

A Place of Pointed Stones
Jessica Traynor



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Poems inspired by the history and folklore of Banagher, Co. Offaly

*'That beats Banagher
and Banagher beats the devil.'*

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Oh mother, your brother the bishop
says he has power to cure you –
but he'll only journey half the way.

I ask him, what does he mean,
forcing you to travel so far
in your agony?

He said, our lives are a series of chains
we drag with us,
arrange in the way that suits us best –

and it suits him best to exorcise your pain
in the place of pointed stones,
that God has anointed our meeting place.

I feel a curse rise in my gut, clamp
around my heart like a reliquary.
But let's see what he can do.

I'll offer my anger up to God,
stamp it into the jagged mountains,
ferry it over the sucking bogs we'll cross.

If he cures you, I'll smooth my rage
into blocks of limestone,
build a convent by the Shannon

where I can cut out the middleman bishop;
beckon God into my oratory,
where we'll drive the roiling waters.

De Renzy at Clonony

'The canker that is amongst them must first be cured from them, wich are the meere *Irische*, called *Clan na Milegh*, and their bards and croniclers wich keeps their descents.'

–from the letters of Mathew De Renzy, German settler in Ireland, written to the authorities in Dublin from his home, Clonony Castle Offaly, 1610-1620

De Renzy understands
the gifts of language,
how it flows like water
through the callows
of the *mighty Shenan*,
a torrent or a glassy drift,
and is ever *anon is anall* –
like Sir John MacCoghlan
who loves his English masters
with *the teethe outwards*.

*

A dagger to the German's throat, a stolen horse,
and servants brought from England
fled to MacCoghlan's castle at Cloghan –
those boys sent on business into Thomond
thought lost among the maze of woods,
the quaking bogs that shrug roads
off furzed shoulders.

*

And De Renzy at the country's heart,
catching each beat in his letters –
here, he says, is the body politic,
here I have marked where you may
carve out its tumours.

*

The moon rises above Clonony.
The *meere Irische* sleep in filthy cabins
with their animals,

their women and bards apt
to *make a dán* for bastard sons
about *Clan na Milegh*

come out of Biscay, who subjugated
the Tuatha Dé Danann,
the Dane and the Norman.

In their schools, they study
suttill and craftie questions and thereby to lerne
to defend the black croe to be white.

And all of them like wolves,
fasting for days on end
before tearing their meat with hands and teeth.

*

The theft of cattle, neglect of the plough,
the idleness of *theeves, murderers and malefactors*
weigh heavy on De Renzy,
and the night stretches around the castle,
full of *dangerous wods and great bogs*.

He knows that *Benchar peopled*
with two hundred men is able
through the vantadg of the place
to annoy Fercaill, Ormonde,
Elye O'Caroll, Devlin MacCoghlan,
O Riegan, and Clancolman
on this side of the Synann...

He knows the restless mind
can be hobbled if memory is lost.
De Renzy, come from Germany, Antwerp, London,
a trail of broken words in his wake,
has one wish for these Irish –
that they might not know in time
from whence they came.

Glossary

<i>Clan na Milegh</i>	The Milesians are the Gaels who came out of Spain, according to the 11th century <i>Lebor Gabála Éirenn</i> , or Book of Invasions.
<i>Shenan / Synnan</i>	The River Shannon
<i>Anon is anall</i>	Hither and thither
<i>Dán</i>	Poem (in particular, an ancestral chronicle)
<i>Benchar</i>	Banagher

Cures

Eclipse the ringworm
with a ring's golden band
and it will fade before the sun sets.

To wither warts, make the sign
of the cross over a black snail.
Leave it to shrivel on a whitethorn bush.

Dig fat pink worms
and boil alive in sheep's milk
to cure the jaundice.

For canker sores, scrub
with soda given by the woman
down in Cloghan with the cure.

The whooping cough answers
to the moon. As she grows fat,
her tide will tug your lungs.

For consumption, go to the forge
and breathe the fumes
of a burning horse-hoof.

When wildfires rage bring wheat
to the blacksmith and he will char
it on his anvil. Its oil will soothe.

Earth from Father McCauley's grave
will numb a toothache.
Pull the tooth, then toss it
back over the graveyard wall.

The Banshee's Comb

10-11

What kind of a life is it, when my husband
finds a fairy comb on a stile,
brings it across our threshold like a gift?

I knocked it from his hand with the tongs.
It was black as oak pulled from bog,
and the firelight made shapes on it,

like a house on fire and burning figures
running to a death in the ditch
where their bones would lie forgotten.

I scooped the comb onto a ploughshare, opened the door.
The frost was making magic on the hay ricks,
the moon so bright the night hid nothing from me.

I closed my eyes, the comb like a hundred-weight
dragging my arms to earth,
and I felt she was there. The cold of her against me

like I'd plunged my face in water. I couldn't breathe,
at the thought of that man's stupidity,
who lay sleeping off his porter on the settle bed.

My rage grew so hot she flinched back,
I felt the plough blade jump and snag –
then a sound in the next field like foxes crying,

but I knew it was her, back combing her hair on the stile.
I opened my eyes, dropped the ploughshare,
the tracks of her nails on it catching the moon's light.

Riddles

What is black and white,
hops on the ground
like hailstones?

What's long and narrow
deaf and dumb
has no feet
yet can run?

What comes in rough on the shoulders
of men, then goes out again
like silk?

What's alive in front,
dead in the middle,
baptised behind?

As I went out a gap I met
my Uncle Thady
I cut off his head
and sucked his blood
and left him
lying aisy.

What part of a cow
goes into the wood first?

What's the oldest tree in the forest?

The man that made it never wore it
the man that wore it never saw it
the man that bought it never used it.

Jane Walker's Hill

12-13

*Jane Walker's property on the Banagher to Cloghan Road
was subject to arson in 1893 and 1895.*

They came to burn me twice,
the men I'd spurned, men
who'd hooked fat thumbs
into their belts, wiped sweat
from their brows on my threshold.

Behind them in the doorframe,
my kingdom of low skies, my cattle
kneeling under threat of rain.

They threw embers from the ash pit
on my pig-sty roof that night,
the stench of charred flesh
clung to my clothes for days.

In court, the man who did it
sat sweating still,
though the fire was quenched.

Another night, my own paraffin
stolen and tossed on the thatch.
My sister and I dragged our furniture
into the roadway as the roof collapsed,
wood and flame wedded.

Above us, the hillside dark and empty.
My name a wisp of smoke that lingers still.

a magpie | a river | the turf | a man ploughing | a cabbage head | her breath | the elder | a coffin

Weather Lore

Signs of Rain

when the horizon is folded in dark clouds
when sheep cower in the ditch
when the cat sharpens her claws
when the dog chews grass
when the cricket's song is sharp
when the mountains huddle close
when a spider is killed or leaves its web
when maggots creep on the road
when flies come into the house
when a bee flies down the chimney
when the walls are damp
when the fire won't light
when the stones in the field glisten
when crows crowd the roost
when the rooks dive like kites
when the curlew flies north
when the wood pigeon cries
when swallows skim the field
when wild geese fly above the clouds
when horses stand tail to the wind
when the sun gathers water into mist
when smoke leans crooked from the chimney
when soot-fall smatters the hearth
when a south-westerly blows
when a rainbow shows

Signs of Snow

Stars sharp in a winter sky
after a bloody sunset.
Comets spark and catch
like fire in the grate.
The world turns white.

Signs of Wind

Seabirds blown inland,
under an egg-yolk sun,
torn clouds.
At night, a halo
round the moon.

Signs of Good Weather

The clouds red at sunset.
Dew on the grass. The rising fog.
Stars swooning in the sky.

The Woman of Garbally Speaks

14–15

My story's travelled far as Curraghavarna and Portavolla,
where it's told to every passing bargeman.
It washes into others like it; a hare in morning mist
among the cattle's steaming flanks. A woman alone and wealthy.
The butter spoiled. Small upsets.

My first crime to have a husband that died and left me some acres.
My second to have my mother's strong arms and the knack of the churn.
My third to walk abroad in the mornings before sun melts the dew,
make silver tracks in grass before my neighbours wake.

And if the cows are lowing for relief,
what harm to fill my pail and give them ease?
But they'll tell you I shrank my bones to fill a hare pelt,
went among the herds, sucked each one dry,
pulled a hair from each cow's tail to curse the butter.

My neighbour said: *I found her in the house,
blood pouring from her side.
The hare's pelt on the floor, all stained with gore.
I pulled the tail hairs from her grasp and left her there.
There was butter and plenty after that.*

But I know: a woman was shot in dawn light.
She ran to her house where a man knocked her down,
threw a battered hare at her and left. No silver pelt.
No cattle hair. No witch. No curse but the idle talk
of neighbours, and the fear of men.

Foxes in the Graveyard

Anne and Mary Fox, d. 1845 and 47 respectively, left the endowment which allowed for the building of the La Sainte Union Des Sacre Coeurs convent and school in Banagher in 1863.

On soft days, a flash of furze
as a vixen mounts our tomb's table
to sniff worn lettering.

Below us, the town's back windows,
dark and unsure, look away
to where the maltings' rusting roofs
rub the horizon.

Banagher may turn its back,
but we perch on its shoulders,
dangle our legs in drizzle,
watch boats mooring at Shannon Harbour.

The odd strolling tourist
might feel their skin prickle
at our glance.
In '45 and '47 we left a world
grown thin and hungry.

Now, as we doze above the schoolyard,
children's games drift through our sleep –
and death is a snowflake melting
on Shannon waters,
famine just a word in a book.

Banagher Beats the Devil

16–17

It began like so many nights –
a cold walk from the shebeen,
the bile of another loss
churning in my gut, and then,
the shock of the table
in the middle of the bridge.

There was a man sitting at it,
a stillness in him so deep
it dimmed the sound of water
rushing underneath.

Now, his face has faded
into the shadow left
by his candle's low flame,
But I remember I felt
there was nothing to fear.

*

When day came again
and I had sweated the poitín out,
my conscience sent me to the priest.
I told him I never played
the cards the man had offered,

never held the strange deck
soft as calfskin, and marvelled
at its pictures;
a goat enthroned,
a ship split by lightning.

But now, I'll tell the truth –
we sat and played for hours.
Sometimes he would win,
sometimes I, and the stars

hanging above us twisted
as if we had travelled
under the horizon
to the world's end.

*

When night softened into dawn,
 he barely played his last hand,
 placed the cards down gently in defeat.
 I threw my winning cards,
 then the candle flickered once,
 and I was afraid to meet his gaze.

But I felt the sadness in him,
 not at his loss, but something else –
 at the sun rising, thinning him.
 It was only when he turned
 to cross the bridge I saw his feet,
 like goat's hooves,

and felt his gaze pinch at my back
 till I rounded the bend,
 saw St Rynagh's belfry
 dark against the dawn sky,
 fell retching in the ditch.

*

If you doubt me,
 I'll show you the scars
 on my shoulders,
 like wounds made by driven nails,
 and I'll ask you now to pray

that when I meet my God
 he'll recognise the kindness
 in playing a hand with the fallen.

On Halloween

play Eve,
 seek the apple in the dark.
 With blindfold on,
 sink teeth into tartness.

Four saucers filled
 with water, clay, ring, rosary –
 choose your future
 juice still sticky on your chin.

Dip your head in the bowl
 for a shilling, seek it
 with teeth and tongue.
 Taste silver and prosper.

Pour melted wax
 through a key's eye
 into water. Swords for soldiers,
 ships for sailors,

stones for the grave,
 a cross for the priesthood –
 these are your four
 compass points.

Taste iron and apples
 in your mouth.
 Spit the seeds,
 pocket the coin,

keep your rosary close
 on the walk home.

Nancy Kelly's Banagher

Some days the Shannon dragged its tangles
far below the surface,
the Martello Tower turned on its head,
the bridge touched its toes.

On days like those, bargemen
stood on the deck singing Bolero,
the melody spiralling
through the bridge's archways.

She'd fill her pockets with hazelnuts
and windfall apples
gathered on the way to the cinema
set up at the haggard.

Trains still stopped at Esker then,
and old women dressed in black.
At the school, Sister Sebastian
nursed unspoken hurts,

while Madame Joseph
took out her dolls for the children.
Her father channeled run-off water
from the spring,

to save her mother trips to the well,
and her sisters dreamt of goose
cooked on the crane in an iron pot,
a pail of coal for the school fire.

Phil Dunne fixing a gramophone,
played them tunes 'just to test it,'
while the ESB men arrived to raise
their wooden poles –

She sees their lights waking up
across the town
just as memory
draws down the dark.

Charlotte on the Bridge

20–21

*In 1854, Charlotte Bronte married Arthur Bell Nichols, who had been raised
by his uncle in Banagher. They spent part of their honeymoon in the town.*

You might have heard how her father,
left seething in that moor-perched house,
would fire his pistol through the window,
bullets slicing between gravestones
as Branwell cursed him from his bed
and local women looked on,
spreading their shifts on the headstones to dry.

*[There is no happiness like that of being loved
by your fellow-creatures, and feeling that your presence
is an addition to their comfort.]*

But here on the Shannon
the story goes that when Charlotte came
on honeymoon to godless Ireland,
she had another passenger in tow –
its metal tainting her hands
with a scent like thumbled coins.

And one night on the bridge that cuts
across the gale-tossed waters,
she's standing, uncertain, looking down
when a farmer coaxing his nervous horse
across the seething river sees her.

Though he's used to the silhouettes
who stare into chaos on a moonless night,
he's surprised by the bonnet,
by the woman's slight frame, jostled
this way and that by wind.

*[And if that boisterous Channel, and two hundred miles
or so of land come broad between us,
I am afraid that cord of communion will be snapt;
and then I've a nervous notion I should take to bleeding inwardly]*

And when he comes near,
the woman turns to him,
face shaded by her bonnet brim
holds out a pistol, slippery with rain.
What do I do? I must get rid of it.

Toss it, sure, he says, as if she's mad,
 gesturing to the waters that swallow,
 indiscriminate, whole farms and diamond rings,
 that spit out longboats and swords—
 these fickle secret keepers
 who surprise us with their thefts and gifts.
 The bonnet gestures yes.
 The gun spirals down.

*[My eyes were covered and closed: eddying darkness
 seemed to swim around me, and reflection came in
 as black and confused a flow.]*

Across the Irish sea, a door slams shut,
 the house for a moment is full
 of women's voices. Reverend Bronte
 feels a ghost-ache in his right hand.
 Branwell tosses in a laudanum dream.

*... why should we care / If a rose, a hedge, a crocus are uprooted /
 Like corpses, remote, crushed, mutilated?*

—from The War Horse by Eavan Boland

On an autumn night, the road is clear,
 the fair green seething in its concrete grave.
 Nowhere to hitch a horse, nowhere
 to pasture the thousand ghostly sheep

that flood the narrow road,
 caught in the streetlamp's amber.
 Along Church Street, they turn,
 horses, sheep, cattle, quick as clouds

passing across the moon,
 seeking the green that fed them
 through famine, tithes, and civil war—
 whinnies echo on St Rynagh's gravestones.

Through years of unpaved roads
 and ambushed mail cars they canter,
 the jingle of a sulky carried on the breeze,
 hooves sparking on vanished cobbles.

We behind our curtains hear only
 the passing music of cartwheels, a bridle bell.
 We wake in the morning
 expecting to find the streets
 awash with muck,

farmers and tangles slapping hands,
 an old woman with a piss-pot
 walking the throng shouting
Cack in me can, young man!

Instead, an absence ripens
 into bitter sloes that dot
 the hedgerows we pass
 as we pull on masks,

walk aimless circuits,
 yearn for the keen
 of a single hoof-beat.

Epilogue: From the Shannon to St Rynagh's

*A poem collaged from the writings of the 2019-20
Transition Year students at Banagher College.*

At the bottom of the town,
the lovely waters of the Shannon lie.
Winter sunlight reflects on ripples.
birdsong echoes on the breeze.

I stand in the cool stillness,
watch worries drift away
like a barge on the water.

*Back into town, I turn and gaze
at the Shannon in the frosty haze.*

Then to the big blue church
in the centre of the town,
where people gather to sing in praise,
share the space for a short while.

It's the gentle brush of arms,
and the welcoming smiles
that take away all feeling of alarm.
the joining of hands and well wishers.

*The guitar made from oak
played so beautifully the chords spoke.*

Then off to school,
where chatter floods
from floor to floor,
where teachers teach
and students learn.

Time ticks through the day,
as we wait for the bell to ring.
When the day is over,
students barge the halls,
bags tossed, doors slammed,
the classrooms finally deserted.

*Sound fades into silence again,
waiting for the next day to begin.*

Then up Cuba Avenue
to St Rynagh's Hurling Pitch,
the smell of freshly-cut grass,
the shouts of the crowd.

The caretaker lining the pitch,
checking the net. Cars pull up,
the grounds alive with nerves.
The sound of players studs on stone
as they run out for a final warm-up.

*I live for the smack of each ball as it's kicked,
The roar of the crowd at every hard tackle.*

*Sound fades into silence again,
waiting for the next day to begin.*

*The guitar made from oak
played so beautifully the chords spoke.*

*Back into town, I turn and gaze
at the Shannon in the frosty haze.*

Acknowledgments

For more information on Sir Matthew De Renzy's letters, and De Renzy as a judge of bardic competitions, Brian MacCuartha's *A Planter's Interaction with Gaelic Culture: Sir Matthew De Renzy, 1577–1634* can be accessed at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/24341350?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents

The National Folklore Collection at UCD has been an indispensable resource for this project, allowing me to read digitised testimonies and recollections of folklore and history from the Banagher region.

St Rynagh and the Bishop: St. Rynagh was St. Finnian of Clonard's sister. She moved from Clonmacnois to Banagher to become Abbess of a religious community in the 6th century. The poem here was inspired by the story recorded at <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/5044635/5028008>.

Banagher Beats the Devil: The origin of this saying is still disputed, but in local lore 'Banagher' is often recorded as being the name of a blacksmith who outsmarted the devil. The poem here was inspired by the story recorded at <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/5044634/5027999/5145234>

The Banshee's Comb was inspired by the story recorded at <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/5044634/5028001/5145243>

Cures is a found poem, inspired by folk cures from the Offaly area recorded at <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/5044606/5025399> and <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/5044633/5027870>

Weather Lore and *Riddles* were inspired by those recorded at <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/5044652/5029075>

On Halloween was inspired by the Festival Customs found at <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/5044633/5027855>

The Woman of Garbally Speaks was inspired by the story found at: <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/5044633/5027864>

Nancy Kelly's Banagher is based on oral history testimony taken from an interview conducted in June 2020 with Banagher native Nancy Kelly, born 1935, and now living in Dublin.

Bracketed quotes in *Charlotte on the Bridge* are taken from *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte, (Wordsworth Classics, 1992).

Historical details from *The Horse Fair* and *Jane Walker's Hill* taken from Valentine Trodd's invaluable *Midlanders: Chronicle of a Midlands Parish*, (Scéal, 1994).

The epigraph for *The Horse Fair* is taken from 'The War Horse' by Eavan Boland, *New Collected Poems*, (Carcenet, 2005).

Epilogue: From the Shannon to St. Rynagh's: In February 2020 I ran a workshop in Banagher College Transition Year students on poetry and place. I used the resulting writings to create this collage-poem, which composer Elaine Agnew set to music.

Thanks are due to Sally O'Leary, Arts Officer for Offaly County Council, for her support and management of the project, and to Kieran Keenaghan, Amanda Pedlow, Brendan O'Loughlin, Roisín Lennon, Aileen Duffy, Paddy Scales, Mairead McIntyre, Nancy Kelly, David Boylan, Adrian Coffey, all the participants of the Banagher Public Art Project Creative Writing Workshops and Mentorship Projects, and the 2019 and 2020 Transition Year Students of Banagher College.

For his continued support and enthusiasm, and for his infectious passion for Banagher and its history, I'd like to say a special thank you to James Scully, who dedicated many hours of his time to this project.

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21 Brookwood Rise
D05 E8P5
Ireland

ISBN: 978-1-5272-8157-8

Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously.

Designed by Jamie Murphy. Typeset in Méridien.
Printed by digitalprintingireland.ie on Genyous uncoated.

First printed edition 2020.

This pamphlet was commissioned by Offaly County Council and funded through the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government Per Cent for Art Scheme.



An Roinn Tithíochta,
Rialtais Áitiúil agus Oidhreacht
Department of Housing,
Local Government and Heritage



Comhairle Chontae Uíbh Fhailí
Offaly County Council

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