

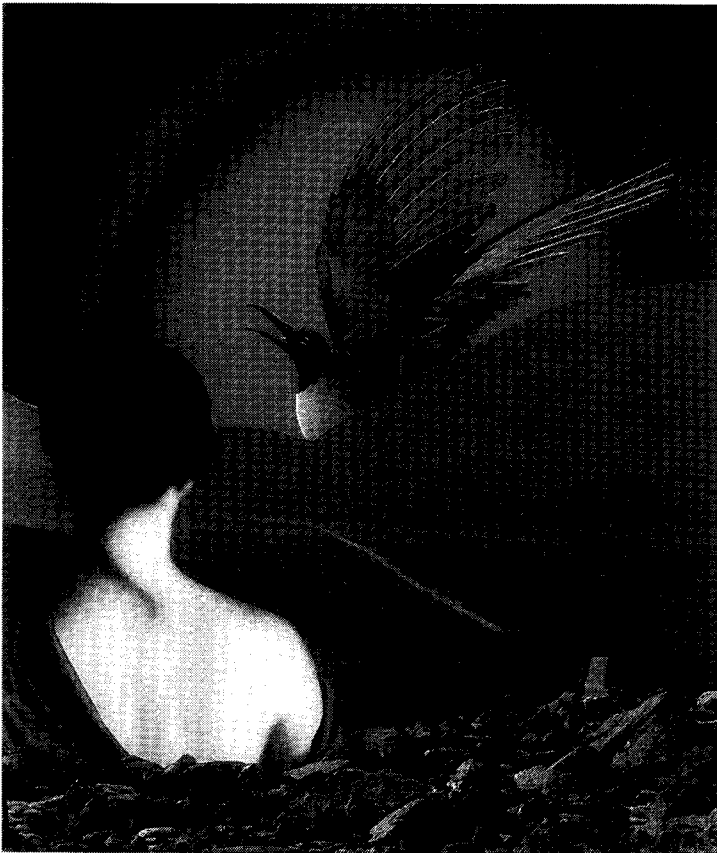
# Perspectives of an Irish Woman in Canada

by *Margo Hearne*

*Une réflexion sur les expériences d'une Irlandaise installée au Canada et qui compare l'Irlande à sa présente demeure dans les îles de la Reine-Charlotte au large de la côte ouest du Canada.*

I was 27 before I moved to Toronto, joining my sister, a teacher, who had emigrated a few years earlier. We shared a lovely old house on Oakmount Road and savoured the fresh, sweet smell of oak trees after a thunderstorm. I helped friends who owned a farm. I groomed horses, cleaned stalls, purchased hay and straw from farms scattered hundreds of miles from the city. I remember the huge, flat, windswept spaces of Ontario as winter came in. Snow, sweeping across farmlands, sifting past the halo of outdoor lights, drifting down the back of my neck as we threw bales of hay into the back of an old International Harvester truck.

When my sister returned to Ireland I was without a family for the first time ever. I sold the rugs and furniture and went west.



Kass Elan Morgain, "The Rocky Road Behind Her," collage, 12 1/4" x 10 3/4", 1990. Photo: Robert Hawkins

In the Rockies I found new friends and worked as a pastry cook in the Banff Springs Hospital. We skied, hiked, and biked the mountain trails. The air rang with clarity; coyotes howled across the river. The following summer I flew to the totally isolated wilderness of Kasba Lake, N.W.T. to run a summer fishing camp. One day, fishing from a rock in the whispering wind, I glanced around. There was no one out there, just water, trees, and sky; grizzlies and wolves in the distance and the terror of isolation. I began to panic and rushed back to the safety of the cook-tent. The isolation had unnerved me. When I returned to civilization I felt as though I was on the other side of the trees with a veil between me and the world, hearing seeping winds under the door and owls in the darkness.

I continued west. Places had no hold on me. People came and went, as did sunsets over coastal ranges, ferries to western islands, float planes up the northwest coast. Stopping on the western edge of the continent on Haida Gwaii, the Queen Charlotte Islands, I flipped pancakes all winter in a local restaurant. When spring came I opened a bookstore in Masset, a small town at the north end of the Islands, and re-entered the world. Two years later I met an independent Haida fisherman and for the next 18 years, aboard our boat the "Lady Julia" with our little cat and dog, we fished the fiery sunsets of Haida Gwaii until the fish ran out.

During the off-season I became an administrator for a local environmental group. Haida Gwaii was being overfished and overlogged and we believed we could change the world by making the public aware of the human and environmental consequences. We brought court cases against government and industry for destruction of fish habitat, argued to stop forestry use of pesticide 2-4D, brought court injunctions against falcon nest robbers, attended innumerable public hearings and fought for Haida land rights. We learned a lot but didn't change much. We burned ourselves and our marriage out. I joined the migrant birds and flew, like a wandering albatross, back to home ground.

Ireland had undergone a terrific change. I was there during the heat of debate over the divorce referendum and recognized the American extreme right-wing influence as they pressured churches and people to vote "no." Irish resistance to the rhetoric was wonderful and the open debate on what had become, for me, the hierarchical male cult of Catholicism, was amazing. Such discussion would never have taken place 25 years earlier. Radio Telefis Eireann (RTE—radio television Ireland) and newspapers carried daily exposés of physical and sexual abuse of women and children by Catholic leaders. The strangle-

hold of a corrupt priesthood seemed to be breaking down, the "old ways" being revisited. "Riverdance" and its aftermath, "Riverdance, The Show"<sup>1</sup> seemed to awaken the world to the beauty of Ireland's unique culture and civilization. The *Sean Van Voght*,<sup>2</sup> the poor, old, British-dominated, victimized, priest-ridden, obsequious Ireland was vanishing, to be replaced by Cathleen ni Houlihan<sup>3</sup> a young, vibrant, politically aware, environmentally conscious, and sought-after little island. I spent six months on home ground soaking up the resurgence and returned, energized, to Canada.

The land that I live in and the land that I left are similar. They are both on the 54th parallel, damp, and misty. They are both islands. They have been inhabited since time immemorial. They have their own civilization, language, and spirituality. They have both been pillaged and plundered: Ireland for centuries, Haida Gwaii only since European contact. There the parallels end.

The island people of Haida Gwaii have no say in the future of the island or its resources. Multi-national corporations have tenure over the forest lands. The people have lost the right to fish their home waters and as the *Tuatha de Danaan*, the copper people, were driven from their wild places in Ireland when the iron people came, so too are the lands and people here seeing the death of their wild places, their spirit home.

I am a woman of Ireland. I had to leave all those years ago to find out what it meant. As I age I become fiercer as I witness the destruction of the wild places so necessary for the survival of the human spirit. The passing of the seasons bring less and less migrant birds and the wave of returning salmon is no more than a flip in the water. There is something ancient about this watching and waiting, this anger at the carelessness of our actions. Our Irish education made Macha and Finn and Oisín<sup>4</sup> live as though it were only yesterday they sang the great plains and battles into being. As I argue and battle and write about the disappearing forests and their resident birds I am reminded of an old Gaelic lament which began "*Cead a deanfamaoid feasda gan admad* (what will we do without wood)"<sup>5</sup> as the hills and valleys of Ireland were stripped. Perhaps, if I stay a little longer, we might effect some change as the journey continues.

*Margo Hearne emigrated to Toronto from Ireland in 1971, moved west via Banff, Elkford, Kasba Lake, N.W.T., and has lived in Masset, Queen Charlotte Islands/Haida Gwaii since 1974. She has been involved in environmental work for many years culminating in the restoration of Delkatla Wildlife Sanctuary, Masset, in 1995. She has been published in Peter Gzowski's Morningside Papers (1989), the Guardian Weekly, and various other local papers. She is also a keen ornithologist.*

<sup>1</sup>Whelan, Bill, composer. "Riverdance" first performed as a music and dance interlude for the Eurovision Song Contest, Dublin 1992.

<sup>2</sup>*Sean van Voght* an allegorical name for Ireland meaning "poor old woman"

<sup>3</sup>Caitilin Ni Uallachain (Catherine, daughter of Holahan) an allegorical name by which Ireland is known in Irish song (Mangan, J. C. "Songs of the Munster Bards"). See also W. B. Yeats "Red Hanrahan's Song about Ireland" (Collected poems # 84).

<sup>4</sup>Macha; Irish Goddess. Finn; Leader of the Fianna, an ancient army of the king. Oisín; son of Finn.

<sup>5</sup>A Lament for Kilcash (*Caione chine cais*). Anon.

## JOANNA M. WESTON

### Names to Die

War dreams us,  
wanting to hold violence,  
with violent longing.

War: air-raid flashes  
dressing the naked in shrouds,  
(they wear only blood and torn flesh  
before the searchlights come,  
to provide white winding sheets)  
until dark comes again  
giving nakedness  
to planes hurtling down the sky  
to land in a child's garden,  
amongst the irises, Japanese anemones,  
that will flower purple and pink next year.

The dead change colours  
by searchlight, in the night,  
through seasons, as their skin  
is shredded by worms and ants.

The dead play with names:  
names that die,  
listed "Missing Believed Killed,"  
names on faded photographs  
whose faces are known only  
by those who love the names.  
The rest are forgotten.

*Joanna M. Weston has been published in several anthologies and magazines, including Chiron Review, Dandelion, Spin, Writer's Own Magazine, Green's Magazine, and Tidepool. Her most recent chapbook is All Seasons (1996).*