

TITLE: SOME POETS AND POETRY FROM THE CELTIC MARGINS

PREAMBLE

The extent of ancient Celtdom stretched from the Burren in Clare to Thrace in Northern Greece, where the poet and singer Orpheus wandered in his last days. We are talking of a significant geographic and demographic entity as is witnessed, for instance, by the remains still in these places of the dolmen reliquaries of the dead.

When I speak of the Celtic margins in this brief presentation however, I refer to certain local geographic and demographic entities at the Western Edge of Europe, namely Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Cornwall, Brittany and the Isle of Man and their respective native Celtic languages – Irish Gaelic, Scots Gaelic, Welsh, Cornish, Breton and Manx. Taken together, these constitute an entity I might call the Celtic Isles and Celtic languages, and it is in this context I will be examining related affinities among the poets and poetry in the native languages of these regions.

Introduction:

A brief introduction to the history and heredity of the Celtic Languages may first be appropriate. The Celtic subfamily of languages is composed of three groups: the *Continental*, the *Brythonic* (also called *British*), and the *Goidelic* (also called *Gaelic*). Continental Celtic, which is inclusive of all Celtic idioms on the Continent with the exception of Breton, died out following the fall of the Western Roman Empire in the late 5th century AD. The Brythonic group includes Breton, Cornish and Welsh. These are all descendants of British, the Celtic language of the ancient Britons of Roman times. The emergence of Welsh, Cornish and Breton from British, as separate languages, probably occurred during the 5th and 6th centuries AD as one of the fruits

of the Germanic invasions of Britain. It is estimated that *Breton* today reaches more than one million people in Brittany, most of whom are bilingual, also speaking French. In Wales, there are some 500,000 people who speak the Welsh language as a primary language. The third group, or *Goidelic* subfamily, is the group to which Irish (also called Irish Gaelic) and Scottish Gaelic belong, as well as that of Manx-Gaelic indigenous only to the Isle of Man off Ireland's eastern coast. All the modern Goidelic tongues are descendants of the ancient Celtic speech of Ireland from the pre-Christian times. Again, it is estimated, *Irish* is known by approximately 900,000 people in Ireland as well as by some 50,000 more in Northern Ireland. Scottish Gaelic is known by some 100,000 persons in the Highlands of Scotland. Most of these people also speak English. Gaelic speech began to reach Scotland in the late 5th century AD when it was brought by the Irish invaders to the Scottish Highlands. However, a truly distinctive Scottish Gaelic only appears around the 13th century. The main difference between Scottish and Irish results, it is said, from the substantial Norse influence on the Scottish dialects.

The Celts that made their home in Ireland, Scotland and Wales brought with them a bardic tradition that is still audible in many of the current literary forms as they appear in certain Gaelic and Welsh writers. In those earlier centuries the bard was also, oftentimes, a priest and philosopher, a physician and prophet, as well as a poet and singer. Variations on these roles still occur today.

FROM CELTIC HISTORY INTO CELTIC CONTEMPORARIETY

Celtic Languages have long been under threat. I alluded earlier to the Roman obliteration of the continental native languages. Let's consider individual cases in more recent times.

Welsh has been under threat since the 1536 Act of Union between England and Wales, where all sinister usages, such as the Welsh language were to be 'expurgated' and 'reduced'. In 1866, *The Sunday Times* referred to Welsh as 'the curse of Wales': its use being synonymous with backwardness and the opposite of material prosperity.

It has often been pronounced dead: as Bobi Jones remarks it is difficult to imagine a language that should have died more often. For him, the Welsh poems born over the centuries have been written on the edge of a precipice (a recurring image among the Celtic poets). If poetry in a rebel act, as Michael Hartnett writes, then the Welsh poets may be among the most subversive of subversives, some going to jail for their views. For Jones, again, the language is a militant survival, a symbol of renewal, [the] 'presence of an ancient usage among the ice-boxes computers and satellites'. Celtic literatures, by extension, because of their state of perpetual issues are more obsessively conscious of the past in the present than are mainstream literatures.

Breton, it could be said, suffered a fate worse than Welsh. Libraries were ransacked and destroyed during the French Revolution: the destruction of all non-French languages in the territory of the Republic was the order of the day. Even in the mid 1800's, a sustained war was waged against the language by schools and other state institutions. Somehow the language and its poetry survived, with the poet Roparz

Heman from 1925 onwards setting the modern tone. The struggle for the language became for the poet a struggle of life and death: the poet's passion became that of the fighter. In more recent times, like the old bards, the young generation of Glenmor and Gwerning sing their poems to their audiences. In their work, they challenge not only French power but a destructive way of life. Modern poetry in Breton has been characterised by Per Denez as the poetry of a people caught up in a struggle – 'unsmiling, quietly harsh, relentlessly rough' like the struggle of the Breton people themselves for survival as well as being quasi-modernist in tone.

There are obvious historical parallels between the threat to Welsh and Breton and that to *Irish* in Ireland. Ironically, one might ask, did compulsory Irish for two generations exacerbate an existing vulnerability bred out of the social, political and agrarian disasters of the 19th Century? After 800 years, people may not have appreciated being told what to do even in terms of linguistic self-government. The resurgent free-willed interest in education through Irish in the *gaelscoileanna* is maybe a harbinger of better times for the language where young people take to it naturally with parental support rather than have it beaten into them. Many of the *Innti* poets found it a labour of love to learn and perfect the language and Michael Davitt and Michael O'Siadhail write with a wry tenderness of that experience. Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill's 'Ceist na Teangan' (The Language Question) does sum up a deeply and widely felt communal hope:

'I place my hope on the water
in this little boat ...'

'Cuirim mo dhóchas ar snámh
I mbáidín teangan ...'

Scottish Gaelic, it may be said, suffered the severest fate in human terms of all the Celtic languages, from the Statutes of Iona in 1609 which set out to smash the social clan system to the 1872 Education (Scotland) Act which presumed Gaelic did not exist. There is a particular sense of haunted and haunting loss in modern Scottish Gaelic poetry, a deep psychic emptiness for what happened. Today parents with their children can opt for education through the medium of Gaelic through pre-school and primary levels and, as in Ireland, TV and the native soap opera attract high audience ratings. Gaelic poets, like the late Sorley McLean, achieved international status. An acute sense of the everyday, the local and the colloquial informs the work of Derek Thompson, for instance, and song writers like Calum MacDonald tap into the bardic tradition I spoke of as they make an old tradition new.

In Cornwall, like the taunt crags of the coastline, *Cornish* survived the superior linguistic wave for thousand years, died and came back to life, the Cornish vernacular itself only disappearing at the end of the 18th Century. Yet it has begun to function as a vernacular once again, from the 1970's, a focus being provided by writers such as Graham Sandcock, Brian Webb, Katrina Waters and Pol Hodge, the latter a critic of Cornish society. Contemporary Cornish poetry, according to Tim Saunders, is losing its new self-consciousness as it addresses, with vigour, issues of the day.

Tucked away in the Irish Sea, on the Isle of Man, *Manx* declined rapidly during the 19th Century, disappearing as a community language by round 1910 (the 1931 Census claimed a mere 531 speakers). Here the basic tape recorder proved a saviour as it recorded the Manx of the last native speakers, facilitating those who learned it as a second language. This has led to something of a latter-day revival – the death of

Manx being exaggerated – the 1991 Census recording a total of 643 speakers. Government and communal support has been of crucial importance. Writers composing in Manx today include Robert C. Carswell, Colin Jerry, George Broderick and Brian Stowell (Carswell being awarded the Allied Irish Bank's Prize for writing in Manx Gaelic, the award itself being an imaginative and timely innovation).

THEMES AND VALUES HELD IN COMMON

What themes, values and concerns do we encounter in those poets, taken either collectively or singly, from the celtic margins?

The past, as one might expect, lives on to be something of a millstone or psychic wound, a continuing trauma that will not be solaced, like a phantom limb that still gives pain. It is surely no accident that images of holocaust occurs as in the Welsh poet, Nesta Wyn Jones's (b. 1946) poem 'Shadows' -

No, we know nothing of those days
- Only we sometimes hear
of incidents, before or time
Beyond our understanding.
But as, from the slaughter and the burning
Slowly the dust rises
Maybe we do feel a tightness,
An echo of a scream.

This state of mind finds affinity with the living remnants of other civilisations as in the Breton poet Mikael Madeg's poem 'Civilisation', in memory of Motovato's Cheyennes and the 'battle' of Sand Creek, a lament, too, for Brittany, by metaphorical extension. The Scottish Gaelic poet, Derrick Thompson (b. 1921) in 'Strathnaver' speaks of the evils of past times weighing heavy on the present and the coincident violence to women. Similarly, Sorley McLean's 'À Ghort Mhór/The Great Famine' on world hunger and the Cornish poet, Tim Saunders' (b. 1952) 'The Great Hunger'

could only have been written by people, who in themselves, and in their forebears, have known hunger for essentials. Such poems often evoke an atmosphere of open and deserted places and spaces as in the Scottish poet Myles Campbell's (b. 1944) 'The Buzzard' or Fearglas MacFhionnlaigh's (b. 1948) evocation of uninhabited Canadian country with elemental mindscapes of wood and snow and creek and sky in the poem 'Eagle, Robin, Pine'. The atmosphere can be visually haunting as in the Manx poet Robert C. Carswell's (b. 1950) 'Lomman' with a raven roaring over, again, deserted spaces.

Allied to the foregoing, is a concomitant sense of being at the edge, on the cliff face, on a precipice looking down, as in the Welsh poet Alan Llwyd's (b. 1948) 'The Welsh Language':

'Stand above the abyss, and shout into the cleft:

She's the thunder in the silence, the sound in the

Cold emptiness ...

Perhaps the most haunting worry-poem on the condition of the language is Cathal Ó Searcaigh's (b. 1956) 'Caoineadh'/'Lament' translated by Seamus Heaney: it is here on tape. I will play it in full. The same sentiments are echoed in the Cornish poet Carfield Richardson's (b. 1925) poem, 'The Cliff' and Welsh poet Elin ap Hywel's (b. 1912) 'Owl Report', a variation, too, on a Suibhne Gelt theme.

In the poets, we have a clear sense of continuing cultural vulnerability, with destruction and displacement of language and culture. The Welsh poet, Bobi Jones,

(b. 1929) speaks of being a second-class citizen in his own country in 'a Welshless Welshman', his nationhood consigned to the back kitchen of his house away from the centre of living and daily social intercourse. His stance is anti-centric or Wales V. London. Like a Welsh *Omeros* in 'Land of Form'. Similarly, Alan Llwyd's (b. 1948) theme in 'The Horizon Gazer' (for R.S. Thomas on his 80th birthday) is What Identity Wales? In the same country, Menna Elfya's (b. 1951) poem 'Nunnery' speaks of the plight of privacy of the person, individuality and fear of encroachment, the poem being read as metaphor for conquest of the nation: the English presence identified as male as in, say, Heaney's, *The Guttural Muse*. Her poem, 'After the Court Case' speaks of the pathetic nature of resistance, embedded complacency in a sea of complacency. Angus Peter Campbell's (b. 1954) 'Suisinish' speaks of the marrow being sucked from his locale:

'My history has been digitalised.
The Clearances, like electricity and the angels,
Have been reduced to the film essentials:
It is all stones and flames and emptiness'.

Such poets are called, like Joyce, to wrestle with 'the Devil of Paralysis' as in the Breton poet's Gwendal Denez's (b. 1951) poem of the same name. The Cornish poet, Pol Hodge (b. 1965) in 'Language Prayer' prays for a deliverance of sorts.

It is not surprising, therefore, to hear outbursts of anger and rage at what is considered violation to the body *dúchas* in the Cornish poet Garfield Richardson's (b. 1925) poem 'Yet I Have Hope' with its angry refrain 'What are they doing to my Cornwall

now' or to note the subterranean violence in Grégóir Ó Dúill's 'Geimhreadh/Winter' or in 'Sonnet for A Six Month Old Cease Fire'.

Related to this is a mordant criticism of one's contemporaries for their lack of pride or sense of *dúchas* or place. The Breton poet, Angela Duval (b. 1951), in 'Elves' castigates her nation as:

'A people of elves
A degenerate people
A genocidal people
Drowned in red wine
Drowned in French pom-pom.'

Her poem, 'The Dismantling of Brittany' is a withering critique. Youenn Gwernig's (b. 1925) poem (from the same county) 'Two Short Tales for A May Day':

'The Lord Mayor is happy
his lousy parishioners went to Paris
to get
their rear-end
clean'

moves from anger and satire eventually to lament.

What is dominant is a rejection of centrality, in whatever guise. In Wales, Nesta Wyn Jones's poem, 'Poppies', initially proffers affinity with, and ultimately rejection of,

the British connection. Menna Elfyn's (b. 1951) 'Wild Flowers' further addresses the predicament:

'here's the white one I wear as a bone of peace
each November, defying war's pieties,
and here am I, the Welsh poppy, head bent –
our spinelessness a yellow-fever'.

The poet is driven to ask basic questions on identify as in Alan Llwyd's 'The Horizon Gazer'. Sometimes the spirit stalls as in Menna Elfyn's 'Message' which states that the death of Welsh (or Wales) would not even make a news item anyway:

the last sweetner of an item
on "News at Ten"
an announcer's jovial remark
before the Close Down.

More often, despair is rejected despite the lack of a wider audience. Militancy demonstrates itself as in the work of the Breton poet Mikael Makeg (b. 1950), and the poet vows a partnership with place as is the case, too, in the poem of the Manx poet Robert C. Carswell's 'The Leaves of Autumn'.

What empathies then, for these poets from the Celtic margins? Outsiders, themselves, often they celebrate the outsider. Elin ap Hywel from Wales in her beautiful poem 'Blue' celebrates the film work of Derek Jarman. From the same country, R. Gerailt

Jones (b. 1934) identifies with the loneliness of the parson in his calling. A Celtic kinship of close-cousins is evolved as in Iwan Llywd's (b. 1955) 'Leaving Land':

a Welshman and a Breton
we could both taste the salt water
like garlic on the wind.

Per Denez, the Breton poet, in 'Negro Song' sees Bretons in the same light as oppressed Negroes. Michael Ó Siadhail (b. 1947) in 'Stranger', the outsider learning Irish, looks in on a poignant picture of inner Gaeltacht circles, and identifies his own loneliness with that of the figure-of-fun widower.

Survival demands ideals and, at least, small measures of the heroic spirit. Menna Elfyn, the Welsh poet in 'Chinese Lantern', reaches out to the heroic young of the 1989 Beijing spring as exemplars. Seán Ó Tuama prototypes Christy Ring in a poem of the same title. Poets make light of adversity in humorous poems. The Welsh poet, Elinor Wyn Reynolds, who, in her own words, 'loves pantomime, patchwork and laughing' celebrates her Vermeer singularity in 'Coupleology'. Despite the cost of dedication to a cause, the Breton poet, and mordant satirist, Angela Duval in 'Thank You' celebrates county farm life as she finds it:

Thanks to you God the Creator!

To have destined me to be a farmer ...

The disdain of city-folk makes me laugh ...

O Yes! Thanks to you Lord.

She writes like Kavanagh's Paddy Maguire might have written on a fine day. In 'The Manx Cat', which is not for turning, Brian Stowell (b. 1930) writes of another kind of stoicism:

we can stand and scratch and shout

Not for us the boat and out.

Maybe there's no answering.

What's left is caterwailing.

For poets on the Celtic margins, or wherever, what is left to do is get on with the business of life and poetry. Bobi Jones from Wales is compelled to praise life anyway in his poem 'A Poem of Praise'. Angela Duval from Brittany praises what she has in 'Thank You'. Elin ap Hywel's poem 'In My Mother's House' is a beautiful evocation of the richness of tradition and experience. Pádraig Mac Fhearghusa (b. 1947) in 'Come Here, I Want to Tell You' imagines heavenly delights as the poor cousin of earthly joys.

Central to this spirit are numerous poems celebrating love and the erotic. Naig Rosmor (b. 1923) uses Breton as a vehicle for erotic poems. One is aptly titled 'Alleluia'. Love and its despairs are poignantly expressed in Iwan Llwyd's 'The

Family of Birds' – a haunting legend where every lie buys time. Gabriel Rosenstock's 'An Mhaened' and Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill's 'Blodewedd' are poems in the same erotic vein.

Finally, allied to this celebratory joy in love is joy in language. What compels these poets to write in a language under threat?

The answer, I believe, is a simple joy, when all complaining is done, a simple joy in the language. Gabriel Rosenstock's 'Revi Shenkar' is a poem of music and joy in visual sound patterns. From Scotland, Ian Crichton Smith's poem, 'Berries', celebrates beauty incarnate in image and vocable. Michael Davitt's 'Chugat'/'To You' is a poem of elements, of sun and sea and a road into tears. Uilleann Neill (b. 1922) in 'Contraband' celebrates Gaelic poetry as narcotic. Siúsaidh NicNeill's (b. 1955) 'Ghost Dancer' celebrates movement and grace and beauty through the medium of Scottish Gaelic, English and Lakota – 'The Ghost Dancing' weaving between three languages.

Above all there is the sense that the language is alive and well with these practitioners, as in Aonghas MacNeacail's poem 'tho gàidhlig bèo/gaelic is alive' and its good advice:

but be dancing be dancing

it is work to be dancing.

This joy in continuum is also encapsulated in Maire Mhac an tSaoi's poem 'Apotheosis', a poem encapsulating the pieties and rituals of a Christmas Day, where death itself, has no meaning or substance, a continuum of family subversively and inclusively regenerating itself.