

*Foibne Chrainn:
The Patience of a Tree*

A Memoir of
Michael Hartnett/Michéal Ó hAirnéide

I have a reproduction in my study of a painting of Michael Hartnett by the Limerick artist John Shinnors and I keep coming back to it. Basically it focuses in on the eyes, those wonderful dark eyes that were in his case very much the windows of the soul. These eyes could gleam with fun and malice and quick mischievous glee. (The Michael I knew was a very funny man, not for nothing dubbed “the fastest pun in the West”, and his eyes were as quick and darting as his tongue.) But they also could speak of other things and in this particular painting they look for all the world like the eyes described in his own poem “Sickroom”:

But I can see your fear,
for two wet mice
 dart
cornered in the hollows
of your head.

Michael came from Newcastle West. A “townie” born and bred, he honoured his native place in a series of vernacular-style ballads. My favourite lines come from “The Maiden Street Ballad”, (sung to the air of “The Limerick Rake”):

They say that in Church Street no church ever stood
Nor to walk down Bishop Street that no bishop would.
They say that in Maiden Street maidenhood
Was as rare as an asses pullover.

This is annotated in a mock-academic way by a footnote on asses' pullovers which adds to the general hilarity of the piece. In spite of this I hesitate to identify Michael with the town of Newcastle West, because it rises out of the rich hinterland of the Golden Vale, an area protected by over three hundred extant Norman tower-houses, the Normans having a great appreciation for good land when they saw it.

Michael belongs rather to the uplands beyond Newcastle. To Templeglantine, out west and up the Barnagh Gap. This belongs to the general area of Sliabh Luachra and had a strong Irish-speaking community in living memory, a fact which is still important in the local culture. The view down from the Barnagh Gap out over the rich farmlands of East Limerick is quite spectacular. The uplands are very different. Michael himself made much of this distinction, making out they were two entirely different tribes to this very day. He insisted that he himself belonged to the early prehistoric peoples of Ireland, the Fomorians or even the Tuatha De Danainn, his surname "Ua hAírneide" meaning "People of the Stone-Axe". Whatever the truth in all of this, it was definitely with 'Glantine that he identified. It was near here in the townland of Camas that he was fostered out for a while as a child to his grandmother, Mrs Bridget Halpin, reputedly one of the last native speakers of Irish in the district. Michael often told me that he learned Irish from her as a child. According to his own poem he also learned much more:

All the perversions of the soul
I learnt on a small farm,
how to do the neighbours harm
by magic, how to hate.

This was the real "Hidden Ireland", not the rose-tinted vision of Daniel Corkery, though it included that as well. Mrs Halpin was Michael's touchstone to a much older world:

Ignorant, in the sense
she ate monotonous food
and thought the world was flat,
and pagan, in the sense

she knew the things that moved
 at night were neither dogs nor cats
 but púcas and darkfaced men,
 she nevertheless had fierce pride.

(“Death of an Irishwoman”)

And again:

Her fear was not the simple fear of one
 who does not know the source of thunder:
 these were the ancient Irish gods
 she had deserted for the sake of Christ.

(“Mrs Halpin and the Lightning”)

These gods included Donn, the old god of Death, connected with the nearby Cnoc Fierna and also included the dreaded spectre of the Barnagh Gap “Sprid na Bearnan” It was Michael who told me all I know about this ferocious phantom, and he told the tales so well that he fair put the heart crosswise in me. So much so that I never pass that particular stretch of road without invoking her, because, well, you never know... “Sprid na Bearnan” used to terrify travellers in that part of the world until she was imprisoned in a tree by a local priest. This tree was known locally and left untouched until in the middle of the twentieth century, that dismal time when all the old gods lost their power, it was chopped down by seven men, each of whom came to a bad end, the last dying violently in a knifing in London. This is the subject of a poem of Michael’s in Irish , “Foighne Chrainn” which ends:

ach bhí scian ag feitheamh leis
 i Londain
 I nglaic sa dorchadas.
 I ngleic sa dorchadas.
 Bhí an scian roimhe ann
 ’s ce gur mhiotal í an lann
 snoíodh an fheirc as díoltas crann.

Translated by himself in *A Necklace of Wrens*, this goes:

...but a knife waited in London.

In a hand, in the darkness
in a fight, in the darkness.

The knife was waiting there
and though metal formed the blade
from a tree's revenge
the hilt was made.

The factual reality of this may be disputable but Michael, the raconteur, told them as mighty good stories, and Michael the poet made very good poems out of them.

It was here to 'Glantine that he retreated after his spectacular leave-taking of English, "A Farewell to English":

I say farewell to English verse,
to those I found in English nets:
my Lorca holding out his arms
to love the beauty of his bullets,
Pasternak who outlived Stalin
And died because of lesser beasts...
.....

I have made my choice
and leave with little weeping:
I have come with meagre voice
to court the language of my people.

And he meant it. Self-exiled out in 'Glantine he wrote in Irish only for about ten years. He got little thanks from the established writers of either language for this enormous sacrifice. The English-language literati, perhaps threatened at some deep level by this action, turned snide, muttering about his farewell to English that "nothing so became him as his leaving it". He also found the welcome of the Gaeilgeoirí somewhat less forthcoming than he might have expected. All this rankled, but he held out, holed up in 'Glantine and studied, studied all the while. This period of intense absorption in the Irish language paid off handsomely later with his masterful translations from Ó Bruadair, Aodhagán Ó Rathaille and Padraigín Haicéad. It also produced some of the most lucently beautiful short lyrics written in Irish in the twentieth century, poems such as "Dán Práta"

(“Potato Poem”), “An Dobharchú Gonta” (“The Wounded Otter”) and “Dán do Lara, 10” (“Poem for Lara, 10”):

a bhanríon óg thír na leabhar
go raibh tú saor i gcónaí
ó shlabhra an bhróin.

Little queen of the land of books
may you always be thus
may you ever be free
from sorrow-chains.

He also produced some of the best stabs at that rough yet shy and elusive beast, the Long Poem, notably in “An Lia Nocht” (“The Naked Surgeon”) and—though, to my undying shame, I resisted the fact for years because I didn’t like the first line—“An Phurgóid” (“The Purge”).

Michael’s Irish was very much an emanation of the man himself: dapper, formal in a slightly old-fashioned way, eminently literary. He brought a vision to the language that was shaped by his wide reading in, and deep knowledge of, world literature. He handled the language like a master-craftsman. What he wrote was definitely not the “caint na ndaoine” of an t-Athair Peadar, which had won out over more literary versions of the language at the start of the Revival period. But then, what poet ever really writes “caint na ndaoine” (though it can often be approximated as a literary style, another mask or pretence)? Michael’s Irish, beautifully hand-scripted as always in the “sean-chló”, was part and parcel of the man himself. And Michael was always himself. He was, and remains, for me the very epitome of what it means to be a poet.

I still distinctly remember the first day I met him. When I arrived home from Turkey in 1980, I asked my colleague Liam Ó Muirthile what had happened in the Irish language since I had left seven years before. “Oh”, he said, “Michael Hartnett has given up English and moved to Irish”. I remember wondering whether he was mad, because it was one thing for the likes of us who had always written in Irish to continue in that particular narrow furrow, but for someone who had a well-developed and recognisable voice in English, to throw it all to the winds did seem a bit wilful at the very least. I was in awe of such a deci-

sion and decided there and then that I really must meet this man. I was living in West Kerry at the time and often used to travel up and down to Limerick to see my parents. I knew he lived in West Limerick and one fine afternoon I decided to see if I could find him. It wasn't as easy a task as it might have seemed. For starters, there were three Michael Hartnetts living in the vicinity. "Michael Hartnett, the poet", was no help either, because that actually meant a local English-language versifier, who produced fine versions in the vernacular of the exploits of the local hurling team. Eventually I tracked him down to a house just off the main road, near a particularly lethal humpy-backed bridge snaking over the railway line. There was a huge twenty-foot box hedge just across the road, proof that this area had once been settled by Palatines, because they were the only people who had had enough security of tenure to be able to envisage planting a box hedge, notoriously slow-growing. I went into the house, rather boldly, and introduced myself. We became friends on the spot.

For the next three years Michael's house was a regular stop on our journeys up and down to Limerick. If we called in and he wasn't at home, he would be sure to be found in one of a few regular watering-places in Newcastle West. Then, as chance would have it, he moved to Dublin more or less about the same time as I did myself. He helped me get used to what I felt at first to be a very alien city. I had always considered myself an Irishwoman only to realise, when I hit Dublin, that actually all of my life lived in Ireland had been spent in Munster. And I insist that there is a difference. Dublin to me seemed very much The Pale, and if it had not been for Michael I might not have made my peace with it so easily. He introduced me to Grogan's pub, the only place in Dublin that would cash a cheque for me. It was there that we sat, at Dermot Bolger's invitation, and worked out what poems he would translate for my *Selected Poems/Rogha Dánta*. He came out to the house regularly. He became the godfather of my third child, my daughter Ayse.

At that time he switched back to English again, with *Inchicore Haiku*. Later he settled in the Leeson Street area and was to be found regularly either in The Leeson Lounge or The Waterloo Inn on Baggot Street. I rarely drank in town, though, as I would always have to face the drive home to the suburbs, and gradually I got caught up in the nitty-gritty of small children and school

runs and the usual 'Mommy' stuff that took every minute of my time left over from writing. My husband became ill, and my social life was reduced to naught and slowly, inexorably, Michael drifted out of my life. I don't think we drifted apart, in the sense that to the very end there was an instantaneous understanding which sprung up again whenever we met. There was no need, even, for the usual few minutes thaw-out when we met, usual at poetry readings. The last time I saw him was at the launch and book-signing for *The Whoseday Book* on 26 September 1999. He looked like an *iarlais*, or changeling, or the tiny little *dreoilin* with which he identified ("The wren, the wren, the king of the birds/ St Stephen's day was caught in the furze").

In less than a month he was gone. I keep asking myself, and anybody else who knew him, why he had to die so young. But then again, would that I could live so long myself, and half so creatively. His *Collected Poems*, edited posthumously by Peter Fallon is full of surprises, and we have been promised two more volumes, one of translations and another called *A Book of Strays*, which will include his work in the Hiberno-English genre, one of the three different languages he wrote in. So he is still constantly with us, and his work will make sure that he is never really gone. I miss him enormously. I consider myself privileged to have known him.