

An Irishwoman's Diary

Sheila Sullivan

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 to Clare Island. 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 Moriarty stood waiting at the pier on Clare island, tall and contemplative, with his distinctive mop of curly white hair. The author of *Nostos* (2001), an astonishing 698-page autobiography which Aidan Carl Mathews called "the greatest Irish book since *Ulysses*", was visiting the island last Monday week to take part in the Bard Summer School on Irish myths. In its 10th year, the summer school is the brainchild of Ellen O'Malley-Dunlop, a Dublin psychotherapist and descendant of Granuaile.

Moriarty has come from Kerry for the past five years, and island friends greeted the philosopher fondly.

"God bless you," John told them. "Up Kerry," he called to a passer-by as we sat outside the community centre, where workshops on *The Táin*, this year's theme, were being held.

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?" I asked.

"There are three things on the go at the moment," he replied, 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, will be published by the Lilliput Press in October and launched at the Clifden Arts Festival.

The 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 reinvoke 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 Moriarty was born in north Kerry in 1938 and educated at Listowel and UCD. After teaching English literature at the University of Manitoba, which he found "an ideal human society", he returned to Ireland in 1971. He has lived in beautiful, remote places: Inishbofin, Connemara, and, for the past 10 years, in Coolies, Muckross, Co Kerry. He does not own a car, a television, a computer or a typewriter. He writes every day, in longhand. He will go to the internet café in Killarney to have his manuscripts typed and photocopied. He listens to the radio in the evening or watches a match at a neighbour's house.

In addition to *Nostos*, Greek for "homecoming", he is the author of *Dreamtime* (1994), which Lilliput publisher Antony Farrell considers the most accessible of his books, and the trilogy *Turtle Was Gone a Long Time: Crossing the Kedron* (1996); *Horsehead Nebula Neighing* (1997); and *Anaconda Canoe* (1998).

His encyclopaedic mind roams from ancient Greece to the crisis facing the modern world, namely the survival of our planet. "We have done so much ecological havoc to the world," he said. "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.

"I believe that we need a Naissance, not a Renaissance. We need to be radically original in our thinking," he said. "The Greeks can't help us this time."

© 2005 The Irish Times