

SPECIAL FEATURE: THE TEACHER – INSPIRED AND INSPIRING

The theme of the eleventh annual international conference of the Irish Association of Teachers in Special Education (IATSE), *The Teacher – Inspired or Tired?*, motivated some contributors to relate stories of teachers who have inspired the lives of others and of students who remain grateful for the inspiration of a particular teacher. The two authors featured here present their reflections on the lives of two well known and greatly admired Irish people, Bryan MacMahon and Christy Brown. Providing brief glimpses into the lives of these men, both authors clearly portray the wonderful and heartening effects of inspired teaching.

Bryan MacMahon – Friend, Master and Storyman

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I have been greatly privileged that in my journey through life I have had as my guide “the master” – my teacher, my friend Bryan MacMahon. He provided me with a unique lifelong education while a pupil in his class, a visiting student teacher and a teacher colleague. As a friend and writer his words inspired and fired me with enthusiasm.

Every visit to my hometown of Listowel gave us an opportunity to meet and talk. And of course we talked about education and special education. He loved children. He valued and encouraged our individuality. He celebrated our differences. All were important to him, irrespective of ability or circumstances. And more than anything else he nurtured the creative imagination that is unique to the human condition. His insights and guidance were inspirational to me as a teacher in special education. Tá sé molta dá mbeinn-se im’ thost.

The following is a summary of a tribute I paid to Bryan at a celebratory concert in his honour six months after his death.

DUINE AN-SPEASIATA

Bryan was a man with rare dignity, superb intellect, of international fame, and yet an ordinary man that spent his lifetime among the people he loved celebrating the richness of life that he encountered in his native North Kerry. He was an extraordinary man, equally at home in the world of university academia as he was when walking the beloved square of his native Listowel. He was so special, recognised and admired for his love of learning, language, literature and people.

Master and Storyman - master of the imagination and of storied Listowel. When one asked Bryan, "Conas tá'n tú?" he invariably replied "Mairim, mairim fós," "I live, I live yet." And Bryan, the moulder of minds, sculptor of words and carpenter of song, lives on through his writings and his inspirational example as teacher and friend. He was, of course, to all who knew him personally an "anam-chara," a soul-friend in the real sense of that word. For me Bryan is a person first with the gifts of ink, of eloquence, of teaching and friendship who through those gifts shared the experiences of life — hopes, dreams, fears — and who enjoyed people, and who cared for and respected their most precious possessions — their thoughts.

When I think of Bryan, I think of celebration, of uniqueness, difference, respect, loyalty, eloquence, elegance and extraordinary kindness, laced with a keen sense of Kerry humour.

HUMOUR

On the 29th September 1983 it was my pleasure and privilege to invite Bryan to Dublin to address an international conference of the Reading Association of Ireland. His address, entitled "Silence, Intimacy and the Lamp," was an inspirational treatise on life, on teaching, on books, aspects of which were developed in much greater detail in his auto-biographical masterpieces *The Master* and *The Storyman*. On that occasion he needed to capture the attention of his very large audience quickly and he did so saying he would not speak at length as a statement he read recently was a salutary reminder not to talk at length on any important subject. The statement was:

There are 56 words in The Lord's Prayer.

There are 297 words in the Ten Commandments - The Decalogue.

There are 300 words in the United States Declaration of Independence, and there are 26,911 words in a recent EEC directive on the presentation and sale of duck-eggs (MacMahon, 1983).

BOOKS

Bryan's life blood was books. In the lecture "Silence, Intimacy and the Lamp," referred to earlier, Bryan stated, "To the book lover — one who is in love with books — the smell of fresh print can be as exciting as the smell of brandy to an alcoholic. Seated there without an audience he is utterly himself as is a woman dreaming herself back and forth from her image in a mirror to her reality in the flesh. The book can take many forms."

In *The Storyman* (1994) he writes of the thousand roles of a book:

It can be comforter; informer in the more ameliorative meaning of the word, healer; enthuser; sedative, elucidator, disturber of the peace, priest, Satan, messiah, physician of the mind and rabble-rouser. It can also be scapegoat, purgative of the imagination, acrobat, pickpocket of convictions, warmonger, peacemaker; imagemaker; and therapeutic rehearser of personal agonies. It can be fingerpost to areas of special beauty as well as a warning sign against dangerous cliffs ahead...books are about every possible activity of the spirit, mind and body. A taste for reading is the finest fruit of education...Our whole lives move on words. So master words!

About books, he wrote:

*There's a hunger of the spirit
For what lies beyond,
And a hunger of the body
To which mankind must respond.
But beneath the gentle lamplight
With word and image twined
A book shall serve to banish
The hunger of the mind.*

PHILOSOPHY

When Bryan was a young boy a simple remark by a fisherman on the west coast of Kerry opened up for him some of the great wonders of the world in one sentence: "i mBaile an Dúinín a bhí sé ag an am, i gCorcha Dhuibhne, lámh le Dún Chaoin a bhí sé ag an am. Buachaill óg ins na déaga, ag iascach lá, nuair a duirt an bádóir leis" : "Isn't it extraordinary that the Almighty God never created any two mackerel with the same pattern on their skins." This, Bryan maintained, is the

essence of uniqueness and individuality... *that He lavished care on the pattern of each individual fish in the sea, each individual grain of sand, each individual blade of grass, each individual nose-print of a hound, each individual finger-print of a human being. So no two people are created alike* (MacMahon, 1983). Bryan said that this simple statement was fundamental to his attitude to life, that it is a privilege to meet and engage with a person who has never been created before and will never be created again.

It is in this context, Bryan maintained, that the good teacher, the good parent, the good friend, the good neighbour engages with all people especially those in the impressionable years. For many of us in Listowel, the engagement with Bryan in the classroom - at eight years of age - has left an indelible legacy. That simple statement by the fisherman, according to Bryan, is what the writer celebrates and the teacher cultivates. This sense of uniqueness - the secret of life - cannot be taught according to Bryan - but it can be conveyed, and convey it Bryan did through his relationship with all he encountered - especially his pupils in the classroom.

DIVERSITY

When one considers Bryan's appreciation of the uniqueness of each and every individual, then one can see why respect for and celebration of difference were characteristic of many of his observations and writings. In *The Master* (1992) he describes his class as follows:

So there they were before me — merchants' sons with Little Duke shoes, poachers and sons of poachers, weavers of fiction, the cunning, the intelligent, and the dull. Sometimes the dull were cunning in certain respects and the intelligent were dull in others. The dutiful, the diligent, the ambitious, the loveable epileptic and the equally loveable Down's Syndrome Child - all were there; the nervous and the fearless, the runaways, the nail-biters, the accident-prone, the superficially perfect, and the crossgrained. The "fixers," the precocious, the kickers, the chewers of putty and mortar, the thumb-suckers, the oats addict (I had been one myself), the sensitive, the nose-bleeders, and the mitchers; the finger fiddlers, the gifted, the unpredictable, the ungovernable, the twins indistinguishable one from the other and who swapped names to avoid the consequence of mischief; the prey seekers, the informers, the impenetrable, the esoteric, the horse lovers, the deaf.

TRAVELLING PEOPLE

Bryan delighted in celebrating the fusion of opposites and the marriage of contradictions. Short stories, according to Bryan, were the progeny of the marriage of male and female ideas. Bryan was also an acute observer of the human condition and constantly strove to identify the commonality in diversity. This is particularly evident in his documentary, definitive and celebratory writings on the travelling people.

In 1972 while in the USA at the University of Delaware, I happened to come across an issue of The American magazine *Natural History* in which there was an article by Bryan (1971), "A Portrait of Tinkers," in which he discusses the origins and indigenous nature of what we now call "the travelling people" and their secret language "Shelta." He outlines both the harsh realities and the natural freedom of their existence. Bryan concludes the article as follows:

As I view him the Tinker on the Irish roads (I have avoided the word 'itinerant' as much as possible, as I reckon it one of false elegance) is one of the outer ramparts of individual liberty. He continues to vouch for the wit, the resourcefulness, and the versatility of man, since every dawn brings him the problem of accumulating enough food to be alive at sunset. And, just as the writer of fiction at times tests the vaguely defined area on the edges of consciousness and sanity, so also in the life of the tinker there is that which tests the edge of physical living. To some extent he exemplifies what man can endure under conditions of extreme hostility.

Mankind has as many layers as an onion, and when all these layers are peeled off, the core is tinker of gypsy; the traveller is in me, in you, in every man. Yet, compared with the tinker we are lapdogs by the parlour fireside quivering in commingled fear and ecstasy when, through the sound of the gusting storm outside, we hear the baying of wild dogs running free by the light of the moon.

INSPIRATION

Let me at this stage recall what are for me at this time among the most poignant words that Bryan wrote. They are poignant now because Bryan's grief at the time for a friend resonates now with our sense of loss at the passing of Bryan. The words are taken from an appreciation by Brian of a much-loved friend from Listowel, the late Tim Cotter.

One by one they leave us, those who it almost seems that if God, after he had made them and smiled on seeing they were unique, had then decided to break the mould that gave them shape...

Perhaps it is that although he was unlike anybody he was like everybody, and that there was so much of us in him and so much of him in us, that we are unable to treat of him objectively. He was all that was vital in our beings being reduced to a healthy essence. He was one with our river flowing, our painted shops and our horse racing. He was the philomath lingering after the age of philomaths has gone. He was the partisan par excellence, the footballer fielding and the natural equal of any emergency. He was the play, the mime, the recitation, the song, the contradiction that called up echoes from chasms deep in us; his was the delight of words placed in their adorable order and his was the unfettered and unfetterable heart...

Those who knew him require no touchstone to recall him: those who did not know him can never have him explained to them.

I will conclude with a scene from *Children of the Rainbow* (1952). It is that in which the spiritual father of the community, who has taken it on himself to pass down the traditional heritage to the youngsters, sees the first aeroplane passing over the bog where the boys and girls are labouring on the winter's fuel. That was the day, too, they found the lune, the collar of gold, in a cutting of the bog, and the old man, taken with the spiritual heritage of the past and all that they are in the process of losing opens up at them:

For the last time I'll endeavour to instruct the youth an'then I'll raise my voice no more...I consider it the duty of at least one old man in every generation to pass on the ferocity he has inherited. Often an' often I have told ye of the kind of place ye were born into. I have striven to raise in ye a pride for the noble people before ye who fell in love with human nature an' through human nature fell in love with God...I have striven to convey before now that the young life as I lived it was so thronged with small beauties that you wouldn't think twas sons and daughters of the flesh we were, but children of the rainbow dwellin' always in the mornin' of the world...an' if only the All-Seein' God had seen fit to send us a man with the gift of ink, then maybe the story of our small wonders would go shoutin' through the borders of the nations.

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