

# Four Irish Poets

selected  
by Frank Sewell





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## Four Irish Poets

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The poets whose work features in this short section represent just some of the diverse strands that exist in modern poetry from Ireland. Their work (or, rather, some of it) links directly and/or tangentially to the current volume's theme of 'minorities'.

Máirtín Ó Direáin was an Aran-island poet, a native speaker of Irish, who moved to the cities of Galway, then Dublin, for employment; thereby moving from Gaeltacht (an Irish-speaking region) to Galltacht (a predominantly English-speaking region). Writing in a minority or minoritized language, he was naturally concerned with what Oswald Spengler had termed the "morphology of culture", the idea that cultures (like species) could die out: ancient cultures such as the Babylonian, recent ones such as the 'Anglo-Irish' (as some critics have called it), and still extant ones, including the Irish or Gaelic. A genuine pluralist, Ó Direáin saw part of his poetic duty as learning from and celebrating diverse cultures. In doing so in his own marginalized language, he showed the 'power and substance' of a minority language and how much it can enrich the culture of an entire country, just as it once inspired writers such as J.M. Synge.

Cathal Ó Searcaigh, likewise, writes in Irish, his native language. A prolific poet, with a range of themes, he was born and lives in the County Donegal Gaeltacht. Among his concerns is that the love that once "dared not speak its name" should be able to speak out openly and lovingly, rather than being shut out or shut out for being in a minority.

Stephanie Conn is a relatively new voice in Irish poetry, publishing several collections of poems since 2016. Among her interests are female artists of the past and present, including Frieda Kahlo who is given voice in the poems selected here. Kahlo was overshadowed in her own lifetime by Diego Rivera and often underestimated by (male) art critics, but has increasingly been recognised for her talent. Conn highlights Kahlo's personal courage in the face of illness and also her identification with elements of Mexican culture such as the Tehuana, who have been marginalized and underestimated.

Bernadette Nic an tSaoir, like Ó Searcaigh, is one of Ireland's contemporary Irish-language poets. She has published six collec-  
tions of poetry. In the first poem selected below, she celebrates

one of the princes of Irish culture: the composer Seán Ó Riada who contributed much to rescuing Irish traditional music from the margins, from being the prized possession of a minority to gracing (increasingly) world stages and international film scores, etc. In some of her other poems, she focuses on less celebrated figures, characters from the margins and/or minorities, those whom Seamus Heaney (in “Mint”, *The Spirit Level*) has termed “the disregarded ones we turned against / Because we’d failed them by our disregard”.

*Máirtín Ó Direáin*

“Ómós do John Millington Synge”

An toisc a thug tú chun mo dhaoine  
Ón gcéin mhéith don charraig gharbh  
Ba chéile léi an chré bheo  
Is an leid a scéith as léan is danaid.

Níor éistis scéal na gcloch,  
Bhí éacht i scéal an teallaigh,  
Níor spéis leat leac ná cill,  
Ní thig éamh as an gcré mharbh.

Do dhuinigh Deirdre romhat sa ród  
Is curach Naoise do chas Ceann Gainimh,  
D’imigh Deirdre is Naoise leo  
Is chaith Peigín le Seáinín aithis.

An leabhar ba ghnáth i do dhóid  
As ar chuiris bréithre ar marthain;  
Ghabh Deirdre, Naoise is Peigín cló  
Is thug léim ghaisce de na leathanaigh.

Tá cleacht mo dhaoine ag meath,  
Ní cabhair feasta an tonn mar fhalla,  
Ach do dtaga Coill Chuain go hInis Meáin  
Beidh na bréithre a chnuasaís tráth  
Ar marthain fós i dteanga eachtrann.

(1957)

“Comhchríoch”

Faoi do mhuintir an diallait,  
Is gunna leo chun fiaigh,  
Ina lámha an ghlac ó chian,  
An sléachtadh rompu, an riar:  
An tsrathair ar mo mhuintir féin.

Ar an tseanáit ós áil leat trácht  
Cá miste dul i do dháil;  
An lá a bhfuil srathair is diallait  
Faoi iamh sa mhúsaem  
Cá mór nach ionann ár gcás?

(1966)

“Homage to J.M. Synge”

Just what brought you to my people  
From foreign luxury to rugged rock  
Was something akin to the living clay  
And inklings derived from grief and loss.

You never heard the stones’ story,  
The fireside tale caught your ear;  
Nor showed interest in slab or churchyard;  
There’s no entreaty from clay that’s dead.

But Deirdre appeared on the road before you  
And Naoise’s currach turned Ceann Gainimh;  
Deirdre and Naoise went their way  
And Pegeen cursed and swore at Shauneen.

Mostly, you had a book in hand  
And, from it, brought the words to life:  
Deirdre, Naoise and Pegeen took shape  
And leapt, unbounded, from the pages.

My people’s ways are in decline,  
The wave no longer a protective wall,  
But till Cuan Wood comes to Inishmaan,  
The words that you compiled once  
Will still live on in a foreign tongue.

(Trans. by Frank Sewell)

“Winding Up the Same Way”

Under your people the saddle,  
And they had guns for hunting,  
The reins in their hands for centuries;  
They were served and bowed down to –  
On my people was the yoke.

Since you like to talk of the old place,  
Why don’t I go there with you?  
The day when yoke and saddle  
Are locked up in a museum,  
Won’t our position be the same?

(Trans. by Frank Sewell)

*Cathal Ó Searcaigh*

“Antinous”

-- *Ammon, file, á chaoineadh in Alexandria, 133 AD*

Buachaill bocht as Bithnia  
ach faoi bhláth agus faoi mhaise na hóige  
b’eisean an té a ba deise  
dá bhfacthas ariamh in Alexandria.  
B’eisean Antinous na háilleachta  
ar thug an tImpire taitneamh dó agus grá.

Bhéarfá mionna gur gineadh é gan smál,  
bhí sé chomh dea-chumtha sin  
i ngach ball, chomh caoin ina mhéin,  
chomh séimh ina ghné. Dá mba toil liom na déithe  
déarfainn gur iadsan a mhúnlaigh é  
as cré dhiaga na gnaíúlachta.

Chífinn é ó ham go ham sa giomnáisiam  
agus sa leabharlann ach ní raibh sé de dhánaíocht ionam  
labhairt leis. B’eisean an comrádaí ríoga  
is ní raibh ionamsa ach cléireach uiríseal  
i seirbhís na hImpireachta. Mar ba dual do mo chinéal  
bhí orm urraim a ghéilleadh dó i gcónaí.

B’eisean mian súl an tslua, fir agus mná,  
b’ionann a gcás, b’áil leo bheith i gcaidreamh  
leis an bhuachaill seo a b’áille dealraimh.  
I dtaca liomsa de, ní raibh a thaibhreamh domh ach é,  
a bhéal le mo bhéal, a ghéaga i mo thimpeall;  
bhéarfainn a raibh i mo chnámha ach dlúthú leis.

I gcónaí buan agus daingean ina dhílseacht  
dá leannán, nuair a tháinig am na hachainí  
gan ghearán, d’íobar sé é féin sa Níl i ndúil  
is go ndéanfaí an tImpire a shábhail  
ó thubaiste éigin a bhítheas a thuar dó.  
Dá mba rud is go dtiocfaí an chinniúint a ordú!

Anois tá a dhealbh le feiceáil i mbailte na ríochta  
is tá a íomhá buailte ar bhoinn airgid na hImpireachta.  
Le hómós dó d’fhógair an tImpire ina Dhia é agus cé  
gur eol dúinn nach bhfuil sna déithe ach miotas ár mianta  
is aobhinn linn go bhfuil Antinous, buachaill a ghéill  
do chlaonta na Greige, ár ndálta féin, anois ar ard na glóire.

Antinous na háilleachta! Antinous na grástúlachta!  
Sa cháil sin, buan beo a bheas sé anois agus go deo.  
Sa staid dhiaga úd, fiú mura bhfuil ann ach samhail,  
buanóidh sé ar feadh na síoraíochta  
ionas nach dtig leis an bhás, fiú amháin, díobháil  
a dhéanamh dó nó é a chur ó dhealramh.

(2013)

“Antinous”

-- *a lament from the poet Ammon (Alexandria, 133 AD)*

A poor boy from the province of Bithynia,  
but he was in the flower of his youth,  
the loveliest that anyone had seen  
in all the city of Alexandria.  
For he was the most handsome Antinous,  
loved and beloved of the emperor.

You’d lay odds that he was born just perfect,  
he was so well-built in body and limb,  
so easy on the eye, so statuesque.  
And were I one to believe in the gods,  
I’d swear that it was they who fashioned him  
from the holy clay of beauty itself.

Sometimes I’d see him at the library  
or gymnasium but not once did I dare  
speak to him. For he was a royal consort,  
and I but a humble clerk in the service  
of the Empire. True to my station,  
all I could ever do was bow before him.

He caught every eye. The women’s, the men’s –  
it made no difference; they’d all want a piece  
of this prettiest of young men. And me,  
I dreamt of nothing else but him, his mouth  
upon my mouth, his strong arms around me.  
I’d give my marrow bones just to hold him.

Firm and unstinting in his devotion  
to his lover, when it was time, he cast  
himself into the Nile without a word,  
and all to save the Emperor from harm  
the haruspices had foretold for him.  
O, if only fate could be subdued!

And now his statue is in every town,  
his image stamped on coins of the realm.  
In grief, Hadrian declared him a god,  
and though we know that gods are man-made myths,  
we’re glad that Antinous, a Hellenist,  
like one of us, has now been raised in glory.

Handsome Antinous! Graceful Antinous!  
Thus let him live, both now and forever.  
And if his divinity is but a symbol,  
long may it last through all eternity  
so that no-one, not even death itself,  
can demonize him or defile his image.

(Trans. by Frank Sewell)

*Stephanie Conn*

“Notes on Concealment”

At six years old pull four socks up your shin.  
At twenty-six, perfect the swish and swirl  
of flowing A-line skirts, trimmed with pleated lace.  
Clutter your neck with starched frills, silk ribbons,  
sling jade and fire opals from gold chains.  
Gather your hair in dark, flamboyant knots,  
braid in place with clips and flower blooms.  
Present a bold stare that dares any living soul  
to look away or look lower, deeper,  
to see the withered leg, the limp, the back brace  
reinforced with metal bars, leather straps,  
the plaster casts: your moulded second skin.

“Under a Gangrene Sun”

They are coming for my foot –  
will cut the leg beneath the knee  
to stop the pain, stop the poison spreading.

They have been shooting into my arm  
for months to make the screaming end,  
stabbing deeper into collapsed veins.

My brow softens. You lift your gaze at last  
to meet my woozy stare and a fire-star  
falls to earth, melting into green leaves

on the ward floor. Before it turns to desert sand  
everything is rotten and shifts in a canopy of thorns –  
toes swing on stripped branches, hang from beaks.

I hold my peacock ring in my left hand,  
a clay deer in my right, try to remember who  
brought them, if it was you, sobbing by my bed.

You weren't so sentimental when my heart  
shattered yet you blub for my poor dead foot –  
birth red turned to brown, black then blacker still.

I love you most of all. You give me wings  
and I've never needed them more than today  
putting on my Tehuana dress to meet the knife.

“Sustenance”

I dream of the Sapodilla tree,  
her long and twisting root system,  
resistance to wind, delicate cream flowers –  
small bells that chime inside my foggy head.

I discard the rough brown skin in leaf-litter  
share the sweet-soaked flesh of her fruit  
with howler monkeys, a sun-blind kinkajou,  
while yellow epauletted bats sip at nectar syrup.

My finger-nails sprout claws, slash at bark, slice  
the trunk for her milky sap. I know the harvesters  
boil and block and cut but I drop to my knees,  
let the chicle drip into my mouth until I choke.

(2020)

*Bernadette Nic an tSaoir* (trans. by the author)

“Ar Shráid an Phrionsa”

*In ómós do Sheán Ó Riada 1 Lúnasa 2010*

Leacht cré-umha atá romham inniu  
D’fhear buan, maorga, gradamúil.  
Cuntanós an laoiach atá snoite  
Faoi lámh an dealbhadóra.

Chímse an fear é féin, tráth  
Ag scuabadh leis ar shráid  
Thart an coirnéal chun siopa  
Is fuadar faoi;  
Lán glaise bonn do thit uaidh.  
Do stad is labhair linn beirt go fóill  
Ag trácht ar phort nó fonn amhráin,  
Pingní rua is práis aige  
Á bpiocadh den leac sráide...

Siúlaim Sráid an Phrionsa inniu,  
Chím an scilling do thit ar leac  
Is chim an lámh do chruinnigh.  
B’in Oirféas an Draighin  
Rí-Alceimicí an traidisiúin  
A d’iompaigh miotal suarach  
I riocht an óir le cor dá bhois  
Is cloch a chuimilt.

*Is fearr le Dia guí ná gol.*  
Más ansa leis na foinn  
Mar thúis altóra os cionn Suláin,  
Thaobhaíomar beirt na Flaithis  
Ar Shráid an Phrionsa tráth.  
(2010)

“On Princes Street”

*In memory of Seán Ó Riada 1st Aug. 2010*

Now you’re cast in bronze,  
Majestic, lasting.  
A hero’s face carved  
By the sculptor’s hand.

But I see you  
Hurrying along Princes Street  
Darting to a corner shop  
Dropping a fistful of coins  
Picking them up off the street  
Coppers and brass  
As you stop a moment to chat  
Of a jig or the air to a song....

Today on Princes Street  
I see that little shilling  
And the hand reaching,  
Orpheus from *An Draighin*  
King of musical alchemy  
Changing base metal into gold  
With a flick of the wrist  
And the rub of a stone.

*God wants prayers not tears.*  
If it’s true then He loves those airs  
Rising like incense above Sullane,  
And we were close to Heaven  
One day on Princes Street.

“Cathaoir Pheadair”

San uaimh laistíos den Vatacáin  
Tá tuamaí marmair na bprionsaí  
Do shuigh ar Chathaoir Pheadair.

Is ar fud Baisleac Pheadair fhéin,  
Leachtanna den chré-umha déanta  
In ómós don Tiarna, deirtear.

Ór is airgead, míle seod ealaíne,  
Maoin is péarlaí thar na bearta  
Anso i gcroílár Eaglais Chríost.

Amach liom ar thóir gile an lae,  
Mé plúchta ag an rachmas seo  
Is ag an gcur i gcéill.

I gcúinne d’aimsíos an both  
Is an bhean ag sciúradh leithris,  
Í ag brath ar an méid a chaití chuici  
Le greim a chur ina béal.

Dá siúlfadh Críost an Róimh inniu  
Do shuífeadh síos léi siúd,  
Labhródh go cneasta bog léi  
Mar a labhair cois Tobar Iacóib.  
Do leagfadh lámh ar bhriseadh croí  
Is leigheasfadh pian a saoil.  
(2013)

“St Peter’s Chair”

In the vaults below the Vatican  
There are marble tombs of princes  
Who reigned on St Peter’s chair.

In St Peter’s Basilica  
There are fine bronze statues  
To honour the Lord, it is said.

Gold and silver, a thousand jewels,  
Paintings, riches and pearls  
Are here in the Church of Christ.

I come out for sunlight,  
Smothered by the wealth of riches  
And pretence.

In a booth behind St Peter’s Square  
I meet the cleaning lady.  
She is poor, rents the booth  
And lives on tips from tourists.

Were Christ to walk today in Rome  
He would sit with her,  
He would speak kindly  
As he spoke by Jacob’s well.  
He would touch her heartbreak  
And heal her pain.