

The Willow's Whisper

The Willow's Whisper:
A Transatlantic Compilation of Poetry
from Ireland and Native America

Edited by

Jill M. O'Mahony and Mícheál Ó hAodha

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P U B L I S H I N G

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For Jane

*An angel appears and shows me my
shadow in the moon.*

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—J.M.O'M

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ABOUT THE EDITORS

Jill M.O'Mahony is a Lecturer in The Waterford Institute of Technology, Ireland. She has previously studied English Literature and Sociology in The National University of Ireland, Maynooth and The University of Manchester. She is working on a doctoral research project which focuses on performance, liminality and event in Native American Poetry. She lectures in the Sociology of Consumption, Modern Ireland, Narrative Identities and Communications. Her research interests include Political Anthropology and Transcultural Literature.

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of the “heart” or “soul” of a poem may seem like an overly-romantic notion, but that very instinct to look beyond the mundane ultimately ensures this art-form’s transformative or transcendent nature. The romantic or idealistic in creative endeavour simply reflects that which we hope for in life and therefore the romantic in poetry only exists because we long for it. Existential issues of love, death, happiness and meaning have always been subject matter that the human being has felt a need to comprehend, and poetry perhaps more than any other art-form, is demonstrative of this. The practicalities of day-to-day existence are never enough to satisfy us. We create and read poetry to transport us into a world where even when the tropes may frighten, poetic lyricism brings consolation. Poetry illuminates the best and the worst aspects of human nature, whether explored in a collective or individual fashion. It challenges dominant realities in a textual fashion and challenges all orthodoxies, whether conceptual, political, social or psychological. When all else fails, the beauty of a poem can stand up fearless and bright against the backdrop that is often the grey sky of humanity. The poems in the following compilation are a testament to this reality, we hope; they offer a glimmer of beauty in a world where there is great need of it.

If we regard poetry or indeed, music, film or art, as mere modes of entertainment we limit their potential and run the risk of restricting their reach within the boundaries we have created for them. When we categorise poetry as an aesthetic creation and under-represent its social, political or human value, we miss out on its most important element; its essence or heart. Poetry has the ability to put its finger on the *zeitgeist* of a particular social context, and in failing to give due attention to this fact we ignore its potential and its transformative nature. A valuable conduit for social commentary and the voice of hope or possibility are thus rendered impotent and the importance of artistic awareness is minimised in favour of a more scientific view of the world. The poems within the pages of this book demonstrate a strong soulful or metaphysical element and this introduction offers an analysis of some of the more distinct thematic concerns which they highlight. It takes account of the fact that the poems are living textual creations in themselves, and are therefore beyond any

final or definitive analysis; they will change and be relevant in different ways according to the specific contexts in which they are interpreted.

“Ag cruinniú ort sa tsamhradh
tig spideog is smólach le scéal,
as ceiliúr seo na n-éan

cruthaím duanta is ceol”

“Gathering by you in summer
the robin and thrush tell stories,
from this babble of birds

I make poems and song.”

—Proinsias Mac a’ Bháird, *I mo shuí cois fuinneoige os cionn Bhéal Áran*
(*Sitting by a window above Aran Sound*)

One of the eternal questions writers, painters and musicians pose in their work is the following - “can subjectivity through a painting, sculpture, song, book or poem lead to a knowledge which may prove valid to the self and others, those who may inhabit a realm outside of one’s subjective experience”. In other words, can art created subjectively be valid objectively?

Artists such as W.B. Yeats and Wassily Kandinsky believed that they could connect to an objective and spiritual level of the universe through their art. But to what extent are such claims of elemental truth or esoteric knowledge legitimate? Can art access unbiased or uninhibited human truths? If it can, to what extent can it influence our perception of reality or effect it?

Before we can really explore any of these questions, we need to situate this book within the cultural, historical and social context from which it emerged. Derived from an array of diverse cultural traditions and perspectives, the poetry collected here ranges from the cultural traditions of the Navajo, Cree, Cherokee, Inupiaq Eskimo and Lovelock Pauite in the North Americas to the Quechuan people of South America and the (Gaelic) Irish of Ireland.

These cultures are all postcolonial to one extent or another and it is unsurprising to find the tropes and themes of many of these poets and poems engaging with this particular legacy. Almost all of the poets gathered here explore questions of authenticity with regard to nationality or ethnicity, a reality which brings to the fore questions such as “Is it ethnologically authentic to restrict yourself solely to works within your

native language?” or “Must you have a blood connection of more than a certain degree to be a bona fide member of an indigenous group?” Following on from this a range of questions emerge as relating to native cultural traditions in general and associated artistic approaches. What of “issues” as relating to apparent “genealogical”, tribal or geographical authenticity? Most of these debates, we feel, come down to questions of community (group) self-ascription and the conceptualization that is self and “other” within a particular society. Who one *is* can also be defined by who one *is not*. How useful is it to maintain cultural delineations and borders reinforcing ideologies of self and other if some of these cultural delineations are in themselves false or irrelevant categorizations? Do we maintain them in order to preserve the distinguishing characteristics of each unique culture or to ensure that they avoid fading into and onto the pages of history? Is apparent “self-segregation” the way to maintain unique or particular cultural phenomena? How reasonable is it to suggest the paradox that there are positive elements within the increasingly “homogenised” social diversity of the (post)modern era? Should the cultural homogeneity of the past as relating to each group be diluted in favour of the trans-culturalism that many consider likely as the new way?

Even if “older” concepts of cultural homogeneity sit uncomfortably with us today, it is a reality that the new “multiculturalism” of the present era has no option but to engage with the patterns of hierarchy and the power structures which defined many societies and cultures in previous generations. The danger is always that in forming novel cultural “categorizations” or approaches we help lead society down new paths of exclusion or stigmatization rather than celebrating a new and multi-faceted diversity. So, where do we go from here? Is it possible in modern society to be truly “multicultural”? Is a society based on recognition and mutual respect, one where most forms of exclusion are absent, even a conceivable or likely reality? Have certain cultures been subjugated at the expense of a larger or more dominant “culture” for so long now that change is unrealistic? Has living in a specific cultural environment while subjugated to the contextual markers of that other culture proven “too much” for some minority cultures at this historical juncture? Perhaps the will is no longer there to engage in or explore aspects of indigenous cultures which are simultaneously trans-cultural or multicultural in nature?

“Agus sin mise ansiúd thall i m’aonar,
i gcoirnéal mo ghruaime,
ag stánadh go héadmhar,
óлта ar fhíon rua mo chuid filíochta,

mo chuid filíochta Gaeilge
nár thuig éinne.”

“And there’s me in the corner,
alone, dejected,
gawping wide-eyed with jealousy,
drunk on the red wine of my poetry,

my ‘Irish’ poetry
that no-one understood.”

—Gearóid Mac Lochlainn, *Aistriúcháin (Translations)*

Indigenous cultures have, in some ways, been engaging in a form of assimilation of cultural phenomena throughout history. Members of these cultures sometimes take on elements of other cultures unaware of the implications of such actions, and sometimes overlooking these implications for the greater good – namely self preservation. This can be called trans-culturalism and is shown in many ways throughout different communities, but the Navajo tradition gives us the fundamentally positive mythological beginnings of such an instinct.

It is said that the Navajo people began with ‘Changing Woman’ (Iverson, 2002). The creation story begins with a First Man and First Woman who had two children, but as these children were siblings they could not procreate. First Man and Woman were past child bearing age and so the Navajo people could not have continued through this family alone. However, in one version of the story, there was a first boy (representative of thought) and first girl (representative of speech) who had a daughter – Changing Woman (Witherspoon, 1977). Changing Woman became pregnant by The Sun and produced six clans created of the skin from different parts of her body – and thus began the Navajo Nation.

Changing Woman is not only an example of the notion of positive change leading to sustaining life but also intimates that maintenance of the Nation should be achieved by using innovative means and ultimately by avoiding insularity. Gary Witherspoon puts it perfectly in his book *Language and Art in the Navajo Universe* when he says “[Changing Woman represents] the capacity of all life and living things to achieve immortality through reproduction” (1977: 18). This is suggestive not only of human procreation but also of producing and reproducing cultural phenomena. It may be worth taking a moment to ponder whether this attitude has real potential regarding cultural authenticity.

Culture can be defined as the representation (through music, language, custom, tradition, ritual etc) of different truths within a specific context. Therefore, incorporating specific elements of an alternate culture can be

progressive, as they may be particularly relevant and true within an emerging cultural context. Perhaps cultural authenticity exists when the social grouping survives and maintains its own traditions regardless of whether those traditions have similarities with other cultures or groupings or are adopted from them. Perhaps it is the community spirit which redeems, reproduces, sustains and maintains cultures. Taking on elements of another culture and making it one's own does not necessarily lead to the break-down of cultural tradition. It is the breakdown of community spirit that leads to the break-down of cultural tradition. Once a sense of community is maintained, once competition is not a factor and once a people have the ability to learn and change, a social group *can* be 'immortal', as the essence of Changing Woman suggests.

“they wanted a native poet
 to round out the environmental element
 expecting eagles and blue mountains majesty
 or at least
 red scarf tied like a headband
 and angst over white dominion
 instead
 they got a rez poet
 talking alcohol abuse and government cheese
 but in a nice way
 they got white collar worker
 with dyed red hair
 wearing designer blue jeans
 they didn't get what they expected
 which was a 'coup'
 in the most traditional indian sense of the word
 they were disappointed
 she took her check and didn't care.”
 —Nila NorthSun, *Indian Poet*

The poetry in this compilation engages with the question of culture in many different ways. The reality of changing civilization has been unavoidable whether that change is forced or chosen. Either way, the poets enjoy a unique positioning between two cultures in some cases, and more in others. The importance of maintaining a unique ethnic heritage can be gleaned from some of the poems while others touch upon incorporating elements of alternative cultures. The distinctive nature of this compilation lies in each poet's cultural situations; as poets creating cultural artefacts between two or more societies they have the benefit of an insight into both the traditional way of life and that society which they may live apart from

but within, in perhaps a trans-cultural manner. The view from this ‘trans-culturalist’ mind then, is that which allows the subject access into additional cultural ‘truths’ and renders them (more) objective. Their poetry is a discourse on the traditional, the contemporary, and the conflict between the two and/or the desire to make them co-existent. This is the development of a voice from the middle ground. It is an acknowledgment of a troubled yesterday, a controversial today and the dream of a progressive tomorrow. Here you will find poetry that adds something to social and political discourse by its particular character.

Language itself is representative of the cultural positioning which this poetry enjoys. Many of the poems in the compilation are written in the poet’s native language while many are written in the language that is not native to the poet. This latter example can be seen as one culture’s ideologies, traditions and meanings signified by another culture’s language. In the former case perhaps the opposite is true—a native language depicting cultural truths of a trans-cultural situation. Does this create a new truth capable of another level of awareness?

How do I know when I know my language is no longer English or Navajo?
My breath a Hogan song building a new dwelling?
—Esther Belin, *Teacher’s Manual Q & A, Session One*.

What can be hoped for within the pages of this book then, is that we find a myriad of breaths, each a Hogan song building a new dwelling (a Hogan song is sung while a ‘Hogan’ – Navajo home – is being blessed).

In her poem entitled *Us Them*, Esther Belin speaks of elementary differences between the two cultures of which she has direct experience. The Navajo Nation is depicted as the “us” that is intimately linked to nature –

“The lightning-tipped rainbow scented like dust
A taste full as the reflection of us”

While the colonial force is depicted as the other that dominates and exists separately from nature –

“We are eager to explore and see what adventures could benefit us I
believe in steadfastness in this journey”.

In the first case, knowledge is found in the natural world and inherent in the human being, in the second case knowledge is to be found, understood, analysed and finally dominated. This connection to Nature as life force is

found not only in the Navajo culture, but in the Lakhota, Cherokee, Celtic Irish, etc. The use of *Salvia* in the Chippewa tradition, Peyote in the Huichol and many Southwestern Athabaskan language groups has been documented as a method of connecting with a type of esoteric knowledge (Le Barre, 1970). The Celtic Irish Druids also consumed Fly-Agaric Mushrooms in order to engage in a state of trance, with the aim of accessing both subjective and objective knowledge and truth (Andrews, 2010).

This fundamental feature of Native American and Celtic Irish communities is symbolic of a deeper awareness. The land or the natural environment were and are of great importance to these particular cultures, their understanding of the world and their place within it. Nature is a vital aspect of existence. To the Dinè (Navajo), nature is Mother; life giver and sustainer. Without her all beings would cease to exist. With the European enlightenment and the following prevalence of rationalism as a way of thought in 'Western' cultures (I use this term hesitantly), the respect afforded to the natural environment as an equal in status and right began a decline. Perhaps in becoming so separated from the earth and the land we live upon, we also become separated from ourselves. If we are all connected through and with the natural world, it stands to reason that when this bond is broken we ourselves become fragmented as subjects.

If we consider the concept of time this becomes clearer: In many modern societies time is perceived as and treated as linear. There is a perceived past, present, and future. In most Native American and Celtic Irish societies, traditionally speaking, time was perceived as multi-linear; there was no particular past, present or future. The universe; the mind or memory of its inhabitants and their mark on physical things are all a part of what went before, what is now, and that which has to yet to come. Yesterday may have made its mark on today, which makes it a valid part of the now. Today's happenings create a tomorrow so that there is touch of the past, present and the future within all of their variables. Beyond this, within a possible spiritual world-tomorrow can be grasped and that which went yesterday can again be observed.

“Bhí grá agam duit amárach
Beidh grá agam duit inné
Tá na haimsirí Ionat go léir
Dein do rogha rud leo
Scrios iad”

“I loved You tomorrow
Yesterday I will love You

All tenses are in You
Do with them what you will
Destroy them”
—Gabriel Rosenstock. *Inné/ Yesterday*.

The fundamental feature of this approach to life is the element of possibility. We may have become too literal in modern times and so have stopped seeing what might be and instead see what we are given to see, that which we are convinced is tangible.

This collection of poems provides an aesthetic commentary on the potential which is beyond or perhaps within the everyday or the mundane. This volume should aid us to reconnect with that part of our being which we may have lost touch with; that part of us intimately linked to nature. It will help us see life in every meandering stream as it surges and animates, and in the breeze moving through the branches of a willow—a whisper of hope.

Jill M. O’Mahony 2011



NATIVE AMERICAN POETRY

N. SCOTT MOMADAY

Navarre Scott Momaday was born in Lawton, Oklahoma. After graduation from the University of New Mexico, and a year of teaching on the Apache reservation at Jicarilla, Momaday won a poetry fellowship to the creative writing program at Stanford University. In 1969, his first novel, *House Made of Dawn* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Momaday moved to the University of California at Berkeley as Professor of English and Comparative Literature. He designed a graduate program of Indian Studies and taught a popular course in American Indian literature and mythology. His long study of the Kiowa oral tradition bore fruit that year in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, a collection of Kiowa tales illustrated by his father Al Momaday. That same year, he was initiated into the Gourd Dance Society, the ancient fraternal organization of the Kiowas. His more recent books include: *The Ancient Child* (1989), *In the Presence of the Sun* (1991), *Circle of Wonder: A Native American Christmas Story* (1993), and *The Native Americans: Indian Country* (1993).

A Miracle of Strings

One instrument among others,
One sound, Or perhaps more –
An orchestra, and many sounds in the one –
But the one is centered upon the cello.
It rises and falls and floats. It resounds.
The strings are the strings of the heart.
The vibrancy is that of the ocean wind,
And versatile as the human voice.
When I heard you play, I heard the breathing
Of my soul. I heard the clear music of being.

Dark Enlightenment

I wander in dark precincts of the mind
And often on the byways I am blind.
I seek enlightenment of every kind,
And yet to darkness is the mind inclined.

ALLISON ADELLE HEDGE COKE

Allison Adelle Hedge Coke was born between paternal oratory and sudden maternal madness; somewhere north of the condor and south of raven. Crow sometimes cawed morning into malady's mixture, pouring song and hack into bleating skies, swirling sunrise and set. Once, high over the Arctic, she witnessed the pounding lights hammer horizon. Since that time her rendezvous with realtime has been a real ride. Allison Adelle Hedge Coke is the UNK Endowed Reynolds Chair of Poetry & Writing. Her authored books include: (American Book Award) *Dog Road Woman* and *Off-Season City Pipe*, poetry from Coffee House Press; *Rock Ghost, Willow, Deer*, a memoir from the University of Nebraska Press; and *Blood Run*, a verse-play from Salt Publications. Hedge Coke has edited eight additional collections, including *Ahani, I Sing You Back*, and *Effigies*. The poet, memoirist, fiction, & scriptwriter, has been an invitational performer in major poetry festivals in Colombia, Venezuela, Argentina, Canada, and Jordan, a Hawthornden Castle Fellow, and foreign poet at Shandong University in Wei Hai, China. Fiction publications have appeared in *Best American Fiction*; *Black Renaissance Noire*; *Indian Country Noir* (Akashic), and *Bombay Gin*. She is Oendat, Tsalagi, French Canadian, Portuguese, Irish, Scot, English, Metis and Creek descent and came of age cropping tobacco and working fields, waters, and working in factories.

Crossing Sky Vault Worlds

For Vaughan

Sun pulled up the ledge of horizon and peeled night from Sky
Vault
as her daughter led endless streams of stars toward Moon.

Red Horse stood near on green grass against blue dawn awakening.
Winds spiraled, with twisting turns, beckoning flush of sky.

White Horse stands anon on black earth, pawing dank soil for
roots.

Fires raise blazing, razing, thatched roofs, conjuring milky smoke upward.

Black Horse hooves along coconino cliff wall precariously balanced.
Stones tumble, rocks anchor, embrace charcoal stratum.

A buckskin bears down on sandhills, blowing wheat through billowing nostrils.
Rivers twine, join, swell and flow green-grey across valleys below Sunroad.

Corn, Sunflower raise their faces toward Sun as she slides into place among blue heavens.
Squash send floral swirls orange-red up into ground fog mist.

An ant angles his way watching constantly for morsels along the path.
Violet morning glories stream upward reaching with their petals wide open for bursting light.

Rays split seams of blue casting hopeful yellow-white strokes beaming brightly. Seasons later,
Red Sioux Quartzite speckled white by snow and fully ice-crusting, holds firm hallowed Sioux Falls grounds nearby.

Glass flows, creating prisms in century-aged windows across this room. Rainbows flourish here. Long ago,
Black Dog spoke to his master, foretold the coming world flood in time for a raft to be built sparing Real People.

Children in Quebec, before encroachment, pleaded for maple sweets each fall. Were pumpkin lanterns lighted?
In my Huron grandmother's midwifing beaded bag, the entire universe gleams at me through pointed stars in dreams.

War Horse lifting his masked face, pawing Earth, withers quivering fast, hard, nostrils flare then snort-charging.
Peace comes to the People only through prayer and good intent. Quarrels crawl, edging Earth, in its presence.