

# Harpsong: The Poetry and Music of the Celts

by Catherine Fletcher

The word Celtic conjures up any number of things from images of knotwork and spirals to nature-loving neo-pagans to football and basketball teams. The modern word Celt is derived from the Greek *Keltoi* used by Herodotus to refer to a group of people living in the Danube region in the mid 5th century BC and has since been used to refer to tribes found from Eastern Europe to the Iberian Peninsula to France and the British Isles. The Celts have been described as diverse peoples grouped together based on Greek and Roman writings, archaeological evidence, linguistic evidence, nationalism, and pure speculation. Common practice demonstrates that the peoples thought to be Celtic have exhibited the following characteristics at different points in time: a tendency toward decentralized authority, a propensity for war, a respect for the natural world with an often metaphysical bent, a high degree of craftsmanship in metalworking, the presence of women in high-ranking roles in society, a fondness for feasting and drinking, and a rich tradition of poetry and music. Among the contemporary cultures that identify themselves as Celtic are the Irish, Scottish, and Welsh.

Some of the earliest records of literature in northern Europe are manuscripts from Ireland and Wales that date from the 11th and 12th centuries. Works such as *The Book of Aneurin*, *The Book of Taliesin*, *The Book of the Dun Cow*, and *The Book of Leinster* contain poems from the bardic tradition (often from as far back as the 6th century). As the curator of Celtic Music and Poetry for the *People's Poetry Gathering*, I have been struck — both in the historical and contemporary poems — with what occurs in this verse on Temair (or Tara), the ancient seat of Irish kings:

Is mise Fintan fili, nirsam écne óen-lindi;	<i>I am Fintan the poet, I am a salmon not of one stream;</i>
is and romtócbad co mblaid	<i>it is there I was exalted with fame,</i>
ar in fót-brug os Temair.	<i>on the sod-built stead, over Temair.<sup>1</sup></i>

Amidst the praises of the distinguished noble line appears the proclamation of the authorial “I”— Fintan the poet was here. This “I” also appears in the riddles of the mythical Taliesin such as “Câd Goddeu” as well as one of the earliest works from Scotland: the anonymous undated waulking song “Seathan Mac Rìgh Eireann,”<sup>2</sup> a first person lament in which a woman refuses to let go of her dead love, even to the Virgin Mary.

This “I” becomes not only a voice but the full blown subject of the lyrics of the 14th century Welsh poet Dafydd ap Gwilym such as “Trafferth mewn tafarn” and here in the infamous “Merched Llanbadarn”:

Am na chefais (drais  
drawsoed)  
Onaddun' yr un erioed,  
Na morwyn fwyn ofynaig,  
Na merch fach, na gwrach,  
na gwraig.

*Though I long for them  
like mad,  
Not one female have I had,  
Not a one in all my life,  
Virgin, damsel, hag, or wife.<sup>3</sup>*

And it occurs elsewhere in Celtic language poetry in the gloating of Clan MacDonald's bard Iain Lom after the defeat of Clan Campbell — “Sgrios oirbh mas truagh leam bhur càramh/'G éisdeachd anshocair bhur pàisdean” (“To Hell with you if I care for your plight,/as I listen to your children's distress”)<sup>4</sup> or in the self-pity of Mathghamhain Ó Hifeárnáin as he walks 17th century Munster trying to sell his poem. I am continually struck by the distinctive voices of individuals that are evident in early bardic and lyric poetry in languages such as Welsh, Irish, and Scots Gaelic as well as in the modern, post-Romantic era where the artist's first person flourish is apparent in the poetry of Dic Jones, Hugh MacDiarmid, Seán Ó Ríordáin, Sorley MacLean, W.B. Yeats, Dylan Thomas, and the artists performing at this festival.

The presence of the English, the French, and the Spanish have driven the Celts to the far fringes of Europe over the past 1,000 years, to often rocky, windswept, nearly uninhabitable areas or overseas to the Americas and Australia. They have been geographically marginalized. Culturally, they are anything but that. The rough estimate of the speakers of Celtic languages is approximately two million today, yet their voices continue to be heard in the literature and music of their own languages and of their regions' more dominant ones. Thriving smaller languages demonstrate qualities that distinguish their cultures from the mainstream society around them. So too with the modern day Celts. But within Celtic culture there always exists a space for the distinctiveness of the individual as well. Has the ability to mythologize and reinvent the self as well as the society contributed to the cultural survival of this group? Do the distinctive Celtic landscapes and sometimes marginalized status breed a rugged individualism apparent in the poems? What links do the contemporary poets share with those of earlier centuries? Does their poetry and music offer any answers or is this individuality merely the work of exceptional artists? Welcome to Harpsong and listen for yourself.

1 “Temair,” George Petrie, ed. and translator from *CELT: The Corpus of Electronic Texts*, Edward Gwynn, ed. (Cork: University College, Cork and The Connacht Project).

2 *Introduction to Gaelic Poetry*, Derick Thomson. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990).

3 *Dafydd ap Gwilym: Six Poems*, Gwyn Thomas, translator. (Powys: Gwasg Gregynog, 1985). English translation by Rolfe Humphries from *The Oxford Book of Welsh Verse in English*, Gwyn Jones, editor. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

4 *Orain Iain Luim*, Annie M. MacKenzie, ed. (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd for the Scottish Gaelic Texts Society, 1964). English translation by Derick Thomson from *Introduction to Gaelic Poetry*, Derick Thomson. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990).

**Matthew Fitt, from “Kate O’Shanter’s Tale”**

Now, wha this tale o’ truth shall read,  
Ilk man and mother’s son, take heed:  
Whene’er to drink you are inclin’d,  
Or cutty sarks run in your mind,  
Think, ye may buy the joys o’er dear,  
Remember Tam o’Shanter’s mare. Ye  
ay, ye  
ah waant a wurd wi ye

juist poppt in, duid ye  
oan the wey hame fae wurk, wur ye  
juist poppt in  
fur a wee blether, wus it  
a cheerie chinwag, eh  
a quick hiya boys tae the smithie an the millar, eh no  
an a wee hauf o hevvie juist  
tae keep juist  
tae keep ye gaun, like

ay  
bit juist the ane tho  
ay, juist the ane  
an a wee ane, mind  
juist the wee, wee, wee, weeiest ane  
an then ye’r awa hame  
ay  
sulky sullen dame an aa that, ken  
ay  
gaitherin her broos, sae she is  
ay, juist the ane  
gaitherin stoarm, ken  
nursin hur wrath, whit  
ay, juist ane but  
ay, nae bather  
ay  
oh, ay

**Robert Minhinnick,  
from “Twenty-Five Laments for Iraq”**

The muzzein voices break the night  
Telling us of what we are composed:  
Coffee grits; a transparency of sugar;  
The ghost of the cardamom in the cup’s mosque.

These soldiers will not marry.  
They are wed already  
To the daughters of uranium.

Sherazade sits  
In heat and dust  
Watching her bucket fill.  
This is the first story.

Before hunger  
Thirst.  
Before prayer  
Thirst.  
Before money  
Thirst.  
Before thirst.  
Water.

Boys of Watts and Jones County  
Build cookfires on the ramparts of Ur.  
But the desert birds are silent  
And all the wolves of the province  
Fled to the north.

While we are filming the sick child  
The sick child behind us  
Dies. And as we turn our camera  
The family group smartens itself  
As if grieving might offend.

## Gwyneth Lewis, "Rhodd"

'Oriawr yn anrheg? Amser gan fy ngwr?  
Sut allet ti roi breichled aur yn glwyf  
mor ddwfn am fy ngarddwrn? Y mae troi  
y rhod ddyfeisgar ym mherfeddion hom  
yn elyn inni, mae fel ffiws ar fom  
a fydd yn chwythu pob cariad rhyngom  
yn deilchion ryw ddydd. Na, nid heddi chwaith,  
ond er mor gwyrain ydyw'r gwaith  
ar ddanedd yr olwynion, mae eu tuaith  
yn llyncu'n bywyd, yn ei rwygo'n rhacs  
i ebargofiant.' 'Amser yw fy rhodd  
i ti. Nid ei beirianwaith — y mae'n anodd  
gweld gwallt yn gwynnu — ond ei led  
a'i ddyfnder, serch â'i gysgodian caled  
a'r gwybod am angau. Na, mae cariad dau  
fel coercerth a daw'r eiliadau  
ato yn wyfynnod brau  
mewn heidiau i edmygu'r golau  
cyn i ni farw. Ond, am y tro,  
gwisg dy oriawr aur fel O  
a chofia ein bod yn gylch, ac yn ei ganol  
y gwacter ffrwytholon a fydd ar ein hôl.'

## "The Watch"

(translated by Robert Minhinnick)

*The present of a watch?  
What's my lover playing at?  
As if time is a tourniquet  
for the gold wound in my wrist.  
I don't think I'm disposed to trust cog-logic  
as it counts the days down  
to the moment love leaves with its whimper.  
No, and today's no different. These seconds  
are piranha teeth at their frenzied work  
and if hours have ghosts then ghosts will be all that's left.  
Yet time's the gift,  
not all its blackboard formulae.  
Old age is only the opened door  
where we eavesdrop on death  
and learn that lovers can do nothing else  
but loiter beneath a lightning tree.  
Talk's pointless. So I'll wear this watch:  
soul-mirror, the white well where I drink,  
and kiss the mouth  
that swells  
to swallow me.*

## Gearóid MacLochlainn, "Ar Eití"

Deir Mo Chara nach labhróidh sé Gaeilge  
arís go deo.  
Go deo na ndeor, le bheith cruinn  
faoi dtaobh de.  
Tá cúpla focal ag agch bocamadán  
sa chathair seo anois, ar sé,  
tá sé ag éirí trendy.  
Tá Gaeilge ag an comharsana béal dorais fiú.  
Ach is iad na Gaeilgeoirí proifisiúnta  
na daoine is measa ar ndóigh, ar sé.  
Beidh sí ag gach duine roimh i bhfad,  
díreach cosúil leis na fóin shoghluaiste sin  
nó cable is e-mail!  
Nuair a thagann an t-am sin ní labhróidh mé níos mó í  
ná Béarla ach oiread.  
Éireoidh mé ar eití tosta, ar sé,  
cláirseach faoi m'ascaill,  
gáire ar mo bhéal  
mar... Harpo! ar sé  
is d'imigh sé leis ag bocléimneach  
síos an tsráid.

## On the Wing"

(Translated by Gearóid MacLochlainn)

*Mo Chara says he will never speak Irish again.  
Not till the fuckin' cows come home, to use his words.  
Every eejit in this town has a cúpla focal, he says.  
It's getting fuckin' trendy.  
Even the new neighbours speak it.  
Before long everybody will have Irish,  
just like mobiles, e-mail,  
and friggin' cable, he says.  
When that time comes, I'll not say another word of it  
or English either for that matter.  
I'll rise above it all  
on wings of silence  
and a smile on my coupon like...  
like fuckin' Harpo! he said  
and he went on by  
hop-scotching down the street.  
Maybe he's going over the top a little.  
Like I said before,  
he hasn't been himself lately.*

### **Aonghas MacNeacail, “cunntas”**

cunntas

's a chaob chumhang seo  
dhe'n a' bhliadhna 's na làithean  
a' dùnadh astaigh air a' ghréin  
bi thu cunntas nam bàs  
na tha falbh a bha san aon sgrìob  
bi thu tomhas dilseachd do chlann  
dhan chairt-iùil a dheònaich thu dhaibh  
agus d'oghaichean mar a tha iad a dealbh  
cànain nach tuig thu mìr no meur  
nas fhasa bhi cunntas nam bliadhna  
ged a b'fheàrr leat gun

is an té ud cho  
bòidheach 's a h-uchd a fàs  
agus tusa fighe

### **“counting”**

**(translated by Aonghas MacNeacail)**

counting  
in this narrow bite  
of the year with the days  
closing in on the sun  
you sit counting the deaths  
those now gone who walked the same track  
you measure your children's fidelity  
to the route-map you wanted for them  
and your grandchildren how they shape  
a language as foreign as trees to you  
much simpler to count the years  
though you'd rather not  
but see her beauty  
that one whose belly is growing  
while you are knitting

### **Cathal Ó Searcaigh, “Ceann Dubh Dílis”**

A cheann dubh dílis dílis dílis  
d'fhoscail á bpóga créachtaí Chríosta arís;  
ach ná foscail do bhéal, ná sceith uait an scéal:  
tá ár ngrá ar an taobh thuathal den tsoiscéal.

Tá cailíní na háite seo cráite agat, a ghrá,  
's iad ag iarraidh thú a bhréagadh is a mhealladh gach lá;  
ach b'fhearr leatsa bheith liomsa i mbéal an uaignis  
'mo phógadh, 'mo chuachadh is mo thabhairt chun aoibh-  
nis.

Is leag do cheann dílis dílis dílis,  
leag do cheann dílis i m'ucht, a dhíograis;  
ní fhosclód mo bhéal, ní sceithfead an scéal,  
ar do shonsa shéanfainn gach soiscéal.

### **“Dear Dark-Haired Love”**

**(translated by Frank Sewell)**

My dark dear, dear dark-haired love,  
our kisses open Christ's wounds up;  
don't open your mouth, don't tell a soul -  
our love's on the wrong side of the gospel.

The local girls are going crazy,  
trying to win you away from me;  
but you prefer us on our own,  
kissing, cuddling till the healing comes.

Lay your dark dear, dear dark head,  
Lay your dark head on my breast, dear friend;  
I won't say a word to a living soul —  
For you I'd thrice deny a gospel.

### **Iwan Llwyd, “La Boca”**

Tra bod dau yn dawnsio tango ar y stryd  
ac awel o'r lwerydd yn La Boca,  
a rhai yn gweld dros orwel pell o hyd,  
a gwin fel haul y bore ym Mhatagonia;  
tra bod cân a cherdd a thra bod iaith  
i eirio'r mymryn gwllith a'r gusan ola',  
a thra bod un hen gaucho'n croesi'r paith  
a haul y de yn mynd i'w wely'n ara';  
tra bod y du yn wyn, a thra bod darlun  
yn stomp o baent, tra bod y morfilod  
yn cadw'r oed ar ochr bella'r penrhyn,  
a thra bod d\_r yn wyrdd yn Nant y Pysgod,  
fe fydd yr angylion bychain yn y wal  
yn gweld breuddwydion eto'n cael eu dal.

### **“La Boca”**

**(translated by Iwan Llwyd)**

While two dance the tango on the street  
and a breeze from the Atlantic hits La Boca,  
while some still gaze over a far horizon,  
and wine flows like the morning sun in Patagonia;  
while there remains a song and a poem and a language  
to tell of a single dewdrop and one last kiss,  
and while one old gaucho crosses the pampa,  
and the southern sun sets slowly in the west:  
while the black is still white, while the portrait  
is a mess of colours, while the whales  
still make a date on the other side of the headland,  
and while the water remains green in the Arroyo Pescado,  
the little cherubs that decorate the wall  
will still hear the sighs of dreams that call.