



ACHILL ORAL HISTORIES

Interviewee: John F Deane, Poet And Founder of Poetry Ireland

Interviewer: Angela Maye-Banbury

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On Keem Beech

Angela: So you were seeing philosophical insights and theological insights in the poetry of Hopkins. Was the Achill sense of place always there with you spiritually or psychologically? Or what that another epiphany of sorts that happened?

John: No, that just has been permanently there ever since I remember. I just love the physical landscape of Achill Island. During the holidays when I'd come home from boarding school, in those years, you were free. There was no worries about being assaulted or being mugged or anything being stolen from you. So we had bikes. And basically we'd be told after breakfast "Go on. Wander off. Be back for rosary in the

evening.” And that is literally what we used to do - myself and my brother and another good friend. We’d cycle off. We’d climb cliffs. We’d go swimming. We’d go up and down the mountains.

Angela: So where did you go? So you were in Bunnacurry. What were your favourite places to go to?

John: The haunts would have been... Keem Bay obviously was the place. We always swam there. It’s still a family tradition that somebody swims in Keem Bay every year.

Angela: It’s just breathtakingly beautiful. I mean, what can you say, you know?

John: Yes, we used to cycle all the way.

Angela: You would have the words to describe it, I know. I don’t. It’s just a stunning place

John: It is absolutely beautiful. It’s small and in those years it was secretive. It was not very easily accessible. Nowadays, you can’t park there.

Angela: Did you collect amethysts there? I read about your quest for amethysts.

John: We used to look for amethysts. Probably just in the wrong place. We never found any - no. We weren’t that fussed about the amethysts - jumping around, swimming, fishing.

Angela: Feeling perfectly safe.

John: Utterly safe. Never any fears. Except once when I actually climbed a mountain called Mweelin.

John: There was no road up to that in those years. So we climbed. And then we come to the top of that and you either go back down to the Bunnacurry side.

Perilous Episode On The Cathedral Cliffs In Mid Teens

John: So I remember being on my own once because Declan was away, I suppose. His novitiate and my friend, was somewhere else. And I remember climbing them and descending and trying to come down the cliffs And of course, looking back on it now, it was frightfully dangerous.

Angela: Very dangerous. You had no equipment or anything.

John: Not at all.

Angela: You wouldn't have had in those days. Just the shoes you were in. Your shirt and away you went.

John: I got stuck half way down. I had a moment of intense panic. I realised I couldn't get back up. And I couldn't see any way to reach. I was at least 240 maybe 300 feet up.

Angela: Gosh. Goodness me.

John: I was seeing a figure away over the beach, miles away. I was trying to signal. But no go. Eventually, I took this chance and I jumped.

Angela: You jumped.

John: I jumped on to a tussock which was quite a distance from me. And made it. But looking back, I quite often now I realise just, if that hadn't worked out, I was gone.

Angela: That was a leap of faith and a half to coin a phrase.

John: It was a leap of foolishness!

Angela: So how old were you have been then?

John: I would have been 15 or 16 at that stage.

Angela: Right. OK. I can feel...my heart's skipping a few beats you just telling that story. So I don't know what it was like when you were on that ledge. But thank goodness you were safe and well.

John: (laughs), It was panic. I can remember the panic so well. And the dread and the fear.

Angela: Did you tell anyone about that?

John: I never told anybody. They would not have let me out ever again.

Angela: Well, that's the thing. It might have curtailed your freedom a bit more because of the worry.

Yeah, my goodness. So when you think of Achill now.

John: We haven't been back for over a year. I go back any time I get an opportunity. We have no relations or anything there.

Angela: I was going to ask whether you still had any family there.

John: No. No family. My mother and father left. My mother because she was suffering from bronchitis and that was developing a little. We knew it was the mists that came in from the sea in Achill which were not good for her. So she moved - they moved - to Dublin - whilst I was actually still in the monastery, the seminary. So I came back to a very different world. So Achill for me - I used to go back on my holidays when I was teaching.

Teaching English At Secondary School, Dublin

Angela: You taught..this was when...you didn't teach in Achill.

John: I finished my degree in university. I left the Holy Ghost Fathers and I found a teaching job near where I lived in Dublin in a secondary school. So I taught French and Spanish and some English.

Angela: Wow. So you were a very accomplished linguist.

John: Not really. But I'd stay a couple of pages ahead of the class so I could run it like that I didn't like teaching English because I found it destructive of imagination the way it was done in those years. But I used to present English. I used to read poems at them and mimic them. I got them to love poetry but I know in that area, I would not have got them through exams because that wouldn't do, a sheer love of poetry. I had a lot of them writing poems, would be destroyed by the education system and the exam system at the time.

First Published Poem And Working With The Chieftans

Angela: That's so true. So very true. There are so very few opportunities for people to be very creative and to follow their true muse and just kind of open up. So how did that happen for you then, John? So you were teaching for a while. And then when did you first begin to publish?

John: I began to publish three or four years after that. Because of my organ work, I was good at the organ, I was invited by the parish priest where the school was situated and where we lived actually in Whitehall in Dublin would I come and take the choir which was a four voice choir - male and female - and would I play the organ in the church. So I did that. We had got together a very fine choir. So the priest - the parish priest at the time - said we were being offered the opportunity to do the mass - the Eurovision Mass - which happens once a year. I think it still happens. And would I get the choir ready for that. And he said "I have a musical group covering it as well." And I said "Who are they?" "And he said The Chieftans." So with The Chieftans and my choir, we actually performed created a mass, a very beautiful mass, And I put the words and Paddy Malony put them to music.

Angela: How wonderful.

John: So the offertory was the first poem I actually wrote that I actually wrote that he set it to music. And we sang it at Eurovision and it got published in a very fine magazine. My first poem to get published.

Angela: That's really fantastic.

John: I got five shillings for it.

Angela: You must have felt very good to have your work in the public domain.

How The 'F' Became Part of John F Deane's Name

John: I was delighted. One funny little story. I was called Jackie growing up because my grandfather was John. So I don't know where the Jackie part came from. So I had signed the poem when I sent it to the editor Jackie Dean. So he wrote back saying "I love the poem very much and I'd love to publish it. But I don't know whether your Mr, Mrs or Ms." So I said "Right, here's a problem!"

Angela: So it was one of these unfortunate names where they couldn't quite fathom whether you were male or female!

John: Yes. My name is John Francis. So I said John Dean doesn't sound good. It's too clickety click. So I put in the 'F'. John F Kennedy was big at the time. So I said will there be another John F? So I use that as my name all the time.

Angela: Well, it really works, It has a certain lyricism to it, you know. It's really lovely.

John: I think it does.

Angela: That's great, John.

John: So that's all roundabout way of covering to explain how I got to write.

On Achill As 'Ireland In Miniature'; Enduring Influence OF Achill

Angela: What is it about Achill that is very special for people like yourself, for people with this really creative drive, you know, writers, poets, artists?

John: Well, it's spectacular. I also think that in miniature, if you think about it, it's got all of Ireland in miniature. So you've got an Atlantic coastline which is wild and huge and very powerful with America visible in the distance. And then you've got the other side between Achill and Ballycroy, the mainland, which I would call a feline sea, it's a quiet as a cat, it purrs, whereas the other one is a lion on the other side. And then it's got these sea cliffs over the other side of the island back over the mountain which are extremely high.

Angela: Croaghaun is that where you're thinking of? And Sliabh Mór...

John: Sheer drop the other side of Croaghaun. You've got Sliabh Mór which is climbable. And then you've got a few areas of flat land and bog land. And the bog land, I always found fascinating. You could spend a day out on the bog just down at my hands and knees just looking what's amongst the heathers, the little pools, the bird life...

Angela: Your poem about the Swallow is beautiful. So beautiful.

John: Thank you. I actually try occasionally to keep Achill out of the poetry and I can't. If the subject at all touches anywhere deep in me, the images, the grounding that I give it is Achill. It's a landscape that I feel very much part of physically, spiritually, mentally and every possible way. And it's kind of hard to shift.

Ends