

Ireland's Poets: Finding Music Between a Troubled Past and an Uncertain Future

A talk with poems and music by **Bill Nevins (Handout.# 1)**

I'd like to talk a bit about some Modern Irish Poetry, and share some samples. This isn't a dull, scholarly lecture--what fun would that be? One of the key aspects of poetry, particularly Irish poetry is *music*! Irish poetry is tied to song and music.

"I think that the poet is a sensitive instrument designed to record anything which affects his mind or interests his emotions. He will be fulfilling his function as a poet if he records these things with integrity and with as much music as he can compass or as is appropriate to the subject."—

Irish poet Louis McNeice, 1939, quoted in *Contemporary Irish Poetry* by Paul Muldoon.

"The 'tuigen' is the feather cloak (or cowl) once worn by a class of Irish poets known as the 'filidh'. These poets were often credited with powers of prophecy - the word 'fili' is etymologically connected to 'seer'. This special garment is described in texts as 'a thatch of birds' or a 'mantle of white & speckled feathers'. In Ulster, Néde - son of Adna, gains the ollamh position wearing a cloak of bright feathers with a 'golden colour on the upper half'. The ceremonial feather cloak is also native to Māori, Hawaiian, Indian cultures & many ancient cultures across the world."—forwarded by Annemarie Ni Churreainn

It might be helpful here to listen to a “poem” that was read out in 1916 to declare the Irish Republic. Padraic Pearse, who was executed after the Rising, wrote it.<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GHRTws-hIAQ>

Below are a few verses from selected Irish poems.

Here are some poets who have linked poetry and music and the Irish language:

Brendan Behan *Breandán Ó Beacháin*; 1923 – 1964) was a poet, short story writer, memoirist and activist who wrote in both English and Irish. A proud soldier of the IRA, Behan was born in Dublin into a staunchly republican family. He loved the drink, poetry and singing.

Ciarán Carson (1948-2019) was traditional arts officer of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland from 1975 to 1998 and was appointed director of the Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry at Queen's University in 2003. Carson was the author of *Belfast Confetti* (1989) and *Collected Poems* (2009). Carson's work engages recent history—including the Troubles—and the past. Carson's interest in traditional Irish music informed *Last Night's Fun: About Music, Food and Time* (1997), a book of prose.

Padraic Colum (1881 – 1972) was an Irish poet, novelist, dramatist, biographer, playwright, children's author and folklorist. He was one of the leading figures of the Irish Literary Revival and he often set poems to music.

As I came down through Dublin City, at the hour of twelve at night, / Who should I spy, but a Spanish Lady / Washing her feet by the candlelight / In all me life I ne'er did see, a maid so sweet about the soul . . .

William Butler Yeats is widely considered to be one of the greatest poets of the 20th century. He was from the Protestant, Anglo-Irish minority that had controlled Ireland since the 17th century, but Yeats staunchly affirmed his Irish nationality. He was interested in mysticism and Irish mythology. Politically conservative but proudly Irish, he had a life-long fascination with aging.

“The Second Coming”(written after WW I) and “Sailing to Byzantium” (a poem about poetry) are among the greatest poems in the English language.

The Hosting of the Sidhe *The host is riding from Knocknarea/And over the grave of Clooth-na-Bare;Caoilte tossing his burning hair,/And Niamh calling Away, come away:Empty your heart of its mortal dream./ And if any gaze on our rushing band,/We come between him and the deed of his hand, We come between him and the hope of his heart. . . .*

An Irish Airman foresees his Death *I know that I shall meet my fate/Somewhere among the clouds above; Those that I fight I do not hate,/Those that I guard I do not love;My country is Kiltartan Cross,/My countrymen Kiltartan's poor,/ No likely end could bring them loss/Or leave them happier than before.*

Sailing to Byzantium *That is no country for old men. The young/In one another's arms, birds in the trees,— Those dying generations—at their song,/The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas, . . .And therefore I have sailed the seas and come/To the holy city of Byzantium. . . . Once out of nature I shall never take/My bodily form from any natural thing,/But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make/Of hammered gold and gold enameling/To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;/Or set upon a golden bough to sing/To lords and ladies of Byzantium/Of what is past, or passing, or to come.*

The Second Coming *Turning and turning in the widening gyre /The falcon cannot hear the falconer; Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;/. . . Surely some revelation is at hand;/ Surely the Second Coming is at hand. .*

Patrick Kavanagh (1904 – 1967), poet and novelist, wrote of Irish life through the everyday and commonplace. His best-known works include the poems "The Great Hunger" and "On Raglan Road", which was first published as a poem in 1946 under the title "Dark Haired Miriam Ran Away". The poem was put to music when Kavanagh met Luke Kelly of the band The Dubliners in a pub in Dublin. The song, often known simply as "Raglan Road", has been sung by Van Morrison and many others. *On Raglan Road of an autumn day I saw her first and knew/That her dark hair would weave a snare that I might one day rue/I saw the danger, and I passed along the enchanted way And I said, let grief be a fallen leaf at the dawning of the day/On Grafton Street I see her walking now Away from me so hurriedly, my reason must allow/That I had loved not as I should a creature made of clay/When the angel woos the play, he'd lose his wings at the dawning of the day*

Seamus Heaney (1939-2013) is one of the major poets of the 20th century. Heaney was raised in County Derry, and lived for many years in Dublin. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995. He is "that rare thing, a poet rated highly by critics and academics yet popular with 'the common reader'" and "the poet who has shown the finest art in

presenting a coherent vision of Ireland, past and present." As a Catholic in Protestant Northern Ireland, Heaney sometimes used his work to reflect upon the "Troubles".

Digging

*Between my finger and my thumb/The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.
Under my window, a clean rasping sound/When the spade sinks into gravelly
ground:/My father, digging. I look down/Till his straining rump among the
flowerbeds/Bends low, comes up twenty years away/Stooping in rhythm through potato
drills/Where he was digging. . . .*

*The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap/Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an
edge/Through living roots awaken in my head./But I've no spade to follow men like
them./Between my finger and my thumb/The squat pen rests./I'll dig with it.*

Paul Muldoon, born in 1951, the eldest of three children, on a farm in County Armagh, Northern Ireland, now teaches at Princeton University. He has published more than thirty collections and won a Pulitzer Prize for Poetry and he was the poetry editor at *The New Yorker*. He writes both poetry and song lyrics, has his own band Rogue Oliphant, hosts Muldoon's Picnic concerts in NYC, and collaborated with the late rock star Warren Zevon on many recorded songs. "I've always been interested in trying to write songs," Muldoon has said. "For the most part, of course, what I'm doing is writing poems, or trying to write them. The two forms of writing, I suppose, are somewhat separate but akin, and I enjoy trying to do both."

Eavan Boland (1944-2020) was born in Dublin, Ireland. Over the course of her long career, Eavan Boland emerged as one of the foremost female voices in Irish literature. Boland honed an appreciation for the ordinary in life. Keenly aware of the problematic associations and troubled place that women hold in Irish culture and history, Boland always wrote out of an urge to make an honest account of female experience. Eavan Boland interview on Youtube

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1rKttojEHWgu>

Thomas Kinsella (1928—2021) came from “a typical Dublin family,” and entered the Irish civil service in 1946, but, also pursued his poetic craft. He was friends with Sean O’Riada, “the most distinguished of modern Irish composers.” Kinsella’s long poem *Butcher’s Dozen* described the atrocity of Derry’s Bloody Sunday 1972. Kinsella translated “*The Tain*,” an eighth-century Irish epic, “and in that translation you can find both savage emblems and bleak outlook.” *The Tain* recounts the story of the Connaught warrior-queen *Medbh* (Maeve) and her battle against the doomed headhunter- hero *Cuchulainn*, the Hound of Ulster. The Irish rock band Horslips recorded an entire album devoted to Kinsella’s *The Tain* which includes the rousing song “Dearg Doom”. And Shane MacGowan, the poet-songwriter of The Pogues band recorded a song called “The Sickbed of Cuchulainn”.

From Dearg Doom by Horslips

*I'm Dearg Doom I'm Dearg Doom. I'm Dearg Doom.
And when the stars go out/You can hear me shout
"Two heads are better than none,/One hundred heads are so much better than one".
And when the stars go out/You can hear me shout/"Two heads are better than none,
One hundred heads are so much better than one".*

From “The Sickbed of Cuchulainn” by Shane MacGowan/The Pogues

*McCormack and Richard Tauber are singing by the bed
There's a glass of punch below your feet and an angel at your head
There's devils on each side of you with bottles in their hands
You need one more drop of poison and you'll dream of foreign lands
When you pissed yourself in Frankfurt and got syph down in Cologne
And you heard the rattling death trains as you lay there all alone
Frank Ryan brought you whiskey in a brothel in Madrid
And you decked some fucking blackshirt who was cursing all the Yids
. . . Then they'll take you to Cloughprior and shove you in the ground
But you'll stick your head back out and shout "we'll have another round"
At the graveside of Cuchulainn we'll kneel around and pray/And God is in His
heaven, and Billy's down by the bay*

Irish America has also produced some fine poetry and music, of course.

Terence Patrick Winch (1945-) is a poet, writer, and musician who was born in NY City, the child of Irish immigrants. An accordion player, he co-founded the band the Original Celtic Thunder in 1977, writing much of the band's material for its albums. His

best-known composition is "When New York Was Irish," which has been covered by many other artists.

When New York was Irish

I'll sing you a song of days long ago/when the people from Galway and the County Mayo/and all over Ireland came over to stay/and take up a new life in Americay

They were ever so happy, they were ever so sad/to grow old in a new world through good times and bad/all the parties and weddings, the ceilis and wakes

when New York was Irish, full of joys and heartbreaks

Jinx Lennon, Lankum, The Mary Wallopers, John Francis Flynn, Fontaines DC, and the raucous Belfast hip-hop trio **Kneecap** are among the new wave of Irish poet-musicians currently performing and recording in Ireland, north and south.

The Mary Wallopers have recorded a lovely cover version of the late Shane MacGowan's poem- song "The Broad Majestic Shannon".

From "The Broad Majestic Shannon" by Shane MacGowan

The last time I saw you was down at the Greeks/There was whiskey on Sunday and tears on our cheeks/You sang me a song that was pure as the breeze/On a road leading up Glenaveigh I sat for a while at the cross at Finnoe/Where young lovers would meet when the flowers were in bloom/Heard the men coming home from the fair at Shinrone/Their hearts in Tipperary wherever they go/Take my hand and dry your tears, babe/Take my hand, forget your fears, babe There's no pain, there's no more sorrow/They're all gone, gone in the years, babe . . .

There is so much more wonderful Irish poetry to read, and I hope you will! To close out, here is a lovely recent song by the veteran Irish folk music poets **De Danaan**, simply titled "Ireland"—"Facing America!"

Here are a few recommended references:

Celtic Crush is a SiriusXM radio show on The Loft channel that airs each Sunday from 9am-Noon ET. It's hosted by Larry Kirwan, song writer and leader of the Black 47 Irish American rock band. For details, email Larry Kirwan at blk47@aol.com

Larry Kirwan has also written several fine books of non-fiction and fiction about Irish music and culture.

Contemporary Irish Poetry is a fine book edited by poet/musician Paul Muldoon.

Contemporary Irish Poetry by Anthony Bradley is another fine book.

Last Nights' Fun is a wonderful book about Irish Music by poet Ciaran Carson.

Selected Poems and ***Collected Poems*** by William Butler Yeats are essential reading.

An Anthology of Modern Irish Poetry edited by Wes Davis is a treasure.

Irish Women's Poetry edited by Peggy O'Brien is a magnificent collection.

And you really should check out these recent music-poetry movies (theater and dvd):
“*Kneecap*” and “*North Circular*”.

Slainte! Hope you enjoyed this talk and will want to read more Irish poetry and hear more songs.—Bill Nevins
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Cold old fire

'Cold Old Fire' by Lankum, a Dublin-based folk group, was written after the financial crisis in Ireland that would end up sending 80,000 people a year overseas. 'The Button Factory' refers to the main Dublin dole office.

**We always sing, even when were losing
'Cos Dublin's drone is hard enough especially when you're
down and you're boozing
We sing the Oul' Triangle and then the Tommy Ryan
'Cos all the world's a jail and we can't remember why**

*Why we agreed to live and lie in embers of a cold old fire nobody remembers
They hand the ashes back to me down the button factory, we're cattle at the stall*

We look for signs that Dublin's heart's still beating,
That concrete and glass and peelers and mass, they haven't stopped the people from screaming,
Being trapped by all the cameras you're inclined to stay at home,
And forget some songs were written to remind you you weren't born

Born to live and lie and die in embers of a cold old fire nobody remembers
They hand the ashes back to me down the button factory, we're cattle at the stall

We see the cracks under the foundation,
Smouldering on the faces of the people on the drip of isolation,
We hear the sounds come streaming across the crackling air,
The broken words of swine who would tell us that we were

**BORN TO LIVE AND LIE AND DIE IN EMBERS OF A COLD OLD FIRE NOBODY
REMEMBERS
THEY HAND THE ASHES BACK TO ME DOWN THE BUTTON FACTORY, WERE
CATTLE AT THE STALL
AND WHEN DID WE AGREE TO LIVE AND LIE AND DIE IN EMBERS OF A COLD
OLD FIRE NOBODY REMEMBERS?
THEY HAND THE ASHES BACK TO ME DOWN THE BUTTON FACTORY, WE'RE
CATTLE AT THE STALL.**

*from Cold Old Fire, released May 25, 2014
Composed by Cian Lawless and Lankum*