

CORCA DHUIBHNE LAUNCH

I have known Liam O Neill for a long, long time. I am a man of forbearance and patience and I have the restraint of a saint, otherwise how could we have been friends for most of that time. I first met him in the Gulag of Coolock. I had been teaching in St. Brendans school for a number of years when, one morning, this long lanky cúirliún walked into the staffroom. And talking about Gulag; he looked for all the world like Alexander Solzhenitzen without the beard. Cheeks hollow and eyes sunken in the sockets. But Ciarraíoch mailithe eile a bhí ann agus bhíomar cáirdiúil ón tosach.

It wasn't long before Liam confided in me that he was doing a bit of painting in his spare time and he asked me to take a look at some of the stuff he had done. He was working with the brush at that time and among the pictures I can remember would have been A Mare And Foal, Gugánbarra and a portrait of Marylyn Monroe. Now if Jack Yeats was right in defining all painting as *a passionate combination of memory and imagination*, it is not difficult to see that any of these subjects would not have excited either in Liam. There was no passion in them, no imagination except in-so-far as Marilyn Munroe excited a young man's imagination! Those pictures were more like competent technical exercises.

I myself was inadvertently involved in Liam's change of style. I had done a favour for another teacher on the staff and as a gesture of gratitude he didn't buy me a bit of Waterford Glass or a meal voucher; instead he gave Liam what turned out to be a first commission. Knowing that I was an admirer of W. B. Yeats, he asked Liam to do a portrait of the poet. Liam gave the commission a lot of thought; which Yeats to paint, the iconic senatorial image, the young idealistic Celtic Twilight figure, and would it be a profile, head only, head and shoulders etc. Having made his decision _ I learned all this retrospectively _ he

painted canvas after canvas but rejected each. Eventually, either through desperation or inspiration one night, he turned the brush up-side-down, so to speak, and began to paste oil paint on the canvas with the tip of the handle. That portrait is a treasured possession of mine still, hanging in my hall in Drumcondra. Knowing that I was speaking here tonight, I took the painting down today. It is still a beauty. Lovely green tones touching the top of Yeats' head, rich plum colours on the shoulders and each deliberate stroke of oil paint discernable on the poet's countenance. That was a breakthrough canvas, a Paul on the road to Damascus moment. The night I got that painting, I recognised immediately that Liam was connecting with the medium of paint in a new exciting way. I remember that I rang him and we spent ages talking about the portrait. That was the start of the palette knife era.

But Yeats himself has a few lines that are relevant for any poet or any painter; *A line may take an hour maybe, but unless it seem a moment's thought/ All our stitching and unstitching shall be nought.* Liam had not as yet achieved that spontaneous, artistic surge of liberation. But boy was he intent on doing so. On Saturday nights a friend of mine, Pat Daye, and myself used to play squash in ALSAA near the airport. Liam would be in the car park, waiting on us afterwards, a couple of canvasses propped in the boot of the auld Toledo. Pat at least had gone to the College Of Art and his response to the paintings had some academic gravitas. My response was totally visceral. Invariably, as a result of what we had to say, I would come into my classroom some morning later that week and find newly worked canvasses propped on the ledge of the blackboard.

Gerry Adams has already quoted Brendan Kennelly here tonight and to illustrate the stage that Liam was at, at that juncture, I'm going to do the same. The poem is called The Gift. *It came slowly/ Afraid of insufficient self content/ Or some inherent weakness in itself./ Small and hesitant/ Like children at the tops*

of stairs./ It came through shops, rooms, temples streets,/ Places that were poorly lit./ It was a gift that took me unawares/ And I accepted it.

As Liam's self-confidence grew, he spent longer and longer hours at the easel. I remember the night in The Goose pub when he told me about the concrete blocks. He was attacking the canvas with such ferocity that the easel kept back pedalling away from him across the floor. So he tied two nine inch concrete blocks onto the rung of the easel so that it would stand its ground and put up some resistance. Time began to have no meaning when Liam was painting. He might start at ten or eleven o'clock at night, mightn't finish till five or six. I became his Guardian Angel in those early years. I had become Principal in St. Brendans and I would get a phone call around 8.30 in the morning; Liam was going to be fifteen or twenty minutes late ... he had to rush down to the Oisín Gallery in Fairview to get a couple of frames. The Vice Principal was a punctilious man, a terror for timekeeping. So when all the teachers appeared to take their classes in the playground and when he saw that O Neill was missing yet again, this man would be at my ear hole like Woody Woodpecker, all about bad example and the Kerry Mafia, etc.

In Samuel Taylor Coleridge's famous phrase, I myself had begun trying to *put the right words in their right order* around that time. So Liam and myself spent many an hour in the Goose Pub rabbiting on about our mutual obsessions. Dylan Thomas has a famous poem, In my Craft Or Sullen Art. *In my craft or sullen art/ Exercised when only the moon rages/ And lovers lie abed...* And that was what intrigued us at the time; when does *craft* become *art*? If you see two blokes hunched over a bar counter you'd guess that they might be arguing over football or horses or dogs, politics maybe, if they looked like hopeless cases you might deduce that they were talking about women. But Liam and myself spent endless hours trying to decide when *craft*, practiced ad infinitum, eventually became *art*.

We would just be on the point of breaking the inscrutable code when Closing Time would ambush us. So what was there to do but totter down to Griffith Avenue, hail a Taxi and go to Clarke's, a late night house at the top of Iona Road. And there we would start running the conundrum to ground once more. The bar counter became the roof of the Cistine Chapel. O'Neill put his beer mat down; that was the Creator, leaning back insouciantly on the cushion of cloud, his right hand stretched, index finger reaching out. My beer mat was Adam, also leaning back, left hand stretched, index finger reaching out. And the gap between the two fingers ... that was what had to be bridged. How to define the static, the electrical surge of creativity that transformed craft into art. However, unfortunately, closing time would catch us out again, just as we were beginning to bring holiness and mysticism into the argument, just when we were on the verge of The Holy Grail.

O'Neill would get a taxi. I'd toddle on home. Mumbling and fumbling my way into bed I'd disturb the REM sleep of my wife, Breeda. (she's up there in the second last row). She'd want to know the time. At that hour of the night, it is judicious to take an hour or two off.

Two o'clock.

How's Julie? she'd say.

I'd think she's fine.

Did you not ask?

Ah, I'd hesitate. Ask about Julie? No. No, I didn't ask about Julie.

How's David?

I'd be tottering around, trying to aim my second foot into the pyjama bottoms.

How's David? she'd persist.

For God's sake, woman. I suppose he's grand.

Did you not ask?

Ask about what?

By this time I was propped against the wardrobe at the opposite side of the room from where I'd started.

About Julie and David.

No. I didn't.

And what were ye talking about?

Art.

Since eight o'clock! Talking about art from eight o'clock till this hour of the morning!

I was lying down now, clinging to the tossing bed, struggling to get the duvet over me.

For over eight hours!

She was wide awake by this juncture and had, obviously, looked at the clock.

Yeah, I slurred. We had to discover when does craft become art.

For over eight hours! When does craft become art!

But I was nicely snuggled now. Long comatose sighs. Falling slowly, slowly falling, into the delicious delirium of drunken sleep.

You have to become like the mystics, I muttered. St. John Of The Cross. St. Theresa of Avilla.

Huh!

Yeah, you have to get the self out of the way.

How many Jamesons does it take to do that!

Then, as Brendan Kennelly said in another context, without fear or favour, Liam began to produce a one man exhibition once a year. The Oisín, the Greenlane, Pat Hopper's The James, and now The Oriel. Patrick Kavanagh said; I dabbled in words and they became my life. The same observation could be made about Liam O Neill and paint at that time in his life.

Looking back, it was not so much the opening night that was exciting, rather, from my point of view, it was the day before the exhibition that I looked forward to most. When all the paintings would be hung. I'd have seen most of them propped against the presses in my kitchen while the paint was still glistening, when the fervour of composition was still raw and the high of bringing something to a quivering conclusion was still pulsing in the brain. Liam and myself would go along, as I say, the day before the opening to have a look at the exhibition in the cold light of day. Liam would stand before those paintings and see them objectively for the first time. He would say – without being in any sense precious about it – *I don't know the man who put that swipe of cerulean blue across the horizon*. So, in a way we are back to the mystics. In fact we are back to a Seamus Heaney poem, A Door Into The Dark. In that poem about the blacksmith, Heaney describes writing as being a journey into the dark. The anvil in the middle is like an altar where the smith *expends himself in shape and music*. The sock of the anvil reminds Heaney of a unicorn and thereby he immediately brings together the two elements of creativity that we had been struggling to nail in the late night bar, namely the mystical and the mythical.

Look at the men in Liam's paintings. None of those men ever bought their clothes in Grafton St. Nor in The Munster Warehouse in Tralee, if it came to that. The only six-pack they ever knew was a brown paper bag clunking with pint bottles as they left Johnny Franks of a stormy night and bent against the

Atlantic gales whipping in over Baile na nGall. But Liam has granted those sleán plungers, those speal swingers, those feamain collectors, those sheep herders and cow milkers, he has conferred on them an immortality of sorts. There was a way of life disappearing from Corca Dhuibhne when Liam was a child and he has captured it. In my efforts to describe what Liam has done for those men from that era in Corca Dhuibhne, I will call on Yeats again; his famous poem, *Sailing to Byzantium – an aged man is but a paltry thing,/ A tattered coat upon a stick, unless/ Soul clap its hands and sing and louder sing/ For every tatter in its mortal dress.*

And, at its best, Liam's landscape is lyrical. It is a symphony of colour, a hymn of praise. I have a cutting here from last Saturday's Irish Times obituary page. At my age that is the page which has most relevance! Seamus Heaney is remembering his friend, the landscape artist, T.P. Flannagan. *He has been faithful to the ancient artistic impulse which is to bear witness to the wonder of the world and to give glory to it, to make it firm by giving it form. His paintings have stark lyric power and hold a deep personal significance for me.* Well, Seamus, I couldn't have said it better myself.

Sar a chríochnaíonn mé, ba mhaith liom cúpla focal a rá faoin eacht a dhein Brenda Ní Shuilleabhán. Tá níos mó ná dhá chéad píosaí anseo, idir próis is filíochta de. Is iontach an taighde ata déanta aici, scríobnóirí ó chian is ó chónagar. An Trionóid naofa, Peig, Ó Criomhthain, Ó Suilleabhán. Agus sríobhnóirí ár linne comh maith; An tAthair Ó Fiannachta, Domhnal Mac an tSíthigh gualann le gualan le daoine eile nach ón leithinnis ian in aon chor; Brendan Behan, Mac an tSaoi, Seán Ó Riordáin, Seán ó Tuama agus araile. Méadaíonn an próis agus an fhillíocht an pléisiur atá le fáil ón leabhar seo Corca Dhuibhne.

This book is Liam's Fiche Bliain Ag Fás. Beimid go léir ag tnúth le Fiche Bliain Faoi Bhláth. Like Danny Sheehy at the launch in Corca Dhuibhne returning to the

theme of blacksmith, having discovered that craft in Liam's forefathers, I am returning to the same theme to finish. Joyce's famous lines at the conclusion of *Portrait Of An Artist*; *I will forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race*. Well, I don't think that Liam would claim anything as grandiose as that but he has recreated his race and his native landscape. The place captured in this book is a place that does not exist, it is but a dream. So I invite you all to enjoy the dream by declaring that Corca Dhuibne is launched.