
Think Piece by Poet Mary O'Malley

Copyright (c) 2016 by Mary O'Malley. This text may be archived and redistributed both in electronic form and in hard copy, provided that the author and journal are properly cited and no fee is charged for access.

Under your Keel – The Real Map of Ireland

I was terrible at geography at school, almost but not quite as bad as at bookkeeping. At bookkeeping I didn't just fail worse, I was so hopeless that they let me give it up lest I be the only girl in the school ever to fail completely. That was fine by me. I just didn't get it, the how or the why. Geography, it seemed, had to be persevered with. The trouble was that it made no sense. I just couldn't see things the way they were on maps. Worse than that, I didn't believe in it. I didn't really believe in Adam and Eve either, but at least they made sense. So we made it through the Inter Cert without disgrace, but without distinction. Then I was let give it up, and giving up was not done, so I must have been really dismal.

Yet, I have always been curiously interested in cartography. Particularly in the form of charts. And we live in a country where song and story has always held the key to our placenames, and the placenames themselves have held clues to our country.

'Siul a ghra cois tra anocht
Siul agus cuir uait na deora...'

so spoke Caitlin Maude in her poem "Aimhreidh" often translated as "Entanglement". Caitlin was taking on the voice of the drowned lover, calling to her from his home under the sea. This is one of the oldest tropes in Irish literature and folklore, along with stories of the Land Under the Sea, of islands such as Hy Brasil and Atlantis which appeared regularly with those who had eyes to see, but never for long enough to be reached by ship.

Full fathom five thy father lies
Of his bones are coral made

Those are pearls that were his eyes...

Ariel's song gives us some of Shakespeare's loveliest lines.

At the time it was written, Hy Brasil was anchored in maps, and had been from the fourteenth century until it was finally erased from the British Admiralty charts in the 1860's. Nor did it stay still in all that time – although generally behaving itself by staying somewhere off the West of Ireland, it was prone to wandering off and has been seen among the Azores, and at another time in another map, nudging close to Madeira, and who could blame it. Once, for reasons best known to itself, it was spotted and recorded, off the coast of Canada. Maybe it got lost. It was finally banished back into the imagination that spawned it by the sensible men of the Admiralty in around 1865, which only increased its sightings in story and song.

Nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange...

Sea change indeed. According to ordinary maps, Ireland has a total area of 32,000 square miles or 84 and a half thousand kilometers, which sounds better. But according to the real map of Ireland, produced by the Marine Institute, Ireland has an area of about ten times that, or 880,000 square kilometers. This includes the Porcupine Bank and the Goban Spur, all now mapped and sitting there, ready to

be exploited for whatever riches they may contain.

Our fishing fleets have all but disappeared, legislated out of existence, along with a way of life that formed an essential part of the poetry and legends of the sea where wonder flourished. But poems and legends know by instinct what may only become known 'rationally' long after.

"The world is full of magic things, patiently waiting for our senses to grow sharper" as Yeats put it, and Hy Brasil, the blessed island with pillars of gold, is still wandering out there somewhere.

There too is Caitlin's drowned lover, calling his siren song to those on the shore:

...Labharaim leat anocht o iochtar mara...
Labharaim leat choiche o iochtar mara...

Our own patch of Iochtar Mara has clear dimensions. We know where our sovereign share of it begins and ends. Perhaps it is time we told the children, putting the real map, with its cliffs and mountains, beside the overland one, allowing every child his double vision, where

Across ridges, the crest of
A wood, your currach sails:
A forest, heavy with mast
Sleeps under your keel

Mary O'Malley was born on the West coast of Ireland, where she now lives. She is the author of six poetry collections – *A Consideration of Silk* (Salmon, 1990); *Where the Rocks Float* (Salmon, 1993); *The Knife in the Wave* (Salmon, 1997); *Asylum Road* (Salmon, 2001); *A Perfect V* (Carcenet, 2006), *Valparaiso* (Carcenet, 2012) – and the latest, *Playing the Octopus*, shall be published in July 2016. Her poems have been translated into several languages and received numerous literary awards. She was involved in setting up the Women's Studies Centre in University College Galway and has written extensively on the need to include the voices of women writers in the Irish literary canon.