

Fionán Mac Cártha: Gaelic poet in Queensland

Dymphna Lonergan

It may be argued that the past is a country from which we have all emigrated...but I suggest that the writer who is out-of-country and even out-of-language may experience this loss in an intensified form¹

Salmon Rushdie is speaking in this quotation of Indian writers like himself, who live and write in Britain and for whom the ‘remains’ of their past lives can take on an even ‘greater status, greater resonance’ in a new setting. This concept may assist in our understanding of the Irish Australian poet, Fionán Mac Cártha, or William Carty, who wrote much of his poetry in the Irish language and whose English language poems also contained Irish language words. For Mac Cártha the poet there was but one home, Ireland, and one language that spoke of home, the Irish² language.

Fionán Mac Cártha was born in Roscommon, in the West of Ireland in 1886.³ As a young man he took an interest in the Irish language. Self-taught, he gained fluency in Irish through conversing with the old people in the district and attendance at language schools. As a twenty-year-old, he was a member of Conradh na Gaeilge, (The Gaelic League), an organisation which was founded in 1893 with the purpose of keeping the Irish language spoken in Ireland. One of its founders, Douglas Hyde claimed that it was only through the Irish language that the Irish people could ‘render the present a rational continuation of the past’.⁴ One of the manifestations of the League’s work was the annual Oireachtas; an Arts Festival conducted in the Irish language. At the 1907 Oireachtas Mac Cártha was hailed as ‘a new voice in Ireland’ in response to his ode of welcome to Douglas Hyde, the President of the League and later first President of Ireland. In 1913 Hyde provided a written reference for Mac Cártha saying that he was:

An accomplished poet, to my mind one of the best Irish poets in Ireland today.

Hyde was referring, of course, to poetry written in Irish. Mac Cártha by this time had trained as a teacher and his work took him to England where he taught for a year. He developed health problems and it was recommended that he move to a warm and dry climate. This is the background that saw Fionán Mac Cártha living in Queensland from 1918 until his death in 1953. Some of his work was published in Australian Catholic newspapers. His poem 'The Mystic' was published under the name of 'William Carty' in *The Bulletin* (Sydney) on September 22 1927. Yeatsian echoes, which mark his English language poetry, are apparent even in this poem which has as its theme the poet as mystic or translator of God's work. Verse six reads:

The golden monstrance of the day,
The silver monstrance of the night,
And earth that censer-like doth sway
In the great God's sight.

which remind us, somewhat, of Yeats' 'the silver apples of the moon/the golden apples of the sun'.⁵

A collection of Mac Cártha's poems was published in Brisbane in 1945 under the title *The Waves of Cool-a-vin*.⁶ Significantly the collection's Foreword is by Douglas Hyde, then President of Ireland, who provides a qualified recommendation for the work:

I am glad that the author is at last publishing some of his English poems. I prefer, however, his Gaelic pieces.

Hyde continues, however, with praise for Mac Cártha's ability to 'get the Gaelic spirit into his verses' due, he feels, to the poet's bilingualism, 'a rare accomplishment nowadays'. In 1953 Mac Cártha's collection of Irish language poems, *Amhráin O Dheireadh an Domhain*,⁷ was published, posthumously, in Ireland by the Irish government printing press. He is buried at Dalby, Queensland.

In all Mac Cártha spent more than half his lifetime in Australia. He worked as a

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teacher in Queensland and raised three children. That he does not appear in Australian poetry collections is, perhaps, not surprising, given the amount of scholarship still required in documenting the history of Australian literary writing.⁸ Another difficulty would have been in Mac Cártha's comparatively isolated life in rural Queensland. He had some connection with the Catholic literary world in his friendship with the poet Martin Haley. Haley's assistance in the publication of *The Waves at Cool-a-vin* is acknowledged at the beginning of that work. Perhaps the greatest obstacle to Mac Cártha's recognition as an Australian poet, however, is the Irishness of his poetry. In theme, imagery and language Mac Cártha's strong affiliation with Ireland is sustained throughout his work. While this may not be particularly significant today, during Mac Cártha's years in Australia firm views were held on what should constitute national literature. Martin Haley, who was a founding member of the Catholic Poetry Society in Queensland, claimed in 1936 that:

provincialism is no longer possible in the changed society of to-day; Australia is very definitely part of the universe, and its language the King's English⁹

That Haley, nevertheless, assisted Mac Cártha in having his English language poems printed nine years later may point to a change of heart on Haley's part, or a recognition that the value of Mac Cártha's work outweighed any reservations he may have had about the use of words not found in the 'King's English'.¹⁰

Martin Haley also believed that 'a poet's themes should be universal rather than national' and that there should be 'little distinctively Australian' in Australian poetry.¹¹ In this latter point Mac Cártha complies. This is not to say that Australia was never a subject in his poetry. However, in general, references to Australia serve as springboards to the universal theme of exile.

The collection *Amhráin O Dheireadh An Domhain* is divided into thematic sections.

The poem 'Lá in Astraoile' (a day in Australia) occurs in the section *An*

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Deóraidheacht (Exile). It commences with a description of the poet walking on a beautiful height in the early morning:

Táim ag siubhal ar árdán aoibhinn, is an ghriann geal
ag éirighe,

He is surrounded by the beauties of nature but he finds life to be lonely in this place far away from his native land. The poet does not blame Australia for his unhappiness: ‘Ní cháinim Astraoile’, recognising the advantages of the climate: ‘tá sláinte na gcéadta/Le fagháil san aer gléigeal’. However the pull of his native home is still very strong. His Australian surrounds merely reflect the topography of the West of Ireland: ‘Mé ag féachaint na sléibhte, ‘s mé cuimhniú ar Shligeach’ (I’m looking at the mountains and remembering Sligo’). The Australian birds remind him of Loch Glynn: ‘Nó ‘g éisteacht na n-éanmaith, ‘s mo smaointe ar Loch Glinne’. Memory focuses on a specific spot, and on a white flower, (possibly the daisy): ‘Och! baile-namóna, ‘s an bláth bán arís!’. The poem concludes with a hundred goodbyes, *céad slán*, to his home county and praise for what are common northern hemisphere birds: *an londubh* (blackbird), *an smól* (thrush), *an uiseóg* (skylark) and *glaoidh na cuaiche* (the cuckoo’s cry).

Another poem from this section is *Síreacht*, (Longing). The poem is a litany of regret for the poet’s exile from the people and the landscape of his native home. As a wanderer in exile he feels dead to life, with nothing but eternal sadness in his heart:

O 's marbh, cé beó, mé im' dheóraidh fánach,
Gan sogh ná sásamh i gcríochaibh i gcéin.

He misses the melodious sound of the Irish language in particular:

Sé an truaigh Mhuire gas mise i n-Éirinn
Agus fuaim na Gaedhilge go blasda binn.

and likens his sadness at this to that felt by the mythological woman Deirdre or the

famous monk Colmcille¹². The poem concludes with the poet lamenting his ever being able to visit Ireland again through the use of a *sean-fhocal*, an old Irish adage about a man called Uí Dhubhda whose hoping was so futile it is likened to a hoping for a visit from the High King:

Acht má bhí mé ag súil le bheith ag déanamh cuart' ann,
B'in súil Uí Dhubhda le h-Ard-na-Ríogh.

Mac Cártha also employed the theme of exile in some of his English language poems. For example the poem 'Aililiú', which is an Irish language interjection of concern or grief, begins:

Aililiu! but it's lonely,
Alone in this lonesome place

and ends with the painful recognition that the poet will, most likely, die away from home:

But to leave my bones among strangers
In a strange land all unknown.
O my ghost will walk the roadway
By the lone lake of Loch Glynne,
And the moonlight, like enchantment,
The cool, dark woods within.

Australia is a strange place to the poet, a Silent Land that cannot speak to him.¹³ European, and specifically Irish topography is where he feels at home; from the 'hawthorn tree', 'May-white bramble', 'claubery boreens' and 'bogland' to hills 'blue with summer' and the 'upturned primrose face'. Above all he remembers 'the woods a green delight' and this is a sharp contrast to where he lives at present. The poem 'A Prayer' sees the poet an uninvolved commentator on what is wrong with Australian landscape. It begins:

God bless the hand that plants a tree,
For some there be that hack and hew;
There's the prayer that came to me,
Where no tree nor green thing grew.

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The poet comes across a ‘cool retreat’ of water and lush growth which is a sharp contrast to the ‘druth and dearth’ effect of land clearance. His answer to Australia’s aridity and heat is simple:

Now, God be praised who made the trees,
And praise to these that spare them, too,
There's the prayer that came to me,
Where bush, and tree, and green things grew.

This is the only one of Mac Cártha’s published poems that has a sustained focus on Australia. His uninvolved with Australia in his writing is in direct contrast with his immersion in his ‘imaginary homeland’ where even the names of places, Cloonard, Doon Gar, Aughaderry, Carrowbehy sound romantically lyrical, and indeed they are romantic places as the opening to ‘Carrowbehy’ demonstrates:

When the cuckoo comes to Aughaderry,
And the blackbird whistles from Derrylee,
And Aughalure with the moorlarks merry,
Tis at Carrowbehy that I would be.
Come with me walking, walking, walking,
Come with me walking at the fall of the dew;
The stars are clear in the deep-lake water,
And all the thoughts of my heart with you.

Once again there is a Yeatsian feel in both language and rhythm. Mac Cártha’s English language poetry is also Yeatsian in its imagery of: swans gliding silently on cool grey water; haunted airs by fairy fiddlers; lakes, trees, youth and age; stars, wind, trees, and bees. In addition, is the use of Irish mythology exemplified, perhaps, by the poem ‘Coolavin’ which is also the title of the collection. It begins:

O swan that floats o'er the lone lake-water,
The cold grey water of Coolavin,
Thy bosom mirrored like Lir's own daughter,
Was thou beloved of the sons of Fionn?
White bird above and white image under,
The silent wonder of Coolavin.

Mac Cártha, no doubt, found his Yeatsian language and imagery apt in its ability to provide a suitable English expression for the Ireland of his mind. His Irish language poems are more earthy; the majority of the poems of *Amhráin O Dheireadh an Domhain* being simply poems describing the ordinary world of nature. For example, the swallow's return in *An Ainleóg*, and *Amhrán Na Cuaiche*, the cuckoo's song (although the theme of the hopes of a return to the homeland for the exile are also present). The Irish language collection is also notable for its poems in praise of ordinary people: musician Micheál Breathnach, doctor John Elwood (in the poem 'Caoineadh' which means 'lament'), farmer Micheál Na Mainnte (toothless Michael) and Scéal Eoghain (John's story). It is also through the Irish language that we are allowed into the heart of the poet. In the poem 'An File' (the poet) the poet is a conduit for the praising of God's work. He is slightly mad, however and his composing is likened to a bird sitting alone on a branch talking to himself:

'S an file ag foghlaim a chéird',
 Ag cur ceóil le céill ar a mhian,
 Go h-uaigneach mall mar éan
 Do bhéadh ag labhairt leis féin ar chraoibh.

The poem 'Do'n Leabhar So' (about this book) addresses the book of poetry, the audience is waiting for it in the land of the poet's people. It concludes:

Éirigh uaim, is a leabhairín Ghaedhilge,
 Go dtéidh tú slán, agus slán a bhéas tú!
 Bail ó Dhia ort-sa 's ar lucht do léighte,
 Sin guidhe óm chroidhe, agus Dia le h-Éirinn¹⁴

In conclusion, Fionán Mac Cártha's poetry reflects the world view of a section of the Irish expatriate community in Australia whose rich oral and geographical background continues to resonate in their adopted home. His use of the Irish language, Irish themes and imagery in his poetry in Australia served to foster a continuation with both his literary and social past and to mitigate the effects of being out-of-country at

the end of the world.

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¹Salmon Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, London: Granta Books, 1991, p. 12

²Also known as 'Irish Gaelic' and sometimes 'Gaelic'. The Irish, however, only use the term 'Irish' for their native language

³All biographical information has been taken from Gregory Byrne's conference paper "In Exile From Home": The Poems of Fionán Mac Cártha, 1886-1953" in *Éire-Ireland*, Summer 1995, pps 118-130

⁴*The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature*, Robert Welch ed., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996. p. 208

⁵W.B.Yeats, 'The Song of Wandering Aengus', in *Yeats's Poems*, A. Norman Jeffares ed., London: MacMillan, 1989, p. 93

⁶William Carty, *The Waves of Cool-a-vin*, Brisbane, The Co-operative Press, 1945

⁷Literally 'Songs From The End Of The World, the word amhrán 'song', however, also serving as a description of 'verse in stressed metre'. Fionán Mac Cártha, *Amhráin O Dheireadh An Domhain*, Baile Aha Cliath: Oifig an tSoláthair, 1953

⁸ He is, however, included in the www.auslit.com.au database.

⁹Martin Haley, *Poems and a Preface*, Brisbane: W.R.Smith&Paterson, Pty. Ltd., 1936, p.4

¹⁰Mac Cártha's Glossary to *The Waves of Cool-a-vin* contains twenty-nine Irish language words

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¹¹*Poems and a Preface*, p.4

¹²According to *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature* the folkloric Deirdre was exiled for seven years to Scotland while Colum Cille was exiled, also to Scotland, in 563

¹³John Pengwerne Matthews, *Tradition in Exile*, Sydney: F.W.Cheshire, 1962, p. 186

¹⁴Go from me little Irish book/May you go safely and may you stay safe/God prosper you and your readers/That's my heart's prayer, and God with Ireland

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