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OVER THE RAINBOW: AN IRISH PILGRIMAGE

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## Secularity

Well, I'm now back in circulation after being on Holy Pilgrimage in Ireland with Tom Forsyth. Tom lives on the remote West Highland peninsula of Scoraig with about seventy others. They have chosen to have no road access so you either walk four miles round a mountain, or cross a mile of sea loch. Each home has its own wind generator for electricity. Sometimes it gets dubbed "Shangri-la" because it so obviously isn't and is. Visitors can be a mixed blessing, some being dubbed the "Bonglais," which is to say, the Anglais, Ecosais, and so on but those out only for "bon" vacances - shoulders bongling with cameras and binoculars which dangle in the way of contributing to hard work.

Tom was one of the early settlers there. He grows potatoes, trees and cows, does stonework, boatwork and retreats, watching more television than the caricature might admit. "Give me any day a bit of Scoraig hatred than Findhorn love and light," he's drily fond of saying. "At least you know it's genuine." And of course, the halo around such places as Scoraig, Findhorn, Iona, Samye Ling and even the Centre for Human Ecology illuminates in direct proportion to distance.

Both Tom and I have, in the past, worked for the ecumenical Iona Community and draw deeply on Christian roots. But we equally relish what, especially up North in Scotland, is still often seen as heresy: interfaith *sharing* and not just stolid "dialogue"; the femininity of God ... (I mean, I want Her as *lover* or not at all ... bugger all this "jealous Father" heavy trip); and prophetic witness on socio-ecological justice, confronting those structural evils which lead us away from our Selves. Aye - Deliver us from evil; deliver us from inauthenticity. Pretty hot shaman was old J.C.

When Tom and I first met up over his proposal to challenge feudal land ownership on the Isle of Eigg, one of the visions he shared was the importance of the Celtic edge of Scotland as a place of pilgrimage. Up to the time of the Reformation in Scotland, holy pilgrimage was very popular - rather like Ireland where, I once read, anything up to a third of the population could be on pilgrimage at any one time. Anyhow, as the Scottish Parliament came under the censorious hand of protestantism it recognised that too many holy-days were bad for the work ethic, and colluded with the established church to ban pilgrimage on account of its Catholic associations. Now, many generations later, Tom's Iona and Rajneesh-influenced thinking was that we maybe need a concept of "secular pilgrimage," a special version for those who would be scared off by holiness.

## Virginility

Anyhow, we had no such inhibitions as we headed off in a VW Polo for Ireland this summer of '93. The word, "holy," derives from the Old German for "whole." And that's what we were after - the whole experience. We set off from Edinburgh and it really was a laugh. We could feel the faeries jumping onto the back bumper as we drove down to the Stranraer ferry. There was very little sense of their presence in Northern Ireland, but as soon as we crossed the border into Donegal they welcomed us with a rainbow brighter than any I've ever seen - so bright that, my red/green colour blindness notwithstanding, I was able for the first time to see all the colours.

After a night camping in a field near Sligo and visiting Yeats' burial ground, we moved on under the guidance of the faeries heading south. Past a 6.2 Mw wind farm with twenty-two 240Kw and 450Kw aerogenerators at a capital cost of 1,000/Kwh, expected lifespan 20 years. They were built beside a 40Mw peat fired power station. The peat was all dug out and there was a massive tangle of bog pine roots - just like a tropical forest after felling - far more extensive and much bigger stumps than one sees in Scotland. Bog oak and yew is found too, though we didn't see any. Like the Great Forest of Caledon which once covered two-thirds of Scotland and is now reduced to one percent, radio-carbon dating of the remnants typically comes out at 4,000 to 6,000 years. Nobody is quite sure what happened. The received wisdom was climate change, but then how come parts survived intact? Recent archaeological work in Scotland points to early agriculture and grazing regimes as a possible culprit. That feels more like it.

## Liminality

Seeing as I just found out from one of my students (thank you Mary Anna!) what "liminality" means, I'm now using it in every context of shape-changing even though it's not in my dictionary. I suppose I'd better say that it derives from the Latin for "threshold," as in "subliminal" - that which is below the threshold of consciousness.

So, it's County Mayo, and the faeries stop us by a faerie bridge to brew tea in a faerie dell. Tom goes to set a fire. I gaze into the water. Two men eye me suspiciously, come over, and ask if I'm here to fish. - No. - Do I have a rod? - No, not just now. - Do you ever fish for salmon? - No, though I used to be a ghillie back home on Lewis in the Outer Hebrides.

Now, "ghillie" is the Gaelic word for servant. It means particularly a boy or man on a sporting estate whose skill lies with bringing stag carcasses off the hill by pony, and in the Zen of gently drifting a boat over a salmon lie, be it in a

flat calm or a gale gusting force seven. All ghillies know that it can be mainly their maneuvering with oars that lands the fly over the fish. However, being experts in the bardic art of supremely praising overgrown insufferables as part of the Celtic love of refined sarcasm, the Great White Fisher is sent away at the day's end believing any catch to have been all their own prowess; an effort at least comparable with their most famous dawn raid in the Great War or stock exchange. Most of the day, most of the fortnight often, is spent on the loch without so much as a rise to the fly. But there's always that possibility. Always the chance of a "take." Unless the concentration of the "Rod" (as the fisher is known) is unwaveringly but restfully focused, the water will swirl to a rise but the split-second opportunity to strike will be missed.

Suddenly a dorsal fin breaks liminality. Black flash zips through ripple's trough. He takes, often, often, often, when least expected. Mindfulness rewarded, barb strikes piscine bony jaw and He "runs," leaps, fresh-run silver about to bear down liberatingly on taught line tailsmacked. "Drop the rod!" I yell. Tense, worried for a fraction, knowing that temporary slackness of trace alone had just prevented linesnap of loss. Aware too that I'm as excited by the hunt as the Rod. Physiologists do now say that fish have pain systems like us. Unease, outvoted by adrenalin.

Light tackle is used to "give the fish a chance." The more expert the Rod, the lower the breaking strain they boast - ten pounds normal, eight pounds on sunny days, and I've even seen them drop to five. "Give the fish a chance," they like to think, echoing similar propriations from the Bank's boardroom, or IMF, or Whitehall, or the playing fields of Eton where such "sport" won Waterloo. But usually in such low breaking-strain ranks, fate plays cruel. The dosage, appearing gentle, is merely better calibrated; less visible on a calm day.

A keystone - the wedge-shaped rock in the middle of a bridge that holds both sides together. These two Irishmen have brought me to a testing point now. - Oh, so you used to be a ghillie, says one, his poised interest vying with my presumption of suspicion in his voice. - Then what flies did you use?

## Dys/functionality

And then an amazing story unfolded from this Bobby Bashford about the community in which he lives at Bangor Erris, Co. Mayo. A few years ago they'd had a big meeting to decide what to do about the fact that their village was dying from depopulation and lack of opportunity for the young. They recognised that their only real asset was the excellent salmon river and loch which had long been in the hands of an English "sporting" syndicate. These people would come over from London to fish, their posh cars filled with supermarket provisions, leaving nothing behind in the local economy.

The community decided to go for bust. They raised 8,000 amongst themselves for legal costs. With it they dragged the syndicate to the highest court in Ireland, challenging the goodness of their title over what had been, long ago before colonial dispossession, the community's own fishing rights.

As this tale unwove, Tom and I told of the Scottish landowning situation: one where 80

Bobby went on to describe how, after they'd got their river back, life had returned to the community. Now they employed themselves as ghillies at 50 a day, and had visitors stay, not in fancy castles or lodges, but in local bed and breakfasts. As a result, a once dying community is now thriving, not just because of the new tourist related jobs, but because the confidence of getting control of their own place has had all sorts of spin offs in terms of empowerment.

We told how Mr Schellenberg, the incumbent Laird of Eigg, has said that if Scots got their own land back then communities would just split apart by infighting. Bobby said that such shit is inevitable within a community when the lid gets lifted after so many years of paternalism. But most people just want to have their say. Accordingly, in Bangor Erris it is imperative that he, as chairperson of the community association, serves as a lightning conductor. He lets all the criticism be fired at him and the committee, but then records only views of which the exponents would be proud when the minutes are read back in the pub the next night. I asked if such censorship caused comment: "Oh no," he said, "people like to have their good ideas reflected back, but they never want to hear their own B.S."

## Communality

By day two we'd made it to the Aran Islands off central west Ireland to stay with Dara Moloy and Tess Harper at the Celtic Christian community they've established there. (As with many of these communities they say, of course, that it isn't a community. Like Scoraig, I sense it's to avoid setting themselves up for idealised expectations). Tom and I had met them 3 years ago at the Glasgow conference on "No Life Without Roots." I hadn't realised that Dara was a Catholic priest until the Islanders gave us a ferry discount because we were going to see "Fr Moloy." We spent 3 days there, helping them compile their journal, the *Aisling*, with articles by people like Radford Reuther, Illich and Panikkar, and lots of really good stuff on Celtic spirituality. Dara said he was content to be called a druid as well as a priest because he considers the druidic tradition to be "our Old Testament." This theme recurred on our travels.

I felt challenged by the degree of poverty taken on by Debbie, one of the Aisling community members. After a year camping in the wilderness on Iona, she'd

come there with no possessions that she wouldn't be happy to give away, and eager to learn as much as she could from Tom about eating wild plants so she could live from the land as a hermit. Tom showed her how to build an anchorage (as in anchoress) out of stone. Part of her simple living has been refusing to sign on for welfare benefits, even if it meant odd days going hungry. I felt really comfortably complacent and middle class! I found this and other things about the seriousness of their commitment curiously draining of energy. I think it was because I was deeply weary from overwork and the series of major campaigns on the Gulf war with GulfWatch, Eigg and the land ownership debate and most recently, the superquarry issues - all probable "loser" campaigns in which the role was one of witness more likely than "winner." So I suppose that part of me wasn't wanting to be materially challenged - an interesting experience as I often seem to challenge others on lifestyle. Tom, I must say, got really inspired by it all.

In the Irish Times while on Aran we saw a full page article with lots of pictures of lovely hippies and tepees at the Rainbow Festival. It even quoted local people saying how great it all was - "you couldn't meet a nicer bunch of people." The festival is still on. We head off the next day to the Sleive Bloom Mountains right in the middle of Ireland.

## Spirality

A big sign says "Welcome Home." Rainbow signs are all over the place - no drugs or alcohol or electronic music; no shitting near rivers; yes to fun and acoustic music and being totally yourself and sharing. Les Dreamwalker welcomes us at the car park area, two miles from where the main site is. We sit down and are instantly at home. A black woman borrows my drum and I play whistle. We drink tea; case the joint. Things like caffeine are acceptable in moderation. Then this guy starts talking about being at Scoraig in Scotland. At first we think he must be trying it on, not knowing Tom's from there. But he was - he'd been at the Solstice festival. Small world, and Les gets excited because they want to scout Scotland for a location for the next British Rainbow. Scoraig's in the running.

I feel drawn to Gehan, a woman with long dark hair and a kind face. What is it about her? Do I know her from somewhere and there's a prior affinity? Later, after the Dongas Tribe invite me to give a rave on superquarries, she comes up to me and it turns out that she belongs to the Faslane peace camp. We had seen each other when the first Trident submarine arrived last October, again at the Scoraig Festival, and had corresponded when she was running the anti-Skye Bridge campaign. Later, Gehan was to start up Earth First! in Scotland. Their debut demo was to make an outstanding contribution to market information needed by an international conference of the superquarry industry meeting in

Edinburgh. Seventy delegates - everyone from the lawyers to the explosives manufacturers had paid 160 each to be sitting there when fifty EF!s moved in with their "Mountains not Motorways" banner. Sticks of Edinburgh Rock (a candy) were handed out, to the admonition, "Here's the only f'ing rock you're going to get from Scotland."

Amazing! And all that round just the first Rainbow campfire! We move up the valley and pitch tents at the main site. Tom's been going on about harnessing the serpent power, the kundalini. And we've been struck by all the grottos we've been seeing throughout Ireland to the Blessed Virgin Mary (BVM). Often the Virgin is standing inside the grotto, so we've started looking beyond her sanitised piety and seeing her as the Earth Goddess, Mother of God, Queen of Heaven, Queen of the Faeries; the Virgin in the sense of an empowered woman in full charge of her own being and sexuality; the Cosmic Lover. We've been stopping at various Marian shrines and paying our respects. Anyway, we pitch our tents and find that just across the river is a well. Typical Irish, there's a framed picture of the BVM by it. And amazing - wrapped around her legs is a serpent. Her heel rests on its head, controlling the kundalini; not killing it. I name it the Well of Our Lady of the Perpetual Serpent. (Later I was to find there is a statue to the same Virgin in the Catholic Church on the Isle of Eigg.) I think of Dara saying that wells are sacred because, going back to druidic times, they were seen as the opening in the Earth from which goodness came; water symbolising the Spirit. An Irish custom is to walk clockwise three times round such wells saying "Hail Mary" - representative, he suggested, of the sun going round the earth. The old Irish, he said, could see the Godhead behind such things as the sun and the moon; we need to recover such vision - a pagan Christianity.

Music is everywhere. Dance workshops. Rebirthing. Healing. Spiritual teachings. Everyone is smiling and open faced. You can be crazy and nobody minds, like Everton, the black Londoner who since the age of 6 had just wanted to walk around holding a stick meditating on it - so that's what he was doing here; or the American gent who wants to go about with no trousers on. There is constant drumming - really good. I am seized on by a clown who's drawn to my drum and find myself sitting down with this group playing the most amazing music. I look up at their flag and find they're the Dongas Tribe. The Rainbow Festival is billed as a gathering of the tribes of Europe, and I'm mindblown by Dongas because they're the amazing people who've been protesting the motorway rape of Twyford Down in England. I feel I've come home; here's the other end of the Scottish superquarry debate. These people's music is amazing. I'm not surprised the press give them such good write ups. "Dirty hippies," perhaps, but "stardust and golden" too; their songs have the power of prophesy in the full Old Testament sense of naming the principalities and the powers. Hail Mary! Ho hum.

Full moon, and I wonder into a tent with great drumming coming out. It's the Earth element people preparing for the midnight ritual of the 4 elements. The

air people see my whistles and ask me to join them - they're short of flutes. Worse still, they don't have a tune - they need something primordial, worthy of the ancient ritual of celebrating the moon goddess. I play the A part of Skye Dance, and they're ecstatic - it's just perfect. I teach the tune, and we're off - wheeling, whirling, elementally, spiralling. Devils and Goddesses and a great dancing dragon all spiral - 3,000 hippies and about 1,000 local Irish people, the latter mindblown at the naked and topless dancing of some, but saying it's great. Even the policeman thought it all great. I mean to say, one policeman for all those hippies! He told me he'd had no trouble at all - quieter than usual 'cause the local troublemakers had all come up here, but were prevented by the hippie customs checkpoint from bringing booze in. Rumour had it that the Sarge was going to paint a rainbow above the copshop.

Mealtimes - twice daily the conches blow. Food gets carried in huge dustbins from cooking areas staffed by whoever helps. Lots of people want to help because, like Ireland and Scotland in the old days, making music and song is integral to the work. The main medicine wheel area is the size of 2 football pitches. A mealtime circle gathers and grows and grows, then starts to spiral until it's 4 rows deep. I count 120 people in one quarter spiral, so there must be some 2,000 people in all. Silence, as we all hold hands. Then singing starts. Earth songs. Goddess songs. The food has now all arrived from the satellite kitchens. The servers have poured mild disinfectant over their hands and are ready. They make an inner circle, blessing the food. Silence again. Then at first it's like bees, then it gets louder, and louder, and then you realise that everyone's joining in the blessing by toning to Om. They call it "saying the Om." The Om reaches crescendo then dies away to silence. Quaker grace. Then all hell breaks loose with wolfhowls and whoops and general joyousness. Everyone sits down and the servers come round with the vegan food. They're followed by minstrels with the Magic Hat. "It's the Magic Hat, the Magic Hat, How about that it's the Magic Hat." And these lovely spiritual clowns laugh and dance about, collecting money from whoever is able to contribute so they can buy the next lot of food. It all works - by magic.

Bed at night, dreams, and this great cosmic spiral always starts turning in my mind, rainbow colours. When I get back to Edinburgh I have to give a talk to the Postgraduate Environmental Research Network. The theme is British science policy and research council funding. I'd rashly given the title as "The Emperor Has No Clothes: Let us Paint our Loincloths Rainbow." I've now worked out what I'm going to say: The British government's White Paper on science and technology talks about the need for "key cultural change" to develop a 3-way partnership between the scientific community, government and industry. School curricula must be changed so that children learn to see the importance of science in wealth production, and learn how to do useful, enterprising science. In my mind I contrast this with Socrates in Plato's *Timaeus*, who saw the role of science as being for "supreme entertainment" so that, in knowing the harmonies of the cosmos, we will better understand the disharmonies of the soul and therefore



learn how better to harmonise the soul with the rest of creation.

The ghost of the Platonic Socrates spirals up, cup of hemlock prepared for the writers of the White Paper. Doubtless, a few dregs left for me too...! "Be careful!" warned one of my academic superiors after I'd written it up for publication in a journal of environmental philosophy. Be careful of, what? Bouncing around in my mind is the playwright Dennis Potter's existential tautology: "Am I right, or am I right" ...Is this "to Hell with it" attitude courage, or merely the reckless arrogance that comes before tripping oneself up? Ego or conviction? I do not know. But just do it anyway; refuse to accept paralysis. Aim to span both groundedness in the "real" world and centredness from deep within. And if ego has gotten out of right proportion; if it is shrouding the clarity of vision which only humility can give - then, damnit: be tripped up! But learn from the falling, and know the grazes to be your gift. Such is how it has to be if you jump into the river's current; if you deviate off the narrow road and perhaps find the stream too strong to swim back.

On returning to Edinburgh ten days later my son Adam shows me his copy of Michael Crichton's "Jurassic Park." It falls open at page 284 where Malcolm is speaking: "[Scientists] think narrowly and they call it 'being focused' ...They are preoccupied with accomplishment. Discovery, they believe, is inevitable. So they just try to do it first. Even pure scientific discovery is an aggressive, penetrative act. Discovery is always a rape of the natural world. Always. The scientists want it that way. They have to stick their instruments in. They have to leave their mark. They can't just watch and appreciate." Socrates, about whose pedagogy I normally have many reservations, nods approvingly. He smiles and, mischievously, winks.

## Faeries

Driving along just outside Bantry and we see a sign - "Future Forests." We stop. We know the faeries are at it again. I walk up to the first person I see. "Hello - we're on Holy Pilgrimage from Scotland under the guidance of the Queen of the Faeries, known throughout all Ireland as the Blessed Virgin Mary " He says, - come right in, and we're there all night. A onetime Oxford philosopher (did you know the Dons keep secret groves which only they have access too?) and our conversation's all about the resurgence of Celtic spirituality, the healing of the Earth through tree planting, restoring the old tree magic, and theories - all anthropogenic - of how Ireland was deforested. - What I'm trying to do, says Mike Collard, is pull together all sorts of sources which the disciplinarian academics never connected. Pollen analyses cross tabulated with the archaeological record tabulated with the legendary and monastic books of invasions tabulated with social attitudes and folklore.... It all fits, he reckons.

Mike continues - The first people left little record since they used only wood. The second wave, until about 5,000 years ago (n.b. Marija Gimbutas), built the megalithic sites, and also dwelt in the forest. But then came the Milesian invasions, and they were tree haters. They burnt and cut and grazed, flushing out the habitats of peaceful matrifocal peoples and wolves, eventually near enough destroying all the forest.

We challenged him on the burning theory. We'd not seen charcoal, but he claims it is widespread. He's presently getting his ideas into academic shape to write a book on it all. As for now, nature is cracking. The reason we've seen hardly any butterflies in such rich landscape throughout Ireland is because nature no longer wants to shine. But she's coming back. The faeries are returning, and we are they, with our treeplanting and remythologising. Yes, he too was at the Rainbow Festival, and the pile of trees from his nursery waiting by the gate is going up to the site tomorrow to thank nature for providing the place. And all these hippies are learning tree planting, and are starting to work with farmers by offering to plant trees free on their land. He asks - Are you a member of the SSSSSS? The "Secret Society for the Subversion of Sitka Spruce Stands"? - What does that do!? - Well, Sitka's fine as a nurse crop, so just wait until there's been some irregular felling or windthrow creating a clearance in a fenced area, and then move in with the acorns. It's magic, and forestry workers these days are getting so enlightened that they just leave the oaks to grow.

A rush back for the boat. We stop with time we don't have to see Mark, an organic farmer who makes a living off just three acres at Dundalk. We have copies of the *Aisling* from Dara, and a formal apology to deliver him. He's mystified by the latter. Well, we explained, we were sitting in the pub when we see this guy's reading the *Kool Aid Acid Test*. So Tom get's talking while I play whistle with the band. And he's a Dublin Uni physics student, and he's really isolated because he's discovering the spirituality of physics but nobody in the department will discuss it with him. Tom dons his honorary "professorship" and, having read texts like Penrose's *Emperor's New Mind* etc., starts to really nourish this guy. - How did you start on the way? Tom asks. - Well, the guy says, - when I was at school our R.E. teacher brought these people over from the Aisling community on Aran. We all pissed around then, but recently we had a reunion and all agreed how much it affected us later in life. We agreed that if we knew where Mark was now we'd want to apologise for not recognising at the time what a wonderful teacher he was.

The apology delivered, time had run out. Bypassing Belfast. Rushing for the boat. Hard noise on the highway. Blue light flashing behind. A 20 fixed penalty from the Royal Ulster Constabulary for doing 70 on a 50mph section of motorway. So much for Mark's parting words - see you take no shit from the Brits! We carry on for the ferry, having now surely missed it by a good half hour, only to be amazed that it has been delayed.

We just squeeze on - the last possible vehicle. There is not even enough room

left on the rear bumper for the faeries. I stand steadfastly, and with my pennywhistle, play the Faerie Dance in salutation out over the immense car deck. Amused tourists clap. We wave the faeries goodbye and, for the time being and inasmuch as one ever does, conclude our Holy Pilgrimage.

A full six thousand years had passed. Yet, when we re-emerged on the Scottish side of the Irish Sea from out of that faerie mound disguised as a ferry car deck, we found that human time had advanced by only two weeks.

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