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The Literatures and Cultures of the Irish Sea

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**Giving 'A Tongue to the Sea Cliffs': The Landless Inheritance of W.B. Yeats and Eavan Boland**

The Irish Sea in culture and memory, both in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, is often portrayed as a path of exit, an avenue of emigration, a way of finally disconnecting from the tragedy of Irish history. In writers as far apart as James Clarence Mangan and John Mitchel it can be everything from “the Deep” mentioned in “My Dark Rosaleen” to the last sight of Ireland a transported felon sees.<sup>1</sup> In other words a one-way passage away from the painful relation to England.

There is however an important tension between this imagined sea and the actual one. In both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, tens of thousands of merchant seamen plied their trade between the British Isles, advancing from generation to generation, progressing from sail to steam and continuously making and expanding connections between land and landmass in a way that disrupted a previously imagined paradigm.<sup>2</sup>

This busy, practical traffic, drawing people of these islands together, found its way into British poetry. And it did so even while Irish writing kept the sea in its sights as

an avenue of history and separation. In 1902 the British poet laureate John Masefield published a poem called "Cargoes." It's three stanzas long and contrasts the romantic Eastern sailing ships of previous times with the busy, unglamorous, current life of the sea in Britain. The location of the poem is the English Channel, a waterway that touches the Irish Sea through the Celtic Sea. The ship described in the last stanza is a small British coaster, plying its trade in rough waters. Masefield's purpose here is to celebrate the contemporary life of the sea in contrast to the romanticized one:

Dirty British coaster with a salt-caked smoke-stack  
Butting through the Channel in the mad March days,  
With a cargo of Tyne coal,  
Road-rail, pig-lead,  
Firewood, iron-ware, and cheap tin toys.<sup>3</sup>

But in Irish writing at this time the sea remained a far more haunted element. The date of Masefield's poem is just a year before James Joyce has Stephen Dedalus, in the first chapter of *Ulysses*, look out at the Irish Sea from the Martello Tower. And when he does he describes it as a "bowl of bitter waters."<sup>4</sup>

How alternative narratives of this waterway complicate and enrich one another is my subject here. And how this complication in turn opens a window for us. It opens a window on how connection and disconnection are addressed and imagined in literature and culture. Imagining the Irish Sea as an emigrant route necessarily confines that water to a national identity. But now new understandings and perspectives in new Atlantic studies and Irish Sea studies have taken us beyond that.<sup>5</sup> They allow us to look more closely at how narratives unrelated to land can be put into conversation with older ones. Two twentieth-century poets, one early and one late, offer us a perspective on this. Shaped by family history rooted in Irish maritime culture, both W.B. Yeats and Eavan Boland address the non-national imaginatively through their use of the sea.

William Yeats was born in Sligo. But from his mother's side he inherited the drama and symbolism of the Cornish coast, through the history of her family, the Pollexfens. For Yeats the sea was first and foremost an origin. The Pollexfens were a milling and shipping family, a family of colorful gesture and larger than life personalities, and all of them steeped in the lore of the sea. Yeats remembered that his fierce old grandfather possessed only one book apart from the Bible. It was *The Shipwreck* by William Falconer, an eighteenth-century Scottish poet who wrote a long, vivid poem about the last voyage of the merchant ship *Britannia*.<sup>6</sup>

But the sea was a practical inheritance as well. The family ran a fleet of sailing ships which carried goods between Sligo, Portugal and Spain.<sup>7</sup> By the time Yeats was born, Sligo was well on its way to becoming the West of Ireland's busiest trading port, so defined by the shipping trade that Thomas Carlisle described it as the Liverpool of the West of Ireland.<sup>8</sup> The Pollexfens therefore provided Yeats with a double inheritance: their links to the ocean were commercial, but they were also verbal, visual and imaginative.

As a young poet Yeats's imaginative life would be profoundly shaped by the lives of nineteenth-century Irish seafarers. In "Pardon, Old Fathers," which opens his 1914 volume *Responsibilities*, Yeats remarks on the imaginative influence of his maternal grandfather, William Pollexfen:

You merchant skipper that leaped overboard  
After a ragged hat in Biscay Bay,  
You most of all, silent and fierce old man  
Because you were the spectacle that stirred  
My fancy . . .<sup>9</sup>

Yeats's fascination with the history, the people, the life of the ocean is also obvious in his prose writing. He chronicles the progress, the shifts and changes of the

waterways, as do his siblings, Jack and Lily. In her scrapbooks Lily remarks on how, in the poet's time, the sailing ships were replaced by steamers:

These gay little ships' lives were over, and they as old black hulls were used as lighters and clustered round the great corn steamers from America and the Black Sea, yellow corn being poured into them with a delicious rushing sound as the steamers lay out in the deep water anchorage at the Rosses Point.<sup>10</sup>

Yeats grew up therefore in a seafaring world that was visually rich and also verbally rich. He had access to sea stories, to tales of ocean voyages, and regular talk of far away places. He also took in the life-and-death world of sudden risk, danger and courage. In *Reveries over Childhood and Youth*, Yeats tells us about a powerful moment in his childhood:

Once too I was driving with my grandmother a little after dark close to the Channel that runs for some five miles from Sligo to the sea, and my grandmother showed me the red light of an outward-bound steamer and told me that my grandfather was on board, and that night in my sleep I screamed out and described the steamer's wreck.<sup>11</sup>

And so when Yeats writes about the ocean we can see him track it from land to coast to a new consciousness. As time goes on, as he develops as an artist, he is not writing about the sea simply as the national or nationally imagined pathway to emigration. Although he was well aware of that identity for it. He knew that the shore, the water of Ireland had such a history. In fact, so present is that history to him that it can at times overwhelm his literary and critical sense. In *Autobiographies* he refers to this glancingly:

Someone at the Young Ireland Society gave me a newspaper that I might read some article or letter. I began idly reading verses describing the shore of

Ireland as seen by a returning, dying emigrant. My eyes filled with tears and yet I knew the verses were badly written.<sup>12</sup>

But with time, his consciousness of the Irish Sea shifts from an historic to a contemporary one. He writes, not about emigration, but in fact about the reverse. He tracks, in vivid language, the intimate, busy waterway linking his home in Sligo and his life in England. His writing becomes alert to narratives of ocean and ocean life which go well beyond the national.

In *Autobiographies* he describes a journey home from Liverpool to Sligo. The passage is vivid with detail. It considers the life of the sea—not as one defined by a national history, but as a landless element to be judged on its own terms. This is a rich seascape, inscribed with small histories that have to do with the life of water, not the claims of the land. The enchantment Yeats describes is confirmed by his awareness of the social nature of this seascape—the lives of the fishermen that it sustains, the way they speak Irish as they come alongside, and the big cliffs of Tory Island that form a backdrop for the continuous narratives of the sea that the captain is telling:

When I arrived at the Clarence Basin, Liverpool, (the dock Clarence Mangan had his first name from) on my way to Sligo for my holidays I was among Sligo people . . . . I waited for this voyage always with excitement and boasted to other boys about it, and when I was a little boy had walked with my feet apart as I had seen sailors walk. I used to be sea-sick, but I must have hidden this from the other boys and partly even from myself; for, as I look back, I remember very little about it, while I remember stories I was told by the captain or by his first mate, and the look of the great cliffs of Donegal & Tory Island men coming alongside with lobsters, talking Irish and, if it was night, blowing on a burning sod to draw our attention.<sup>13</sup>

This landless inheritance of Yeats had a powerful effect upon the shaping of his imagination. When we look at his work we can see how this profound influence played out: that he continued to have a charged and defining sense of himself as being involved with the water. It's there in obvious places like the poem "Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea." It's there also in his poem "September 1913" when the antithesis to those who "fumble in a greasy till" is the patriotic adventure of those who found water an escape: "Was it for this the wild geese spread / The grey wing upon every tide . . . ?"<sup>14</sup>

This influence can be found also in the dark fables of water which come in and out of his autobiographical writing. Characters of impulse and self-destruction are given space in his memoirs, like his great Uncle Robert Corbert who drowned himself in the Irish Sea:

An old man who had entertained many famous people, in his 18th century house, where battlement and tower showed the influence of Horace Walpole, had but lately, after losing all his money, drowned himself, first taking off his rings and chain and watch as became a collector of many beautiful things.<sup>15</sup>

By the time the sea enters Yeats's mature poetry it has been given depth as theme and subject by his sense of an ocean stripped of national reference and open to new imaginings. The concept of ocean, of water begins to shift from biography to image. In his poem "On a Political Prisoner," written in 1921, he considers the imprisonment of Constance Markiewicz, who has been detained for her political activism. The poem gains energy through an imagistic tension between land and sea. Images of water serve to disrupt and question the national narrative with which the poems begins—a story of ideology and commitment. Finally this life of the land, with its national emphasis, is cleansed, measured and destabilized by images of the life of the sea. The temporary national entanglements of land are worn away by the ageless identity of water. And the woman prisoner who is entangled in the national in an earthly guise is able to be freed from it through the imagery of the sea.

When long ago I saw her ride  
Under Ben Bulben to the meet,  
The beauty of her country-side  
With all youth's lonely wildness stirred,  
She seemed to have grown clean and sweet  
Like any rock-bred, sea-borne bird:

Sea-borne, or balanced in the air  
When first it sprang out of the nest  
Upon some lofty rock to stare  
Upon the cloudy canopy,  
While under its storm-beaten breast  
Cried out the hollows of the sea.<sup>16</sup>

This emphasis, continuing through his mature work, shows us the strength of the landless imagination in Yeats. It is not hard therefore to imagine why, when John Butler Yeats first recognized that his son was a poet, he announced: "by marriage with a Pollexfen, we have given a tongue to the sea cliffs." <sup>17</sup>

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The immediate attraction the teenage Eavan Boland felt for the work of W.B. Yeats is due in no small part to certain shared biographical circumstances. Both lived in London as children and felt dislocated there. Both came from a family history of millers and merchant seamen. Both had sea captain grandfathers with a history of shipwrecks.

Like Yeats, Boland, through her mother's side, came from a long line of Irish mariners who had, since at least the late 1700s, learned their skills and earned their



livings on the Irish Sea. Both of her maternal grandparents, James Kelly and his wife Mary Anne, were born in Drogheda, which, like Sligo, had a strong seafaring tradition centered around a busy port. Boland's grandfather James Kelly went to sea as a boy, working first on his father's sailing ship in Liverpool, before signing on, in 1890, as a ship's boy on small sailing ships in Runcorn and Preston. Over the next decade, he advanced from ship's boy to sea captain.

But while Yeats's seafaring tradition was produced by a strong and prosperous family heritage, Boland's grandfather's seafaring produced only a cascade of dispossessions. James and Mary Anne Kelly were on the margins of the rural society that was seething through the changes of the Land Acts and the political unrest that had already taken a deep hold of the country. The Kellys had no investment in the land. In a passage from a short prose poem from her 2014 volume *A Woman Without a Country* Boland describes her grandmother's relationship with land:

The story of Irish history is not her story. The monster rallies, the oil-lit rooms, the flushed faces of orators and the pale ones of assassins have no place in it. Inasmuch as her adult life had a landscape it was made of the water her husband sailed.<sup>18</sup>

Boland has written frequently about James and Mary Anne Kelly, both in her poetry and in her prose. The poem which addresses their lives most directly is "Lava Cameo." "Lava Cameo" is based on a rare story she heard from her mother: that her grandmother would always go to meet her grandfather when his ship docked because she feared the women at the ports. Using this fraction of information, Boland imagines her grandmother pacing the Cork docks waiting for her husband's ship to return:

If I say wool and lace for her skirt and  
crêpe for her blouse  
in the neck of which is pinned a cameo,  
carved out of black, volcanic rock;

if I make her pace the Cork docks, stopping  
to take down her parasol as a gust catches  
the silk tassels of it –

then consider this<sup>19</sup>

In this passage Boland deliberately becomes, to use her own term, a “fictional interventionist”<sup>20</sup> who, faced with silence, intervenes in the past:

there is a way of making free with the past,  
a pastiche of what is  
real and what is  
not, which can only be  
justified if you think of it

not as sculpture but syntax:

a structure extrinsic to meaning which uncovers  
the inner secret of it.<sup>21</sup>

“Lava Cameo” makes an imaginative connection with the seafaring life of Boland’s grandparents. Yet, when looking at the life of her grandfather through the lens of historical record rather than the fictional intervention of the poem, a strikingly similar story emerges. The gangplank Boland puts down in “Lava Cameo is indeed

lowered on the Cork docks where, in 1896, James Kelly has just arrived in from five years spent working on immigrant ships.

In July Kelly took a rare month off work. He married Boland's grandmother and when he came home at Christmas, he gave up the North Atlantic crossings altogether. To stay closer to home, he would now cross back and forth between the ports that rimmed the Irish Sea and the North Sea.

Nevertheless the misfortune that Boland described in "Lava Cameo" was waiting for the young couple: "She will die at thirty-one in a fever ward. / He will drown . . . in the Bay of Biscay," wrote Boland:

They will never even be  
sepia, and so I put down

the gangplank now between the ship and the ground.  
In the story, late afternoon has become evening.  
They kiss once, their hands touch briefly.  
Please.

Look at me, I want to say to her: show me  
the obduracy of an art which can  
arrest a profile in the flux of hell.

Inscribe catastrophe.<sup>22</sup>

In March 1922 James Kelly's ship was caught in a spring tempest. The ship had steamed into a ferocious gale at the mouth of the Bay of Biscay. When approaching the harbour, "in a blinding snowstorm, with the seas mountains high, the doomed ship struck on a sunken reef," reported the *Drogheda Argus* two weeks later.<sup>23</sup> Kelly

lowered the lifeboat and got most of his crew off safely. He was launching a second boat when a giant wave struck the vessel, sweeping him overboard.

Boland's mother, Frances Kelly, was just under two years old when her mother died of fever. At the time of her father's shipwreck, she was fourteen, and had been living with her sisters in the Dominican Convent in Kingstown for over a decade. As Boland wrote in *Object Lessons*, "My mother wanted to forget. Childhood was a place of unreadable signposts and filled-in roads. The language could not be retrieved."<sup>24</sup>

From her earliest poems to her most recent, the dispossessions and complications of her seafaring inheritance have featured in Boland's poems. But by the time she wrote *Outside History*, a mid-career volume, Boland's seafaring grandfather is felt more as absence than influence: "how little / survives of the sea-captain in his granddaughter / is everywhere apparent," she writes in "Our Origins are in the Sea." "Such things get lost: / He drowned in the Bay of Biscay. I never saw him." Standing in her darkening garden, where "the sea is just a rumor," the poet turns to go in and sees:

The briar rose is rigged in the twilight.  
The way I imagine sails used to be—  
Lacy and stiff together, a frigate of Ivory.<sup>25</sup>

Here the memory of James Kelly has suffered a sea change. In Boland's poems, as in Yeats's, what begins as biography—the often painful story of a landless inheritance—moves eventually into imagery where it is explored in new ways.

In this respect we can say that in the imagination of the poet, the ocean is malleable. And yet behind Boland's poetic configuration of the Atlantic is an actual, historical ocean, and James Kelly's history on it. Boland probes this space between actuality and image when she opens the sequence "A Woman Without a Country" with a poem called "Sea Change." The poem questions her landless inheritance:

What did he leave me, my grandfather,  
Who lost his life in a spring tempest . . . ?

With his roof of half-seen stars  
His salty walls rising high and higher  
To the last inch of the horizon  
He built nothing that I could live in.<sup>26</sup>

As in Yeats poem “On a Political Prisoner,” Boland sets up a dialogue in a psychic terrain between what is landed and unlanded. Her sea is stripped of national reference and placed at a stark angle to land, “where every inch of ground / Was a new fever or a field soaked / To its grassy roots with remembered hatreds.” She sets up a contrast between two gardens: Dublin’s Garden of Remembrance, a memorial to those who died for Ireland, and an imaginary “ocean garden” that belonged to her grandfather:

When he looked over the ship’s rail at midnight  
Into his ocean garden  
All he saw was oxygen unfrocking phosphorous  
Lacing the sea with greens.<sup>27</sup>

What “Sea Change” makes clear is that for Boland, her grandparents’ past is not legible from within the national narrative precisely because it was not shaped by its relation to the national through land. Her sea captain grandfather finds no repose in “the Garden of Remembrance” where “the dead are defined by their relation to land.”

From what we have seen here, in the poems of both Yeats and Boland, the Irish Sea as a theme and a locale offers a rich opportunity for alternative narratives: sometimes placing its dailyness as an inland waterway next to its historical past as a

vendor of tragedy and disconnection. This can also be seen in a poem called “The Long Evenings of Their Leavetakings” from Boland’s 2014 volume *A Woman Without a Country* where the two narratives are again placed beside each other. The poem describes her mother’s marriage by the water in Dun Laoghaire, which at that time, and in terms of that event, was a practical, utilitarian waterway. But as the poem suggests, its history may be inescapable. In Boland’s imagining, the pained voices of the emigrants, who left those shores in previous times, rise up through the vows of a service enacted in a modern state.

The Long Evenings of Their Leavetakings

My mother was married by the water.

She wore a grey coat and a winter rose.

She said her vows beside a cold seam of the Irish coast.

She said her vows near the shore where  
the emigrants set down their consonantal *n*:

on *afternoon*, on the *end* of everything, at the start of *ever*.

Yellow vestments took in light.

A chalice hid underneath its veil.

Her hands were full of calla and cold weather lilies.

The mail packet dropped anchor.

A black headed gull swerved across the harbor.

Icy promises rose beside a cross-hatch of ocean and horizon.

I am waiting for the words of the service. I am waiting for  
*keep thee only and all my earthly.*

All I hear is an afternoon's worth of *never*.<sup>28</sup>

In “The Long Evenings of their Leavetaking” the psychic tensions between land and water are clarified. Despite the fact that the couple is married by the water, and images of water are strong throughout the poem, the history of land informs and threatens the meaning of the Irish Sea.

We have seen in this podcast how a landless connection to the Irish Sea can turn from biographical history of the poets' families into powerfully disruptive images. For both Boland and Yeats the relationship between land and sea is inescapable. These destabilizing relations between water and land are one of the most powerfully focussed elements of their poetry. As both poets suggest, land and sea are not unrelated, but powerfully connected.

The matrix Christopher Harvie has called “the Inland Sea”— the inland waterway that connects the west coast of England to the east coast of Ireland, a coastal littoral of ports from Glasgow and Carlisle, via Belfast, Dublin and Liverpool, to Holyhead, Swansea and Cardiff— is a real and important one. What makes it such a rich field of study, and a source of further enquiry, is that this inland sea can operate as both actual entity and imaginative construct. Irish Sea studies, by placing the actual entity beside the imaginary one, is able to track the conversation between these two dimensions in a way that discovers new aspects to both.

Finding new perspectives of the Irish Sea and its relation to land in poets like Yeats and Boland refreshes our senses of how the culture and memory of the Irish Sea is defined and redefined in Irish poetry. By recognizing that any body of water is an imaginative structure as well as a real one, Atlantic studies and this part of it, the

study of the literature and culture of the Irish Sea, begins a new conversation, a new dialogue. Oceanic approaches to literature and culture—in this case Irish Sea studies—allow us to see more deeply into how older imaginative constructs were made, and why. Moreover, they give us new tools with which to understand the history and fiction of waterways, and our own continually evolving relation to them.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> James Clarence Mangan, “Dark Rosaleen,” *Irish Literature, A Reader*, ed. Maureen Murphy and James MacKillop (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1987), 114.
- John Mitchel, *Jail Journal, or Five Years in British Prisons*. New York: *The Citizen* (1854), 87–88. On his deportation to Bermuda, Mitchel describes “last look of Irish land” from St. George’s Channel, which connects the Irish Sea to the Celtic Sea.
- <sup>2</sup> See, for instance, David Snook’s online index of Irish Merchant Seamen, “Irish Merchant Seamen 1918–1921,” <http://irishmariners.ie>.
- <sup>3</sup> John Masefield, *Salt Water Poems and Ballads* (New York: MacMillan, 1916), 124.
- <sup>4</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses*. Introduction by Declan Kiberd (London: Penguin, 2008).
- <sup>5</sup> See for instance Margaret Cohen, *The Novel and The Sea* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Christopher Harvie, *A Floating Commonwealth: Politics, Culture, and Technology on Britain’s Atlantic Coast* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); John Kerrigan, *Archipelagic English: Literature, History and Politics 1603–1707* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
- <sup>6</sup> William Falconer, *The Shipwreck*, London: T. Cadell, 1772, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich.
- <sup>7</sup> R. F. Foster, *W. B. Yeats: A Life—The Apprentice Mage, 1865–1914* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998), 19.
- <sup>8</sup> Bruce Arnold, *Jack Yeats* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 12.
- <sup>9</sup> W. B. Yeats, *Responsibilities and Other Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1916), 2.
- <sup>10</sup> Foster, 19; Arnold, 12.
- <sup>11</sup> W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1956), 12.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 55–56.
- <sup>14</sup> *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats*, volume 1, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner, 1991), 107.
- <sup>15</sup> Yeats, *Autobiographies*, 21.
- <sup>16</sup> Yeats, *Collected Works*, 186.
- <sup>17</sup> Yeats, *Autobiographies*, 23.
- <sup>18</sup> Eavan Boland, *A Woman Without A Country* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2014), forthcoming. These lines also appear in Boland’s 1995 memoir, *Object Lessons*.
- <sup>19</sup> Eavan Boland, “Lava Cameo,” *New Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2005), 227.
- <sup>20</sup> Eavan Boland, *Object Lessons* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995), 10.
- <sup>21</sup> Boland, *New Collected Poems*, 227–28.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>23</sup> “Wreck of Dublin Steamer. Drogheda Captain Lost,” *Drogheda Argus*, April 8, 1922.
- <sup>24</sup> Boland, *Object Lessons*, 14.
- <sup>25</sup> Boland, *New Collected Poems*, 193.
- <sup>26</sup> Boland, *A Woman Without A Country*.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*