The Irish Female Presence in Jane Urquhart's Fiction

by Libby Birch

L'auteure commente l'oeuvre de l'écrivaine canadienne Jane Urquhart, qui donne une nouvelle voix aux Irlandaises à travers celle de Mary O'Malley, l'héroïne de son roman "Away."

Urquhart's Mary O'Malley becomes a voice for Kathleen, the marginalized nineteenth-century Irish-Catholic immigrant woman who symbolizes a vanquished Celtic goddess, her culture buried in the mists of time.

> The idea of Ireland is especially complicated for a woman for Ireland has conventionally been represented as a woman—a weak, vanquished victim. When a woman looks in the glass of Ireland she sees inextricably reflected there her own image and that of her poor, sorry country. She symbolizes "Ireland" and Ireland stands for "Woman"—that is "how men like to imagine her" and she has no space, no voice, no right to imagine herself differently or even to imagine at all. As symbol, "woman" is allowed no history, no story, no capacity for change—she is a given. Her particularity is overwhelmed by the demands of the [dominant culture]. (Smyth 40)

Nineteenth-century literary and historical perspectives on Irish women immigrants to Ontario are often the work of writers who identified with Ontario's ruling class. Kathleen Mavourneen[1] symbolizes Ireland's sad economic and political plight and in nineteenth-century Canadian literature, Kathleen *is* usually depicted as a maidservant or a lower-class Irish woman immigrant who exists at the periphery of a story, seen but seldom heard. The harbinger of change is the Celtic literary revival which starts to take place at the end of the nineteenth century in Ireland. As Ireland retrieves her mythological voice, Kathleen assumes a new role in the work of twentieth-century Canadian writers who focus on nineteenth-century Irish immigration to Canada.

Ontario writer Jane Urquhart provides a stunning example. Her novel *Away* exemplifies an Irish female peasant consciousness who rediscovers mythic Ireland and seeks to preserve such myths by transcending *normal* Canadian nineteenth-century society. Urquhart's Mary O'Malley becomes a voice for Kathleen, the marginalized nineteenth-century Irish-Catholic immigrant woman who symbolizes a vanquished Celtic goddess, her culture buried in the mists of time.

By the mid-nineteenth century, Ireland reaches its lowest ebb and is almost destroyed by famine and disease. The Gaelic culture, which has been preserved in hedgerow schools, is threatened by the coming of the national school system where instruction will be in English only. Urquhart steps outside the boundaries of writing nineteenth-century historical fiction by interweaving strands of Celtic mythology throughout her novel set in Ontario, Canada. She also provides an interesting connection between Ireland and Canada's First Nations people so that Canada and Ireland become mythically linked. Ginette Paris claims that:

> A people that loses its mythology dies, and a people that fails to pass on its history is alienated and becomes a stranger to itself. This also applies to women: we can not afford not to know our own history. (qtd. in Turbide 59)

Urquhart claims to have been strongly influenced by the Irish cultural revivalist Lady Gregory. Born Augusta Persse to strict evangelical Anglo-Irish landowner parents, as a child, she is enchanted by the Irish tales told to her by her Irish-Catholic nursemaid, Mary Sheridan. As the widowed Lady Gregory, Augusta learns the Gaelic language and collects folklore from the cottagers in County Galway, Ireland. Urquhart, fascinated by her own Irish roots, makes the connection with Gregory and ultimately links her to the Irish immigration experience. One of the strangest beliefs among the Irish is the belief that a person can be "away" and Gregory records several strange stories of this phenomenon, one of which is told to her by a woman from Slieve Echtge. This is a tale about a girl who goes away with the fairies every night but is capable of squeezing through the keyhole if she returns and finds the door locked. The fairies try to force her to eat but she refuses, knowing that if she eats the fairies' food, they will possess her forever. All-told, she is "away" for seven years and then she marries a serving man and immigrates to Sydney, Australia. Urquhart is intrigued by the idea that immigrants are "away" in that they bring only replicas of themselves to the new land, leaving their old self behind.

Gregory's folklore is the basis for the fear which Mary, Urquhart's enigmatic peasant girl, inspires in the Irish villagers after her encounter with her demon lover from the sea:

> Mary recognises immediately that he came from an otherworld island and assumed that he had emerged

from the water to look after her, and knew that her name had changed in an instant from Mary to Moira. (8)

Moira, as a pre-Christian form of Mary, derives from the Trinitarian form taken by the goddess Aphrodite as "the Great Moira" said to be older than time. Greek funerary hymns consigning the dead to her care were known as the *Moirologhia*, in vocation of the Greek Fates who are versions of the oriental triple goddess as creator, preserver, and destroyer. The ancient world recognized that life is a mystical thread spun by the virgin, sustained and measured by the mother, and cut by the crone: Clotha

Urquhart reinforces the notion that the transition from one language to another can result in a confusion about one's identity and that one's communication skills can become so impaired that there is a difficulty in making oneself understood.

the Spinner, Lachesis the Measurer, and Atropos the Cutter (Walker). Miriam, the Hebrew form of Mary, is the name of the sister who cast Moses upon the waters (Book of Exodus). Such water imagery is also associated with the Celtic goddess, Aine/Dana/Danu, who gives her name to European rivers from the Danube to the Don. In ancient Irish myth-telling, one encounters all the intelligent energies of animism—that is, nature seen as having mentality (animus); there are examples in eighteenth-century texts of water spirits (luchoirp or luchorpain) who grant the hero the power to travel under water like a shaman and the power is his until they break the taboo (Kane 35).

W. B. Yeats, who plays a strong part in the Celtic literary revival writes of Clooth-na-Beare (also known as Cailleac Beare, Beare, Bere, Vera, Dera or Dhera) who went all over the world, "seeking a lake deep enough to drown her faery life, of which she had grown weary until she found the deepest water in the world in little Lough la on top of the bird mountain" (507). Yeats is uncertain where he heard this story but thinks that it was told to him by a priest from Colooney. Since Father Quinn makes the final decision that only Mary should have contact with the young sailor's dead body and that she alone can prepare him for burial shows that he is not above a belief in supernatural happenings that have little to do with orthodox Christianity.

Urquhart's Moira/Mary seems to escape into a faery world, a world depicted by Yeats in his poem, *The Stolen Child:*

Where the wandering water gushes
In pools among the rushes of Glen-Car
That scarce could bathe a star,
We seek for slumbering trout
And whispering in their ears
Give us unquiet dreams
Leaning softly out
From ferns that drop their tears
Over the young streams.
.....
Away from us [she's] going,
The solemn eyed:
[She'll] hear no more the lowing
Of the calves on the warm hillside
Or the kettle on the hob
Sing peace into his breast,
Or see the brown mice bob
Round and round the oatmeal chest.
Come away O human child,
To the waters and the wild
With a faery Hand in hand,
From a world more full of weeping than [she] can understand. (53–54)

The water imagery in Urquhart's prose seems to echo the Yeatsian poem:

Now the waters of Lough Crannog licked the rushes near the shore. Mary waited as she had learned to wait, calmly her hands palm upward in her lap as if she expected them to be filled with pools of rain. Bright glimmers of life darted near the water on blurred wings and occasionally a trout leapt, then plummeted, a flailing blade into the lake. (126)

Yeats and Urquhart both deal with escapism into a mythological world which may seem to be more desirable than the world of reality; one mythic symbol, to which both authors refer, is the leaping *trout* for the belief exists that the hidden tribes of the *Tuatha De Dannan* (the people of the ancient Mother Goddess) can take all shapes, those in the water often taking the shape of fish (Yeats). Where Yeats has a longing for the mythological world, he also realizes that his stolen child will escape the ordinary pleasures of human life, the familiar everyday things like the sound of the kettle whistling on the fire.

Urquhart marks Mary's attempt to return to ordinary human life with Mary's marriage to the schoolmaster, Brian O'Malley when, "she fell weeping on the schoolmaster's shoulder. Unbuckling. Beginning to enter the world again" (59). Father Quinn encourages the teaching of English on the island because he believes it is necessary for any kind of advancement and although he teaches the language to a handful of boys, it never occurs to him that a girl might need this skill. Mary is encouraged in her studies by her schoolmaster husband and has a gift for eloquence but the transition to English from Gaelic results in mixed messages that seem to be aimed at no one in particular and get little attention from anyone on the island.

Urquhart reinforces the notion that the transition from one language to another can result in a confusion about one's identity and that one's communication skills can

become so impaired that there is a difficulty in making oneself understood. Combine this with the act of immigration and we can see why Mary clings to her mythological world as the only world in which she can truly find herself. This is still a consideration today for certain immigrants who are forced to integrate into a Canadian culture which is still primarily based on British middle-class values.

Mary has internalized the Celtic myths, through an encounter with a mythic lover, who comes to her from the otherworld of Ireland's green heroic past as a psychic supernatural experience. Yet the experience still has some discernible grounding in desire or need and Mary's need may be to survive the hardships of her life which do little to fulfill her dreamy romantic nature. The bare subsistence of the Irish peasant is sustained by a culture which is fast vanishing and the Great Famine, with its twin ogres of starvation and fever, becomes the final horror.

Mary seems to be at one with a great turbulent energy which we can only attempt to define as the life force; domesticity cannot hold Mary and so she roams the Canadian forest searching for some link with a culture which is disappearing from her homeland.

In a promotional blurb on the back of Urquhart's *Away*, Timothy Findley compares her to Emily Brontë who, in her own novel *Wuthering Heights,* makes no difference between the natural and the supernatural when she speaks of the energy which flows between Catherine and Heathcliffe even after Catherine dies. Mary, like Catherine, is a disturbed, divided spirit who is shattered, the fragments everywhere, and so is blocked from entering a conventional social world. Catherine continues to haunt the Yorkshire moor while Mary lives mythologically in the Canadian forest transcending *normal* Canadian socialized communities. Urquhart and Brontë offer no easy answers. Mary, like Catherine, seems to be at one with some elemental force, a great turbulent energy of which we have little understanding of and can only attempt to define as the life force; houses, domesticity, and maternal duties cannot hold Mary and so she roams the Canadian forest searching for some link with a culture which is disappearing from her homeland. Her isolation also serves to preserve the Celtic culture for Osbert Sedgewick, the eccentric Irish laird who finances the O'Malleys' voyage to the New World, and senses Mary's mystic mission:

> There's this light in her you see ... and it must not be put out. I can't explain it but I know that it must not go out, must be kept somehow though I'm not certain at all that it will shine as well across the ocean as it does here. Nevertheless ... I will not stand by and see it fade. (122)

I see Urquhart's book as being an allegory where the pre-Christian values of the Celtic goddess and her pantheon of gods survive in hidden secret places: the psyche and imagination of an Irish immigrant woman who is in transition between the nineteenth-century cultures of Ireland and Ontario, Canada. Mary, by becoming Moira, reclaims her ancient heritage and the faery lover from the sea "touches" Mary in a way which transcends physical contact. At their final meeting in Ireland, prior to her departure for Canada, she questions him thus:

> "And you," she asked, "will I take you with me?"
> "Yes and no," he said. She saw that he was clothed in the feathered coat of a poet, that clots of bird's nests rested in his hands, and that small fires guttered at his feet. (128)

The early Irish poets wear cloaks of bird feathers and are priestly visionaries who are experts on the law of kingship and resemble the Shamans of the Paleolithic Stone Age (Kane).

Mary's meeting with Exodus Crow in the Canadian forest is interesting both because of the bird imagery and the fact that metamorphosis is very much a part of Irish legend. Tuan, keeper of the ancient Irish legends, is thought to have lived for two thousand years and towards the end of his life conversed with St. Patrick (who converted him to Christianity). After he assumes human shape for the second time, he lives 320 years; a man for the first hundred, then as a stag, a boar, a vulture, or an eagle, and finally as a fish who is eaten by a queen. The creation of Tuan serves one purpose in Irish mythology: to relate the history of three Irish races, those of Parthelon, Nemed, and the *Tuatha De Dannan* (gods of light, art, and literature, the pantheon of the Irish Mother Goddess). This wonderful pagan legend is placed under the protection of the venerated St. Patrick in order to secure its acceptance by the clergy and a new element is introduced in that, after Tuan assumes human form for the second time, he lives for hundreds of years. The belief in metamorphosis, which tends to explain the wonderful knowledge possessed by certain individuals and the legends of Tuan, finds its roots in one of the fundamental principles of Celtic mythology: the belief that the soul survives and returns to this world and assumes a new body (de Jubainville).

Exodus Crow provides a link between Celtic and Canadian First Nations culture in that firstly, he is Mary's willing listener and secondly, he connects her country's history with his own threatened culture. There is also an interesting link between Christianity and the old Irish mythology which equates with the dominant culture in Ontario, Canada in that the ways of the indigenous Native people are threatened. Water imagery and bird life again surface in Mary's accounts of life on Rathlin Island off the coast of the north of Ireland across the waters of the Moyle where the Children of Lir live for three hundred years

disguised as swans. She tells Exodus of Finn MacCumhail and the Fianna (Yeats describes Finn as a great leader of the Fenian circle. His warriors, the Fianna, are thought to be a body of infantry (484)) and especially about the poet Oisin who returns from the land of the young known as Tir-na-nOg to argue for the old ways and beliefs with he whom Oisin called Patrick of the Crooked Crozier (180).

The meeting between St. Patrick and Oisin is the subject of one of Yeats's earlier poems, *The Wanderings of Oisin.* St. Patrick accuses Oisin of 300 years of "dalliance with a demon thing" to which Oisin replies:

> Sad to remember, sick, with years,
> The swift innumerable spears,
> The horsemen with their floating hair—
> Those merry couples dancing in tune
> And the white body which lay next to mine.
> .....
> And passing the Firbolg's burial ground,
> Came to the cairn-heaped grassy hill
> Where passionate Maeve is stony still
> And found on the dove-grey edge of the hill
> A pearl-pale, high-born lady
> And like a sunset were her lips
> A stormy sunset on doomed ships
> A citron colour gloomed her hair...
>
> S. Patrick: You are still wrecked among heathen dreams. (5–6)

"Passionate Maeve" symbolizes the old Irish culture and language which start to erode with the coming of Christianity. Urquhart realizes that the same sources which inspire Yeats also inspire her and *consciously* she is influenced by the original translation of the Gaelic version of the poem which precedes the Yeats version and that his "A Stolen Child" has been a part of her since the age of nine or ten.

Echoes of lost Irish mythology continually surface in Urquhart's work for Oisin's lament for the past can be likened to Mary's longing for the mysterious Others:

> ... those who live under the ground and those who had lived under the water, and how they were around always and in everything and how they made the most beautiful music ... so sweet and sad ... once heard never forgotten [on her island all were haunted by it and Mary, lost in her own story, suddenly looks in surprise at Exodus as if she had forgotten his presence and thus says] Do you believe me? (180)

Exodus Crow is named for the Book of Exodus and for his father's spirit-guide who is the crow. Exodus' mother learns her reading from a churchman and she loves the Book of Genesis with its stories of "the man with the boat of apples, the woman Snake made bite the apple, and many dreams and vision quests" (175). But in the Book of Exodus, the Great Spirit is no longer so involved with a perfect balance in nature for now mankind's concern is for conquest and for the taking and exploitation of lands which perplexes Exodus' mother (175).

Mary reminds Exodus of his mother's stories of the Manitou, the spirit which is everywhere and he eventually realizes that there is a wisdom in white people beyond the land conquest prompted by the Book of Exodus; he dreams of a golden fish (the Celtic goddess?) and senses that in order to preserve her unique pre-Christian spirituality, Mary must learn concealment and endurance in order to keep the old legends alive. Mary can be seen as a torch for the Irish people for she carries the histories, legends, and songs of ancient Ireland which even precede the coming of the Celts. She could be likened to the spirit-guide Crow who sits on the tallest tree in the forest so that he can see many things at once and has a strong voice which insists on being heard. This wise bird survives many hardships and loves that which shines (the golden fish, the Celtic goddess whose presence glimmers through the hardships of a colonized people in nineteenth-century Ireland and still shines in the Canadian colony?) Mary also has far-seeing visionary powers for she sees:

> ... the world's great leave takings, invasions and migrations, landscapes torn from under the feet of tribes, the Danae pushed out by the Celts, the Celts eventually smothered by the English, warriors in the night depopulating villages, boatloads of groaning African slaves. Lost forests, the children of the mountains on the plain, the children of the plain adrift on the sea. All in all the mourning for abandoned geographies. (128)

Urquhart conveys a sense of the disruption of humankind now adrift on an unchartered voyage of destruction. This is familiar to us as the fall of our earliest forebearers who are cast out of Eden; in a Christianized Ireland, disunity is caused by the loss of belief in an earth goddess, mated to sea and sky, which represents a perfect cohesion-in-nature. The Ojibway Exodus Crow finds a reverence for nature in the red-headed Irish woman who makes her new abode in the Canadian forests and recognizes it as being attuned to the beliefs of his people who are being threatened by technological progress. Urquhart draws on themes of muted cultures who can know a rebirth and thus emulates Lady Gregory and Yeats who play a vital role in effecting the Celtic revival in Ireland.

> At the end of the day, the goddess is once again frozen into death and silence: ... there lay the beautiful, pale, frozen woman ... her hair was loose, framing her face like a cloud of fire ... almost translucent ... the skin on her face and neck ... so perfect ... that it might have been created more recently than Eileen's [Mary's baby daughter]. Her lips ... frozen into the shape of a faint smile. (173)

What are we to make of this frozen woman? Is she the sleeping-beauty goddess awaiting her faery-demon lover or does the smile denote that the union has finally taken place? In Yeatsian terms, she will always be his stolen child beyond the pale of the conventional Christian community. As Moira, she moves away from Mary the Virgin, the ultimate icon of unselfish motherhood whose son was sacrificed for the *sins* of the world. Yeats shows a concern for the death-centred religion which focuses on the hanged god on the cross when Oisin argues with St. Patrick for a life felt through the senses. The exodus out of Eden leaves behind the green natural world while the spiritual quest turns to conquest and to an exploitation of lands, often in the name of Christianity.

In the context of today, Urquhart's Irish woman immigrant, who sees spirits in earth, trees, and water, raises our consciousness to the fears which we hold for the natural environment and which we are in danger of losing. In death, Moira reverts to Mary, the frozen goddess who may yet once again be transformed into a living vibrant being. The ancient Mother Goddess survives as part of the Irish consciousness for she is the other who calls from the past and the beam of light who guides us towards what we are now becoming.

Libby Birch was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland, and emigrated to Canada in 1948. She is a retired daycare supervisor, and is a graduate student at Trent University.

[1]"Kathleen Mavourneen" is the title of a traditional Irish song used here to symbolize Irish womanhood, an Irish immigrant, or Ireland the country. *Mavourneen* is also a term of endearment like "darling or dear," so "dear Kathleen" is both "beloved Ireland," a symbol for Ireland as woman, or Kathleen as Irish immigrant.

References

Book of Exodus, Holy Bible, King James version.

Brontë, Emily. *Wuthering Heights.* London: The New English Library Ltd., 1959. Overview.

de Jubainville, H. Arbois. *The Irish Mythological Cycle and Celtic Mythology.* Trans. Richard Best. Dublin: O'Donoghue, 1903.

Gregory, Lady Augusta. *Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland Collected and Arranged by Lady Gregory; with Essays and Notes by W. B. Yeats.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1920.

Kane, Sean. *Wisdom of the Mythtellers.* Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 1994.

Smyth, Ailbhe. "Ireland." *Bloomsbury Guide to Women's Literature.* Ed. Claire Buck. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Co., 1992.

Turbide, Diane. "All About Eve: A Series Takes Females from the Margins." *Maclean's* 20 Jan. 1997: 59.

Urquhart, Jane. *Away.* Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1993.

Walker, Barbara G., ed. *The Women's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets.* San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1983.

Yeats, W. B. *Yeats's Poems.* Ed. A. Norman Jeffares. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1991.

RENEE NORMAN

Mask

orange
three grey tears hand-painted
on the hardened felt
of a small mask on the table
like a flat oval pumpkin
with sockets
a skeletal shape
beckons

she molds the mask to her face
folds of cheek & chin
a perimeter of disregarded flesh

to lose herself she gazes deeply
in the ornamental mirror on the table
looking for the character hidden
in the rigid form

the glass absorbs the felt
the trace of grey
reveals another face
but when she turns around
only eyes return my stare

when she turns away
peels the mask from skin and bone
the tears transform
orange too

for once i felt beautiful
she says
in another face
imagining it anew

Renee Norman is a poet and writer and a part-time teacher. Currently, she is working on her PhD at the University of British Columbia. Her work has appeared in literary and academic journals and newspapers: Freefall, Whetstone, CV2, Prairie Fire, Room of One's Own, Dandelion, Canadian Woman Studies, *and* The Vancouver Sun.