

# **Irish Literature and Culture**

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# Literature and History



## Quarantine

by Eavan Boland

In the worst hour of the worst season  
of the worst year of a whole people  
a man set out from the workhouse with his wife.  
He was walking — they were both walking — north.

She was sick with famine fever and could not keep up.  
He lifted her and put her on his back.  
He walked like that west and west and north.  
Until at nightfall under freezing stars they arrived.

In the morning they were both found dead.  
Of cold. Of hunger. Of the toxins of a whole history.  
But her feet were held against his breastbone.  
The last heat of his flesh was his last gift to her.

Let no love poem ever come to this threshold.  
There is no place here for the inexact  
praise of the easy graces and sensuality of the body.  
There is only time for this merciless inventory:

Their death together in the winter of 1847.  
Also what they suffered. How they lived.  
And what there is between a man and woman.

# ***Key Dates and Historical Facts***

- **1845-1851** Great Irish Famine causes death of over 1m people and c. 1 million people emigrate between 1846 and 1851 (pop. Island of Ireland in 1841 was 8.5 million; in 1851 6.5 million)
- 1881 more than one third of all Irish-born people alive at time lived outside of the country
- **1916** 'Easter Rising': short-lived rebellion against British government (mostly in Dublin)
- 1918 Vote granted to women over 30
- **1919-1921** Irish War of Independence
- **1922-1923** Irish Civil War (those for versus those against establishment of Irish Free State: independence for 26 of 32 Irish counties; 6 Northern Irish counties remain in UK)



# ***New Irish State***

- 1922 Equal franchise to women in first constitution of the Irish Free State
- 1929 'Marriage bar' introduced whereby teachers had to resign posts on marriage (operable from 1932); later extended to all parts of Civil Service
- 1937 Constitution of the Irish Republic
- ***Article 41, Irish Constitution/Bunreacht na hÉireann (1937):***

*'The State recognises the Family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society.....*

*In particular the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.*

*The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that Mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home.*

*The State pledges itself to guard with special care the institution of Marriage, on which the Family is founded.'*

# Social Change

- 1979 Family Planning Act: 'Irish solution to an Irish problem' (result of cases to European Court and Irish Supreme Court; contraception theoretically limited to married couples for medical reasons, with opt-out clauses for medical personnel)
- 1983 Eighth Constitutional Amendment passed, established equal rights to life of the mother and unborn child
- 1986 Referendum confirmed constitutional ban on divorce
- 1990 Election of Mary Robinson as President of Ireland
- 1992 'X' case (14 year old) led to Supreme Court finding that abortion is legal if a 'real and substantial threat to the life of a pregnant woman' exists and later to passing of Abortion Information and Right to Travel Referenda
- 1993 Homosexuality decriminalised, with equal age of consent (17)

# Literature and Social Change



## The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks

by Paula Meehan

It can be bitter here at times like this,  
November wind sweeping across the border.  
Its seeds of ice would cut you to the quick.  
The whole town tucked up safe and dreaming,  
even wild things gone to earth, and I  
stuck up here in this grotto, without as much as  
star or planet to ease my vigil.

The howling won't let up. Trees  
cavort in agony as if they would be free  
and take off — ghost voyagers  
on the wind that carries intimations  
of garrison towns, walled cities, ghetto lanes  
where men hunt each other and invoke  
the various names of God as blessing  
on their death tactics, their night manoeuvres.  
Closer to home the wind sails over  
dying lakes. I hear fish drowning.  
I taste the stagnant water mingled  
with turf smoke from outlying farms.

They call me Mary — Blessed, Holy, Virgin.  
They fit me to a myth of a man crucified:  
the scourging and the falling, and the falling again,  
the thorny crown, the hammer blow of iron  
into wrist and ankle, the sacred bleeding heart.  
They name me Mother of all this grief  
though mated to no mortal man.  
They kneel before me and their prayers  
fly up like sparks from a bonfire  
that blaze a moment, then wink out.

# (death of Ann Lovett, 1984)

But on this All Souls' Night there is  
no respite from the keening of the wind.  
I would not be amazed if every corpse came risen  
from the graveyard to join in exaltation with the gale,  
a cacophony of bone imploring sky for judgement  
and release from being the conscience of the town.

On a night like this I remember the child  
who came with fifteen summers to her name,  
and she lay down alone at my feet  
without midwife or doctor or friend to hold her hand  
and she pushed her secret out into the night,  
far from the town tucked up in little scandals,  
bargains struck, words broken, prayers, promises,  
and though she cried out to me in extremis  
I did not move,  
I didn't lift a finger to help her,  
I didn't intercede with heaven,  
nor whisper the charmed word in God's ear.

On a night like this I number the days to the solstice  
and the turn back to the light.  
O sun,  
centre of our foolish dance,  
burning heart of stone,  
molten mother of us all,  
hear me and have pity.



# Contemporary Ireland

- 1997 Ceasefire in Northern Ireland (end of 'Troubles', Northern Irish Conflict began 1968); 1998 Good Friday Agreement established devolved rule and power-sharing in Northern Ireland
- 2013 Limited legislation passed in Irish Parliament with regard to 1993 Supreme Court finding allowing abortion if a woman's life is at risk, including risk of suicide: abortion and reproductive rights still a highly contentious issue in Ireland
- 2015 The Thirty-fourth Amendment of the Constitution (Marriage Equality) Bill passed (Ireland first country in world to legalise same-sex marriage by popular vote – 62% yes)
- 2016 (June) 51.9% of the participating UK electorate voted for 'Brexit'

# IDENTITY, LANGUAGE AND RELIGION

## **Ability to speak Irish 2011:**

- 1.77m say they are able to speak Irish in 2011 census (from total population of Republic of Ireland 4, 588, 252; Northern Ireland 1.8m)
- 41.4 per cent of respondents; decrease from 41.9 in 2006 but increase in real terms from 1.66m to 1.77
- 77,185 said they speak it daily outside the education system (increase of 5,037 since 2006)
- 110,642 said they spoke it weekly
- 613,236 said they spoke it less often than weekly
- One in four said they never spoke Irish

**Foreign Language 2011:** Over a half a million (514,068) Irish residents - 11% - spoke a foreign language at home including Polish – 119,526.

# IDENTITY, LANGUAGE AND RELIGION

## Religious Identity: 2011 Census

- 84.2% of the population identified themselves as Roman Catholic – decrease of 3% since 2006 but increase of 180,000 in real terms;
- Church of Ireland 2.8%;
- Non-Christian religions 1.9% including Islam 1.07%
- 5.9% identified selves as not having a religion; 1.6% did not state a religion

# The Language Question (in Irish)

## Ceist na Teangan

Cuirim mo dhóchas ar snámh  
i mbáidín teangan  
faoi mar a leagfá naíonán  
i gcliabhán  
a bheadh fite fuaite  
de dhuilleoga feileastraim  
is bitíúmin agus pic  
bheith cuimilte lena thóin

ansan é a leagadh síos  
i measc na ngiolcach  
is coigeal na mban sí  
le taobh na habhann,  
féachaint n'fheadaraís  
cá dtabharfaidh an sruth é,  
féachaint, dála Mhaoise,  
an bhfóirfidh iníon Fharoinn?

# The Language Question (English)

## **The Language Issue**

I place my hope on the water  
in this little boat  
of the language, the way a body might put  
an infant

in a basket of intertwined  
iris leaves,  
its underside proofed  
with bitumen and pitch,

then set the whole thing down amidst  
the sedge  
and bulrushes by the edge  
of a river

only to have it borne hither and thither,  
not knowing where it might end up;  
in the lap, perhaps,  
of some Pharaoh's daughter.

Poem by Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Translated by Paul Muldoon

# Literature, Myth and Wonder

## Seamus Heaney, “The annals say...” (Squarings: Lightenings viii)

Posted on [March 25, 2015](#) by [ashok](#)

*triptych, central panel*

“The annals say...” (Squarings: Lightenings viii, in [Poetry](#))

*Seamus Heaney*

The annals say: when the monks of Clonmacnoise  
Were all at prayers inside the oratory  
A ship appeared above them in the air.

The anchor dragged along behind so deep  
It hooked itself into the altar rails  
And then, as the big hull rocked to a standstill,

A crewman shinned and grappled down the rope  
And struggled to release it. But in vain.  
‘This man can’t bear our life here and will drown,’

The abbot said, ‘unless we help him.’ So  
They did, the freed ship sailed, and the man climbed back  
Out of the marvellous as he had known it.

# 60 years of Irish-Japan relations

## 2 Irish Haiku (by Michael Hartnet)

In the sad canal  
my face and a broken wheel –  
debris of dead tribes

I make my sad verse  
but hope keeps interfering –  
forget-me-nots wink

# 60 years of Irish-Japan relations

**Irish Haiku (by Seamus Heaney, Nobel Prize Winner, 1995)**

Dangerous pavements

But this year I face the ice

With my father's stick!





***Crediting Poetry: Seamus Heaney's Nobel  
Lecture (1995)***

Poetry's power: 'the power to remind us that  
we are hunters and gatherers of values'