

The Old Seminary

("We have no reason to suppose that the qualities which, rightly employed, won for our country, in the long-gone centuries, the proud title - 'Insula doctorum et sanctorum' - are not ours today." From the address of Lord O'Hagan, official opening of Literary Institute, Letterkenny, 1877)

Early morning libations. Then, his father
Would tap him on the shoulder and cough -
"Criostoir!". Roused from his nightly dream of
Cold altar and incantation, he joined
James and Andy, Bridget and Mary, as they
Blinked between buttermilk and scone,
Between half-sleep and the half-light,
Between their mother's hurried brush of
Holy water, and their father's curt
Unlatching of the half-door. "Criostoir",
His mother whispered, as he stepped into
The day, her voice as soft as townlands -
Meenaneary, Meenavean, Meenacharvey,
Meenacross,
Her ambition as hard as the cairn of Clo'n
Aoineach,
Founded, sounded and solidly in him, Criostoir,
Carrier of Christ, she carries him still.
Now. As the bell jolts him awake, and her face
Recedes into the haze under Owenteshna,
A ritual begins that will last a lifetime,
And in that time will prompt Kitty to boast -
"Hasn't he the hands of a doctor all the same,"
A PhD in Divinity not quite being the thing
For a girl who might have nursed in England,
But once kept a house for a young priest from
Glen,
Cooled his soup and occasional tempers, and
stayed.
Early morning libations, Literary Institute,
Letterkenny.
He plunges his hands with relish into the ice-cold
Of his bedside basin, as the rough soap works up
An insipid lather in which, again and again,
He washes between the lines of black peat and
Potatoes, staple only in their indifference.
Between the lines. Twelve long drills of pinks,
Twelve steps below the door, only prayer keeping
Them midling for twelve months of the year.
James and Andy, Bridget and Mary, stoop daily

And gather, so that, in time, through the sweat
Of a harvest day, they will stoop again and shake
The hand of one they should embrace, but can't:
Criostoir, Father Christy, home from the near parts,
Too far for them - Glenswilly, Gartan, Churchill,
And in time, the neighbouring parish, Kilcar.
Their father, distracted from contrary work,
Listens to his son in the scrubbed urgency of
The parlour, talk of far flung corners of the
Diocese, while his wife smiles and audible "Now!"
Now- "Neque enim patrius consistere mentum
Passus amor - For his paternal love suffers
Not his mind to be at ease" - Aeneas.
Latin by lamplight, Lower Main Street, on
The Hillside of the O'Cannons - Leitir Ceanainn;
Sure of itself, yet a town in two minds,
Hung between Gaeltacht and Galltacht,
Hungry Glens and lush Laggan,
Between lowland jigs and highland reels,
Seed for export, blight in the fields.
Between the lines -
Virgil of Mantua, Mc Ginley of Meenaneary.
The town grows dark, the old seminary
Is at prayer. Criostoir kneels by his first
Translation. Somewhere, another vocation
Is being born. "Insula Doctorum et Sanctorum."