

WHAT MELVILLE KNEW

News that John Moriarty had triple cancer – in the liver, bowel and prostate – came as a shock to his friends throughout Ireland in January 2006, but to hear him talking about it to Joe Duffy on *Liveline* in April was somehow reassuring. Even more encouraging was the fact that, with strong new drugs and treatments, his doctors were prepared, as John put it, ‘to put up a fight’. His friends in Dublin, Kerry and along the west coast already had circled the wagons, sending text messages to one another with the latest bulletins about his condition. Eileen Moore gave up her job to care for him. The man himself took all our phone calls, patiently giving updates, describing the hospital scenes, and signing off with his characteristic ‘God bless’. Hearing the diagnosis had been traumatic, but it appeared that his doctors did not consider it a death sentence. He had a chance for a longer life, one which could be of good quality. Why else submit to the chemotherapy drip?

When I spoke to John on the phone on a sunny day in May 2006, he was proofreading his massive book on Europe, *Night Journey to Buddh Gaia*. His voice was strong and, despite a pain in his arm and the profound fatigue that results from chemotherapy, he was, in his own words, ‘optimistic on either side of death’.

John Moriarty is a philosopher, writer and mystic from north Kerry. His mother’s early assessment of him may have contained a certain bleakness: ‘What with his drainpipe trousers and long

hair, he doesn't even look like a fact of life,' but her son John went on to write *Nostos*, from the Greek word for homecoming, a 698-page autobiography published in 2001 which Aidan Carl Mathews called 'the greatest Irish book since *Ulysses*'. Few who attended University College Dublin with John, who took a first-class honours degree in philosophy, would disagree with the view that he has one of the best minds in Ireland.

He is the man who reawakened my interest in American literature after nearly twenty years in Ireland, who brought me back to my days as an English major at Williams College in the 1970s, sitting in a classroom staring at Mount Greylock with its whale-shaped peak or poring over the pages of *Moby-Dick*. He explained Herman Melville's diagnosis of the western psyche to me, trying to help me understand why America and western Europe are in the state they are in today. He described what had been going on in my own backyard in the Berkshires of Massachusetts and he attempted to teach me what Melville knew, to help me reclaim my American inheritance in both its positive and negative aspects after so many years away. He was instructive about the profound changes taking place, both positive and negative, in my adoptive and ancestral homeland of Ireland.

I interviewed John for the first time on Clare Island, which meant driving from Achill to Roonagh pier and getting the boat. I had begun to read *Nostos* and had been amazed by its depth and erudition, its grace and independence of thought; it struck me that, while he might not claim the title, John seemed to be an heir to Herman Melville.

'I'm nervous,' I confided to a friend, before heading to Clare Island. 'He's smart.'

The drive along the Mayo coast was a labour of love, and the sea sparkled as I left Achill and headed towards Mulranny and Newport. Westport gleamed, tidy and proud. In Murrisk I saluted Croagh Patrick and slowed down to admire John Behan's bronze sculpture of a coffin ship in the Famine Memorial Park, a lonely

work set incongruously close to the busy road. The day was brilliantly sunny and fresh, ideal for my trip. Beyond Louisburgh I turned right for the pier at Roonagh. I took my seat on O'Malley's *Island Princess* and watched Mayo county councillors in jackets and ties board O'Grady's *Pirate Queen*. Crewmen's voices rose above the engine as the ferry rumbled into Clew Bay.

John stood waiting on the pier on Clare Island, tall and contemplative, with his distinctive mop of curly white hair. He was visiting the island to take part in the Bard summer school on Irish myths, founded ten years ago by Ellen O'Malley-Dunlop, a Dublin psychotherapist and descendant of Granuaile, the sixteenth-century Pirate Queen of Connaught believed to be buried in St Brigid's Abbey on the island. The abbey contains rare medieval wall-paintings, which were restored in a painstaking project that took more than ten years. The only known Irish image of a medieval organ was uncovered during the conservation work.

'Up Kerry,' he called to a passer-by outside the community centre. We walked past the hotel and sat on a cliff overlooking the bay with spectacular views of Achill, Mulranny and Croagh Patrick. He identified the flowers around us: 'purple wild mountain thyme, eye-bright, regarded traditionally as being a cure for blindness, dwarf ferns, trefoil, beautiful grasses and unopened dandelions'. We were sitting in 'literally a herbal meadow', he observed.

'Are you writing anything, John?'

'There are three things on the go at the moment, one big book and two smaller works.'

One of the shorter books, *Ailiu Iath n-hErend, Invoking Ireland*, which picks up where Yeats and Lady Gregory left off, was published in the autumn of 2005 and introduced at the Clifden Arts Festival. In the book John retells twenty of Ireland's oldest tales from the eighth and ninth centuries, having read them in the original Irish. The book's title comes from 'I Invoke the

Land of Ireland’, among the first words spoken in Irish in Ireland by Amhairghin Glungheal, the poet at the head of the fleet as the Celts came up Kenmare Bay.

‘What he’s doing is he’s calling the rivers, he’s calling the mountains, he’s calling the animals, he’s calling the grass, he’s calling the trees, he’s calling everything over on to his side,’ John said.

Now that’s what I’m trying to do in this book. I’m trying to reinvoké the land of Ireland, and my way of reinvoking the land of Ireland is to bring back some of the ancient stories and to see if there isn’t both a conscience and a consciousness there that is really the ancient soul of Ireland and that we would do well to recover. My sense is that it is not a question of inventing Ireland, it’s a question of discovering an Ireland that’s there. Douglas Hyde did not invent Ireland; he uncovered an Ireland in *The Love Songs of Connaught*. Synge didn’t invent the Aran Islands; he went there and discovered them. Also Yeats and Lady Gregory.

John was born in 1938 and educated at St Michael’s, Listowel, where he studied Greek and Latin. After teaching English literature for six years at the University of Manitoba in Canada, which he found ‘an ideal human society, an environment in which you could absolutely prosper’, he returned to Ireland in 1971. He has lived in beautiful, remote places, sometimes in quite primitive circumstances. He spent twenty-three years in Connemara and he has lived in Coolies, Muckross, County Kerry, for the past ten. He does not own a car, a television, a computer or a typewriter. For years he travelled by bus or train around the country to give talks. He writes most days, in longhand, even now that he is ill.

In addition to *Nostos* and *Invoking Ireland*, John is the author

of *Dreamtime* (1994), and the trilogy *Turtle Was Gone a Long Time: Crossing the Kedron* (1996), *Horsehead Nebula Neighing* (1997) and *Anaconda Canoe* (1998). He has read and seemingly ingested all the great books and he quotes freely and frequently from them. His encyclopaedic mind roams from ancient Greece to the crisis facing the modern world, namely the survival of our planet.

‘I am heartbroken about what is happening to the planet,’ he told me on Clare Island. He continued:

We have done so much ecological havoc to the world. We are now AIDS virus to the Earth. We are doing to the Earth what the AIDS virus does to the human body: we are breaking down its immune system. And I don’t know that the Earth can survive our presence in it. In the meantime, Ireland has become another Japan. Dublin is another Tokyo, with the amount of concrete that’s being poured all over the place. I personally do not want to move about the world in a bullet train. We’re going to have a bullet train from Dingle to Puck Fair.

He said, ‘I believe that we need a Naissance, not a Renaissance. Collectively we need to be radically original in our thinking. The Greeks can’t help us this time.’

I asked him how invoking Ireland could work in the present day, when one in ten people in the country was a foreign national.

He replied:

There is now a new coming ashore into Ireland, in the way that the Vikings came, the Celts came, the Megalith builders came. I would hope for the people who are now coming to Ireland, I want to say to them that I hope that we have a great story for

you to come ashore into, not just another economy or into Ireland.com, and that maybe in time you can find that you can inhabit our great story because we have begun to inhabit it architecturally, poetically, in literature, in all kinds of ways.

Half-way through our interview John moved from the idea of the ideal human society – which he found at the University of Manitoba and which I found at Williams College – to the deck of a whaling ship, where Herman Melville received his education. Out of the blue he mentioned *Moby-Dick*, calling it ‘one of the great books of the world’.

I looked up from my notebook. It had been twenty-seven years since I had been an undergraduate and heard anyone discussing *Moby-Dick* seriously. Too long to go without Melville.

John said: ‘*Moby-Dick* is the greatest diagnosis of the western psyche that we have, infinitely better than Hegel’s diagnosis, infinitely better than Marx.’

Our time was running short and I had a boat to catch, but I was determined to interview him again and ask him about *Moby-Dick*. At that point I had been in the news business for almost twenty-five years, seventeen of them at *The Irish Times*. In 2004 I applied for an unpaid leave of absence from the paper. Bob had died in 2003, and I wanted to rest and to spend more time with Conor, who was starting secondary school. Among other things, I needed to step back from the unending flow of breaking stories, to try to analyse events from a different perspective. The news business was changing. Newspaper coverage was being affected by twenty-four-hour TV news networks such as Sky, which were setting the agenda; authors were using their books to break news stories because there was less time for investigative reporting in daily journalism, and satellite television was filled with shouting Americans on Fox News. People were being bombarded with bulletins and alerts at every turn; we were watching TV news in

train stations, in hospital, at the gym, in pubs and restaurants, everywhere, without time to reflect on what we were seeing and hearing. Mobile phones were going off at funerals, during concerts and in the middle of plays at the Gate Theatre. Many of us were flirting with meaningless multi-tasking, charging around with MP3 players, Sony Walkmans, portable DVD players, PSPs and BlackBerrys. Pedestrians were crossing busy streets while reading text messages. Drivers were reading text messages while people were crossing busy streets. We were all going around wired up like suicide bombers. It was time, I felt, to turn to the philosophers.

I got my chance about three months later when I attended the publication of *Invoking Ireland* at the Clifden Arts Festival. On a Friday afternoon I left Achill and drove down the coast from Mayo to Galway. I passed through Westport, Carrowkennedy and Leenane, nodding to Killary harbour and the mountains surrounding the fjord. I drove through Letterfrack and Moyard before reaching Clifden, hallowed ground from my Watson Fellowship days. In 1978, when I was packing for Ireland, Tom MacIntyre recommended that I look up Brendan Flynn; he said to inquire in Frank Kelly's bar in Clifden. So that autumn I arrived in Clifden and asked for Frank Kelly's bar, and was directed to a pub on the corner. Two men were sitting with their backs to the bar, facing the door. One looked to be in his forties, amiable and soft-faced; the other man was older, more angular. I approached them.

'Excuse me, I'm looking for Brendan Flynn.'

'Who's looking for him?' the older man demanded.

I was taken aback but stood my ground. I gave him my name, and I said Tom MacIntyre had sent me.

The two men looked at me.

More silence.

Nobody blinked.

'I am Brendan Flynn,' the soft-faced man said, leaning forward

slightly on the bar stool.

The older man was Frank Kelly. I laugh to think of it now.

Brendan, from Taugh ma Connell near Ballinasloe, on the Galway-Roscommon border, is a man who loves the arts and artists. He retired in 2005 after thirty-one years as assistant principal of the Clifden Community School; he was acting principal for six of those years. He was a member of the Arts Council from 1998 to 2003. He founded the Clifden Arts Festival in 1977 when the town was a quiet outpost, a destination for discerning French and German holidaymakers and visitors to Inishbofin. It all began with Brendan having poets read to the students in the community school.

Throughout the 1980s I visited Brendan's house overlooking the lake many times en route to Cleggan and Paddy O'Halloran's boat to 'Bofin. There was always someone passing through. Once, in his kitchen, Brendan introduced me to a French ballerina with long blond hair who was living in the area. He mentioned that I had been a newspaper reporter in New York and that I had covered the 'Murder at the Met'. She pouted and said: 'I don't read newz-papers. Zey get my feengeers so dirrr-ty.'

John Moriarty was scheduled to speak at Foyles Hotel, Clifden, on 22 September 2005. The poet Moya Cannon introduced him, praising the intellectual and moral courage of his work in 'an age of new illiteracy'. John stood at the podium bearing the motto: 'The Mind Altering Alters All', and then he began to speak. It was an astonishing performance, a torrent of stories, myths, words and ideas, a verbal concert.

The following morning I interviewed John at Anglers' Return, a guest house four miles from Roundstone and two miles from Ballynahinch Castle, owned and run by Lynn Hill, born Lynette Prynne. Lynn's parents had bought the house in 1954 and turned it into a small, private hotel. After returning from Canada, John lived in a cottage on the property, across the yard, for fourteen years and worked as a gardener. During that time he became close

to Lynn, her husband Simon, and their children.

I asked him about what he had stated on Clare Island during our first interview: that *Moby-Dick* was a diagnosis of the western psyche. Could he elaborate?

John replied:

To me *Moby-Dick* is the finest diagnosis and prognosis that we have of the western psyche in all its historical 'psychles', and I'm saying psychles, not cycles, because I am talking about cultural enactments of psyche. There's the Mesopotamian psychle, the Egyptian psychle, the Greek psychle, the Roman psychle, the medieval Christian psychle, and if you like, Renaissance and modern psychle.

Melville knew, he divined – the great genius will divine things before they are known – that the western psyche was founded on a hatchet job, the hatchet job of killing the dragon in one form or another.

Marduk in Mesopotamia goes out into the abyss and kills Tiamat with her seven heads, so you have a hatchet job in the abyss. In ancient Egypt in the person of the sun-god Atum we went down into the underworld, into our own unconscious, with a spear and there we slaughtered Apophis, the great snake-dragon bellowing at us and hissing at us from the top of his thousand coils.

Now that is a desperate and terrible thing to do. You'll never, ever, ever again be at peace with your own psyche.

You have it in Greece, you have it in Rome, it's right there in Germanic culture. Seamus Heaney has translated *Beowulf*. Beowulf the great hero goes out to kill Grendel. So I'm just saying Melville knew that

we have founded not only our psyches but we have founded our world and our culture on that hatchet job in all and in each and every one of the psychles of western history.

He paused to explain that by using the word diagnosis he meant dia-gnosis, from the Greek 'dia', all the way through, and 'gnosis', to know, meaning to know right through to the core, to the root, of the illness. He pointed out that the *Pequod*, Captain Ahab's ship, was the name of an exterminated Native American tribe.

Now we have Ahab setting out again to repeat the old hatchet job. And this time the beast turns on us, staves us in below waterline, and we go down. And western culture, in Melville's dia-gnosis, is *Pequod* culture, and it's lying below on the floor of the ocean. The culture that gives us our identity, that gives us our meaning, our sense of who we are and who we might be, that culture has already gone to the bottom.

And I am saying I take that diagnosis seriously, and I'm starting at the other side of that collapse, I'm writing for the other side of that collapse. I mightn't be an heir to Melville, but I certainly take up where Melville left off. I accept his dia-gnosis, I accept his prediction, I accept his enactment; he enacted the end of western world culture. That's what *Moby-Dick* does. The ship of western culture has opened at the seams and has taken sinking abyssal water. And it's only Ishmael himself who comes back to tell us what happened.

Western culture in all its psychles is founded on suppression rather than integration. Do you integrate the beast in yourself or do you put your heel

on the head of the serpent as Mary does in Catholic iconography? The way of repression and suppression and exclusion hasn't worked for the west because the beast has always been reborn in us. The only way to deal with the beast is to integrate the beast. And Melville knows that, but he didn't for some reason go on to enact it.

Had anyone since Melville tried to integrate the beast?

'Integrating the beast is at the heart of my own literary project,' John said.

How did Melville know all this?

A genius of the exceptional sort that Melville is will intuit this, and he did. A year on board a whaling ship, two years on board the *Acushnet*, which he was, intuitions will come, and he was hugely well read in the Bible and in available world literature.

Melville knew there is that in us which drives us on, he knew that we're self-driven to destruction. And Ahab is the captain, you have the mad captain, the monomaniacal mad captain who hypnotises everyone. Melville's talking about a hypnotised crew, they're hypnotised by this man.

In the chapter called 'The Quarter-deck', they drink Ahab's grog. He says, 'Bring the grog', and all these sailors splice hands on killing the monster. We'll run down this beast and we'll kill him. Then he fills the harpoon sockets with the grog and the harpooners drink from the harpoon sockets, as they would from chalices. Now what kind of Eucharist is that? This is a Black Mass enacted right there. The implication is that in some unconscious sense western culture's been a kind of Black Mass from the

word 'go', and that there's an Ahab who's hypnotising us.

Hitler hypnotised all of Germany; did Stalin hypnotise all of Russia? How did people go out and do the terrible things they did? I think society works by hypnosis, not by a conscious social contract.

We all end up quite early in our lives literally hypnotised. How else can I explain people gridlocked in Dublin? How are they willing to do that? Not only to be gridlocked in traffic physically, but to be gridlocked emotionally, intellectually, to be gridlocked, stuck in the traffic of your life, stuck in the traffic of a bad marriage, of a mortgage.

John Moriarty concluded: 'I can only explain modern society in terms of mass hypnosis.'