

Truce



*"I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made;
Nine bean rows will I have there, a hive for the honey bee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.
And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes
dropping slow,
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the
cricket sings;
There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
And evening full of the linnet's wings.
I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements gray,
I hear it in the deep heart's core."*

"The Lake Isle of Innisfree"

W.B. YEATS

"The SF [Sinn Fein] cause and organisation is breaking up ...there is no need of hurry in a settlement. We can in due course and in our own fair terms settle this Irish Question for good"

Hamar Greenwood, The Chief Secretary for Ireland

"There are of course one or two wild people about who still hold the absurd idea that if you go on killing long enough, peace will ensue.

I do not believe it for one moment but I do believe that the more people are killed the more difficult a final solution becomes"

Commander in Chief, in Ireland, Neville Macready

"I call on all Irishmen to pause, to stretch out the hand of forbearance and conciliation, to forgive and to forget, and to join in making for the land they love a new era of peace, contentment, and good will."

King George V

"To say that we were jubilant would be untrue. It was more bewilderment. Through the years of struggle, the hangings and executions and sufferings had generated in us something unchristian. Our lust to kill had not been satisfied."

Volunteer, County Monaghan

University College, Cork

Monday, 11th July 1921

Eileen was nervous as she boarded the train at Blackrock on her way into the city. She had chosen to wear her light blue chemise dress with its delicately designed lace collar and her white pumps. The previous day she had her hair cut into a fashionable bob and she was hoping the look of her would provide the confidence she needed as she faced the ordeal of her finals. She had fitted a cloth portfolio around the frame of her finished piece, to help with its ferrying to college. "If I am not ready now I never will be," she thought to herself as she had closed the front door of Riverview. It was the day her Da had longed for, but would not see. She owed it to him to be at her best.

She had prepared long and hard for this day, had dreamt many times of being in front of her examiners with her work displayed before them, vulnerable in all its simplicity. Would it capture enough of what was inside her? Express, to their critical, even censorious eyes, the vision she had set herself to portray?

The months without Micheál had been long and hard, fretful about his whereabouts and safety, missing his comforting presence, his reassuring voice, his encouragement. His absence like a dull ache to be endured. Things had gone from bad to worse in the country. The very air had become bitter and the city and county had sunk into a morass, a labyrinth of killings, murders, reprisals, burnt-out houses, terror, viciousness, hatred, enmity, hostility and fiercely held antagonism. Killings and reprisals doubled by the week as 1920 ground on into 1921. It was as if the people were continuously holding its breath, awaiting the next atrocity; ordinary people going about their daily lives under a cloud.

Eileen looked at this very real contagion, and guided by the memory of her dear Da, sought a different view. She wanted to excavate the beauty of her county and its people, capturing their aboriginal spirit in her creations, in her art. Obligated, in the middle of all this turmoil, to forge a pastiche of the land which distilled all its wild beauty, the deep dignity of its people in their daily quest for life, their acquiescence to the unknown and the

mysterious; uncovering their identity and soul; simple ordinary unsophisticated folk, women and men, making their peace with life.

During the winter months she had lived in Sherkin island. Sherkin. Replete with memory. How she loved that island, her own 'Little Isle of Innisfree'. The family had spent many happy holidays there in her childhood in Mrs Roche's house. Everything about the place had enraptured her from the very first encounter. Vivid recollections of stepping into John Willie's boat as they sailed from the harbour at Baltimore, excitedly looking forward to the days ahead. The rich green expanse of water washing away, cleansing them as they headed to that magical place, landing, disembarking in gleeful anticipation, past the ruins of the Franciscan Friary and up the hill, the overgrown boreens winding their way to the Atlantic side, in and out of fissures of land and water, mystical in its intrinsic beauty, capturing the soul of the land and its island people, the very air teeming with the sweet aroma of summer.

Long days in the sun on Silver Strand or Noreen's bay; Searching the rock pools, bracing the cold waves rushing in from the ocean beyond. Mass on Sunday in the little chapel, a chance to meet with new found friends and reflect on the glories of weeks past and adventures planned.

Her Ma had been alive then, alive and captivated by the place. She remembered days with her, stalking otters in Horseshoe Bay, following their spraints, rewarded by glimpses of their proud heads above the deep green water, fishing; Picking wildflowers for the table; Scanning the rock pools for gems. Mattie and Da joining others in fierce games of hurling on the smooth strand. In the evening, as Mattie and she were tucked into bed with a glass of milk and a marietta biscuit, counting the indents on its circumference to prolong the pleasure, her Ma and Da would trek across the island to John Willie's for 'ceól agus craic'.

Sherkin was the place to guide her reflection. At the beginning she felt daunted. How could she give expression to the thing that was resonating inside her. To bring forth its beauty. She trawled the island, seeking inspiration, gathering quintessential materials; Driftwood, shells at the Atlantic shore; Roots, berries, bark; Turf

from bogs carried with such dignity to light and warm winter fires; Arran weaves that spoke a family's name; Perfection in lace filigree; Discarded fired fragments from the potter's kiln; Stones from rock pools and creeks to mirror her precious find, sandstone, lime, chalk; Thatch golden from the sun; Wild grasses dried in the wind. She spent hours in Mrs Roche's, grinding, dissolving and extracting the pigments, firing them in clay kiln that Micheál had shown her how to construct, melding the raw materials of the countryside to form a subtle yet untamed image, a prospect, textured and worn, which characterised the deep soul of her people and depicted their celebration of blessing and life.

She surrendered herself to the process, all the time open to where it would lead her, curious, energised, inquisitive. There were moments along the way which authenticated her voyage of discovery. Enamoured, touched deeply by Native American rock art, it's pared-down simplicity pointing to mystery, a treasure of a life lived in community and solidarity, in union with the immanent cosmos. The Conquistadors, seeking gold and fortune of a temporal nature, had missed and obliterated the real wealth of heritage and understanding inherent within the vision and lifestyle of the many tribes they had overrun. Instead they brutally and in ignorance slaughtered people in their thousands and consigned to oblivion the wisdom of centuries.

Eileen wanted to mine, explore, reveal and exhibit the quiet self-esteem of her people, their deep connection with the earth, wild and glorious, the land perched as it was on the edge of the Atlantic, the last outcrop of Europe, somehow carrying in its essence the mystery of the eternal in the now.

After the winter of exploration and composition, today was the day when all her efforts, her reflections, her work would be placed in the open. Her notebooks, scrapbooks replete with her commentary, understanding and vision: The finished work, a framed image, textured, layer on layer, to be seen, touched, felt, seeking to celebrate identity and origin. Her heart beat faster with the thought of it, the uncovering of her soul.

When she alighted from the tram on the Western Road, she saw a group of her friends gathered at the quadrangle of the college. There was something strange about their gait. Were they

as nervous as she was? And yet, their expressions didn't seem to exhibit a strain. Instead, even from this distance, their faces were wreathed in smiles, arms clasped around one another in some sort of communal embrace of exhilaration. On catching sight of Eileen, struggling as she was with her portfolio and satchel, walking towards them, they turned and rushed over to her, screaming, screeching with joy,

"ITS OVER, EILEEN, ITS OVER!!!!!!!"

The jubilation in their faces astonishing to Eileen, a transformation she had not seen before, an iridescent eruption of exaltation.

One of her friends, Úna, grabbed her and spun her around,

"The British, they've called for a truce. Its over. We've won."

Eileen could hardly take it in. Is it true? The conflict gone? The news cast her into a tumult of emotions. Relief, oh blessed relief. She would have Micheál back. But pain and sadness. Her Da not there, gone and missed now, keenly so, taken by the turmoil that had won this day. She fell to her knees and sobbed. Úna was taken aback for a moment and did not know what to do. In the midst of her own unconfined joy, she was brought back to earth, with a crash, remembering the cost of this day. She was suddenly transported, as others were throughout the country that day, into a conflicted state, thoughts colliding violently, in a clash of syllogisms, differing ergo's falling, tumbling from scrambled minds and hearts.

"Isn't it great. The day has finally arrived. Its here!!!!!"

"Why did it not happen earlier?"

"We can begin to dream again! Life can start now!"

"Why did we lose so many? Oh if he was only here!"

"We can be at peace in a new Ireland!"

"Why so much hatred? How can we escape that?"

"We can build our own nation, our own, free identity!"

“Why did we have to suffer the destruction of our city?”

There were no answers. The pain of sorrow and loss was inextricably and inherently bound up in the ontology of this new day, this new dawn, this new frontier. Eileen was comforted by her friends as they gathered her to her feet and held her. Tears of inconceivable elation and bliss were mixed with profound sorrow and anguish as she allowed the news to sink in, to become absorbed into her very being.

The exams were cancelled as was everything else. The whole city seemed to expel its breath and spontaneously, here and there, at street corners, crossroads, pubs and shops, people burst into song and dance. Neighbours, friends, comrades who had travelled together in the terror and wrath that had engulfed them, now embraced and reached out to one another with a different consciousness, glad to be alive and present to one another, knowing with certainty and conviction that, as they come through this, they could, together, endure anything that the future threw at them.

As ordinary men and women greeted the rapture of that glorious day, the 11th July 1921, no-one knew or could have guessed that within a year, just a short twelve months from their celebration, from this ecstasy, all would be plunged into a convulsion of hatred, an outpouring of fratricide, a division of bitterness that would wound immeasurably and hopelessly all their desires and dreams and leave each one, in their own individual torment, paralysed, trapped by memories of what could have been and should never have happened.

