

The Steam Rising: A Walk Along the Harbour's Edge

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I live in a town of ghosts. Kinsale, a harbour town on the rocky Cork coast, is a place with a complex history reflecting numerous changes of fortune over the centuries. Today it is largely a tourist town attracting overseas visitors to its bars, restaurants, cafés, and scenic harbour. In other times it has been an impoverished fishing village, a garrison town and an acclaimed gourmet capital. To wander the streets is to walk amongst the past. Despite the best efforts of contemporary town planners there lingers evidence of days gone by in the narrow, winding streets, the few fishing boats still eking out a living and the smoke that arcs illicitly in the air at winter.

A few years ago I might have encountered the Northern Irish poet Derek Mahon as I walked down to the harbour. Mahon, himself attracted to ports, harbours and other places on the borders or edges of being, lived the last years of his life here. We often met for coffee in one of the many cafes or occasionally at a drinks party or informal poetry evening. Mahon's own work has long been an exemplar for me, and I particularly remember my first encounter with his most anthologised poem, "A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford". The scope and scale of this poem, which John Banville called "the best single poem written in Ireland since the death of Yeats", was all the more extraordinary for the specific location: an abandoned outhouse in a rural corner of South-East Ireland. Whilst

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the poem ranges across history and geographical place the concept of giving voice to places and people on the margins is something that struck me especially forcefully. The opening line, “Even now there are places where a thought might grow”, draws the reader into considering lives lived “in a twilight of crumbling / utensils and broken pitchers”.



Not far outside Kinsale, on the other side of the river that runs into the sea, is an abandoned house I once visited with my photographer daughter. We pushed open the rotting door and stepped into the past. A diary for 1985 lay open on a small table in the hall beside a pile of unopened letters. Dust motes buzzed like midges in the diffused light and a photograph captured a ghostly presence in the room. We were caught between worlds; order and decay, dark and light, the hard brown furniture and the heavy air that lay with the dust on bedsheets, counters and a dining table. Past lives were evident in the photographs, trophies and the tennis racket placed atop the table, waiting for decades to be picked up once more. We stumbled back outside, into the light, and, although there was no one else around, heard the unmistakable sound of someone humming to themselves. I wrote about this in “The Humming” a poem which attempts to bridge the invisible gap that exists between past and present, considering its presence as “oblivious to the laws / of physics, the apparent passage of the years”.



A walk along the harbour’s edge leads me to contemplate the lives that depend upon the intersections and boundaries that surround us. An aeroplane crosses “from sky to sky”, makes its way to Britain or Europe as if these names mean any one thing. In the inner harbour I loop around the Scilly Dam, murky and still like a pool of forgetfulness. The yachts that dominate the water along the Pier Road are here replaced by odd little fishing boats and buoys, a reminder of the days when the town contained a large fishing industry and was dependent upon the tides and seasons to bring in fish such as mackerel to sell at the water’s edge. A few fishing boats still head out from the other end of town, the slipway at World’s End, but the road by the dam is mostly a parking spot for expensive

campervans in the summer and a quiet corner for herons and egrets in the colder months.

Up the short, sharp hill to the hairpin bend that shapes The Spaniard Inn. I pause outside to admire the mural painted a couple of years ago. It's a loose copy of an old photograph of the poet Desmond O'Grady, Kinsale resident who died back in 2014. The painting captures the poet in full flow, reading aloud from a book of poems seemingly in a state of rapture. This pub, for me, marks the boundary between Kinsale and Scilly, which was once an independent fishing village, but has now been assimilated into the moneyed encroachment of the town.

The Spaniard has mercifully been spared from development and the interior is dark, cosy with a spit and sawdust floor. In the summer people sit outside on the bend soaking up the evening sun, drink in hand. The rest of the year the natives gather in the locals' bar, the fire is lit and sometimes a fisherman might bring in a few fish to be cooked on the open fire. This was O'Grady's sitting room as he called it and I spent many an hour here with him downing pints of Beamish, cheaper than Guinness, and listening to his stories concerning his life and travels. He knew everyone. He left Limerick in the 1950s to live in Paris and later Rome where he had a small speaking part in Fellini's classic film *La Dolce Vita*. I was more interested in his friendship with Ezra Pound and the influence of that poet's work on O'Grady himself. O'Grady, like Pound, turned to translation that shapeshifting art and produced volumes of versions from Arabic, Greek, Kurdish and other languages. He lived on Paros, Greece, in the summers but in his later years preferred the crooked Kinsale coast, the "dark edge of Europe" as he referred to Ireland.

In a poem I dedicated to O'Grady, "The Poet Returns With His Catch," I wrote of poetry as navigation, a "careful orientation" along the coastline. My walk now takes me down a short hill past the idiosyncratic Harbour Bar and the large modern house that replaced The Spinnaker bar and restaurant some time ago. The Spinnaker was once owned by Hedli MacNeice, widow of the poet Louis, and played a major role in the evolution of Kinsale into a gourmet town. MacNeice, a poet whose work slipped deftly between English and Irish impulses, was a huge influence upon Northern Irish poets Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley and Derek Mahon. He found a way to draw on his Irish identity whilst avoiding insularity and extending his range of interests to Britain, Europe and beyond. In his poem "The Manuscripts of Louis MacNeice" O'Grady connected Kinsale to the North, echoing the long march down through the

country by Hugh O'Neill and his armies resulting in the Battle of Kinsale in 1601 which was the final nail in the coffin for the Irish Gaelic order.

The road here narrows, known as the Low Road it winds just above the water with views across the harbour as far as the New Bridge and Castlepark where the ruins of James Fort still stand. Up above is Ardrack, literally speckled height, and a row of apartments, controversial in their day, which command views over the town and estuary. Towards the end of the lane rangy conifers provide shade. Over Christmas in 1997 many of these came down in a big storm. In another of my early poems, "The Hurricane Report," the speaker skims stones across the harbour whilst at the same time contemplates the holiday homes, "sculpted into brash / versions of ourselves." Nevertheless, there is a realisation that such constructions are a "sheltering from nature" and thus indicative of the way, in Western thought at least, the human has separated themselves from the natural world. Tellingly the rain rolls in from the west and "small triumphs / begin to disappear, slide underwater."

The bridges and sea-walls observable in this area are elements of the means of overcoming the problems of living on the edge. A harbour is not an immovable static object, but one that is shaped by other forces. In 1755 the Lisbon earthquake set off a chain of events that included a tsunami which crashed against the southern coast of Ireland. The renowned harbour of Kinsale and the Bandon river streaming into it were radically altered in an instant. Much of the current town centre is built upon the sand and silt which was washed in overnight, reclaimed land. The river itself, once navigated by large ships bringing trade upstream, was reduced to a shallower shade of itself. Nature works both slowly and at speed. In another poem, "The Landscape of Mountains," an earthquake is heard as "a distant rumble / and crash heard somewhere in my sleep."

Imperceptibly through Rincurran and its small church, now a cultural centre, and graveyard. The church was once a couple of miles away beside Charles Fort but was moved stone by stone to this more inland setting. The hill steepens down into Summercove with its tiny waterfront and pub facing across the bay. Sheltered though it is storms, and high tides often wash in across the car park scattering stones and seaweed over the tarmac. Up again the path crests to the large star-shaped fort, Charles Fort, with its vantage view to the south and west. Such places create their own stories, legends grow up like lichen in the brickwork. Ghosts stalk the battlements. The "White Lady" an ethereal presence, victim of tragedy on her wedding night and recalled in written and oral records seen or sensed as a "lost soul in the corridor."

Ports are portals, places of transportation between worlds in many senses, not just the physical tangible spaces, but also the imaginative, the spiritual more abstract aspects of our lives. Histories shape not only the geography of a place, but also the mental landscape of the people, the superstitions and the unexplained sounds and shapes that shift in the night. If you look carefully as you wind your way along the rugged coastal path away from the fort you can still make out the outline of old cottages, now mostly rubble, strewn here and there in the patchwork of trees. There's a busy boatyard and new houses dotted around but once these were little villages living on their wits. In 1790 the French Consul visited one of these, Middle Cove, and had a conversation in French with a local peasant girl. She had learned the language on trips to Brittany and the implication here is that these trips were connected to smuggling.

I leave behind evidence of habitation, the land is wilder now, less shaped by man and in the summer the path will be almost too overgrown to pass. The ferns here can grow above head height and the views out west towards various peninsulas are obscured by green fronds arching over the passer-by. Autumn sees a dieback and once more vistas are revealed, the seal bobbing down below and the flat rocks where Eastern European fishermen sometimes come, fishing the same spots their Irish predecessors frequented. Sometimes you can see the rain come in, its steady unrelenting grey sweep pushing in from the horizon. Slowly the line between sea and sky dissolves into a mizzle and then a down-pour which might pass almost as swiftly as it first appeared.

The farthest point of the headland is a rocky outcrop known as Hangman's Point, on the edge of land and sea, life and death. Stories abound of how pirates were hung here and their bodies left dangling above the crashing waves as a warning to others. It's now a quiet spot. A place of contemplation. Somewhere to watch the cormorants, listen to the screeching gulls wailing in the wind and occasionally see a whale or pod of dolphins swimming by. It was from close to here in that strange hiatus of lockdown that I watched a minke whale casually feeding, "an old presence seeking new ground."

Time stretches, curves with the horizon in these in-between places. I remember walking here yesterday or was it three years ago? Walking with my daughter through the furze, pushing the limits of a five-kilometre restriction. We watched the sun set below the headland and then as we climbed higher it rose and set again. These moments form the origination for "Second Chance", a poem that finds comfort in a place where nature and wonder prevail even as the evidence of man is reduced to a disappearing presence. The sunset "relives

the warmth, revivifying / birdsong amongst the ghosts of tractors". At places like this the poetry of nature subsumes human interference. One can hear the sound of the future hissing, as Derek Mahon put it in his poem "Tractatus", "the steam rising wherever the edge may be."

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