

An account by Diane Fahey of places visited and people met during the Australian Poetry Tour of Ireland, 2013.

From early May to early June of this year I took part, with Ali Cobby Eckermann, in the Australian Poetry Tour of Ireland. This tour was funded by the Literature Board of the Australia Council, and organised by Nell White, National Director of Australian Poetry Inc.

Starting in Dublin, Ali and I gave readings and discussed our approaches to poetry at the National Library, the Irish Writers' Centre, Tallaght County Library and at the Manor House School in Raheny. As throughout the Poetry Tour, we were met with warmth and courtesy, and engaged in rich conversations about poetry with our audiences.

While in Dublin, we were able to take in various sessions at the Dublin Writers' Festival. The reading by Robin Robertson, the London-based Scottish poet, was a highlight for me, his taut, compressed style carrying great power. Wild North Sea winds blew through his last poem, an eerily gothic tale of selkies, which was both compelling and unnerving.

My time in Dublin also afforded me the opportunity to visit the National Museum of Archaeology, the National Gallery of Ireland, the Hugh Lane Gallery—all wonderful institutions housing superb collections—and the atmospheric Irish Writers' Museum. At the Chester Beatty Library, I found displays of many sacred texts, paintings and artefacts from the Eastern and Western traditions. In a section on Islamic painting techniques I learnt of the brushes used for filigree work, and wrote of them in a tanka—the five-line Japanese form I've been working with for some years.

The brushes used by the painter might be made from the hair of squirrels, goats, or the inside of a calf's ear, but the very finest were made from hair cut from the throats of white kittens, two-months old. Painters frequently bred their own cats to ensure a supply of highest quality hair.

Hairs from squirrel breasts,
calf ears, white kitten throats, touch
liquid malachite,
ochre, orpiment. Pink shells
hold traces of silver, gold.

Another poem was written during a visit to the Museum of Decorative Arts and History, housed in Collins Barracks. I entered a wide, high quadrangle of grey stone, the far wall split obliquely by morning sunlight with soft-edged gull shadows moving across it. Inside I walked along airy, high-ceiling rooms of treasures then came to the exhibitions, 'Curator's Choice' and 'Out of Storage'. And here were wonders indeed: on a very high shelf, a teapot, almost as big as a stove, (made for advertising purposes by Bailey and Co. in Scotland); nearby, a vast cloisonné enamel charger plate from Japan, depicting flying cranes, their wings interleaved. In display cases at ground level: a serenely grave Florentine bust of a woman; a figure from Syria, half-kneeling, brass inlaid with silver; and a reclining Buddha.

And in the middle of that room was a woman vigorously signing to a large group of people, her face so expressive, her hands occasionally pointing dramatically, as her audience's gaze turned or lifted towards her chosen treasures. Except for throat sounds made by one of the party, there was a profound silence, filled with wonder.

Why do I walk more
softly over the pliant,
worn boards, as I skirt
the guide and her audience—
their rapt, passionate silence?

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Ali and I were due to give a reading at Laurel Villa Guest House, in the town of Magherafelt in Co. Londonderry. We decided to include in our journey a trip to the spectacular north-east coast, and to the Giant's Causeway at the top of Ireland. These were memorable and inspiring experiences, as was a visit to the Megalithic Passage Tomb Monument of Knowth, near that at Newgrange, on our return journey south.

We arrived at Laurel Villa just in time to be included in a photo shoot with a number of people involved in the support of literature in this region, including some from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and the Magherafelt Arts Society. Then Ali and I entered a large parlour where afternoon tea was invitingly set out—flowered cups and plates, polenta cake.

There had just been a meeting of people to discuss plans for the 'On Home Ground Poetry Festival', set for September 2013. Eugene Kielt who, with his wife Gerardine, runs Laurel Villa, had instigated and will organise the Festival, which was to have been opened by Seamus Heaney, who died, at the age of 74, on August 30th.

Each of the guest rooms is named for an Irish poet—Seamus Heaney, Patrick Kavanagh, Louis MacNeice; I am given the Michael Longley room. His full-length portrait faces me when I close the door and, as throughout this lovely house, framed large-scale texts by celebrated Irish poets decorate the walls.

The predominant voice is, not surprisingly, that of Seamus Heaney, who is the reigning literary spirit of this house, which is within reach of where he grew up. In fact, Eugene holds specialised tours to key sites connected with Heaney's life and work, in the surrounding region. On leaving I will take away a scroll-like facsimile of 'Colmcille the Scribe' from *Human Chain*, a wonderful book I spent much time with before leaving for Ireland. The poem is a translation from an Irish poem, circa eleventh century:

My hand is cramped from penwork.
My quill has a tapered point.
Its bird-mouth issues a blue-dark
Beetle-sparkle of ink.

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The journey south from Dublin took us to Glendalough, an ancient monastic settlement in a valley among wooded hills, one of Ireland's most beautiful sacred sites:

We continued towards Co. Waterford and travelled along its Copper Coast (so-named because of its historic metal-mining industry) taking in towns such as Tramore and Dungarvan. Then, the grandly handsome—and diabolically hilly—city of Cork. Ali and I presented readings at Ó Bhéal (Irish for 'from the mouth'; pronounced 'oveil') a weekly reading held in a famous pub called The Long Valley. Organised by Paul Casey, it has a tradition of audience participation as, each week, five words are plucked out of the air, then poems are speedily made which include them. Those who wish to do so read their poems to the audience and a winner is chosen, the challenge of randomness often producing surprising results. Ó Bhéal is a place with poetry in the walls, where a spirit of community and inclusiveness reigns.

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The charming town of Listowel (pronounced 'list-owl' with the emphasis on 'list') in County Kerry, has a yearly Writers' Week which celebrates the town itself and its distinguished writers—including John B. Keane, author of *The Field*—along with presenting a wide-ranging national and international component. This is one of the foremost literary festivals in Ireland, along with the Dublin Writers' Festival (just before it, towards the end of May), Galway's Cúirt Festival in April, the West Cork Literary Festival in July and the Clifden Arts Festival in September.

Listowel Writers' Week is an immensely hospitable festival. The main venue, the Listowel Arms Hotel, is a fascinating link with a past world, grand in scale, with a ballroom (used for festival sessions), but also warmly sociable. I enjoyed the homely creak of old wooden floors; the lamplit nooks with armchairs; and from the French windows, a view of distant hills... The festival staff were welcoming, in the quieter times inviting people to sit and chat.

As always in Ireland, Australia is a big reference point because of so many family interconnections, past and present. Sean Lyons, mayor of Listowel, short-story writer and chairperson of Writers' Week, plumbed memories of several years spent in Australia decades ago.

The highlight of the Festival was, for me, the evening devoted to a celebration of the achievements of Máire Mhac an tSaoi, one of Ireland's foremost poets of the twentieth century, who writes in the Irish language. The most recent poem I have read by her was a tribute to her husband Conor Cruise O'Brien who died in 2008. Máire, now in her 90s, sat in the front row as her powerful and starkly truthful poems were read in Irish and English by Louis de Paor and others; then she read some of her poems and her translations of Rilke.

In other sessions I heard interesting readings by poets Mark Granier and Joseph Woods; and a forum on Irish-American writers with a talk by Dr Victoria Kennefick on the Irish-American short story's greatest proponents—Flannery O'Connor, Frank O'Connor, Eudora Welty and Elizabeth Bowen—followed by Dr Daniel Tobin focusing on Irish-American culture through its poets, including Bogan, McGrath, Montague, Wall, Delanty and Donaghy.

During this session, a view had been referred to, in passing, that many of Emily Dickinson's poems could be sung to 'The Yellow Rose of Texas'. In closing the session the convener, Sean Lyons, sang an impromptu version of 'Because I could not stop for death...' to the tune in question. Certainly doable in musical terms, and hilarious, though of course an eternity away from the spirit of Dickinson's poem.

Another comic moment occurred when I sped to a launch of paintings which, reading the programme, I'd presumed were by my friend Geraldine O'Reilly. I'd not seen her for thirteen years, and was hoping to surprise her, a signed copy of my new book in my bag. But her face seemed dramatically different and she seemed to have grown taller, so that, for a moment or two, I wondered if a recent illness had distorted my perception. Even the paintings on the walls bore some relationship to Geraldine's more dark-veined lithographic work. But no, this was another artist altogether, whose name sometimes has 'Hines' added to the end of it—a change made, I will learn, at the request of my friend.

I was keen to attend the open reading at The Mermaids Bar on the last day, so hastened there after another session. Though the readings had been underway for over an hour, I found an atmosphere of enthralled attention, some audience members having travelled a long distance to take part in this event. There was just time for three other readers and myself to make a contribution before the session ended with emphatically affirming words from David Browne, the convenor, that Listowel Writers' Week was set up, in the first instance, to support those present in their creative journeys.

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After Listowel I took off for the Beara Peninsula, and Anam Cara Writer's and Artist's Retreat where I was due to give a reading and two workshops, while Ali headed north for a different range of literary engagements. The journey to Beara (the first syllable pronounced as 'bear') often took me through

ravishing countryside, and included the celebrated Ring of Kerry. Poets are fugitives from cliché, so I can say little about the splendours I witnessed. Though I've often written about natural settings, I felt that one would have to live in landscapes such as these to write about them, to learn them stone by stone, story by story. It was this thought that was behind a rather ironic tanka I wrote about a derelict, once grand mansion. (How we long to be tantalised by wind-combed secrets, narratives now beyond reach...)

That grimed, broken house—
mattress poking like a tongue
from a high window—
stays in the mind as I whirl
through scenery, scenery.

The Beara Peninsula has its own distinctive way with mountains, the map showing long arcs and spines of them. It is extraordinarily rocky and stony, but also very fertile, and becomes, on closer acquaintance, more hospitable. The main town, Castletownbere, is the largest white fishing port in Ireland, and it was relaxing to wander round and take the air there after a very twisty road journey. At Eyeries, several miles away, I found Anam Cara—situated between a lofty hill with a cemetery on it, and a long descent of fields towards Coulagh Bay and distant coastal mountains. Later, walking the spiral meditation path cut into the meadow of long green grass beside the house, I would see the tops of headstones above the near trees, then turn towards the limitless, ravishing ocean—a powerful focus for meditation on life and death, should I need one.

Welcomed by Sue Booth-Forbes, who is the Director of Anam Cara, I felt immediately at home there, finding a sense of spaciousness, calm and freedom. Each room is beautifully and simply arranged, with art works by artists of the Beara Peninsula decorating walls and shelves throughout the house. The kitchen was the hub of the house, with Sue providing excellent meals, without fuss or ado. The atmosphere was warm, relaxed. And for those who might wish for even more relaxation, there was a Hot Tub outside the house, with a view of the bay as the bubbles do their work. I tried this once, at dusk, sharing the spa with two other women, an artist and a writer, and did indeed feel the flow of my thoughts slowing, my body seeming to melt into the pulsing water.

I had offered two workshops to the people of the local community, and these happened over a weekend and were immensely productive: I was delighted with the work achieved, and it was lovely to meet those who came and have a glimpse of their lives in Beara. I learnt that traditional Irish dancing happens often and is engaged in with a passion, and that Beara is a place where artists, writers and healers thrive.

I stayed six days at Anam Cara, so there was ample time to explore its environs. On the bay side, there is a steep hill with pathways and steps, and many 'creative nooks'—sequestered seats with wonderful views of the treed slopes, the winding stream:

I spent much time sitting on a ledge beside the river which, descending from a weir, courses fiercely over steep rocks, forming small waterfalls that spurt down over the doughty ferns in rock crevices:

My mind slides over
sky-glazed rocks I've swum above,
limbs rasped by lichen.
Between the weir's terse whisper,
the slow-voiced stream, this stillness.

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Personally, I can say that I have never visited Ireland without a sense of great human enrichment, or without receiving gifts, creative and spiritual. On three past visits I started new books there—*The Sixth Swan*, *The Mystery of Rosa Morland* and *The Stone Garden: Poems from Clare*. I hoped that would again be true of this visit as, after the end of the Tour, I travelled first to the tip of the Beara Peninsula, to stay at Dzogchen Beara, the largest Buddhist Retreat Centre in Europe (its setting the most photographed site in Ireland) then north to Errislannan, outside Clifden in Co. Galway.

At Errislannan I gathered my thoughts, reviewed the notes made so far in my journal, and added to them. I read inspiring and challenging collections by some of contemporary Ireland's foremost poets, including Kerry Hardie, Moya Cannon and Vona Groarke. And, serendipitously, I found also a book of paintings by Janet Pierce, whose luminous work is the subject of a sequence I'd recently begun. This felt like coming full circle, as it revived memories of when I'd first met Janet Pierce, (along with Geraldine O'Reilly) in 1999, during a residency at the Tyrone Guthrie Centre at Annaghmakerrig. Some weeks later I'd travelled with Geraldine to Co. Mayo where Janet had another residency. During that visit we tried out Erriscrone's historic Sea Weed Baths where, in an overheated bath in a closed room, I came close to losing consciousness before I managed to struggle out and call for help—the third save from a watery death in my life. No doubt there is a poem or two waiting to be culled from such memories.

Along with the new poems written or begun, a further positive associated for me with the Irish Poetry Tour occurred on the publication front. In late 2012, buoyed by the prospect of the Tour, I had sent off poetry submissions to various Irish journals and literary magazines. By the end of my visit to Ireland I'd received acceptances from *Southword*, *The Shop*, *Skylight*, *The Moth* and *Poetry Ireland Review*—the first three publishing my poems while I was in Ireland; the other accepted poems will appear later this year.

Meanwhile, back in Errislannan, the cows in the fields below the house where I was staying eyed me with companionable curiosity, creature to creature; the unopened waterlilies on the two dams spread further over their surface during the course of my two-week stay; the Atlantic ocean sent floating mists over magnificently scarred and fractured outcrops, and the small peninsulas of rocks forking out from the long shore.

Diane Fahey's most recent collection is *The Stone Garden: Poems from Clare* (Clouds of Magellan 2013). *The Wing Collection: New & Selected Poems* (Puncher & Wattmann 2011) was short-listed for the 2012 Adelaide Festival of Arts' John Bray Poetry Award. Diane has won the Newcastle Poetry Prize, the Wesley Michel Wright Award, and the ACT Judith Wright Poetry Prize. She lives at Clifton Springs, on the Bellarine Peninsula in Victoria.