

District and Circle

March 24, 2008

Robert Smith

From a small green isle off Europe's shore
The Irish came, with words galore
Wilde and Swift, Burke and Shaw
Joyce and Yeats and many more
Oozing charm from every pore
You've heard me harp on these before
Are there any left in store?
Or has this all become a bore?

Ireland, once poor, ruled by a mighty neighbor,
Now rich, Europe's powerful Celtic Tiger
From Ireland, once a bright light shone
Is this extinguished, dead and gone?

Goldsmith's crystalline lucidity,
He's on our wall yonder
Yeats' lyrical fluidity
A world of verbal wonder
Those marvelous words of yesterday
Seem like music fading... far away

Poetry....does it really matter?
Words just going pitter patter
May be made of dull material
May be subtle, may be ethereal
Rhythm, sound and meaning fusing,
May be sad, may be amusing
T.S. Elliot may confuse

Unless in "Waste Land" you enthuse
 Some is trivial, some tremendous
 Shakespeare into raptures sends us
 His plays and sonnets
 Life enriching
 Everlastingly, bewitching
 Forgive me, lest you think I boast,
 The poetry that I love most,
 Soaring way above the rest,
 W.B. Yeats at his best

Here is one of his poems I've had framed, which hangs on a wall at home.

"Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths
 Enwrought with golden and silver light,
 The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
 Of night and light and half light,
 I would spread the cloths under your feet:
 But I being poor, have only my dreams;
 I have spread my dreams under your feet;
 Tread softly because you tread on my dreams"

Yeats' love was repeatedly rejected by the beautiful Irish rebel, Maude Gonne Mc Bride.

Not least were Yeats's final words
 Striking angry, deeper chords,
 Death approaching, life's work done,
 Future expectations....none.

"Under Ben Bulbin", his final poem.

Ben Bulbin is a majestic table-like mountain that juts out into the Atlantic off the coast of Sligo, in the west of Ireland. It towers over the small town of Drumcliff, where past generations of the Yeats family lived.

It seems that Yeats had little time for most of the modern verse then being written by his younger Irish colleagues.

“Irish poets learn your trade
 Sing whatever is well made
 Scorn the sort now growing up
 All out of shape from toe to top,
 Their unremembering hearts and heads
 Base-born products of base beds
 Sing the peasantry, and then
 Hard riding country gentlemen,
 The holiness of monks, and after,
 Porter-drinker’s randy laughter:
 Sing the lords and ladies gay
 That were beaten into the clay
 Through seven heroic centuries;
 Cast your mind on other days
 That we in coming days may be
 Still the indomitable Irishry”

He ordered that he be buried in Drumcliff in the shadow of his beloved Ben Bulbin. He wrote of his burial. Everything was to be kept simple.

“Under bare Ben Bulbin’s head
 In Drumcliff churchyard Yeats is laid.

.....

No marble, no conventional phrase;

On limestone quarried near the spot
By his command these words are cut:

“Cast a cold eye
On life, on death
Horseman, pass by!
September 4, 1938”

Four months later Yeats died aged 73, while on vacation in the south of France with his much younger English wife Georgie Hyde-Lees.

With World War 2 brewing and travel restrictions becoming increasingly difficult, transporting a corpse back to Ireland would have been a daunting task. So Yeats was buried where he died, at Roquebrun, on the French Riviera.

After the war friends and admirers had his remains re-interred at the foot of Ben Bulbin.

In 1958, a growing band of followers formed a Yeats Society and built a Center in Sligo, where each August, a Yeats International Summer School is held and this has become a world-wide literary event. It is usually fully booked, attended by internationally known poets, professors of literature, graduate students and other lovers of the poet's work. Lectures are given by well known literary figures as well as readings by the rising generation of Irish poets. One such visiting lecturer from the US was our own Bill Pratt, to whom I owe much in preparing this paper. He has been most helpful and I have drawn freely from his published work.

On whose shoulders has Yeats' mantle fallen?
Who brings us gifts, transcribing with his pen
Poetry, from deep within his soul?
Who ponders on its purpose and its goal?

Some years ago at England's Oxford University, its professor of poetry stated that, sooner or later, poetry practitioners like himself are tempted to show how their work, as a form of art,

relates to daily realities and how it may even have some practical value. To him poetry was not just nice stuff to read or listen to. Sometimes it does really matter, as he explained;

“There are times when a deeper need arises,
 When poetry is not only pleurably right in itself,
 But is also pleurably wise,
 Not only a surprising variation played upon the world
 But a re-tuning of the world itself,
 The surprising impatient thump that unexpectedly restores the TV picture,
 The electric shock which sets the fibrillating heart back to its proper rhythm”.

The tall distinguished-looking professor, who spoke with a marked Irish brogue was Séamus Justin Heaney.

Séamus was attracting much student attention. Not only was he winning acclaim from literary experts, he was also winning over the students and the non-expert general reader. Sven Birkerts, an essayist wrote, “He reactivates the language every time he writes, even if he is just describing a bucket or a path in the woods”.

Another critic, the American Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky, described him as “A gifted Irish mensch”.

The students were quick to note that the eloquence of Heaney’s language matched the grace of his manner; they saw him not only as a great teacher, he was also a very nice guy.

Séamus was born in 1939 three months after Yeats died, about eighty miles north-east of Ben Bulben, across the “Border” in County Derry. He grew up at “Mossbawn”, a small farm of 50 acres, owned and worked by his father and his father before him. He was to be the eldest of nine children, born into a warm and loving family. Later he described what it was like growing up at “Mossbawn”.

“We crowded together in the three rooms of a traditional thatched farmstead and lived a kind of den life which was proofed against the outside world. It was an intimate creaturely existence in which the night sounds of the horse in the stable beyond one bedroom wall mingled with the

sounds of adult conversation from the kitchen beyond the other. We took in everything that was going on, of course – rain in the trees, mice in the ceiling, a steam train rumbling along the railway line one field back from the house....we were as susceptible and impressionable as the drinking water in a bucket in our scullery: every time a passing train made the earth shake, the surface of that water used to ripple delicately, concentrically, and in utter silence”. Even his prose was poetic.

Séamus was brought up an Ulster Roman Catholic and consequently was an Irish nationalist. He soon began to understand what that meant. He was a member of a minority group. This was reinforced at night when he overheard his parents’ conversations, home from nationalist meetings at the local Hibernian Hall.

He went to the local primary school, a mixed school of Protestants and Catholics, where he learnt that not all Protestants were that bad. He was a gifted student and at the age of eight won a scholarship to St. Columb’s, a Catholic boarding school, some miles away in Derry city.

While he was there his hard-working parents, responding to the needs of their growing family, moved into a larger home and farm.

One day, tragedy struck. His younger brother Christopher, aged four, was hit by a car and killed when crossing the busy road, just outside their new home.

Fourteen year old Séamus, away at school, heard the shocking news and was told to return at once for the funeral and the wake.

He recalled it in “Mid-Term Break”, one of his earliest poems.

“I sat all morning in the college sick-bay
 Counting bells knelling classes to a close.
 At two o’clock the neighbours drove me home.

In the porch I met my father crying----
 He had always taken funerals in his stride----
 And Big Jim Evans saying it was a hard blow.

The baby cooed and laughed and rocked the pram
 When I came in, and I was embarrassed
 By old men standing up to shake my hand
 And tell me they were sorry for my trouble.
 Whispers informed strangers I was the eldest,
 Away at school, as my mother held my hand
 In hers and coughed out angry tearless sighs.

At ten o'clock the ambulance arrived
 With the corpse, stanced and bandaged by the nurses.

Next morning I went into the room. Snowdrops
 And candles soothed the bedside: I saw him
 For the first time in six weeks. Paler now,
 Wearing a poppy bruise on his left temple,
 He lay in the four-foot box as in his cot.
 No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked him clear.

A four foot box, a foot for every year"

In 1957 Séamus entered Queen's University Belfast with a scholarship and in 1961 graduated with First Class Honors in English. He decided to become an English teacher. He entered St. Joseph's Teacher Training College in Belfast and about then began publishing poems in local magazines. These were well received and he was appointed lecturer in Modern English Literature at Queen's. He met Maire Devlin, a school teacher and also a poet and they married in 1965. He published his first volume of poems, which included "Mid-Term Break" and a poem "Digging". The North of Ireland "Troubles" were on the way. Here are some lines from "Digging":

"Between my finger and my thumb
 The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.

My father digging.....
 By God, the old man could handle a spade.
 Just like his old man.
 My grandfather cut more turf in a day
 Than any other man on Toner's bog.
 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"

As the eldest son in an Irish Catholic nationalist family in Northern Ireland, he had to choose. He could inherit the farm and like some of his neighbors' sons join the IRA and live a life of danger, disappearing from home from time to time.

"But I've no spade to follow men like them. The squat pen ...I'll dig with it". He had made his decision.

Though his heart was on the side of Irish nationalism and writing had become his life; in the violence-wracked North that surrounded him he avoided one-sided politics. It poured out in his poetry:

"Human beings suffer,
 They torture one another,
 They get hurt and get hard,
 No poem or play or song
 Can fully right a wrong
 Inflicted and endured.
 The innocent in gaols
 Beat on their bars together
 A hunger-striker's father
 Stands in the graveyard dumb.
 The police widow in veils
 Faints at the funeral home.

History says, don't hope on this side of the grave.
 But then, once in a lifetime
 The longed-for tidal wave
 Of justice can rise up,
 And hope and history rhyme.

So hope for a great sea-change
 On the far side of revenge.
 Believe that a further shore
 Is reachable from here.
 Believe in miracles
 And cures and healing wells

.....”

His poetry retained a steady calmness and balance for which he was bitterly cursed by some of his co-religionists. One put it this way, “When the bloody hell are you going to write something decent about us?”

Instead he wrote the following in prose, to make sure each word was clearly understood, to show how humanity and murder went hand in hand in the troubled North.

“A minibus full of workers being driven home one January evening was held up by armed and masked men and the occupants of the van were ordered at gunpoint to line up at the side of the road. Then one of the masked executioners said to them ‘Any Catholics among you step out here’. As it happens this particular group was all Protestant, so the presumption must have been that the masked men were Protestant paramilitarists seeking to carry out a tit-for-tat sectarian killing. One of the group was a Catholic, and as the odd man out, the one who would have been presumed to be in sympathy with the IRA and all its actions. It was a terrible moment for him, caught between dread and witness. He made a motion to step forward. Then the story goes, he felt the hand of the Protestant worker next to him take his hand and squeeze it in a signal that said no, don't move, we will not betray you, nobody need know what faith or party you belong

to. All in vain, however, for the man stepped out of line; but instead of finding a gun at his temple, he was thrown backward and away as the gunmen opened fire on those remaining in line, for these were not Protestant terrorists, but members, presumably of the Provisional IRA.”

Helen Vendler, distinguished professor of literature at Harvard, considered by many as one of the world’s greatest literary critics, wrote of her feelings when she first heard Heaney read some of his poetry at the Yeats Summer School. “A young man in his thirties stood at the lectern and read some of the most extraordinary poems I have ever heard. I wanted to write about them”. She wrote in the New York Times; “Heaney, to my mind the best poet now writing in Ireland, seems the only one of his generation not in some way inhibited by the shadow of Yeats”.

Séamus was inspired by Ireland’s bogs; the vast areas of swampy peat-lands that are a unique feature of Ireland, covering one sixth of its land surface. They recalled his early days and his father and grandfather digging turf. But for him bogs became much more than fond memories. They became his poetic symbol of Ireland and provided some of his greatest and most moving poetry.

Works of exquisite Celtic art in gold, silver and bronze found in bogs revealed the work of past Irish civilizations. But Séamus was more moved by other objects, that for him had a very special meaning.

They cried out to mankind to behave in a more civilized and human fashion.

These objects were the perfectly preserved human remains that threw light on the far back pre-Celtic Irish, their dress, the food they ate, their work implements, remains of their primitive homes, their way of life and in some cases how they behaved towards each other.

There was clear evidence that these bodies, both male and female, were victims of ritual slaughter and Séamus mourned for them. He grieves how little had changed in thousands of years. About then a popular ballad refrain put it well;

“When will they ever learn?

When will they ever learn?”

He reflects on the body of a young woman, probably stoned in public for adultery and then drowned in the bog, with onlookers deaf to her cries and no one coming to her aid. He had

witnessed in Belfast two young Irish girls chained to railings, tarred and feathered, for having dated British Tommies. People walked by, including himself, turning their heads, afraid to protest, as he admits shamefully in his poem “Punishment”.

“I can feel the tug
Of the halter at the nape
Of her neck, the wind
On her naked front.

.....
I can see her drowned
body in the bog,
the weighing stone,
Her shaved head
Like a stubble of black corn,
Her blindfold a soiled bandage
Her noose a ring

You were flaxen haired,
Undernourished and your
Tar blacked face was beautiful
My poor scape goat
I who have stood dumb
When your betraying sisters
Cauled in tar,
Wept by the railings

Finds in Irish bogs continue to resonate with our modern times and to make us marvel. Three years ago a bog in Ireland offered up a remarkable find to a man digging; a thousand year old volume almost in perfect condition, astonishingly open at a page containing a passionate plea to the Almighty for help in dealing with a problem that’s still with us to-day.

In beautiful Latin script were the biblical psalms written on twenty pages of vellum bound in leather. The book was found open at Psalm 83;

“O God, keep not thy silence
 Hold not thy peace, and be not still O God.
 For lo thine enemies make a tumult
 They make crafty counsel against thy people
 They have said, Come, and let us cut them off from being a nation,
 That the name of Israel may be no more”

Pat Wallace, the Director of the National Museum of Ireland, where it’s now on display, describes it as a staggering find of immense archeological importance and a measure of Ireland’s learning and art at a time when the rest of Europe languished in darkness.

But back to Séamus:

Séamus decided to give up his academic career and devote all his time to writing. He found peace and quiet in the gate house of an estate in County Wicklow, south of Dublin, owned by the writer Synge’s family.

As predicted by Vendler he gained international recognition as Ireland’s greatest living poet. He also grew as a literary scholar and in due course was appointed to professorships at Oxford, Harvard and Berkeley.

His most recent book of poems, published in 2006, his 12th such collection, marked the 40th anniversary of the publication of his first volume of poetry. It includes a poem, “District and Circle”, which gives the collection its name. This poem harks back to a summer in the early sixties when, working for a spell in London, he travelled during rush hour by the London Underground or Tube. “District and Circle” are interconnecting train lines, the “District” and the “Circle”. At about the same time I was using the “Piccadilly and Circle”, to get to work in London. Séamus and I were part of the milling throng that travel daily by Underground. Sadly we never met.

Held at the ready, but now my gaze was lowered
 For was our traffic not in recognition?
 Accorded passage, I would re-pocket and nod,
 And he, still eyeing me, would also nod.”

The perking of lark music on a tin whistle, a modest instrument loved
 through-out Ireland, a moment of sharing a familiar tune, an intimacy created and valued, a
 flicker of a two-way glance, not to be demeaned by the mere toss of a coin into a beggar’s cap.

Much in “District and Circle” poetry refers to Heaney’s past memories, elegies for family
 members and old friends. But some have a wider reach and are shadowed by our present times,
 as in “Anything can Happen”.

“Anything can happen. You know how Jupiter
 Will mostly wait for clouds to gather head
 Before he hurls the lightning? Well, just now
 He galloped his thunder cart and his horses

.....

Across a clear blue sky.

.....

Anything can happen, the tallest towers
 Be overturned, those in high places daunted,
 Ground gives. The heaven’s weight
 Lifts up off Atlas like a kettle lid.
 Capstones shift, nothing resettles right.”

Again a U.S fireman’s helmet, a friend’s gift of 20 years ago, now takes on a new meaning.

“Helmet,
 Tinctures of sweat and hair oil
 In the withered sponge and shock-absorbing webs

Beneath the crown
while shattering glass
 And rubble-bolts out of a burning roof
 Hailed down on every hatchet man and hose-man there
 Till the hard-reared shield-wall broke”

Flying above the ice-field at Höfn, Iceland, he worries about global warming.

“The three tongued glacier had begun to melt.
 What will we do, they ask, when boulder-milt
 Comes wallowing across the delta flats

 And the miles-deep shag ice makes its move?”

Séamus was awarded the 1995 Nobel Prize for literature; for “works of lyrical beauty and ethical depth, which exalt everyday miracles and the living past”. His contribution to peace in the North may also have helped.

Séamus, the unassuming farmer’s boy, who signed his early poems “Incertus”, the Uncertain One, found it hard to believe what had happened. He had won the prize. At the celebratory banquet, he ended his brief words of thanks with;

“Oscar Wilde once said that the only way to survive temptation was to yield to it. So here and now, I happily and gratefully yield to the temptation to believe that I am indeed the winner of the Nobel Prize.”

He has not rested on his laurels. Apart from his poetry, in 2002, he published 30 years of selected prose pieces entitled “Finders Keepers”. This covers excerpts from his lectures given at universities and elsewhere and his views on the past and present work of a wide range of Irish, British, American and Eastern European poets. He is generous in his praise and gratitude to those who helped him in the development of his own skills.

Charles Mathews the columnist wrote in his review of the book;

“Heaney’s critical prose can be as impassioned and as musical as the verse he’s explicating... Heaney takes us to those places where we can find the genuine consolation that literature can provide”.

In late 2006, “Anything Can Happen” struck nearer home.

Out of the blue the Fates threw a thunderbolt at Séamus. He was felled by a stroke. Happily, he has done well and is slowly recovering.

In January last year Séamus was awarded the T.S.Elliot prize for the “District and Circle” collection. The prize is considered poetry’s most coveted award. The ceremony was held in London at the beautiful Wallace Collection Art Museum. He was not yet well enough to attend. The prize was accepted by his daughter Catherine.

Literary experts consider Heaney’s greatest accomplishment, most likely to be remembered by future generations, is his translation poem of the thousand year old Anglo-Saxon masterpiece, “Beowulf”, published in 2000.

The poem, more than 3000 lines long, stands as one of the foundation works of English poetry. It is a far-fetched story of a mythical Scandinavian James Bond who kills the evil warrior Grendel, his more terrorizing mother and fire-belching dragons in bloody battles. After happily reigning for 50 years he fights a final battle, killing yet another dragon, but is fatally bitten by it in its death throes. He left this world in a blaze of glory on top of a massive funeral pyre.

There have been more than sixty Beowulf translations since the early 19th century. None of these has caught the public eye as much as Heaney’s. His poetic mastery and linguistic skills retain much of the atmosphere of the ancient Anglo-Saxon language. He seasons contemporary English with remnants of Anglo-Saxon English he heard as a boy and still spoken by older folk in rural Northern Ireland. These familiar archaisms made him feel at home working on the translation. It was an immediate best-seller, winning the annual Whitbread Book of the Year award just ahead of J.K.Rowling, creator of Harry Potter.

So, is Heaney the modern Yeats?

Yeats was an upper class Anglo-Irish Protestant, part of the Ascendancy, who for centuries made the laws, owned and worked all the rich arable land, exported their wealth to their homeland and allowed the native Irish to suffer repeated famines. Yet Yeats was a leader in the Celtic revival;

he created the Abbey Theatre and provided the spiritual awakening that led to the 1916 rebellion and eventually to Ireland's freedom in 26 of her 32 counties.

Yeats was by no means wealthy. At 50, he married a beautiful young English heiress, living in comfort thereafter and writing some of his greatest poetry. He was offered a Knighthood for his contribution to literature which he politely declined. At times dour and haughty, he was not loved by the Dublin man-in-the-street. My father, I remember, thought him a poseur with long hair and flowing cravat and tended to dismiss his early "Celtic-Twilight" poetry as effete English romanticism, not truly Irish.

Heaney, a farmer's boy, had no privileged start in life. He made his way to the peak of his profession, both as poet and literary scholar, by sheer hard work and natural talent; loved by his students and generous in his comments on the work of others.

Yeats and Heaney, such different products of Ireland, yet both in their day considered the best in their field. One was an upper class Protestant and a rebellious supporter of the South and the other an Irish Catholic, an underdog peace-maker in the North, both Nobel Laureates.

It is said of Ireland, that it is a place where the probable never happens and the impossible always does.

Ireland produces great writers
 Also produces great fighters
 Came to this land, hungry, oppressed
 Succeeded in ways one would never have guessed
 I am proud of my Irish green genes
 And their unending supply of my Lit'rary Club themes
 Heaney and Yeats, so, which is the better?
 None of their poems go "pitter patter"
 They are different,
 But oh so good !
 Let's celebrate both
 As all Literarians should.