

Memories of Tom Hannon: A Tribute



When Tom Hannon passed away on April 15, 2011, people far from Slieve Aughty mourned the loss of an irreplaceable source for local history and family lore. More than that, they grieved the loss of a friend. Tom had, over the course of a long life, enthusiastically shared his knowledge of the region around Gort with hundreds of locals and visitors. In doing so, he shared his own love of the land and its people, cementing friendships that lasted over years and miles. For those who never knew Tom, and even more for those who did, I offer these memories of an inimitable and unforgettable man.

“Where are you staying, Patricia?” Tom asked as he sat down at a table in the Jack B. Yeats bar. I had arrived an hour or so before, bringing with me an American friend, Mary Jo Neitz. We’d checked into our B&B just long enough to leave our luggage before heading down to the Lady Gregory to meet Tom.

“In Kiltartan, at Corker House,” I said.

“Ah, Patricia, Corker. I know it well. Now right there, you’ll find St. Colman’s Well, where his mother Ríonach gave birth to him under an ash tree.” Tom stretched his long frame out a bit and settled into the story. Mary Jo leaned forward, fascinated. She was a sociologist of religion, on her first trip to Ireland, and she wanted to hear anything having to do with saints, holy wells, and miraculous births.

“You see, Mary Jo, Colman was heir to Connaught – that’s the western province where we are – and the rivals to the throne didn’t want to see Ríonach safely deliver. So, Patricia, they pursued her across the land, and she ran swift enough, even though she was huge with child. Like Macha, the goddess who was forced to run a race while pregnant with twins – now that was in Ulster, of course, not around here – Ríonach ran and ran, almost outrunning her hunters.”

I glanced over at Mary Jo. She was following the story, sure enough, despite not having a clue who St. Colman was.

I’d never heard of Colman, myself, before visiting Gort the first time, over 30 years ago, when I got to hear the story of Colman and Kilmacdugh

from Tom himself. But let that go for a moment, and let us return to the story of Ríonach.

“She was fast, indeed she was, Patricia, but near Corker she lost the race. The rivals caught her and put a noose around her neck. They tied the rope to a stone, and they threw her in the river, Mary Jo—you can see the part of the Kiltartan River where she landed. It was the deepest part of the river, but somehow, Patricia, the woman survived.”

In the decades I had known Tom, I’d heard a lot of stories. I’d read most of what’s been published about the Gort area, too, but I had never run into this particular story. I interrupted Tom for a minute. “Tom,” I asked, “do you know a story for every place around here?”

“Patricia,” he said seriously, “I think I could probably recall where the biggest cow patty was ever passed in Gort.” He grinned, his somewhat lopsided smile, and plunged right back into the story—and into the river where we had left Ríonach, almost drowning.

“I don’t know how she survived, what with the stone around her neck and all, but she did. She crawled out of the river right at Corker, right where you’re staying, Mary Jo, and dragged herself across the land to the ash tree that still stands there. And there, Patricia, she gave birth to the saint.”

But this was not enough miracles for a saintly birth. No, Tom told us more: how Ríonach had called out for someone to baptize the child and how two passing monks had heard her. But when they got to her side, they were too far from the river to get water for the ritual. One monk—“the blind one, Patricia,” Tom emphasized—reached to the ground and pulled out some

rushes. Immediately, a holy well gushed forth. Not only did it provide water for the baby saint's baptism, but it also instantly cured the monk's blindness.

"And, Mary Jo, because the well cured the monk, its water is still used for eye cures today," he assured us.

It went like that all night. I would mention a site, and Tom would relate the story, to my friend's delight and amazement. When we left after several hours of storytelling, Mary Jo said, "I was expecting a lot, but really, Tom is like no one I've ever met."

There were probably lots of people like Tom in the past, but these days, who makes time to study a place like Gort? You have to stay put to acquire such knowledge, and ours is a mobile world. And you have to be genuinely curious about "where the biggest cow patty was passed," to set aside prejudices about significance as determined by outsiders and to absorb the lore of a place for its own sake, and ours is a world of celebrity and fortune, not of cow patties and saints.

Over more than 30 years of friendship, I was lucky to share many explorations and stories with Tom. He took me on a winter solstice drive to Lough Graney to tell me the story of Gillagriene, the woman born of a sunbeam who drowned herself when she learned of her strange parentage. He told me the tale of the black hag Mal as we leaned out one winter day looking at the Cliffs of Moher from which she fell while chasing a handsome young man. And of course he told me the story of Kilmacdugh and its founding by St. Colman, its heyday as a center of learning, and its eventual decline into the scenic ruin it is now.

Once, sitting in The Pier Head looking out at Dúnguairé Castle, I asked Tom to tell me its history. It took well over an hour, and from that memorable recitation I learned how the great but demanding bard, Seanchán Toirpéist, was tricked by King Guaire into leaving the castle with his hundred retainers. Guaire, tired of feeding the herds of budding poets, had mildly inquired as to whether Seanchán could recite the full text of the Táin bó Cuailnge, which the king knew had been lost. Shamed, Seanchán departed, taking those hungry followers with him. But Seanchán was a powerful enough magician – poets were, in those days – to call up the spirit of Fergus, lover of Queen Medb, star of the whole epic. Fergus obliged him by reciting the poem in its entirety and Seanchán, being a skilled bard, memorized it even as he spoke.

Seanchán then returned to Dúnguairé Castle to satisfy the king's demand. But as he stood before Guaire, speaking the lost verses of the Táin, Seanchán saw the ghost of Fergus appear outside the window. He finished the recitation but fell down dead of fright. Thankfully, his students were sufficiently well trained that they memorized the poem as their master was reciting it. And thus was the Táin preserved to this day.

Many stories that Tom told me, over the years, I later found in published sources, although whether he originally learned them from books or heard them from another raconteur, I do not know. But some stories were never written down. He never did tell me where the biggest cow patty was passed in the Gort area, and now we may never know. Thankfully, folklorist and broadcaster Maurice O'Keefe of Tralee recorded Tom as they walked the grounds of Kilmacdugh (<http://www.irishlifeandlore.com/>). I was having tea with the endlessly friendly Anna Hannon when the two returned from their recording session, giggling like girls in excitement. The two CD's

made that day were, Maurice told me later, “the best I ever recorded.” I can imagine. Kilmacdugh, where Tom’s mortal remains now lie, was one of his favorite spots on earth. I like to think of his spirit still walking there, telling the old tales about St. Colman and King Guaire and the flying meal on Easter and...and...and...

What Tom taught me, in our decades of friendship, is how fascinating any place – and by extension, any subject – can be, if it is studied passionately. I doubt that I will ever know a place with the intimacy with which Tom knew Gort, but I hope that I will never forget the delight that came over his face every time he told a story about the places he loved. May that spirit remain alive among us.



Tom and Anna

Poet, non-fiction writer, and impassioned teacher, Patricia Monaghan has published a study of environmental messages in Irish folklore and is currently studying the folklore of spring vegetation as well as tracing the mysterious figure after whom the Slieve Aughty hills in Co.Clare are named.

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