from A Milesian Tel in Southern California

Karen Marguerite Moloney

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from A Milesian Tel
in Southern California

for John Moloney
(6 January 1904—20 November 1983)

Karen Marguerite Moloney

And he shall plant in the hearts of the children the promises made to the fathers, and the hearts of the children shall turn to their fathers.
(D&C 2:2)

Karen Marguerite Moloney is a doctoral candidate in English at UCLA.

Milesian in its broadest sense means Irish. More particularly, a Milesian is a descendant of Milesius, legendary father of the Irish race.

Both Newtwonsandes (referred to on maps as Moyvane, the town's original Irish name) and Ballybunion are towns, Newtownsandes about fifteen miles inland from Ballybunion, on the mouth of the Shannon. Knockanure is a village. Coilagurteen and Knockenagh are townlands, Ireland's smallest division of land. In the 1800s both Knockanure and Coilagurteen were part of the parish of Newtwonsandes. Parish records for Knockenagh are kept in Ballybunion. The name Timothy is anglicized from Tadhg, Gaelic for 'poet.'
PROLOGUE

I

Whittier, California

I’d practice all day long, then sing
"When Irish Eyes Are Smiling"—
Still off-key—
When my daddy came home from work.

But my name—
Now that
Was an altogether different matter:

"Moloneybaloney, moloneybaloney!"

"No. Phonybaloneymoloney."
(That’s what my father said to say.)
"Sticks and stones can break my bones . . ."

"Bonymoloneymacaroni, baloney!"

Then Uncle Ed mailed around a family tree:
"O’Maoldhomhnaigh—
Descendant of a Church devotee."
And I saw my father had a father,
And so did he, four fathers back—
To Timothy.

Did he look like me?

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X

HERITAGE

(as told beside a turf fire by an heir)

Coilagurteen, County Kerry, Ireland

Timothy Molony built roads,
Farmed these green fenced fields
Across the bogs from Knockanure,
Kept a journal on a payroll slip,
Married Kate, the Enright girl,
Sired Edmond at rest with them in Gale,
Emigrants, and John—

Who married Ellen of the Doody farm next door,
Dispersed eleven children to the wind,
And passed the farm to Timothy called Thady—

Who wed Johanna Loughnane,
Sired Michael, buried as a baby,
Five daughters, and a son named John—

This smiling, aging Kerryman,
Whose stretched ancestral roots,
As yet unsnapped,
Still web the Shannon back to County Clare,
Foreclosed there, somehow, long ago, foretelling
These embers of an ancient clan gone dim,
Yet fanned beside this turf fire by an heir.
"So you want to see the old graveyard. The Moloneys are out in Gale, I’m sure . . .
Though you might find some Dinneens. But understand

The names are gone now, mostly, or hard to read. It’s the view from there is grand—All the valley peaks at Knockanure."
XIII

THE HILL IS ALIVE

For Mary, third cousin once removed

Graveyard, St. Brendan’s Abbey, Knockanure

This relic nave, roof caved to Cromwell’s cannon balls,
Stood sentinel through Civil War, emboldened hope
When victories blazed lanterns on its walls.
The hill rolls slowly, singing it to sleep.

Amused among the gusts of grass and stones,
You played here as a child. You loved to peep
Around the doors of tombs, primed for skeletons—
But counted on the dark in which they sleep.

The hill is alive twilight is afoot

You come here often now to feel the valley spread,
To soften in the soft rain and listen to the scoop
Of Kerry’s wind, to dream among the dead.
You dipped us gently on our fathers’ sleep.

We spread like rivulets, meandering down,
Then wound our way back, poling the deep
Grass around islands of lichen-laced stone.
The hill rolled slowly, singing in its sleep.

The hill is alive twilight is afoot
Afloat on the waves of centuries

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John found it first, all teeth intact, white, occult
Survivors nestled in a refuse heap
Within the abbey walls, the vestige of a vault
Collapsed upon its coffins in their sleep.

You raised the bone and called me to your side:
‘Where are your songs, old mandible, old chap?
Not one to mock your grinning, ancient bride?
Ancestral kiss, conceive us as you sleep.’

_The hill is alive twilight is afoot_
_ Afloat on the waves of centuries_
_Break on these bones shall live._

I watched you turn it slowly in your hand
And scan it with a thoughtful fingertip.
You mused as you returned it to the mound,
‘This might once have robbed me of my sleep.’

Below, the cows fanned out down through the town,
Herded from their fields, their udders ripe,
Their low mooing mixing with the wind.
The hill rolled softly, singing in its sleep.
XIV

"FOR MANY AWAIT . . ."

(A)

Ballybunion, County Kerry

Jotted on a time card:
1851 October 7th My son Patsy left home

"Father,
I'm hoping you can help me. My great-great-great
Grandparents are buried down the road in Gale,
A long walk away from where they lived—
In Coilagurteen—on the road to Newtownsandes.

You see, I'm thinking, maybe, Kate
Was raised near here, so married here and not
In Newtownsandes, the parish of their farm.
Do your books go back that far?

Kate was an Enright, and my cousins say
There are lots of Enrights still, just down in Doon.
In fact I met an Enright—married to a Brown—
Just yesterday. Catherine. Her family calls her Kate.

She's a cousin, too. Kate's grave in Gale
Is in the Enright plot these Enrights claim.
Could I see your books, Father?
I can guess the date—and I know the name."

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CHORUS

Oh, by the way, are you a Catholic? 
Are you Catholic, by the way? 
You bring the faith with you, I suppose 
Latter-day Saints? Saints today?

Map courtesy of John Bartholomew and Son, Edinburgh
“... YOUR HELPING HAND.”

(B)

The Presbytery, Ballybunion

Chuckling, "Alex Haley and his roots,
He left me with the oldest register,
My toes already numb inside my boots.

I held the wooden binding of the book
And opened, in another routine check,
To where I thought the marriage entries were.

The ink was crusted, thin and brown with age.
I ran my finger down the brittle page
And stopped half-way. "Baptized—this 24th day

Of January, 1832,
By Father Keane in Ballydonoghue,
In Holy Catholic Rite, Patrick, son

Of Timothy Molony and Catherine Enright
From Knockenagh, near Gale." That night,
Beside his fire, I told a tale to John.

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XV

EMIGRANTS

(as told beside a turf fire by an heir)

Coilagurteen

Timothy Molony built roads,
Farmed the green fenced fields
Of Knockenagh, near Gale,

Began a journal on a payroll slip,
Married Kate, the Enright girl,
And sometime after 1836,

Moved Kate and three small children here from Gale,
Uprooted likely at a landlord’s whim,
Sired three more sons before the famine came

(No entry of its horror countrywide),
Sired two more sons, replenished, multiplied,
Though only two would stay on Irish soil:

John—wed to Ellen Doody, given the farm
Bequeathed in turn to two succeeding heirs,
Our heritage preserved, our turf fire warm;

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And Johanna—bride to Geoffrey O'Donoghue
(Not counting Edmond, child of famine years,
Unmarried, died in 1872).

The famine eased, the scattering began:
James—second of the five to emigrate,
Sent £10 home in 1861;

William—professed a priest in 1868,
Carried the faith astride a donkey's back,
With all the Irish missionary's pluck,

To mining camps in California's hills.
Maurice travelled very different trails:
"Illinois attorney-general, 1895;"

Kerry's pride in his achievements still alive.
(One visit home in style made sure of that:
A tomb in Gale for Timothy and Kate—

"Erected by Maurice" chiselled on the base.
Kate Enright Brown remembered well the fuss.)
Margaret—married Patrick Looney, last to leave,

Last departure over which to grieve.
Patrick, their firstborn, was the first to go:
One immigrant I must look inside to know.
PASSAGES

The cliffs at Ballybunion front a wild Atlantic,
The same cold sea
That Patrick crossed in 1851
For Indiana,
“Paddy” scarcely long enough to wed,
Plant a seed, and send brown eyes to me;

Killed by a train before the son was born
Who sired a son in turn
Who sired a son
Who sired me
One hundred years after Patrick crossed the sea—

A pink-haired daughter born the twelfth of May,
A cache of Celtic seed in Friesian mulch—
Timothy’s green fields in L.A.
And Catherine’s variation on a theme
(Kate become Karen in keeping with the times);

The dust of dreams blown ever farther west
In auburn afterglow to meet the east,
The view from Knockanure to County Clare,
Reflections of the eighth of Banquo’s sons—
A vision without end (without beginning):
Star of Abraham, heir of Ephraim, temple of Elijah
Pulsing with the blood of Irish bards—
A turning and returning—
Shards freckling on a mild Pacific coast
In the image of my fathers (bone of their bones):

Balm upon the gall of penal law
And manna to their famine,
Vindication of their vigil
And their efforts canonized in latter days
In a savior on Mount Zion:

A mystic toned in thick commercial smog,
Turf portioned from a bog,
Carried smoldering here,
But kindled long ago in County Clare—
A Milesian tel in Southern California:

Warm Whittier womb,
Cradle, loom,
Daughter in whom,
Anointed and transfigured,
The eyes and faith of Timothy survive—
Transmitted and transplanted and alive.

—Karen Marguerite Moloney