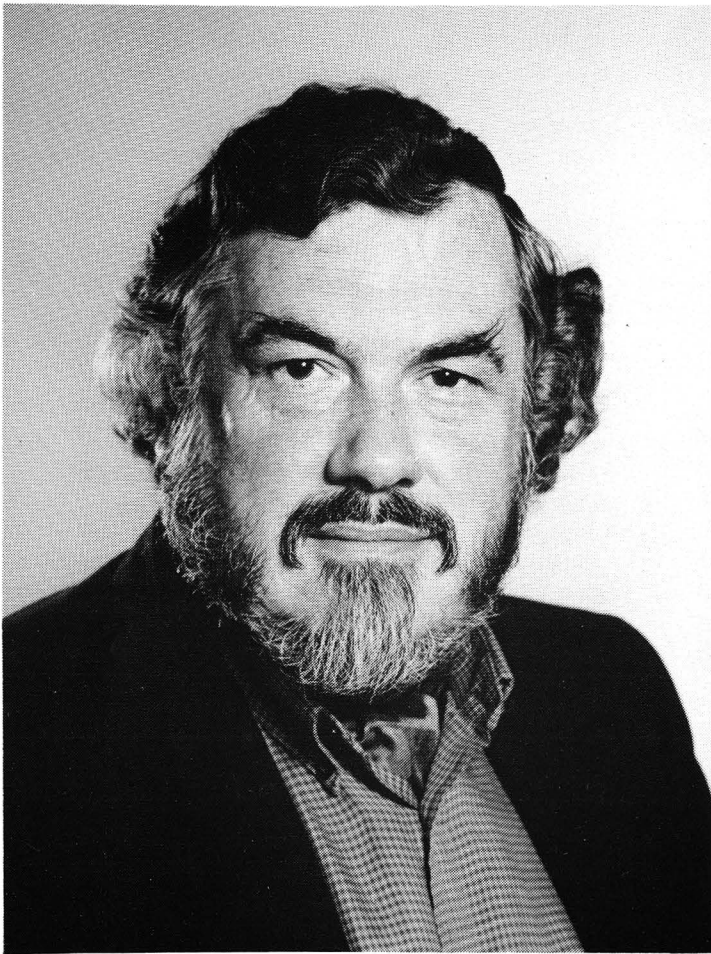


British Association for Irish Studies

Newletter

ISSUE NO. 21 JANUARY 2000



***ERIN'S BLOOD
ROYAL***

SEE

FOCUS ONINTERVIEW

WITH

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EDITORIAL

The publication of two outstanding books on neglected areas of Irish Studies occasioned invitations to the writers to use the BAIS Newsletter as a platform. The books and writers involved were *Erin's Blood Royal* by Peter Berresford Ellis and *Hungry for Home* by Cole Moreton. Both writers were happy to accept the invitations. Peter is the subject of Focus Interview no. 11 and Cole has answered my questions in conjunction with a brief review which draws attention to his remarkable book which should be available in the bookshops during March 2000.

Both books deal, in quite different ways, with displaced Irish families: in Peter's book, with the families descended from ancient Gaelic noble families; and in Cole's book, mainly with the exile families of those who emigrated from the Great Blasket Island to Hungry Hill, Springfield, USA. Both books suggest that there are invaluable insights into a genuinely All Ireland culture for our twenty-first century to be gained from an understanding of the legacies of both Gaelic nobles and Blasket islanders.

There is the announcement of the BAIS Bursaries Scheme 2000 which appears in this Newsletter. For the second year running, BAIS will award 4 bursaries of £1000 each. The coordinator this year is Dr. E. Evans of the University of Hertfordshire. Those interested should submit the application as soon as possible.

The Newsletter is very happy to congratulate Celia de Fréine, who writes in Irish and English,

on being awarded First Prize in the British Comparative Literature Association's Translation Competition 1998-9. One of Celia's poems 'Jacob's Ladder' is included in this Newsletter.

There is always an open invitation to BAIS members and others to become active contributors to the Newsletter. Suggestions of subjects for the successful series of Focus Interviews are most welcome. Suggestions for features on newly published worthwhile books in the field of Irish Studies are also welcome. Reports from world-wide Irish Studies Conferences of special interest would be greatly appreciated. The form for the BAIS Research Register appears for the final time on the back page – if you have not done so already, please fill in your details and forward the completed form to Mary Doran before 1 March 2000.

Finally, may I direct your attention to the one-day Conference on contemporary Irish fiction being held in the Centre for Irish Studies, St. Mary's College, Strawberry Hill, as part of the College's 150th anniversary celebrations? The line-up of writers for the day is remarkable – it includes Eileen Battersby, Anne Enright, Robert Welsh, Colm Toibin, Eamonn Hughes, Seamus Deane, Emma Donoghue and Bernard Mac Laverty. The Conference Fee (including lunch, coffee & tea) is £60; Reduced rate for Students /Unwaged is £40. Further information from the Conference Director: Dr. Liam Harte, Centre for Irish Studies, St Mary's College, Twickenham TW1 4SL Tel: 020-8240-4091; e-mail: hartel@smuc.ac.uk

Copy and/or discs (Word 6/95) with articles, reports, notices, letters etc. to be included in No. 22 should be sent to Jerry Nolan, 8 Antrobus Road, Chiswick, London, W4 5HY by April 10th 2000.

11 FOCUS INTERVIEW: PETER BERRESFORD ELLIS

Peter Berresford Ellis (b.1943) took his degree in Celtic Studies but began a career in journalism. He was reporting from Northern Ireland in the mid-1960s before the rise of the Civil Rights Movement, and has continued to produce signed journalism in newspapers ranging from the *Independent*, *Scotsman* to *An Phoblacht* and written a regular column for the past twelve years in the *Irish Democrat*. He wrote *A History of the Irish Working Class* in 1972, still available in paperback from Pluto Press and considered a classic in Irish historical writing. Peter's literary career has been amazingly prolific and somewhat covert – with 33 novels and three volumes of short stories under the pseudonym of Peter Tremayne and eight adventure thrillers under the pseudonym of Peter MacAlan. But with 32 titles under his own name, he has been acknowledged as one of the foremost authorities on the Celts with such titles as *Ancient World of the Celts*, *Celt and Greek*, *The Druids*, *Celtic Women & etc.* His work has been translated into a score of European languages and into Japanese. He has lectured in Britain, Ireland, France, Spain, Canada and the United States. Recently Peter published *Erin's Blood Royal: The Gaelic Noble Dynasties of Ireland* (London: Constable, 1999) which he has agreed to discuss in our ongoing series of Focus Interviews.

JN: What could have drawn a self-acknowledged republican socialist like yourself into telling the story of those twenty families of the old Gaelic aristocracy whose ancestors were kings, princes and nobles before the Tudor conquest of Ireland?

PBE: As soon as I had developed an overview of Irish history, I came to the opinion that the late 16th century and 17th century was the pivotal period for an understanding of the rise of modern Ireland. In the 1970s I began to concentrate on a series of studies starting with the Cromwellian period (*Hell or Connaught: The Cromwellian Colonisation of Ireland 1652-1660*), first published in 1975, and still in print from Blackstaff, and *The Boyne Water: The Battle of the Boyne 1690*, first published in 1976, and later reprinted by Blackstaff in 1989). It was natural, therefore, that I should turn to the formative events which commenced this 'ethnic cleansing' policy which started in 1541 and lasted through the 17th century with unabated savagery. The understanding of why the Tudor policy changed from coercion of the Gaelic ruling class in 1541 to ethnic cleansing is central to any subsequent understanding Irish history.

JN: You claim ambitiously that the history of *Erin's Blood Royal* can be said to encompass three thousand years of Irish experience and folklore. What were the most significant discoveries resulting from your research?

PBE: English propaganda, sadly accepted by many Irish historians from the 19th century onwards, has led us to believe that, before the coming of the Normans and their successors, Ireland was simply a rural chaos of constantly

bickering and warring disparate tribes with no sense of cohesion, led by fierce kings. Standish James O'Grady was even assured by a professor of history at Trinity College, Dublin, that Brian Boru did not exist. So one could say that what is significant is the emergence of a fascinating system of kingship with kings constrained by a sophisticated law system, with a people clearly identified in a common nationhood, with a common literary language, mythology, law, social system and set of religious beliefs. There were kings who patronised the arts and learning; and there was a society, in many ways, that was in advance of many of its neighbours.

JN: Why do you think the concept and practice of Gaelic kingship are among the things only vaguely acknowledged and barely understood by the modern historian of Ireland?

PBE: The destruction of Gaelic Ireland, four hundred years of an oppressive regime dedicated to the eradicating the last traces of Gaelic Irish culture, the law and social system and even the language has almost extinguished any historical knowledge of the realities of Irish society as it was under the native kings.

JN: What is the major difference or emphasis in the overall interpretation of Irish history when a researched understanding of the Gaelic dynasties is taken fully into account?

PBE: The major differences are the cultural and philosophical differences between the Irish and their conquerors which were the causes of persistent misunderstanding and conflict. One English historian writing on the Gaelic kingship system commented that it was a bloodthirsty

business because 'hardly ever did a son succeed his father to the throne'. Yet the ancient Irish law system did not recognise primogeniture. Sons did not necessarily succeed their fathers, only if they were talented enough to do so. Office was filled not only from the bloodline but by election by the *derbhfine* or electoral college of the family. Of course, those now imbued with primogeniture inheritance can dismiss this as 'no real legal system'. This is a culture clash between Ireland and English historians. An awareness of the Brehon Law and its principle of election is immensely important to self-understanding in the Irish context.

JN: You write about the personalities of the individual members of the Irish noble families who were forced to flee abroad. Which of these romantic personalities did you find the most exciting to explore?

PBE: I would say that all of the families have fascinating histories. I could not, hand on heart, say one family was more fascinating than others. There are enough research challenges to keep an army of historical biographers in work for centuries dealing with the lives and achievements of Erin's blood royal.

JN: Why was there an Irish government policy since the 1940s of 'courtesy recognition' for some twenty of the Irish noble families?

PBE: Edward McLysaght, who was to become the first Chief Herald, approached de Valera with the idea that those claiming Gaelic titles should be acknowledged by the Irish state. It was not a government policy but rather an arbitrary decision by de Valera to do so. McLysaght was left to implement the idea as a civil service administrative policy. There was no legislation, no guidelines as to how it should be done, and all this was the reason why in recent months, inevitable problems have arisen about 'courtesy recognition'.

JN: But did de Valera really consider installing a descendant of an Irish King as the first President of Ireland? How do you react to the idea of an Irish monarchical President?

PBE: In 1937 de Valera made an approach to the O'Brien of the day who was the direct descendant of Brian Boru, the High King who defeated the Danes at Clontarf in 1014. The

O'Brien, who also held the title of 16th Baron Inchiquin, turned down the idea. I think he was wise. As a republican, I would not be in favour of the appointment of a 'Prince President' *per se*; such a person would have to be democratically elected on the grounds that they had something more positive to offer than family history.

JN: Would you explain why you regard the importance of the Brehon Law of electoral succession, as distinct from the law of primogeniture, as crucial to the ongoing process of the Irish government's recognition of the ancient Gaelic titles?

PBE: On September 29 1999, following the publication of my book in which this matter was discussed, Síle de Valera, Minister for the Arts, Heritage and Gaeltacht, announced in the Dáil a commission of inquiry which will investigate the whole concept of how state courtesy recognition of those claiming Gaelic titles should be made. My opinion is that if the Irish State is going to continue with their courtesy recognition, then it must be done in accordance with international laws and usages. Gaelic titles arose out of Irish native law, the Brehon Law, and passed down through Brehon successional law until the conquests in the period we have talked about. Not only did the English Statute and Common Law abolish Gaelic law, it also abolished all Gaelic titles. It is that Statute and Common Law which was inherited by the Irish State following independence. For the Irish State to give courtesy recognition to those claiming Gaelic titles under the very law system under which these titles were abolished is nonsensical; it is also contrary to International Law and practices. No successor state can retrospectively alter the successional laws of a predecessor state. Can you imagine the furore that would ensue if the Irish State told the Irish Peers (Lord Inchiquin, or the Duke of Leinster, Lord Mount Charles & etc.) that they could henceforth hold their titles, created by the primogeniture system, only under the Brehon electoral system? That is as nonsensical as telling those claiming Gaelic titles that they can only hold them under primogeniture law. Either the Irish state has to amend its recognition to recognising these people merely as senior members of families descending from the old kings and princes of Ireland, or they have to accept the *derbhfine's* decision of appointing the head of the family with the appropriate title and acknowledge that person's right to use the title as

a social courtesy in accordance with the international usages and laws under which things are governed in other modern republics. The Irish State cannot merely invent Irish titles, otherwise it would descend into a laughable Disneyland fantasy.

JN: How do members of Gaelic noble families, who are no longer Irish citizens and have lived permanently abroad for generations, view their stake in the future of Ireland?

PBE: Most of the families, such as O'Donels (the current Duke of Tetuan of Spain is Leopoldo O'Donel), the O'Neills of Clanaboy in Portugal and O'Neill (Marques de la Granja e del Norte) of Spain, are very active in promoting Irish history and culture. The O'Neill of Clanboay at the turn of the last century donated money to setting up Irish language medium schools and also helped to supply and arm the Irish Volunteers. They still see themselves as intrinsically Irish and most would want to hold Irish citizenship but are precluded because they were driven out by the conquests and have been in exile ever since.

JN: How successful have recent attempts by the Irish government in encouraging the survivors of the ancient Gaelic noble families to play a useful in developing modern Irish society?

PBE: There has been an ongoing problem in recent years over what the Irish state thought it should do concerning those to whom it gave courtesy recognition and what those claiming Gaelic titles wanted to do themselves. The main problem has been the legal position of the titles. Were they genuine holders of titles of nobility? Were they state appointees? Did the State create them? One Chief Herald believed that he was creating their titles and not merely recognising existing titles. This has led to many problems. I believe the state wanted to create 'Chiefs' who were seen as heads of clans to promote tourism in Ireland. Bord Fáilte created Clans of Ireland Ltd and encouraged clans to 'elect' Chiefs who would be seen as heads of clans and were dismayed when existing Gaelic title holders took exception to having titles so demeaned. Most of the descendants of the Irish kings and princes see themselves as holders of genuine aristocratic titles who want to promote Irish arts and culture and reawaken a full awareness of Irish history. The Standing Council of Irish Chiefs and

Chieftains, to which these representatives belong, have put up an annual prize for essays in the Irish language and so on. The year 2000 is now going to be a 'make or break' year because the sitting Government Inquiry will decide their attitude to those claiming to hold ancient Gaelic titles.

JN: What are the implications of the Chief Herald of Ireland's withdrawal of the courtesy title of the MacCarthy Mór from the very person who wrote the Foreword to your book *Erin's Blood Royal*?

PBE: Unfortunately, my book was caught up in the incredible MacCarthy Mór affair. Terence McCarthy, a graduate of Queen's University Belfast, had been recognised as MacCarthy Mór, Prince of Desmond, not only by the Irish State but by the Castile & Leon King of arms of Spain and by the Italian Courts as well as numerous other dignitaries and bodies. He had been given civic receptions by the Irish President and other civic dignitaries in Ireland, knighthoods and other honours by European royalty and states. He was considered a leading authority in genealogy and published extensively (nearly a dozen books) on Gaelic Munster. This was why I asked him to contribute the Foreword to my book. Just as my book went on sale, the Chief Herald of Ireland withdrew courtesy recognition from him. It took a further month for the facts to emerge that McCarthy was entirely bogus. Now it emerges that another holder of a Gaelic title might also have a questionable pedigree. Needless to say, further editions of my book have been stopped until such time as I can rewrite that part pertaining to this matter. A new edition should be out by next autumn. This is why the Irish Government has now had to make an announcement in the Dáil concerning the commission of inquiry to consider the entire matter. Obviously the Irish State must accept the fault of its procedures. If it is going to extend a courtesy recognition to those claiming Gaelic titles, then it must act in accordance to international law and usages governing such matters. The problems, as I see it, arose in 1943, when the Irish state began to recognise courtesy titles, and no one has made any effort to correct them until now.

JN: Then what would you like to see happen to the courtesy titles which at least one person has claimed under false pretences?

PBE: As an historian, I think it would be appropriate for these old Gaelic families, descendants of the ancient Irish kings and princes, and heads of these families, whether they claim the old Gaelic titles or not, to have some input into helping to promote the study of Irish history. As a socialist and republican, I would not be in favour of any political participation in the Irish State unless the heads of the families were democratically elected. Having said that, there is, of course, the little known fact that the

Taoiseach is allowed to nominate several members of the Irish Senate. That is a procedure I do not favour but while it lasts, perhaps some of the talented Gaelic title holders who have something to contribute in promoting Gaelic culture could be appointed to show some initiative in that field? Whatever the future of those claiming Gaelic titles, no understanding of Irish history can be made without acknowledging the important role of their ancestors.



The current Duke of Tetuan in Spain, Leopoldo O'Donel (b. 1915) is recognised as heir to the O'Donel Prince of Tirconnell. Here Eamon de Valera, as Chancellor, was present on the occasion when an honorary doctorate from the National University of Ireland was conferred on the Duke in 1954

CELIA DE FRÉINE

Celia de Fréine is a poet, screenwriter, playwright and literary critic. She has already been the recipient of several major awards, including the Patrick Kavanagh Prize in 1994. Moving between Connemara and Dublin, she writes in both Irish and English. In this instance she was awarded first prize for her translation of

her own poems from Irish into English. The award was presented at a reception at the University of Essex/BCLA Conference and her winning poems will be published in *Comparative Criticism* (Cambridge University Press) later this year.

DRÉIMRE JACOB

Is fursta go leor iad a aithint –
na haingil a díbríodh as na flaithis:
bíonn preab faoi leith ina gcosa ag cuid
acu, is lámh mhaith acu ar an leadóg,
nó ar an gcispheil – cluichi a thiomáineann
suas iad mar a bheidís réidh le heitolt, ach
gach uair a fhaigheann siad lán a mbonn
den talamh, cuittear a bpeacaí I gcuimhne dóibh;
bíonn cuid eile acu I dtaithí a ndualgas –
an fear déirce nach féider a thart a shásamh,
an bhean Afracach nach ndeineann a bhfuil
ina crúiscín uisce cúis riamh. Anois is arís
tugaim faoi deara cruth aisteach ar na néalta
agus, má ardaim chun léis piosa cairchláir
a bhfuil poll curtha agam ann, is beag nach féider
rungaí dreimir a dhé anamh amach,
iad forshuite ar bhall na cistine.

JACOB'S LADDER

It is easy enough to spot them –
the angels sent down from heaven:
some have the extra spring in their step –
they tend to be good at tennis, or basketball,
sports that propel them upwards, as though
they are about to take flight, but each time their feet
touch base, they are reminded of their sin;
others have become more attuned
to their task – the beggar whose thirst
is never quenched, the African woman
whose pitcher of water never seems to suffice.
at times I notice a strange cloud formation ,
and if I puncture a piece of cardboard,
hold it to the light, I can almost
make out the rungs of a ladder
superimposed on the kitchen wall.

BAIS POSTGRADUATE BURSARIES SCHEME 2000

The British Association for Irish Studies has established a scheme to support postgraduate research in Britain on topics of Irish interest. BAIS will award four bursaries of £1000 each to postgraduate students based in a university in Great Britain, conducting research on any aspect of Irish Studies. The aim of the awards is to further research in Great Britain in the subject area of Irish Studies. This will be done by providing assistance to take advantage of opportunities which would enhance a student's research project, or to alleviate financial hardship, which could otherwise hinder the pursuit of a student's studies. Students may use the bursary for travel expenses, payment of fees, subsistence expenses or other expenses related to the completion of a research project.

Applicants must be registered for a postgraduate degree in a higher education institution in Great Britain. The research project on which the applicant is working must be within the subject area of Irish Studies. All applications must be received by 1 March 2000.

How to Apply:

Applicants should provide:

- ◆ 10 copies of the following information on no more than 3 sides of A4:
- ◆ Personal details (full name, contact details, date of birth)
- ◆ An outline of the research project, in no more than 500 words
- ◆ Details of the specific purposes for which you would require research funding, and when the money will be spent
- ◆ Details of your educational background, qualifications and postgraduate registration
- ◆ Information regarding any other source of funding which you have received or have applied for
- ◆ The contact details of two referees, who should be asked by you to send their references directly to the coordinator.

Criteria for the Allocation of Bursaries:

A panel of Irish Studies academics, covering a wide range of disciplines, will judge the submissions and select four bursary winners according to the following criteria:

- ◆ That the research will make a significant contribution to Irish Studies
- ◆ That the purposes for which funding is required are necessary, or at least of substantial benefit, to the research project
- ◆ Preference may be given to applicants who are not in receipt of other funding for this specific project.

The Bursary Winners will be announced in May 2000; the decision of the Awarding Committee will be final; successful candidates will be required to provide a report on how the funds have been spent and to acknowledge the financial support of BAIS in any publication resulting from the research.

Applications and references should be sent by 1 March 2000 to: Dr. E. Evans, 48 Brampton Road, St. Albans, Herts. AL1 4PT.

HUNGRY FOR HOME: A REVIEW & SOME ANSWERS

Cole Moreton, Chief Feature Writer at the *Independent on Sunday* and Londoner from the East End, is about to have published, amid the current welter of books about the Irish Diaspora, a remarkably original book mainly focused on members of one family of Irish migrants in America. The family chosen is the Ó Cearnas of Hungry Hill, Springfield, Massachusetts USA, formerly of the Great Blasket Island; and the book, entitled *Hungry for Home*, will be published by Penguin Viking in March 2000.

The Ó Cearnas are now to be found, with the exception of their eldest sister Céit, living alongside at least some fifteen other families, all of whom have emigrated from the Blasket Islands in County Kerry to form a closely knit social grouping which retained a sense of distinctive apartness from the other Irish migrants in Springfield. *Hungry for Home* is a book which thoroughly explores the unfolding fate of what survives in County Kerry and what has been changing on Hungry Hill. What gives the book its distinctive tone is the omnipresence of the indefatigable researcher who follows in the footsteps of the exiles, in what for him becomes a personal quest for some wider cultural meaning.

The book is structured into Three Parts with an Epilogue. Part One, 'The End of the World' (1-16), is a painstaking piecing together of the events which led to the final abandonment of the community life on the Great Blasket in 1953. Part Two, 'Island Story' (17-23), is an exposition of the most distinctive characteristics of Blasket culture – the ancient oral tradition of storytelling and the common way of life developed under conditions of physical hardship. Part Three, 'The Land of Youth' (24-42), is a series of impressions of an exile's journey to America and of cultural developments among the American Blasketers of Hungry Hill. In the Epilogue, the ghosts amid the abandoned ruins of former homes are invoked as spectres at the Irish American feast. The highlights of each Part display the strengths and the limitations of such a highly stylised symbolic structure.

In Part One, the highlight in a different scenario would have been the visit of de Valera to the Blaskets in 1947. This visit took place at the most dramatic moment in the decline of the Great

Blasket community. The few remaining inhabitants wanted the Irish government to support their way of life. Dev's subsequent inaction is curious. How can one explain his Hamlet-like posture in government and opposition? Was Dev genuinely torn between the desire to promote the ancient Gaelic ideals of an Irish-speaking island and the need to have a realistic policy on the harsh emigration problems of Ireland as a whole? What was said and thought behind the scenes? What is highlighted in *Hungry for Home* is the considerable increase of Blasket anger which first began to rise before Dev's visit, having been triggered by the tragic death of the young man Séainín Ó Cearna brought about by the combination of bad weather conditions and indifference from the authorities. The heartfelt testimony of Séainín's sister Céit, born in 1919 and still living on the Irish mainland in Dunquin, and others have inspired Cole Moreton to record eloquently expressed insights into the world that was ending.

In Part Two, there is an eclectic selection of Blasket stories which includes Celtic monks on the islands about the time of the Vikings, the story of the poet and hero Piaras Feiritéar being cornered by the English on the Blaskets in 1653, an interesting historical background note on the tune *Port na bPúcaí*, or *Faerie's Lament*, dating back to the late 1800s, and wise reflections life from the pen of Tomás Ó Criomhthain. But the real highlight is the witness of the two elderly Irish-speaking brothers, Seán and Muiris Ó Guithín who still live in the past in Dunquin within constant sight of the island which was once their home. Cole Moreton spoke to the brothers with the help of a translator. Their talk brought to life the once living island at its peak – crowded with children, dogs, chickens, dancing youngsters and watching elders.

In Part Three, we eventually reach the USA and meet Séainín's family there, Michéal Ó Cearna and his brothers on Hungry Hill when we are invited to ask the questions 'Where was home to them now? What had they become?' This is the most uneven part of the book, with an assorted mixture of social observation without pause for radical analysis, and romantic reflection on the mythological depths. Social observation includes: the Irish Republican John Boyle O'Reilly Social Club on Hungry Hill; the Irish

Tourist Board plaque in Mike Carney's house which commends him for his contribution to Irish culture; the vast pseudo-Florentine Catholic church, by the name of Our Lady of Hope, attended almost exclusively by the Irish; the attacks on their fellow-Catholics, the Puerto Ricans, for being insular, self-supportive and speaking a foreign language. Romantic reflection wells up around the theme of exile in America: the evocation of the myth of the Land of Youth; the migrant's mixed feelings of euphoria, fear and worry at the first sighting of the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island; the story of Oisín returning to Ireland to see old friends after hundreds of years only to experience profound disillusionment. What Part Three best succeeds at doing is in generating a metaphysical view of the migrant's fate when the individual has to

accept reluctantly the death of the community that had nurtured and sustained an unique way of way of life for so long.

In the Epilogue, the Great Blasket is revealed as now peopled only by ghosts. The ageing American Blasketers' persistent desire to return in spirit is gently unmasked: 'The life they had made in Hungry Hill . . . was almost over, dismantled by its own success . . . There was nowhere for the old ones to go but back into their memories and dreams of the island, which had never faded.' One senses that the writer's profound regret for the fading away of a once-thriving Blasket culture is an all-embracing lament for the death of all once-thriving communities of storytellers.

A few questions for the writer were noted down during the Editor's reading of *Hungry for Home*. Very fortunately for the BAIS Newsletter, Cole was available to give his responses.

JN: Don't you think you've missed an important dramatic trick in your pen-picture of de Valera on and off the Blaskets?

CM: I took a conscious decision that de Valera's appearance in my Blasket story would reflect the way he was seen by the islanders themselves. Even when they welcomed him as a great national hero, he seemed a remote and distant one. That remoteness and distance grew considerably as de Valera maintained a silence about the government's role in supporting any form of community life on the Great Blasket. Among the remaining islanders this provoked anger and disenchantment with the man whom they had regarded warmly and whom they had thought might be their saviour. My account is mainly drawn from first-hand accounts by the islanders and other eyewitnesses, newspapers and other documentation, although one chapter is based on a private note that I believe was written by de Valera which illustrates his ambivalence. Perhaps another writer should probe the political and other possible reasons for de Valera's enigmatic silence. My job here is to raise the question, in passing.

JN: Why did you select the Ó Cearna family as the spine of your own Blasket story?

CM: Although there have been many books on the Blasket islands, none has ever told the story of the end of the island community and what

became of its people. This branch of the Ó Cearna family, which had never been written about before, was at the heart of the events which led to the evacuation. The catalyst for the end of the community was the premature death of one of the brothers, Séainín, at the age of 24 during a winter storm when the island was cut off so that that no doctor could come and save him, and no priest could be summoned for the last rites. It was that event that broke the spirit of the remaining islanders, those who had not already left for America. Séainín's brothers and sisters were still alive, half a century later, and made coherent and powerful witnesses to what happened then. Céit, the eldest girl, who had brought the family up after her mother's premature death, still lived within a few miles of the island. Mike, her brother and the pioneer in the family, was in New England. *Hungry for Home* is full of big themes, and the historical sweep of the narrative ranges over a thousand years (with particular emphasis on the middle of the last century and the present day) but in the spirit of the island storytellers, I wanted to explore these themes through the lives of individuals. Once I had established that the Ó Cearnas would talk to me, it made sense to place them at the centre of the narrative – which gave a human dimension and focus to three years of research.

JN: Just why did all those Blasket Islanders resettle in Hungry Hill, Springfield?

CM: It's uncertain who was the first Blasket islander to reach Springfield. Here is a good place to acknowledge my debt to Ray and the late Joan Stables whose book *The Blasket Islands: Next Parish America* was an indispensable starting point for my own research. Ray has suggested that the first to go may have been a man called Manning who arrived there in the middle of the nineteenth century. The early migrants found work in the railways, in the factories and in the service of the rich. The migrants wrote enthusiastic letters back home which encouraged further emigration by promising adventure, work and caring support on arrival. The pattern was that the able and fit went, worked and sent back dollars – as gifts and to pay for their siblings to join them. The exiles, who were usually the young of the island, took pride in being able sustain the community back at home on the Great Blasket, which in time consisted mostly of their parents and other older people,

JN: Are there still important links between Hungry Hill and the Blaskets?

CM: Exiled islanders and their children and grandchildren do occasionally return, and I understand there have recently been established links between Elms Cottage in Springfield and the Great Blasket heritage centre in Dunquin, the nearest mainland parish to the island. Of course, there are other, less formal, more symbolic links, and one that comes to mind involves an ancient black iron cooking pot. During my visit to the Ó Guithín brothers in Dunquin, I ate chicken which had been cooked in such a pot over a peat fire in their cottage which lacked modern conveniences and might as well have been on the island a century earlier. Within two weeks, I was having a big American breakfast with Mike Carney who showed off his mother's black iron cooking pot as a feature of his basement collection of Blaskets memorabilia. Both the Ó Guithín brothers and Mike Carney needed to believe that they had made the right choice, to stay as they were or leave that kind of life behind, respectively – and as a result they both needed to play down the significance of the alternative way of life

JN: Did you ever discuss with the older generation of Hungry Hill migrants the wider political and social issues in modern America?

CM: Their racist views were not a secret, particularly in relation to their fellow Catholics, the Puerto Ricans. Most of them missed the deep irony in their resenting the Puerto Ricans for sticking together, keeping their own language, looking out for each other and starting from a position of poverty – which was exactly how they were in the beginning, when they first arrived in America. Of course, there is a territorial dimension to this, as the Puerto Ricans are now taking over the very streets that made up Hungry Hill. Also in common with many of their fellow Americans, the exiles were suspicious of the English, which included me. I could not help but feel threatened when I saw posters in various drinking places advocating IRA revolutionary violence. I was, after all, working in offices at Canary Wharf when the IRA bomb exploded there. Then again, I believe that part of the value in my writing this book was that I was neither an Irishman nor an American. I was an English journalist and writer studying Blasket ideals of home and cultural identity as an outsider, with a cold eye. The islanders felt some warmth towards Englishmen such as Robin Flower and George Thomson who studied Blasket culture as it existed on the islands sixty or seventy years ago and gave valuable accounts of it. At no stage did I flatter anybody to obtain material. Mike Carney and others would not talk until they had asked me lots of questions, and checked out my credentials with those I had already met 'back home' in the west of Ireland.

JN: Did Oisín and the Land of Youth crop up in your conversations?

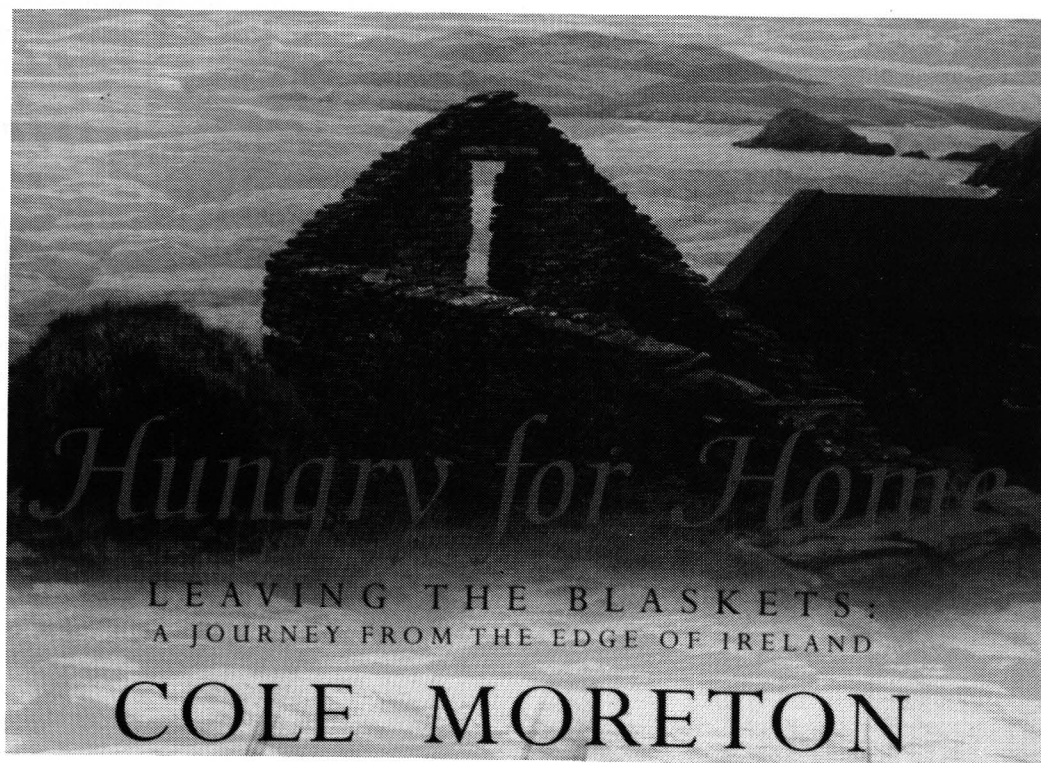
CM: Nobody in Hungry Hill mentioned Oisín. It was Muiris Ó Suilleabháin who described the link in islanders' minds between the myth with the prospect of America to the West, and I followed his lead. I feel strongly that the emigration of the islanders cannot be simply reduced to sheer economic necessity. Part of the westward quest was closely linked to a mythological way of understanding life's physical hardships and a sense of adventure. The imaginative survival of pagan Ireland in Blasket storytelling, especially in the stories of Peig Sayers, meant that priests, Catholic and Protestant, had to accept the islanders on their own terms. The distance between them was not just a result of geography. The wounded and lost figure of Oisín in Christian Ireland is echoed

somewhat in the experience of island exiles who have returned to experience their past. I am fascinated by the idea that just as Oisín aged three hundred years when his foot touched Irish soil again, so the exile seems to age instantly when he or she returns. The minds of those who have stayed behind are ready for the bright young teenager of memory – not the elderly American who comes through the door. Then, of course, there is the sense that the first-generation Blasket emigrants belong neither to the past or the present. Their community in Springfield is breaking up and their old island is uninhabitable except in memory.

JN: How do you think *Hungry for Home* stands up as a work in the wake of Frank McCourt's *Ashes* bonanza?

CM: I don't believe it has to stand up to comparison. Hopefully *Hungry for Home* is a great tale that is well written but rather than a memoir or a novel, it is a scrupulously researched study which seeks to integrate eye-witness accounts into a historically convincing story. The Blasket islanders often saw themselves less as Irish than as a tribe apart: because of their isolation and way of life when islanders crossed the Atlantic in the 1940s they were less like their Irish contemporaries than like those who had left the mainland a

century earlier. During that short journey of about three weeks they went from the Middle Ages to a county on the verge of the Space Age. The exiles bore within themselves the sense of the unique life which they had left, so much so that they all chose to live together in the same few streets, in a suburb of a landlocked New England town. The first generation of children born in America were encouraged to assimilate as quickly as possible to the American way of success, which meant speaking only English. Soon material inequalities ensured the loosening of communal ties, as the more successful children grew up and moved out to better suburbs. Now the grandchildren of those original migrants, distanced by their parents from Blasket culture, are developing an intellectual curiosity about their cultural roots. Perhaps they will have something to say about the future of the island, which is largely abandoned, the focus of great many legal battles. No doubt some of them will research still further the unique place the Blasket islands have in the history of Ireland in the twentieth century. I hope *Hungry for Home* will help them and those engaged in Irish Studies to understand the islanders. They have an unusual story, but they also have much to say about the common experience of emigration and the longing for home. Who knows what future generations of Blasket families will make of that?



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CONFERENCE AT THE CENTRE FOR CRITICAL & CULTURAL THEORY

Cardiff University 27-28 May 2000-01-12

THEORISING IRELAND

Speakers include Terence Brown (Trinity College Dublin), Claire Connolly (Cardiff), Patricia Coughlan (NUI Cork), Seamus Deane (Notre Dame), Luke Gibbons (Dublin City University), Robert Young (Oxford)

Registration details from **Janette Graham, Centre for Critical & Cultural Theory, Cardiff University, PO Box 94 CF1 3XB; tel: 01222-874722; fax: 01222-874502; e-mail: Graham@cardiff.ac.uk**

THE IRISH LITERARY SOCIETY LONDON

The following Spring talks 2000 have been announced:

Tuesday 25 January: Dr. Cyril Barrett S.J. on PHILOSOPHY IN IRISH LITERATURE

Tuesday 29 February: Dr. Mary Hickman on 'RETURNED YANK' OR 'PLASTIC PADDY: IRELAND & THE IRISH DIASPORA

Tuesday 28 March: Cole Moreton on HUNGRY FOR HOME: LEAVING THE BASKETS

The Irish Literary (ILS) meets at the Irish Club, 82 Eaton Square, London SW1 at 7.45 pm. Non-members are always welcome to attend before deciding to join a famous London society which has survived since 1892.

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRADFORD

The Centre for Continuing Education of the University of Bradford is running two half-day Saturday schools in May 2000 on the theme, 'How Irish Writers use the Past'. May 13 will be devoted to Parnell and May 20 to the Easter Rising 1916. The tutor is BAIS member Maurice Colgan.

Details from **Mrs. Ann Hull, Centre for Continuing education, University of Bradford, 2, Claremont, Bradford BD7 1BQ Tel: 01274-233210**

BATH SPA UNIVERSITY COLLEGE

IASIL 2000 - IRISH LITERATURES: BORDERS & BORDER CROSSINGS

The 2000 Conference of the International Association for the Study of Irish Literatures will be held at Bath Spa University College, 24-28 July. Papers will explore the conference theme from a variety of angles: examining, for instance, regional literatures; the fixing and transgression of national, cultural and sexual identities; new methodological approaches which cross the borders between traditional disciplines; border dialogues with writing from other countries. To mark its bicentenary, papers are particularly welcome which look at the literary consequences and treatment of the Act of Union.

Further information from **Lorraine Keyte (BSUC< Newton Park, Bath, BA2 9BN Tel: 01225-875707; e-mail: l.keyte@batspa.ac.uk**

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DATE FOR NEXT BAIS COUNCIL MEETING SATURDAY 22.01.00

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