walk into the enclosure, and to quote again from Macdara Woods' superbly incisive description:

> ... you become aware of, and enter into, the sheer urban cohesion of it, in the same way as when you enter into one of those walled Italian hill-towns that from below look as tight and impregnable as an oyster.

And to the right as you would exit from the oratory door, just where, eight centuries ago, Giraldus Cambrensis reported them to be, are the stone cisterns that gave rise to legends and folklore about supernatural supplies of water – the island has no freshwater spring – and even stories of water miraculously becoming wine. The cisterns, which hold almost 500 litres between them, are in fact fed by rainwater from the quarried sloping surface above the beehive huts. Grooves were chiselled into these slabs, and the rainwater that flowed into them was then channelled through the foundations of the beehive huts, obviously *before* they were built, to be stored in these cisterns. It may not have been a divine intervention that supplied the monks with water, but, like other engineering miracles on Sceilg, it was the urge towards the divine that animated those who conceived of and built those cisterns. This is how I imagined Gerard Manley Hopkins discovering the secret of the cisterns:

> Investigation quickly undermined the miraculous,
> Undammed the secrets of the underground
> Conduits from the slabs behind the cells,
> Grooved and guided into the stone basins.
> A miracle still, he mused, of intent,
> Of will to stay, of work, to channel
> Water through stone as grace through spirit.

Laborare orare est. Aqua vita est.

The poetry of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, a writer of great depth and integrity, is elusive, even abstract. Paradoxically, perhaps, it also exudes rootedness and place. You may find yourself unclear about where exactly that place and those roots are, but there is no doubt about their reality, and the almost palpable connection between her poems and that reality. I think about this as I stare down into the cisterns, contemplating their ingenuity at the same time as the magic realist accounts of them in medieval accounts or more modern folklore. Eiléan is typically and fleetingly allusive rather than factual about the monastery, about forgotten histories, about manuscripts being stored in corbelled stone cells, about gannets and the overwhelming presence of the sea and the wind. And yet, when I read her poem "Litany", the opening poem of a series appropriately called *Vertigo*, I hear it recited in this enclosure, high above the sea:

As every new day waking finds its pitch
Selecting a fresh angle, so the sun
Hangs down its veils, so the ancient verbs
Change their invocation and their mood.

Steady through the long gap in the story
A stiff breeze whistles up off the ocean
Choosing a pair of notes, the same key.

A tidal drag sucks back down as deep
As it rode high; the foamy-crested wave
(Astonished at numbers, the white gannets,
In their salt generations) arrives
To listen for that high voice and stays,
Arching smoothly, waiting for the response.

The soaking tears of centuries drill down
Low passages in between the stones,
Holding to the calendar made out

In columns of names, a single stiff skin

Coiled up and stowed away in the high slit
Above the stone corbel that once had human features.

The wave can pause no longer, called back to Brazil.

I stroll over to the wall beside the usual entrance, a wall that overlooks the monks' gardens. Analysis of pollen remains as well as experimental projects has shown that food crops can be and were grown here successfully. The gardens and monastery, despite their height, are in fact situated in an area of natural shelter from the wind, almost a micro-climatic effect. The archaeological stratigraphic report on excavations conducted between 1986 and 2010 offers an insight:

> Both barley and oats were found in layers from the lower monks' garden, although the low numbers make it impossible to determine with any statistical relevance which cereal was utilised in greater abundance … suggestive of cultivation taking place on the island, as opposed to the oats and barley being imported as grain.

The technical details are interesting. But a passage in the Regensberg manuscript, in the translation by Diarmuid Ó Riain I quoted from earlier, is even more so. Having described how the monks had run out of flour for making hosts, it tells how Saint Michael came to their aid, and decreed that

> yearly, on the day of Saint Michael himself, when the solemn rites of the mass had been completed, the priest who celebrated mass was to go out and, holding a casket in his left hand as if he were carrying seed in it, was to move his right hand here and there in the manner of one casting seed, and go through those nine plots of land on the summit of the mountain and, still imitating the gestures of one sowing, he was to say: "In the name of the Lord I command that pure wheat grow here", and it shall happen accordingly. Since this happens in like manner right down to the present day, even now, because the number of gardens or plots agrees with the number of the ranks of the angels, they are called the Gardens of the Angels.

Leaning on the wall overlooking these terraced gardens, I find it easy to suspend disbelief, to give assent to the idea of angelic order and intervention. The gannets I see wheeling over a shoal out to sea seem to be as intent on moving in ordained circles, divinely synchronised, as they are on zeroing in on the fish below. Of course this is just something my very vague knowledge of medieval theology

prompts me to invest in what I see. And the music of the spheres that I can conjure up as a soundtrack is equally an imaginative construct built around the same patchy memories. Nevertheless, the monks who built this place subscribed to such a vision of highly codified divine harmony. If I can spend time enjoying what they built, I can spend time listening to the imperatives that inspired their work. And if that suspension of disbelief allows me to see these gardens – in themselves miraculous enough in concept and construction – as metaphorically work of angels, then that suspension is an enabling and enriching thing.

Back in the monastery enclosure itself, the organisation behind the settlement strikes me forcibly again. The OPW report I earlier quoted from describes it well:

> The area of the inner enclosure where the cells and oratories are located was fully paved throughout. Large white quartz flags are used to define a symbolic area in front of the large oratory. The paving dates from the monastic period and gives the monastery an almost urban quality.

This is the same urban ambience that impressed itself on Macdara Woods, what he called 'the sheer urban cohesion of it', that also led to the water supply to the cisterns being planned and installed before the beehive cells were built. The 'white quartz flags' the report refers too, like so much about Sceilg, require some re-imagining before their full impact can be seen. Firstly, there is the erosion and discolouration of the centuries, of rain and wind and of many thousands of footsteps. But the biggest obstacle to their impact is in fact one of the monastery's later buildings. St. Michael's Church dates from the 11th century, and is the only mortared building in the enclosure. It belongs to the era of the Romanised clergy being organised into religious orders more than to the less centralised monastic regime of the earlier Irish Church. As it was built in or around the time that Sceilg was abandoned as a permanently inhabited monastery, I always imagine that it was intended to serve the needs of visiting pilgrims rather than resident monks. I think of it as imposing itself on a settlement rather than having developed organically as part of it. And that perception – which I readily acknowledge as intuitive rather than scholarly – crystallises (I can't resist the image!) as I remember those white quartz slabs. Without the presence of the later church, you could see the quartz slabs forming a passageway between the main cell and the oratory. Again, perhaps presumptively, I imagine this passageway as a sort of sacred or ritual space connecting the two, as has been noted in other early medieval monasteries. If this is true, then I find it hard to imagine that a community of monks inhabiting the monastery would block that sacred perspective. But who knows? There are no historical records to tell us, and St. Michael's Church, the most modern of the

monastic buildings, is, ironically, the most ruinous. But it does offer one specific historical record, a sad gravestone commemorating two infant boys of a lighthouse family, Patrick and William Callaghan, aged just less than three and five respectively and who died within three months of each other in the 1860's. The original gravestone, which had split, has been replaced by a replica. The stark record of names, age and death is a reminder of the hardship faced by the lighthouse men and their families during the nineteenth century. On a more pleasant note, I am reminded of the welcome that the keepers used to have for visitors in the 1970s when I first went there, especially if I brought a selection of newspapers. The automated lighthouses of today may be efficient and more economical, but they have also come at a price.

Thinking about lighthouse keepers brings a smile to my face as I think of the work of Biddy Jenkinson. Let me explain the connection. Apart perhaps from myself, I can think of no other contemporary writer who has absorbed Sceilg so much into their imagination, and indeed written so much with the island as subject or background. I have already mentioned *Sceilg na Scál*, one of the best contemporary collections in Irish to come my way. But that followed an earlier book, a short story called *Duinnín Bleachtaire ar an Sceilg*. At the beginning of this chapter I quoted from Dineen's Dictionary, as it's usually known, to explain the meaning of *Sceilg*. Biddy's learned and fertile imagination gave him a more active role in relation to the island. Not many writers would think of sending the same lexicographer, An tAthair Pádraig Ua Duinnín, as a kind of Father Browne detective figure, to investigate the murder of a lighthouse keeper on the island. Recalling this is what causes my smile. When Biddy came with us to the island for *Voices at the World's Edge* she brought with her, as did Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, a wide-ranging familiarity with the literature and traditions of the language which was the vernacular of Sceilg throughout its occupation by the monks, and was also, the vernacular of the closest mainland places until recent times, in some cases into the second half of the twentieth century. Her engagement with Sceilg is cultural, linguistic, naturalistic, historical, spiritual and occasionally quirky in a typically Jenkinsonian way. At times, she is at eye-level with limpets and seaweed. Sometimes the different aspects coalesce. A poem she contributed to the anthology, "An Cat Mara" – a title that manages to simultaneously suggest a cat, a sunfish and a calamity – tells a story of a narrowly avoided calamity when monks were rowing to the mainland. Within that story, it parallels and constantly echoes a nineteenth century poem by Tomás Rua Ó Súilleabháin about pilgrims to Sceilg who were similarly almost lost. The famous literary monastic cat Pangur Bán reappears under the name Pangur Dubh. A reader doesn't need to know any of this to enjoy the poem. Biddy wears her references lightly, as do her poems.

I mentioned earlier how Geoffrey Moorhouse used the annalistic reference to Etgal and the Vikings in order to flesh out a chapter. In her poem "Lomán Samhna", Jenkinson places the captive

abbot on a different rock, the bare wave-battered *Carraig Lomán*, which lies halfway between Sceilg and the mainland, and which is officially and ludicrously Anglicised as “Lemon Rock”:

Sa bhliain 824
dhein na Lochlannaigh
an Sceilg a argain.
Thug said Éadghal chun siúil agus
d’fhág siad ar Charraig Lomán é
gur chreim ocras agus tart é
agus gur chlaochlaigh a chnámha
ina stuaic carriage
chun onóra dé.

Arsa turasóir:
‘Is that a guy
on Lemon Rock
or what?’

Or what?

I translate:

In 824 AD
Norwaymen
plundered Sceilg.
They carried Etgal off
left him stranded on Carraig Lomán
so that hunger and thirst wasted him
and his bones sea-changed
into a pillar
for the glory of God.

A tourist asks:
‘Is that a guy

on Lemon Rock
or what?'

Or what?

So much is said by being half-said. Even her language shift, the effect of which is diminished in translation, as well as the register of English that she uses, carries significance in relation to cultural integrity and perception. To again quote Emily Dickinson – with whom Biddy has indeed much in common – it is a matter of 'Tell all the truth but tell it slant'.

I look out towards the distant and tiny Carraig Lomán where Biddy Jenkinson, in a poem that is a surrealistic imaginative reconstruction, placed the hapless Etgal, a historical figure whose factual existence is now confined to a two-line annalistic reference. Then I focus on a very different rock, just off the south side of Sceilg, where Geoffrey Moorhouse imagined Etgal, building a realistic story about how he was starved to death by the Vikings in a show of power and vengeance over the rest of the abbot's monastic community. And the same figure animated the imagination of the poet Gerry Loose, who lived in Iveragh for many years, and who now lives on the island of Bute in Argyll. Loose wrote a series of thirty-two short poems, *Eitgal*, experimenting with form and subject. Published in part or in whole in various outlets, it was also broadcast in dramatic form. This is how Etgal introduces himself in Loose's poem, buffeted in mind and body in this most windblown of places:

Am I not Eitgal winged fury wings of wind
the blusterer the breathmaker the singer
the scaler
fletch of Michael a feather fallen off the
archangel plume and pennant of Skellig
of Michael abbot of this sea rock where I am
blown where I blow
ach a windbag
christ abate my pride

The abbot whom we just glimpse in *The Annals of Innisfallen* has been reincarnated in various ways in contemporary literature. These very different imaginings make Etgal a living figure. And what stimulated all three writers I quote now, as I look out from Etgal's clifftop monastery, was not just

the story but the place, the stony, windswept, brine-washed rocks of Sceilg and Carraig Lomán, a real and elemental setting for their stories to take root and give literary and imaginative life to history. Also, it seems to me, to rock, to sea and to the salty wind.

In contrast with John F. Deane, Cathal Ó Searcaigh brought his atheistic sensibility to his poetic responses to the island. Like some other writers I have mentioned, he instinctively responds to the harsh eremitical practice of the monks who settled on the island as being essentially anti-life. In a wonderful series of homoerotic poems, written in a kind of *pastiche* of early Irish monastic verse, he imagines a love affair between two monks (something which Geoffrey Moorhouse also did in *Sun Dancing*) as a sort of antidote to the ascetic puritanism of the monastic life. Here is one section:

Oileán lom na dtonn,
tearmann Talcheann;
beag is fiú de mhaith ann,
cothú garbh gann.

Tréanas géar an léin,
tionól dochma bréan;
beag an baol teaspúlacht …
Éalód as thar aigéan.

Ord ná riail ná cuing cléire
ní choisceoidh mo rith.
Chugatsa, a chroí, de rúide treise …
deise liom tú ná Dia ar bith.

And in my translation:

This stark, this wave-bound island,
Tálcheann's [Patrick] sanctuary;
little good it was to him
poor, scarce sustenance.

The cutting strength of sorrow,

a woeful congregation;
no flesh will ever sing here …
I'll dare the ocean.

Order, rule or clerical yoke
will not obstruct my run
to you, dear heart, with utmost speed …
God is not. You're the one.

I'll quote just one other quatrain, with my translation. Among the monastery's cells and oratories, there is a sort of platform graveyard which I am about to visit. There is a salutary scepticism in Cathal's response to this graveyard, perhaps usefully antidotal to the more conventional reaction. The quatrain reads:

Géag ar ghéag ár gcual cnámh
á mheilt is á mhionú sa chré mhéith;
ár mbunadh romhainn a chreid go tréan
gan focal astu anois faoi ghlóir Mhic Dé.

And in translation:

Limb upon limb our mound of bones
is milled and ground beneath the smooth sod;
our forefathers, once loud in their belief,
are silent now on the glory of God.

With those lines ringing in my mind, I walk back into the monastery enclosure, past St. Michael's Church – hoping that neither itself nor its dedicatee resents my comments about how I see it as intrusive – and stand at the Monks' Graveyard. A stonewalled rectangular structure, it was excavated and restored by the OPW. Walking around it, careful to move *deiseal*, I am struck by how small, anonymous and communal it is. I am also struck by the closeness of the graveyard to what would have been the living community. The sense of the dead having been incorporated into that community is very strong. As the monks prayed or meditated, either in their cells or in the oratory, their dead companions lay within a few metres of them. It reminds me, in a very different context, of

graves I saw more than twenty years ago in rural Korea, in the middle of small fields where families were working at their crops. I remember thinking how there must have been a strong ancestral presence for the families, a sense of being guided by those who had worked those fields before them. I like to think that, while presumably not an ancestral link, the monks felt the same way about the physical remains of their departed brethren being so close to them at the same time as their departed souls interceded for them in the afterlife.

There is another aspect of this burial ground that comes into my mind now. After excavation, there was comprehensive analysis of the skeletal remains found here and in other parts of the enclosure. Intriguingly, a number of juvenile skeletons were identified, of boys between the age of nine and twelve. When I, a member of a largely post-Christian Western European society, look down at this little cemetery, I find this disturbing. I automatically tend to wonder what suffering or scandal lies under the thin soil. It seems cynical to allow this train of thought, but revelations over the last few decades about the exploitation of children, that did so much to undermine the clergy and even religious belief itself, cannot be unlearned. And now I remember the child monks I saw in a Buddhist monastery in Xiahe, a Tibetan area in western China. They were, I remember, about the same age as those boys whose remains were buried here. I recall them turning cartwheels in their purple and yellow robes, their brightly coloured runners circumscribing the air, full of shouts and giggles as apparently benign old monks smiled at their play. To this day, I have no idea whether or not all was as idyllic as it seemed. I remind myself also that fosterage was quite normal in early Irish society, and in fact survived up to the time of Daniel O'Connell, who was fostered out to one of his father's tenants. It is not easy, and probably not advisable, to simplify or standardise our thinking about how best to ensure that children may securely grow into happiness and fulfilment.

It's time to move away, perhaps, from this obtrusive train of thought. I pass back between the oratory and the cisterns, between St. Michael's Church and the upper cells, and into the darkness of the largest cell, the one joined to the oratory by the white quartz pathway. It is usually called, rather prosaically, Cell A, which makes it sound more like a prison cell than a monastic one. I have heard it referred to as the Abbot's Cell, and also heard speculation that it was a communal refectory area. Speculation aside, it is visibly obvious that it was the most important among the cells. As well as its greater size and its emphasised relationship with the oratory, it has a very impressive doorway, its double lintel standing out from the other doorways. There is also the lovely cross quite high over the doorway, inserted into the very structure of the building by the use of white quartz stones to shape the cross. These silent statements of significance are eloquent enough in themselves. They invite contemplation rather than explication. Another silent statement, which we have now by report rather than by physical presence, is John Windele's account in 1851 of the

finding by lighthouse men of a ‘stone coffin with a skeleton’. Here is enigma inviting not only contemplation but any amount of speculative reconstruction, from fragments of poetry to the twists and turns of medieval whodunnit.

Inside, once my eyes have become accustomed to the gloom, I can see a limited amount because of three window spaces high up in the corbelled walls. It is one of these in particular that has brought me in here. I imagine a crate to stand on, as I have more than once actually done, and step carefully onto it. The window faces west, and beautifully framed within it is the South Peak. It is a powerful visual axis between these two monastic poles on Sceilg. And I have written about how the east window, that can be presumed to have been above the altar of the oratory on the South Peak, would have looked over towards where I am now standing. This silent statement is more than eloquent; for me it reverberates among the rocks, and among the far recesses of my imagination. The same axis reverberated in the creative imagination of Geoffrey Moorhouse in his book *Sun Dancing*. I mentioned before that the Annals of the Four Masters record the death, in 1044, of ‘Aedh of Sgelic-Mhichil’. Moorhouse took this fragment, and, as he did with Etgal, built a whole story around it. In his fictional reconstruction Aedh is a *Céile Dé* (a spouse of God), an adherent of a very ascetic movement in Irish monasticism. Aedh’s ascetism becomes extreme and self-obsessed, he builds the oratory on the South Peak, his penitential impulses descend into madness and he finally plunges to his death in the belief that he can approach God. Immediately before his fatal plunge, Moorhouse writes, ‘he looked across at the monastery, and could see his brothers turning away from their office at the leacht’. The story then switches perspective, is taken up by the monks in the monastery enclosure:

> ‘Look!’ said one of the monks, pointing towards the peak.
> The naked figure was standing *crosfhigil* upon the summit, its head turned towards the sun. Then the arms flexed and the legs bent a little, and the body was in the air. Some trick of the wind, a powerful draught rising from the sea perhaps, carried it upwards at once on gracefully outstretched arms, but only for the time it took to draw a breath. Then the arms flailed frantically, not with the confidence of a bird, but with the desperation of a drowning man. And the body plunged out of their sight in an awful and uncontrollable whirling of limbs.

Out of their convincing and well-informed context, these fragmentary extracts may seem melodramatic. My main interest here, however, is to show once again how the recognisable landscape of Sceilg, and the sensitive absorption of what we know about its past, can allow a writer

entry into a rich imaginative world that can allow the creation of literary work which in turn becomes a part of the island's story.

I come down from my vantage point, allow my mind to wander in that story. Inevitably, most visitors today experience Sceilg when the weather is fairly benign. Of course there are times when the weather here is anything but benign. Very cold weather would have been less of a problem on a tiny island, washed by the Gulf Stream, than in many other places, but rain and storm, together with sometimes extraordinarily high seas, would certainly have caused great hardship. A strong awareness of the overwhelming physicality of Sceilg lies behind a novel called *In the Falcon's Claw* by Chet Raymo, an American writer who is a regular visitor to Kerry. Although its geographical range is far wider than Skellig, and its narrative and philosophical scope belongs to millenarian Europe, nonetheless the hardship and isolation that must have attended monastic life on the island is convincingly embodied in the narrative. Here, Aileran, a fictional intellectual monk familiar with the sophistication, the sophistry and the feuds of Rome, writes to his friend:

> For a fortnight a gale has raged about the Skellig, throwing sheets of stinging black spray over the highest pinnacles of the island; the wind is from the west, out of the sea, and lashes the island with a whip of thongs. I cannot leave my cell. I have little to eat: a few bird eggs, taken uncooked, leeks, a bit of rancid butter, a bite of cheese. And for drink, only an occasional swallow of goat's milk and the salty mix of rain and spray that collects in the niches of my stone cell. I cast my prayers on to the wind …...

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin also imagined storm here. But in contrast to Chet Raymo's medieval monk, she has imagined it, it seems to me, in contemporary, existential terms, the storm being news overshadowing the 'softer days' the 'old strong voice' once knew:

> *What am I doing here*, says the old strong voice,
> The wave reaching and snatching
> Around the pinnacles, faltering and returning
> To fling its quilt across the sloping stone
> Where in the softer days the seal took a rest;
> So it wells up, squirting up roses in its fall,
> Trying again, the awful repeated recoil,
> *And where is truth* under the slamming and roaring,
> It wants to know, and *where,*

Where is pity now? Gone below,
Wiped from the view, and indeed
What has happened to time, as the day's news
Is repeated, bellowing like the storm?

In my own writing, when I sent Gerard Manley Hopkins to Sceilg because I thought he should have gone there, I imagined him spending the night here in the monastery during a storm that mirrored the turbulence and doubt within himself. The poem I wrote deliberately echoes the poem I think of as Hopkins's masterpiece, "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire", which was written in Dublin. I tried to ground Hopkins and his poetry into the actual physical setting of the monastery during a storm:

Squall after squall from the black northwest,
Layer upon layer of darkness, stratum
Down stratum of stone-faced time, all
Without rhyme or reason pounded him,
Beat him level in the blurred vastness
Of the storm. The monastery terrace
Was tilting like a panicking deck,
The island was riven stone, splintering
On the shipwreck of itself, itself
Its own cause and cacophonous effect,
Foundering deeper into its own void.
Rain-and-spray blinded, he stumbled to the high
Cross, clung to it, swallowed salt,
Conjured witness, summoned arbitration
Against blankness.
The lighthouse beam flickered
Behind walls of rain, beat against clouds.
beat then, too, in his brain, spread
The length of passages smeared with despair,
And sprang in salty relief to his eyes.

Enough, he prayed. *Let me elect to follow*

And light, though it comes and goes, will shine.
Will the clarion, and the clarion will sound.
And this bare brute, air-bruised, wind-weary and wounded,
Floundered towards light once whole, whole once again.

I walk out of the cell into the sunlit enclosure, my head full of the literature which the darkness of the cell made it so easy to recollect.

Immersed in that light, I surprise myself by remembering that some of my most enlightening and enjoyable experiences on Sceilg happened during the night or in the half-light of dawn or in the twilight of evening. Of course I could have these experiences only because of the inestimable privilege I have had of so many overnight stays on the island. The standard two-and-a-half-hour visit, with perhaps hundreds of others, is in itself wonderful. But the freedom to go up and down the steps – whenever you choose, at whatever speed you choose and for whatever reason moves you – and to go to parts of the island that are not accessible to most visitors, is of an enormously different order. The rhythms of the short trip give way to your own rhythms, your own activity, your own contemplation. And the gradual shifts of light, of half-light, of darkness, of half-light again, something we perhaps are familiar with in our ordinary daily lives, are a dimension to life on Sceilg that most visitors never experience. After my first three-day stay on Sceilg, about thirty years ago, I wrote a sequence of poems that, almost without my being aware of it, naturally divided itself five sections that I called *Dawn*, *Morning*, *Noon*, *Evening* and *Night*. Without thinking about it, I was echoing the *Matins, Lauds, Nones* and so on that I associated with monastic life, but I was also implicitly acknowledging the natural rhythm of a few days spent away from cars, roads, schedules, crowds, media and so forth. I remember also that, when I came off the island, I was amazed at how low and horizontal the landscape seems. On Sceilg, nothing is horizontal. You direct your eyes either up or down. Obviously I cannot quantify this, but I have no doubt but that this verticality of perspective on Sceilg, as opposed to the horizontality of ordinary mainland living, has a profound effect on thought and emotional processes, an effect which does not disappear on return to the mainland.

But back to the twilight world of the island. One of the most memorable epiphanies – I think the word is justified – that came out of my range of experiences while organising and editing the anthology was when Seán Lysaght, who is a dedicated ornithologist as well as a very fine poet, led Bernard O'Donoghue and myself up the monastery steps in deep and windswept darkness in the hope of encountering storm petrels. We were like children out on a nocturnal adventure, our torch beams crisscrossing one another up and down the steps, lending strange and otherworldly

shapes and shadows to the rocks bordering the stairway. The higher we went, particularly around Christ's Saddle, the stronger the wind beat at us, and the more eerie and unnerving were the cries of the also nocturnal shearwaters, enough to send a shiver down the spine and conjure up thoughts of lost souls wandering the night. This would often be amplified as flurries of disturbed wings burst close by our startled heads.

But it was really the storm petrels we wanted to hear, whose gurgled calls we could hear in corbelled walls and stone steps during the day. Seán had promised that it was around the monastery, with all those crevices to attract them, that we were most likely to find them. And, in its relative shelter, find them we did, our delight in seeing these furtive and survivalist birds matched by our astonishment at how tiny and fragile they seemed, in contrast to their name and the robust sound of their call. I used the encounter in a later poem with a very different context, but Bernard was more immediate. In his wonderfully encompassing prosimetric account of his trip, one of the highlights of the anthology, Bernard included the following short poem:

> Eight miles off the coast, you are that much
> nearer the weather, in an element
> where the seabirds dwell in their daily round.
> You take your post on watch. There is nothing.
> And then, poor sleep-craving disciple,
> you wake to see what the Wanderer found,
> all around you: sailors' spirits
> who bring there not many known songs.
> Dark invisible, inaudible
> winged souls, peopling the dark above your head.

And Seán himself also wrote about that memorable night, in lines that delighted me so much that images from them made their way into my own later work. I remember the tender, familiar way Seán introduced us to the tiny bird, *Peadairín na Stoirme* in Irish. Here is Seán's poem, a poem I cannot resist quoting in full:

> Pilgrims at midnight,
> Our flashlamps climbing the stairs,
> We had a scuffle with buffetings
> On the last flight

And crept up on all fours
Under the lid of the wind.

The enclosure steadied us.
Wall and corbelling
Had been heaped for so long
Chink by chink, we could not go wrong,
And the hutch of stone was heaviest
At the very top, to make us strong.

Darkness was a swarm
Of darker fragments, of wills
Briefly flickering in my beam.
These were said to be the souls
Of dead monks coming home
On a gust to their star garden.

There was one, atop a wall,
Trapped in the dazzle of our light!
He had dancing shoes for the sea,
Little black webbed feet,
And each beaded eye of Biscay
Shone with its original star.

To conquer this dark
Another age painted terror –
But none was here.
I fingered the plumage gently
And blessed our reverent heads
With a motto: '*Never fear*.
The boats are coming back.
This will be remembered
In a gurgle and a small click you hear
When you listen at the stone gap.'

I remembered this epiphanic moment, and Seán's extraordinary poem, five year's later, when I wanted an image for a poem to welcome my grandson Éibhear (named after a brother of Amergin) into the world, after a hazardous and difficult passage. This is how the poem ends:

> The wings that beat instead into my mind
> Are those of storm petrels, nightbirds on Skellig,
> Whose gurglings in walls and crevices by day
> Were a warm promise, never fully realised
> Until the birds whizzed past me in the dark
> And torchlight guided me to where they perched,
> Newly landed, impossibly frail in the face
> Of all that wind and weather, bearing within
> Their restless eyes and tiny quivering frames
> The knowledge of the oceans, of the stars.

It was indeed an extraordinary night on Sceilg, a night whose echoes continue to multiply in mind and memory.

The disused lighthouse, the road between it and the lower lighthouse, as well as Seal Cove, the body of water between the two lighthouses, was the backdrop for another high point for me on Sceilg, one that found its way into my writing. Seamus Heaney, as I have said, never got to Sceilg, except in his poetry. But Marie Heaney did, during the *Voices at the World's Edge* project, and wrote the introduction to the anthology, a vivid, perceptive piece in which she absorbs the island and its context just as she immerses herself into the various writers' works. Seamus, who had sent down a lovely illustrated of print of "Remembering Malibu" when Marie came to stay, told me afterwards that she had come back 'with a new light in her eye'. I like to think, and my engagement with their writing bears it out, that writers who have visited Sceilg, for whatever length of time, have acquired new vision and new insights consequent upon that visit. But let me walk back up that lighthouse road with Marie, in the hours before sunset sometime in early June 2009. Once we pass through the surroundings of the working lighthouse, we are on the roadway that rises towards the disused one. Some of this has collapsed, along with its parapet wall, into the cove below, and in places landslides in the form of boulders and gravelly earth have created other hazards. I write, of course, from memory; from what I understand, reconstruction work by the OPW is by now well in train. We make our way carefully up past a signal station and into the disused lighthouse. If the lower lighthouse is

impressive, this one is spectacularly so. We marvel that families lived and worked here. Food and fuel were stored. Children went to school. A cast-iron porch, similar to the well maintained one in the lower lighthouse but without the attention of a paintbrush for more than a century, still stands respectably solid and Victorian, testament to the extraordinarily high standards of materials and construction that has been a hallmark of Irish Lights. We move then beyond the lighthouse, out to the end of the terrace built by the lighthouse men below the north-western face of the South Peak. We have come here because the evening promised a good sunset. The promise is more than fulfilled. A spectacular orange disc begins to descend towards a metallic blue sea that is streaked with golden light. Its intensity is like that of fire; you could imagine it might actually hiss when it enters the water, as it will do quite soon. A strong north-westerly brings a chill to the terrace. We are about to move away, when, suddenly, from the north and at speed, there is a sail, and then another and another until there is an armada, moving more quickly than I have ever seen sailing boats move. And then we realise: it's the Volvo Ocean Race, the participants in which have been partying for the past fortnight in Galway and are now resuming the race. With the strong north-westerly wind following them, the speed of these huge racing yachts is extraordinary.

As they approach Sceilg, most of the boats steer a course towards the gap between Sceilg and Sceilg Bheag, the straightest course they could take towards Mizzen Head, which they must round before they swing east towards Hook Head. But one yacht, which is then followed by two more, takes a different tack, and sails close in below the terrace which is our vantage point. It is, we realise, going to round Sceilg just out from Seal Cove and the lower lighthouse. Immediately, we left the terrace and legged it down to the roadway. I'll let Marie Heaney take up the story:

> While we were visiting the lighthouses we witnessed, from that unique vantage point, something that might, in jest, be called a Viking raid in reverse. It did, however, bring to mind the dread those monks, on that same vantage point centuries ago, must have experienced as they saw the long, dragon-headed ships enter stealthily into the sound.
>
> It so happened that the Volvo round-the-world yacht race was taking place and a yacht called the Green Dragon, with a joint crew of Irish and Chinese yachtsmen aboard, was taking part. The boats had been in Galway for a few festive days and the next leg of the race was taking them to Stockholm. It was evening and the visitors had gone. There was a good stiff breeze blowing and I was glad that I was staying on the island. Suddenly we saw a yacht scudding along. As it came closer we saw on the full sail a heraldic green dragon.
>
> We were delighted. We became even more excited when we saw that it was in the lead and realised that one of the crew, a local man from Derrynane who had sailed these

waters since childhood, had taken a different route from most of the other yachts. By the time *they* hove into view, sailing between the two Skelligs, the Green Dragon was a small speck on the horizon, heading for Scandinavia.

It was an extraordinary moment. And moment is not an exaggeration; the yachts passed along the mouth of Seal's Cove quicker than I would have thought possible. The local man that Marie mentions in her piece was Damian Foxall, a former pupil of mine who, as I write, is on a honeymoon sailing expedition in the Antarctic. His wife, Lucy Hunt, who grew up a close neighbour of mine, is a crusading marine biologist, and they share a commitment to the local and global environment, especially its marine aspects. *Gura fada buan iad beirt.*

I can still recall the excitement and exhilaration in Marie's voice as she described the whole thing on her mobile phone to her daughter, who serendipitously happened to call just in time to share in the whole thing. It was shared too with some lighthouse maintenance men who were on the island, and a few OPW guides who had also gathered for the spectacle. Incongruously perhaps, it took on for me some a sort of sacral atmosphere and, inevitably, it led to a poem, which I called "The Dragons and Archangels of Skellig Michael" and which I dedicated to Marie:

We knew the race was coming from Galway
And had seen the sails high out to windward,
But a sharp north-westerly had edged us away
To the sheltered road between the lighthouses.

And so it was that Seal Cove all at once
Held its breath when that emblazoned sail,
Familiar from the otherworld of television,
Flared out of the west, waking the sunset.

Here was a presence wonderful beyond belief:
Here was communion, a congregation,
As if the Archangel Michael had abandoned
His solitary, high-peaked wrestling with monsters

For the time being, to descend and watch
That slanted, billowing exuberance burst

Into and out of our vision, to hear your daughter
In your excited phone speak from afar

And invoke *the blessing of the Green Dragon*
On all of us, on the guides high as kites,
On the beaming lighthouse-men, on the twilight
Replete with a grace proper to archangels.

The *horarium* the monks would have followed on Sceilg probably never envisaged the celebratory aspects of day, night and twilight that I included here. I imagine they might have been deemed trivial. But who knows? Many of the loveliest lines of early Irish poetry are in the form of marginalia on scriptural or annalistic manuscripts, stray quatrains that celebrate birdsong, respite from Viking raids, a pet cat, the seasons, the weather or other subjects presumably secondary to the weighty subject of the manuscript. Sceilg is in itself marginal. At the margin of the known world when it was settled by the monks, it is now uninhabited. It is at the same time the centre its own unique and self-contained world. And for those who manage to enter that world, and especially those who manage to give artistic expression to that world, marginality and centrality tend to resist definition and limitation. Everything becomes, in fact, a twilight zone, and all the richer for that.

With that on my mind, I have been wrestling with how to finish off this chapter. Earlier, I explored poems by Tomás Rua Ó Súilleabháin and Derek Mahon about rough weather preventing them from getting to the island. Self-indulgently, I've chosen to finish with a poem of my own about rough weather preventing me from getting *off* the island. I think it may be a subconscious wish not to leave, to play with the idea of self-imposed exile, of pilgrimage. As soon as I write those words, I realise that the essential word I've used is *play*, because, like all creative writers, I play with ideas, emotions and memories, making new patterns of meaning from them in the hope that they may enrich my own life and perhaps the lives of others. But, as always, let me get back to the island itself, to its stony reality. On one of the *Voices at the World's Edge* trips, the OPW boatman Eoin Walsh, one of the great constants of the project, advised us that if we didn't come off later that day, imminent stormy weather meant at least a few days on the island without any boats coming. Having no commitments at the time, I elected to stay. It was to be five more days before another boat was to land on Sceilg.

It sounds perhaps adventurous to talk about being stormbound on Sceilg for five days, but I must be honest. There were three guides as well as myself on the island. I had a nice warm hut, as well as plenty of food. There was no hardship, there was no danger, there was good, helpful and

informative company. What I felt most was privilege and gratitude. I also experienced a receptivity, an engagement with the island on these unfamiliar terms that was enormously liberating and enabling as far as my writing was concerned. When I saw Sceilg Bheag disappear into storm clouds, along with the islands of Deenish and Scariff, the Beara peninsula, the Dingle peninsula and the Iveragh peninsula, I felt myself being sucked into the isolation of Sceilg, into its uniqueness, its layers of story. When wind-driven rain coursed down the rockfaces, then overflowed the drains made by the lighthouse men and poured down the roadway in a flood, I was invigorated by it. I felt it course through my veins and arteries and into my soul. The increasing size and power of the waves was as elating as it was frightening.

Alone by night in my hut, the page in front of me pooled in light from my gas lamp, eating sorrel leaves I had gathered on the slabs behind the monastery, I could begin to guess – and I claim no more than that – at aspects of the eremitical and contemplative life. And yes, I know, I was playing. But what incredibly purposeful and rewarding play it was! Before those few stormbound days, I had thought that I had written all I was ever going to write about Sceilg. From my first collection in 1989, I had written exponentially about Sceilg. I thought I had said all I had to say. When the OPW project was conceived, I thought of myself as editor and organiser, and I told people that I would be unlikely to contribute any original work. But by the end of my five days, as well as regular but cautious forays out into the rough weather, including some well buffeted trips to the monastery, I had conceived or drafted far more poems than there would be room for in the anthology. It was the relatively solitary engagement with the island, under relatively extreme conditions, that renewed what I had thought of as completed work. And it is with one of those poems I am going to finish.

Four days into my stay, the wind shifted, and the sea below my hut seemed to have eased. I walked down towards the landing place to have a look to see if it was anything like calm enough to expect a boat the following day. Of course, I hadn't properly realised that the wind had merely shifted, not abated, and that it was only because I was walking on the lee side of the island that it seemed relatively calm. But when I rounded the last bend in the roadway, I stopped, transfixed. It would have been reckless to go near even the top of the steps leading down to the pier. Waves measuring up to five metres were boiling and breaking over the pier. To stand on the pier would certainly have meant being washed off. The whole thing was just terrifying, in a way that was far more universal and existential than simply a matter of personal danger. That was when I yearned for the certainty, order and consolation that I imagine the monks found in their regulated lives in the cells two hundred metres above me. I had come down hoping to find a boat might be able to come for me tomorrow. I was confronted with what seemed an appalling, apocalyptic vision of nihilism.

Now I suddenly yearned to go back in time to the certainties of the religious beliefs I was brought up with. I wished I could share in a communal monastic vision that might shield me from the void I was staring into:

The fourth day running now
Without any sign of a boat,
And, ignoring the slap and thump
Of the wind, I stroll to the landing,
Wondering idly about a boat
Tomorrow. A young fulmar
Flaps, and spits straight at me
Its terror of being abandoned.
Then around the last sheltered
Bend above the pier I gape
At a sea that's gone out of its mind.

This is no swell, or tide,
Or crest, or trough or backwash
Ordained by moon and wind.
This is a charge, a hurtling,
A trampling, a goring, a huge
Grey and green and white bulk
Buckling, a frenzy to withdraw,
Heave breath, rear, re-gather
Itself, again, for the great collapse
Again, of itself and of cliffs
And of pier and of everything
Under the sun and moon and stars.

And all at once this raw, tormented air,
This roadway pounded by the knowledge
Of its own pitiful, tenuous hold,
This onlooker, aghast once again
At what he has always known,

Are all urgent with the need
For the stone steps' passage
To the high oratories and cells,
For ordained hours, for bells and ritual
That might placate the implacable,
For the final, clear word upon this rock.

Of course there is no 'final, clear word'. A yearning is not a belief. Part of me, yes, ached for the old certainties, their consolations. But a greater part of me now ached for home, and for the certainty of the love I knew awaited me there.

An Glór Conallach

The Poetic Voice of the O'Connells of Iveragh

Sometime in the late summer of 1828, if tradition is to be believed, the people of Bord Eoghain Fhinn (the area that stretches along the southern side of the Iveragh peninsula) assembled here at Cúm a' Chiste, which forms, as I pointed out when tracing Milesian footsteps, a natural border that can be traced back into prehistory. They were assembled to greet their own hero back to his own territory after a national triumph. Daniel O'Connell had just recently been returned as M.P. for Clare, and had signalled his intention to refuse to take the oath that had in effect made it impossible for a Catholic to take a seat in Westminster. It was a political earthquake that would lead to Catholic Emancipation the following year, and the first step in the politicisation of the *cosmhuintir* (the lower orders), a step which still echoes in the corridors of power in Ireland and abroad.

Before I start digging into the memories of O'Connell that inhere in this rocky hillside, I should probably give an idea of what I am hunting for – and the hunting metaphor is very apt, as we will see. A friend of mine, a fervent upholder of the violent revolutionary nationalism which supplanted O'Connell's philosophy of constitutional political involvement combined with peaceful mass agitation, and who supported that violent nationalist movement during the Northern Ireland troubles, once refused an invitation to visit Iveragh because the place, he avowed, had 'too much of O'Connell in it'. I find it difficult to understand the disdain, indeed the hatred, that was and still is directed at O'Connell by adherents of that philosophy. Nonetheless, although I disagree profoundly with his views, and found his stated reluctance to visit profoundly silly, my friend did make me think about just how much the man I regard as the greatest Irish political figure in recent centuries is connected with the landscape of Iveragh and especially with Derrynane, which I can see below me, its sheltered harbour relatively calm, protected by rocky promontories from the stormy sea that is battering the coast today. I'll be going down there someday soon, but for today I want to stay here in this liminal space, in a hollow below the dividing ridge, in search not of Donn or Amergin as before, but of the shade of Daniel O'Connell, who even during his own highly documented and controversial lifetime, arrived at something like the same mythological and heroic character which is the only prism through which we can glimpse those Milesian brothers. Much of what "everybody knows" about O'Connell is not factually true. The black glove he famously wore to Mass, after killing D'Esterre in a duel in 1815, is a posthumous fiction. The multitudinous children with whom he reputedly populated workhouses were equally fictitious. But the very fact that "everybody knows" these things is in itself testament to the mythic character of this most historical of men. The man I hope to find in Iveragh, which was during his lifetime one of the most remote and inaccessible places in Ireland, can be sketched from various perspectives: history, family, place, myth, literature, politics and many more. During his long public life, he made Derrynane, or Darrynane as it used to be more accurately called, one of the most resonant placenames in Ireland. I take pleasure in the serendipity

that the place takes its name – *Doire Fhíonáin*, the oakwood of Fíonán – from another great Iveragh personage. And while my explorations will take place with an awareness of great political stages in Ireland and in London, it is in the place he loved best that I want to encounter O'Connell.

Here at Cúm a' Chiste, on the old road, in the late summer of 1828, O'Connell's own people gathered to welcome him after his triumph in the Clare Election. The seismic repercussions of that triumph had been well understood by the establishment. Vesey Fitzgerald, O'Connell's opponent in the election, had written this to Robert Peel, Chief Secretary for Ireland:

> All the great interests broke down and the desertion has been universal. Such a scene as we have had! Such a tremendous prospect as opens before us!

The crowds who gathered at Cúm a' Chiste also understood this, perhaps in a more immediate and more visceral sense. They were after all, the dispossessed whom O'Connell had motivated and organised and who, for the next twenty years, would continue to see him as the Liberator. Among them was a schoolteacher and poet who was ten years younger than the fifty-three-year-old landlord he had come to welcome home. I have already written about how, ten years later, he would describe the roadbuilding explosions that happened around here, as well as about his song about stormy weather almost causing the loss of a boat carrying pilgrims to Sceilg Mhichíl. But now, in the late summer of 1828, he was at the head of the crowd that gathered to welcome home the newly elected O'Connell. It can be argued that Tomás Rua Ó Súilleabháin was the last representative of a long tradition in Gaelic poetry, a tradition whereby one of the poet's functions was to praise his patron chieftain. Tradition has it that O'Connell paid for Tomás Rua's education in a Dublin college, and that the poet was always welcome in Derrynane House. This is how Séamus Fenton, an educationalist and writer from the area, describes local tradition in his 1949 memoir *It All Happened*:

> The poet, Tomás Ruadh, a welcome visitor both at Derrynane and in the priest's house, was frequently asked by people, who wanted a favour, to compose for them an appropriate stanza or two, in Irish, on the subject of request, to be sung before the great man. It was well known that the Liberator loved a good Irish song, and the requested was ever granted with the poet's *mír*, a glass all round, O'Connell's concluding remark being *"Mo ghradhain thú, a Thomáis, níor chaillis riamh é."* (Good man, Tomás, you never lost the gift).

Tomás Rua composed a number of poems in praise of Daniel O'Connell and other members of his family, once referring to him as 'Ó Conaill geal de phór Mhíléisius', giving him a Milesian ancestry

which possessed, as we have seen in an earlier chapter, both local and national resonance at the time.

I am alone now, in early March 2020, as I come here to try to reimagine that celebratory gathering in the late summer of 1828. I'm trying to see the place without the Ring of Kerry road below me, which would have been then just a gleam in an engineering eye. The narrow and steep butter-road which Domhnall na mBróg, in an earlier chapter, described as 'rough and uneven, going straight up the high and straight down the low, often by difficult rockfaces ', and along which I have walked up, would have emphasised rather than mitigated the remoteness of this end of the peninsula, which, until the middle of the nineteenth century, was far more easily accessible by sea than by land. The consequent ease of extra-legal trade – or, to use the more direct term, smuggling – had been a factor in the relative prosperity of the O'Connell family, who had been prominent in Iveragh since at least the fifteenth century, when they were seneschals in the maritime McCarthy castle at Ballycarbery near Cahersiveen. Today, however, I'm trying to recreate something more immediate than lineage or history. I'm trying to populate this lonely place with the crowd that assembled here almost two centuries ago, daring to hope for the lifting of the burden religious, political and economic deprivation they felt.

The crowd would have been substantial. Today, when I look down at the farmland below me, I see monocultural grazing-land, beef-cattle or sheep being the only form of agriculture practised. Even that has become marginalised, and sustained largely because of subsidies. That, combined the mechanisation of agriculture, means that the necessary workforce is a small fraction of what it used to be, regardless of the question of the ownership of the farmland. Two centuries ago, the farming landscape would have been far more varied. Indeed, at this time of the year, early March, the small fields would have been dotted with families preparing the ground for the potato crop that was their primary sustenance. Even today, you can trace the cultivation ridges under heather, furze and rushes on the remains of upland fields. These impoverished tenant farmers, many times more numerous than their freeholder descendants today, would have formed the majority of the crowd that gathered to greet O'Connell, Tomás Rua among them. The same Seámus Fenton whom I have already quoted gathered the poems and songs of Tomás Rua from oral tradition, publishing them in book form in 1914, under the name James Fenton. Here, in my own translation, is how he describes the gathering here in 1828:

> In the year 1828 when Daniel O'Connell was returning from Clare, the people of Bórd Eóghain Fhinn went to the top of Cúm a' Chiste to meet him, 900 feet above the sea. The young men had to push the coaches to the brow of the hill along the old rough and

dangerous road. The poet [Tomás Rua] was among them and he proceeded to welcome Daniel like this:

Sweeter to me is your coach
Than Greek cavalry under arms
Swarming down from the hilltops
To lovely, sun-kissed Derrynane.

But when Daniel spoke to the poet, Tomás then performed the following song, and the whole crowd joined in the air.

The song is the well-known "Dónal Binn Ó Conaill Caoin/ Sweet and Decent Daniel O'Connell", sung to a lively tune in marching time that has become known as "Máirseáil Uí Chonaill". Here are the first and last stanzas, together with the phonetically written rhythmic chorus, as collected by Fenton:

Sé Dónal binn Ó Conaill caoin
An planda fíor de'n Ghael-fhuil
Gur le feabhas a phinn is meabhar a chinn
Do scól sé síos an craos-shliocht
Mar go bhfuil se scríofa i bPastorina
Go maithfear cíos do Ghaelaibh
'S go mbeidh fairrgí breach le flít
Ag teacht thar poinnte Chléire.

San rite fol de dol dol rite fal dol dol
Rite fol ol dol der a laddle iddle
Rite fol de dol dol rite fol ol dol
Rite fol ol dol déro.

Beidh ministrí gan strus gan phuimp
Is ní rithfid chun chinn mar théidís,
Ní bhainfidh cíós de Chaitilicíbh
Mar cuirfear síos na méirligh.
Beidh Dónal choíche ar a dtí
Go nglanfar cruinn as Éilge iad
Nuair a bheidh an dlí fúinn féin arís
Ar theacht Emancipation.

And here it is in my own translation:

Our *Dónal binn Ó Conaill caoin*
Is the purest flower of Gaeldom
Who with reason's strength and might of pen
Has beaten down the slavers.
And Pastorini's book proclaims
That soon we'll be free from taxation
When fleets of sails will be seen on the bay
Heeling round by the point of Cléire.

Their clergy will forfeit wealth and pomp
With no more unrestrained rampaging
There'll be no more tax on poor Catholics
For the knaves will know abasement.
Dan will be forever at their heels
'Til they're banished out of Erin
And the law will be once more our own
With the coming of Emancipation.

It is immediately obvious that the language and the sentiments are not those of the non-sectarian and inclusive political leader who was being welcomed. But in the context of the religious fault-line along which Irish nationalist feeling has largely found itself aligned for the last four centuries – an alignment which was taken for granted in the tradition into which I was born – this should hardly be surprising, especially when we consider that the crowd gathered was undoubtedly largely comprised of an underclass in many aspects of their lives: economic, religious, political and linguistic. These were, to use a phrase coined by Richard Nixon – a very different person in a very different context – "the silent majority" to whom O'Connell had given a voice. And Tomás Rua's song is one manifestation of that voice, rooted in the place I am now contemplating.

The place today is quite empty. March has indeed "come in like a lion". Cold, blustery winds are interspersed with showers. Some sheep are huddled in the shelter of rocks. The only energy that manifests itself is the exhilarating display of aerobatics that little groups of choughs are indulging in, throwing themselves with abandon into the currents and updrafts overhead. I love the contrast between their glossy black plumage and their bright red beaks and legs. In Irish, they're known as *cág coise deirge*, the red-legged crow, and are quite common on cliffs and rocky hillsides along the

western sea-coast. Today, their harsh corvine call and "fingered" wings at first made me think I was seeing ravens, but their smaller size and highly communal bursts of stunt-flying, together with the flashes of red beak and leg when they came near, reminded me of a haiku I had once written about them after seeing them at close range on Sceilg:

> Shrieking a *Can Can*
> They display their scarlet legs
> To the whole wide world.

But let me return to 1828, and the Liberator's welcome, which probably was as wild and energetic as the cavorting of the choughs. Whether or not, these now bare hillsides were no doubt alive with groups large and small streaming here from all sides. Men, women and children would have streamed up from *Cúm a' tSleabhcháin* (the cúm of the seaweed), from *An Fearann Iarthach* (the western townland), from *An Rinnín* (the small headland), from *Teamhair* (the sunny slope), and over the hill from *Na hInsí* (the river-meadows), from *Ard Caorach* (the uplands of the sheep), from *Cúm na hEorna* (the cúm of the barley), from *An Gleann Mór* (the big valley). They came from all over, the *cosmhuintir* who had given O'Connell the nickname "King of the Beggars", a nickname that Seán Ó Faoláin was to use as a title for his wonderfully literary and highly readable biography of O'Connell. And let that raw, *cosmhuintir* voice be heard, in the words of Tomás Rua. He sang, perhaps naively, that every young man would be shod in fine black boots, despite having long been without them:

> Beidh bróga dúbha 'r gach óig-fhear clúmhail
> Cé gur fada dhúinn a n-éagmuis.

When I hear those lines sung, the term that comes into my mind is *les sans culottes*, the *without britches* who were the *cosmhuintir* of the French Revolution. Today, in an era when cheap clothing from impoverished countries is an accepted part of our European world, it is challenging to realise the meaning of such phrases, but it is salutary and necessary to do so. O'Connell had released forces that went far beyond religious civil rights. But one line of Tomás Rua's song has for me a particular and lasting resonance. I translated 'feabhas a phinn is meabhar a chinn' fairly literally as 'reason's strength and might of pen'. Along with the traditional trope of O'Connell as Jacobite hero who brings military aid from abroad, a trope that was by this time purely literary, Tomás Rua in this line identifies the real basis for O'Connell's power and strength as his intellectual and polemical reputation. When, after O'Connell's death some twenty years later, a shrine was being constructed

in the church of St Agata dei Goti in Rome to house, according to his wishes, the silver casket in which his heart was embalmed, a commemorative stone tablet was engraved with these words:

> Qui ingenii sui splendore, et mira dicendi copia
> Vitam, religionem, civium jura, libertatemque
> Adservuit et propnugnavit.

This can be translated as 'Who by his splendour of intellect, and extraordinary fluency of speech, preserved and fought for life, religion, civil rights and liberty.' When I read the words of that first line, many years after becoming familiar with the words of Tomás Rua's song, I was immediately struck by the similarity between the words of the lively song originally sung here at Cúm a' Chiste and the dignified Latin epitaph carved in Rome. Today, as the raucous choughs throw themselves around the sky overhead, I toss the Latin (half-remembered) and Gaelic words around my mind, and take delight in how they work off one another.

From the top of the ridge over which the old road passes, I look around to try to guess the most likely place for O'Connell to make his victory speech and for his Gaelic laureate to sing the praises of his triumphant chieftain. Just down from the ridge, on the southern side, there is a large, open and fairly level space. It seems to me to be the most likely place for the crowd to have assembled. And then, all of a sudden, I can see the ideal podium for O'Connell and Tomás Rua. Tucked into the bottom of a steep hill, and commanding a view over the open space I have mentioned, is the wedge tomb I described as a "Bronze Age Mirador" while tracing Milesian footsteps. Nowadays it might be found shocking to suggest that a prehistoric monument could be used in this way, but not, I imagine, in 1828. Musing on the symbolic force of using it as such a podium, I am reminded of Lady Chatterton's description of this very same monument in 1837, just less ten years later than the day I am reimagining. This is her account:

> My companions left me at the Druid's altar, on the summit of the pass; a spot which, placed as it is in the midst of such sublime scenery, and commanding such a splendid view of the ocean, with all the bold headlands, lovely bays, and islands on this coast, seems peculiarly calculated for adoration.

Peculiarly calculated for adoration it may well be, but it is also ideal for commanding a view of the gathered crowd, and of the townlands and farmland from which they had gathered to this place. Lady Chatterton, as usual, refers to this type of monument as an altar. Today we know that to be

erroneous, but it is worth reminding ourselves of her source for that description. A little further on, she spells out that source. She refers to the Milesian myth and Ballinskelligs Bay,

> …. where, according the traditions of the surrounding peasantry, Irr, the son of Milesius, was drowned in attempting to land. Hence they say that the name Ireland has originated; that the other brothers, with their followers from Spain, succeeded in landing, and subsequently obtained possession of the country; and that from gratitude for their conquest, they erected these altars, which are so often seen in this part of the island.

Whether or not my surmise about the wedge tomb being a podium is right, what is beyond dispute is that ten years before Lady Chatterton came here, the same "surrounding peasantry" gathered here to welcome home a hero to whom, as we have earlier seen, the designation "Milesian" had already been attached by his own poet-grandmother, as well as by the poet Tomás Rua, and would later be embodied in the "Milesian cap" which he would wear with pride. I think it is reasonable to assume that such splendidly sited monument, which his audience regarded as a Milesian thanksgiving altar, would be seen as an ideal platform on which to welcome home the triumphant *Ó Conaill geal de phór Mhíléisius*, to quote Tomás Rua. And I cannot resist quoting again from Elizabeth Fitzpatrick when she said about inauguration sites for Gaelic chieftains:

> Open-air assembly in medieval and early modern Ireland to ca. 1600 exercised elite collective identity more than any other institution of Gaelic society. It was at the assembly site, often situated in a territorial boundary zone and distinguished by an ancestral burial, real or imagined, that the concept of people and place as indivisible found its greatest expression.

Where I am standing now fulfils the 'territorial boundary zone and distinguished by an ancestral burial' criterion, and it was a commonplace about the Liberator, even during his lifetime and among foreign visitors, that he in many ways was treated as a clan chieftain, especially at home in Iveragh. Slowly but surely, my imaginative reconstruction seems to transform itself into factual memory. Although I am on my own here today, I can visualise Dan being carried shoulder-high by the exuberant crowd and raised up onto it to address his people. And if he was indeed so raised up, then he would have directly faced Scariff Island, the most prominent of 'the islands on this coast' to which Lady Chatterton referred. It will be remembered from an earlier chapter that this island was where the Franciscan Friar O'Sullivan, *Bráthair Rua na Scairbhe*, was beheaded by Cromwellian troops, and

that the friar's skull was kept in the O'Connell family and used as a talisman in the taking of oaths and other solemnities. O'Connell would not have passed on the opportunity to remind his audience of this, and to weave it into a political narrative that he was about to bring to the climax of Catholic Emancipation. Factual or fanciful, the whole scene is now embedded in my memory as firmly as if I had read it in a contemporary account.

Before I leave this wedge tomb, its two-metre-long capstone patterned with grey-green lichen, its enigmatic presence literally silent as a grave, I would like to strike another imaginative echo from its empty chamber. As I have said, Tomás Rua's welcoming song, "Dónal Binn Ó Conaill Caoin", is a lively, rousing march tune, with a strongly rhythmic chorus, and is still popular in Iveragh. In a radio recording made in 1958, Fíonán Mac Coluim, a distinguished folklore-collector from the area who was born in 1875, introduced a lovely rendition of the song by Máirín Ní Shúilleabháin. But it is not the song itself I want to concentrate on, but Mac Coluim's introductory remarks. Here is my translation of some of his observations:

> It is a vibrant, lively song, of a type that is unusual now, because it is a marching song and a song for dancing. This type of song was common in Ireland until maybe a hundred years ago, I found out from asking people. But it fell out of fashion to have dancing steps with them, because it was thought odd to have dancing steps with a song like that.

And indeed there is another radio recording, one made available to me by the Iveragh singer Tim Dennehy, who himself has recorded "Dónal Binn Ó Conaill Caoin". The recording he played for me was made by Ciaran Mac Mathúna in a house in Maistir Gaoithe, near Waterville, sung by a woman named Cáit Ní Ailíosa, originally from the same *An Gleann Mór* I mentioned earlier as being one of the areas close to Cúm a' Chiste from where the people assembled would have come. As usual the word *Emancipation*, the very last word of the song apart from the mouth-music chorus, is sung as five clearly-stressed triumphant syllables, the penultimate syllable being particularly elongated and emphasised. Despite the political naivety of some of the words, it is metrically a highly accomplished piece. And in the background to the singing of the chorus, the same Fíonán Mac Coluim can be heard dancing steps in time to the song. Mac Mathúna comments that Mac Coluim told him 'that it was customary to dance a few steps to the chorus of the song'. Here is a wonderful link whose sources go a long way back in the folk memory. And the same folk-memory tells us that Tomás Rua played the fiddle, and that he would often dance few steps when he sang his compositions. It is an imaginative leap, certainly, to recreate Tomás Rua's performance of his new song for O'Connell from these linked fragments. But it is not an impossible leap. It is easy to imagine the assembled crowd

coming to the end of the song, finishing on a triumphalist *ar theacht E-man-cip-AA-tion!* So here, now, in the cold silence of this early March day in 2020, I am conjuring the crowd from the summer of 1828, and, helped by Fíonán Mac Coluim's dance-steps and all the versions of the song I have heard over the years, I see and hear Tomás Rua on the capstone, his singing words celebrating his own and his people's hero, his dancing feet beating out a rhythm on this ancient capstone that would resonate through the benches of the House of Commons in Westminster to consolidate what Daniel O'Connell had achieved through peacefully harnessing the power of the 'surrounding peasantry', in Iveragh and all over Ireland.

And while I'm at it, I allow a very different piece of verse inhabit the surrounding land-and-seascape; not because there is any factual connection, but because the opening lines of the extract I want to quote echo the breadth and magnificence of my surroundings here. Edward Bulwer-Lytton is not a familiar name today, but he was a well-established literary figure in the mid-nineteenth century, and also an MP, first as a Liberal and afterwards as a Tory, whose time in Westminster overlapped with that of O'Connell. In 1860, he published a book-length poem called "St. Stephen's", which was a poetical exploration of the interplay between oratory, politics, history. A section of it deals with O'Connell, and, although Bulwer-Lytton's view of O'Connell was not always positive, he vividly describes O'Connell's power as an orator. Obviously he had seen and heard O'Connell speak at one of the open-air Repeal "monster meetings" in Ireland (his wife was from Tipperary), and had been struck by O'Connell's physical and verbal dominance at such meetings. The crowd which O'Connell had addressed here a decade or so earlier would have been much smaller; but the majesty of the surroundings seems to me to be mirrored in how the poet creates a 'human ocean' of the crowd he describes, and 'the giant' orator a dominant force in the landscape, contained only by 'wide air' and 'boundless heaven':

> Once to my sight the giant thus was given,
> Walled by wide air and roofed by boundless heaven;
> Beneath his feet the human ocean lay,
> And wave on wave flowed into space away.
> Methought no clarion could have sent its sound
> E'en to the centre of the hosts around.
> And, as I thought, rose the sonorous swell,
> As from some church tower swings the silvery bell;
> Aloft and clear from airy tide to tide,
> It glided easy as a bird may glide.

> To the last verge of that vast audience sent,
> It play'd with each wild passion as it went:
> Now stirred the uproar, now the murmurs stilled,
> And sobs or laughter answered as it willed.

These lines were written in a very different context, but their sense of O'Connell's oratory having the range, scope and sheer hugeness of a created landscape is especially fascinating in this place, in the same landscape in which I traced the presence of Donn, of the Cailleach and of Fíonán, all three of whom were in some way perceived of as having been shapers of place. O'Connell himself, boastful though he may have been, would not have made such a claim. But he did often claim the inverse: that he himself had been shaped by Iveragh and its landscape.

In this context, and before I leave Cúm a' Chiste, I want to contemplate another literary depiction of O'Connell, a depiction that can also be linked to this most extraordinary setting. About 1844, William O'Neill Daunt, a friend and close associate of O'Connell, and afterwards an anecdotal biographer, accompanied him to Derrynane. His account of O'Connell at home is interesting in many ways, but the picture I want to concentrate here is that of the Liberator giving free rein to his great outdoor passion – hunting hares by following on foot after beagles. It is a pursuit that, although much diminished over the course of the half-century or so I've lived in Iveragh, is still quite popular here, and has established its own place in the folklore and songs of the peninsula. For O'Connell it was more than just a holiday at home. In a letter to Daunt dated 9th September 1842, he interrupts his business-like instructions and questions to say 'I have had some excellent hunting and feel quite renovated in health'. Just eleven days later, in a letter to P. V. Fitzpatrick, he again interrupts the business of the letter, this time even more effusively and revealingly:

> The weather has been very favourable since my arrival here. I have exceedingly enjoyed my hunting scenes and I really feel a restoration of health and energy even beyond my expectations. I do delight in this retreat. My *pack* is beautiful and they hunt admirably. They kill with ease full six and even seven hares in a day, and this amidst the finest scenery, the most *majestic* in the world. How I wish you saw this place and saw *my hounds* hunt because it is not the men but the dogs that hunt with me. It is with bitter regret I tear myself from these mountains, and I would not consent for any offer to forfeit my prospect of being here all October in the ensuing year.

> I have given nearly the last fortnight to political idleness, and from this day I *begin again*. I think I feel that the prospects of the people are less clouded than they were. I am sure events are working for the popular cause.

Leaving aside my distaste for blood sports – a distaste that, while normal enough today, would probably have been unimaginable two centuries ago – I find these extracts very moving. O'Connell's identification of hunting in this landscape with his own physical and mental renewal is remarkable. In the course of a dozen or so lines he uses *renovated*, *restoration* and *begin again*. The place is *majestic*, the hounds are *beautiful*. The last paragraph finds him politically and socially optimistic. It is almost as if the world has been recreated through O'Connell's recreational activities. Somehow it invests O'Connell with something of the mythic land-shaping characteristics I mentioned earlier in relation to personages like Fíonán and Donn. Add in Bulwer-Lytton's vision of him as a 'giant' who is 'Walled by wide air and roofed by boundless heaven', and it becomes easy to see how he was often perceived as having superhuman qualities even during his own lifetime.

So let me quickly allow him to be recreated as entirely and ordinarily human, here at Cúm a' Chiste, in a description of a day's hunting written by O'Neill Daunt after his visit to Derrynane:

> … we ascended the hill of Coomakista, crossed the line of the new road, and ere half-an-hour had elapsed, a hare was started. It was a glorious run; the hare was in view for half a mile or more; and as the dogs ran the scent, they kept so close together, that a sheet might have covered the pack. O'Connell, who enjoyed the hunt with infinite glee, walked and ran from rock to rock, to keep the dogs in view. The mountain air had already sharpened my appetite, and I inquired rather anxiously when we should have breakfast. - "Not until we kill two hares," replied O'Connell, "we must earn our breakfast." He then engaged in busy speculations on the course of the hare—she had doubled, and thrown out the dogs— the pack were at fault—they had scattered, and were trying in different directions to recover the scent. Ah! Drummer hit the scent again, and now they were all once more in full pursuit. It was a glorious scene. Overhead was a cloudless sky; around us, on every side, was the most magnificent scenery, lighted, up with brilliant sunshine. There was that finest of all music, the loud, full cry of the beagles, returned by a thousand echoes; the shouts of men and boys ringing sharp and cheerily along the hills; and there was Daniel O'Connell himself, equalling in agility men not half his age, pouring forth an exhaustless stream of jest and anecdote, and entering with joyous zeal into the fullest spirit of the noble sport. Two hares were killed within a hour and a half; and we then sat down to breakfast in a small sheltered nook. It was

> a green hollow in the hill-side, about 900 feet above the level of the sea. Immediately over us projected a gray rock, which formed a sort of rude ceiling to the inner part of our mountain parlour. Breakfast in such a spot, and with such appetites, was truly a luxurious feast. A fragment of rock was our table; some of the party sat on stones, whilst others reclined in primitive fashion on the grass. The huntsmen, in their gay red jackets, and several of the peasantry, formed an irregular line upon the outskirts. The noble dogs sat around with an air of quiet dignity, that seemed indicative of conscious merit. Far beneath us was the Atlantic, sparkling in the morning sun; to the right were the mountain isles of Scarriff and the bold rocks of Skellig. "Those Skelligs," said an imaginative English visitor, "are like two huge cathedrals rising out of the sea." The outline of the larger Skellig, as seen from Coomakista mountain, in some measure justifies the comparison. Our telescopes enabled us to discern a few large sail in the extreme offing; but with the exception of some fishing-boats, there were not any vessels in the Bay of Ballinskelligs. The Liberator amused himself at the expense of such of the party as had been deficient in agility; and quizzed one or two Londoners, whose previous knowledge of country scenery had been almost solely drawn from the Beulah Spa, the parks, or theatrical representations. However, although the pavements of Pall Mall and Regent Street afford but indifferent preparation for mountain pedestrianism, yet his London friends, upon the whole, acquitted themselves very creditably. The post-boy arrived with the letter-bag while we were at breakfast. Mr. O'Connell read his letters on the mountain—the hunt was then resumed, and with such success, that, if I mistake not, we brought home seven hares at sunset.

It is a lovely and lively description. I take particular delight in the 'finest of all music' passage describing the baying of the hounds, with its echoes, conscious or not, of Oisín telling Saint Patrick that the baying of hounds was more attractive than monastic prayer and of Fionn Mac Cumhaill describing the 'finest music' as being 'the music of what happens'. I love, too, how the arrival of the post up the side of the mountain allows the great world its place in the Liberator's day without upending the renewal he enjoys on the mountain, and how gentle fun is poked at the metropolitan visitors who had come to visit this most accomplished and sophisticated of parliamentarians in his mountain fastness. I even like the consistency between O'Connell's boast of 'even seven hares in a day' and O'Neill Daunt's 'brought home seven hares at sunset' But what fastens itself into my mind is the 'green hollow in the hill-side, about 900 feet above the level of the sea', where the hunting party stopped for breakfast and O'Connell had his post delivered. For it will be remembered that 900 feet is exactly the height at which Seamus Fenton said the crowd assembled to meet O'Connell in

1828. And O'Neill Daunt further tells us that 'over us projected a gray rock, which formed a sort of rude ceiling to the inner part of our mountain parlour'. From where I am standing, both physically and imaginatively, this could be the capstone of the wedge tomb where I imagined O'Connell speaking and Tomás Rua singing and dancing.

But, of course, it doesn't really matter where exactly that particularly day's hunting party took breakfast. It is the vivid depiction of this celebrated man of the world at his most exuberantly happy in his own remote and majestic surroundings that remains in the mind, as it obviously remained in the mind of his friend O'Neill Daunt. Seán Ó Faoláin, whose admiration for O'Connell in his highly literary biography, *King of the Beggars,* was by no means uncritical, also warmed to the scene, being especially struck by the detail of the postman bringing the affairs of the world to the side of the remote mountain:

> Darrynane came as a welcome rest in the autumn after all that hurly-burly. There he was, as somebody said, like a petty German king, with his hounds, his early morning hunting, his red-coated men with their long staves hallooing from glen to glen. One would like to dally with him there, especially where we find him seated high up in the mountainside greeting the postman from Caherciveen who comes clambering up with his heavy postbag. He would breakfast on the hills, going quickly but intently through his letters, strewing the grass with the *Times*, the *Universe*, letters from France or America, reports from Dublin, the *Oxford and Cambridge* magazine that contains some article of interest to him, begging letters, appeals from his poor folk in trouble … while, far beneath him, all Kerry sends its hills falling to the vast sea.

The scene also found its way into fiction. Walter Macken, perhaps the most popular Irish novelist of the mid-twentieth century, published *The Silent People*, a romantic historical novel set in the first half of the nineteenth century. In the early stages of the narrative, the main protagonists, Dualta Duane and Cuan McCarthy, are on the run in Kerry following trouble with a landlord:

> He ran a long way and wasn't even breathless from the run, when around the shoulder of the hill came a racing hare and baying beagles and behind them the forms of running and shouting men. He was in the middle of the hare-hunt almost before he was aware of it. When the hare saw him, it paused, fatally, because the dogs got to it. It had only time for one despairing cry before it died and then the panting men were there and they were

looking curiously at him, and at the figure of Cuan coming down the hill behind him, his cloak on the breeze, like a great flapping black crow.

They were a ragged-looking bunch of men, mostly barefooted, healthy, bright-eyed, and breathing heavily after the chase. All except one who came from behind, a tall burly man, booted to his calves, his neck stockless. As Dualta met his eyes, his heart started to pound slowly, because you couldn't but recognize the face or the figure. It was strange to see the lines drawn in a newspaper or a magazine, the cartooning and caricaturing of the real, suddenly become reality before your eyes. There it was, the thick curly hair with the reddish tint, dusted with grey, intelligent blue eyes and an impudent snub nose. He found himself looking at Daniel O'Connell, who came forward to meet him, as curious as a Kerryman, as strange as if a drawn figure had walked out of the pages of a newspaper.

'Well,' said the deep voice, clear on the air, 'and who are you?'

And, a few pages later, after much political argument, Macken's novelistic eye focuses on the detail of the arrival of the post which had also taken O Faoláin's literary fancy:

'McCarthy is a fighting name,' said O'Connell.

'So was O'Connell, ' said Cuan.

'And still is,' said O'Connell. 'I must go. I see my poor secretary struggling up the hill with a basket of letters on his arm. If you are staying here come down and see me at home. We will talk more.'

The open invitation from O'Connell was typical, and his hospitality was widely testified to by often casual visitors from Ireland, Britain, Europe and the United States.

When I came to write a series of poems about O'Connell during the early 1990's, O'Neill Daunt's recollections, Ó Faoláin's literary biography and Macken's novel all coalesced in my mind with the memory of Fíona and myself being with my parents and our two then young children one Sunday afternoon on nearby Fearann Iarthach mountain. We had heard hounds baying somewhere nearby. Suddenly a very agitated hare, zigzagging wildly, crossed in front of us, stopped a moment, wide-eyed and panting, then disappeared into the heather and furze. My father, who used to follow beagles in his youth in Castletownroche in north Cork, got excitedly enthusiastic about directing the approaching hounds after the hare. The children and ourselves were equally determined to encourage them in the wrong direction. There followed the spectacle of four adults and two children whooping and halloaing and waving our arms in a way guaranteed to confuse any humans, beagles

or indeed hares in the vicinity. It was, in any case, all pointless; the beagles had lost the scent and were circling aimlessly until called off in a different direction by the huntsmen, who looked over their shoulders at us with understandable curiosity if not indeed suspicion. My mother used a favourite saying of hers about cute people who *run with the hare and hunt with the hounds*. Later, when reading and writing about O'Connell and his political and parliamentary manoeuvring, all the elements fused into a poem:

At Cúm a' Chiste, above Derrynane,
Dan rested from the hunt, two hares
Already in the bag. The postman panted
Up the hill. Newspapers, reports
Spread over the rough grass. Gulping milk,
Dan absorbed new splits, fresh alliances.
He chewed breakfast, and his options
For the time being, sharpened a knife,
Spat out a mouthful that was stale.

A hare broke wildly from ferns
Reddening with autumn, and streaked
Between heather and furze. Dan howled
Louder than his hounds and careered
For the high ground. From a bluff
He saw the hare take a *caol*
In its stride then double back
With the pack still straggling across.
Ah, you beauty, he whispered, and berated
The beagles towards the new course.
Shifting his ground he gave the hare
A clear run for the time being.
That's how it's done, boys, he exulted,
Run with the hare, and hunt with the hounds!
His men were puzzled, but followed his laughter.

So details from an anecdotal recollection of a day's hunting, especially a detail that causes O Faoláin to say that 'one would like to dally with him there', live on in biography, in fiction and in poetry. For me, it causes O'Connell himself to live on especially here at Cúm a' Chiste, and often gives me the excuse to dally here with him. But I will also take up his invitation to Dualta and Cuan in Walter Macken's book to 'come down and see me at home. We will talk more.'

Interlude

I begin the writing of this section during a great hiatus, a huge indrawn breath, a suspension of the rhythms of local, national and international life that is as incredible as it is abrupt. It is shortly after Easter of 2020, just four months after reports began to come from Wuhan in China about a dangerous new virus. As I write, Ireland, like most of the world, is in lockdown, a term I would have found strange until these strange times. Fear is pervasive, a fear that is both personal and existential, and that goes far wider than the immediate fear of infection, sickness and death. That the coronavirus has reached and clamped the entire world in such a short time is a stark and startling result of the globalisation which can no longer be looked at in the abstract. Its destructive possibilities, as well as its beneficent potential, are in plain view, to be judged and chosen from according to the political and moral imperatives that will decide our common future.

But this is the context in which I am writing, not the subject of that writing. I am aware that if and when this work is published, everything will have changed. And I am equally intensely aware that, while our global awareness is unprecedently intense, with maps, graphs and information being constantly updated, our physical horizons have contracted. Fíona and myself are *cocooned* – the somewhat patronising but also comforting term the authorities use for vulnerable elderly people like ourselves – which means we're not supposed to leave our own house and garden. Our son Éanna looks after our shopping, and is meticulous about keeping his two-metre doorstep distance when he delivers it. Everybody's choices have become societal as well as personal. As I write, I am looking out the window towards Cúm a' Chiste where I ended the last section. I know that I could drive close to it, park my car, and walk up to the wedge tomb along the old road without meeting anybody, and so without any danger to myself or anybody else. But a sense that the precautionary rules – which I am very aware are focused on the vulnerable such as my septuagenarian and diabetic self – should be visibly implemented by all, keeps me at home. I must admit, however, that we do sneak down to the beach, which we can do without going on the public road, when, quite literally, the coast is clear. And, as the days lengthen and the sea gets more and more settled, I am looking with imprudent

intent from my kayak out to Carraig Éanna, the cormorants standing on the rock with outstretched wings, gannets wheeling and diving around it and seals stretched in the sunlight on its flanks.

I am conscious that the contracted physical landscape where I am confined is miraculously expansive compared with that of most people, and a consequent sense of privilege dilutes the frustration of the confinement. I think of suburban houses with tiny gardens horizoned by other houses; I think of the millions of people, even relatively affluent people, who are confined to apartments in conurbations all over the developed world; I think of the countless millions crowded into shanty towns and slums all over the undeveloped world, without adequate medical or welfare systems, for whom the need to source food may override all public health considerations. I think of all of these, and I look from Cúm a' Chiste to Carraig Éanna, from our early potatoes, which are just beginning to push their dark-green leaves out of the clay, over towards the clifftop in the next field where a pair of ravens is nesting. With my recently delivered telescope, I have focused with newly found wonder at the four fledglings whose throats regularly open bright red in anticipation of food. The parent birds, glossy black and watchful, take turns at sentry duty while perched on top of fencing stakes just above. Never before, in the forty-seven years we have lived here, have I realised so utterly, and with so much gratitude, how privileged I am to live here. This sense of confinement diluted by gratitude – a gratitude arising not only from place but also from the cocooning itself – is what I imagine led to three poems about the virus being visualised essentially through the prism of place, of coastline, of birds and of family, as well as the wider community.

The first was written during the initial days of social distancing, that counterintuitive, paradoxical term which has also entered our vocabulary. We came across a wonderful piece of beach-art, on the shingle above high tide. I had been thinking about *corona* and *covid*, thinking of the heart and the garland hidden in *corona*, and thinking that the word *corvid*, used of species so often seen as birds of bad omen, is so close to the new coinage of Covid-19. The white stones somebody had circled around a boulder moved me deeply, seemed like a statement of solidarity and security, even of love, in the face of the unfolding terror:

Corona Sculpture

From the Latin "corona", *a crown, a garland*

I

Between one morning's bleak, isolated
Shoreline walk and the next day's tentative

Spring in the air and in my step, it appeared

Just above the tidemark, below the clay cliff

That's still eroding day after day, collapse
By small collapse. There it was, it just was,

As if the tide had stranded the whole thing
Or the choughs throwing their airy, corvine

Shapes overhead had danced its presence here
With a ceremonious scarlet and black welcome.

II
Someone has gathered these stones, these shining
White stones, hundreds of them, gleaming in all

Shapes and sizes, enough to string a beaded wall
Around this weathered and tide-battered boulder

Shouldering its worn grey bulk out of the gravel.
I can see an old monk telling his beads, see a herd

Circled tight around its young. The ring of white
Quartz blossoms and settles. Here, now, is a corona

That will garland the fragile heart. And I would love
To know who built it. And I would love who built it.

We actually met the sculptor, by chance, some days later, an unassuming young man engaged in another construction. 'Just something to pass the time', he said. That particular passing of the time uplifts me every time I walk past it, which I do most evenings.

Etymological musing also gave rise to another poem, which began to suggest itself to me as I sat looking out the window at breakfast, across the bay towards Hog's Head, along which peninsula our son lives, Éanna, whose care for us has made our confinement easy. I had been think of the words *isolation* and *insulation*, how they were both derived from the Latin *insula, an island*,

although one usually seems cold and unwelcoming, the other warm and protective. I thought of how our actions and attitudes can nudge the nature of our experiences and that of others in so many different ways. My gratitude welled up:

The Etymology of Isolation

No man is an Iland, intire of itself.

John Donne

I
Outside our window, above the wind-flecked
Bay between its two enclosing headlands,

A dozen gannets circle, now and then plunging
And struggling up to wheel and plunge again.

I am contemplating *isolation*, its meanings
In the here and now and then and again,

Contemplating that *isolate* shares its Latin
Island roots with *insulate*, that each one is also

A peece of the Continent, a part of the maine.
Isolation warms itself towards insulation.

II
I think of our son, whose house on the small
Peninsula across the bay I can just make out,

And who drops food and news and comfort
To our insulated door, like a boatman judging

A quick now or never surge to a storm-isolated
Island slipway, quickly heaving up supplies

One-handed, the other on the tiller steering
A curve astern. He smiles, waves. Half-joking,

Wholly grateful in this semi-isolation, I offer
A coinage: *peninsulated*. We'll live with that.

Of course, the image of the boatman delivering supplies to a stormbound island is from elsewhere, the only part of the poem that is imported. And I was particularly pleased when my friend Mick Delap, a poet who is also a keen sailor, recognised its provenance when he emailed me: 'I can just feel the surge on the Skellig quay!' Where else indeed? There are many currents of language that carry meaning through the sea of poetry.

A few days later it got very frightening. Our daughter Ciairín, who has rheumatoid arthritis with a consequently compromised immune-system, developed symptoms. She immediately went into self-isolation from her husband and then seven-year-old son and was put on the list for testing. Her life, her husband Mike's life, her son Éibhear's life, Éanna's life and the lives of Fíona and myself all at once went into a kind of surreal psychological lockdown of disbelief alternating with dread, of keeping up a front with dinnertime four-way Zoom calls when the tacit priority was reassurance for a disorientated and frightened child. Prayer might have been a comfort, had it been part of any of our vocabularies. On the morning Ciairín drove herself for testing, I went for an early walk on the beach, agitated and preoccupied, but enjoying the warmth of morning sun on my back as I watched gannets fishing in the bay. I paused, entranced by a heron's exploratory walk among the rocks exposed by low tide, and then, when it found a suitable pool, how it stretched its neck and froze in absolute and intent concentration. Later, Ciairín told us on the phone how she had revelled in the freedom of her drive to and from the test-centre, in the same lovely sunshine I had enjoyed on the other side of the country. Especially, she enjoyed stopping the car on her way home at the clifftop near Malahide, where she lives, to drink a Coke and watch gannets, which in recent years have established a colony on Ireland's Eye, circling and diving offshore. The bittersweet happenstance of the two sunlit interludes chimed its way into a poem that was perhaps a substitute for prayer:

Reflections

The morning sun slants warmth along the beach,
Breath by breath, as delicately as the heron's slow

Angular steps between clumps of seaweed gleaming
On tide-washed rocks. The heron stops, straightens

And stretches its long neck. The world is a water-bead,
The man on the beach a reflection in the heron's eye.

The woman at a faraway clifftop, who has stopped
Her car on her isolated way home from a virus test

To take pleasure in the gannets wheeling offshore,
Is a reflection suddenly welling in the eye of the man.

The fragmentary, unfinished nature of the poem was, in itself, a reflection of how I felt. I left it hanging like that, on the edge, afraid to even think of any sort of conclusion.

About five days later, Ciairín began to improve, and we allowed ourselves to hope, and then to think, that she was safe. Another two days, and the test came back to her doctor. It was negative. The doctor, however, conscious of reports of quite a high level of "false negatives", especially in relation to the symptoms she and others with immune-compromised conditions displayed, advised her to continue to act if the test were positive. The advice later proved to be well founded. But by now it didn't matter; whatever it was, she had come through and needed to spend just two more days isolated from her husband and son. The psychological lockdown was lifted, and I drafted the second part of the poem, the part which had lain nascent in my mind for two or three days:

And that was then and this is some uncounted days
Later and the test is negative, maybe falsely negative

The doctor says, but it makes not a blind bit of difference
Because whatever it was or wasn't you have come through.

At my laptop, I google the words of *Te Deum*. Unanswered,
I close my eyes. I recall that morning, that dead-still heron,

And I see its ragged grey and black outline transfigured,

See the bird robe itself in a crane's hieratic whiteness,

See the ceremonious outspreading of wings, see it lift
Itself, gracefully, towards some high and sacred space.

Even now I find it hard to integrate the two halves of the poem. It feels like they were written by two different people: the first one desperately trying to stay calm and controlled, the second abandoning caution and coherence, babbling in grateful relief. And that binary, contradictory persona, moving from being an unidentified third person writing about another unidentified third person to being *I* directly addressing *you* and trying to find expression adequate for the gratitude and exaltation I felt, is in itself a reflection of those turbulent ten days. I decided to combine the two parts, in all their raw contradictoriness, just as they are, and to keep the title *Reflections* for the combined poem.

All of the foregoing is, of course, a long way from the world of Daniel O'Connell in Iveragh, various imaginings of which I have been trying to explore. You will remember that I left Cúm a' Chiste with the intention of making my way down to Derrynane House to continue my search for imaginal presences of this most extraordinary of men. That was in early March, six or seven weeks ago. Facilitated by the wonderful OPW custodians of the place, I did spend a day in Derrynane House, anxious to have contemplative time there before the tourist season got underway. No tourists ever arrived. The house, like all public buildings which are not absolutely necessary for the minimal functioning of the State, is locked and deserted, its ghosts in protective isolation. In the light of what has happened to our world since I went there in search of those ghosts, it seems trivial to say I was lucky to get there in time. But I was lucky, and am grateful for what I managed to absorb there, for the voice recordings I made there, for the slow time I was allowed there and that help to open my imagination to the both the domestic and public world of the man who lived there.

But when I tried to work on it, I found that entry into writing about that world was as closed and barred to me as the house is now to visitors. It wasn't writer's block, or laziness, or lack of confidence or any of the usual excuses. Lockdown, cocooning, social distancing, self-isolation: this strange new terminology which have has entered normal discourse should have represented advantage, opportunity. The fact that my pursuit was of a figure the apex of whose career happened almost two centuries ago, should have beckoned me on with an escapist gesture, a promise of relief from personal and existential fear and foreboding. Instead I shied away from the work, feeling it was, at best, a trivial and self-indulgent pursuit, irrelevant to the world I now inhabit. And yet, at the same time, because O'Connell and his era had occupied so much of my mental space, I was finding echoes and parallels between his times and personality and the shapeshifting contemporary world.

O'Connell lived at the cusp of a transition towards a democratic world. He was also someone whose political concerns and perspectives were universalist and inclusivist, concerns and perspectives which were to be drowned out by the noise of the narrow and exclusivist nationalism which came to dominate Irish political life during the century after his death. He was also somewhat of a populist demagogue, adept at harnessing popular discontent through extra-parliamentary rallies in order to further his own career and political aims. Now, with swaggering authoritarian egotists such as Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro and, to perhaps a lesser extent, Boris Johnson, seemingly more concerned with their own image and electoral prospects than with the health of the people who elected them, questions about the integrity and, yes, the moral fibre of political leaders, have acquired an even sharper urgency than they had just a couple of months ago. So has the question of how much power people should cede to their leaders in an emergency, and what should be the parameters and the duration within which such powers can legitimately operate. Populism and the manipulation of popular opinion are in themselves not necessarily bad things, and Daniel O'Connell had a lot of swagger and ego about him. What is certain is that we can learn much both from the past and from the wider world in which we live, a world which has never been so immediate and so close to us.

The echo from O'Connell's life and times which has most strongly resonated with me over the last few weeks is that of the Great Famine. O'Connell died in the year that became infamous as "Black 47", the most horrendous year of the Famine. His last speech in the House of Commons, was on February 8th, when – frail, ailing and almost inaudible – he pleaded for the British Government to recognise the nature and scale of the impending catastrophe in Ireland, and to obviate it:

> She is in your hands—in your power. If you do not save her, she cannot save herself. One-fourth of her population will perish unless Parliament comes to their relief.

They were prescient and morally committed words. The British Government, however, did not hear them, either literally or metaphorically. A *laissez faire* economic philosophy trumped the moral and humanitarian perspective. I use the verb advisedly, at a time when right-wing neoliberal influences seem to be swaying the President of the United States in a similar direction, seeing "opening up the economy" as overriding the need to protect the lives of workers and their families. That O'Connell died at the height of the Famine, and that his Repeal campaign disintegrated with him, has come for many to embody his political failure, as well as the ineffectiveness of his combination of popular agitation with political and legal activism. I do not subscribe to that view, although I was indoctrinated with it during my schooldays and by the tradition in which I grew up. But I can see that the Famine and its consequent demoralisation and emigration led to a bitter disillusionment which

was fertile ground for the revolutionary nationalism that flowered in the early part of the twentieth century, a flowering which he would undoubtedly have opposed with all his political and intellectual power, just as he did its earlier incarnation in the Young Ireland movement. The Young Irelanders, unlike the staunchly and vociferously abolitionist O'Connell, did not extend their intellectual commitment to revolutionary struggle for freedom to the question of slavery in America, from whose adherents they were quite happy to accept money for the cause. That O'Connell refused to accept such contributions was one cause of the rift between O'Connell and the group. Insular thought or nationalism was never part of the Liberator's mental furniture. But history is what happened, and the might-have-beens had the Famine not happened are not the reason I find myself thinking about it while Ireland and the world are in the grip of Covid-19. It took me some days to realise what the overriding resonance was, and still is. It is the silence.

Let me be immediately clear: I do not for one second compare the ordeal Ireland – or any other developed country – is enduring as I write, with the unimaginable and traumatic suffering many of her people endured during and after the years of the Great Famine. I shrink from thinking about what may happen in the poorer countries of the world, on which we in the developed world, often perhaps unconsciously, have fattened ourselves in so many ways. As I write, fatalities in this country have not yet reached 500, although many more are expected. But at local level, and in news footage of deserted city streets and shops, it is silence that I have absorbed. Traffic noise is greatly reduced. There are almost no jet trails or their attendant rumblings overhead. I greet neighbours with a distant wave rather than a chat. The village was deserted at Easter. Visually and aurally, my world is immeasurably less active than it was a few short weeks ago. It's as if a film has been silenced and shown in slow motion. Of course there is still radio and television and, wonderfully for family and friends, phone calls, Zoom calls, Skype, Viber, WhatsApp and whatever. But these punctuate rather than dilute the silence and inactivity that pervade our lives. And it is this feeling of stillness, of the suspension of daily living that recalls for me the silence that came to be associated with the Great Famine.

It was a silence that entered into the cultural imagination of Ireland. One of its best-known expressions is from the painter, antiquarian and cultural historian George Petrie, in the preface to his *Collection of the Ancient Music of Ireland*, which he published in 1855:

> This awful, unwonted silence which, during the famine and subsequent years, almost everywhere prevailed, struck more fearfully upon their imaginations, as many Irish gentlemen informed me, and gave them a deeper feeling of the desolation with which the

> country had been visited, than any other circumstance which had forced itself upon their attention.

Brendan Kennelly, writing about a poem of his which is intimately connected with Waterville and to which I will later return, wrote of the 'the terrible, unbearable silence' that arose from the Famine. Walter Macken titled his novel of O'Connell and the Famine years *The Silent People*. And Seán de Fréine, writing in the late 1960's about the social, linguistic and cultural displacement and loss that resulted from the Great Famine, called his study *The Great Silence*. I emphasise again that I do not compare the present situation with the overwhelming tragedy of the Famine. But I find the silence and inactivity I experience personally, and see and hear reported universally, recalls the silence with which we imagine the Famine.

I think I had to write this section – this interlude, as it were – before I could go back in my imagination and unlock the echoing rooms and stairs of Derrynane House. I needed to reposition myself, to think about O'Connell in a context different from that of a few weeks ago. Because my world, and I personally, have changed since I visited the house some weeks ago, and it is as that changed person in a changed world that I will revisit it.

In Derrynane House

And so, after an interlude during which Covid 19 has, it seems as of now, irrevocably changed the world, I return to my pre-lockdown visit to Derrynane House, hoping, as did so many travellers from Ireland, Britain and Europe during the 1830's and 40's, to find Dan at home. The friendly and immediately hospitable invitation to Dualta in Walter Macken's novel, which I quoted earlier, may have been fictional, but it was well founded in fact, as numerous memoirs from the period attest. One in particular I find very revealing, although its author was one who, rather than actually meeting O'Connell, observed him over two days at fairly close quarters. The poet Aubrey de Vere, from an Ascendancy background and a convert to Catholicism but not to O'Connell's Repeal campaign, travelled by steamer from Kingstown to Liverpool in the spring of 1841. He immediately recognised another passenger who had just boarded. He did not introduce himself to Daniel O'Connell, possibly because of his lack of sympathy towards the Repeal movement, but his description is vivid:

> A few minutes after getting on board the steamer at Kingstown I observed a large, strong man, whose face I at once recognised, though I had never seen it before. There it was, the

> eye potent but crafty too, the large mouth full at once of humour and good-humour, a broad forehead, well adapted for thinking purposes, but better still, apparently, for butting against opponents or pushing his way through them. His bearing had a singular confidence about it; and he wore, slightly on one side, an arrogant little sailor's cap, with a good deal of gold lace about it.

You might choose to hear a note of affronted privilege here, especially in that last sentence, but de Vere's cameo portrait of O'Connell, who was then in his sixty-sixth year, is a warm one, especially when he observes him the next day on the onward journey to London:

> The next morning O'Connell was our fellow-traveller from Liverpool to London. Two little girls were put into the carriage as we started. He treated them with as much care as if they had been his grandchildren, surrendering his seat at the window to one of them, so that she might count the sheep and cows as we passed them. He boasted that twelve of his grandchildren were to meet in Derrinane in the autumn, and described several. He told them endless stories, and repeated not a few short poems by Byron and Moore, especially Moore's lines on Emmett,
>
> "She is far from the land where her young hero sleeps,"
>
> which brought tears, not only into the eyes of the children, but of the reciter, for a few trickled down his cheeks, not only then but when he recited Emmett's speech on his trial.

This is a recurrent motif in personal writings about O'Connell: the intellectual, but also emotional and avuncular man, for whom his family and his ancestral home in Derrynane were of primary importance. And his reputation as being an extraordinarily generous and welcoming host is also attested to by de Vere in this chapter of his *Recollections*, again not from personal experience, but from the perspective of the peripheral observer, a perspective that allows for an interesting, almost novelistic and even filmic interpretation of the character he observes. He continues, firstly with a writer's professional interest in O'Connell choice of words and manner of speaking, then with a remembered anecdote concerning friends of his:

> O'Connell's language, although abounding in humour and figure, was also full of force and precision. When speaking, he worked his lips vehemently, half dropping his lids while his eyes protruded and flashed as if they had the power of making his thoughts pass before him in palpable shape. If I had wished to make his acquaintance I had only to tell him that I was a

> near kinsman of four adventurous English ladies who, travelling about Ireland, had resolved not to leave that country without making acquaintance with its greatest man, little as they were in sympathy with his politics. They drove up nearly to his hall door, while he was haranguing a large body of men who had chosen him as their arbitrator in some local dispute. He walked up to them at once, took off his hat, and welcomed them as if they had been old friends. Before they had got through half their excuses, he assured them that none was necessary; that the country was a wild one; that Derrinane was the home of every passer-by, and that his housekeeper would show them to their rooms at once. At the dinner-table there sat about twenty guests, most of whom asked the stranger ladies to drink wine with them. O'Connell never touched on politics; but they heard him say in a low voice to his neighbour, "I had a letter from Normanby today"[The Marquess of Normanby was Lord Lieutenant of Ireland from 1835 to 1839 and Home Secretary from 1839 to 1841]. He was at that time at once the chief demagogue in Europe and the dispenser of nearly all the Government patronage in Ireland. My English friends accepted his hospitality during several days, and his family showed them the loveliest objects in that enchanting region, and especially that ruined church on the seashore which O'Connell had taken as a model for the chapel he added to his own house, and in which he daily made his meditation. When offering him their farewell thanks they presented him with their cards. "I am glad to learn your names," he said, "because that makes it the more likely that we may meet again; but I should never have asked for them."

This is typical of contemporary descriptions of the man whose hall door I have come inside, although I am just now in an empty house. It has become commonplace to draw a comparison between O'Connell's open hospitality and the requirements of hospitality towards travellers that were by tradition intrinsic to the role of Gaelic chiefs or princes. As I move into the house from that hall door, I am reminded that the Irish word *flaithiúil*, an adjective which nowadays means generous, derives from *flaith*, a sovereign or chief, and that the house I am in was, in the mid-eighteenth century, the ancestral home of a man who was at once a radical politician of his time, and the inheritor of a clan chieftainship that went back many centuries.

From this historically welcoming hall door, I move left into the study. According to his son John, writing in 1849, the Liberator habitually, after breakfast, went for 'three or four hours of close confinement to his study while he wrote or dictated to secretary or clerk answers to letters public or private, frameworks of bills on different subjects and addresses to the Repealers.' Among the books on the shelves behind locked glass doors are volumes by Henry Grattan and Edmund Burke,

reminders of earlier Irish political stars in the political sphere whom O'Connell would equal and indeed outshine. But the exhibit that always speaks loudest to me in this room is a cartoon, an 1835 engraving by John Doyle with the title "Little Red Riding Hood's meeting with the Wolf". It shows Lord John Russell – at the time the Whig Prime Minister who, with the support of the so-called "O'Connell's tail" of Irish MP's, had taken power from the Tories – as Little Red Riding Hood – completely dwarfed by O'Connell, whose wolf's tail protrudes below his voluminous cloak. I love the cartoon not only because it is very funny, but because it is refreshingly free of the racist and supremacist imagery of O'Connell that was common at the time, and that featured simian or potato-like caricatures of himself and his followers. His face is recognisably his own, plump and affable with a snub nose, and the calculation noted by de Vere is quite clear. The cartoon does what political cartoons should do: make a sharp, funny and informed comment on political affairs and politicians without indulging in ethnic or religious prejudice. Indeed, as I examine it once again, it strikes me that O'Connell himself probably took it as a compliment, perhaps even allowing it to stimulate his political salivary glands and run his tongue over his political fangs. John Doyle, although an Irish Catholic, was not a supporter of Daniel O'Connell. But the cartoon's overwhelming impact is to illustrate O'Connell's dominance, whether from the perspective of friend or of foe.

The study is quite small, and functional. A small and very plain writing desk stands in the same corner as it does in an engraving from 1846 in *The Pictorial Times*. I say "stands" to emphasise that it is a high desk, made to be stood at or used with a very high stool. Perhaps O'Connell himself stood there, or perhaps one of the secretaries or clerks his son John referred to. One way or the other, this is a practical room, with a workmanlike personality. But there is another aspect to its personality, which was also a significant aspect of the personality of O'Connell himself. Two tall south-facing windows open the hardworking room towards the sand-dunes bordering Derrynane Bay and the muscular, rocky outlines of Lamb's Head across that narrow stretch of sea. The landscape around his home was entangled in O'Connell's heart and his imagination, and he must have spent hours contemplating it while contemplating letters and news from the metropolitan world and dictating his responses to them. And that contemplation of the landscape which is so immediately present just outside these high windows of his study, is reflected in his correspondence, sometimes in a just fleeting aside, sometimes in more effusive detail. Just weeks after a crowd of Iveragh people had gathered at Cúm a' Chiste to welcome home their newly elected hero, and Tomás Rua had sung his celebratory song to him, O'Connell was preparing for his new role. Having enjoyed his respite even as he prepared for the final battle for Emancipation, he wrote from Derrynane to Edward Dwyer, secretary of the Catholic Association about immediate plans. In the course of a business-like letter, dated 1st October 1828, he included an interesting aside:

> I think Mr. Lawless should be left on the subject of his mission to his own discretion, so that if he deemed it right to stop short, he should communicate privately with the Association and procure an order to desist.
> I doat so much on this place. I so much love to be here that I can scarcely tear myself from it. I have had several visitors. Mr Rosson, the English Catholic agitator, spent a few days with me. I have had Prince Pukler Muskau!!! and I expect Lord Nugent. But I must be off to Kilkenny.

I doat so much on this place. I so much love to be here that I can scarcely tear myself from it. It is a revealing little outburst. Shortly after his great triumph, as he prepares to re-enter the busy public world – which has also come to visit him in Derrynane – the Great Agitator cannot help crying out against the necessity to leave the place where he is happiest. Today, I am standing in the room where he probably wrote those words. Sunlight streams through the window beside the tall writing-desk. I look towards the dunes, the bay and the rugged headland and I can sense his conflicted feelings.

But it is a letter written almost exactly ten years later – again quite likely in this very room – that most fully and indeed most famously articulates O'Connell's deep and abiding love of Iveragh and its landscape. It is also a letter that shows O'Connell's love of words and poetic sensibility, a sensibility that, as we will see, had inhered in his family for many generations and which is the focus of this chapter. The poet Walter Savage Landor had published an open letter to him in *The Examiner* on 25th September 1838, a respectful although somewhat rambling letter urging O'Connell to embrace the colonial culture of Britain. In a reply also published in *The Examiner*, O'Connell did engage with his argument, but the real interest of the exchange lies at the beginning of the letter. Landor had prefaced his letter to O'Connell with a somewhat diffident approach:

> There are so many of all conditions who take the liberty of writing and appealing to you, that you hardly can wonder if another, whose name is unknown to you, should offer a few reflections.

The literary side of O'Connell's personality protested and, on the 4th October, he replied, quoting at the beginning of his letter from a poem by Landor about how seashells seem to echo the sound of waves:

Sir,—You wrong me much in supposing that I do not know you. ' Not to know you were to bespeak myself unknown.' Little do you imagine how many persons besides myself have been delighted with the poetic imaginings which inspired these lines on one of the wonders of my infancy – the varying sounds emitted by marine shells.

Pleased, they remember their august abodes,
And murmur, as the ocean murmurs there.

Then, having established his literary credentials with a flourish, O'Connell went on to dig deep into his own personality and sensibility in words which, despite the perhaps overblown Romantic language (this was, after all, 1838), still bear powerful witness to how profound was his imaginative relationship with and love of the landscape outside of the windows of this study:

Would that I had you here, to show you ' their august abode ' in its most awful beauty. I could show you at noontide—when the stern south-wester had blown long and rudely—the mountain waves coming in from the illimitable ocean in majestic succession, expending their gigantic force, and throwing up stupendous masses of foam, against the more gigantic mountain cliffs that fence not only this my native spot, but form that eternal barrier which prevents the wild Atlantic from submerging the cultivated plains and high-steepled villages of proud Britain herself ; or, were you with me amidst the Alpine scenery that surrounds my humble abode, listening to the eternal roar of mountain torrent as it bounds through rocky defiles, I would venture to tell you how I was born within the sound of the everlasting waves, and how my dreamy boyhood dwelt upon imaginary intercourse with those who are dead of yore, and fed its fond fancies upon the ancient and long-faded glories of that land which preserved literature and Christianity when the rest of now civilised Europe was shrouded in the darkness of godless ignorance. Yes ! my expanding spirit delighted in these day-dreams, till, catching from them an enthusiasm which no disappointment can embitter nor accumulating years diminish, I formed the high resolve to leave my native land better after my death than I found her at my birth, and, if possible, to make her what she ought to be —

Great, glorious, and free,
First flower of the earth, and first gem of the sea.

Perhaps, if I could show you the calm and exquisite beauty of these capacious bays and mountain promontories, softened in the pale moonlight which shines this lovely evening, when all which during the day was grand and terrific has become calm and serene in the

> silent tranquillity of the night—perhaps you would admit that the man who has been so often called a ferocious demagogue is, in truth, a gentle lover of Nature, an enthusiast of all her beauties, fond of each gentle and each dreary scene, and catching, from the loveliness as well as the dreariness of the ocean and Alpine scenes around, a greater ardour to promote the good of man, in his overwhelming admiration of the mighty works of God.

The last sentence is absolutely Wordsworthian, and, to my mind, absolutely sincere. The quotation from Thomas Moore, whom he greatly admired, is invoked by him as an explanation of his public career having been nurtured both by the physical environment of Iveragh and the cultural memory that inhered in it, for example in what Aubrey de Vere referred to as 'that ruined church on the seashore which O'Connell had taken as a model for the chapel he added to his own house'. The writing is that of a man for whom poetry flowed in his veins, and was an essential element in his *dúchas*. And, as I will come to very soon, he passed on that *dúchas* to at least one of his children, who may even have prompted the sort of poetic writing we see in his letter to Landor.

This public correspondence seems to have struck a chord. In Volume X (1841) of *The Dublin Review* an unattributed review of *The Poetical Works of Thomas Moore* ended like this:

> The captive hath outgrown his chains: the heart of Ireland is beating quick with life and vigour never yet felt; her arm is strengthening with a new strength she was never conscious of: and, under the guidance of the great chief who has made her what she is, we hope to live so long as yet to see her—and most fervently do we pray that it may be after a bloodless struggle—in the language of her own dear bard
>
> "Great, glorious and free,
> First flower of the earth, and first gem of the sea."

O'Connell had invoked Moore in his open reply to Landor, and now, three years later, the anonymous reviewer of Moore's collected poems uses the same quotation and invokes O'Connell as 'the great chief who has made her what she is'. The letter he probably dictated in this room three years before has rippled far and wide. It is a letter that is widely quoted in biographical works on O'Connell. Ironically, both sides of the political argument involved have disappeared into dusty archives. What survives is O'Connell's statement of how the landscape of his native place affected his imaginative, moral, philosophical and political being. Staring out at that landscape through the windows beneath which he composed that statement, I recall some lines from Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey*:

Therefore am I still
A lover of the meadows and the woods
And mountains; and of all that we behold
From this green earth; of all the mighty world
Of eye, and ear, both what they half create,
And what perceive; well pleased to recognise
In nature and the language of the sense
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being.

It should be said that the love of Derrynane O'Connell expresses in this public letter to Landor, as well as the moral and political imperatives that he traces back to it, was not just trotted out for public consumption. Five years earlier, in a private letter dated 3rd September 1833 to his friend and ally William Fagan (later his biographer) pleading for a postponement of a meeting in Cork at which he was to be honoured, O'Connell expressed the same sort of feelings, in a more stressed and poignantly revealing way:

> But, although I must accept your invitation, as I would obey an honoured command, yet I trust you will allow me to name a distant day for that purpose. After nearly seven months of the most close and unremitting labour, I want the calm and quiet of my loved native hills—the bracing air, purified as it comes over " the world of waters," the cheerful exercise, the majestic scenery of these awful mountains, whose wildest and most romantic glens are awakened by the enlivening cry of my merry beagles; whose deep notes, multiplied one million of times by the echoes, speak to my senses, as if it were the voice of magic powers commingling, as it does, with the eternal roar of the mighty Atlantic, that breaks and foams with impotent rage, at the foot of our stupendous cliffs. Oh! these are scenes to revive all the forces of natural strength—to give new energy to the human mind, to raise the thoughts above the grovelling strife of individual interests—to elevate the sense of family affection into the purest, the most refined, and the most constant love of country, and even to exalt the soul to the contemplation of the wisdom and mercy of the all-seeing and good God, who has been pleased to afflict Ireland with centuries of misrule and misery, but seems now to have in store for her a coming harvest of generous retribution.

> Permit me, then, to postpone for some—shall I say considerable—time, the day on which I am to meet my friends, and the friends of Ireland, in Cork. Do not tear me from this loved spot, until I have enjoyed some of its renovating effects.

Again, his beloved mountains, sea and hunting – at once recreational in both senses of the word, as well as spiritually and politically inspirational –are inseparable from O'Connell's personality. He did not write poetry, at least in the formal sense. But the language and insights in these passages are those of a person who might well have done so. Poetry, as we will see, was in his blood.

I like to imagine too that it was in this study that O'Connell read a particularly vitriolic attack on him in *The Times* of London. Certainly he was in Derrynane in November 1835, when that newspaper published an anonymous verse editorial about him:

> Scum condensed of Irish bog!
> Ruffian – coward – demagogue!
> Boundless liar – base detractor!
> Nurse of murders – treason's factor!
> Of Pope and priest the crouching slave,
> While thy lips of freedom rave;
> Of England's fame the vip'rous hater,
> Yet wanting courage for a traitor.
> Ireland's peasants feed thy purse,
> Still thou art her bane and curse.

And it continued on in this vein. What always makes it memorable for me is that opening line, 'Scum condensed of Irish bog!' *The Times*, in seeking to insult O'Connell, had unwittingly identified O'Connell's greatest strength. Inexplicably perhaps for *The Times*, 'Ireland's peasants' and O'Connell himself were bound together by ties of culture, tradition, religion and language beyond the comprehension of the anonymous versifier. In that sense, the man I imagine reading this by a turf fire in this study in late November of 1835, was indeed 'condensed of Irish bog', and was indeed expert at weaponizing that condensation in the interests of his countryman and against the interests of the imperialist and supremacist Tories whose perspective *The Times* spoke from. I can imagine him opening the newspaper, perhaps having been forewarned, imagine him being at first enraged and insulted, maybe even hurt. And then, I imagine, he thinks about his followers, the mass of people whose power he had unleashed in a way that frightened the interests that newspaper

represented – then, and perhaps even now – and he thinks of the implications of their fear and anger. I imagine him thinking of the men, perhaps kinsmen of his, who recently, I imagine, had brought to Derrynane House pony-carts of turf that had been saved with back-breaking effort over the previous summer. All of this comes together in a poem I wrote many years ago:

> *Scum condensed of Irish bog!*
> thundered The Times from London
> at O'Connell. All over Ireland
> bogs continued their slow assimilation
> of leaf, branch and root. Small pools
> winked ambiguously in the sunlight
> while heather nodded wisely in the wind.
>
> In Derrynane Dan smiled and spread
> his hands towards the turf fire.

Leaving Dan by the fire in his study, I move back through the hallway. In that hallway, near the bottom of the stairway and the dining-room door, hangs a portrait. This is Maurice O'Connell, Dan's uncle, a childless widower from whom he inherited Derrynane House. Maurice habitually wore a huntsman's velvet cap to avoid the tax on beaver hats worn by the gentry, earning him the nickname of "Hunting Cap" or Muiris a' Chaipín. The portrait shows a somewhat hard, calculating man. But Hunting Cap, as we will see, was not without his humorous side, and had a way with words. I nod to him as I enter the dining-room. But rather than enter by myself, I conjure up the company of somebody mentioned by O'Connell in one of the letters from his study. In his letter of 1st October 1828, he wrote, somewhere between boastfulness and bemusement, that 'I have had Prince Pukler Muskau!!!'. Three days earlier, Prince Hermann Ludwig Heinrich von Pükler-Muskau, a colourful but financially embarrassed German aristocrat who had become a celebrity in high society circles in England, and who was to be lampooned by Dickens as Count Smorltork in *The Pickwick Papers*, had visited O'Connell. He gives a somewhat dramatic account of his journey from Kenmare, and of arriving at Derrynane about eleven o'clock at night and consequently 'somewhat anxious as to my dinner'. He was, however, as so many visitors to Derrynane have described, hospitably received:

> Soon, however, I heard sounds in the house; a handsomely-dressed servant appeared, bearing silver candlesticks, and opened the door of a room, in which I saw with

> astonishment a company of from fifteen to twenty persons sitting at a long table, on which were placed dessert and wine. A tall, handsome man, of cheerful and agreeable aspect, rose to receive me, apologised for having given me up in consequence of the lateness of the hour, regretted that I had made such a journey in such terrible weather, presented me in a cursory manner to his family, who formed the majority of the company and then conducted me to my bedroom. This was the great O'Connell.
>
> On my return to the dining-room I found the greater part of the company assembled there. I was most hospitably entertained and it would be ungrateful not to make honourable mention of Mr. O'Connell's old and capital wine.

The last sentence is a good cue to take a break from this rather pretentious visitor to Derrynane. But it is worth noting that his experience of O'Connell's hospitality echoes that of de Vere's friends, even to the extent of being brought the following day to the tidal island where stand 'the genuine ruins of Derrinane Abbey, to which O'Connell's house is only an appendix'. He was brought there by O'Connell's chaplain 'as O'Connell was busy.' The day before O'Connell mentioned him in his letter, the German prince left Derrynane, although he makes sure to tell us that O'Connell had pressed him to stay for a week. It might have been interesting had the host left us his opinion of his guest. Pukler-Muskau's account of his departure, like his host's being 'busy', is open to interpretation:

> I therefore took leave of the family this morning, with the sincerest of thanks for the friendly welcome they had given me. O'Connell himself escorted me to the boundaries of his demesne, mounted on a large and handsome gray horse, on which he looked more military than ever.

Whatever connotations we may choose to read into 'escorted me to the boundaries of his demesne', the socialite celebrity left Derrynane very impressed by O'Connell's hospitality as well as by his intellect and personality. And now I enter the room where he laid eyes on O'Connell almost two centuries ago.

It is a fine room, well lit by tall windows to the east, west and south. The light flooding in through those windows deepens the rich glow of fine furniture, heightens the gleam of the silverware that stands on the large welcoming table where so many guests and family members gathered, and throws light on the portraits that decorate the walls. This table, the matching chairs and the sideboard date from 1825, when O'Connell extended and improved the property he had inherited from his uncle Maurice. The impressive silverware on the table interests me not for itself

but for the inscriptions it carries, inscriptions that testify to O'Connell's status and to the widespread affections and respect in which he was held. Theses inscriptions are fragments from a narrative whose settings spread far and wide beyond Derrynane. In the centre of the table is a highly wrought and ornamented epergne, made to hold fruit, candles and flowers. I must admit that, as well as never having heard of an epergne, I find the piece itself rather ugly. But the inscription on its base resonates with me, and sets the artefact rippling outward in an extraordinarily global way. It reads that in 1833, it was

> Presented to Daniel O'Connell M.P. by the working classes resident in London, natives of Great Britain and Ireland and of the European and American continents as a token of their esteem and admiration for his splendid and successful exertion in the cause of civil and religious liberty.

There are other stories and fragments of stories in these pieces, many of them presented by town and city public bodies and corporations all over Ireland. I'll choose just one, a silver service on the sideboard. Again, my choice is not aesthetic, silverware not being of any great interest to me. But the events which led to its presentation to O'Connell were of profound consequence and are, to my mind, still profoundly, dramatically and even aesthetically stirring. The information board reads:

> In December 1813 the Catholic Board voted to present O'Connell with silver plate to the value of one thousand guineas. They wished to show their support for him following his controversial defence of the newspaper owner, John Magee, against a charge of libelling the Lord Lieutenant. O'Connell used the trial as an opportunity to attack the British administration in Ireland.

This is, as you might expect on an information board, a somewhat prosaic and neutral description of what has come to be known as *The Magee Trial.* When Magee – a Protestant whose newspaper, the *Dublin Evening Post*, supported Catholic Emancipation – was charged in July 1813 with libel on the recently departed Viceroy, the Duke of Richmond – the then thirty-eight years old O'Connell, realising after some time that the verdict was a foregone conclusion, used the occasion to attack the whole Protestant and Unionist ascendancy establishment, especially in the person of the prosecuting Attorney-General William Saurin. The attack was to electrify Ireland, and marked a turning point in the politicisation of its Catholic majority. Sean O Faolain, in his wonderfully vibrant way in *King of the Beggars*, put it like this:

> Yet O'Connell had only taken up the glove flung by Saurin and lashed it back into his face. He tried through two adjournments to defend Magee by law; spoke law and won it; mocked Saurin's law and forced the bench to support him; then he abandoned the case as an ordinary legal fight and launched himself bodily on the Attorney-General, on the Government on the whole system which Magee had assailed, and while he did the court seems to have listened open-mouthed, aghast, silenced, unable to realize that a cowering Catholic, one of the "scum of the earth", had stalked into their courts and flung defiance in their teeth. To the people the thing was tremendous. To them, O'Connell's attack on Saurin, like Saurin's attack on Magee, became a combat between Nation and Empire.

Even John Mitchell, who was to become a vitriolic enemy of O'Connell in the 1840's, wrote after O'Connell's death that his defence of Magee was 'the most powerful forensic achievement since Demosthenes'. A printed version of O'Connell's speech sold 10,000 copies in Ireland and was even translated into French for distribution abroad.

So even though I smile empathetically when O Faolain writes that this silver service is 'of an ugliness impossible to describe', its presence here in Derrynane House brings me back more than two centuries to the Four Courts in Dublin, and back again to a speech whose exposition of the power of words is revelatory. Many years ago, when I read *King of the Beggars*, and Oliver McDonagh's marvellous biographical volumes *The Hereditary Bondsman* and *The Emancipist*, I was enthralled by the account, and especially enthralled by what I saw – or rather heard – as poetry in parts of it. One attempted interruption of O'Connell's flow particularly caught my attention and my imagination. Here first is the prose record:

> CHIEF JUSTICE: What, Mr. O'Connell, can this have to do with the questions which the jury are to try?
> MR. O'CONNELL: You heard the Attorney-General traduce and calumniate us - you heard him with patience and temper – listen now to our vindication!

O'Connell's impatient dismissal of the judge's attempt to rein him in seemed to me to encapsulate the essence of his whole case, in words that struck me as being poetry in their rhythm, their structure and even their rhyme. I incorporated these words into a poem called "Magee Trial".

> The Castle prosecuted words, found them

seditious, libellous of establishments.
Defence abandoned, a strutting upstart
instead put English law on trial.

You heard the Attorney-General
traduce and calumniate us.
You heard him with patience and temper.
Listen now to our vindication.

Convicting judge, jury and prosecution
he sentenced them to savage mockery
in every town in Ireland. The Counsellor
had risen to address a different jury.

I have adverted already to the poetry of O'Connell's words, their eloquence and imaginative intensity. And, in this recreation of my visit, I am about to discover an aspect of that in O'Connell's family which I was until now completely unaware of.

On the dining-room walls hang a number of portraits: Dan's uncle, also Daniel, a distinguished soldier of fortune who served in the armies of both France and Britain, and who became known as "The Last Colonel of the Irish Brigade". A biography by that name, written by Mrs. Morgan John O'Connell (née Mary Anne Bianconi) at the end of the nineteenth century, is an invaluable source of information about the O'Connell family and Derrynane. Dan himself, one assertive hand on hip and another on a petition seeking 'freedom of conscience' for Catholics, looks across the room at his more reticent wife Mary with their infant son. Other paintings of his children contribute to the warm and familial atmosphere of the room. It is by one of these family portraits – all of which are by John Gubbins – that I am led into a new and fascinating discovery. It is a portrait of Ellen, the eldest daughter, who would have been in her early teens when the portrait was painted. She is portrayed as an intelligent and sensitive young woman. But it is initially the context of the portrait that draws my attention. There is a large harp in the background. Ellen holds sheet-music, and there are books on a table. One of the books is *Moore's Irish Melodies* and the sheet-music is Moore's "The Harp that once through Tara's Halls", written about ten years before. This is at once an aesthetic and a political statement which, twenty years before O'Connell's letter to Walter Savage Landor, expressed a cultural nationalism that, although not Gaelic, did invoke a Gaelic past, a "Golden Age" that was to be entwined with many threads of Irish political nationalism for at least a

century after that. But Ellen was by no means simply a pictorial vehicle for her father's political beliefs. The information panel tells me that she 'was well educated, spoke several languages, and enjoyed scholarly pursuits'. But what is the real discovery for me, one that is another link in a poetic chain that has for some time been forging itself in my mind, is the information that 'in 1863 she published a volume of poetry entitled *Darrynane in Eighteen Hundred and Thirty-Two and Other Poems'*. This is completely and excitingly new for me, something which, in previous more casual and crowded visits, had completely escaped my notice .

Since then, I have bought a copy of that volume, the original edition, which was published – under her married name of Fitz-Simon – when Ellen was almost sixty and had been widowed for seven years. The cover, like that of *Moore's Irish Melodies*, is green, with the title in gold, and a wolfhound and harp embossed in gold on the front cover. This iconography, which we will see repeated here in Derrynane House, reflects the same cultural nationalism that animated Ellen's portrait. The thirty-five euro I paid for this first edition in Kenny's of Galway is probably, given the rate of inflation that the internet tells me exists since 1863, worth slightly less than the five shillings it was originally priced at. Ellen's poetic star has not risen since its publication; nonetheless there is work here of poetic integrity and value, and, although her illustrious father makes no more than a few appearances, the poems are also of historical interest. Coincidentally, while I was waiting – during the Covid 19 lockdown – for the book to arrive in the post, I heard Ellen's great-great-grandson, Christopher Fitz-Simon give a brief radio talk about her on RTÉ Radio's *Sunday Miscellany*. As he pointed out, her poems, both in content and attributed translation, indicate a well-travelled and well-read poet, and a lover of the natural world.

Just a handful of the poems deal directly with her father. One of them, titled simply "O'Connell" and written sometime after his death, is public and respectful rather than personal. Its opening lines, however, are interestingly confirmative of O'Connell's own words about how his native landscape formed his consciousness:

> On the high cliffs above the Atlantic Sea
> Or in some lonely "cummer" of the hills,
> Where foam wild torrents formed by meeting rills
> (Scenes loved by thee in age and infancy)
> The Genius of the country came to thee,
> O'Connell, as thou roamedst a careless child:
> She plained her of the injuries and ills
> Erin had known since Saxon foot defiled

Her emerald shores!

In the context of the somewhat stilted language – 'she plained her', for example – I take pleasure in that "cummer". It is of course the Irish word *cumar*, a ravine, which is still used by Iveragh people, even those who don't speak Irish. But it is the idea that the formation of the mind, imaginatively and morally, can be influenced by landscape, that we hear again in these lines. And the rest of the poem is not without its high points, such as these lines about O'Connell's parliamentary career:

Calumnious hate
Launched all its venomed darts at him, to find
That he regarded as the idle wind
Its utmost efforts. Fixed and firm as fate,
He in an alien senate still upheld
The rights of Erin, and with scorn repelled
The charges of her enemies, the sneers,
Aye, even of some she had for many years
Among her friends as warmest, truest held!

There is sense of scores being settled in those last lines, but there is also pride, dignity and indeed power in the description of her father upholding the rights of Ireland 'in an alien senate'.

However, it is the title poem of the collection, "Darrynane in 1832", that has inhabited my imagination since I first read it. It has the strengths and weaknesses of its time, but at its best, it has, like the Liberator's own invocations and evocations in his letters of the landscape around Derrynane, a Wordsworthian integrity and intensity of vision. It must be remembered, of course, that Derrynane was not Ellen's principal home; most of her childhood years (she was born in 1805) would have been spent around Merrion Square in Dublin. But Derrynane seems to have been far more stimulating to her young imagination. Indeed in revealing aside in a poem called "The Daisy", written, a note tells us, in 1838, she describes the two environments, without actually naming them:

My childhood's hours were wasted
  Within a city's bound,
My daily walk was but throughout
  A square's dull plot of ground;

This is contrasted unfavourably with the surroundings of luckier children:

> And those more favoured children
> Who breathe the mountain air,
> And trace the streamlets' wanderings …

As I look at the portrait of this sensitive young woman in Derrynane House, I can imagine her perhaps rolling impatient eyes, as teenage girls do, when, in Merrion Square, her homesick and overworked father wouldn't stop talking about Derrynane, while at the same time inwardly realising that she had inherited his love of that 'mountain air'.

That love of Derrynane infuses the whole poem. The opening, invoking the 'undying spirit of Poesy', locates that spirit in Derrynane:

> Dost thou not love the mountain's breezy heights,
> The valley with its thousand sparkling rills,
> The echoing torrent and the cliff sublime?
> And, dearer still, to rove the lonely beach,
> Where billows burst in foam upon the rocks –
> To watch the sea-bird in its whirling flight,
> And list the moaning music of the surge?

This is, of course, fairly conventional, and could be a generic rather than a specific landscape. But the poem follows a very identifiable route when Ellen goes 'abroad into the balmy air'. I will very soon follow that walk, because Ellen's poem can be read as a usefully directive guide, and parts of it are best savoured in the open air. Her poems are sometimes rather conventional, and too mannered for modern tastes, but this poem of almost 200 lines is animated by and grounded in a Derrynane whose presence throughout the lines is as real and vibrant as the landscape which lies outside the high windows of this sunlit room. I will follow those grounded and guiding lines, but for just a while more I will stay in Derrynane House, and stay with the public and historical aspects of the poem, a poem much of which was political, not only in a general sense, but also in the immediate, electoral sense. Any poem from the time about Derrynane would have been greatly wanting without reference to the person who was, even during his lifetime, so inextricably associated with it. Ellen introduces him by asking, rhetorically, of course, 'who made this little Eden in the wild?' And this is

the cue for a typically dramatic entrance by O'Connell, and for another Wordsworthian statement of the moral and ethical influence of landscape and the natural world:

> Why, one who, Fame declares aloud, has wrought
> More wondrous changes in the moral world.
> The scourge of sycophants, the tyrant's dread,
> The pride and glory of his native land!

The reader gets apprehensive here, perhaps, wondering is this going to be just one big fanfaronade of an ending. But Ellen is far too real a writer for that, and she goes on to show her father in a light that is not only endearing, but one which illuminates the intensely personal nature of her poem and its grounding in the reality of her own life and that of her family:

> Who that has seen him in his mountain home,
> Surrounded by a merry dark-eyed train
> Of laughing elves, that wind him as they please,
> Who to their grandsire run in every strait,
> Secure for wildest mischief to obtain
> Complete immunity, if not applause?

Many of us will recognise the indulgent grandparent in this picture of O'Connell. I take particular delight in the phrase 'that wind him as they please'. My own grandson, who is seven years old at the time of writing, will sometimes raise a little finger to me, a coded signal we both know to mean he can and will continue to wind me around his little finger. But Ellen has a further purpose here, not just to celebrate the doting grandfather, but to integrate that aspect of her father with the public figure who has achieved great things against great odds. And she does so, very cleverly and very effectively, as her emotional father watches her sleeping children:

> Or who, that saw him with a glistening eye
> Watching the sleep of cherub infancy,
> Had in that fond and tender parent traced
> The conqueror of Wellington – the man
> Who first this glorious lesson taught the world,
> That what a nation steadily pursues,

Unstained with blood, unsullied by a crime,
Howe'er delayed, must still be hers at last?

This is, to my mind, writing of a very high order, integrating the public and private aspects of her father while affirming their shared political beliefs. And the writing gains huge resonance for me when – as always with O'Connell in Derrynane – convivial home hospitality and his beloved beagling are in the foreground. In Ellen's poem, these characteristics, together with the picture of the devoted family man, constitute the foil against which is set his achievement of having wrested emancipation and parliamentary representation for the Catholic majority of his country's population from an unwilling British government.

Or who, that heard him at the social board,
Returned aweary from the chase at eve,
Talk o'er the varied fortunes of the day,
With boyish eagerness describe the spot
Where first the hare was started, and repeat
Her every winding till the close of all,
Had recognized the far-famed voice of one
Practised with eloquent appeal to touch
The minds of men, one to whose mighty powers
An alien senate bore unwilling witness!

In the dining-room at Derrynane, in the portrait presence of father and daughter across the glowing table that, close to two centuries ago, was 'the social board' at which O'Connell, having perhaps 'with a glistening eye' tucked his grandchildren into bed, held forth on the day's hunting and the politics of 'an alien senate', I realise with renewed intensity how much Daniel O'Connell was a product of his beloved Derrynane, his beloved Iveragh. And who could bear better witness to that than his eldest daughter, who so obviously revered him as a father, as grandfather to her children and, as this and her poem after his death also show, also as a public figure. And the love and respect were reciprocal. A letter to Ellen from her father dated 22nd September 1833, begins 'My dearest Nell, my own best of children', and later calls her 'my best and noblest of children'.

When I read this poem, I was also struck by how effective it is as a piece of public relations. I do not imply any questioning of its integrity or its literary value when I say that a modern media guru would also be impressed by how it presents O'Connell. The man who is 'the scourge of sycophants,

the tyrant's dread', the Great Agitator who became 'the conqueror of Wellington' is also a big softie whom his grandchildren can wind around their little fingers, a simple convivial man who loves roaming his own hills with his beagles, a down-to-earth decent man whom Rousseau might have eulogised. I began to see similarities between the poem and O'Connell's 1838 public letter to Walter Savage Landor, and to wonder might O'Connell have drawn on it for that letter. I wondered at the title specifying Darrynane in 1832 although the book was not published until 1863.

So I did a little digging. And - more by accident than design – I discovered online that the poem was indeed first published in 1832. To be specific, it was published in *The Irish Monthly Magazine of Politics and Literature* in December 1832, when Ellen was just twenty-seven years of age. She published it under the coy *nom de plume* of L.N.F. which those who knew her, I'm sure, recognised as Ellen Fitz-Simons. The date of publication, I believe, is not coincidental. All through the month of December 1832, and even into January 1833, the process of a General Election was ongoing (the holding of the vote in a General Election on a single day throughout the UK did not happen until 1918). It was an election that was to consolidate O'Connell's position in the House of Commons, with increased representation for his Repeal group. Wellington, of whom Ellen wrote that her father was 'the conqueror', was the leader of the Tories, and Prime Minister when O'Connell won Emancipation. Christopher Fitz-Simon, Ellen's husband and an ally as well as son-in-law of O'Connell, was a first-time candidate, as were other family members . Eventually, as O'Connell forecast in letter dated 20th December 1832, the election was a triumph for him. On that date, he had written to his agent, P.V. Fitzpatrick:

> Everything has – blessed be God! – hitherto passed in the most satisfactory manner. If Meath and Dublin County [his son-in-law's constituency, where Fitz-Simons was, in fact, later elected] do as well, why we shall be all triumph – and the best kind of triumph, that which furnishes hope …

That the 'best kind of triumph' was realised, especially for and by the O'Connell family, is well illustrated in the opening of memoir written in 1848 by the Liberator's son John:

> Early in the forenoon of Tuesday , the 5th of February , 1833 , my father led what might have been called his household brigade — viz . his three sons , and two sons - in - law , down to the House of Commons , to be present at the opening of the first Reform Parliament , of which all six had just been elected members .

It seems to me that, as well as being a genuine recollection and invocation of Derrynane and its surrounding landscape, Ellen's poem, published in the months before the triumph described above, was also a highly effective public relations exercise on behalf of her father, her husband, her two brothers and a brother-in-law and the political movement they espoused. Published at the height of what turned out to be a very successful election for that movement, the date in its title – which is there also in the original publication – seems to me to be a statement of its essential currency at the time of this original publication. I read this aspect of the poem, and its title, as saying something like the following: *This is Daniel O'Connell, the fifty-seven-year-old who has achieved so much for his people, at home with his family, grandchildren and friends. This is where he comes from, and who he is. Here and now, in 1832, he and his parliamentary supporters need and deserve your support.* Of course the poem says all of this only by implication. Ellen was politically shrewd enough to realise that indirectness in a work like this was more likely to sway potential voters than harangue. Indeed, immediately after the passage I quoted ending with the reference to 'an alien senate' – the same 'alien senate' to which her father and husband were seeking re-election and election respectively – she seems to apologise to the reader for making a political statement, but makes sure also to explain:

> Enough – perhaps too much – on such a theme:
> Yet how could I refrain from pouring forth
> The fullness of my heart in fervent praise
> Of one so loved, so honoured – one so well
> Deserving of love and honour?

The message is clear, and it is masterly, without sacrificing any of its genuinely poetic quality or integrity.

That *The Irish Monthly Magazine of Politics and Literature* also saw the poem in this light is, I believe, made clear in the following edition of January 1833, by which time Ellen's husband Christopher Fitz-Simon had been elected to Westminster. In that edition, the magazine reviewed a lithograph of a sketch by Christopher Fitz-Simon M.P. of, *mirabile dictu*, Derrynane House. The newly elected MP did not, like his wife, obscure his identity, or his new status, behind a *nom de plume*. However, it is not the sketch that interests me, but parts of the accompanying unattributed editorial note. After detailed and enthusiastic praise of the sketch, this is how the note concludes:

It is not, however, the singular beauty of this wild spot, producing, as it does, much of its influence over our minds by its very remoteness and isolation – resembling the fabled Oasis surrounded by sterility – that alone invests it with interest, but the importance it derives from being the favourite home of

> One who, Fame declares aloud, has wrought
> Most wondrous changes have in this moral world,
> The scourge of sycophants, the tyrant ' s dread,
> The pride and glory of his native land!

and who himself

> ope'd this little Eden in the wild,
> And gave to scenes by nature sternly grand,
> The grace and comfort now so striking there.*

Hereafter, when the fame and days of this extraordinary man shall be full, and Ireland a happy nation, Derrynane Abbey will become a place of pilgrimage to all who revere liberty or admire talent; and every memorial of it will be treasured in gratitude and respect for the LIBERATOR of his country. It is this feeling that enhances the value of the sketch before us, and demands our thanks.

> *We quote these passages, as our readers will observe, from the poem "Darrynane Abbey in 1832", which appeared in our number for December. It is not, perhaps, the least merit of that charming production that it illustrates admirably the sketch before us.

It is unashamedly if understandably triumphalist, a celebration of what I believe was, at the very least, part of the reason for the poem's publication in the previous issue. And it is also extraordinarily prescient when it asserts that 'Derrynane Abbey will become a place of pilgrimage'. As I write, Derrynane House lies locked and empty, because of Covid 19 lockdown. But since 1967, when, having been taken into the possession of a somewhat reluctant State that had been almost a half-century in existence, it was opened to the public as a museum, it has been visited by hundreds of thousands of visitors, from Ireland and all over the world. So when I read that confident prediction from almost two centuries ago, I have a twofold reaction. Firstly, its prescience exhilarates me; secondly, I both wonder and regret that it took a century and more for this to happen, a long and agonising period during which Ireland and Irish nationalism followed a path very different from that which O'Connell envisaged. And it took until towards the end of the twentieth

century before Ireland produced a political figure great enough to absorb O'Connell's moral and political vision and to have the courage and ability to use that vision to heal the fracture in Irish nationalism that had occurred when the Young Irelanders turned on O'Connell in 1845, and ushered in the reverence for heroic sacrificial bloodshed which animated nationalist thought right up to our own times. John Hume died as I was working on this chapter, his health, as was O'Connell's, broken.

Recalling now my excitement when I first realised that Ellen had published a book of poetry in 1863 and resolved to investigate her poetry, I realise that I had no idea not only how much her poetry was entwined with the same landscape that meant so much to her father, but how much also it was entwined with his public career. Now, having read her book, I stand again in my imagination before her portrait, the portrait of the teenage girl that is also a kind of homage to Thomas Moore. I wonder did Ellen think of that portrait when, in 1834, Moore published a song called "The Dream of Those Days". This is the final stanza:

> Up Liberty's steep by Truth and Eloquence led,
> With eyes on her temple fix'd, how proud was thy tread!
> Ah, better thou ne'er hadst lived that summit to gain,
> Denied in the porch, than thus dishonour the fane.

Although the song didn't actually name O'Connell and was formally addressed to Ireland, it was generally taken as an attack on O'Connell, not least by O'Connell himself. Moore went close to confirming this when he said that O'Connell was entitled to take it personally, as 'he is, and has been for a long time, to all intents and purposes, Ireland – and I look upon this as one of the most fatal consequences of his extraordinary career'. The two men were later more or less reconciled, but not before Ellen had written a sharp response, one which is quite specifically aimed at Moore by name. Indeed she repeats the name as if she were wielding a sledgehammer:

> No; I cannot believe it. Some foe to the fame
> And the honour of Moore, has made use of his name.
> No; I will not believe it: it cannot be true
> That Moore, my loved Erin, is faithless to you.
>
> What! Moore by the pathos and pow'r of whose songs
> Even England was roused to sense of our wrongs!
> Moore, renowned as our *Patriot Bard* through the Earth

Moore, to shrink from the cause of the land of his birth.

It's not great poetry, and it doesn't really improve over the following seven stanzas. But it is certainly to the point. I haven't been able to establish if or where it was published before its 1863 publication in Ellen's book. But her note to the poem at the end of the book is interesting, perhaps more interestingly ambiguous than the poem itself, and certainly shows that the poem reached Moore, whether by accident or design on the part of Ellen:

> These lines are the expression of the naturally indignant feelings of the author, roused by the very strange and unfair attack covertly conveyed in the verses above named.
> They were written *à trait de plume*, and sent by some *good-natured* friend to *Moore*, who was pleased to remark in the following flattering terms: "They show the writer is a good daughter and a true-hearted Irishwoman".

But by the time this was published, Thomas Moore had been dead for more than ten years and O'Connell for closer to twenty. My admittedly patchy reading of biographical material on both men has landed a number of times on references to the tension between them about this poem of Moore's. But, strangely, I haven't found any reference to Ellen's scathing response in verse to Moore's song.

In fact Ellen, despite her literary talent and her active support for her father, has become largely invisible and inaudible. There are many quoted accounts in various biographies of her father of his home life in Derrynane, especially his warm familial relationships and his love of hunting. But I have never seen "Darrynane in 1832" used as an illustration of this. Obviously, her gender and the era she lived in are likely to be a large part of the story of what is, effectively, her erasure from the story. Although her often declamatory style would not suggest it, I suspect that a lack of confidence and self-belief also contributed. The introductory poem to her collection, dated 1862 and dedicated to the Marchioness of Normanby (the wife of the Normanby referred to by O'Connell in Aubrey de Vere's account of his hospitality), refers to her poems as 'these trifles' which are 'feeble'. A convention perhaps, but her long 1832 poem about Derrynane also opens with an acknowledgement that she is not the 'favoured child' of the 'undying spirit of Poesy'. And yet she is not indifferent to literary reputation. An undated sonnet with the title "To the Muse" ends like this:

> More highly would I prize such gift, than all
> Of honour, wealth, or power this world could give;

Wouldst thou but come, responsive to my call –
"And I, too, am a Poet", dare I say,
Then, then indeed would I begin to live.

These are poignant lines, the regret and the yearning embodied in the heavily stressed rhythm of that final line. The same yearning animates another poem called "The Mountain Glen", which, although it doesn't specify it, is obviously written about Derrynane. It was published *The Irish Monthly Review* in November 1832, the issue before the one in which "Darrynane in 1832" appeared. But it carried no author's name, not even the coy L.N.F. under which the latter was published. Its conclusion may carry a hint of why Ellen's yearning to be a poet bore only limited fruit. Having described the mountainous coastline in affectionate and idyllic terms, she concludes:

Happy then was I,
Glowing with hope. Yet I am happier now
More calmly happy; for domestic peace
Is mine, and mine are all a mother's joys,
A mother's happiness, too deep for words!

Perhaps it is too much of a twenty-first century reaction, but in those lines I think I hear the lady protest too much. The last lines of the previous poem tell us that she saw poetry, and the writing of poetry, as essential to her life. I am not a great believer in the contemporary fashion for reading poetry with an ideological red pen poised to deconstruct and recalibrate, but as I look again at the portrait of the young Ellen with music and poetry as its context, I am saddened to think that, possibly because of gender, marital status and motherhood, a vital part of the life of a talented woman did not flourish as it should have.

Ironically, the reputations of two other women poets of the Derrynane O'Connell household – women of whom no portrait hangs in Derrynane House, Gaelic poets neither of whom would have dreamed of having anything printed – have become consolidated even as that of Ellen has diminished almost into oblivion. The name of her great-grandmother, Máire Ní Dhuibh, has lived on in folklore, although in a half-glimpsed, fragmentary way, right up to the present day. And Ellen's grand-aunt, a daughter of Máire Ní Dhuibh named Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill, composed *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire*, widely considered to be one of the greatest poems to come out of Ireland in the eighteenth century. But before I try to locate these two women in the story of Derrynane, let me imagine that youthful portrait of Ellen stirring again, stepping forward to say *And I, too, am a Poet*,

and beginning to live. And one of the ways I hope to have her come alive for me is as my guide to parts of the landscape around the house, a landscape which, as we have seen, was of enormous personal and symbolic significance to her.

I am not aware of Ellen anywhere adverting to Máire or Eibhlín as literary influences. Certainly she grew up in a Dublin English-speaking environment and family, very different from that in which her father spent his formative years. But, as we have seen, she did use the Irish word *cumar* when describing the landscape around Derrynane. And in a poem she called "The Fox Glove", written in 1843, she recollects the Irish name *An Lus Mór* which she is likely to have heard on one of her stays in Derrynane:

> The *Fox-glove* did I call it? – Nay,
> Its *Irish* name shall grace my lay,
> 'Twas the *Lusmore* I meant to say!

So there was at least an openness to and an interest in the Gaelic element of her *dúchas*. In fact when, in 1844, Thomas Crofton Croker published *The Keen of the South of Ireland*, he included a poem called "The Fisherman's Keen for his Children", for the translation of which he thanked Maurice O'Connell of Derryane, recording under the title that the work had been 'versified by a lady'. The lady was, as the letters E.F. after the translation indicates, Ellen (O'Connell) Fitz-Simon, and Maurice was her brother. The gradual transformation of the cryptic L.N.F. in 1832 through E.F in 1844 to the Ellen Fitz-Simon who published her poems under her full (married) name in 1863 I find fascinating, but is perhaps more reflective of the conventional social decorum of the time than of Ellen herself. I imagine that Ellen's version was done from a literal translation that Croker himself had published in *Researches in the South of Ireland* in 1824 rather than from an original version in Irish. Nonetheless, the fact that she was interested enough to be familiar with such material indicates a leaning towards a Gaelic dimension to her cultural interests. Given these fragmentary indications, and the very limited details we have from the reticent Ellen herself, I think it would be surprising had Ellen not known about Eibhlín Dubh and Máire Ní Dhuibh. Certainly her father, the Liberator, was aware of Eibhlín's creation, as we will see later, and called it 'one of the finest Irish keens'. The poem is undoubtedly a masterpiece, and has long occupied significant space in my imagination. But, rather than here in the house, where I find no presence of its composer, I think it might best be encountered in a less formal setting outdoors. So I'll head out to the surroundings of Derrynane House, under the guidance of Eibhlín Dubh's grand-niece, Ellen.

The Moss House

And so, as Ellen herself puts it in her Derrynane poem, 'I will abroad, into the balmy air' of the surroundings of the house, and see where her poem will lead me. Her initial directions remain, at least as of now, somewhat mysterious:

I will abroad into the balmy air,
And through the leafy shrubbery wend my way,
To where the Moss House, from its airy height,
(Crested with grey and ivy-covered rocks)
Looks down upon a wide and pleasing view;
There sit, and lulled by the unceasing sound
Of the waves rippling on the sands beneath,
Give fancy scope to wander at her will.

I have not so far been able to find out definitively what 'the Moss House' is or was. Somehow the name suggested a child's playhouse to me rather than an actual permanent structure. Was Ellen recollecting some childhood haunt of hers? A few lines from "The Mountain Glen", which I mentioned earlier and which was written about the same time as "Darrynane in 1832", might well refer to the same place, without giving it the specific name:

… a pathway led
To where a moss-grown and heath-covered rock
(Well known to frequenters of the spot)
Offered a pleasant seat, from whence the eye
Strayed o'er a scene of rich and varied beauty …

The elevated situation and the rock, heather and moss common to both descriptions suggested a possible connection, but there was no definitive link.

However, Bernard O'Donoghue came up with an intuitive association. He recalled that the opening lines of the traditional song "The Streams of Bunclody", are

Oh, were I at the moss house where the birds do increase
At the foot of Mount Leinster or some silent place

> By the streams of Bunclody where our pleasures do meet
> And all I would ask for is one kiss from you sweet.

When I investigated this on the internet, I came across colour-enhanced photographs, Lawrence photographs from about 1900, of two “Moss Houses” at Bunclody. They showed a kind of small, circular “rustic” folly, with upright rough-cut logs supporting a roof and walls of thatch, twigs moss, etc. The folklore collector and recorder Michael Fortune wrote about them

> I've also attached the OSI maps from 1888-1913 to show you both. The one in Cuilaphuca is marked as a 'Moss House' while the one at Carrhill is down as 'The Lady's Seat'. Both appear to have similar cap on the roof also if you look closely. There were more like this around Wexford, including one at Peppards Castle near Ballygarrett and another near Monageer. I've seen them in other counties too …

This suggested that a “Moss House” was a recreational feature associated with “Big Houses” in the nineteenth century. But the internet search also came across a book with the marvellous title *The Moss House: In which Many of the Works of Nature are Rendered a Source of Amusement to Children*. Written by Agnes Strickland, set in an estate house and published in 1822, this was aimed at children, with relentlessly improving and educational intent, it appears to have had wide circulation when it was first published. It is easy to imagine that it would form part of the O’Connell household’s library for children. Another discovery was a 2019 novel by Clara Barley, about an early nineteenth-century lesbian affair, also called *The Moss House*. The novel is based on real people (Anne Lister and Ann Walker) in a real place (an estate house called Shibden Hall in Halifax, West Yorkshire) and, specifically, on a “moss house”. Here is an extract from a review by Danielle Orr of *Nature's Domain: Anne Lister and the Landscape of Desire* by Jill Liddington, on which the BBC series *Gentleman Jack* was based:

> While waiting for Miss Walker to return, Anne consulted the copy of Loudon's *Gardener’s Dictionary* that Ann had lent her and began to transform the thatched cottage, for which she had already assembled plans and workmen, first into a thatched hut and then into a hut with a moss roof. It was presented ceremoniously, entire and complete, to Miss Walker upon her return as the "moss house”.

Coincidentally, Anne Lister's moss house was built in 1832, the year Ellen's poem was composed. So now I knew that a moss house was a feature of a number of nineteenth-century estates. But where was Ellen's moss house? As before, I went back to the poem, where I read that the moss house was placed at an 'airy height/ Crested with grey and ivy-covered rocks'. Suddenly, I recalled a fascinating conversation with the archaeologist Laurence Dunne at the site of a small ringfort or *caiseal* in the grounds of Derrynane House, on which he is engaged in ongoing work for the OPW. His work has established that there was never any habitation within the ringfort, although there are souterrains partly incorporated into the wall. The interior of the ringfort is dominated by large high boulders. I remembered Laurence telling me that these boulders would have provided a clear view of the sea had the present-day woodland not obscured it. I further remembered him saying there was evidence of use or adaptation of the site in relatively modern times, and showing me how the top of the boulder had been partially built up to make what seemed to be a platform, for purposes unknown. He believes that modifications to the site and its surroundings, were carried out by the O'Connell family. I looked at the original Ordnance Survey map on the OSI website, and confirmed for myself that the woodland around the site was less extensive than now at the time of the original survey, which roughly coincided with the time Ellen composed her poem, which refers only to a 'shrubbery'. It is likely, therefore, that if the Moss House was here, it would have been accurate to say that it 'Looks down upon a wide and pleasing view'. Furthermore, the ringfort is situated beside the most direct path between Derrynane House and Aghavore, the route Ellen's poem describes. I could now imagine Ellen's Moss House on top of the prominent boulders in the ringfort. Altogether coincidental and conjectural? Certainly, and I make no remotely definitive claim. All I assert is that what I put forward as a possibility would fit with the poem's itinerary and description. I phoned Laurence Dunne, and asked him about my speculation. As I knew would be the case, he couldn't say anything definitive either, but he did confirm that nothing I speculated about was at odds with the excavatory evidence he had uncovered, and could indeed fit in with that evidence. And in a subsequent email to me, he wrote

> There is no doubt in my mind that the uppermost limits of the caiseal were modified by the O'Connells to create a level viewing platform that included an intra mural niche-convenient for a couple of books and candle. It is conceivable that the Moss House could have been built here.

That is more than enough for me, and I can now continue with Ellen on her walk.

Abbey Island

Ellen's walk from now on is retraceable, even today, using her poem as a guide. She goes down towards the shore, and

> … thence descending, seek the winding road
> That to thy harbour leads, sweet Aghavore,
> Where all our little fleet in safety ride
> In thy unruffled waters, while beyond
> The rocks that at thine entrance lift their fronts
> The sea in mountain billows rolls.

I love that 'sweet Aghavore', its echo of popular nineteenth century songs of place. It's a name that is a name almost gone out of use. Now I walk down the narrow winding road to what is now almost always referred to as Derrynane Harbour, the path Ellen would have walked almost two centuries ago. Today, in mid-June, it is quiet, uncannily so. Were the Covid 19 lockdown not happening, I would have to step in many times to avoid the non-stop traffic crawling to and from the beach. As it is, there are less than a dozen cars in the car-park when I arrive. The sailing-boats, dinghies and windsurfers that normally crowd the harbour in this season are absent. But the 'sweet Aghavore' that Ellen describes stretches, immediately recognisable, before my eyes. The almost completely enclosed harbour is as unruffled as she says and the sea outside, although the wind has calmed and the sun is bright, is still fairly high after a stormy interlude. The calm waters of the harbour are protected by an islanded reef running northwest from Aghamore Island – now almost always known as Abbey Island – where the ruined abbey is situated. The narrow and rocky entrance at the far side of the harbour is, as so often, turbulent with breaking waves, just as Ellen describes. I also recognise the perspective from which Ellen sees an island which I have already mentioned more than once:

> Even where I stand, I see the breakers dash
> In sheets of foam, high 'gainst the steep black sides
> Of rugged Scariff, famed in many a tale
> Of witchery, though scarce remembered now …

Nearly a century later, a namesake of Ellen's, the seanchaí Seán Ó Conaill from Cill Rialaig, did in fact still remember the story of the Cailleach from Dingle trying to tow Scariff south to the Cailleach Bhéara, a story to which I earlier alluded. The story is part of the imaginative and the physical

landscape, and Ellen must have shared in it on her visits to Derrynane. She continues her versified walk, which is really an imaginal appropriation of the landscape, over to Abbey Island, the tidal island where stand the monastic ruins where, as we have seen, the O'Connells always brought their visitors:

> I shape my course, and soon before me rise
> The old grey walls, where once the hymn of praise
> Rose to the living God! Now all is still
> Save the shrill whistle of the wild curlew,
> And the loud music of the wind and waves.

The ruins themselves are late medieval, said to be of an Augustinian monastery, but little is known of it. John O'Donovan writes in his Ordnance Survey letter of 23rd August 1841 that it was associated with the ubiquitous Fíonán. He is dismissive of Charles Smith's opinion in *The Ancient and Present State of the Kingdom of Kerry*, published in 1774, that the abbey was associated with another saint:

> This is the abbey which Dr. Smith says was built by the monks of Saint Finbar in the seventh century. For this assertion he quotes no authority and I fear that he had none but the dictum of some country schoolmaster. The name *Doire Fhionáin*, The Oak Grove of Saint Finan, would go to prove that this abbey owed its origin to Saint Finan of Loch Luigheach, not to Saint Finbar of Cork, and the proximity of Derrynane to this lake (which is about four miles to the north) entirely favours this conjecture.

Somewhat piqued by O'Donovan's dismissal of Smith's possible source, this particular retired 'country schoolmaster', recalls that even Daniel O'Connell himself seems to have been unaware of the Fíonán connection to the name Derrynane. This is O'Neill Daunt's account of how the Liberator explained the name:

> O'Connell's etymology of Darrynane was derived from the two Irish words, *Darragh*, an oak, and *Inane* [pronounced *Eyenawn*], ivy: "The Ivied Oaks."

This, I muse, shows two things. Firstly the connection with Fíonán , now toponymically accepted, had lapsed from local consciousness in his time. Secondly, O'Connell's Irish was very competent. Because

Doire Eidhneáin, to give it its correct spelling, is an understandable, if inaccurate, phonetic interpretation of the name. But I am digressing. So, along with Ellen,

> I pass the arch, and in the grass - grown aisle,
> Pause o'er the marble that commemorates,
> In plain but energetic phrase, the worth,
> Talents and virtues of those, long, long laid
> Within the narrow house!

And it is that same Gothic arch I pass under, and the interior of the church is indeed 'grass-grown', especially around the O'Connell family tomb that I, like Ellen, have come to visit.

There is no marble. At least there is no marble today, and the tomb is well-preserved enough to suggest that there never was any marble as part of it. I am guessing that Ellen uses the term poetically as being synonymous with a commemorative gravestone. In 1832, when Ellen describes it, its surface and lettering would have been impressive. The inscription is nowadays obscured by lichen, moss and the blurring of time. But I come armed with another description, published in 1846 by William Howitt, a noted travel writer of the time. His extended account of his visit to O'Connell in Derrynane is wonderfully vibrant, wide-ranging and incisive. As seemed always to happen, O'Connell's love of hunting and the local landscape figures prominently, but for a change let's look at how he describes the place where I am now:

> The whole of the interior of this ruin was filled with the dead, laid close as possible, side by side, and was consequently studded thickly with those short, rude, unhewn stones of memorial. This crowding into this roofless ruin, was owing to the feeling of the greater sanctity; for without was almost limitless space, yet within there was but one grave, the tomb of the O'Connells, which had any inscription. Without, it was the same. I could but discover one stone, and that a flat one, with one inscription. Every other evidence of the neatness which distinguishes an English grave yard, was wanting. The bones which had been dug out of the grave of yesterday, were laid on the next grave, and a few stones piled upon them—a faint trace of the old habit of piling the cairn over the dead. The boards of the old coffin were thrown into a corner, where my companion on the occasion assured me they would lie and rot. At the east end, where the high altar had been, a considerable quantity of disinterred bones were laid, and stones piled upon them; and both within and without, amongst the long grass of the graves, lay about these unsightly boards of old disinterred

coffins. It is no doubt the poverty of the common people which has led them to retain the old habit of merely raising a rough stone in memory of the dead; but it were to be wished that they studied a little more the decorous aspect of their burial-places, by interring again the bones, and burning the coffin-boards.

In the south-west corner of the abbey ruin stands an object of interest to the visitor—the tomb of the O'Connells. Here rests Mrs. O'Connell; and here will, doubtless, one day rest the remains of the man who has made his name familiar throughout the world, for his exertions in behalf of his oppressed country. This is a plain altar-tomb, set close into the corner; and on the western wall above it, a Gothic arch encloses an iron cross. On the tomb is inscribed—

D.O.M.
Erected to the Memory of
Daniel O'Connell,
Formerly of Derrinane, Esq.
Who departed this life in the month of
September 1770,
Full of years and virtues.

Also of MARY his wife, &c.

Here also are deposited the mortal remains of
of MAURICE O'CONNELL, Esq.
Their son, who erected this monument.
The chief ambition of his long and prosperous life
Was to elevate an ancient family from unmerited oppression.
His allegiance was pure and disinterested
His love of his native land sincere and devoted.
And his attachment to the ancient faith of his fathers,
To the Church of Christ,
Was his first pride and his chiefest consolation.
He died on the 10th of February, in the year 1825
In the 97th year of his age.
They loved him most who knew him best.

May his soul rest in eternal peace.

Here is the 'plain but energetic phrase' that Ellen read in 1832. And it is no longer by any means the only grave with an inscribed stone. Nor are the other graves any longer as untended and as poverty-stricken as Howitt describes. Reading the gravestones, I see names and townlands which are familiar to me since I used to teach students by those names and from those townlands: Fentons, O'Gradys, Sheehans, O'Sullivans, MacGillicuddys, Currans, from townlands such as Rath, Derrynane, Caherdaniel, Loher, Glenbeg, Toor and many more. The *cosmhuintir* have come into their own, in no small measure because of the campaigns by the man whose remains Howitt expected – wrongly, as it turned out –to also rest here.

That the 'plain but energetic phrase' on the tomb is entirely in English is in itself significant. It tells us, as does the correspondence of the O'Connells, that English, for at least two generations before the Liberator, was the language of this family in formal contexts. Those who regularly choose to blame Daniel O'Connell for the widespread abandoning of Irish in the nineteenth century tend not to recognise this, at least not openly. My own belief is that they use the language issue as a convenient stick with which to beat O'Connell; the real cause of their often virulent hostility lies in O'Connell's opposition to bloodshed in the pursuit of his political aims. But I pull myself back from this byroad to muse on the irony that all three of the names on the tombstone are not the names by which they lived on, either locally or, even today, in historical or cultural narratives. The 'Daniel O'Connell' who was 'full of years and virtues' lives on as *Dónal Mór Ó Conaill*. The woman Howitt merely etcetera'd as 'Mary, his wife' became far better known, but under her own name of *Máire Ní Dhuibh*. And the 'Maurice O'Connell, Esq., their son', whose 'chief ambition was to elevate an ancient family from unmerited oppression' is almost universally known, even by academic historians, as *Hunting Cap*, or *Muiris a' Chaipín*.

There is another discovery to be made. I've said that, because of the difficulty in reading the inscription, I brought with me Howlitt's 1846 reading of the O'Connell tomb. But because I knew from previous visits that the part of the inscription which Howlitt had simply etcetera'd as 'Mary, his wife', had a much more detailed text, I also brought with me a powerful torch and a stiff shoe-brush for the accumulated grime obscuring the inscription. As it turned out, I could have saved myself the trouble. I was to discover a few days later that, in the same 1841 Ordnance Survey letter of John O'Donovan that I quoted from earlier, there was a more accurate and complete transcription. But let me, as if I am doing it right now, share the excitement I feet as I decipher for myself Máire Ní Dhuibh's epitaph, a longer and more revealing one than that of her husband. With my brush, my

torch and fingertip explorations in the grooves of the lettering, the reality behind Howlitt's patriarchally dismissive 'MARY his wife, &c.' is gradually revealed:

And of Mary his wife.
She also was of an ancient race
Of the House of O'Donoghue.
She survived her husband 22 years
And was a model for wives and mothers
To admire and to imitate.
Requiescant in Pace.

It is like seeing an old-fashioned photograph in the developing-tank as it resolves itself into a clear image. The woman whom Howitt treated as an unimportant appendage to her husband, declares herself – or is rather declared by her family – to be 'also of an ancient race'. And indeed she was. For Máire Ní Dhuibh was of the Ó Duibh branch of the Killarney O'Donoghues of the Glen, a significant family of the Gaelic aristocracy, and was related to the seventeenth-century poet Seafraidh Ua Donnchadha. There is a vibrant phrase in Irish – *mórtas cine* – which nowadays is used mainly in a nationalistic way, but which is more accurately used in connection with ancestral and clan pride. In Máire Ní Dhuibh's epitaph, and in the epitaph of her son Hunting Cap, that *mórtas cine* survives and transcends the language shift represented in the inscription. And, standing here beside the tomb, I am struck by the thought that Hunting Cap's concern 'to elevate an ancient family from unmerited oppression' was taken immeasurably further by his nephew, who made it his 'chief ambition' to try do the same, not primarily for his family but for the great mass of the Irish people. One way or another, the tomb does much to explain where the Liberator came from.

But let me stay for a while with Máire Ní Dhuibh, whose presence in Derrynane House itself today is minimal, although it was she and her husband, Dónal Mór, who built the original house, where the restaurant now stands. But she is certainly present in the imagination of this place. To a significant extent, this is due to *The Last Colonel of the Irish Brigade*. That book, published in 1892, includes two poems of Máire Ní Dhuibh's that were rescued and preserved, even if in fragmentary and linguistically attenuated form, by its author, Mrs. Morgan John O'Connell (Mary Anne Bianconi) who was married to a nephew of the Liberator. Both poems are set at the little harbour just a short distance from Máire Ní Dhuibh's burial-place. The longer and more complete of the two is unfortunately extant only in translation. Mary Anne Bianconi O'Connell rather coyly writes that 'two of her [Máire Ní Dhuibh's] descendants gave me copies of a metrical translation by the late Father

Charles O'Connor-Kerry.' The translation is somewhat stilted, but the *mórtas cine* chiselled over her grave is also embodied in the poem. The eighteen young men leaving Derrynane, as ambitious young Catholics did, for military careers abroad – the "Wild Geese" of popular imagination – include the Last Colonel (Máire Ní Dhuibh's son Daniel) along with two of his brothers, as well as some O'Donoghue nephews. As she bids them farewell at the harbour, she mourns them with an epithet that recalls the Milesian myth as they leave Ireland as soldiers of fortune, much as the Milesians, the myth tells us, came to Ireland as soldiers of fortune.

> Let me weep, for we may not meet again.
> Never ship bore a goodlier freight –
> Twice nine noble scions of the Soldier of Spain.
> O'Donoghue's two gallant sons are climbing yonder mast
> To cast a last look on the land.
> And my five brave O'Connells are shedding tears so fast
> They cannot see their mother kiss her hand.

Both family names are proudly, even boastfully there, front and centre. And the lineage of her two families is also a cause for boasting:

> My sons and my nephews, we are one,
> One red stream is flowing in our veins.

And, whether prophetically or by retrospective addition by another hand it is impossible to say from this linguistic or chronological distance, she adds

> Ye go your ways. A greater chief from me shall yet be born
> To triumph over the ocean's haughty lord.

Thinking of these lines as I trace the letters of Máire Ní Dhuibh's epitaph, especially the letters that assert that 'she also was of an ancient race', I find myself almost praying that somehow the original Irish of these lines will turn up. Whether or not they do, I think that even the translation gives us an idea of the poetic strength of its composer, and of her passionate pride of ancestry. Luckily, again thanks to Mary Anne Bianconi O'Connell, we have a few original lines of another poem by this redoubtable materfamilias, and again the setting is a shoreline one, probably at the nearby harbour,

glimpses of whose calm waters I can see between the dunes that stretch outside this ruined church. This short stanza is attributed to Máire Ní Dhuibh, and is introduced like this:

> Sergeant Michael O'Connor, late R.I.C., has happily remembered it. He says she made the lines on being suddenly summoned to the beach to watch a vessel, which was supposed to be bringing back some of her posterity.
>
> *Máire Ní Dhuibh cecinit*
>
> Cím chugam anoir
> An crann is áille ar bith
> Nár cailleadh riamh
> Agus nár rith
> Is tá naoi naonúr inti istigh.

This is how I translate:

> I see coming from the east
> The wide world's fairest mast
> That never perished
> Nor ever retreated
> And nine nines within it rest.

There are a few things to note here. I have translated *crann* as "mast" for contextual reasons, and it is indeed the term used for a ship's mast, as well as its normal meaning of "tree". That in these lines it is used to mean "ship" is confirmed by the use of the feminine *inti* in the last line. But the word "crann" is also freighted with two literary meanings: that of "hero" or "warrior", and that of "destiny" or "fate". I emphasise these points not for semantic interest, but to point out the richness and resonance of the original Irish. Máire Ní Dhuibh is describing – or more likely trying to conjure – a ship bringing home her son and kin from Europe. But what emerges in the language of the original is a symbolic pillar-like figure suggesting heroism and destiny. The 'nine nines' recall the 'Twice nine noble scions of the Soldier of Spain' to whom she had bade a tearful farewell in the other poem. It is at once frustrating and intriguing that we have just fragments of an orally transmitted original remembered by a local man. Mary Bianconi O'Connell even wonders if this fragment is really part of the longer poem, 'an allegorical verse which Father O'Connor-Kerry altered considerably in the

rhymed translation?'. It would be nice to know, but as I look out to sea, and imagine a sail appearing on the horizon while a proud woman 'of an ancient race' hurries to the small pier nearby, I am almost glad that the mystery is undiluted by factual accuracy, and that the mast, the hero, the destiny from the east can sail towards us, in the words of Keats, 'in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.'

Of course we have to remember the essentially oral nature, not just of Máire Ní Dhuibh's compositions themselves, but of their transmission after her death. The policeman who, roughly a century after Máire Ní Dhuibh's death, is identified by name as the source for the five lines of poetry I've been looking at is just one example of this. And Mary Bianconi O'Connell, who was married to her great-grandnephew, tells us in a declaration that 'this most notable dame was a famous Irish improvisatrice'. That improvisatory element of her poetry, and the oral and therefore improvisatory element of its subsequent transmission during a time of radical language change, inevitably leads to the shifting, almost illusory perspectives from which we apprehend this woman. Much of the folkloric material about her paints a picture of a shrewd, tough woman who was demanding of servants and tenants. Significantly, there is also material that suggests that Daniel O'Connell's eloquence was a legacy from her. One example from Iveragh was brought to my attention by the folklorist Ríonach Uí Ógáin, who has published two fascinating and valuable studies, *An Rí gan Choróin* in Irish and *Immortal Dan* in English – of the folklore surrounding O'Connell. Here it is:

> The Counsellor and Seán Sigerson used to be on opposite sides in matters of law, and Seán used to say that it wasn't through education that Dan used to win but through poetry that he got from the old crone of a grandmother he had.

It is said that O'Connell himself used to say the same thing. One way or another, it wasn't off the wind, as the saying goes, that the Liberator took his extraordinary eloquence, and, despite Seán Sigerson's barb, it wasn't just from his grandmother either.

This inscribed gravestone in the ruined abbey somehow seems a suitable place to invoke that poetic O'Connell heritage. Because much of that heritage is concerned with mourning and praising the dead. I will come to the most resonant and best-known example of that tradition of *caoineadh* or keening later, but, again, that famous example was not without precedent in the family. Mary Anne Bianconi O'Connell tells of the importance of that tradition to Máire Ní Dhuibh, when one of her sons died. A woman from Cork who had married into the O'Connells came to the wake, where the mourners had been loudly lamenting in the traditional way, and knelt down in silent prayer by the corpse. The matriarch's reaction was dramatic:

> The bereaved mother violently reproached for uttering no words of praise and sorrow above her dead. She clapped her hands, and called out in Irish, "Where are the dark women of the glens, who would keen and clap their hands, and would not say a prayer until he was laid in the grave?

Again, it would be fascinating to have the original version. But there is enough here to show a more passionate and less formal side to the woman who is formally inscribed in stone as 'a model for wives and mothers to admire and to imitate'. We begin to sense the wild intensity of her daughter, the far better known Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill, who, at least in verse, drank the blood of her murdered husband.

And, again according to an account in *The Last Colonel of the Irish Brigade*, another daughter, Alice, keened Máire Ní Dhuibh beside this very grave when she died in 1795, taking the opportunity to also renew her mourning for her own husband who had died early in her marriage, many years before. Mary Anne O'Connell tells us that she heard 'the venerable Miss Julianna O'Connell recite it in Irish and explain it in English', and that she subsequently recovered 'a fragment of the original Irish'. This is the fragment:

> Fear maith mo thí
> Ón lá a d'fhág sé mé
> Ní bhfuaireas sonas in aon ní
> Ní thógfadh ceol mo chroí.

This fragment is amplified in the rest of the translation which Mary Anne preserved. Although this section of her caoineadh deals with her husband whom she hopes her mother will encounter in the afterlife rather than with her mother, it must be remembered that she was widowed very young, and that her mother, by contrast, had survived Dónal Mór by twenty-two years, living to about the age of ninety. There is something very touching, I think, in the picture of the daughter at her mother's graveside, asking her to carry a message of love and faithfulness to her dead husband whom she hopes her mother will meet. And so I find that it's fitting to quote all we have of a keen said to have been uttered at the burial of the woman who invoked 'the dark women of the glens, who would keen and clap their hands', while I decipher the formal, chiselled epitaph of that formidable woman:

Mother of my heart! If you meet the good man of my house,
Tell him since the day he left me
I have found no pleasure in anything;
No music raised my heart. Forgive me for bringing down any grief but yours;
But tell him I find no pleasure in anything
But his child.
Since the voice of my wailing
Will not reach the good man of my house,
Who left me long years ago,
Tell him, mother of my heart,
That I have been ever true to him;
And when reunited with the firstborn of your youth
Tell him also his Mary has never changed his name,
Nor the sable colour of her garments.

As I transcribe these words, two and a quarter centuries after this funeral *caoineadh* was uttered, I surmise that, in those last few lines, Alice was referring to the death of Máire Ní Dhuibh's son John, at whose wake his grieving mother invoked 'the dark women of the glen who would keen and clap their hands'. When I consult a genealogical table in *The Last Colonel of the Irish Brigade*, I find this is indeed the case. John had died in 1751 aged twenty-six. Máire Ní Dhuibh's daughter keens her mother in 1795, and her keening includes a request her mother to carry messages to the dead of half a century before. Immediately after the recounting the words of Alice, Mary Anne, writing towards the end of the nineteenth century, knowing little or no Irish herself but interested enough to preserve what she can, allows herself a comment that shows she recognises the gap between the gravestone inscription and the oral utterances of a Gaelic world of which she has given us such tantalising glimpses:

And this is spoken over a dead body, within five years of the dawning of our prosaic century!

Just over twenty years before those words were spoken over Máire Ní Dhuibh's dead body, another woman of this family, a daughter estranged from the family because she followed her heart, had made her own great *caoineadh* over the dead body of her murdered husband, a *caoineadh* that luckily has survived and is universally acknowledged, in its original Irish and in many translated versions, to be one of the great poems of eighteenth-century Ireland. Neither woman is to be

encountered in Derrynane House, but I have surprised myself by finding the older woman here in the abbey graveyard and the perspectives it offers, perspectives of language, landscape and memory. Before I leave the graveside to continue Ellen's walk around Derrynane, I'll try to discover some presence of Máire Ní Dhuibh's banished daughter.

Before I do so, I'd like to make a small digression, one that shows how misunderstandings can wind themselves around the truth and transform themselves into something that "everybody knows". From Wikipedia to folklorists, biographers and historians in Irish and in English, it has become an accepted fact that Máire Ní Dhuibh had twenty-two children, although family trees never go beyond thirteen named children. As far as I know, the source for this belief is *The Last Colonel of the Irish Brigade*. Describing the tomb from where I have been trying to delve back into literary and folkloric legacy of the O'Connells, the author writes:

> A quaint tomb, approached by steps and bearing a very long inscription, occupies an angle of the ruin, and covers Donal Mor and Maur-ni-Dhuiv, their son Maurice, and the Liberator's wife, the fondly loved "Mary" of his letters. Maur-ni-Dhuiv's epitaph mentions her twenty-two children, and styles her a model for all wives and mothers to admire and imitate.

The last bit about being 'a model for all wives and mothers to admire and imitate, is quite accurate, but Mary Anne's usual attention to detail seems to have failed her, or perhaps the 'very long inscription' was already somewhat obscured by the weathering of almost a century, because, what the inscription actually says is that she 'survived her husband 22 years'. Of course Máire Ní Dhuibh's folkloric personality, vividly and accurately described by Mary Anne in the same passage as characterised by 'her keen wit, her caustic tongue, her despotic rule and her open hand' was perfect for the absorption of further evidence of matriarchal strength and dominance. Thirteen children was, even for its time, quite a large family, and their mother survived to the age of ninety; nonetheless, it is interesting to see how easily and firmly a number carved in stone attached itself to another narrative and insinuated its carved presence into the fluidity of what everybody knows.

One of the children who did undoubtedly exist, and whose name has become increasingly well-known over the last two centuries, is that of Máire Ní Dhuibh's and Dónal Mór's daughter, now universally known as Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill. In passing, it is worth noting that her name does not mean "Dark Eileen" or any variation of that. She is named after her mother's people, the Ó Duibh branch of the O'Donoghues of the Glens, and her name echoes her mother's Máire Ní Dhuibh rather than the colour of her own hair. "Dark Eileen" is a romanticised nineteenth century Celtic image. But this is of minor importance. What is of major importance is that her *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire* is

recognised as an extraordinarily powerful poem, a poem that has been translated by many writers, myself included. It has, among other reincarnations, been filmed by Bob Quinn, dramatized by Tom McIntyre, novelised by Clíodhna Cussen, set to music by Peadar Ó Riada and used as a template for poems by James Simmons and Dermot Bolger dealing with contemporary violent killings. The poet Doireann Ní Ghríofa has recently published *A Ghost in the Throat*, a very well received prose work that defies classification, in which, from a feminist perspective, she explores her own fascination with the *Caoineadh* and the life of Eibhlín Dubh and her family, emphasising that 'this is a female text'. Earlier, in essay published in Seán Mac Réamoinn's wonderful *The Pleasures of Gaelic Poetry*, Thomas Kinsella wrote that 'the *Caoineadh* is a classic – one of the world's great poems – and is on its way to proper recognition as such'. And because it is almost *de rigeur* to do so, I should mention that it was famously, if perhaps rather pontifically, described by Peter Levi as 'the greatest poem written in either Ireland or Britain during the eighteenth century.' And perhaps its ultimate accolade is that it has arrived at the position of having academic knives sharpened over it in the course of academic feuds, the protagonists in which will remain nameless.

Such a posthumous reputation for a woman whose now internationally famous poem survived for many years only by way of oral and untraceable transmission! Her portrait does not hang with her two brothers, Hunting Cap and The Last Colonel, in Derrynane House. She is not buried in this tomb; in fact her burial place is unknown. After the murder of her husband she seems to have faded from history to reappear, in shadowy form, in myth and legend. This uncertainty is mirrored in the various readings and receptions of her *Caoineadh*. The fact that variant versions exist, and that much of its language and many of its tropes are traditional, and to be found in other examples of the genre, has led some scholars to question how much – if indeed any – of its four hundred or so lines can be attributed to the personal authorship of Eibhlín Dubh. This is an argument that is also made about Homer's work, and one for which I have neither the necessary qualifications nor interest. The *Caoineadh* exists, in a by now more or less settled amalgamated text, and it is magnificently more than enough.

Whatever about authorship and transmission, the historical and factual basis for the poem is established, although only in the barest of detail. Eibhlín Dubh's husband, Art Ó Laoghaire, of a Gaelic Catholic gentry family, from Múscraí in West Cork, was shot dead on 4th May 1773, by a party of militia under the orders of Abraham Morris, High Sheriff of Cork and a neighbour of Art. There had been enmity between the two since Art had returned from service as a Captain in the Hungarian Hussars, a Regiment of the Empress Marie Therese's Austro-Hungarian Army. Morris had Art proclaimed an outlaw. The impression the *Caoineadh* leaves is of a handsome daredevil on horseback - or a macho swaggerer, depending on your point of view. The fault lines between

Catholic and Protestant, Gaelic and Anglo-Irish, are intrinsic to the poem, although a nationalistic reading is, at the very least, an ideological and retrospective reading rather than a textual one. Other readings, derived from feminism, historicism, folkloricism or whatever *ism* you choose, have their place. I tend to agree with the late Breandán Ó Buachalla, who argued in *An Caoine agus an Chaointeoireacht* that the extraordinary poetry of the *Caoineadh* should not be pushed to the background by arguments about whether its details are either purely factual or common folk-motifs. Do we care whether Eibhlín Dubh actually cupped her dead husband's blood in her hands and drank it? Does it matter whether she actually took the three steps from the threshold of her home to the empty saddle of her husband's horse, or whether she just used a traditional motif? Does it matter how much – if any – it she authored herself? If oral transmission influenced the poem we have today, is it any the poorer for that?

I remember how powerfully an extract from the poem resonated within me when I studied it at school. Undoubtedly my reaction was partly the standard Catholic nationalist one of the time, which, as a sixteen-year-old brought up on the orthodox pieties, I enthusiastically embraced. But even when I sloughed these off, the headlong, tumbling rhythms and sound-patterns of Eibhlín's poem stayed in my mind, along with the equally turbulent visual and emotional progressions of the poem. I know of no poem in which the sound-patterns and the rhythms are more integral to the meaning of the poem than they are in *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire*. The grief, the shock, the anger, the pride, the determination, the boastfulness, the despair – all of these and more are embodied in its lines. Its orality cries out to be heard, even as you read it. From its dramatic invocatory opening, 'Mo ghrá go daingean thú!', through Eibhlín's fear-driven gallop on her dead husband's mare, through her discovery of his body, through her ritual drinking of his blood, through her cursing of his enemies, and finally to the dignified heartbreak of his burial, with Art 'ag iompar cré agus cloch/bearing clay and stone', the poem is one long torrent of drama and emotion. As Breandán Ó Buachalla has pointed out, the grammatical admixture of tenses and moods in the poem help to make it at once both immediately present and also outside of ordinary time or timelines. A historical, dated event, together with its context and aftermath, is invested with the force of myth, and the timelessness that is characteristic of myth. This is what I attempted to carry over into my own English version of the poem, and partly why I called it *The Howl for Art Ó Laoghaire*, which I include as an appendix to this work. I think of the poem as a long howl of varying emotions, varying registers and varying narratives, all flowing together into something suspended outside ordinary time, outside ordinary convention, even religious convention as we know it. Again, I come back to the words attributed to Maire Ní Dhuibh, who, at her son's wake, berated a family member who simply knelt down to pray, without entering into the hiatus of suspended time and convention:

> The bereaved mother violently reproached for uttering no words of praise and sorrow above her dead. She clapped her hands, and called out in Irish, "Where are the dark women of the glens, who would keen and clap their hands, and would not say a prayer until he was laid in the grave?

Eibhlín Dubh in Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire, certainly steps out of the shadows of her life to join her mother's 'dark women of the glens' in an extraordinarily intense keening of her murdered husband before the burial with which the poem fades into silence, time resumes, prayers are recited, and epitaphs are carved into stone.

Eibhlín Dubh has no such carved tombstone. Art Ó Laoghaire does, in Kilcrea (Cill Chré) near Ovens in Cork. I have several times visited his grave there, in a corner of the ruins of this substantial late medieval abbey, protected by an iron railing. Here, the inscription on the grave tells us, lie the remains of the outlaw. The epitaph carved into his tombstone could have come straight from the pages of a nineteenth-century romantic historical novel:

Lo! Arthur Leary, Generous
Handsome, Brave, slain in
His Bloom Lies in this Humble
Grave. Died May 4th 1773
Aged 26 years.

And the inscribed slab goes on to boast of Art's outlawry, in its epitaph for his son, who in the *Caoineadh* is described by Eibhlín as 'Conchubhar beag an cheana/ little affectionate Con', and who was not yet five years of age when his father was shot dead.

Cornelius O'Leary. Barrister-at-Law,
ex-Captain of the Gardes-Francaises,
son of Arthur the Outlaw.
Born August 25, A.D. 1768.
Died August 20, A.D. 1846.

C.F. Purcell O'Leary, Barrister-at-Law,
Son of Cornelius, born October 6 A.D. 1815.
Died June 21 A.D. 1846.

In a memorable passage in the *Caoineadh*, Eibhlín anticipates with dread her two children asking about their father's whereabouts. (Here and elsewhere, I use my own translated version)

> My lover now, and always!
> When they come into the hallway,
> Conchubhar, the little favourite,
> And the small one, Fear Ó Laoghaire,
> They'll ask, all hot and bothered,
> Where I have left their father.
> I'll tell them through my horror
> He's beyond in Cill na Martar.
> They'll call out for their father,
> With silence for an answer.

Art lies in Kilcrea, and the little boy whom Eibhlín dreaded telling about his father's death lies with him, and is proudly called 'son of Arthur the Outlaw'. His education and welfare was looked after in Paris, by Eibhlín's brother Daniel, the Last Colonel, as evidenced in a letter to Hunting Cap in April 1789. Mary Anne describes him as 'the little Connor of the poem, who ran through the house of mourning looking for his murdered father.' Furthermore, the education of his own son, also buried here, was also being looked after by the Last Colonel, according to a letter dated March 1825, more than a half-century after Art's assassination. So not only Eibhlín's murdered her husband, but their son and their grandson, whose welfare was looked after by Eibhlín's brother, lie here. But where is Eibhlín? Where is her epitaph carved into stone? Seán Ó Tuama, in the introduction his now canonical 1961 edition of the poem, tells us (I translate) that 'no one knows, however, where Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill died, nor when, nor where she was buried'. Like her poem, she seems to have moved from a timelined, narrative and recorded world into one that is timeless, mythic and non-linear.

Yet still, I am left wondering why her grave – if there was a grave – is unknown, why she has no carved letters either here at Derrynane Abbey or with her husband, son and grandson in Kilcrea. It's almost as if she chose to make her historical self as elusive and as indefinable as the exact nature of the authorship and text – if indeed that's the right word – of the long poem which is by now

undoubtedly hers. And the authorship – and again the word may lack precision – being ascribed to Eibhlín Dubh happened not long after the occasion and composition of the *Caoineadh*. In 1790, Charles Étienne Coquebert de Montbret, a representative of the French government, specifically as *agent général de la Marine et du Commerce*, travelling between Castlemaine and Tralee, gave this account of keening women:

> Before leaving the house, women improvise verses (sung to some well-known melody) in praise of the defunct, recalling his exploits and the generosity of his ancestors. These women are paid for their lamentations, and the higher the payment the more they lament. Some of the lamenters are quite astonishing. One, a Mme Mahoni, is especially famous in these parts and the song of Mme O'Leary on the death of her husband is praised above all others.

So there we have it. Just seventeen years after the death of Art Ó Laoghaire, *le chant de Mme. O'Leary* is associated with an 'especially famous' keening woman in North Kerry, quite a distance from either Derrynane, Eibhlín's original home, or Múscraí, the home of her husband. This is clear evidence that the *Caoineadh* very quickly established a reputation for Eibhlín herself – not a *bean chaointe* or keening woman – independent of any keening or mourning function it may have had at the time of Art's assassination and burial. And indeed, despite Eibhlín's disappearance from formal historical narrative, her family was aware of the status of her *Caoineadh*. In 1834, when Thomas Crofton Croker was researching for *The Keen of the South of Ireland*, he wrote to Maurice O'Connell, the son of the Liberator, for information about another famous lament. In the course of his reply, Maurice gave this information:

> My father desires me to mention that one of the finest of Irish keens is that of his aunt, the widow of Arthur O'Leary, who was shot near Carraig-a-nimmy [*Carraig an Ime*], on the road from Cork to Millstreet. He was the last person shot as an outlaw in Ireland; of course you have heard of his case.

The language is studiously neutral about the assassination, but familially proud of the *Caoineadh*. Yet, once again, I am left wondering where Eibhlín disappeared to in the ordinary world. Maurice O'Connell's letter doesn't even tell us when – or indeed if – she had died. It is as if Eibhlín inhabits some sort of Platonic reality, her existence in this world a shadowy, unreal one.

To get some sort of hint about why that life is so shadowy, at least from the O'Connell side, I go back briefly to the house, and to two portraits hanging there. An unattributed painting of Maurice

O'Connell, better known as Hunting Cap, hangs in the hallway just outside the dining-room door. It shows a thin-faced man, with a long bony nose, whose appearance can be best described as flinty. Near the fireplace in the dining-room itself is a portrait by Jean Baptiste Paulin Guerín of Hunting Cap's brother Daniel, now better known as The Last Colonel of the Irish Brigade. The same long, bony nose is evident, but the features are altogether softer, mellower and more good-humoured. These contrasting portraits of two of Eibhlín's brothers may well mirror the way she was treated by her family, before and after the death of Art. The *Caoineadh* opens with these lines:

> My love holds fast in you!
> That day I chanced on you
> Beside the market-house,
> You were my eye's distraction,
> You were my quickened heartbeat,
> I escaped home and family
> To travel far with you.

D'éalaíos óm charaid leat/ I bhad ó bhaile leat. This is how Eibhlín describes her elopement and marriage. And this poetic description is corroborated by the factual world of the Last Colonel's correspondence from France with Hunting Cap. In a letter to Hunting Cap dated 26th May, 1768, he wrote, in a beautifully balanced sentence:

> I am sorry to Learn that our Sister Nelly has taken a step contrary to the Will of her Parents, but Love will not know nor hear Reason.

In its own way, to my mind, that sentence, while being careful not to ruffle family feathers, indicates somebody who could empathise with the torrent that was to rage forth from Eibhlín five years later. It is clear, I think, where the Last Colonel's emotional sympathies lie, whatever about his more rational and conventional side. Five years later, in June 1773, writing to Hunting Cap after Art's death, he writes with the same judicious understanding:

> I received your favour of the 23rd last month, by which I learn the unhappy fate of poor Arthur Leary. I can't express how much I've been shocked by it. The short acquaintance I had with him gave me a more favourable opinion than I had at first conceived of him. I still foresaw that his violence and ungovernable temper would infallibly lead him into

> misfortune. Brother Baldwin [their brother-in-law] has given me a full account of the circumstances that preceded and attended his last moments. It's, however, no small comfort to be assured there remains some Livelihood for his Orphans and Widow. Her situation, my dear Brother, when she considers her own imprudence in the disregard she showed for your advice at the time of her marriage with that unfortunate man, would be distracting were she not encouraged by the goodness of her mind. You are too generous to add to her misfortunes. I am sure you've ere now forgot that ever she offended you, and let you [a Hiberno-English way of making a request] exert your friendship for her and the children. [He then refers to the ingratitude of some unidentified person] You'll find in your family hearts as feeling as your own, and more suited for friendship.

The pleading was apparently unsuccessful with Hunting Cap. That flinty face must have remained turned away from his grieving sister, because three years later, in a postscript to a letter of June 1776, Daniel again pleads with his brother to allow his heart to take precedence over his utilitarian head:

> Were it possible you'd bring your heart to forget the faults of the unfortunate Widow Leary, charity and her misery and misfortunes call upon you for mercy. I wish it may be, could be, but dare not urge it from a sense of her offences; however, from my dear Maurice's good heart anything may be expected. follow but its dictates, and I'll venture to affirm you'll forgive.

Mary Anne comments that 'it was many a day yet before this high-spirited, wilful woman and Maurice made friends.' Indeed Hunting Cap, widowed at a very young age himself, appears to have seen it as his role to ensure that members of his family "married well" in the economic and social sense of that expression, and Eibhlín Dubh, as the Last Colonel had foreseen, had not married at all well. In August 1804, he also had to intercede for his namesake, the Liberator, two years after he had secretly, a Mary Anne dryly puts it 'committed the unpardonable sin of marrying the girl he loved without taking thought for the *£. s. d.'* And, rather unbelievably to us in the twenty-first century, the Last Colonel himself was to experience Hunting Cap's hostility when he – aged 52! – married a Frenchwoman without his brother's approval, and wrote rather coldly in March 1796 in response to a letter from Hunting Cap:

> Accept the wishes of my wife. Some indiscreet persons have told her that you had condemned me for marrying her, which hurt her very much.

Mary Anne's rather jaundiced view of Hunting Cap's authoritarian and hard-headed approach to family marriages is given deliciously ironic expression in what she says about his role in these affairs of his family's hearts :

> Among all the connections of the sage of Darrynane, very few ventured on this audacious step without his sanction. Three who pleased themselves – Dark Eileen, my colonel, and the Liberator – were all eminently happy in their disobedience.

For those who had the opportunity, it must have been an entertaining experience to listen to Mary Anne in her less guarded moments!

It does seem likely that Hunting Cap had some sort of reconciliation with Eibhlín. In 1784, eleven years after Art's death, the Last Colonel added this postscript to a letter to him:

> How does Sister Nancy, the Baldwin family, the Widow O'Leary, etc.? Be so good as to mention me to them all, and tell me something of 'em and all our family, nominally and circumstantially, in your next.

The inclusion of Eibhlín with other family members, and the assumption that Hunting Cap will be in a position to 'mention me to them all' is either highly disingenuous or indicative of some level of reconciliation. But the use of the name 'the Widow O'Leary' rather than either her own name or 'sister' would suggest that any such reconciliation was limited and distant. Mary Anne, writing in 1892 with the enabling distancing both of time and of being married into the O'Connells rather than being herself an O'Connell, offers a refreshing and balanced perspective:

> Eileen had married in spite of the warnings of her family. She tells us in the keen that she eloped with her blue-eyed, bright-haired rider of the dark-brown mare. Dan [The Last Colonel] would have Maurice [Hunting Cap] let bygones be bygones and make friends, but he had a very hot-headed woman and a very hard-hearted man to deal with, and it was years before a real reconciliation was effected. Old Maur-ni-Dhuiv forgave her, however, according to Miss Julianna, on the plea that no woman could have been expected to resist the pleadings of so handsome and attractive a suitor. That a widow of full age should have

been supposed incapable of bestowing her hand where she pleased is a curious instance of the patriarchal tyranny of old family life.

This echoes the contrasting portraits of the two brothers, the Last Colonel's sympathetic understanding that 'Love will not know nor hear Reason' as opposed to Hunting Cap's utilitarian intransigence. But back at the O'Connell tomb in the ruined abbey, it is also possible to hear a justificatory plea in the words engraved on the tombstone as part of Hunting Cap's epitaph:

The chief ambition of his long and prosperous life
Was to elevate an ancient family from unmerited oppression.

Mórtas cine can take many forms.

Fragments of Eibhlín's life are all that we have; her *Caoineadh* is her real existence. A full exploration of that masterpiece would take many books. While it is tempting to write at length about the whole of the poem under its many aspects, and to quote at length in the original Irish and in translation, I remind myself that my own primary act of exploration of and homage to the complete poem is my translated version, which I have appended to this work. In that translation, I set out to be as loyal as possible to the text and to its meanings and, at the same time, to try to arrive at some sort of equivalence with the extraordinary rhythms and sounds of the poem, which for me are integral to its meaning. My task now is to find what I can of the work and its composer here in Derrynane. And while Eibhlín Dubh was of Derrynane and had both paternal and maternal poetic blood in her, the landscape of the *Caoineadh* is to a great extent that of Múscraí in West Cork. Nonetheless, there are significant and illuminating links. For one thing, without going into unnecessary detail, it's unlikely that the *Caoineadh* would have survived as well as it did had not Mary Anne Bianconi O'Connell decided to write her biography of Eibhlín's brother while, at the same time, telling the story of the O'Connells of Derrynane. Certainly the background material, as Seán Ó Tuama acknowledges in his introduction to his edition of the poem, is almost completely dependent on the two volumes of *The Last Colonel of the Irish Brigade*. But Eibhlín's Derrynane and O'Connell heritage are also elements in the context of the poem. Here, for example:

My love and my pet!
If my call were to echo
To Doire Fhionáin to the west
And to Carhen of the golden apples,

It's many the light horseman
And white-kerchiefed woman
Would be here with all speed
To weep by your head,
My laughing Art.

It is not just Derrynane and Carhen (near Cahersiveen, the birthplace of the Liberator) that the poem invokes, but her people too, just as her sister Alice did later when keening her mother at this very graveside. In mourning Art, Eibhlín invokes her father, and two siblings who had died young by the time of Eibhlín's own bereavement. Her sister Abigail, or Gobnait in Irish, lived at the court of the Empress Maria Theresa and died aged during a smallpox outbreak. Her brother Connell, or Conal in Irish, one of the sons whom Máire Ní Dhuibh had wept over when they left Derrynane, was washed overboard during a storm of Cape Clear when returning home in the spring of 1765.

It's not my kin who have gone,
Nor the death of three of my own;
Nor Domhnall Mór Ó Conaill,
Nor Conall whom the tide drowned,
Nor my sister, twenty-six years old,
Who lived high and died young
Among royalty abroad –
It's not these whom I invoke,
But Art to be struck down
Near the river at Carraig an Ime!

Eibhlín's final resting place may be unknown, but when I recall those lines here in the Abbey, beside her family tomb, somehow she takes her own place in the roll-call of the family, she or her ghost stand at the tomb, her utterances melding into those of her mother, who 'also was of an ancient race' and even finding something in common with her hard-hearted brother whose 'chief ambition … was to elevate an ancient family'.

Before I resume my walk with Ellen O'Connell, I'd like to touch on one more Derrynane connection with *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire*. I have said that its survival and reputation is in no small measure due to the interest and efforts of the author of *The Last Colonel of the Irish Brigade*, who, in her own words, 'didn't know ten words of Irish'. Not only did she acquire a copy of

manuscript written from oral recitation about 1800, and have it translated, she herself collected three further stanzas, and she collected them in Derrynane. This is how she tells it, obviously having been moved by how long the poem had lived in the oral tradition of the people among whom Eibhlín Dubh had grown up, and familially proud, too, with the *mórtas cine* of her in-laws, that this 'fierce and passionate poetess' was also 'great grand-aunt to my own young son':

> I visited Darrynane in the April of 1890, and, a hundred and seventeen years all but seven days from the date of Arthur O'Leary's death, recovered three of the missing verses. They were recited to me by Mary O'Sullivan Liah, a tenant's daughter, who had picked them up, with many of the verses already preserved, from the recitation of an old woman, now dead, named Kate Murphy. She was much helped by a tenant, John James Galavan, both in reciting and translating. The Rev. John Martin, C.C., wrote down the verses from the young girl's recitation, and translated them, J.J. Galavan often making valuable suggestions.

I have already just quoted one of these verses, where Eibhlín invokes deceased family members. The others are two of the finest verses of the entire poem, so much so that when Seán Ó Tuama was preparing his canonical edition, he used them to end the poem. The second of them – perhaps my favourite section of this most extraordinary poem – especially resonates with me in this burial-place, albeit that its setting is presumably at Art Ó Laoghaire's tomb in Kilcrea almost a hundred miles away. Eibhlín does not lie here in Derrynane Abbey. Nonetheless, I rehearse these lines in her memory, wherever she lies, and I take delight in the fact that it was here in her native place that they were rescued from the oblivion that threatened them.

> My love deep, deep down!
> Your stacks of barley stand
> And your cows' yield is good.
> But my heart is in a gloom
> That all of Munster could not cure
> Nor the smiths of Oileán na bhFionn.
> Until Art Ó Laoghaire comes once more
> There will be no lifting of the sorrow
> That has my heart blocked,
> Shut utterly off,
> Like a chest still locked,

When the key has been lost.

You weeping women, hold
Your step out there as one,
While Art Mac Conchubhair calls one round
Moreover for the poor,
Before he enrols in that school –
To learn no lore or tune,
But to bear the clay and stone.

Ní ag foghlaim léinn ná port/Ach ag iompar cré agus cloch. I know of no two lines that carry more of a bleak finality than is borne by this final couplet. And that bleak finality is hammered home by the rhythmic and assonantal correspondences between those two almost monosyllabic lines. There is a drumbeat of footsteps to be heard here, a shovelling of clay, a numbing of hope and feeling. And this is unmediated by any consolatory reference to God or an afterlife. I know nothing of Eibhlín Dubh's beliefs, but I am reminded once again of her mother's invocation of something older than Christian belief when she scolded a family member for praying before the ritual keening had been performed:

> Where are the dark women of the glens, who would keen and clap their hands, and would not say a prayer until he was laid in the grave?

It's almost as if Eibhlín Dubh, at the end of her *Caoineadh*, was listening to her mother's exhortation and following the older, more elemental practices of those 'dark women of the glens'.

But I would not be honest if I did not sound another note, a note which I am very aware may seem begrudging, even petty. Eibhlín Dubh's poem is magnificent, technically brilliant, deeply felt and profoundly moving. Having said that, I also venture to say that I'm not sure I would have enjoyed the company of the woman who composed it, and I'm quite sure I don't much like the picture it presents of the man whom it mourns. *Mórtas cine* is one thing; the celebration of toxic masculinity, materialistic possessiveness and pride, boastfulness, snobbery and what Seán O'Casey called 'notions of upperosity' are quite another. I know they are characteristic of heroic literature back to Homer and beyond, but, as I often do when I read Yeats, I sometimes find that, despite the power and glory of the poetry, I want to explode at the protagonists. When I was working for months on my translation of the *Caoineadh*, more than a decade ago, and was consequently 'up close and personal' with Eibhlín Dubh and her murdered husband, this feeling was sometimes

overwhelming. The following poem, and especially perhaps the note on time and date on the composition of its original draft, gave vent to this aspect of my engagement with the poem:

On Completing a Translation of *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire*

Thank God you've gone, you loud, overbearing
Gucci-bagged woman bragging your grief
– Art *like, so totally* for Art's sake –
For the bully speeding behind the long
Entitled snout of a top-of-the-range BMW,
Who crashed spectacularly on his way
To brazen special access for the pair of you
To the Anglo-Irish-European corporate trough
With exclusive views over the eighteenth green.
I'm out of here. Past time. And it's past time
You were gone too, finally lost in translation.

5.20 am, 11 February 2009

It's over the top, unbalanced and highly tendentious. And it was twenty-past-five in the morning.

Before I leave the abbey in the company of Ellen, I divert to another grave, the grave of a poet whom she never mentions, but of whom I feel sure she would have been aware, if only at a linguistic and social distance. Tomás Rua Ó Súilleabháin, as I have said, can be seen as the last flickering of a tradition of bardic poetry whose function was to praise the achievements of his patron/chief. We have encountered him welcoming home the newly elected Liberator at Cúm a'Chiste in the hills above us. We have also heard of the abortive attempt to visit Skellig and of the great song "Maidin Bhog Álainn" that resulted. His grave is just a few metres outside of the abbey nave where the O'Connell tomb is tucked into the southwest corner. Tomás's grave is marked by an upright gravestone, simply and tastefully decorated in a style my daughter Ciairín termed Celtic Art Deco. The inscription tells us that the *leacht* or monument contains

corp an fhile bhinn
Tomás Ruadh Ua Súilliobháin
1785 – 1848

So Tomás was born ten years after the Liberator, whom he revered, and survived him by just a year. The rest of the inscription consists of three extracts from his work. The first quatrain offers, to my mind, one of the sweetest and most socially life-affirming inscriptions anybody could wish for. It is taken from a poem where Tomás Rua gave thanks for his recovery from a serious illness in his youth while at school in Dublin and looked forward to seeing his people again. The inscription tells us that this *sweet poet* is buried here

i measc a ghaolta
Atá go fairsing san líon ón gCathair go Snaidhm
Is i nDoire Fhionáin aoibhinn aerach
Cois beanna an naoimh bhí i ngradam ag Críost
I Sceilg Mhichíl ghil naofa.

This is how I translate:

Now at peace here among his relations
Shoaled in a network from Caher to Sneem
And in Derrynane so sweet and so airy;
In sight of the peaks of the liegeman of Christ
On Skellig Michael the bright and the saintly.

I love that *Doire Fhionáin aoibhinn aerach*, and, looking around me as Ellen must have done, I absorb the beneficence and exhilaration contained in Tomás Rua's lovely epithet for his native place. In fact, from here, I can look across the harbour and up the hill to where he was born. And I enjoy the way his metaphor in Irish saying his relations are 'plentiful in a net' anticipates the contemporary use of network as a metaphor for connection. The lines exhale an almost palpable sense of rootedness. I muse that the lines written by a poet who hailed Daniel O'Connell as *Ó Conaill geal de phór Mhílésius* also mention Sceilg Mhichíl and the name of Fíonán . The four great narratives of the work I am engaged with seem to coalesce in these lines. Tomás Rua will make his presence felt again in this walk; before I leave his grave, I note that the monument was erected in 1928, eighty years after his death. The inscription tells me that *Na Gaedhil a thóg an leac seo san mbliain 1928*. Two things strike me as I think about this. Firstly, it was the centenary year of O'Connell's electoral triumph, a hundred years after Tomás Rua had welcomed him home at Cúm a' Chiste, which is also within sight

of here. Secondly, the newly independent state was just six years old. Much of Iveragh was an Irish-speaking *Gaeltacht*. The official policy of the infant state was that Irish would replace English as the principal language of the country. Those who gathered at this graveside in 1928 are very likely to have seen themselves as being at the dawn of a Gaelic revival. Today, much of Iveragh is still in theory a Gaeltacht, but in practice Irish is *ar an dé deiridh* (on its last breath), the entire peninsula is demographically devastated and culturally impoverished. There are efforts in train to try to reverse this, and to consolidate and regenerate Iveragh culturally, socially and economically. A centralised and homogenised state – as well as the area itself – will need to rediscover its idealistic soul if those efforts are to succeed. With that thought, I leave Tomás Rua in his grave for now, and head out again in the company of Ellen.

Leaving the abbey by the squeaky swing-gate, I let myself be once again guided by Ellen. It strikes me that while I have lived in Iveragh for almost a half-century, I am not really very familiar with this tidal island, although I have often visited the abbey and, especially when our children were young, the nearby beaches. I take a sort of trade satisfaction that I am being literally guided by a poem, and at the same time being guided towards places that extend far beyond the physical. Ellen's directions are now fairly clear:

> Next seek the path,
> But faintly traced, across the grassy slope,
> Where the bright golden blossoms of the furze
> With the dark purple of the heath combine,
> Forming a tapestry more rich than e'er
> Adorned the halls of gorgeous palaces.
> With hasty step I press the thymy turf,
> That springs elastic 'neath my foot, and on
> Unto the little Islet ' s western bounds,
> Where memory tells me of the "Scholar's Cave",
> Pursue my walk.

The island's 'western bounds' are on the opposite side from the sheltered side where the abbey is, across low, rocky hills with boggy and sometimes reedy hollows between them. As I head over the hump of the island's centre, the heather and furze from which Ellen weaves her 'tapestry more rich' are still predominant, as is the 'thymy turf' of the rocky slopes. The furze is exclusively the low-growing native *aiteann Gaelach*, or dwarf furze, rather than the imported and much taller *aiteann*

Francach, and its yellow blossoms are only beginning to show, as are the purple blossoms of the heather. But even my very hit-and-miss knowledge of wild flowers can add further detail to Ellen's tapestry. Pink and purple bog orchids are abundant. Their name in Irish – *magairlín meidhreach*, which translates as "merry testicle" – may not be botanically informative but makes me wonder if whoever gave Ellen the Irish name for foxglove also translated this little beauty for her. Bog cotton, too, is beginning to lets its wispy white heads – from which the Irish name *ceannabhán* – wave in the wind. The blue spiky heads of scabious are everywhere, and sea pinks and the lovely deep yellow of the bog asphodel. And I am especially pleased when I find – later verifying, as I admit I must do with some of the other species – the rare Kerry Lily, which in Ireland is confined to this area and has consequently and serendipitously christened *Lile Fhionáin* in Irish. I am no botanist, but the richness of the natural vegetation as I walk the 'turf that springs elastic' is uplifting, as is the blustery brightness of the day itself. My curiosity has been roused by Ellen's reference to the "Scholars' Cave". Nobody I have asked is familiar with its name or location, so I am not expecting to definitively identify the Scholar or his – even her – cave. There is, nevertheless, a spring in my step that doesn't come only from the elastic turf under my boots.

When I find my way to the western shore of the island, I have to start guessing. I can see no trace of a cave in the normal sense of that word. But this side of the island, facing west and southwest towards the islands of Scariff and Deenish, is predictably rugged and deeply indented, facing at it does the unmediated power of the Atlantic. I explore above and between these deep, sea-carved fissures. For once, that poor much-abused word *awesome* seems not only appropriate, but also inevitable. My deeply rooted fear of sheer heights means I stay a more than prudent distance from cliff-edges, but I also remember that the geology of these old red sandstone cliffs does not lend itself to the formation of cliffs in the usual sense, and that I have heard hollows in rockfaces in the area referred to as caves. Neither does Ellen suggest any daring exploration was necessary to find her "Scholar's Cave". So I do what should have been the obvious thing all along: I once more allow the poem to be my guide. And this is what I read:

> The spot is gained. I stand
> Gazing with awe into the dark abyss,
> Where fret the waves in never - ending war
> With the fantastic rocks that hem them in.
> Sometimes, as larger waves intrude, the noise
> Increases, and a shower of feathery spray
> Springs high in air, and in the sun ' s bright beam

A moment sparkles, and is seen no more.

So it seems that Ellen, as I am doing here and there on this western shore of the island, was looking down at the "Scholar's Cave" – whatever it was – from above, rather than into a cave in the ordinary way. It seems likely that what she meant by a cave was in fact one of these deep, narrow inlets which are constantly gouging and lengthening themselves into the cliffs. Now it is the sound of waves surging into a fissure between 'fantastic rocks that hem them in' that I am on the alert for.

Sure enough, I soon arrive at what a map will later confirm is the deepest and narrowest of the inlets. At the edge of a sheer drop of more than thirty metres into a churning tidal surge, I too am 'gazing with awe' into what I am guessing is the 'dark abyss' of the Scholar's Cave. It is one of those landscape features that evoke in me not just an aesthetic response to their beauty, but also a kind of existential fear that goes beyond my fear of heights. I think of the Middle English meaning of *dread*, as in "dread liege" or "dread lord", suddenly remembering a stay on Tory Island off Donegal fifty years ago, when I was in the throes of losing the religious belief I had grown up with. I remember being overwhelmed by its extraordinary cliffs, and thinking that while they might reflect a judgemental Abrahamic god, I could find no reflection of a redeeming Christ in them. This smaller but no less "dreadful" abyss invokes in me now – I think, with reservations – more of an aesthetic response than the fearful one a hesitant and reluctant atheist experienced in 1968. Now I think of Rilke's First Duino Elegy, in translation by Stephen Mitchell:

For beauty is nothing
but the beginning of terror, which we still are just able to endure,
and we are so awed because it serenely disdains
to annihilate us. Every angel is terrifying.

I sit and have my coffee and sandwiches a few safe steps back from the clifftop. Across the chasm, I can trace the patterns in Ellen's 'fantastic rocks'. They first lead me down semantic byroads. I think of how the word *terror* branched in directions that Rilke's poem understands, how *terrible*, *terrifying* and *terrific* are all descendants of that word, descendants which have made their own individual ways in the linguistic world, and found their own meanings, just as have the contemporary *awesome* and *dreadful* today. It's terribly – even awfully – interesting, but I bring myself back to Ellen and her fantastic rocks, rocks which are indeed fantastic in the contemporary sense – terrific! – as well as in the sense of being strange or weird which Ellen no doubt meant.

So, as I chew my sandwiches, my musings turn from semantics to geology, although my understanding of it is no more than basic. The rocks across from me clearly show the layering of the sand that, probably about 400 million years ago was under an enormous weight of ocean water. Compressed into rock by that weight of water and time, the layers also rear up in great patterns of folding, sometimes almost vertically, in the weird and wonderful curves Ellen called 'fantastic'. In places the upswing has been dramatically cut and has collapsed into the water surging in with a force that is heard rather than seen, and indeed I imagine I feel the surge as much as hear it, so visceral is the sound of these unseen waves in the hollows below. The patterns on the cliff-face across from me are endlessly absorbing in their abstract beauty, their own time-woven textures. And then it strikes me that I sit and contemplate them within a frame of knowledge and reference, however sketchy, which was probably completely unavailable to Ellen. She published her poem in 1832. The three volumes of Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* were serially published from 1830 to 1833, and it was to be many years before its theories gained credence or foothold in the public mind. In 1832, Charles Darwin was an unknown twenty-three-year-old. Ellen was a twenty-seven-year-old religious conformist, who, it can be assumed, believed that the history of the creation of the world was to be found in the Bible. Although she was an intelligent and widely-read woman, the concept of geological time, which is commonplace today, would have been completely outside of her world-view. She presumably would have seen these rocks and their convolutions as the result of some divinely ordained catastrophic event. And lest I am tempted to patronise such a world-view, I remind myself that my contemporary acceptance of what scientists and received opinion present to me is no more a result of independent thought and comprehension than was the acceptance by early nineteenth century educated people of the Biblical narrative which doctors of divinity presented to them. Every angel is indeed terrifyingly beautiful, and all of our various angels carry different lights.

Trying to ground this abstraction in the land-and-seascape around me, I make my way downhill from the deep inlet which I have tentatively identified as the Scholar's Cave. Descending, I make my way towards a small inlet just north of it, and the outline of a stone slab, roughly a metre high, silhouetted against the silver sheen of the ocean. Fíona had noticed this when we had previously come here. We had at first surmised that it was only the sort of natural outcrop often found in this sort of landscape. We were, however, struck by its positioning, by the way it is placed at the edge of the island's heathland, framed in the inverted triangle of two steeply descending slopes, with a strong visual relationship to Scariff and Deenish Islands a few kilometres to the west. We decided to have a look. When we got there, it became obvious that, whatever it may be, it is not a natural outcrop. For one thing, the grain of the stone runs north-south as opposed to the east-

west orientation of the surrounding rocks. Furthermore, there are a number of other slabs, much of their surface covered by vegetation, which look as if they have been placed to support the upright slab. Most intriguingly of all, the slab has been worked; a rectangular shape has been cut out of one side, and the landward surface has a roughly circular shape in raised relief just above ground level. By default, I think of a cross-slab of some description, but, although it is obviously a built structure, only excavation will give any real sense of its purpose. It is its positioning, however, which fascinates me. Perhaps more intuitively than rationally, I am convinced that it is situated to establish a relationship with the islands, especially with the more dominant Scariff Island.

Coincidentally, I have recently been reading, in draft form, sections from a forthcoming book by the archaeologist Tomás Ó Carragáin called *Churches in the Irish Landscape AD 400-1100*. He and the historian Paul MacCotter have identified either Abbey Island or Scariff – most likely the former – as being the island referred to as *Gair Meic Mogha* in the ninth century *Félire Oengusso*, which I have already quoted from in relation to Fíonán. Scariff has quite substantial early medieval monastic remains. Ó Carragáin and MacCotter believe that the late medieval abbey I visited earlier, and which is so entwined with the O'Connell family, was built on the site of this earlier monastic settlement. They further speculate that Scariff was

> an eremitic offshoot, for Scariff, six kilometres offshore and later owned by Aghavore [the older name for Abbey Island] has substantial ecclesiastical remains. Like Skellig Michael, there is a possible satellite hermitage, known as *Cnoc an Díthreoigh* (Hill of the Hermit) on the summit of the island.

I gaze across the sunlit sea towards Scariff, imagining myself back into the position of a monk in the new monastery on what is, in reality, only barely an island. Did he and other monks come here to the exposed western shore of their island to contemplate their original settlement out on the Atlantic? I am acutely conscious that, as I face out towards Scariff, that more or less directly in a line behind me lies Derrynane Abbey. A monk of that abbey who stood or knelt here would no doubt have been at least equally conscious of that alignment in a physical sense, and immeasurably more conscious of it in a spiritual sense. In any case, it is the perspective out towards Scariff that engages me now. In the chapter identifying *Gair Meic Mogha* with Abbey Island, Tomás Ó Carragáin refers to Odrán, the saintly monk who is alliteratively described in *Félire Oengusso* as 'Odrán sab sóer snámhach/ Odrán strong, noble [and] buoyant' and who, a prose note adds, went to 'Gair Meic Moga ata .i. indsola i Corca-Duibne & for snam dochuaid innti' which translates as 'Gair Meic Moga .i. an island in Corca-Duibne and by swimming he went into it'.

As I have said, I am guided only by intuition. But somehow, I feel sure that there is a connection, if only a tenuous and conjectural one, between the nearby "Scholar's Cave" and this mute, semi-collapsed construction which I hope to see excavated in the not too distant future. The idea of a saintly, scholarly monk retreating from his monastery on the sheltered eastern side of the island to this exposed place and looking out meditatively to the island monastic outpost where his community, in previous centuries, had its 'eremitic offshoot', fascinates me. And, luckily, I can indulge my fascinations without the caution and evidential constraints of scholarship, scholarship to which I am deeply indebted and on which I constantly draw during my own imaginative explorations of place. I am free to imagine myself as the late medieval monk imagining himself - perhaps even willing himself – out towards Scariff Island and its hermit's hill. Once there in his imagination, perhaps he imagined himself further west, out towards the *ultima thule* of Skellig Michael. I love this sort of speculation, and I love it especially when it can be in some measure grounded in the verifiable "real world". In fact, after our initial discovery, I had contacted Tomás Ó Carragáin and sent him some photographs of the structure and its context in the landscape. Tomás was very interested, and soon afterwards came himself to have a look at the structure. For him it was another clue in the investigation he and Paul McCotter were engaged in. It was Tomás who discovered the relief-carved surface and confirmed the probability that the structure was an incomplete cross. The forthcoming book now describes it as being 'clearly positioned to make a visual connection with Scariff', and as having 'the appearance of an unfinished, broken cross, reminiscent of some of those on Skellig Michael'.

It is with a thrill of recognition that, later, I come across, in an account of an 1844 visit to Derrynane House by an English visitor called Catherine M. O'Connell, a recollection of her visit to Scariff, which was then still inhabited. Here is a part of it:

> We saw the vestiges of an ancient hermitage and burial ground, and an old woman, living on a dairy-farm here, told me she very seldom went to the mainland, but that on Sundays she came up to this old cell, and, turning her face to the east, knelt down and said her prayers.

What an extraordinary mirror image of the line of vision I ascribe to my fictional monk beside the collapsed cross! I find myself crossing centuries and a few kilometres of sea at the same time, imagining the old woman on Scariff, wondering why she specified 'turning her face to the east' when she prayed. Perhaps the long-established tradition of Christian churches being orientated east-west with the altar towards the east was the basis for her kneeling towards that direction. But is it just coincidental that Abbey Island lies just a little north of east from Scariff? Might it have been the

abbey she was orientated towards rather than just the compass-point? I imagine a conversation, with the old woman saying ‘I turn east towards Abbey Island and kneel and say my prayers’. The English visitor notices the direction being specified, perhaps not realising that the old woman, as was quite normal among her rural compatriots until quite recently, was used to going ‘west the road’ or ‘south to the house’ or ‘north to the hill’ in normal conversation. I’ll never know the factual truth, but the luxury of being able to weave my way around scholarly or historical exactness allows me to see the late medieval Abbey Island monk carving a blessing in the air towards the old dairy-woman on Scariff, and she in turn kneeling to receive his blessing centuries later.

Energised, even elated, with all of this, I head back roughly the way I came, but taking a different angle up towards the highest point around the middle of the island. Once again, Ellen is my guide:

> The other caves, though scarce less worthy note,
> I pass unheeded by, and gaily climb
> The island's central, elevated point;
> Thence gaze upon the ocean spreading wide,
> Studded with many an island. Scariff there
> I view, and Dinish, and the green Lamb Isle,
> While on the dim horizon's furthest verge
> The sister Skelligs lift their pinnacles.
> Nearer to home the Two Head Isle appears,
> And the “Old Woman's Rock", and opposite
> The Derseys stretch, while o'er the hills of Rath
> A glimpse of Kenmare's estuary I gain.

And what a vantage point she chose! The ‘central, elevated point’ is no more than fifty metres high, but it overlooks, as is partly detailed in the poem, an extraordinary panorama, especially but by no means only, towards the sea and its ‘many an island’. I let my eyes rove over Ellen’s list. I discover from it, confirmed by my map, that the small headland, which runs northwest from Abbey Island and which shelters Derrynane Harbour, is in fact Lamb Island. I had always thought of it as part of Abbey Island. Skellig and Scariff have long had their place on my physical and imaginative horizons. The two heads of *Oileán Dá Cheann* are familiar. ‘The Derseys stretch’ puzzle me for a while, before I realise that Ellen must refer to the three islands that stretch along the horizon from Dursey at the tip of the Beara peninsula to the south. The most prominent of these, of course, Bull Rock or Tech Duinn, the

Island of the Dead which I have written about in connection with Donn and the Milesian myth. But I must admit to being rather at sea in relation to the “Old Woman's Rock" she mentioned towards the end of her list. The fact that Ellen gives the name in quotation marks suggests that she has doubts about its validity. That she places it with Two Head Isle ‘nearer to home’ brings it close in to Derrynane itself. I initially think it may be an erroneous stab at translating *Carraig Uí Chróin* (Carrigycrone on the O.S. map). This is the collective name for a group of rocks just offshore directly below Derrynane House, and plainly visible from here. It is mentioned in a song by Tomás Rua Ó Súilleabháin welcoming the Liberator home to Derrynane:

Beidh tinte cnámh in Uíbh Rathach romhat
I mbaile cois trá mar a mbeidh báire is ceol
Ar Dhoire Fhionáin aerach mar a dtriallfaidh slua
Ar bhruach an chalaidh sin, Carraig Uí Chróin.

I translate:

Bonfires will be lit in Uíbh Ráthach before you,
The village by the sea full of music and sport,
Sweet Derrynane is where everyone’s going
Alongside that harbour near Carraig Uí Chróin.

Breandán Ó Cíobháin in his extraordinary and authoritative *Toponomia Hiberniae* gives its meaning as simply “Rock of Ó Cróin”, that is simply as being named after someone with the surname Ó Cróin. Might Ellen have conflated the name of the island with the English word *crone*? I am unlikely ever to find out, but in the face of this seemingly endless stretch of mountain-and-seascape, a detail so small left to niggle in the mind feels as inconsequential as a pebble rolling in the Atlantic. I turn to the west and, as I do so, another rocky islet brings up another possibility, which, on reflection, is a more likely candidate for Ellen’s “Old Woman’s Rock”, a candidacy which I am grateful to local boatmen John O’Shea and Kieran Moran for bringing to my attention. At the mouth of Derrynane Harbour sits a rock known as *Carraig Eibhlín Ní Rathaille*. I have no idea who Eibhlín Ní Rathaille was, but this rock brought about a misfortune which led to perhaps the greatest of all Iveragh songs, *Amhrán na Leabhar/ The Song of the Books*, composed by Tomás Rua Ó Súilleabháin. It is a hauntingly beautiful song, and the background story – whether or not it has been enhanced by time – carries its own pathetic drama. Seamus Fenton, who edited *Amhráin Thomáis Rua* in 1914, wrote in that edition that (I translate) ‘there are very few people in Iveragh who do not know a verse of it. If a reader wants to hear it, all he need do is go to the next fair in Cahersiveen, in the evening, and if

he doesn't hear the song, it will have been a particularly poor fair'. Many of the assumptions of that sentence have been overtaken by time. The song, nonetheless has survived and has spread it wings afar. As I write, I have just googled its title – in Irish – and got 140,000 results.

Briefly, this is the background to the song: Tomás Rua was moving to Portmagee to take up a schoolteacher's post there. He sent his valuable collection of books and manuscripts by boat from Derrynane. However, when the boat was setting off, it struck against Carraig Éibhlín Ní Rathaille at the mouth of the harbour and, although no lives were lost, the poet's books were lost overboard, much to his distress. There are those, notably Mícheál Ua Ciarmhaic, the distinguished writer from Ballinskelligs, who says that Tomás Rua exaggerated the scale of the mishap, as well as the range and value of the books he lists as having been lost. Be that as it may, and oral transmission lends itself to many variables, the song as collected and edited by Fenton has some beautiful poetry and is also notable for the long and detailed list of books whose loss is mourned by Tomás Rua. These range from mathematical textbooks to a manuscript of the Psalter of Cashel and Keating's *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn.* The air to which it is sung is also widely played, both by Irish and international musicians. The poet Moya Cannon memorably describes its music, and how the song lives on:

> It's the plummeting second note
> that knells his despair
> two centuries later –
>
> …….
>
> ……
>
> yet the bell-voiced singers
> and the uileann pipers tell it
> as though the wodden sailing-boat
> with its small, treasured library
> identity-papers of the dispossessed,
> had hit that sea-hid rock,
> had gone down
> only yesterday.

I remember being awestruck when, as a seventeen-year-old, I heard the air played by Seán Ó Riada's Ceoltóirí Chualann, long before I knew Iveragh or had ever heard of Tomás Rua. The Breton harpist Alan Stivell has made a memorable recording and, as I write this, I am discovering online a version on the cello by the Irish-Australian cellist and composer Ilse de Ziah. I have heard countless sung

versions, both live and recorded and I remember with particular pleasure a version by the late, great Ballinskelligs singer Máire de Barra. These are the opening four lines:

Go Cuan Bhéil Inse casadh mé
Cois Góilín aoibhinn Dairbhre
Mar a seoltar flít na farraige
Thar sáile i gcéin.

The complete song consists of a dozen sixteen-line verses, many of which list the books lost overboard. I'll offer just two of the opening stanzas in translation, stanzas that give the narrative rather than the list of lost books. I have kept to the rhyme and rhythm pattern of the original:

I reached Béal Inse Harbour
By the lovely strait of Dairbhre,
A place of embarkation
To cross the briny sea.
In Portmagee I tarried then
To gain good reputation
For among them it had been my plan
Schoolmastering to be.
But then I heard what had bechanced
From everyone, my grief!
The sturdy ship off Doire Fhionáin
Had foundered on a reef;
My heart then swelled in great anguish
For that stout-hearted captain's ship
That should have held the landward side
And sheltered in the lee.

If I travelled England, Ireland,
Spain, France and Scotland's Highlands,
Moreover still, by my right hand,
The whole wide earth,

I could not buy a library
More learned or more widely
Improving to a high degree,
        But now I am bereft.
I am forlorn without my books
And plundered I am left,
Now I have cause to elegise
        After this, my little death.
The curse of God and his high Church
On that ugly rock, that wave's sly burst
That sank the ship without high gust
        Without gale, without wind's breath.

I am always moved by the song, both by its words and by its air. Whatever truth or exaggeration underlie the factual story, *Amhrán na Leabhar* has come down to us as an elegy for culture much of which has been lost, a culture whose memory – at the very least – I believe to be ecologically vital for the survival of Iveragh as a viable social and cultural entity. The poet Austin Clarke, always alert to that culture, recognised this in Tomás Rua's poem, also cleverly and relevantly tying in Derrynane House and Daniel O'Connell's legal and administrative world with Tomás's song, in a 1963 poem called "The Song of the Books", which, while not a translation of *Amhrán na Leabhar*, invokes the poem thematically and in its verse-form. This is the opening stanza:

The Skelligs hid again their stone-steps,
The hermit steps that had been skeps
Of Heaven's beeswax. Thunder slept
        In a high coombe.
By Gallarus and Caherdaniel
The torrents poured out. Barn, crab-tree wall
Sheltered the house of Derrynane:
        In lamp-lit room
The Liberator marked a law page:
Outside, green gloom,
Thick branches, glim of tideways raging
        With heels of spume.

A gust struck, snapping chain and rope post.
Book-boxes of a Gaelic poet
On board a vessel sank with side-blow.
A little doom.

From the highest point of Abbey Island, guided here by Ellen, I look westward towards Carraig Eibhlín Ní Rathaille, the rock that brought about that 'little doom', and wonder was this Ellen's "Old Woman's Rock". Both of these rocky islets that present me with their claim also feature in the poetry of Tomás Rua. I turn a number of times slowly through three hundred and sixty degrees, moving *deiseal* of course, as if to absorb the whole thing into myself, to embody Ellen's vision of islands within myself. As I turn for the third or fourth time, I pause to admire dozens of gannets wheeling and diving in the tidal estuary to the east. There are at least two or three of them hitting the water every few seconds. It is something I never tire of watching. I assume that the rising tide has brought a shoal of sprat into the estuary, a bonanza for the gannets.

And the same rising tide prompted Ellen's hurried departure from this spot nearly two centuries ago. The next few lines of her poem reminds me that I too must leave the island fairly smartly, or else I will have to wade rather than walk across the tidal channel that separates the island from Derrynane itself:

But come, no longer must I loiter here,
Or else the rising tide will shut me in
A prisoner. Hastening to retrace my steps,
Homeward I turn, and pass the Deadman's Gap,
Where, in the olden time, all funerals
Found passage to the Abbey burial ground.

I make it back dryshod to the mainland beach, passing by what I take to be that "Deadman's Gap". It is a name no longer in use, I have been told, even though funeral processions still pass by here. Breandán Ó Cíobháin records the original Irish name as *Bearna na gCorp*, which would translate literally as *The Gap of the Corpses.* Older placenames often have a directness which fastidious respectability tends to draw a veil over, much to our communal loss. Whatever about that, this is a place I can never pass without remembering what happened at a funeral Fíona attended there many years ago. The funeral took place during a heatwave, and had to navigate its way through tourists crowded on the beach. As the coffin and followers passed a group of sunbathers, an unsuspecting

woman who had been lying half-asleep face down on the hot sand with her bikini top untied, opened her shocked eyes as the procession passed, sat up confusedly in all her topless glory and exclaimed "Jaysus, it's a fuckin' funeral", causing many among the mourners to crack up. I can't imagine what Ellen might have thought could she, in 1832, have foreseen such a spectacle. Respectability, in any case, is in the eye of the beholder.

The Meadow Walk

Let's follow Ellen, because her walk now takes us back to where she started at Derrynane House, and then further again:

> I climb the beach, and passing quickly by
> The mansion house, that most irregular
> But picturesque and striking pile, I gain
> The antique garden, with its terraces
> And avenue of venerable trees,
> Thence wander forth into the Meadow Walk.

Today I will be walking that Meadow Walk in the genial and informative company of James O'Shea, who is presiding genius of the gardens around Derrynane House and is responsible to the OPW for their upkeep and maintenance. For both of us, it is a walk of discovery. The Meadow Walk was a name that James was not familiar with. Neither were those O'Connell family members I asked about it. But when I read Ellen's poem, I knew that, unlike the Moss House, there was evidence that it was not just a private or personal name for Ellen's own use. Because about twelve years after Ellen's poem was written, when O'Neill Daunt was setting out for the day's hunting with the Liberator which I have earlier written about, he walked the Meadow Path on the first part of his journey up towards Cúm a' Chiste:

> On the third or fourth morning after my arrival at Darrynane, I was summoned by Mr. O'Connell to accompany the hunting party. It was not quite six o'clock—the morning was clear and bright, and gave promise of a beautiful day. We followed a winding path called "The Meadow Walk," which crosses and re-crosses a merry mountain brook; we ascended the hill of Coomakista, crossed the line of the new road, and ere half-an-hour had elapsed, a hare was started.

So I knew the Meadow Walk was real. But where to find it? Ironically, O'Neill Daunt's account at first set me, in hunting terms, following a false scent. Because I knew that he and the hunting party had gone to Cúm a' Chiste, I presumed the Meadow Walk had gone immediately in that direction. I could find no trace of any such path, either by reference or on the ground. After much pointless toing and froing, like hounds that have lost the scent, I read Ellen's poem again, this time with the due attention I should have given its details in the first place, and so picked up what I had had skimmed over, the detail of 'passing quickly by / The mansion house'. Ellen's walk, I belatedly realised, had retraced her steps past Derrynane House, and gone through the ornamental garden; in short, the beginning of the Meadow Walk was in almost the opposite direction from a direct line to Cúm a' Chiste. When O'Neill Daunt and the hunting party used the walk, it was simply a way of easily accessing the old eighteenth century road I have talked about before, and which, as he says 'crosses the line of the new road (the main Ring of Kerry road) near where 'a hare was started' and, in 1828, Tomás Rua had welcomed the Liberator with his newly composed song.

Having thus reoriented myself, I now picked up on other evidence, and this time it was evidence common to Ellen's poem and O'Neill Daunt's account of the hunting trip. Ellen wrote of the Meadow Walk being

> a rude path, winding along the verge
> Of a wild mountain torrent, that at first
> Flings itself across a pile of crags,
> Wanders in many windings through the glen,
> To lose itself for ever in the sea.

And O'Neill Daunt described how the Meadow Walk 'crosses and re-crosses a merry mountain brook'. I have seen enough of how in these parts 'a merry mountain brook' can indeed very quickly become 'a wild mountain torrent' after heavy rain, to know that both authors could well have been describing the same watercourse. From my own frequent walks along what is now the Kerry Way, I was familiar with a mountain-river that the eighteenth-century road crossed by way of a handsome bridge arched high enough to take a considerable flood. Just above this bridge there is a lovely waterfall and pool. Could this be where the Meadow Walk joined the road? Once again I belatedly realised what I should have done before. The marvellous Ordnance Survey of Ireland website allows access to its earliest maps. The original surveys for the earliest maps would have been done in the 1830's, the first maps being published in 1841. Might these early maps show the Meadow Walk? And sure enough, the earliest 6-inch and especially the earliest twenty-five-inch maps clearly show a

footpath which is not named but which clearly correlates with both Ellen's and O'Neill Daunt's description of the Meadow Walk. It goes through the gardens, out by what is now the Derrynane House carpark, joins the stream and follows it almost to the old bridge I mentioned. And so here I am with James, about to, I hope, retrace and rediscover a path about the development of which Ellen sang her father's praises, and along which O'Neill Daunt set out for a day's hunting with him.

The scale of the original 25-inch Ordnance Survey map I am using makes it fairly easy to follow. The traces of the 'avenue of venerable trees' are still clear among younger growth in the 'antique garden'. James identifies some of these as elms, and tells me that the elm disease which has wreaked such havoc on this species in other areas, hasn't crossed the mountainous boundaries of Iveragh. I am reminded again of how remote this area was until the development of road and rail networks in the second half of the nineteenth century, a remoteness that had been valued by the O'Connell family in guarding its privacy or, from another perspective, protecting its smuggling business. From here, we simply follow the dividing wall between what is now sometimes called the South American Garden and the visitors' carpark. The map shows the path veering northwest just past the central passage of the garden and, though we have now left the carpark, a maintenance trackway cut through the meadow-grass by the OPW seems to coincide with the original Meadow Walk. Soon, as we enter the woodland, this becomes a just discernible footworn path through the woodland undergrowth. As we follow this path, we know that we're going in the right direction because we can hear the sound of the stream getting gradually louder. A short distance into the woodland, we come to the stream, which is quite low now after a fairly dry spell. As we move upstream, it turns a fairly sharply right. On checking our map – which is just a printout from a screenshot of the original 25-inch map on the OSI website – we can see that the marked footpath crosses the stream before this point, where it is crossed by what is marked as a "Foot Stick", an archaic term not in my dictionary, but which an internet search indicates means a small footbridge. We retrace our steps a few metres, trying to guess where exactly it may have been. And, sure enough, on the far bank, we can make out the remains of the stone foundations of the map's Foot Stick. The stream is easy to ford here, a few stones being easily stepped across. From the east bank, the foundations on the side we have just left are even clearer, the quite visible remnant of stone walling along the bank. Some stone walling on either side of a natural crossing-place over a stream may seem inconsequential, but the sense of discovery is energising, even exciting. This is the path Ellen remembered in a poem of which a primary function was to eulogise her father during a crucial – and ultimately very successful – election campaign. And this is where, much later, her septuagenarian father, his vitality as yet undiminished, led an early morning hunting party on a hike up towards Cúm a' Chiste, a few miles away and nine hundred feet higher, a day which, as I have

written about earlier, entered into the imaginative portrayal of O'Connell in biography, fiction and poetry. The realisation of this has the effect of grounding the imagination in the surrounding landscape while, at the same time, infusing the collapsed walling and overgrown path of this place with the presence of a personality which reverberated throughout Ireland and the wider world. To have rediscovered this path, to have found a small piece of an enormous jigsaw, is for me something of profound satisfaction, a satisfaction which I think is shared by James. But before either of us can disappear into a time tunnel, we are brought very definitely into the twenty-first century by the sight of a child's red plastic swing hanging by a combination of blue and white nylon ropes from a lovely beech tree in a small clearing nearby. It has obviously been there for at least a year or two. We have no idea abouts its provenance, but immediately I think of Ellen's children and their doting grandfather, that 'merry dark-eyed train / Of laughing elves, that wind him as they please', and I find myself hoping that whatever children used or use this swing are equally merry, and equally loved.

Soon afterwards, we cross a tarred road, a road that is bridged over the stream we are following. Known as "The Serpentine" because of its twisting bends, it didn't exist in 1832 and doesn't appear on the original six-inch map, although it is shown on the first 25-inch and on later editions of the six-inch map. So although neither Ellen nor her father would have known it, it is a useful checkpoint on the map we are following. Also, as we realise when we continue on the far side of the road, it forms a boundary between the first part of the walk, which is relatively easy to follow, and the denser scrub and woodland we are entering into. The one constant is the stream, Ellen's 'wild mountain torrent' or O'Neill Daunt's 'merry mountain brook' depending on recent rainfall or the lack of it. The path on the map follows it closely on its eastern bank. But now sometimes we have to pick our own way through the wood, the undergrowth of which is now quite thick. For a while we have to go on the wrong side of an old wall which is shown on the map, the growth being so dense as to remind me of Marvell's lines in "Thoughts in a Garden" describing luxuriant growth 'Annihilating all that's made/ To a green thought in a green shade'. This semi-wilderness was probably once as tame and ordered as Marvell's garden. Ellen's description of 'this little Eden in the wild' would suggest so. The beech tree we pass, not native to these parts, was probably part of this landscape gardening, although the salty winds that Derrynane is familiar with, as well as the boggy soil here, mean that it has split into four trunks and is not the tall, stately tree envisaged by those who planted it. Bracken and ivy have retaken ground here, and the oaks that gave Doire Fhionáin its name are still part of the vegetation, as are the ubiquitous holly and alder. The invasive and voracious rhododendron, while not as yet overwhelming this part of the woods, has established colonial outposts here and there. Time will tell how successful that particular colonisation is. My musings on colonisation are interrupted when James notices a few square metres of half-hidden

slaty stones, a remnant of a paved pathway that is not yet overgrown. Here again is material evidence of the Meadow Walk we are recovering. And soon we recover more material evidence, for, exactly where our map indicates another 'Foot Stick' just below a pool in the stream, there is a further piece of walling on the west bank, walling that no doubt supported the simple footbridge that formed part of the walk. Again, we cross easily, although heavy rain might have made it difficult, even hazardous. From here on, as far as we can judge, the path seems to have been built as a small holloway running alongside the stream.

A few hundred metres along this way, the noise of the stream increases, and we realise that we are coming towards the waterfall I mentioned earlier. Soon we are in familiar territory, and we climb across an old wall that bounds the old butter road. Scrambling over this wall, we startle a group of walkers who tell us they are originally from Nigeria, but now living in Ireland, and who are walking the old road in its modern incarnation as the Kerry Way. I can only imagine the amazement of Ellen or O'Neill Daunt could they have foreseen this; I can equally imagine that the internationalist and inclusivist and hospitable man who was Ellen's father, and O'Neill Daunt's friend, would be pleased to welcome them to his home and would invite them to enjoy its delights. James and myself now swing along this old roadway until, a short distance later, it crosses the Wood Road. Here we turn south along the tarred road down to Derrynane House, a road that was the main road into that house in the Liberator's time, and which our map indicates formed part of the looped walk along which Ellen has guided us. This last section of our walk is along a narrow but well-maintained modern road; the year is 2020, but somehow we have looped through two centuries, discovering – literally – much of interest along the way.

In Derrynane House Again

I am back again in Derrynane House, having spent many days walking in its surroundings, although, for the sake of narrative ease and unity, I have blended most of this into one account. On my first working visit here, I was alone in the house, before the visiting season opened, and when the word *Covid* was a coinage whose clinking was not generally audible. Today I am revisiting the house in a sort of half-light, a twilight between what seemed the frightening gloom of the complete Covid 19 lockdown and the almost unreal memory of – and hope for the return of – a world without masks, without the oxymoron of "social distancing" and without the personal and societal fear we are enduring. Second waves and resurgences have become part of the currency of public and private discourse, an aspect of the "new normal". Even as I type these words, the semi-permanent nature of this twilight comes home to me: my computer spellcheck once again underlines *Covid* in red, as it

has done for the past few months. I pause, hesitate, then reluctantly click on *Add to Dictionary*, wondering whether it's an act of realism or of surrender.

One way or another, here I am, masked and distanced from other masked and restrained visitors, ascending the stairs again. This time I have a particular focus. I have spent many days in Ellen's company, and those days were especially informed by the portrait of Ellen I wrote about earlier, that showed her as a young woman in love with literature and music. She has guided me to Abbey Island, the Meadow Walk and, from a perspective grounded in Derrynane House and its surroundings, to the philosophy, reputation and achievements of her illustrious father. Now, in the light of that guidance, I want to take a closer look at two other portraits of her that hang in the house. Upstairs, in a drawing-room filled with fascinating memorabilia and wonderful furniture, as well with light and landscape, that the hideous pink wallpaper cannot spoil, her portrait as a middle-aged woman hangs beside that of her husband, both oval, done in watercolour and gouache. His portrait suggests a pleasant, intelligent and reliable man. But hers, although she is smiling pleasantly, has a far more ethereal quality to it. Her blue eyes seem to look beyond you rather than at you. She wears a black dress, which acts as a foil for a crimson shawl around her shoulders. The shawl does not fall naturalistically, but almost fades and floats lightly out from her arms, forming the base of a triangular composition whose apex is just above those otherworldly eyes. This triangular shape seems to elevate Ellen upward and outward beyond the confines of her seated pose. Unlike the portrait downstairs in the dining room, there is no assemblage of national cultural iconography. Ellen's own intensity and detachment from the viewer are what give the portrait its character. Before I leave it, carrying with me that intensity and detachment, I note that just visible below her hands lies a locket attached to a bracelet, the locket bearing the vague image of a head. It is not obviously significant in the context of this painting, but its significance will echo when I go back halfway downstairs to look at the third portrait of Ellen, which hangs in a far less prominent location, at the bend of the staircase.

This portrait, like the two I have just been looking at, was donated to Derrynane House by Christopher Fitz-Simon, a great-grandson of Ellen's. In an email to me, he described it as 'one vast one of Ellen (painted in Paris, we think, though no one has been able to identify the artist) which would give you a fright as you come up the stairs'. And it is indeed a large painting, which might well be perceived as intimidating, especially by a child. The OPW inventory describes it as a 'three-quarter length portrait of Daniel O'Connell's eldest daughter in later life, on a very dark background. She has grey hair, is wearing dark clothing with a shawl over her shoulders, and holds a locket in her hands which contains a picture of a man'. This 'dark clothing' merges into the 'very dark background' so much that just three areas of almost theatrical light emerge: Ellen's gaunt face and white hair, the

fine lace shawl and the hands holding the locket. The monochromatic effect and almost photographic light remind me of some portraits by Manet, especially one of his mother which he painted in 1863. There is the same use of light to highlight the face and hands against a dark background merged with dark clothes. And there is the same motif of the highlighted hands to foreground an object the sitter is holding. In the Manet portrait of his mother, she holds a piece of gold jewellery of indeterminate shape. But there is nothing indeterminate about what Ellen holds in her hands. The 'locket in her hands which contains a picture of a man' is quite clear, detailed and bright, just as if a spotlight had been focused on it, and there is what looks like some woven gold filigree attached. Furthermore, while the hands are painted naturalistically, they are painted so as to suggest hands joined in prayer, although inverted. The portrait in the locket framed within those hands is orientated towards the viewer, not towards Ellen herself. It is almost suggestive of a medieval altar painting, and the whole thrust of it is devotional. Excited, I go downstairs to reception, where Declan Moran, a very helpful OPW guide whose older siblings I used to teach, confirms for me that it is indeed a portrait of Daniel O'Connell that is enshrined – and I use the word advisedly – in those hands. And, he tells me matter-of-factly, the actual locket is upstairs in the drawing-room. Straightaway I go back upstairs to the glass case I had blithely passed over, and there it is, Ellen's braceleted locket with the miniature of her father, which he gave her as a wedding present. I leave aside the question of what this says about the Liberator's self-importance to consider what it says about Ellen's devotion to him in her old age. In 1832 she wrote of him:

> Yet how could I refrain from pouring forth
> The fullness of my heart in fervent praise
> Of one so loved, so honoured – one so well
> Deserving love and honour?

This painting, to my mind by far the most interesting of the three, shows that her devotion – and again I use the word advisedly – was undiminished for many years after her father's death in 1847.

The date of this painting is unknown, as is the artist. But Ellen is undoubtedly an old woman. Widowed in 1856, she lived until the age of seventy-eight, dying in 1883. Her sole volume of poetry was published in 1863, more than thirty years after its title-poem was written. I have suggested earlier that she felt unhappy that she had not achieved what she wanted to achieve as a poet. In 1861, writing on a beach in Co. Wicklow, her invocation of youth bears a sadder tone than the yearning or nostalgia that is common to all such invocations:

O vanished days of my fair peaceful youth
Precursors of less calm maturity,
And of a sadder, gloomier middle age ….

The three portraits of Ellen that hang in Derrynane House might have been painted to accompany these lines. In the dining-room, a calm and sensitive teenage girl in an oil painting by John Gubbins surrounds herself with poetry and music; in the drawing-room, a middle-aged woman is still calm, but seems to be focused somewhere outside of herself; and on the stairway, a gaunt, almost spectral woman in sombre clothes directs the viewer to an image of her dead father. Not all of her poems are hopeless; but, especially in the later poems, hope is addressed in conventional religious terms anticipating a redemptive afterlife. The vitality that infused "Darrynane in 1832" and other of her early work is missing, replaced by a dutifulness that seems solely one of conviction rather than of feeling. I find myself saddened that the woman who has been a wonderful Derrynane discovery for me, and who has guided me to new discoveries in the landscape around this house, may have allowed her own sense of discovery, especially of literary discovery, to be sacrificed for the sake of other interests. I find myself hoping that further research into the life and work this largely forgotten woman will prove me wrong.

I move downstairs again, because I want to end this visit to Derrynane House in the company of the person who brought me here. There are enormous swathes of Daniel O'Connell's life and work I have left untouched: the monster meetings, his uncompromising opposition to slavery, an opposition that contributed to the hostility the more narrowly nationalistic Young Ireland movement displayed towards him, his enormous reputation and celebrity throughout Europe, his mastery of parliamentary strategy, his imprisonment and release, his enormous funeral and much, much more. But all of these have been described often and in great detail. My fascination is with O'Connell not only as being inextricably woven from and into the landscape of Iveragh, but also as being part of a family that was a major literary and imaginative voice in and for Iveragh during the course of more than two centuries. In short O'Connell, while not a literary practitioner in the strict sense, inherited – and handed on – a literary and imaginative legacy from his family that can still be traced in Iveragh. In the term used by the Scottish poet Somhairle MacGill-Eain about his own family, the O'Connells were "tradition bearers". And this tradition borne within his family became part of the Liberator's political and intellectual armoury in his political struggles. The power of the word was what he inherited, a power which survived the far-reaching changes in language use in Iveragh and the country in general during his lifetime. `

To begin my final explorations of this legacy of the word, I pause in the hallway at the portrait of one of the O'Connells who might seem least likely to be seen as a custodian of the power of the word. Hunting Cap is generally seen as a stern, utilitarian man, and the portrait outside the dining-room door would seem to embody this view. But he had perhaps another side. The epitaph on the O'Connell tomb in the Abbey hints at this side of him, telling us that his chief ambition 'was to elevate an ancient family from unmerited oppression'. Mary Anne Bianconi O'Connell, who was often highly critical of him, wrote that 'hard, stern and caustic as Maurice O'Connell could be, he had a kind heart and a very strong feeling for his own kith and kin'. But I am not in search of moral judgement here, but of the power of words. And just before Mary Anne gives us that opinion, she tells us that she 'cannot resist the temptation of inserting here a most characteristic letter of Hunting Cap's' to his sister-in-law'. This was written to the future Liberator's mother in 1796, when the young Daniel, Hunting Cap's heir and protégé, was a student. I think Mary Anne couldn't resist it for the same reason as I can't. The 'harsh, stern and caustic' tone is indeed there; but there is humour and understanding there also. Above all, there is the power of the word. Over twenty years ago, I used the exact words of the central part of this letter to make what I called "Found Poem". I added or subtracted nothing except my explanatory first line, and did no editing except to rewrite just over four lines of Hunting Cap's prose as seven lines of poetry:

> Hunting Cap wrote to Dan's mother:
> *He is, I am told, employed at visiting*
> *the seats of hares at Kilreelig,*
> *the earths of foxes at Tarmons,*
> *the caves of otters at Bolus,*
> *& the celebration of Miss Burke's wedding at Direen*
> *- useful avocations, laudable pursuits*
> *for a nominal student at law!*

There is no high purpose here, and perhaps it is even wishful thinking on my part to think that Hunting Cap is being humorously understanding as well as displaying, like generations after him, an impatience with the perceived idleness and extravagance of students, but there is undoubtedly a rhetorical and rhythmic power to his complaint that the young Daniel may well have learned from. And, in the context of my exploration of place and language, I delight in how Kilreelig, Tarmons, Bolus and Direen – all places in Iveragh with which I am very familiar – are part of the weave of Hunting Cap's indignant letter, and of the young Liberator's formative engagement with the cliffs,

sea-caves and mountains of Iveragh. Again, I have to remind myself that my instinctive and philosophical shrinking way from the blood-sport aspect of this engagement is not one which would have been widely shared in the late eighteenth century.

I move once more into the dining-room, with a renewed sense of O'Connell being part of a literary continuum, a continuum which he adapted to his wider political purposes. Ellen has been for me the great discovery, but she was not the only one among her siblings with literary interests. Her brothers Maurice and John were also writers, under their own names and also using pen-names. Their portraits also hang here in the dining-room. From my limited knowledge of their work, it was more than competent, and suggests they grew up in a household that valued literature and the arts. I'd like to quote from a memoir published by John in 1849. The extract covers ground that has been covered by O'Neill Daunt, Ó Faoláin and Macken – the Liberator, the postman, newspapers, hunting at Cúm a' Chiste – but to which John's memoir adds a personal and familial element, as well as an enviable ability to dramatize:

> The moment, however, that the men had concluded their meal, he was upon his legs the first, pitching away Times, Chronicle, Freeman, Pilot, Globe, etc. in much admired confusion, and breasting the mountain again. Up to the last year of his life, he displayed an activity, and a power of endurance of fatigue on these occasions, that often put much younger men to shame. Hurrying from hilltop to hill top, and choosing his points of view with what military men would call an admirable *coup d'oeil*, he watched every incident of the hunt, every turn and double of the hare, and all the patient or eager trackings of his excellent beagles, with the liveliest and most entire interest. During the lulls of the chase, he relapsed into political meditations again; and the same indications I have alluded to before, of the current of busy and stirring thought through his brain, were visible from time to time. But one cry from the hounds — one giving tongue, at least of the older and steadier dogs, (whose note he always distinguished as clearly and readily as the huntsman himself) and at once politics, and all thought but that of the hunt, passed away as quickly as the last wreaths of the morning fog, swept off from the mountain peaks around him before the fresh and gladsome breeze of the Atlantic. Of this I had one experience, the remembrance of which teases me to the present hour. I was alone with him upon a glorious autumn day during the recess of 1835, at the very pinnacle of Coomakishtheh, the high mountain over which the road from Caherciveen to Darrynane then traversed, and around which the present road passes. The truly magnificent panorama of mountain - promontory and islet, wild bay and illimitable ocean, lay before us in all its sublimity. Deeply engaged in thought as he was, I could not restrain myself from

> interrupting him with an expression of admiration. He joined in it, and then added, “These are the scenes, John ……”
>
> “Fioch! Fioch! Fioch inish! (see, see now!) there's the hare, masther — there's the hare", half-whispered, half-screamed a ragged urchin, jumping down between us from the top of a crag, and pointing eagerly to what seemed a small brown dot moving with vast rapidity across a patch of green heather two or three hundred yards below. At the same instant, like the sudden swell of a magnificent organ, came up the hill the musical burst of the hounds in full cry, as, emerging from a deep coomer, they got a view of the hare. Away went my father, and away to the winds went the deep thought which a moment before had been beaming from his glance, and just breathing from his lips, and it was lost to me for ever!

When I recall that this was written very soon after the Liberator’s death in 1847, I find it strikes a poignant and moving note, a note that is grounded in the drama of the ‘ragged urchin’ jumping from the crag between father and son shouting *Féach, feach, féach anois!* John’s version is not orthographically correct, but it is an accurate phonetic rendition of an Irish phrase I once heard used by a neighbour, who claimed not to know any Irish, when he saw a shoal of mackerel breaking the surface of the water near the beach below my house.

Just as Ellen’s poem about Derrynane had a political aspect not only to its content but to the time and place of its publication, so did some of the literary work of the siblings. In 1845, James Duffy published an anthology of poems, with music, called *The Spirit of the Nation*, an anthology of poems which had appeared over the previous three years in the periodical *The Nation*. This was more than a year before the Young Ireland movement, with which the periodical was associated, split from O’Connell’s Repeal Association. All of the three literary O’Connell siblings are represented in the anthology. I must admit that I find none of these particular poems very appealing, but the fact that three of the people who would have spent long family holidays around this table in Derrynane went on to write poetry, and that one of them published a book with some fine work in it, not least “Darrynane in 1832”, suggests to me that the conversation around this table was about much more than the day’s hunting, and that the children were given a sense of the value of literature for their private and public lives. Again, it is brought home to me how words, literature and the cultivation of the creative imagination were in the Liberator’s blood and breeding, an aspect of his *dúchas* that he passed on. A lovely cameo illustration of that *dúchas* is provided by Mary Anne in *The Last Colonel*:

> Miss Evelina McCarthy tells me she remembers her venerable grand-uncle, Count O'Connell, in his old age in Paris, reciting and expounding to her long passages in Irish verse; and surely he was one of the most prosaically sensible of men.

I love that last comment by the Last Colonel's biographer, reminding me that his brother Hunting Cap was also 'one of the most prosaically sensible of men', but had, as we have seen, his own power with – and delight in – the poetry of words. I look at the portraits of both men, these prosaically sensible men and I think of the Irish *seanfhocal*, or proverb: *briseann an dúchas trí shúile an chait*, a proverb that tells us that inherited characteristics shine out through the eyes of the most impassive cat. The *dúchas* of the power of words shines out through generations of the O'Connells, those whose portraits hang here and those, like Máire Ní Dhuibh and Eibhlín Dubh, whose images inhabit the shadows. It is in this context that, once again, I contemplate the John Gubbins portrait of O'Connell himself that hangs here. It was painted about 1818, ten years before he was elected an MP. He stands beside a table, gazing confidently at the viewer, one hand assertively on his hip, the other on a petition seeking Catholic Emancipation, signed by eminent public figures. On the table is a silver cup presented to him by the 'Manufacturers of the Liberty of the City of Dublin'. The painting shows a man confident of his ability to use the mechanisms of power to address injustice and discrimination. I choose this painting as the setting for conjuring two of O'Connell's ancestors – familial and literary – imagining that they might satisfaction in contemplating this portrait of a man of the law using the structures and mechanisms of power and the law in a way they themselves might have felt cut off from.

The first of them that I conjure is Eibhlín Dubh, his aunt. Estranged from her family and from Derrynane House because she married for love, she now, I imagine, comes face to face with her nephew who was also – albeit temporarily – estranged from and disinherited by Hunting Cap because he married for love. I recall a section of her *Caoineadh* where she considers using the power of the law to seek justice for her husband's murder, two years before her nephew was born:

> By Jesus Christ, there is nothing,
> No headgear, no millinery,
> Nor finely-stitched linen,
> No shoe, no stocking,
> No furniture or hanging,
> Not even the brown mare's tackling,
> That I won't sell to buy law

And I will travel abroad
To petition at court
And if I get no satisfaction
I will come straight back
To the black-blooded savage
Who rifled my treasure.

I think it's interesting that Eibhlín Dubh places recourse to law – even expensive law, and she was not penniless – before what seems like more direct and personal revenge. But more striking is that she sees the law as a distant thing, the seat of power being elsewhere, necessitating that she go abroad, *anonn thar toinn*, on a journey which she anticipates being in vain. *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire*, despite its widespread reception as a nationalist poem during much of the twentieth century, is infinitely more personal than it is political. Nonetheless, a passage such as this expresses an alienation from the seat and structures of power, as well as a yearning to have access to the institutions of that power, a yearning that will break out in other forms if it is denied. I have no idea whether or not the outlaw's widow ever spoke with her lawyer nephew about such things, or indeed if they spoke at all. What I am certain of is that the calm, confident figure in the portrait before me would have understood the passage I've just quoted, and that he certainly understood the necessity to struggle to put an end to this alienation, at a societal level as well as at the intensely personal level expressed by Eibhlín Dubh.

The second O'Connell ancestor whom I conjure had undoubtedly absorbed and understood alienation and oppression, in both personal and societal terms, and expressed this in extraordinarily powerful poetry about one hundred and twenty years before the Liberator's birth in 1775. Of all of the O'Connell weavers of words, Seán Ó Conaill is the one of whom I would say: *ah, now I understand where Daniel O'Connell came from!* I have introduced him before this in three other contexts: when I was on Carraig Éanna in search of the Milesians, when I was in meditative mood beside the Amergin monument in Waterville, and when I was on Inis Uasal in search of Fíonán and early Irish Christianity. But, for Seán Ó Conaill, those contexts, sweepingly historical as they may be, are still just contextual narratives for the great outpouring of personal, societal and religious grief that is *Tuireamh na hÉireann/The Dirge for Ireland*, written during the mid-1650's in the immediate aftermath of the Cromwellian conquest and during the process of the ethnic and religious dispossession and displacement which followed.

Before I get to the poem itself, let me introduce the seventeenth-century poet in the context of the wider O'Connell family. A genealogical table included in *The Last Colonel of the Irish Brigade*

indicates that 'John, author of *The Dirge of Ireland*', who died around 1702, was the grandson of 'Maurice of Caherbarnagh, transplanted to Clare after 1641, but never got there, dying en route'. An eighteenth-century manuscript copy of *Tuireamh na hÉireann* says, however, that the author was Seán *mac* Muiris Ó Conaill. Whether Seán Ó Conaill was the son or the grandson of Maurice of Caherbarnagh, he is in a fairly direct line of ancestry to those whose portraits surround me here in the dining-room of Derrynane House. More significantly, his immediate and wider family suffered dispossession and displacement as a result of the Cromwellian conquest. Not only was Maurice transplanted to Clare, but around the same time Ballycarbery Castle, a McCarthy stronghold guarding the Fertha River near Cahersiveen, was 'dismantled by order of the Cromwellian government' according to an essay on the O'Connell family by the late Gerard Lyne, which appeared in the recently available *Kerry: History and Society*, edited by the historian Maurice Bric. The O'Connell family had for generations been the hereditary seneschals of Ballycarbery Castle.

Even at the distance of almost three hundred and seventy years, *Tuireamh na hÉireann* carries the force of the contemporary. It was written out of immediate personal experience of the ethnic, religious and linguistic fault lines that had gaped open in Ireland over the previous century, fault lines that were to undermine the peace of the country right up to our own times, and whose aftershocks have not yet disappeared. Its five hundred lines had widespread currency and influence for at least two centuries after its composition. Writing in the mid-eighteenth century, Friar O'Sullivan of Muckross Abbey wrote that it had been 'repeated and kept in memory on account of the great knowledge of antiquity comprehended in it'. Cecile O'Rahilly, who edited the poem as part of *Five Seventeenth-Century Political Poems* in 1952, found the poem 'in seventy-four manuscripts which range in date from 1699 to 1857', as well as four translations into English. Vincent Morley, in his recently published *Ó Chéitinn go Raiftearaí*, a fascinating and invaluable exploration of how Gaelic Ireland chronicled and viewed the colonial history of the country from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, has expanded on this figure. He has traced two hundred and forty dated manuscript copies of the poem made between 1700 and 1900. When I looked at Morley's breakdown of this figure, I found that an extraordinary 168 of these were copied out between 1775 and 1850, dates that coincide – to within three years – with the Liberator's lifetime. Twice translated during the eighteenth century, it was first issued as a printed book, along with a verse translation, by Michael Clarke, under the title *Ireland's Dirge, an Historical Poem, Written in Irish*, in 1827, the year before Daniel O'Connell's triumphant Clare election. It is in the context of this widespread and long-lasting interest in the poem, as well as its undoubted literary merit, that Michael Cronin has called it 'probably one of the most important poems ever written in Ireland'. Composed a hundred and twenty years before *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire*, its transmission was more immediate, more

widespread and more textually formal. And, unlike the *Caoineadh*, it is first and last a public poem, although the anguished voice of Seán Ó Conaill howls throughout the poem as intensely as does that of Eibhlín Dubh throughout hers.

This is the man and this is the work that I present to the gaze of the crusading lawyer in the portrait that overlooks the table at which he so often presided. Although the interest in the poem, especially during the course of his lifetime, would suggest that he must have known about his ancestor's work, I cannot say with certainty that the Liberator was familiar with *Tuireamh na hÉireann*. But he was certainly familiar with the material that formed the basis of its narrative, and I am certain he would have been viscerally as well as intellectually empathetic with much of the perspective embodied in the poem. The first part of the poem recounts the same story as did *An Leabhar Gabhála*, including the lines I quoted when I was on Carraig Éanna in an earlier chapter. It goes on to deal in learned detail with the Christianisation of Ireland, invoking the sort of golden age which Thomas Moore and others had invoked so powerfully, as evidenced across the room in the portrait of the young Ellen O'Connell. The Anglo-Norman conquest of Ireland is recounted in a positive way in the lines I quoted when contemplating migration beside the Amergin sculpture. But when the poem moves towards the Tudor plantations, and especially into the contemporaneous Cromwellian wars, there is a radical change. Images of slaughter, of keening widows and crying orphans introduce one of the most powerful and technically brilliant passages in the poem:

> Is docht na dlithe do rinneadh dár ngéarghoin
> Siosóin cúirte is téarmaí daora,
> *Wardship livery* is Cúirt Exchéquer,
> Cíos coláisde *in nomine poenae*;
> *Greenwax, capias, writ, replévin,*
> Bannaí, fíneáil, díotáil éigcirt,
> *Provost*, soffré, portré, méara,
> Sirriam, sionascáil, marascáil chlaona.
> Dlí beag eile do rinneadh do Ghaelaibh
> *Surrender* ar a gceart do dhéanamh.

I feel that any attempt on my part to translate this passage would do it an injustice. In any case, I don't think translation is necessary. Translation and transliteration is embodied – and indeed weaponised – in the text itself. A quick glance will show that what we have is a *tour de force* in which the poet creates a savage rhythmic litany of legal terms in Latin, French, English and Irish, terms used

in the dispossession and displacement of those of the Catholic native Irish and "New Irish" Anglo-Normans, whose lands were confiscated in favour of Cromwellian Protestant settlers. Irish speakers will also see that each line ends in a trochee in which the stressed penultimate syllable assonates with the others, creating a series of rhythmic hammer-blows that embody the societal oppression which is the real function of the legal language, rather than the societal ordering which is the nominal function of such language. The final couplet tells us that the law had become an instrument whereby the old Gaelic order had to surrender its rights, almost spitting out the word "surrender". The insights and techniques of the passage would be familiar to practitioners of what is today known as post-colonialist literature. But the O'Connell literary legacy, a legacy built up, like their family fortune, over a number of centuries in Iveragh, is too expansive, rich and varied to be constrained or diminished by contemporary literary theory. The reason I conjured Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill and, especially, Seán Ó Conaill, to the presence of this portrait of O'Connell as judicial agitator, is to allow myself to wonder how they might have felt could they have anticipated how a descendant of their family would invoke the law, and, very significantly, use the language and idiom of the law, in parliament, in the courts and in public agitation, to redress the sense of grievance, personal and communal, that both of them expressed. I have chosen these passages from these two ancestral figures – one distant, the other very immediate – to look at O'Connell's achievements in the light of their howls of despair. They made use of the literary creativity that ran through generations of their family to articulate the rage they felt, deeply personal in one case and deeply communal in another. Their poems – in both cases the only poems known to have been composed by them – articulate that rage and despair magnificently. Would they take familial pride in Dan's harnessing of the power of words in the cause of the liberation of their people, even in another language? I will not impose an imagined conversation on them, but I am sure I will from now on eavesdrop on whatever snatches of it that I can.

I walk out into the sunshine in what is now the outside dining-area of the Ahavore Coffee Shop, situated where Dónal Mór Ó Conaill and Maire Ní Dhuibh built their house. Just across from here is the display area for the Liberator's triumphal chariot, an extraordinary construct – metaphorically as well as physically – built especially for his release from prison in 1844, a term of imprisonment that served only to increase his popularity, if not his power. The chariot was also used in 1847 for his funeral, which also became a triumphal procession. There is enormous scope for exploration in this chariot, the narratives around its use, the iconography on display in its decoration, the fact that the Liberator's grandchildren accompanied him on the triumphal procession from Richmond Prison to Merrion Square. But the chariot, restored, came here in recent years as a museum exhibit. Its magnificent presence here is wonderful, and enlightening, but it is not

part of my story. Derrynane – the house and its hinterland – is my territory. O'Connell in the wider world is territory for historians. I'll content myself with a poem:

> Eternally cute, you kept your options
> open to the end: soul to God,
> heart to Rome, body to Ireland.
> The jury was hugely impressed.
>
> Historians say you're being revised
> back again. You'll be seminarred,
> God love you, into little pieces.
> I'll leave you as I found you,
> towered in Glasnevin, statued in the city,
> hunting storied hares in Derrynane.

The Woman who Danced on the Shore

A Coda

The wind is still boisterous, the aftermath of a gale last night. I'm snatching a quick walk along the seafront in Waterville, in between sleety showers, foreshadowed in dark curtained clouds that draw themselves in from the Atlantic every hour or so, dramatically lowering the light and temperature. Then when they have pulled themselves inland, the light once again revealed is all the more intense, all the more invigorating, for having been buffeted by the passing squall. Hail or shine, the wind today is icy, unusually so for this area. It is the end of January; in a few days we will have *Lá 'le Bríde* and the beginning of Spring, after which, St. Brigid promised *gach re lá go maith óm lá-sa amach*: from my day on, every second day will be fine. The dramatic contrasts of wind, hail and sunshine today seem like a settling-in, a preparation towards the fulfilment of her promise. The sea is still quite rough, green water and white foam buffeting the beach, Carraig Éanna and Carraig na mBarc throwing up spray every so often. But the sea has lost most of its force, and what remains seems more of a display than a threat, at least for now. But the evidence of its force last night is scattered all over the beach and its shingle, that has been deposited there over the centuries, and that constantly shifts and moulds itself into a flexible barrier against the waves. Seaweed gleams in the sunlight like burnished copper, here and there into heaps of up to two metres in height. There are all sorts of seaweed in them, but predominant this morning are the broad fronds and long, thick stems of kelp often called sea-rods. In all probably they will either be carried out again by the tide, or will be there until they rot away.

This was not always so. Seaweed is an excellent fertiliser. My own vegetable garden is regularly enriched by a coating of rich, gleaming fronds. When I first came to live here, it was common, especially in the aftermath of stormy seas, for tractors drawing trailer-loads piled high with seaweed to pass along the road from the beach. I recall a friend telling me that, when he was a boy in the 1930's, he used to spend a night standing guard over his family's pile of seaweed before it was drawn home by donkey-cart the following day. Artificial fertilisers have bypassed all of this now, but who knows what a more environmentally friendly type of farming may bring in the future? And seaweed was harvested not only as a fertiliser but also as a commercial enterprise. John Fitzgerald, a scientific expert on seaweed who, with his wife Kerryann runs a foraging and culinary enterprise on the foreshores around Derrynane, tells me that seaweed has commercially harvested all through the nineteenth century for the production of iodine, glass and even explosives. Adam Smith, in *The Wealth of Nations*, wrote as follows:

> Kelp is a species of sea-weed, which, when burnt, yields an alkaline salt, useful for making glass, soap, and for several other purposes. It grows in several parts of Great Britain, particularly in Scotland, upon such rocks only as lie within the high-water mark, which are

> twice every day covered with the sea, and of which the produce, therefore, was never augmented by human industry. The landlord, however, whose estate is bounded by a kelp shore of this kind, demands a rent for it as much as for his corn fields.

This may seem a strange piece to insert, but I quote it primarily as a context for one traveller's account of how the exploitation of this natural resource, by means of the exploitation of the underclass by those who claimed proprietary rights over the foreshore where it was washed ashore, at once fascinated and horrified a most extraordinary and outspoken woman. Bear with me.

I have walked here through part of the village, down the steep slope from Spunkane, past the two grocery mini-markets, the post-office, the Church of Ireland, a couple of restaurants; then I crossed the section of the main Ring of Kerry Road known as the New Line, and onto a tarmacked promenade with an extensive boulder-wall on its sea side to try to hold back the sea's erosive power. I walked this way, and I list out these buildings, roads and paths, familiar to anybody who knows Waterville today, simply to remind myself that they didn't exist when an American evangelist and social campaigner visited here in 1845, and, on a morning like this, walked from her lodging in Spunkane to where I now stand watching the sea as it calms itself. Waterville was barely even a village at the time. The new village had taken its atypical English name from Waterville House, a manor house, built by the Butler family in 1790 and so named because it was built at the confluence of two rivers, just a few hundred metres from the lake and less than a hundred metres from the sea. *Ach sin scéal eile*. For now, I'll return to our American evangelist in 1845, late March of 1845 to be more precise. She had spent the previous night in what she called 'the hospitable dwelling of Jerry Quirk' where Lady Chatterton had stayed less than twenty years before. Both of them, incidentally, were passing through Waterville on their way to or from the home of Daniel O'Connell at Derrynane, ten kilometres further on. The O'Connells and Derrynane, as we have seen, are a vital element in any exploration of the imagination of Iveragh. But today, I'm reimagining the evangelist's visit here in Waterville, as well as searching for the roots of a poem that, more than a hundred years later, grew out of an encounter she had during that visit.

The woman in question was Asenath Nicholson. This is how her biographer, Maureen O'Rourke Murphy, introduced her talk on this remarkable woman at the Daniel O'Connell Summer School in Derrynane House in 2018:

> Had you been traveling in Ireland in 1844-1845, you might have seen or heard about an extraordinary American woman who was walking through the countryside singing hymns, reading the Bible and distributing religious tracts drawn from the depths of her large, black,

bearskin muff. She wore Indian rubber boots, a polka coat and, when they weren't missing, silver-rimmed spectacles. She recorded, with some indignation, that people stared at her. She was Asenath Hatch Nicholson: teacher, reformer, abolitionist, writer and traveller, and she had come to Ireland to investigate the condition of the Irish poor. Her account of her travels, *Ireland's Welcome to the Stranger* (1847), is one of the most valuable records we have of Ireland on the eve of the Famine. She left Ireland in the fall of 1845, just before the first reports of the failure of the potato crop. She returned in 1846 determined to do what she could to relieve the suffering of the poor. Her account of those years, *Annals of the Famine* in Ireland (1851) is a remarkable chronicle of human suffering.

This was the woman whose footsteps I have retraced here the greater part of two centuries later. I don't know if she was wearing the bearskin muff, the boots or the polka coat (which my dictionary tells me means a tight-fitting knitted jacket). If the weather was anything like as cold as today's, she would have needed them. Although two months later in the year than my walk here today, her walk was also in the aftermath of a storm, which also resulted in plenty of seaweed. I'll allow Nicholson tell the story herself:

> Next morning the tempest was still high, and venturing upon the strand, I there saw, as at Valentia, crowds of females busied; and speaking to one, she replied, "These stawrmy nights, ma'am, blow good luck to the poor; they wash up the say-weed, and that's why ye see so many now at work."
>
> The company increased, till I counted more than sixty; and busy, merry work was made of it; running with heavy loads upon their heads, dripping with wet, exultingly throwing them down, and bounding away in glee. Truly, "A merry heart doeth good like a medicine." "And are you not cold?" "O no, ma'am, the salt say keeps us warm; the salt say, ma'am, never lets us take cold." "And how many days must you work in this way, before you get a supply?" "Aw, sometimes not fawrty, but scores of days." "And all you have for your labor is the potatoe?" "That's all, ma'am, that's all; and it's many of us that can't get the sup of milk with 'em, no, nor the salt; but we can't help it, we must be content with what the good God sends us." She hitched her basket over her shoulder, and in company with one older than herself, skipped upon the sand made wet with rain, and turning suddenly about, gave me a pretty specimen of Kerry dancing, as practiced by the peasantry. "The sand is too wet, ma'am, to dance right well on," and again shouldering her basket, with a "God speed ye on ye'r journey," leaped away. I looked after them among the rocks, more with admiration

> for the moment than with pity; for what hearts, amid splendor and ease, lighter than these? And what heads and stomachs, faring sumptuously every day, freer from aches than theirs, with the potatoe and sup of milk? This woman, who danced before me, was more than fifty, and I do not believe that the daughter of Herodias herself, was more graceful in her movements, more beautiful in complexion or symmetry, than was this "dark-haired" matron of the mountains of Kerry.

It is a picture that walks a fine line, and threatens to wobble into the sentimental or the patronising, the same fine line walked by, say, the paintings of Paul Henry or, even more so, earlier nineteenth century "romantic peasant" paintings. But Asenath Nicholson, eccentric and evangelistic as she may have been, was no sentimentalist. A reforming abolitionist at home, her purpose in coming to Ireland, the book's subtitle tells us was to make 'an excursion through Ireland for the purpose of personally investigating the condition of the poor.' And although she may have been charmed by the encounter she related – as who would not? – she was deeply aware of the poverty and demoralisation underlying a life such as she had just encountered. Her sympathetic questions, and her phrase 'more with admiration for the moment than with pity' recognises that pity is the more essential response, that her enthusiasm is 'for the moment'. Two or three days earlier, on her way to Valentia Island, a righteous anger had been her response to her first view of the conditions under which women engaged in this work:

> The employment of females here, though I had seen a little of it before, was of that degrading kind, that I felt like revolting from the sight. Men and women go out in boats, to gather sea-weed that adheres to the rocks, which is used for manure. They take a long pole with hooks upon the end, wade in, standing often to the armpits in water, and scrape the weed from the rocks, put it in the boats, and the men take it to shore; the women remaining in the sea often through the day. At night they take a basket-full upon their backs, and bend to their wretched cabins, to boil their potatoes, and lie down upon the straw; and in the morning awake to the same hopes, and go to the same employment. Woman is here worse than a beast of burden, because she is often made to do what the beast never does. "Eight months in the year we drag at this, praise God," said a poor woman. I looked back to the garden of Eden, and was it for this that a help-mate was made for man? Is this the being that is destined to mould the minds of his children, to look well to the ways of his household, and make him "known as he sitteth at the gate among the elders?" Surely Ireland's Bible

teachers must have added their own theology to that of Henry, Clarke, and Scott, to have produced such a version as this for the station of woman.

If Asenath Nicholson's response to the woman who danced at Waterville is to some extent similar to that of Wordsworth when he encountered his *Solitary Reaper*, her response to the seaweed gatherers at Valentia, even to the extent of partly blaming a harsh religious philosophy, is uncannily prescient of that of the great Scottish Gaelic poet Somhairle MacGill-Eain (Sorley MacLean) in one of his early poems. MacGill-Eain is a poet whom I revere for the sense of place that lies behind all of his work. An uncompromisingly left-wing poet writing in the 1930's, he contextualised his internationalist outlook within the place and the Gaelic history and traditions within which he was raised. He was consumed by the same reforming zeal and anger as Nicholson, although he did not share her religious belief, and composed "Ban-Ghàidheal" or "A Highland Woman" from his knowledge of his people's history. This is the second half of the poem:

An t-earrach seo agus seo chaidh
's gach fichead earrach bhon an tùs,
tharraing ise 'n fheamainn fhuar
chum biadh a cloinne 's duais an tùir.

'S gach fichead foghar tha air triall
chaill i samhradh buidh nam blàth;
is threabh an dubh-chosnadh an clais
tarsainn mìnead ghil a clàir.

Agus labhair T'eaglais chaomh
mu staid chaillte a h-anama thruaigh;
agus leag an cosnadh dian
a corp gu sàmhchair dhuibh an uaigh.

Is thriall a tìm mar shnighe dubh
a' drùdhadh tughaidh fàrdaich bochd;
mheal ise an dubh-chosnadh cruaidh;
is glas a cadal suain a-nochd.

And this is the poet's own translation, in which, although rhyme and rhythm are lost in the poet's faithfulness to the literal meaning, the burning anger of the poem jumps across any linguistic firebreak that might have otherwise taken from its power:

> This Spring and last Spring
> and every twenty Springs from the beginning,
> she has carried the cold seaweed
> for her children's food and the castle's reward.
>
> And every twenty Autumns gone
> she has lost the golden summer of her bloom,
> and the Black Labour has ploughed the furrow
> across the white smoothness of her forehead.
>
> And Thy gentle church has spoken
> about the lost state of her miserable soul,
> and the unremitting toil has lowered
> her body to a black peace in a grave.
>
> And her time has gone like a black sludge
> seeping through the thatch of a poor dwelling:
> the hard Black Labour was her inheritance;
> grey is her sleep tonight.

I revere, as I have said, the work of Somhairle MacGill-Eain; indeed, so much so that I spent a number of years translating his collected poems from Scottish Gaelic into Irish. To my mind, he was the greatest Gaelic poet of the past two centuries, Irish or Scottish. Love poetry, political poetry, historical poetry – all were brought into glorious light through the prism of place, almost always the islands of Skye and Raasay, his native island. Today, in a wild and windy landscape that is in many ways as close to Somhairle's maritime landscape as Irish is to Scottish Gaelic, I take delight in the echoes I find between a poem by a twentieth-century atheistic socialist and the prose of a nineteenth-century American crusading evangelist.

It is, however, another poem and another poet, an Irish poet, that has brought me here today. A book with the title *My Dark Fathers* was published in 1964, roughly a hundred and twenty years after Asenath Nicholson spoke to the graceful seaweed-gatherer here in Waterville. The author was a young Kerry poet called Brendan Kennelly, who went on to become one of Ireland's most eminent and indeed most beloved poets. The title-poem of that early collection is, to my mind,

one of the great Irish poems of the twentieth century. It is, both for Kennelly personally, and Irish people communally, a powerful rhetorical exploration of the darkness that is often seen to have entered into the psyche of Ireland with the Great Famine, a darkness that expressed itself especially through language-loss and cultural impoverishment, together with the consequent social and economic demoralisation. A number of influences converged to bubble up in Kennelly's poem. This is how he described its genesis:

> One day I attended a talk given by Frank O'Connor about the famine that happened in Ireland in the nineteenth century and had such a harrowing effect on the Irish character. I was trying, at the time, to write a poem about that history which I had lived with since childhood. During his talk, O'Connor spoke of a traveller's description of a woman dancing on the Kerry shore:
>
> > This woman who danced before me, was more than fifty, and I do not believe that the daughter of Herodias herself was more graceful in her movements, more beautiful in her complexion and symmetry, than was this dark-haired matron of the mountains of Kerry.
>
> This image struck me immediately. The woman was the entire people, capable of spontaneous artistic expression: capable of it, that is, before the famine. But then came the terrible desolation. O'Connor made me aware of Peadar O'Laoghaire's *Mo Sgéal Féin* (*My Own Story*) where there is the following description of the dead and dying:
>
> > You saw them every morning after the night out, stretched in rows, some moving and some very still, with no stir from them. Later people came and lifted those who no longer moved and heaved them into carts and carried them up to a place near Carrigastyra, where a big deep pit was open for them, and thrust them into the pit.
>
> This is 'the pit of doom' in my poem. There is a description of a man named Paddy bringing his wife Kate from the workhouse back to his hut: Next day a neighbour came to the hut. He saw the two of them dead and his wife's feet clasped in Paddy's bosom as though he were trying to warm them. [The same image would later be used by Eavan Boland in her poem "Quarantine"] It would seem that he felt the death agony come on Kate and her legs grow cold. So he put them inside his own shirt to take the chill from them.
>
> In the poem I identify this woman, dead from famine disease, her 'perished feet nailed to her man's breastbone,' with the woman comparable to the daughter of Herodias, dancing on the shore in Kerry. Perhaps the most frightening consequence of famine is described in George Petrie's collection of *The Ancient Music of Ireland* - the terrible, unbearable silence.

To my mind this meant not only the silence that followed racial suffering akin to what Hitler inflicted on the Jews, but it meant that Ireland became the grave of song. I was witnessing the death of the dance:

> *This awful, unwonted silence which, during the famine and subsequent years, almost everywhere prevailed, struck more fearfully upon their imaginations, as many Irish gentlemen informed me, and gave them a deeper feeling of the desolation with which the country had been visited, than any other circumstance which had forced itself upon their attention.*

These images of the pit, the woman, the rows of the dead, the terrible silence, were in my mind after hearing O'Connor's talk. Shortly afterwards, I was at a wedding and a boy was asked to sing. He did so, but during the song he turned his back on the wedding party. In his averted figure I saw the woman who forgot the dance, the land that rejected its own singers.

Powerful as Kennelly's exegesis of his poem is, the poem itself is even more powerful. It has what for me is a necessary hallmark of such poems: it can be grasped and absorbed even when you don't know the details of its background or context. I knew the poem for years before I knew anything about a nineteenth-century American traveller describing a woman dancing on the shore. And for years after I had read Kennelly's introduction to the poem, I had no idea that its genesis was here on the seashore where I stand. It was only when I read *Ireland's Welcome to the Stranger* that it jumped into local focus, and found itself tossing on the rough sea I'm looking at now. It may be that Kennelly himself may not have been aware of its exact geography. Here's the poem:

My dark fathers lived the intolerable day
Committed always to the night of wrong,
Stiffened at the hearthstone, the woman lay,
Perished feet nailed to her man's breastbone.
Grim houses beckoned in the swelling gloom
Of Munster fields where the Atlantic night
Fettered the child within the pit of doom,
And everywhere a going down of light.

And yet up the sandy Kerry shore
The woman once had danced at ebbing tide
Because she loved flute music - and still more

Because a lady wondered at the pride
Of one so humble. That was long before
The green plant withered by an evil chance;
When winds of hunger howled at every door
She heard the music dwindle and forgot the dance.

Such mercy as the wolf receives was hers
Whose dance became a rhythm in a grave,
Achieved beneath the thorny savage furze
That yellowed fiercely in a mountain cave.
Immune to pity, she, whose crime was love,
Crouched, shivered, searched the threatening sky,
Discovered ready signs, compelled to move
Her to her innocent appalling cry.

Skeletoned in darkness, my dark fathers lay
Unknown, and could not understand
The giant grief that trampled night and day,
The awful absence, moping the land.
Upon the headland, the encroaching sea
Left sand that hardened after tides of Spring,
No dancing feet disturbed its symmetry
And those who loved good music ceased to sing.

Since every moment of the clock
Accumulates to form a final name,
Since I am come of Kerry clay and rock,
I celebrate the darkness and the shame
That could compel a man to turn his face
Against the wall, withdrawn from light so strong
And undeceiving, spancelled in a place
Of unapplauding hands and broken song.

Here now, today, in the exuberance of this almost-Spring day in the aftermath of a storm, standing beside Holger Lönze's Amergin monument, that celebrates a much older poem coming ashore, I celebrate that intensely local and intensely universal genesis of both poems, as I do the link with the great Somhairle MacGill-Eain. And I celebrate Brendan Kennelly's determination to face the cultural and social darkness of the past, and, by recognising and naming it, helping to set hands applauding and to mend the broken song.

The intent of Kennelly's poem is redemptive. It is, I hope, not pretentious on my part to say that my purpose in writing this work has also been redemptive. My prologue ended with a poem, the final couplet of which was

> Here now are bells, voices lingering in prayer
> Upon prayer for the redemption of memory.

There was and is a deliberate ambiguity in that last phrase: the idea that memory is a redemptive agent combined with the belief that memory itself is in need of redemption. Our planet too is in urgent need of redemption, most palpably in relation to the physical environment, climate change and the loss of biodiversity. This environmental crisis cannot be unwoven or separated from other aspects of our world – the philosophical, spiritual, ethical and cultural beliefs and practices that underlie and underpin how we deal with the world, including our physical environment. Our cultural investment in the environment is inextricably intertwined with how we perceive the environment, and consequently in how we value it. We need to value and preserve the flora and fauna of our world, its soil and rocks, its air and water. An essential element of this valuing is how we imagine place, and, just as crucially, how we allow place to shape our imaginations. It is just a small step from this realisation to think of *place* as imagining *us*. If, like Amergin, we can imaginatively identify with – rather than simply exercise dominion over – wind and sea, with falcon and flower, with stag and salmon and dewdrop, we will surely choose not to further wound ourselves. And, furthermore, when we delve into the imaginative shaping of the places we live, we will immeasurably enrich our lives. To become part of where we live, and, at the same time, allow where we live to become part of us, it is necessary to dig into the past of where we live, and, in doing so, rediscover the essential contemporaneousness of that past, and to allow for its continuity into the future. The redemption of what has been forgotten can be the redemption of ourselves.

In the midst of all this abstraction, place is what grounds me, what allows metaphysical excursions which always bring me home. I have no interest in disembodied or unrooted imaginings.

As a student more than a half-century ago, I experienced these lines by Wallace Stevens as being tinged with revelation:

> We keep coming back and coming back
> To the real: to the hotel instead of the hymns
> That fall upon it out of the wind.

Today, I listen to the hymns, and do not accept the binary choice that Stevens's lines perhaps imply. I say 'perhaps' because the fact that Stevens writes about us 'coming back and coming back' also implies that we keep going away and going away. In any case, I find I can hear the hymns all the more clearly for being ground in the real, in the hotel, or, in my case, on the clifftop overlooking Ballinskelligs Bay. And here, to end, is one such hymn, which was, like Heaney's "The Given Note", taken 'out of wind off mid-Atlantic', and dedicated to somebody who has painstakingly teased out the context, the grammar, the meaning and the insights of the poem by Amergin, a poem which has, for me, been a foundational text for my explorations in the imagination of the place where I live:

> Shaping the Place of Speech
> *for John Carey*
>
> Accepting its vowels
> From the surrounding air
>
> From the exhalations
> Of lake, river and sea
>
> Shaped too by consonants
> Of shoreline and horizon
>
> Punctuated by stone
> Aching to become speech
>
> To become monuments
> Rooted in the place conjured

Again and again into being
By the poet’s utterance

Place grows into language
Language into landscape.

Appendix: a translation of *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire* by Paddy Bushe, first published in *My Lord Buddha of Carraig Éanna*. Dedalus Press, 2011.

The Howl for Art Ó Laoghaire

(i)

My love holds fast in you!

That day I chanced on you

Beside the market-house,

You were my eye's distraction,

You were my quickened heartbeat,

I left home and family

To travel far with you.

(ii)

It never went bad for me:

You had the parlour cleaned for me,

Rooms painted to please me,

Ovens well-heated for me,

Trout by the gills for me,

Spitted roast meat for me,

Slaughtered beasts for me;

Duck-down sleep for me

Until the cows came home –

Even more, if it pleased me.

(iii)

My firmest friend!

It lives in me always,

That boisterous spring day;

How well it became you,

That gold-banded beaver,

Your silver-hilted sabre

Held in highhanded bravery –

The swaggering, the daring

Had your enemies shaking,

Venomous, but craven;

You ready for a tearaway

On your white-faced mare.

The English abased themselves

Down towards the clay then,

And not for your own sake

But for how much you scared them,

Though you got your grave from them,

My heart's dearest favourite.

(iv)

My chevalier, white-handed!

How well your jewelled tie-pin

Pierced firmly through the cambric,

And the lacing adorned your hat.

When you came from abroad to us

They'd clear the road for you,

And never out of love for you,

But with their deepest curse for you.

(v)

My lover now, and always!

When they come into the hallway,

Conchubhar, everyone's favourite,

And Fear Ó Laoghaire, the small one,

They'll ask, all hot and bothered,

Where I have left their father.

I'll tell them through my horror

He's beyond in Cill na Martar.

They'll call out for their father,

With silence for an answer.

(vi)

My love and my pet!

Kin to Antrim's earl

And to the Barrys from Aolchoill,

A blade well became you

And a gold-banded beaver,

Boots of Spanish leather,

And suits of finest cloth

You had woven abroad.

(vii)

My deepest darling!

I knew nothing of your killing

Until your horse came straggling,

Her reins beneath her trailing

And your blood upon her withers

Back to the figured saddle

Where you'd sit or stand, daredevil.

My first stride cleared the doorstep,

My second flew through the gateposts,

My third step found your stirrup.

(viii)

My wrought hands beating,

I set your mare careering

As fast as ever I've ridden,

To where I found you deathly still

Beside a stunted whin-bush,

Without pope, without bishop,

Without clergy, without priesthood

To read over you from scripture,

Just a woman, old and wizened,

Who spread her cloak to ease you,

And the blood on you still streaming;

Nor did I not stop to clean it,

But palmed it up to drink it.

(ix)

Forever my darling!

Rise up to your full standing

And come away back with me,

That we have a bullock slaughtered,

That we organise a party,

That we get the music started,

That I prepare a bed for you,

With fine sheets spread for you,

And patchwork quilts so heavy for you

They'll make sweat break out in you,

Better than that chill you've taken.

(x)

My firmest, and my favourite one!

There's many a graceful woman

From Cork of the tall sails

To Droichead na Tóime,

With acres of cattle-dowry

And handfuls of gold coin,

Would not have slipped away to lie down

The night that they waked you.

(xi)

My lamb, my sweet one!

Don't ever believe it,

That slander that reached you,

Nor their poisonous sneering

That I had been sleeping.

It wasn't sleep that I needed,

But your children were grieving

And needed me near them,

So I lay down to ease them.

(xii)

You people of my own kind,

Is there a woman in Ireland

Who, night after nightfall,

Would lie down beside him,

Who is carrying his third child,

Who would not lose her mind

When Art Ó Laoghaire is lying

Here, drained and lifeless,

Since yesterday morning?

(xiii)

Morrisín, that I may see you

Disembowelled, bleeding,

Your eyes unseeing,

On your shattered knees –

Who killed my sweet one –

And not one man to be found

Who will shoot you down.

(xiv)

My love and my kind!

Up now, Art, you boyo,

Up on your horse's back,

Away with you to Mágh Cromtha

And back by Inse Geimhleach,

Lowering wine from the flagon –

Because you're indeed your father's son.

(xv)

It's a bitter hurt inside me

That I wasn't beside you

When the bullet was flying,

And I'd take it in my right side

Or the folds of my white blouse,

To let you go for the high ground

You sweet-handed rider.

(xvi)

This I cannot bear –

That I could not be there

When the gunpowder blazed.

Deep, deep in my waist

Or in my dress I'd have taken it

To have let you clean away

To settle with them another day,

Rider of the blue-grey eyes.

(xvii)

My beloved treasure!

It's no hero's reception:

A shroud and a coffin

For the bighearted horseman,

At home by a trout-stream

Or drinking in drawing-rooms

With fashionable women.

And I do not yet comprehend

That all of this has ended.

(xviii)

May you live to know horrors,

Morris , for your foulness!

Who killed the man of my house,

The father of my unborn;

Two children wandering the house,

And in my womb a third

That I'll hardly bring to birth.

(xix)

My shining favourite!

When you headed out the gateway

You turned at once and raced back,

Embraced your two children

And blew a hurried kiss to me.

You said, 'Eibhlín, go quickly

And attend to your business

As soon as ever you can.

I'm going now, and I'm leaving you

And most likely I won't return.'

I only made light of your words,

Having heard them so often before.

(xx)

Dearest friend of mine!

Bright-hilted rider,

Let you rise up now

And attire yourself

In the best of your finery,

Put on your black beaver,

Draw on your calf-hide gloves,

Hold your whip up high;

Your mare is just outside.

Take the eastern by-road

Where trees will quail before you,

Where streams will narrow before you,

Where people will bow before you

If they remember their manners –

A thing sadly out of fashion.

(xxi)

It's not my kin who have gone,

Nor the death of three of my own;

Nor Domhnall Mór Ó Conaill,

Nor Conall whom the tide drowned,

Nor my sister, twenty-six years old,

Who lived high and died young

Among royalty abroad –

It's not these whom I invoke,

But Art to be struck down

Near the river at Carraig an Ime! –

The brown mare's rider

Who lies alone with me here –

Not another living soul near

Only the black-robed women of the mill,

And to multiply my grief,

Their eyes dry of tears.

(xxii)

My calf, my own favourite!

Art Ó Laoghaire,

Son of Conchubhar, son of Céadach,

Son of Laoiseach Ó Laoghaire,

Who came east from the Gaortha

And west from an Caolchnoc,

Where berries are fragrant

And nuts heavy on hazels

And apples cascading

In their proper season.

Who could be amazed now

Were Uíbh Laoghaire to blaze up

With an Guagán's sacred lake

For that skilled horseman's sake,

Who at the end of the chase

Would ride down the failing stag

Beyond the pack's baying?

And oh, you sharp-eyed rider

What happened last night to you?

For I felt deep inside me

The wide world could not strike you

When I laid out your finery.

(xxiii)

My friend and my love!

Kin to noblest bloodlines,

With eighteen women to nurse you,

Whose pay for this was good –

A milking cow, a mare,

A sow and her litter,

A mill by a river,

Gold coins and silver,

Fine velvet and silk,

A farm from the landlord –

For their breasts yielding milk

To the heir of fine manhood.

(xxiv)

My deep, deepest love!

My pet, my whitest dove!

Although I never came to you,

With troops of followers to save you,

That was no shame to me

For they were in a hard place,

In closed-up chambers

And in narrow grave-pits

In a sleep beyond waking.

(xxv)

Were it not for pestilence

And the black death

And foul infection,

That band of hard horsemen

Would be shaking their harness

In clamorous procession

On their way to your burial,

My bighearted Art.

(xxvi)

My love on me shining!

Kin to those wild horsemen

Who would track through the glen

Until you'd turn them again

Back into your dininghall,

Where knives were being sharpened,

Pork served up for carving,

With endless racks of finest lamb

And a mess of oat grain fattening

To speed the horses' galloping –

Sleek long-maned stallions

And grooms standing by them

With no reckoning for lodging

Or for the horses' foddering

From week to week's ending

While you partied with your friends.

(xxvii)

My own calf, my favourite!

I saw through a dark haze

A nightmarish vision,

In Cork in the late hours

Alone where I lay:

That our bright house was razed,

That the Gaortha had dried,

That your hounds had no baying,

That birdsong had died

When you were found lying

Out on the bare hill

Without priest, without cleric,

Just an old, old woman

Who spread a corner of her shawl

On you stitched to the clay there,

My Art Ó Laoghaire,

With your blood cascading

Down your gaping shirt.

(xxviii)

My rooted love!

How well that suited you,

Stockings of toughest stitching,

High-polished knee-boots,

A tricorne Caroline

And a whip to flick at

A frisky colt –

And many a modest maidenly eye

Drank you in from behind

(xxix)

My love for my life!

When you went to the prosperous

And powerful towns,

Those merchants' wives

Would bow right down to you

Because they knew deep inside them

How in bed you would drive them,

No better front-rider

To sire a child for them.

(xxx)

By Jesus Christ, there is nothing,

No headgear, no millinery,

Nor finely-stitched linen,

No shoe, no stocking,

No furniture or hanging,

Not even the brown mare's tackling,

That I won't sell to buy law

And I will travel abroad

To petition at court

And if I get no satisfaction

I will come straight back

To the black-blooded savage

Who rifled my treasure.

(xxxi)

My love and my pet!

If my call were to echo

To Doire Fhionáin westward

And to Ceaplaing of the yellow apples,

It's many the light horseman

And white-kerchiefed woman

Would be here with all speed

To weep by your head,

My laughing Art.

(xxxii)

And my heart is grateful

To the fine women of the mill,

For the tears they have shed now

For the brown mare's fallen rider.

(xxxiii)

May you dearly rue it,

Seán Mac Uaithne!

If it was a bribe you wanted

Why not have come to me

And I'd have given you plenty:

A fine long-maned pony

To have sped you away from

Any crowds or strangers

At the first sign of danger;

I'd have given you cattle,

Or sheep when they're lambing,

I'd have seen you well-suited,

And spurred and booted,

Although it would have stuck

In my craw to have looked at you,

Because according to rumour,

You're a spineless wee boor.

(xxxiv)

White-gloved rider!

Since now you are laid low

Rise up to Baldwin,

Of the scrawny mind

And the scrawny body,

And make him pay dearly

For your beloved mare

And for what I must bear.

May his children never blossom!

To Máire I wish no harm,

Although I do not love her,

But my mother bore her

Three seasons in her womb.

(xxxv)

My love deep, deep down!

Your stacks of barley stand

And your cows' yield is good.

But my heart is in a gloom

That all of Munster could not cure

Nor the smiths of Oileán na bhFionn.

Until Art Ó Laoghaire comes once more

There will be no lifting of the sorrow

That has my heart blocked,

Shut utterly off,

Like a chest still locked,

When the key has been lost.

(xxxvi)

You weeping women, hold

Your step out there as one,

While Art Mac Conchubhair calls a round,

Moreover for the poor,

Before he enrols in that school –

To learn no lore or tune,

But to bear the clay and stone.

Critical Commentary

(This was written after the entirety of the proceeding pages, and is intended to be read after them.)

Preamble

I grew up in Donnycarney, a suburb of northside Dublin. James Joyce, in one of the poems in his 1907 collection *Chamber Music*, wrote

> O, it was out by Donnycarney
> When the bat flew from tree to tree
> My love and I did walk together
> And sweet were the words she said to me.

When Joyce wrote those words, Donnycarney was a small country village about four miles from the city centre. And this was how Joyce remembered it almost a decade later in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*:

> Father Conmee, having read his little hours, walked through the hamlet of Donnycarney, murmuring vespers.

It grew as a suburb during the 1930's. My newly married parents, both from rural backgrounds, settled there during the war years, and by the time I was aware of my surroundings in the 1950's, it was part of the spreading city. There was, however, still farmland close by, two large institutional farms, owned respectively by the Christian Brothers and the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity, the latter being part of a campus which also included High Park, one of the now notorious Magdalene Laundries. My childhood self, however, was aware only of the rural, pastoral presence of these institutions, a *rus in urbe* that was a pale reflection of a different sort of landscape for which, I realise retrospectively, I always ached with an intensity inherited from my rural parents.

I should explain why I am beginning my commentary with this biographical information. *The Amergin Step* is a work exploring my imaginative engagement with the place where I have lived for almost a half-century. The first-person mould of that statement – the *my* and *I* of it – is deliberate. When I first mooted the nature of the work to Eibhear Walshe, he suggested that memoir, biographical detail and my world view would become integral to it. I demurred, envisaging the work as being more neutral and impersonal than is suggested by those terms. Of course he was right. The first fifteen or so lines that I wrote – the beginning of the chapter about the Milesian myth – included, without my being conscious of it, my wife, my children, my grandchild, a description of

where my clifftop house is, how long I have lived there, coastal erosion, personal anxiety about climate change and the fact that I had kayaked out to a sea-rock just offshore from our house in order to use it as a physical and imaginative vantage-point. Obvious as this is to me now, full consciousness of this personal aspect of the writing came to me only very gradually, and despite my reluctance to see it. Even more gradual was the realisation that the work should, indeed must, include poems of my own which had, over many years, arisen from frequent but still unconnected and less sustained explorations of the stories that inhere in where I live. During the writing of *The Amergin* Step, I came to realise that the poems were for me an integral part of the story of the place, and that leaving them out – which had seemed something like "decent reticence" – would in fact be a distortion. I had conceived and started on the work as an exploration of two elements: place and imagination. What it developed into was an exploration of the interaction between three elements, the third being myself, albeit in a sometimes fragmentary and tangential way. Hence this brief biographical perspective on the work,

Our house was in a small *cul de sac* of terraced houses, a *sac* the *cul* of which was a high wall that bordered on the convent farm. (A deconstructionist – not me – might find significance in the fact that the same wall was used a *cúl* for the street football games played there, as used to be possible). As far as I recall, the large field on the other side of the wall was generally used for growing barley. Although I lived there until I was twenty-two, I think it's no exaggeration to say that, imaginatively, I had left it for the west coast from early childhood. As I have said, both of my parents were from rural backgrounds. My father grew up in Castletownroche, a north Cork village where his father was a shoemaker. My mother, whose father was employed by the Post Office, was born in Castlebar, Co. Mayo, although the family moved to Nenagh, Co. Tipperary and Charleville, Co. Cork. Like so many others, both of them moved to Dublin to Civil Service jobs in their late teens. Neither of them, I think, ever felt at home in the city. Family outings, especially after we got a car, were almost always an escape from, rather than an embrace of, the city. We used to drive at least as far as the Phoenix Park, which was then at the edge of the city, or Malahide, then a rural seaside village, although woodlands in Co. Meath were where my father felt most at home. Of course many of the boys I went to school with would have had similar family backgrounds. What was different for us were the summer holidays.

My father worked in the Valuation Office, the department of the Civil Service that was tasked with estimating and recording the value of commercial and private property, as well as of agricultural land, all over the country. Newly built or newly renovated houses had to be mapped, inspected, measured and much else besides, so that local authorities knew what annual rates were payable by their owners. This meant that while my father's office was in a lovely old Georgian house

in Ely Place just off St. Stephen's Green in Dublin, he also spent lengthy periods of time in what was called "out the country". Judicious choices of what he called "districts" at particular times meant that he might spend July and August working on the west coast. When he travelled by himself at other times of the year– at first in an old Ford Prefect and later in a Hillman Minx – he would stay in hotels mainly frequented by what were known as "commercial travellers". But in the summer months, when we six children had school holidays, the family would rent a house for up to two months, an expense that was covered by his travelling expenses. So when most of the neighbouring children, or our schoolfriends, were lucky to have a week in Bray or Tramore, or perhaps a fortnight wherever in "the country" their parents were from, our family had up to two months in Connemara, in Donegal or, most often and most memorably, in Kerry. There were long days on the beach, long drives around the Ring of Kerry or the Dingle Peninsula, trips to Fenit and Ballybunion. And there coveted trips "going to work" with my father, driving into farmyards where, even if he was not the most welcome of visitors, he was usually received with the courtesy and curiosity which was normal at the time among the people who lived at the end of small bóithríns that were rarely travelled by cars or even tractors. It was a time before the industrial nature of monoculture flattened the nature of farming. Whereas now farms on the west coast are almost exclusively devoted to the production of beef or lamb, even smaller farms then also produced oats and barley as well as fodder crops, and it was a rare farmyard where you were not greeted by the clucking of hens, the gobbling of turkeys and the grunting of pigs. A donkey, or a horse in more affluent farms, provided transport for people and goods. In July, sweet-smelling haycocks and the horse-drawn floats that carried them home to a barn, made meadows a hive of activity, and plastic bales of silage had not begun to dot the fields and pile up in farmyards. I have no wish to idyllize what I know now to have been a life of much drudgery and poverty, a life which in many cases led only to the emigrant ship. But I remember that when we used to come back after our summer in Kerry, the little front gardens of my suburb seemed patchy and dull, the pavements were hard and uninteresting, and the people passing busily by on those pavements surprised and disappointed me when they didn't return my greetings as the people I met along the roads of Kerry unfailingly did or, more likely, had anticipated mine. I remember my childhood drawings as almost always featuring farmyards, with mountains, cliffs and the sea in the background. I had absorbed the west coast, its landscape and its easy sociability, through the pores of my childhood imagination, and, without being fully aware of it, I constantly yearned for it.

A new dimension to this yearning was added during my teenage years. Language courses in the Gaeltacht have been a sort of rite of passage for many Irish teenagers for many years. In my case the experience was a continuation and a development from my childhood holidays. My siblings and I attended classes during family holidays in An Mhuiríoch in the Corca Dhuibhne Gaeltacht in Kerry, in

Béal Átha an Ghaorthaidh in the Múscraí Gaeltacht in Cork and in An Spidéal in Galway. When I was a little older, I twice attended residential courses in Anagaire in Donegal. So, perhaps unusually, I absorbed a wide if not always deep range of the landscape and dialects of the Gaeltacht, which was linguistically much stronger during the early 1960's than, sadly, it is now. My secondary schooling was at the Irish language Coláiste Mhuire, then in Parnell Square in Dublin. There I further absorbed the Gaelic, Catholic and Nationalist ethos which was the dominant philosophical ethos of the state, in theory if not necessarily in practice. I have to a large extent gradually sloughed off the latter two, intellectually if not necessarily instinctively and emotionally. I still place enormous value – personally and societally – on the Gaelic aspect of that ethos, but I do so in the belief that its identification with the other two aspects has been narrowly limiting and counterproductive as regards its survival and consolidation, within and without the Gaeltacht. It is perhaps just emblematic, but I always regret that Douglas Hyde's seminal 1892 lecture on *The Necessity for De-Anglicizing Ireland* did not instead carry the title *The Necessity for Re-Gaelicizing Ireland*. A lifetime after the formation I have described, I have come to see the whole issue of the Irish language in ecological terms, and I believe that the constitutional and nationalistic terms within which it was approached allowed the state, and the broader society, to pay self-satisfying lip-service to "our native language" without actually taking the persuasive steps necessary to consolidate and increase its use.

But all of that is beyond the scope of this commentary. What I'm trying to do here is to contextualise the interests, intellectual and emotional, which I bring to this work and which, I think, help to explain its motivation and preoccupations. By the end of my schooldays, I had begun to write poetry, usually in Irish. These early efforts were full of cliffs, mountains, lakes and pools and the sea, as well as of deer and hawks and craggy summits. Within long-range hindsight, I can see why I would be so attracted to Amergin, of whom I had never heard, nor would for perhaps ten more years. And of course there was a literary and artistic climate, which I was undoubtedly influenced by, that saw the west of Ireland as being more real, unspoilt and Irish than anywhere else in the country. Think of Yeats's advice to Synge about Aran, the paintings of Paul Henry or Seán Keating, the stories and poems of Patrick Pearse. Think of Liam O'Flaherty or of the Blasket memoirists. The west of Ireland, in Irish or English, had an aura of noble intensity, and its landscapes seemed to mirror this. In my late teens and early twenties, I was captivated by the poetry of the Aran writer Máirtín Ó Direáin, by lines like

> Coinneod féin an t-oileán
> Seal eile i mo dhán,
> Toisc a ionraice atá

Cloch, carraig is trá.

This is how I translate that quatrain, which I would have first read when I was about seventeen:

I will keep my island home
A while still in my poem,
The honesty that I know
Being rock and sand and stone.

A lifetime later, those last two lines, their elemental simplicity, still captivate me. Looking back now, I find an echo of Andrew McNeillie felt when, as an eighteen-year-old far more adventurous than I was, he went to live for a year on Inis Mór, under the influence of Synge. He went there in 1968, and this is how, looking back after more than thirty years in a book called *An Aran Keening*, he describes his younger self:

> My adolescence was waxing at that time and came hand in hand with an addiction to language, glutinous grammar, sinuous sentences, and the physicality of the material world. I got caught like an insect in the sticky web of words, as spun by the poets and poetic writers.

My own hindsight now stretches back more than fifty years, but I can see my adolescent self in McNeillie's recreation of his.

I have given this brief and selective biographical sketch not for any intrinsic interest, but to try to explain where the septuagenarian author of *The Amergin Step*, who has lived most of his life overlooking the location of that step, came from. For many years now, I have not given any sort of intellectual credence to the idealisation of the west, its landscape or culture, but the aesthetic and emotional response I have is not amenable to any intellectual rigour, and, even if it were, I'm far too old to be bothered. And when I open my door and walk to the edge of my clifftop garden, I feel no urge, never mind urgency, to change.

Listening to the Landscape

I have used a biographical sketch to explore how it was that a suburban child grew up with little or no imaginative relationship with the city he was born and raised in, and who had decided from his early teens that he wanted to spend his life on the west coast of Ireland. Serendipitously, Fíona felt the same way, and we ended up in our clifftop house on the edge of Bá na Scealg, or

Ballinskelligs Bay. I now have a lifetime of familiarity with a landscape of the kind I used to almost literally ache for as I grew up in Donnycarney. I never tire of looking at it. But I think I have discovered over that lifetime the importance – and the fascination – of doing more than just *looking* at it.

From the time I embarked on this project, I was determined that the physical landscape of Iveragh was to be of essential importance in *The Amergin Step*, and that it would not be simply a picturesque backdrop or an explanatory context for whatever imaginative creativity – literary, mythological, folkloric or whatever, that I would come across there. Like most people, at least in a conscious way, I had approached landscape in a visual way, and the imaginative engagement with the landscape of the west coast that I earlier described was, at least in the front of my mind, primarily visual. This had been reinforced perhaps by how I had seen so much of it from a car, with stops for photographs or a roadside picnic, and the almost obligatory stops for a "dip" when we came to a beach. In a way, I was feeding image after image into my imagination and memory, images I indeed treasured and by which I was enriched. I have no doubt that, subliminally, I absorbed much more, but, as the term *subliminal* implies, I absorbed it under the threshold of my conscious mind, and it was the visual that openly inhabited my imagination, and for which I was aware that I ached. I hadn't learned to consciously *listen to* place, or indeed to consciously *read* place. In an essay called "The Sense of Place", published in 1982 and based on an earlier lecture, Seamus Heaney put it this way:

> When we go as tourists to Donegal or Connemara or Kerry we go with at best an aesthetic eye, comforting ourselves with the picturesqueness of it all or rejoicing in the fact that it is unspoiled. We will have felt little knowledge of the place, little enough of a sense of wonder or of the tradition. Tory Island, Knocknarea, Slieve Patrick, all of them deeply steeped in associations from the older culture, will not stir us beyond a visual pleasure unless that culture means something to us, unless the features of the landscape are a mode of communion with a something other than ourselves, a something to which we ourselves still feel we might belong.

It is a simple and yet very profound insight, especially for the relatively young man Heaney was when he shared it with an audience in the Ulster Museum in January 1977. The writing of this work is first and foremost an attempt to actively engage with the landscape in which I live as listener and as reader, to attempt 'a mode of communion with a something other than ourselves', to contemplate

the results of that engagement and then to be the intermediary for the expression of that engagement.

But let me be clear: I am no mystic, nor do I believe that the landscape itself has a consciousness, nor that any sort of supernatural or hidden creative force has anything to say to humans. I do not subscribe to theories of ley lines or any other quasi-religious or esoteric belief. Whatever I hear or read in a landscape, I believe to have been invested in that landscape by human beings, myself included. It may have been invested in the landscape by the inhabitants of the place, by visitors to the place, even by people who have never actually been in the physical place. In this latter respect, I think of Wallace Stevens's postcard-and-letter correspondence with Thomas McGreevy, and especially of the wonderful poem "The Irish Cliffs of Moher". This poem, without his ever having visited Ireland, came about as the result of a John Hinde postcard sent to him by John L. Sweeney, the American husband of Máire MacNeill, whose magisterial *The Festival of Lughnasa* was so inspirational to me in listening to the landscape of Drung Hill. In a letter, Stevens wrote:

> Jack Sweeney (the Boston Sweeney) sent me a post-card from County Clare the other day – the worn cliffs towering up over the Atlantic. It was like a gust of freedom, a return to the spacious, solitary world in which we used to exist.

This especially jumped into my mind when I thought about Seamus Heaney, Padraic Fallon and others who wrote about Skellig Michael without ever having been there. I also think of Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, of how his only sea voyage had been a crossing to the continent when he wrote it. But John Livingston Lowes's *The Road to Xanadu* has shown us that Coleridge had voyaged far and wide in his reading, and had so internalised that reading that his masterpiece – my favourite poem, especially as read by Richard Burton – is as convincing and enlightening as if he had spent his whole life at sea.

Perhaps I should invoke one or two other voices. I recall that when I first read Simon Schama's 1995 book *Landscape and Memory*, it crystallised for me what I had only half-absorbed: that landscape is what human beings have made of the raw material of place. Here are a few extracts from the introduction to that book that express more elegantly and succinctly than I could:

> For although we are accustomed to separate nature and human perception into two realms, they are, in fact, indivisible. Before it can ever be a repose for the senses, landscape is a work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock.

Schama's insight that landscape as a function of our minds, in a way that is anterior to our physical perception of its physical character, is exhilarating, as is his insight that 'it is our shaping perception that makes the difference between raw matter and landscape'. And the formative implication inherent in that 'shaping perception' is an integral part of what landscape means to us. The word itself, as Schama points out, came into English towards the end of the sixteenth century from the Dutch *landskip*, 'a unit of human occupation, indeed a jurisdiction'. Even today, our computers will ask us whether we want our photographs printed as *portrait* or *landscape*. In other words to characterise something as a landscape is essentially to describe how we perceive a place rather than to identify a place in an objective way. Schama brings the 'shaping perception' insight further still. We see the physical landscape not just with the eye but with the inner eye of our imagination, an eye that is also informed by the culture in which we live and the culture of those who have gone before us:

> And it is culture, convention, and cognition that makes that design; that invests a retinal impression with the quality we experience as beauty.

This work, I hope, is testament to how the extraordinarily powerful 'retinal impression' of the place where I live has been immeasurably expanded, intensified and deepened by my explorations in the imagination of that place. By now, I trust that it is not necessary to explain that my suggesting that place has an imagination – or a voice, or a soul – is purely metaphorical, and refers only to human imaginative investment of all sorts in that place. If that makes me a materialist, then I am a materialist.

There is another aspect of Schama's introduction that, when I read it more than twenty years ago, helped me to clarify a new aspect of my own relationship with place in general, and in particular with the place where I live. The consciousness that environmental concerns had developed an urgency that went far beyond the simplicities of "preservation" and "conservation" for essentially aesthetic and recreational reasons, had become part of public discourse. There was now an awareness that environmental degradation was a measurable and even imminent threat to human survival on the planet. In 2003 Fíona and myself spent ten days walking and camping in Greenland in the company of an archaeologist. It was extraordinarily stimulating, even magical. We had never seen, for example, icefloes floating nearby. Unzipping our tent in the dazzlingly bright morning I could appreciate the accuracy – derived only from his reading – of Coleridge's

And ice, mast-high, came floating by,
As green as emerald.

At night, hearing the explosive, thundering noise of an iceberg toppling on its side, I could recall other lines:

The ice was here, the ice was there,
The ice was all around:
It crack'd and growl'd, and roar'd and howl'd,
Like noises in a swound!

I wrote my own poems, almost all in Irish, arising from this trip. Ten or fifteen years before, I probably would have written lyrically and uncomplicatedly, about the experience. But now, as well as celebrating the beauty of the icebergs, my poems were infused with the ominous knowledge of the fragility of what I was privileged to see. I wrote of glaciers calving prematurely, of the *aisling gheal* (bright vision) around me and the *aisling ghéar* (distressing vision) I knew underlay it. I wrote a villanelle about a new global flooding, of biblical proportions but of human origin. I'll quote a stanza that I think is relevant to whatever environmental belief is to be found in *The Amergin Step*:

Goin croí na cruinne, agus fágfar í gan trua.
Meileann oighearshruth go mall, ach meileann go mín réidh.
Fillfidh ár bhfeall orainn, mall nó luath.

I translate this as

Wound the world's heart, and she will no longer rue
The glacier grinding slowly, but grinding to the bone.
Our broken faith will turn on us, late or soon.

The gendering of "the world" is grammatical in the original Irish; it was a choice in the translation. The *Gaia* concept of James Lovelock, the landscape-forming *Cailleach* of the Gaelic tradition and other earthwoman figures lie behind the choice. But more fundamental than the question of gender is the idea that humankind wounding the earth is humankind wounding itself.

When Amergin identifies himself with his surroundings rather than simply claiming them, he offers us an empathetic, non-exploitative and sustainable way of relating to our physical world. If we

imagine – and I emphasise again that I am talking about purely imaginative investment in our physical environment – that our physical world is a sentient part of ourselves, and if we act as far as possible in the light of that willed belief, then what seem merely objective and somewhat removed scientific conclusions about environmental damage, become a matter of felt pain, a pain to which our instincts and traditions urge us to put an end. In simple terms, we need to personify our surroundings, give them a persona within our society. And just as a person we value is infinitely more than the sum of that person's physical presence and characteristics, our imagined persona for the earth must be far more than the physical attributes of the earth. We need to listen to our surroundings, talk to our surroundings, walk with our surroundings and be curious about one another's seed, breed and generation. It is the difference between knowing somebody to see, and knowing somebody to talk to. The Chinese-American writer Yi Fu Tuan established currency for the term *topophilia*, which had been coined by W.H. Auden in relation to the poetry of John Betjeman. In his 1974 book of the same name, Yi Fu Tuan differentiated between *perception* and *attitude*. Perception is primarily biological and practical. Attitude, on the other hand

> is primarily a cultural stance, a position one takes vis-à-vis the world. It has greater stability than perception, and is formed of a long succession of perceptions, that is, of experience. Infants perceive but have no well-formed attitude other than that given by biology. Attitudes imply experience and a certain firmness of interest and value.

He goes on to define what is, I think, a useful term:

> *Topophilia* is the affective bond between people and place or setting. Diffuse as a concept, vivid and concrete as personal experience, topophilia is the recurrent theme of the book.

That 'affective bond between people and place' is also a central theme of *The Amergin Step*. The work, I feel, is the result of my learning to converse with place. And because my primary area of interest is creative literature in the broadest sense, this is what place and myself usually converse about, and I have come to believe that this aspect of the persona of my surroundings must be cherished and nurtured along with the physical health of those surroundings.

Simon Schama, in 1995, felt the need to justify his concern to explore the relationship between myth and landscape when the critical and urgent nature of the environmental crisis we face was becoming evident. Here is his justification:

> For what it is worth, I unequivocally share the dismay at the ongoing degradation of the planet, and much of the foreboding about the possibilities of its restoration to good health. The point of *Landscape and Memory* is not to contest the reality of this crisis. It is, rather, by revealing the richness, antiquity, and complexity of our landscape tradition, to show just how much we stand to lose. Instead of assuming the mutually exclusive character of Western culture and nature, I want to suggest the strength of the links that have bound them together.
>
> That strength is often hidden beneath layers of the commonplace. So *Landscape and Memory* is constructed as an excavation below our conventional sight-level to recover the veins of myth and memory that lie beneath the surface.

That last sentence has always stuck resonantly in my consciousness. My work, however, is less myth-focused; it certainly explores myth, but it also deals with relatively recent folklore, literature in the conventional sense, travel writing and other areas, all with the same intention.

The American sinologist, poet and translator, David Hinton, expresses similar sentiments about the relationship between landscape and the imagination. In his book *Hunger Mountain*, a physical and philosophical exploration of a mountain in Vermont near where he lives, he also challenges contemporary Western attitudes to landscape and nature. Referring to the conceptual framework he discovered in Chinese philosophy and poetry, he writes of

> …. a primal cosmology oriented around earth's mysterious generative force, a cosmology whose deep sources in the oral tradition may well be female. And it is what we now call "deep ecology", meaning it weaves human consciousness into the "natural world" at the most fundamental level. In fact, the West's separation of "human" from "nature" is entirely foreign to it.

And in a sentence which, in spite of its simplifications, I would be happy to adopt as a mantra in relation to the writing of this work, he says:

> To walk through a landscape is to walk through a culture, for it is culture that determines what we are and what a landscape is for us.

An té atá siúlach, bíonn sé scéalach

The *seanfhocal* or proverb which I have used as a title for this section means, literally, that someone who walks has stories to tell. In general, I would guess, it was used to suggest that someone who travels brings news with them – *scéal* means news as well as story in the ordinary sense – but in writing and researching *The Amergin Step*, I decided to adopt the saying's literal sense as a *modus operandi*. I also had in mind the Latin phrase *solvitur ambulando*, which is attributed, perhaps randomly, to St. Augustine, and which suggests that things can be resolved by walking. I came across it many years ago when I read Bruce Chatwin's *The Songlines*; it has also been invoked by travel writers such as Paul Theroux and Patrick Leigh Fermor. Their writing, of course, travelled far and wide, while almost of mine explored a small area within a twenty-five-kilometre radius of where I have lived for almost half a century. Furthermore, I was writing not about unfamiliar places, but about places I had visited and revisited more times than I could remember. So perhaps I should explain further

The work, insofar as it is possible to categorise it, is a personal exploration of aspects of the creative imagination associated with the tip of the Iveragh peninsula. Obviously, one of these three elements is abstract. The other two – the landscape and myself – are physical elements. I wanted to dig into the abstract with the physical as present and immediate as I could make it. After all, the imaginative abstractions I wanted to explore were brought into being by physical beings in the physical landscape. What I wanted to find and examine was an amalgam of all three – interdependent and indivisible. About twenty-five years ago, when I was beginning to absorb archaeology into my writing, I wrote a poem that, I realise with hindsight, was exploring this approach and setting out a metaphorical stall as regards the methodology I have used for *The Amergin Step*, even if the work involves no physical digging whatsoever:

Digging

Remembering from the beginning
that digging will discover nothing
unless the ground has first
been probed in the imagination,

sink yourself deep into it,
absorbing seed and pollen,
the insinuations of clay.

Below the tangle of roots,

be alert for voices,
a hint of ashes or smoke,
the stench of midden
and always, the hammering of stone.

Follow the incense of ceremony,
a strain of bone flutes.
Be yourself companion to
bodysmells of fear, and love.

Only then open your eyes
and mark out your site
with appropriate measurements
methodically, square by square.

Extract and piece together
the random shards you had sensed.
There will be a tentative, half glimpsed
outline of bowl or amphora

whose fragments and splinters,
aching for vanished completeness,
can fuse into something
discovering the shape of itself.

Much later, I came to know the work of Robert Macfarlane, whose writing I have found enormously stimulating. I do not share his aptitude for adventurous and physically taxing exploration of place, but from his first book, *Mountains of the Mind*, I have been fascinated by his work, especially by how he is so aware of the veins of culture and memory (to adapt the phrase used by Simon Schama) that lie beneath the surface of landscape. His 2015 book, *Landmarks*, an invaluable compendium of landscape lore and vocabulary from more than a dozen various languages and dialects of these islands, used a quotation from Norman MacCaig, a poet who was highly sensitive to landscape and

nature, as an epigraph for the book, and it is worth quoting here again. Having evoked a maritime landscape, MacCaig makes a plea:

> Messages everywhere. Scholars, I plead with you,
> Where are your dictionaries of the wind, the grasses?
>
> (*from* By the Graveyard, Luskentyre)

The Amergin Step is hugely indebted to scholars, and while it involved much reading and research, I was determined that the wind, the grasses, the bogs, the summits, the paths, the islands and all the other physical attributes of place should be as integral to its writing as the library or the internet. Mcfarlane's own author's note to his 2012 *The Old Ways*, an exploration of old pathways across land, sea, mountain and bog, also chimes with what I wanted to do in this work:

> This book could not have been written by sitting still. The relationship between paths, walking and the imagination is its subject, and much of its thinking was therefore done – was only possible – while on foot……. It tells the story of walking a thousand miles or more along old ways in search of a route to the past, only to find myself delivered again and again to the contemporary. It is an exploration of the ghosts and voices that haunt ancient paths, of the tales that tracks keep and tell, of pilgrimages and trespass, of songlines and their singers and of the strange continents that exist within countries. Above all, this is a book about people and place: about walking as a reconnoitre inwards, and the subtle ways in which we are shaped by the landscapes through which we move.

Although old pathways were just part of what I was exploring, and although I was already very familiar with almost all the places I wanted to write about, I decided not to put pen to paper or finger to keyboard until I had visited and revisited them, specifically with the writing in mind. Whether it was my own imaginative creations or those of others – textual or otherwise – I wanted place to occupy its own space in that creation, to be an inherent and indispensable constituent of the trinity of elements to which I earlier referred.

And, with the exception of the chapter about Sceilg Mhichíl, for reasons I have explained in the text, I followed that methodology. The very first piece I drafted – the Carraig Éanna section in the Milesian Footprints chapter – was begun after I kayaked out to the rock, bringing my phone with me as being to easiest way to make notes on its voice recorder. I knew before I went there what texts and associations I wanted to write about, but I had no idea – indeed was quite apprehensive – about

what in Irish is called *an cur chuige* (meaning actually getting down to something). After landing on the rock and pulling up the kayak, I just sat there for an hour, letting the surrounding sights, sounds and smells wash over me, and gradually assert themselves into my consciousness. At the same time the literary and folkloric associations were also washing over me, mediated into a more immediate and perceptible context by my surroundings. My house and the nearby village, the shoreline and cliff, the mountains beyond all that were all visible from a different perspective, something that helped me shift my mental perspectives. I became intensely aware of geological time, for example, of rock formation, of glacial deposits. I became aware that I could see the homeplaces of two men by the name of Seán Ó Conaill: one an early twentieth century *seanchaí*, the other a seventeenth century poet and historian whose family was dispossessed by the Cromwellian plantation and who wrote about the history of Ireland until the Cromwellian conquest in an extraordinarily vivid and powerful poem. I remembered that, the best part of two centuries later, a descendant of the same family became known as the Liberator because of his extraordinary campaign to empower the dispossessed in Ireland. So historical time also washed over me. Contemporary time reasserted itself in the sound of tractors and, unpleasantly, in the sight and loud noise of helicopters ferrying in the super-rich to play golf on vandalised stretches of the landscape. All of this informed the writing of the chapter, as well as grounding and contextualising my subsequent drafting of it. I still recall the abrasive texture of the tiny mussels and barnacles on the rock, the rank smell I associate with seals and the surprisingly loud splashes they sometimes made when they almost flounced back underwater. As I sat on the rock, my senses were quickened in conjunction with my imagination.

When I was assembling material for this section, I came across a quotation from Nan Shepherd's wonderful book about the Cairngorms, *The Living Mountain*, which I had read with great pleasure some years before. It was a quotation used by Robert Macfarlane (who championed Shepherd's book back to public notice) as an epigraph for *The Old Ways*. It reads 'my eyes were in my feet'. Curious as to its context, I sought it out in Nan Shepherd's book. She is describing a night-time walk in a place familiar to her:

> The heather through which the path runs was very black, the path perceptibly paler, clumps and ridges of heather between the ruts showing dark against the stone and beaten earth. But it amazed me to find how unfamiliar I was with that path. I had followed it times without number, yet now, when my eyes were in my feet, I did not know its bumps and holes, nor where the trickles of water crossed it, nor where it rose and fell. It astonished me that my memory was so much in the eye and so little in the feet, for I am not awkward in the dark

and walk easily and happily in it. Yet here I am stumbling because the rock has made a hump in the ground. To be a blind man, I see, needs application.

It chimed, not just for its awareness of how the different senses play a part in our perception and memory of place, but because it reminded me of a poem I wrote following a trekking holiday in the Atlas Mountains of Morocco. Our group was guided by a young Berber man, whose empathetic relationship with the people and places we walked through had embedded itself in my mind. I cannot, I'm afraid, aspire to the level of natural empathy to place that he seemed to me to possess, but I offer the poem as a – perhaps idealised – portrait of how I would like to approach my exploration of the place I inhabit and how it has been integrated into the human imagination now and in the past.

Navigator

for Nabyl Boudrouz

He carries no compass, recognising no need
For an arrow quivering northward from his palm.
Nor does he feel any call for precise coordinates
Beamed from satellites to tell him where he is.

The pattern of the stars is as fixed in his mind
As the junipers that doggedly clamp the embrace
Of their roots into these scree slopes, whose steepness
In the darkest night his feet can read like contours.

By day it's easier. The high sun makes everything clear,
A clarity so insistent that sometimes he must escape it.
Now it's the quick scurry of the lizard that informs him,
And the circles woven by falcons in the blanketing sky.

Sometimes his routes are traced along the lined faces
Of the old men along the way who pour him tea;
A stone stair made the year the gorges were flooded,
A dry stream that leads by midday to the shade of figs.

Thunderstorms among the high peaks, he knows,
Will tumble a wind withershins across the plain below,
But by daybreak the river surging through the gorge
Will have said its piece, and calmed, and moved on.

At times he navigates by landmarks he cannot see
But has heard about from people he has not met:
A foreboding of illness or death along that gorge,
The promise of fresh water below a distant overhang.

He knows winds by their smell, by their texture:
The dust-bearing summer wind that clogs the nose,
The spring southerlies beloved of the high villages
And the iron wind that nomads say can crack a bone.

And always remember, he says, to look for droppings
On any likely path. The goat's quick path may lead you
To dark, blank walls. But the path slowly trodden by mules
Will always lead to campfires, stories, a place to sleep.

Zooming In

It is time perhaps, to bring into closer focus some of the places which are the constituent locations for this work's tripartite engagement with some of the landscape and literature of Iveragh. As I have said, it was when the idea of listening to place (and its multiple imaginings) crystallised in my mind that I began to consider this book. It was one of those realisations that afterwards seem so self-evident that you are amazed not to have always been conscious of it. I sometimes think that I have always been aware of it at a subconscious or subliminal level, but that the rational side of my mind put barriers in my way. It was liberating to at last willingly suspend my disbelief – to paraphrase Coleridge – and to enter into those long-delayed conversations.

One of the reasons I chose the site at Killabuonia for the prologue to the work – a prologue which was the last section to be written – is that it is the place that most springs to mind when I think about listening to the landscape. On the very first page, I wrote:

> And I come to this place in search of that perspective and focus because it is one of the places where this work began to germinate, and I began to somewhat reluctantly conclude that what was germinating would not find expression in the poems – of whatever length – that I have been writing for many years.

The section itself tells how I discovered the visual triangulation of the landscape by the monastic communities who, over undocumented centuries, inhabited Skellig Michael, Killabuonia and Loher. One settlement lies about twelve kilometres out to sea; the other two are close to the coastline of two different bays, and are about twenty kilometres apart and are, in theory but not in any practical sense, just intervisible through a small gap in the hills. Skellig is clearly visible from both mainland monasteries, and the oratories of both are aligned towards it, but, again, the monastic settlement is visible only in a theoretical sense. This realisation filled up my imagination. I had known for years about the winter solstice alignment of the Bronze Age stone alignment at Eightercua, and had written poems grounded in that knowledge. But, perhaps unimaginatively and certainly unreasonably, all of that had before seemed distant, inexplicable, legendary rather than historical. Now it seemed that figures who moved in and out of documented history were trying to tell me something. Of course their message, if you want to be rational about it, was probably intended by them to be contemporary: it was to tell themselves, the wider society in which they lived and the supernatural being they worshipped, that the landscape as far as they could see was a landscape infused with Christianity. But it is also reasonable to presume everlasting intent, and to that extent, they were also addressing me. It became important to me to listen, not so much for the content of what those monastic communities were saying, but because they chose the landscape itself – the island I could see, the boggy hillside on which I walked, the sea and cliffs and mountains that surrounded me – as the medium of communication. This was a *pietas* to which I wished to listen and with which I wished to converse, and this wish was the seed of *The Amergin Step*.

The physical texture of this site had to become a primary text for me to explore. So while I wrote the work's prologue, "Lines of Vision and a Stone Butterfly", as if it arose out of one particular visit, in fact I made a number visits, usually by myself. And there were always the accretionary memories and associations of previous visits over many years, sometimes with groups, sometimes with house visitors. But for the purpose of writing this introductory section, I came with the express purpose of absorbing the physicality of the landscape with which I wanted to converse. So when I made the visits expressly for the writing of this work, I brought my phone as a voice recorder, preferring the immediacy and spontaneity of the notes I could make with this to written notes. And, if I were to be completely honest, my unsystematic approach to writing means that I almost never

take notes and, if I do, I lose them. So my phone was better for a few reasons. In any case, this method of absorbing the physical texture of the site gave rise to this sort of detail:

> I stumble and squelch through some uneven, waterlogged ground to where a few stone slabs are scattered near a pool somewhat bigger than the others nearby. This is *Tobar Buaine*, Buonia's Well, a holy well now sadly choked by vegetation, and waterlogged because its outflow is blocked, effectively making it inaccessible.

There was much more, most of which did not find its way into the finished work. I remember lying flat among the bracken and furze around the doorway of the oratory, trying to imagine myself into the heavy work of lifting and positioning the very large stone slabs used in its corbelled construction. I wanted to hear the grunts and heaves of the builder-monks before I listened to their sung prayers. I frequently ran my fingers along the grooves of the simple cross that generations of pilgrims had carved into a slab near the tent shrine and into another near the holy well. It was like the way practitioners of meditation tend to ground themselves before entering into a meditative state, mentally acknowledging and tracing their bones and sinews and muscles in their immediate surroundings, and acknowledging also their sensual apprehension of those surroundings. It was after such groundings over numerous visits that I would allow myself to enter into a more speculative state, to suspend my disbelief long enough the hear the voices of believers, to read the stories told by others who had spent time here.

I was well advanced into the writing of the work when I read *Experiments on Reality*, a book of essays that was Tim Robinson's final book, published in 2019, the year before his death. An extract from the preface resonated strongly with me, perhaps with a more adamant note than I would myself sound, yet one that I can respond to:

> My focus is, as always, on the multitudinous ways in which our physical bodies relate to the physical universe. This commitment to material nature in its wondrous plenitude encourages me to reappropriate terms, themes and tones long regarded as the property of religion, and dares me to denounce supernaturalism as blasphemy.

While I'm quoting from Tim Robinson's book, I'd like to quote further, because he so eloquently – and with the enviable expertise of a naturalist and ecologist – expresses much of an understanding I have been struggling towards. Since I am talking about my treatment of a site of which a holy well

was, for most people in recent centuries, the most important element, I take particular delight in these extracts, which come in the final essay:

> What might a cult of place entail? One could take guidance from the ancient cult of holy wells ……. The cult involves visiting, thoughtfulness, ritual handling of pebbles, water, flowers – as well as features we can do without: superstition, penitential barefootedness, repetitive mumblings. A secular version might call forth an awareness of the place's constitution, the causal net that brought it into existence, from cosmic origins to the casual touch of local microhistory. On such occasions the basic act of attention that creates a place out of a location would be renewed, enhanced by whatever systems of understanding we can muster, from the mathematical to the mythological, by the passion of poetry, or by the simple enjoyment of the play of light on it.

Robinson goes on to say that in his descriptions and evocations of various places in Connemara, he has

> … spontaneously drawn on imagery of pilgrimage and shrine. Realizing that the mindful seeking-out of place has been the half-subconscious drive of my practice in all of these years of mapping and topographical writing, I can hardly disown this terminology now, unbeliever though I be. And since for centuries the material world was seen as a quarry of metaphors to describe the glories of a spiritual world, that gorgeous structure of the imagination should in return provide the liturgy and ceremonial we need for a praiseful approach to the places that glorify the here below.

I cannot improve on that, except perhaps to suggest that synthesis, as well as Robinson's more binary approach of thesis and antithesis, can allow for a fruitful and enriching engagement with place. Wordsworth was intensely and even hungrily aware of the natural physical world. Yet even his early atheistic radicalism allowed him moments of insight such as this:

> And I have felt
> A presence that disturbs me with the joy
> Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
> Of something far more deeply interfused,
> Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,

And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.

The bathwater of religious belief need not – indeed should not – be thrown out once the baby reaches the age of reason and begins to walk on its own two feet. The last time I was at Killabuonia was around the winter solstice of December 2020, when I was investigating a hunch that the solstice sunset might feature in the architecture of the monastery, as indeed it does on Inis Uasal and at nearby Cill Rialaig. My hunch was not borne out, but the sight of a fiery sunset plunging into the sea just a few degrees south of Sceilg Mhichíl brought the lines I've just quoted to mind, and, despite an icy north-easterly down from the hill, I felt elevated. The elevation was not a product of the 'blasphemous supernaturalism' that Tim Robinson very reasonably abhorred, but a reverential concelebration with the imagined whispered prayers that I clearly heard from monks offering reverence to what they imagined as the creative force behind that sunset. It was a moment that was all at once rooted and physically palpable, as well as universal and deeply spiritual. It encapsulated the kind of conversation I wished to have with place. It was also emotionally and aesthetically liberating, allowing me to invoke the vocabulary and emotions of the religious belief I was born into, but which my rational side has long since discarded. I used to be an altar server, very often a thurifer, and incense still lingers in the passages of the memory.

Forgotten Paths, Forgotten Poems

I began my chapter on *An Glór Conallach* on the old "butter road" above Derrynane, the place so much associated with Daniel O'Connell, not only nowadays as a national monument but, during his own lifetime, in newspaper reports, travellers' stories, contemporary folklore and songs and other sources. Derrynane House is where I find O'Connell the historical personage and the most celebrated member of an extraordinary Iveragh family. But it was along that old roadway, now rejuvenated as the Kerry Way walking route, that I heard his people shouting – or, in the case of Tomás Rua Ó Súilleabháin, singing – his praises. Later in the chapter, I walked paths described by his daughter, imagining his poet grandmother and his poet aunt in the same places. There is something about routes travelled by the dead that makes those dead easier to imagine as the living, to imagine them as present, in the present. When the great Somhairle MacGill-Eain, in his masterpiece "Hallaig", imagined the dead as the living – 'chunnacas na mairbh beò' – he imagined them most

vividly walking the old moss-covered roads, 'keeping up the endless walk' along those disappearing roads. Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, in a poem called "Old Roads" written almost a half-century ago, also imagined the dead as living along these old ways:

> Missing from the map, the abandoned roads
> reach across the mountain, threading into
> clefts and valleys, shuffle between thick
> hedges of flowery thorn.
> The grass flows into tracks of wheels,
> mowed evenly by the careful sheep;
> drenched, it guards the gaps of silence
> only trampled on the pattern day.
>
> And if, an odd time, late
> at night, a cart passes
> splashing in a burst stream, crunching bones,
> the wavering candle hung by the shaft
> slaps light against a single gable
> catches a flat tombstone
> shaking a nervous beam as the hare passes.
>
> Their arthritic fingers
> their stiffening grasp cannot
> hold long on the hillside –
> slowly the old roads lose their grip.

Audaciously, perhaps, I like to think that what I am trying to do with *The Amergin Step*, and especially in this chapter, is to find voices to fill those 'gaps of silence', to find my way into the beliefs that lay behind 'the pattern day', to strengthen the arthritic grip of those old roads so that the voices of those who travelled them can be as audible as the voices of those who today travel along other routes towards the same places.

In focusing this section on aspects of my exploration of the landscape around Derrynane and the imaginative expression of generations of the O'Connell family, I hope to avoid repeating too much of the general principles I have already written about, which also apply here, and I'll try to

trace some paths, literal and literary, which I was lucky enough to stumble across while researching and visiting for what I had thought would be a much less extensive chapter. Primary research, in either the landscape itself or the literature that grew out of it, had not been part of my intention. But I was lucky enough to have discovered – or, more properly, again uncovered – a physical pathway around Derrynane and, in a related uncovering, a poet whose work has largely disappeared from biographical and literary view. These uncoverings were more fortuitous than intentional, but I think it is fair to say that they arose from my determination that my primary place of research would be the location rather than the library, and that the function of the library would be, to use Tim Robinson's terms, to help turn location into place.

The reader will remember that, in early March of 2020, in what I thought at the time was just a pre-emptive visit before tourists would begin to crowd into Derrynane House, I arranged to spend a day by myself in the house. As it turned out, I was just in time: a week or so later, Covid 19 closed off access to Derrynane House for an extended period. *Ach sin scéal eile.* That particular day, I had the great privilege of spending a day absorbing what I could of the house, my phone with me as an *aide-mémoire*, sifting and reflecting on what I absorbed. I had been in the house many times, sometimes as part of a guided group, sometimes with friends, sometimes with Fíona, years ago with our children. But the time and space this solitary day-long visit gave me was invaluable. I went halfway up the stairs at least half-a-dozen times, to examine and re-examine the sad but dignified portrait of Ellen O'Connell in old age. I lingered in the Liberator's study long enough to realise how immediate was the presence of the sand-dunes and the rocky hills of Lamb's head through the high, south-facing windows. The numerous references in his correspondence from Derrynane to how much he loved the landscape of Iveragh were reinvigorated for me. Upstairs in the drawing room, I remembered with great pleasure how, about 1980 when our children were young, the kindly caretaker, Michael Maher, who then lived with his wife Mary in the old living quarters (which have recently been rather neutrally modernised), used to raise the velvet rope, and letting them sit in the Liberator's ceremonial oak chair, and used also raise the hinged top of its companion table, whispering that it was especially for them and that they mustn't tell anybody. God knows how many children enjoyed the same secret privilege. During my lunch-break that day of privilege for me, I saw Michael and Mary's grave near the western wall of the new graveyard on Abbey Island, and I remembered their kindness and gentleness.

There are numerous aspects of the absorptions of that day (and others) that I could write about, but I'll concentrate on one, which is very much bound up with Ellen O'Connell, eldest daughter of the Liberator, of whom there are three portraits in Derrynane House which I have written about in the *An Glór Conallach* chapter. Because I had so much time on that privileged day,

and because there was nobody looking over my shoulder, I did something which now seems inexplicable to me not to have done before. I carefully read the information cards beside the portraits. What to me is the least interesting of the three portraits carries this caption:

> Daniel O'Connell's eldest daughter, Ellen (1805-1883) is shown here in middle age. Her husband, Christopher Fitzsimon, was one of her father's closest political allies. She was well educated, spoke several languages, and enjoyed scholarly pursuits. In 1863 she published a volume of poetry entitled *Darrynane in Eighteen Hundred and Thirty-Two and Other Poems.*

Two things struck me. Over many years, albeit in an unsystematic fashion, I had read a lot of biographical material about the Liberator, particularly about his life in Derrynane. But I had been completely unaware of Ellen's poetry, much less that it had a particular focus on Derrynane, which, I reminded myself, would have been an ancestral and a holiday home rather than her residence. Later, at home, searches through the indexes of books on O'Connell confirmed Ellen's extraordinarily low posthumous profile. The other thing that struck me was the title of the collection, the very specific date of the title poem of a book that was not published until thirty-one years after that date. I had no idea about what I would discover, but listening now to the recorded notes I made at the time, I hear myself saying 'I must follow this up, and see is there something I will be able to use'. This following up was to lead me along a number of paths, physical and metaphorical. There was the path – tantalisingly fragmentary – of Ellen's life as a poet. The most recent entry for her as a poet in a standard reference book that I happened to come across was in *The Poets of Ireland: a biographical and bibliographical dictionary of Irish writers of English verse*, by D.J. O'Donoghue, which was first published in 1893-5. I have written in the *An Glór Conallach* chapter about my regret that her path as a poet seemed to have been one whose promise was unfulfilled, and about my puzzlement about the neglect of the title-poem of her book, a poem which has been, to my mind, very unjustly neglected, from both a literary and a historical perspective. I have written also about the walks and paths I discovered as a result of a close reading of the poem. I don't propose to go over that ground again, except to emphasise that it was groundwork in a literal sense that was the basis for discoveries which I have personally found fascinating and which I believe are of some significance. As a footnote, I'm glad to say that I recently accompanied a surveyor, commissioned by the OPW, along "The Meadow Walk" which I traced through Ellen's poem and O'Neill Daunt's memoir. The hope is that the walk will be reconstituted as a matter of historical interest and as a visitor attraction. I take satisfaction from that practical application of my explorations, as I do from the archaeological reorientation that happened as a result of the discovery by Fíona and myself of the broken cross slab

on Abbey Island, a discovery made while we were retracing Ellen's walk there. The satisfaction lies, I think, in the feeling that my engagement with place, with the imaginative expression of place, has resulted in some small way in the reconstitution of elements of that place, of what, to again use Tim Robinson's terms, makes a place of a location.

Placenames and other language issues

If the Iveragh landscape could speak, it would speak most naturally and most volubly in Irish. Until quite recent times, in many cases until well into the twentieth century, the same was true for most of its inhabitants, especially in the western tip of the peninsula which is the context of my explorations. Today, the opposite is true, in spite of the constitutional status of the language or of the official designation or boundaries of An Ghaeltacht. I regret this situation, both personally and as a long-time member of the community of Uíbh Ráthach, and I applaud and support the efforts of those who strive to arrest and, as far as possible, reverse this huge sociocultural loss. To some extent, *The Amergin Step* is a contribution in this direction.

At the risk of being repetitious, however, I stress that my concerns in this area are ecological, cultural and inclusive, rather than driven by the nationalistic and binary linguistic climate in which I grew up, a climate which encouraged an exclusivity of choice, the longer-term effects of which are now clear. I don't want to spend time on this, but let me cite just one recent example. A number of years ago, the residents of Dingle were told that the name, a name by which some of their families had known the town for hundreds of years, no longer existed. It was to be called, exclusively, An Daingean, because it was within the boundaries of An Ghaeltacht. The pushback against this by some and the counter-pushback by others led to great controversy in Corca Dhuibhne, with the people of the town being called "síol Chromail" (the seed of Cromwell) on one occasion, those who wish to speak Irish being called "spud gobblers" on another, while others still saw the issue in purely touristic and commercial terms. It was a depressing and polarising episode. I understand the need for recognition and legal status for a language, especially a threatened language. I understand the historical factors and the imperialistic monoglot attitudes which led to widespread abandonment of Irish, especially during the nineteenth century. I understand the political accretions around terms like native language, mother-tongue, national language, minority language and many more. I understand the necessity for urgent interventional measures if Irish is to be preserved, let alone revived. But the fact is that English is, by now, an indigenous language in Ireland, even in the strongest Gaeltacht areas, for many years. There is no such thing today – nor has there been for at least a century – as a monoglot Irish speaker. This is not a cultural impoverishment. But there is a huge population of monoglot English speakers, and this certainly is a cultural impoverishment, one

which can and should be tackled. The cultural ecology of an area, and consequently of its inhabitants and visitors, is something to be treasured and widely accessible. And, for the area which is the context for this work, Irish is an enormous part of that ecology. To ignore it would be to close our eyes, ears and minds to whole areas of the imagination of the place. Michael Cronin, in his 2019 book, *Irish and Ecology*, has written:

> An ecological ethics based on appreciating, tolerating and accepting strangeness is, in many respects, a more realistic and more useful approach to Irish-language learning for the majority population in Ireland than the older, nationalist trope of a sudden, effortless conversion. What is more, this necessary humility faced with the unfamiliar becomes an ecological virtue as we unlearn many of the prejudices we had about the environment and come to a new understanding of it through the uncanny, long-term perspective of the language. Irish forces us to look at our surroundings anew and it is precisely the need to be jolted out of our complacency which becomes a pressing necessity in the midst of a climate crisis.

There is much to ponder in this, and while I might have reservations about some aspects of what Cronin says, it is undoubtedly true that the 'older, nationalist trope' has lost all relevance in relation to the preservation of either the Irish language or the physical and cultural environment in which it once flourished.

My engagement with the imagination of the place is informed by the distinction made by Tim Robinson between questions of language and The Language Question. When Robinson went to live on Aran, he knew no Irish. Research for his cartographical and consequent toponymic work led to him realising that he could not engage with the place without engaging with the language. In his 2011 Parnell lecture in Cambridge, he said that, ideally,

> … a placename summarizes the place's attributes and origins, asserts its excellencies and rights to respect. Therefore the handing down and rehearsal of its placename is a place's first defence against neglect or exploitation, against its being regarded as a mere shortcut to some other more profitable place. Among the historical roots of Ireland's carelessness of place is the retreat of its language and the accompanying anglicization of its placenames, which have been defaced, rendered dumb and sometimes reduced to the ridiculous. To undo a little of this damage has been for me, an Englishman, a work of reparation.

It seems to me that this is something that nobody, whatever their view of "The Language Question", could reasonably demur from. And I would broaden it from Robinson's focus on placenames to include folklore, song, literature, mythology and many other expressions of the imagination of place. The creative imagination of the Iveragh landscape cannot begin to be absorbed without being open to the language of Uíbh Ráthach, the language in which Amergin/Aimhirghin/Amairgen (English/Modern Irish/Medieval Irish) was imagined to have taken his step ashore and in which an anonymous scribe wrote his imagined incantation. But neither can contemporary reality be ignored. Tim Robinson recognised this when he prefaced the piece I have just quoted with this clear-eyed qualifying clause:

> To idealize a linguistic situation that in reality is often ravaged and corrupted ……

Recognition of this reality is a necessary step towards reparation.

Accordingly, I have tried to recognise the real as well as the ideal. This is why I have not tried to be consistent or rigid about placenames, for example. I write about Cúm a' Chiste and Coomakista, about Cill Ó Buaine and Killabuonia, about Drung Hill and Cnoc na Droinge. I have written about Skellig and Sceilg, as well as about Skellig Michael and Sceilg Mhichíl. This is because I know and use these forms of the name, as I know and use the other names I have mentioned. I think about them bilingually, I talk to others about them bilingually. They are real names grounded in previous and current usage. But, where possible, I provide the meaning of the name, a meaning which, it must be said, is not always clear, even to fluent Irish speakers. (In this I am guided by experts such as Breandán Ó Cíobháin, the four volumes of whose *Toponomia Hiberniae*, which are all centred on the Iveragh peninsula, are inspirational.) I should say in passing that while Brian Friel's *Translations* is a wonderful play, one which deals sensitively and powerfully with the cultural calamity that the loss of Irish as a community language during the nineteenth century represented, a loss which may yet prove to be total, it should not be seen or read as being historically factual, or an accurate representation of the methodology or the personnel of the Ordnance Survey, which included such scholars as John O'Donovan and Eugene O'Curry. This is something which Friel himself accepted in a discussion with J.H. Andrews, the author of *A Paper Landscape: the Ordnance Survey in Nineteenth-Century Ireland*, and very basic research will establish that anglicized placenames were on maps, in documents and commonly used for centuries before the Ordnance Survey of the 1830's.

When I say that my thinking about the Irish language is primarily ecological, I want to emphasise that I do not subscribe to the theory that Irish is inherently a more eco-friendly language

than English, a theory that has recently gained quite a following. I find it unconvincing, even soft-centred. The second page of Robert Macfarlane's *Landmarks* contains this sentence:

> Although I knew Gaelic [Scottish Gaelic] to be richly responsive to the sites in which it was spoken, it was my guess that other tongues in these islands also possessed wealths of words for features of place – words that together constituted a vast vanished, or vanishing, language for landscape

Macfarlane's book goes on to indicate the wealth of such vocabularies in the languages and dialects of these islands, including English. It is changes in work-patterns, lifestyle, industrialisation, suburbanisation and other aspects of our lives that have made these vocabularies redundant. Vocabulary and usage of languages will reflect the needs and concerns of those who use them. It is not something inherent in Inuit languages that dictates the number of words they will have for snow. It is the engagement of its speakers with snow that will decide how many words they need. If that engagement diminishes, the vocabulary for snow will diminish accordingly. The engagement of Gaelic culture and language with the nuances of the landscape it once almost exclusively inhabited, has left a rich legacy of placenames and landscape terminology that can enormously enrich our ecological relationship with that landscape. It is self-evidently necessary to explore that legacy if we wish to so enrich ourselves – and the landscape from which we have become distanced – just as it is necessary to explore the dialect of East Anglian English which contains the same sort of treasure-trove in relation to the wetlands of that area.

In addition to placenames and landscape vocabulary, I have worked in the belief that the imaginative material I explore in *The Amergin Step*, ancient and contemporary, in Irish and English, in history and mythology, in folklore and archaeology as well as in other areas, is of intrinsic and fundamental ecological value in our relationship with place, just as is the physical landscape, together with its flora and its fauna.

Choices

When I began this work, I envisaged a wider geographical range and a wider range of subject areas than those with which I ended up. I knew from the beginning that there were whole areas of imaginative engagement with landscape that I would not write about, essentially because they did not fire my own imagination. In a way, this is because there are areas of local *pietas* in which I do not share. I wrote earlier that, a long time ago, I sloughed off the nationalism and religion that were such powerful formative influences on my upbringing. I should perhaps have added in the strong interest

in sport – especially in the GAA, although as spectators rather than participants – that animated my father and my three brothers. But, despite sometimes yearning and occasionally trying to be like them and most of my male acquaintances (this was the 1950s and 60s, before gender limitations were breached), I never had enough interest to slough off. Arising, I suppose, from these sloughings-off, the strong tradition of Fenian, War of Independence and Civil War song and story, very often intimately connected with families and places I know, is a subject from which I have kept away. So too with the very strong connection with place and parish that animates the GAA, and almost all male imaginations in Iveragh, as well as, and increasingly, a large proportion of the female imaginations of the area. My sloughing-off of the strong religious belief and practice that informed my childhood and adolescence did not prevent my engaging with the extraordinarily rich Christian heritage from the early medieval period in the area, possibly because that heritage dates from such a distant time that I didn't necessarily identify it with the puritanical, dogmatic and extraordinarily hierarchical religion in which I had grown up. This if course does not make logical sense; I offer it as an explanation, not a rationale. I do not see the two areas I have not dealt with as being omissions. If the work were being put forward as being in any way comprehensive or objective, then not to have dealt with them would indeed be culpably omissive. But I have been at pains to stress that my explorations have been personal and subjective. There is rich ground there for others to plough, who would empathise more than I could with what those imaginative furrows might turn over.

But there are areas, geographical and imaginative, which I had envisaged myself exploring. The poems and songs of Sigerson Clifford, especially the by now anthemic "The Boys of Barr na Sráide". I had intended to explore that and other songs, as well the places they reflect, with singers like Tim Dennehy and Seán Garvey. I had intended to follow the footsteps of J. M. Synge, on his visit to Bolus Head, his stays near Mountain Stage below Drung Hill and his discovery of a contemporary oral telling of Oisín and Niamh Chinn Óir leaving for *Tír na nÓg* from nearby Rossbeigh Beach. The poems and songs of Tomás Rua Ó Súilleabháin were to have had a chapter to themselves, rather than becoming part of the O'Connell chapter and the Skellig Michael chapter. I had also envisaged *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire* as being a separate chapter, as I did *Tuireamh na hÉireann*. It was as I wrote about Daniel O'Connell that I found these separate strands twining themselves into one narrative, which I called *An Glór Conallach*, the longest chapter in the work. And as that chapter consolidated and lengthened itself, I found that other, wider areas of the Liberator's story that I had envisaged exploring fell away, and that the immediate and local aspects became stronger for that.

Overall then, I found my multiple stories unifying themselves into the four main narratives, with prologue and coda, which now constitute the work. This meant that, as well as Synge and Sigerson Clifford, there are other, more personal aspects of landscape and imagination that I've not

written about. Two in particular, I would have thought a few years ago, would certainly have had a place. One concerns a late nineteenth century novel, the other a fourteenth century poem. I was familiar with the names Coomasaharn, Lough Acoose and Coolrue long before I ever saw them, and long before I climbed Carrauntoohil, Drung Hill and other mountains that enclose those places. This was because my father used to read *Red Cloud*, by William Francis Butler, serially to my siblings and me. Although it was set largely in the North American prairies, its long opening chapter was set in Glencar, where Butler had spent his honeymoon and where he subsequently often holidayed. One particular episode described two boys' perilous raid of an eagle's nest in the cliff above Coomasaharn, a spectacularly beautiful *cúm* just inland from Drung Hill. When I wrote a poem for my father's seventieth birthday (at the age of forty, seventy still seemed unimaginably old to me) I wrote how his reading to us as children stimulated my interest in words. I wrote that words 'groped among the cliffs of Coomasaharn'. I had thought about exploring this, had bought a biography of Butler, had thought my relationship with my father might find its way into the work. But as the book found its narrative and spatial structure, I decided to put this particular exploration aside, perhaps to be resumed in a different context. The fourteenth century poem is "Beir eolas dúinn, a Dhomhnaill" by Gofraidh Fionn Ó Dalaigh. Now Gofraidh Fionn was never in Iveragh; in fact the poem is quite disparaging about what the poet sees as a remote and wild country, unworthy to be the residence of the McCarthy Mór who was in effect hiding away there. The poem has been examined in great detail by Michelle O Riordan in *Irish Bardic Poetry and Rhetorical Reality*. My interest in it is because the Domhnall Mac Cárthaigh whom it urges to leave Iveragh and reclaim his rich lands elsewhere, was resident at the time in a tower house on Lough Currane (Loch Luighdeach), now a ruined pile of stones in the lake. Although it was only archaeologically recognised and classified about thirty years ago, I knew it, from shortly after I came to live nearby, as "The Sunken Castle", and I was glad to have directed archaeologists towards that whisper in the landscape. I have since boated to it many times and landed there, and enjoyed telling my passengers that they had just floated in the door of a medieval castle. But again, I found it was squeezed out by the larger narratives around which my explorations had gathered, and reluctantly concluded that it too must wait for another opportunity.

There are other subject areas I did not pursue, or simply integrated into one of the larger narratives. But I think I have mentioned enough of them to show that the possible areas of exploration are endless. And this, I think, is one of the fundamental lessons to be learnt from this type of work. Another writer would come up with areas of exploration which may not have even occurred to me. Another writer would approach the material differently, find a different narrative structure. What anyone hears when they listen to landscape is likely to be different from what another hears. *The Amergin Step* is simply a partial telling of what I hear in the landscape that lies

around where I live. I believe that the important thing for all our futures is for all of us to take the step, and to listen to what we variously hear.

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