

When I was asked a few weeks ago to say a few words today I thought “Great!”
At last.

An opportunity to wax eloquently and speak floridly about the prolificacy of artistic endeavour in Tuam since the bronze age, and to expound on my theory that Tuam is the Byzantine Jewel of the N17...

Home of the last High King and capital of Ireland; at that time Tuam being a primary source of artistic patronage itself.

Songs were sung, tapestries hung, harps strung.

As you can well imagine, bardic recitations, commissions commissioned, the finest of ecclesiastical art as exemplified by the 12th century Celtic high cross.

An Ri Turlough Mór O Connor in his time built Galway out of timber because he couldn't spare the stonemasons. They were too busy building a Hiberno-Romanesque cathedral with a chancel arch in Tuam.

So let there be no doubt

Where the cultural capital was.

So established as to be continuous down centuries with the bardic school only up the road in Kilclooney Castle under the patronage of the O Higgins.

Here poets came from all over to perfect their art.

At one time there were 17 poets come from Ulster
Simultaneously sweating similes in their stone cells.

Travelling Carolan stopping in Tuam for rashers

The regularity of the returning's of Raifteri an File

Or what about the brave Tom Murphy?

All the way from Tuam to Broadway...

Stall the ball I'm only starting sham.

Cathedrals in the plural;

Octagonal clasping buttresses,

Tower topped by crocketed pinnacles, molded corbels and Tudor arches.

Organ gallery with Gothic Baldachino!

Late classical courthouse.

Not to speak of the town hall's octagonal louvered lantern.

Corinthian capitals with dentillated cornices cast in iron at the train station.

And the sweeping curvature of the kerbstones on church view laid by the county council outside the mart

or the shimmering stained glass of the rustic vaults...

But I got the flu so I didn't write about any of that.

I know what you're thinking, and I can't disagree. You're dead right. I am an innocent fool. A gomie. I am a blow in.

My first memory of Tuam is when I was hitching from Donegal to Galway and I got stuck for an hour outside of Sligo in a ditch full of nettles. When a car stopped I didn't care where it was going I got in. It was going to Belmullet. Which is a roundabout way to get from Sligo to Galway. It was dark when we got to Belmullet; I was offered a bed on the floor beside a sheepdog that snored. The next morning I wandered off down a breen that led onto a bigger breen. Bog roads without houses, miles of suspicious sheep, crossroads without roadsigns and no sign of motorised vehicles for hours at a time. At last a lift with a rusty Massey 35 took me two miles. It was a long day of short lifts. Walking miles in-between till I started to see the occasional turnip-looking yoke at the side of the road. Soon there were more of them and then a lorry passed, overflowing, spilling turnip looking yokes onto the road; these turnippy yokes I later learned were sugar beet; I came to the place where tractors with high trailers and trucks with high sides swung in through the factory gates, from here flowed sugar onto the teaspoons of Ireland.

I spotted the Cathedral...and Tuam rose before me like an oasis of renaissance civilization.

From there on in I was like tumbleweed blowing in and out of town.

At the start of 1987 the macnas were very new

Preparing to perform at the Connacht final.

Rehearsals began on a winter's morning with myself and Leo Moran running in circles around the Fisheries Field just the two of us, day after day, While macnas figured out what to do next.

This afforded me the privilege of connecting to the aforementioned bardic tradition of Tuam in its contemporary manifestations, Leo being a bard of the highest caliber, and sure by spring Macnas was teaming with bardic shams.

So, there's me flat with the flu at home on the Weir Rd, knowing as much as I learned, as much as I know, I haven't a hope of conveying the richness of tradition or creative vibrancy of the place. Too much for the blow-in sham.

As I lay dying on the couch I thought...what I'm I going to say... and then the fever took over...

Floating out the door and up the road
Not East to Tuam but back to where it started, Cloonfush.
There's Jarlath heading off with his carthorse and cart,
And the instruction that wherever the cartwheel broke that was where he was to
lay his foundation.
Off he goes on an epic voyage like St. Brendan before him,
maybe he thought he might make it as far as Dublin.
At least he'd cross the Shannon.
Four miles down the road the wheel broke.
Four miles, that random.
Never buy a cartwheel in Cloonfush.
One wonders what if he'd wandered west instead
We might all be living in Mayo. Oh dear.
I wish I was on the N84.
Such a simple twist of fate...
Like all the twists that brought me here
I'll speak it as I see it.

Footloose and fancy free, if I wanted to live in New York I'd live in New York, if I
wanted to live in Paris I'd live in Paris,
but Kilaloonty is where I roll out my blanket this past 16 years...

Its fierce flat if you want mountains...
Stall and soak the horizon.
The wideness of the sky that reaches all the way to the bottom like a posh
curtain.
Look at the size of the sky.
The colour and the light,
The caravansari of clouds.
And no other distraction pulling your eyes away from what's in front of you;
The bit of bog cotton,
The gorse blossoms,
The righteous wee bumble bee...
The torn black bin bag in the bog water.
Cnocma rises up before us;
If you only have the one hill it better be special,
Enchanted.
If you don't believe in the gentle people
You'll understand why others might

“Caherlistrane” say it again “Caherlistrane”
There’s a short poem. “Caherlistrane”

Alice walker said:
“horses make the landscape more beautiful”
She wasn’t wrong.
Pie-balds and skewbalds, all manner of cobs
To lift the heart above all the world’s squabbles.

To walk or to spin that is the question.
In my old jammer Bellclare to Cummer
Back round by Ballyglunin
Take the long way into town
See it now and know,
I couldn’t begin to tell you all that’s going on.
There’s poets teaching in the schools
and there’s poets sitting learning.
There young wans making music in garages
There oul wans telling stories and small wans with crayons.
And you shouldn’t need telling
It was travelers kept the art going
When it was scarce around the country
And if you don’t know that, sit down
Haul up for some learning.

This town of musicals
And festivals
Art asserting itself
All the fabulous Roman candles
Patricia King and JoJo Hynes and on and on...
Relentless local heroes
The sweat and blood forgotten
All the art that went before
And all the wheels that got broken.
All the seeds sunk into these streets,
King Midie and the invincibles,
Perenials.
But let’s not forget the invisibles.

There's no point not saying...
There is suffering.
Loneliness, pain, addiction
There is shame.
Some people think of babies when they hear Tuam's name
Those wheels of life, broken.

Tom Murphy said:
"Rage not against the unfairness of life – life is of course unfair – but against the
inequalities, the arrogance of power."

I was always made welcome.
I'm not the only blow in
And there's a rake of new songs arriving,
Songs about surviving
Cos that's the point of singing
Turning adversity into dancing.

So I'll tell you what
You picked the right spot.
This train your bringing into town
This train is bound for glory