

Windharp

Title:

A windharp, or Aeolian harp, is a type of box harp in which strings are stretched between two bridges. (Aeolus was the Greek god of the winds.) The strings are the same length, but are different thicknesses and are all tuned to the same pitch. The



strings vibrate when the wind passes over them, thus making music. King David is said to have hung his lyre in his bedroom window at night to enjoy the music made by the breeze. The first recorded windharp was made in the 17th century and in the late 18th and 19th centuries windharps became popular

with Romantic poets in England and Germany. They believed that the harp translated the truth and beauty of nature into music and some placed small windharps in windows to catch the breeze. Aeolian harps are still popular today and are made in a variety of forms, some of which are designed to be left outside permanently. Here is a link to a site where you can hear the music:

<http://www.mohicanwindharps.com/?gclid=CJerjfC0vI8CFRIUagodXhgFTw>

Background:

Montague was inspired to write this poem after viewing an exhibition of Patrick Collins' work. Collins – 1911 to 1984, was one of the most important Irish painters of the 20th century. He was born in Sligo and began painting in the 1930s, becoming a full-time painter in 1945. He drew inspiration from the Irish landscape and people. In the foreword to the book *Patrick Collins*, the Chairman of the Arts Council, James White, says that Collins 'made a unique contribution to painting in our time by his power to evoke an aspect of Ireland which captures not only the primary image of the place and the people, but also its spiritual content. His grey-blue landscapes contain images of households, farms and figures, which emerge with a curious imprecise shape that is ultimately seen to be marked by folk-memory and by legend. Like a poet with words, his images penetrate areas beyond exact statement or description – they belong to the area of suggestion and

imagination’.

If Collins’ paintings are visual poetry, then Montague’s poem is a word picture. The two complement each other wonderfully.

Summary and analysis:

This poem is written as one single sentence, which effectively captures the idea of the constant movement of wind and shadow across the Irish landscape.

The landscape is particularly Irish and that fact is made clear in the opening line: ‘The sounds of Ireland’.

There is something not altogether pleasant about the wind: it is like a ‘restless whispering’ from which you cannot escape. The run-on lines here reinforce the idea that the wind is ever-present and is something ‘you never get away / from’. There is also a suggestion that the Irish landscape is always with Irish people. In a 1972 Thomas Davis lecture Montague said, ‘An Irishman may travel, but the memory of his maternal landscape persists.’ Interestingly, in the same lecture he quotes a poem ascribed to St. Columcille in which the exiled saint longs for the ‘Clamour of the wind making music / in the elms’. The idea of our country’s natural melodies is not a new one, as Columcille left our shores around 1,500 years ago.

The sibilance reflects the hiss and sigh of the wind in the leaves and rushes. The ‘restless whispering’ also brings to mind the low babble of many voices and Montague has said that this poem can be seen as a metaphor for the diverse voices of the Irish people – North and South – and an effort to show how all can exist together and create a sort of harmony, just as the different strings of a windharp work together to make music. The word ‘restless’ makes this image an unsettling one and yet the overall effect of the wind on the land is unifying and positive: eventually the whole valley ‘gleams’ as a result of its action.

The rustle of the grasses and ‘low bushes’ is compared to water ‘seeping’ out of the earth. There is nothing particularly pleasant about this image. It may be natural, but it is slow



and the word 'seeping' has negative connotations. However, the breeze rises and the sound changes to a gentle melody as the 'heatherbells and ferns' move with the wind. The assonant 'e' sound and the way the short syllables trip off the tongue suggest the tinkling of bells, which is picked up by the reference to the tiny, bell-like flowers on the heather when it is in bloom.



The poet moves on to visual imagery now to describe the wind creating ripples and ridges on the surface of the bog pools as it passes. It also produces a 'scraping' sound as tree branches rub against one another. The verbs 'wrinkling' and 'scraping' are negative and remind us that nature can be harsh. This is not a Romantic, idealised view of the landscape but a realistic, evocative one. The word 'scraping' is onomatopoeic and reinforces the idea that this wind can create unmelodic sounds as easily as melodic ones. However, all of these sounds are part of 'The sounds of Ireland' and each has a place in the music. Again, this reminds us that even if there are voices in our country that grate, they have a place and can be incorporated into the final tune.

Now Montague moves onto the images of light and shade. The images of the wind causing cloud and light to hunt or hound one another across the sky is a rather menacing one. The internal rhyme in 'sound hounding' mimics the repetitive noise of hounds in full cry as they race across fields.

The final lines of the poem show the wind in a more positive light. Now it is compared to an affectionate hand tenderly stroking and combing the landscape just as one might groom a pony's coat. The 'valley gleams' or shines in the same way a well-groomed coat would. This is a wonderfully vivid, tactile image and it is easy to imagine oneself looking down into a valley where the wind is flattening the long grass and rushes as it passes over them. The long 'o' sounds in 'combing' and 'stroking' slow the pace of the poem at that point and bring to mind the long strokes of a brush on a horse's coat.



References:

1. *Patrick Collins* by Frances Ruane, ISBN 0-906627-00-3, 1982
2. *Irish Poets in English: The Thomas Davis Lectures on Anglo-Irish Poetry*, ed. Sean Lucy (Cork: Mercier Press 1972)