Homecoming

An bealach 'na bhaile

Cathal Ó Searcaigh
(Photo by Rachel Brown)

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Selected Poems / Rogha Dánta

Cathal Ó Searcaigh

arna chur in eagar ag / edited by

Gabriel Fitzmaurice

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for Micheál Ó Searcaigh
my father
for his graciousness and his Poetry:
for Traolach Ó Fionnáin
our enterprising
Arts Officer in Co. Donegal, for his indefatigable
promotion of the Arts:

An Clár / Contents

Cuid / Part III

Cuid / Part IV

Cuid / Part V

Editor's Preface

Cathal Ó Searcaigh is one of a number of Irish poets who have unabashedly opened up to the world of the spirit, to the inner world where one is neither male nor female, Catholic nor Protestant, Hindu nor Buddhist; where the laws, if laws there be, of poetic and aesthetic propriety do not obtain. It is useless for the pedant to protest, the cleric to complain, the feminist to find fault, the city to censure — his is a free spirit that goes its own way with a good wish to all.

It would be easy for any, or all, of the above to accuse Ó Searcaigh of transgression, but that would be to miss the point. Ó Searcaigh is not an inept poet, irreligious, sexist nor culchie. These four areas are central to a poetic that is, in my reading, sensual and sensuous, a hymn to the human body as incarnation of the soul. He writes as much as a woman as as a man — not as androgyne but as one in whom the *yin* and *yang* of Chinese dualistic philosophy find expression, complementing each other and informing not only his poetry but his life. Like many before him, not all of them hippies, dope freaks or persons disaffected with society and/or disenchanted with themselves, Ó Searcaigh has turned to the east and eastern philosophy and religion to complement his Catholic upbringing. In so doing, he frees himself from the puritanism of Irish Catholicism and gains a celebratory vision which informs his poetry, placing him beyond the strictures of dogma where he comes to terms personally with the divine. I do not expect the cynical modern sensibility, crippled by angst and nausea, to make this leap with Ó Searcaigh into the light. But it might at least allow him his jump, even if all leaps, inevitably, end up back on the ground. It is the leap that matters — the leap and the mind it creates.

He would appear to be a sitting duck for feminist censure. And not without reason. Does he *compromise women with all his talk of sex and his own pleasure?* Ultimately I think not. He seems to me to be very naively, for which read "simply and honestly", celebrating the creative act, poetic

as well as sexual. He can hardly be blamed for its concomitant pleasure. Indeed, the centrality of women to him is revealed in *Súile Shuibhne* in which he states: "B'ise mo mhaoinín, b'ise mo Ghort a' Choirce" ("She was my darling, she was my *Gort a' Choirce*" — i.e. his home place). This is the central image, I feel, in the whole book. Place becomes person, significantly a woman. The *yin* is uppermost. He is a poet in exile (in the city, away from home, in the English language, in formal religion) and the thrust (the *yang*) of his poetry is to return to fertile ground, the sanctuary where he can be whole and fruitful. This he achieves in a poetry that is mellifluous and melodic, sensuous and sensual.

Eventually, like many artists, he achieves a sense of being at home in exile:

> "Now I pick up *Mín 'a Leá* and Mayfair
> On the same mad miraculous
> Frequency in my mind
> In this buzz I feel in Berkeley Square;
> While I discover myself with a positiveness
> I haven't already felt
> My own vibe, my own rhythm
> The exciting rhythm of life increasing and buzzing
> In the arteries that are my words.
>
> Like a flock of sheep being driven to the mountain
> The traffic is bleating
> Uneasily on the roads
> From Park Lane to Piccadilly
> And in all directions
> The offices.... grey green city mountains
> Sun themselves and rejoice in the May sunshine,
> For the first time I feel at home abroad."
>
> Home is where the word is.

He is not afraid of using certain words, words that tend to annoy the modern English-language reviewer. Words like "animated", "wholesome", "pure", "God", "heaven", "chalice", "desire" come naturally to him and invite us to a world where language is free of inhibition returning to its true function: to convey meaning, shades of meaning and attitude as clearly or as obliquely as its terms and context allow. Ó Searcaigh, then, with the sensitivity of a poet and the sensibility of a child ("Whosoever shall not receive the Kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein"), invites us to join him on his journey, echoing Jack Kerouac's, which "zigzags all over creation... Ain't nowhere else it can go". Like any worthwhile journey, it is an internal journey, a personal quest. A mystical journey that doesn't deal in easy mysticism. A journey that sets out from Gort a' Choirce, his physical, emotional and spiritual home, a journey that ends as it begins in the full knowledge that in *"the age of want... there will have to be a going back to the sources"*.

Gabriel Fitzmaurice
Moyvane, Co. Kerry.
29 January 1992

Introduction: A Yellow Spot on the Snow

Réamhrá: Ball Buí ar an tSneachta

Is grá geal mo chroí thú
A Thír Chonaill a stór,
I do luí mar bheadh seoid ghlas
San fharraige mhór.

You are my truelove
Tír Chonaill my darling
Lying like a green jewel
In the great ocean.

The above sentimental song composed during the nationalist and cultural revival around the turn of the century speaks of Donegal almost as if it were an island and seems almost prophetic in hindsight, since the partition which came with self-determination served to cut Donegal off to a large extent from its natural hinterland. It is joined to the rest of the republic only by a narrow band of land in the extreme south of the county. Therefore Donegal is in many senses an island, isolated and distinct with its own unique mindcast. It is ironic that, although part of what is known in current parlance as the "south", it is the northernmost of any of Ireland's thirty two counties. The continuing violence in Northern Ireland discourages many potential visitors, so that Donegal has not as yet fully succumbed to the naked commercialism of more accessible southern regions.

Donegal, *Dún na nGall,* means the Fort of the Foreigners. Originally

the name only applied to Donegal Castle in the south of the county but it has come to be used in both languages for the whole region. *Tír Chonaill* — Land of Conall — which the song celebrates is a much older name and properly used excludes *Inis Eoghain*, the peninsula of Eoghan, in the north east. Both Conall and Eoghan were sons of Niall Naoi-Ghiallach, High King of Ireland in the early fifth century and ancestor of the Uí Néill, a dynasty which controlled the succession to the High Kingship for five hundred years. Most of the aristocratic families of Gaelic Ulster claimed descent from him in former times. *Tír Eoghain — Land of Eoghan* — is also named for this Eoghan. Conall Gulban is known as the ancestor of *Cinéal Conaill*, the interrelated Donegal tribes of whom the O'Donnells became the most powerful and the best known. They were traditional hereditary chieftains of Donegal until the seventeenth century when the native order finally ceased to exist independently of English rule. In the middle ages Donegal maintained links with the wider Gaelic world both in the rest of Ireland and in the Lordship of the Isles in Scotland. There was a lot of movement back and forth at this time. The Scottish Gaels often provided mercenary fighting men, known as *Gallóglaigh* — Gallowglasses — for Irish leaders in time of war. Many of these settled in Donegal afterwards, a fact which the surnames of the area bear out. The origin of the Mac Sweeneys is well documented and MacPháidín and Mac Íomhair are but two other examples of local surnames which are also found in the Scottish Highlands. There was also intermarriage between the aristocratic families of Ulster and Scotland. The formidable Inghean Dubh, for example, a very ambitious character and the mother of Red Hugh O'Donnell was a Mac Donald from Islay and was known in her own day as "great bringer in of Scots."

The variety of Irish spoken in Donegal forms part of a linguistic continuum which stretches from Lewis in the north to Cape Clear in the south. Donegal Irish has many similarities to Gàidhlig. These were formerly attributed to the movements which have just been referred to, but now some scholars take the view that they are indigenous and not due

to any overt Scottish influence. Whatever their origin, these affinities render Donegal Irish different in many respects from the Irish spoken further south. This, together with Donegal's marginal location, causes many southern speakers to say that they cannot understand the dialect. Recently indeed, a row erupted when some southern teachers objected to the dialect being included in listening comprehension tests set by the Department of Education. Such prejudice, though commoner than might be wished, is not general. Although most competent speakers not unnaturally prefer their own dialect, they view the difference as interesting and exciting and do not feel threatened by it.

Donegal is a place of many contrasts. The fertile district of east Donegal is markedly different to the wilder and more barren west. The people of the west generally refer to this region as *An Lagán*. Much of the western area is designated as Gaeltacht or Irish-speaking although casual visitors may be disappointed in many districts if they expect to hear Irish spoken as the vernacular. Most of the area marked on the map will contain native Irish speakers but in many places English has become the usual everyday language. Irish is maintained in these as a second, lesser-used language. Linguistic competence generally decreases among the younger people in such communities. Their main contact with Irish will usually come from school and some may later choose to increase their fluency by joining a youth club or a drama group. The language becomes an occasional medium for them and they do not readily perceive it as a real language. Some however do make that transition and also become actively committed to arresting the further marginalisation of Irish in their localities.

It is believed that before the collapse of the Gaelic order, the western region of Donegal was very sparsely populated, although remains of human habitation survive the Mesolithic era. In 1609, during the Plantation of Ulster, the more fertile areas of the province were granted to English and lowland Scots and the Irish were allocated to the poorer, more mountainy land. It was at this time that many people moved into west Donegal. Here they lived just as they had always lived, self-sufficient

and independent, with little interference from the state. They worked the land and created the landscape to which Ó Searcaigh is so attached:

Here I feel permanence
as I look at the territory of my people
round the foot of Errigal
where they've settled
for more than three hundred years
on the grassy mountain pastures...
Above and below, I see the holdings
farmed from the mouth of wilderness.
This is the poem-book of my people,
the manuscript they toiled at
with the ink of their sweat.

Here at Caiseal na gCorr Station/Anseo ag Stáisiún Chaiseal na gCorr

Things continued in this manner until around the time of the Famine when the people began gradually to be drawn into a consumer economy. Shops were opened and the need for cash prompted many parents to send their children to work on the large farms in the *Lagán* district. The contract was usually for six months, the labour extremely hard and the wages a pittance. This practice continued until about fifty years ago. It was quite normal for children as young as nine years to go to the *Lagán* and they usually spent about five or six seasons on the *Lagán* before going further afield to the large farms and industrial cities of Scotland. The *Lagán* was considered child's work and the wages were better across the North Channel. The men began to go to Scotland around the same time and in doing so began a pattern which survived until the early nineteen sixties. They would often spend the better part of the year in Scotland working on the farms, coming home only in spring to help their women till their own small patch of ground. This life is well documented

in the regional literature, for example by Micí Mac Gabhann in *Rotha Mór an tSaoil* (translated as *The Hard Road to Klondyke)*. Cathal's parents, Mickey Sharkey and Agnes Roarty, lived this life. Mickey's passport for the war years gives "migratory labourer" as his occupation. Cathal has celebrated his mother's experiences in his adaptation of Derick Thomson's *Clann Nighean na Scadan; Cailíní na Scadán/The Herring Girls:*

It was history's confused mess which had left them abroad
slaves to the herring curers, to the short-arsed upstarts
in the towns of British Ports
from Lerwick in Shetland down to Yarmouth in England.
Well-seasoned was their prize, by God,
from the unceasing filling of the barrels
the sea wind sharp on their skin
and a burden of poverty
in their coffers
and but for their laughter
you would think that their hearts were broken.

In the nineteen fifties and sixties many young couples chose to remain abroad and some settled in Glasgow where there is a vigorous Donegal community to this day. Emigration reached its peak during these decades but slowed to a trickle in the seventies as better opportunities became available at home. Such emigration as there was then was more a matter of choice than of necessity. In the eighties emigration accelerated again, though it was not to Scotland that this generation looked but to south-eastern Britain, the cities of the United States and Australia. Although they were better educated than any of their predecessors, this did not decrease their sense of isolation in their new environment. Perhaps their education indeed heightened their awareness of their position and made

them more critical of the successive governments who failed to provide an alternative. By the nineties the Thatcherite boom had ended in recession and many of the emigrants have returned home, believing it preferable to live on the dole in a rural environment than in a foreign city:

To-morrow I travel on to a haven
Beyond the pitch and brawl of the seas:
The flats round here are a run-down graveyard
Where my young self walks like a nameless zombie.

Triall/Will Travel

Emigration then for the last hundred and fifty years has been a fact of life for the people of Donegal and has left its mark on their personality. The dream is to go away and to return a success and many achieve a version of this dream. More do not and they deal with it in different ways. In an attempt to preserve the illusion of success some never come back. Others return, not having succeeded abroad and became involved once again in the life of their home place. Their homecoming and resumption of their old lives is perhaps the most difficult decision. The Scottish writer Iain Crichton Smith himself from a rural, Gàidhlig speaking background, accurately describes the dilemma: "To return home is not simply to return home, it is to return to a community, for one's gains and losses to be assessed. The community is the ultimate critic, not easily taken in, with its own system of checks and balances." There are those who settle in the cities, marry, and bring up their families there. Their isolation is to a large extent replaced by an accommodation to the values of their chosen environment. They become cultural amphibians, functioning equally well at home and abroad, although this facility is not without its tensions and contradictions. Again Smith's insight into the matter is invaluable: "When I left the village community in order to attend the secondary school in Stornoway I felt as if I was abandoning the community

There was a subtle alteration to me in the attitude of my contemporaries who were not taking the road of education but would work on the land or on the fishing boats. Even now when I meet members of the community who have stayed at home there is a slight constraint in our relationship, there is a human distance. I have made the choice, I have forsaken the community in order to individualise myself."

This statement is reminiscent of one made by Seosamh Mac Grianna in *Mo Bhealach Féin: "Tá babhún dímheasa idir an té a théid chun coláiste agus an té nach dtéid."* 'A wall of contempt stands between the one who is educated and the one who is not.' In a striking simile Smith compares the community to a spider's web, where if one part is pulled the remainder trembles. In such a society everyone is part of the whole and no one person takes precedence over the rest. The community has its strengths in its concern for all its members and the structures which enable people to give practical expression to that concern. It has its own unwritten rules beyond which no one may go without risking censure. Smith discusses the concept of *clù* which he translates as moral reputation or standing. This reputation once lost cannot be regained. The community judgement lasts until the fourth generation and beyond. In fact this same word, *cliú,* is used to express the same idea in Donegal. It is significant in this context that the American ethnographer Henry Glassie has pointed out that lying, theft and murder are classed as crimes of equal gravity. Indeed he infers that stealing is feared almost more than murder, since it is the clearest instance of an attack by one member of the community on another who is innocent. Such attacks deeply offend the delicate balance necessary for its proper functioning. The desire to keep the machinery of the community smoothly running also accounts for the dislike of individualism. In more recent years the community has changed. Constant exposure to television and the aggressive consumerism promoted by advertising have had their effects. People nowadays lock their doors since crime is no longer unheard of and it is often perpetrated by members of the local community. Ó Searcaigh marks

the change in *An Tobar/The Well:*

But this long time, piped water from distant hills
sneaks into every kitchen
on both sides of the glen;
mawkish, without sparkle,
zestless as slops
and among my people
the springwell is being forgotten.

A word is necessary on Donegal's literary tradition which dates back to Bardic times when the O'Donnells and other aristocratic families maintained a professional class which included poets, historians and lawyers. Indeed one sixteenth century chief, Mánas Ó Domhnaill, has achieved lasting fame as a scholar and poet. At his castle in Lifford in 1542 he compiled the famous biography of his kinsman St Colm Cille. In the seventeenth century the patronage upon which the professional classes depended gradually ceased as the Gaelic aristocracy either emigrated or adopted English ways and customs. The custody of the native learning then passed to the ordinary people who, with succeeding generations became more remote from the bardic heritage. There was never a strong manuscript tradition of literary transmission here, unlike areas such as Munster and south-east Ulster where scribal activity continued well into the second half of the nineteenth century. The literature and culture of the people was transmitted by oral means for over three centuries. Inspired by the romantic movement and the growth of cultural nationalism which accompanied it, the upper classes found that the unlettered peasants, as they perceived them, possessed a heritage of their own which had hitherto remained unnoticed. Enthusiasts began to collect this material which they believed was in danger of imminent loss, and in 1927 the Irish Folklore Commission was established to systematically record this disappearing tradition. The Donegal man most

associated with this collection is Seán Ó hEochaidh, a native of *Teileann,* who spent fifty years engaged in this work. The results of his vast labour are stored in the archive of the Department of Irish Folklore at University College Dublin.

Oral literature takes many forms. In the past storytelling and singing were regarded as the highest artistic expressions of it. The *scéalaí* was a specialist whose province was the telling of the old stories. A special narrative style characterises these tales and great skill was required to tell them properly. The practitioners were generally older men. *Seanchas* was another distinct branch of learning, a term which can best be translated as local knowledge. This term was used in the days of the Gaelic aristocracy to define history. Seán Ó hEochaidh's main informant for the *Gort a' Choirce* area was Niall Ó Dubhthaigh, from whom he recorded over four and a half thousand manuscript pages of detailed knowledge on every aspect of local life. The songs belonged more generally to the community and the singing of them was an important part of any social gathering. This branch of culture also had its specialists who could be counted upon to remember rarer items of the community repertoire. There were of course the exceptional individuals who excelled at all three branches of traditional learning. Anna Nic a'Luain from *Na Cruacha Gorma* — the Bluestacks — springs immediately to mind. She gave the Folklore Commission fifty long stories, the texts of 250 songs and numerous items of *seanchas*. She was unable to speak English. Seán Ó hEochaidh compared her to a spring well during a long summer drought: every evening the well would be empty and on returning the next morning it was found replenished with clear life-giving liquid.

It is fashionable nowadays to point out that Ireland has been a bilingual society since the middle ages. This reminder is issued to counter the "monolithic Gaelic model" which nationalists put forward during the earlier part of this century. English was spoken in Ireland during the middle ages but it was certainly restricted to the areas outside Gaelic control. The important point is not the existence of the language but

its relationship with the dominant Irish language. The speaking of English in those days was quite naturally seen as a mark of education and an accomplishment to be enjoyed in much the same way as a continental language is seen today. The relationship was one of equality and there was certainly no thought at this time of replacing the native language with the other. This changed with the complete subjugation of Gaelic culture during the seventeenth century. The relationship of the languages changed. Irish was deprived of any official status and English became the only language of administration and law. The aristocracy became an English-speaking class. Irish was seen as backward, a mark of ignorance and poverty, and all who wished to advance under the new régime made the English language their medium of communication. This change was gradual but steady until after the Famine when it accelerated dramatically. English was established in Donegal during the early seventeenth century but Irish continued to maintain itself strongly side by side with it until about the eighteen fifties or sixties. Many factors contributed to the shift, some of which I have already mentioned. As the people became increasingly bilingual they began to assimilate the songs of the new language. Child ballads such as *Barbara Allen* and *John Barbour* became part of the repertoire as did songs like *A Lady Walked in her Father's Garden.* Ballad sheets hawked at fairs by professional singers contributed many more new songs to the repertoire. Some of the Gaelic songs acquired English equivalents to their verses:

Tá mo chleamhnas a dhéanamh inniu agus inné
Is ní mó ná go dtaitníonn an bhean adaí liom féin
Ach fuígfidh mé mo dhiaidh í is rachaidh mé leat féin
Fá bhruach na coilleadh craobhaí.