

Like Dolmens Round My Childhood

Like dolmens round my childhood, the old people.

Jamie MacCrystal sang to himself,
A broken song without tune, without words;
He tipped me a penny every pension day,
Fed kindly crusts to winter birds.
When he died his cottage was robbed,
Mattress and money box torn and searched.
Only the corpse they didn't disturb.

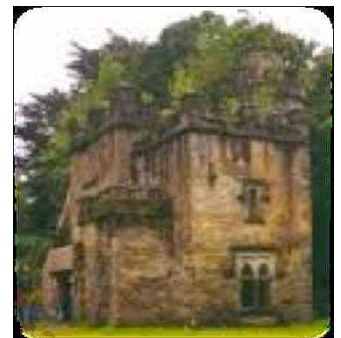


Maggie Owens was surrounded by animals,
A mongrel bitch and shivering pups,
Even in her bedroom a she-goat cried.
She was a well of gossip defiled,
Fanged chronicler of a whole countryside:
Reputed a witch, all I could find
Was her lonely need to deride.

The Nialls lived along a mountain lane
Where heather bells bloomed, clumps of foxglove.
All were blind, with Blind Pension and Wireless,
Dead eyes serpent-flicked as one entered
To shelter from a downpour of mountain rain.
Crickets chirped under the rocking hearthstone
Until the muddy sun shone out again.



Mary Moore lived in a crumbling gatehouse,
Famous as Pisa for its leaning gable.
Bag-apron and boots, she tramped the fields
Driving lean cattle from a miry stable.
A by-word for fierceness, she fell asleep
Over love stories, Red Star and Red Circle,
Dreamed of gypsy love rites, by firelight sealed.



Wild Billy Eagleson married a Catholic servant girl
When all his Loyal family passed on:
We danced round him shouting 'To Hell with King Billy,'
And dodged from the arc of his flailing blackthorn.
Forsaken by both creeds, he showed little concern
Until the Orange drums banged past in the summer
And bowler and sash aggressively shone.



Curate and doctor trudged to attend them,
Through knee-deep snow, through summer heat,
From main road to lane to broken path,
Gulping the mountain air with painful breath.
Sometimes they were found by neighbours,
Silent keepers of a smokeless hearth,
Suddenly cast in the mould of death.

Ancient Ireland, indeed! I was reared by her bedside,
The rune and the chant, evil eye and averted head,
Fomorian fierceness of family and local feud.
Gaunt figures of fear and of friendliness,
For years they trespassed on my dreams,
Until once, in a standing circle of stones,
I felt their shadows pass

Into that dark permanence of ancient forms

Background:

This poem first appeared in the *Poisoned Lands*, Montague's second volume of poetry in 1961. The critic Matthew Campbell says that it 'both mocks "ancient Ireland" in all its stereotypical guises, but is simultaneously seduced by it'¹. Montague has said of this poem that it is 'riddled with human pain'. At the same time, it is this community and these people which have helped to forge Montague's identity. Seamus Heaney said of him, 'When Montague asks who he is, he is forced to seek a connection with a history and a heritage; before he affirms a personal identity, he points to a national identity, and his

¹ 'The Cambridge Companion to Modern Irish Poetry', edited by Matthew Campbell

region and his community provide a lifeline to it².'

Summary and analysis

Stanza One:

The poet begins by comparing the elderly neighbours he knew when he was young to 'dolmens round my childhood'. Dolmens are prehistoric tombs consisting of two or more upright stones supporting a flat capstone. By comparing the old people to dolmens, Montague makes them seem both a lasting, important part of our landscape and history, and also suggests that the neighbours were a looming, dominating, almost frightening presence in the young boy's life.

The first character to whom we are introduced is Jamie MacCrystal. Like the other neighbours, his name is given and thus he instantly becomes a real figure. The picture we are presented with is wonderfully evocative. He seems a contented and gentle man who sang to himself and gave the young poet 'a penny every pension day'. The repeated 'p' sounds here evoke the image of the repeated dropping of a coin into the boy's outstretched hand. However, the song he sang was 'broken' and 'without tune, without words', suggesting that the man's life was perhaps as disjointed and directionless as his song. The songs he sang were 'to himself' rather than to anyone else, highlighting his isolation and loneliness.



Although Jamie MacCrystal was a kind man who even feeds the birds throughout the winter, his generosity was not rewarded with respect.

Unnamed figures ransacked his cottage and turned it upside down in search of money. The verb 'torn' highlights the violence with which the furnishings and contents of the old man's house were searched by these pitiless individuals. The ugliness and

soullessness of this act is not directly commented on by Montague but there is an unspoken judgement in the line 'Only the corpse they didn't disturb'. As is the case in all of Montague's poetry, we see that he is not an idealist and is capable of showing us that generosity and kindness can live side-by-side with callousness and selfishness.

² Seamus Heaney, *'The Sense of Place'* [1977]

Stanza Two:

The description of the next neighbour, Maggie Owens, appears at the outset to be more sinister than that of Jamie MacCrystal. She was 'surrounded by animals' but there is little nurturing or positivity in this image. The mongrel bitch's pups shivered and the nanny goat 'cried' in her bedroom. This negative imagery is continued in the following lines when we learn that this woman was a well-spring of malicious gossip and resembled a poisonous snake or 'Fanged chronicler' whose damaging and dangerous rumours dripped like venom from fangs. The impression given is that she knew what everyone was up to and ensured that the worst possible slant was put on all of it.

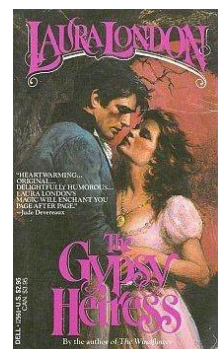
The final lines of the stanza bring us back to reality when Montague says that although this old woman was regarded as witch, he saw – even as a boy – her loneliness and the fact that her bitter words were a product of her sad life.

Stanza Three:

In the third stanza, we are introduced to the Niall family. Although they lived in a beautiful place where 'heather bells bloomed', they could not see any of this loveliness because they were all blind. They lived on a disability allowance and listened to a radio provided by the State. The poet remembers seeking shelter in their house 'from a downpour of mountain rain', so the Nialls were obviously welcoming. However, their sightless eyes flickering back and forth like those of a snake frightened the young poet. The sun after the rain is described as a 'muddy sun': the Niall's world was one of shadow and darkness.

Stanza Four:

Mary Moore is yet another character who is not quite what she seems. She lived in a 'crumbling gatehouse', and eked out a poor living running a farm. The poet's humour is evident in his description of the gable end of her house resembling the Leaning Tower of Pisa. This tough, fierce old woman wore an apron made from sacking and housed her thin cattle in a filthy stable, but like all the characters we have met so far, she had another side to her. Montague evokes our sympathy for Mary Moore when he tells us that she often fell asleep in her chair, reading cheap romance novels. There is something deeply sad about the lonely old lady dreaming of love as she sits by the fire.



Stanza Five:

Billy Eagleson also lived between worlds. A Loyalist, he married a Catholic girl when his family had died. The implication here is that they would not have approved such a match. Montague shows us the sectarian nature of life in Northern Ireland at the time as he describes himself and his young friends taunting Billy by mocking his Loyalist values, easily dodging the blows he aimed at them with his walking stick. Billy did not fit into the community because he belonged neither to the Catholic or Protestant side. The word 'forsaken' highlights his isolation. It was only during the Orange marching season that Billy's situation caused him distress. The sectarian tension and aggression in the divided community is perfectly captured by the onomatopoeic 'Orange drums banged past'.

Montague's cinematic style is evident in this poem when he cuts from one image to the next and describes each one vividly, bringing both the characters and the place to life.

Stanza Six:

Eventually, all of these elderly characters fell ill and died. Isolated during their lifetimes, they are united only by this common aspect of humanity. Their physical isolation is clear here too: the doctor and priest had to make a difficult journey to reach them in times of need. The verb 'trudged' suggests both the long walk up infrequently used mountain lanes and 'broken path' to reach the old people, and also a sense that this was a duty call – not welcomed but necessary. This impression is reinforced by the description of the visitors 'Gulping the mountain air with painful breath'. If the curate and doctor find the journey so arduous, it is easy to infer that the elderly people themselves would be effectively trapped in their out-of-the way homes.

Sometimes it was neighbours who found the dead bodies by the cold firesides. The sibilance in the line 'Silent keepers of smokeless hearth' emphasises the stillness and silence of these lifeless houses. In death, the old people resemble statues and we are reminded again of the dolmens: stones marking where the dead lie.

Stanza Seven:

Although this poem chronicles the lives of the poet's neighbours rather than his own life, it is nonetheless deeply personal. One critic remarked that 'Montague's most personal dialogue has been conducted through his own family and those who inhabited his

childhood³.’ The community in which he grew up shaped Montague’s identity and he recognises the role each member played. In this final stanza, Montague addresses the reality of Irish life compared to the idealised version of ‘Ancient Ireland’. There is some bitterness in the way he says ‘Ancient Ireland indeed!’ and says that he knows the country far too well – ‘I was reared by her bedside’ – to be taken in by any romantic notions of the place. He describes a land in which pagan fears and superstition reigned: ‘The rune and the chant’ and in which old women like Maggie Owens were labelled as witches on the basis of rumours of the ‘evil eye’. Family and local feuds are waged with ‘Formorian fierceness’. The Formorians are a mythical race said to have lived in Ireland in ancient times. They are linked to chaos and wildness and are depicted as demonic giants who could call up storms, diseases and other natural challenges for mankind.

The old people of Montague’s childhood were a mixture of friendly and frightening. They made a lasting impression on him and appeared in his dreams as trespassers, suggesting these memories were not welcome. However, Montague broke free of their influence and, by extension, the Ireland they represented. He stood in a circle of standing stones and there felt the ghostly figures of his past fade into shadow.

The final line of the poem, like the first, stands alone. This reflects the distance between the dead and the living as well as reminding us of the old people’s isolation during their lifetime.

Themes:

Coming of age, identity, childhood, sense of place

³ Sean Dunne, ‘History Lessons: A Note on John Montague’s Relationship With the Past’ – *Poetry Ireland’s Poetry Review* Issue No. 27

Montague: Quotes

'Poetry opens up a hinge into the unconscious, and to the unconscious of other people with whom you are connected. I guess you can call that a form of prayer if you like.'

'There is a famous phrase of Auden's, which is: poetry is breaking bread with the dead.'

'He returned to Ireland in 1952, so that was 18 years in between I didn't see him, so I was inclined afterwards to be kind to him I think. One time when I was working away at my typewriter, in those later years, he came into the room to me, and he said, "I frittered away all my chances, John. All my chances"'.
www.aoifesnotes.com

John Montague in an interview with J.P. O'Malley – Irish Examiner Saturday, October 22, 2011

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