

Eros in Erin

Ireland's ten greatest love poems

by Jack Holland

Ireland has produced one of the world's richest poetic traditions, and its love poetry has always been a vital part of it. Its distinct character has been shaped by many influences.

For almost a thousand years, the Celts of Ireland preserved their culture as the only people in Western Europe to remain outside the Roman Empire. It was not until the arrival of Christianity in the 5th century A.D. that the old Celtic traditions were challenged. But some survived for centuries, among them, the status and esteem bestowed upon the poet. In an oral culture, poetry was the vehicle for the preservation of the memory of the tribe. The tales of their warriors, queens, gods, goddesses, their heroes and villains, were held fast for a thousand years in the aspic of Irish verse. That verse reveals a culture that is striking for exhibiting an attitude to women refreshingly free from misogyny.



Ireland's ten greatest love poems.

The Norman French brought their own tradition of courtly love poetry into Ireland in the 12th Century. The two blended. Later, the Elizabethan conquest and the spread of English added a further dimension to Ireland's poetic heritage as Irish poets produced some of the greatest love lyrics in the English language. All three traditions, the Celtic, the Norman and the English remain alive in modern Irish poetry.

I have tried to select those poems that I believe are among the best of Irish love poetry and that represent something of the complex traditions that make up the Irish poetic experience.

1. "Woe to Him Who Slanders Women," by **Gerald Fitzgerald**, 4th Earl of Desmond, translated from the Irish by Thomas Kinsella.

Gerald Fitzgerald, the 4th Earl of Desmond (1333-1398) was the first to adapt the courtly love tradition of the Norman French to the Irish. In the poetry of courtly love, which originated in the 12th century in southwestern France, the love of woman is exalted, a redemptive force for both the lover and his beloved. Gerald's poem is a rebuttal of the fierce clerical misogyny that was prevalent in the Middle Ages:

Woe to him who slanders women.
Scorning them is no right thing.
All the blame they've ever had
is undeserved, of that I'm sure . . .

He draws on the older, Celtic tradition, in which women were held in high esteem.

Sweet their speech and neat their voices,
They are a sort I dearly love . . .

Thomas Kinsella, who was born in 1928, is a fine poet in his own right. His "Collected Poems: 1956-2001" appeared in 2001.

2. "The Song of the Wandering Aengus," by **William Butler Yeats** (1865-1939). Yeats spent a great part of his poetic energy immortalizing his frustrated love affair with the beautiful Maud Gonne. With the exception of Robert Graves, no other modern poet wrote so much love poetry. But "The Song of the Wandering Aengus" belongs to the poet's earlier period and his fascination with Celtic myth. It retells the story of the divine youth, Aengus, identified as a sort of Celtic Eros, who dreams of a beautiful woman "with apple blossom in her hair/Who called me by my name and ran/And faded through the brightening air." When he awakes, he dedicates his life to finding her:

Though I am old with wandering
Through hollow lands and hilly lands,
I will find out where she has gone
And kiss her lips and take her hands.

3. "She Moved Through the Fair," by **Padraic Colum** (1881-1972). Colum, a playwright, poet and compiler of mythology, his poem echoes traditional Irish love laments:

She stepped away from me and she moved through the fair,
And fondly I watched her go here and go there,
Then she went her way homeward with one star awake,
As the swan in the evening moved over the lake.

Powerful emotion is expressed with a simplicity and purity of dictation that is rivaled in English only by "Greensleeves". And like "Greensleeves" it has become a popular song.

4. "Deirdre's Lament for the Sons of Usnach" translated from the Irish by **Sir Samuel Ferguson** (1810-1886).

Born in Belfast, Ferguson developed an interest in Irish mythology. His work helped prepare the way for the Celtic revival of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He retells the tragic story of Deirdre, the Celtic Helen, who escapes from the hands of king Conchobar with her young lover, Noise, and his two brothers. The king promises them safe return only to treacherously murder the brothers. She laments over the fallen men:

The lions of the hill are gone,
And I am left alone – alone –
Dig the grave both wide and deep,
For I am sick and fain would sleep!"

One of the most well-known figures from Irish mythology, her tale passed into popular folklore, and is among the most celebrated in Irish literature.

5. “Deirdre.” by **James Stephens** (1882-1950).

“Deirdre” testifies to the power of her legendary beauty. Stephens was a novelist, poet and gifted story-teller, weaving Irish mythological themes through his work.

Two thousand years! The grass is still the same,
The clouds are as lovely as they were that time
When Deirdre was alive.
But there has been again no woman born
Who was so beautiful, not one so beautiful
Of all the women born. . . .
Now she is a story that is told
Beside the fire!

6. “Slievenamon,” by **Charles Kickham** (1828-1882).

Kickham was a revolutionary first, and a novelist and poet second. He was a member of the Young Ireland movement and the Fenians. In “Slievenamon,” Kickham blends love of a beautiful young maiden with his intense patriotism. In an old Irish tradition, she symbolizes Ireland:

Twas the soul of truth and of melting ruth,
And the smile like a summer dawn,
That stole my heart away one soft summer day
In the Valley near Slievenamon.
In the festive hall, by the star-watched shore,
Ever my restless spirit cries:
?My love, oh my love, shall I ne'er see you more?
And my land, will you never uprise?

7. From “Chamber Music,” by **James Joyce** (1882-1941).

Joyce, the most famous novelist of the 20th century, began his career with a slim volume of love lyrics, among which “V” is perhaps the most well loved:

Lean out of the window
Goldenhair,
I hear you singing a merry air.
My book was closed;
I read no more,
Watching the fire dance
On the floor . . .

The simplicity, fragility and delicacy of the poetry are in contrast to his later work.

8. "Lovers on Aran" by **Seamus Heaney** (b.1939).

In a poem from his first collection, "Death of a Naturalist" (1966), the Ulster-born poet contemplates the waves breaking upon the rocks of this Donegal island. It becomes a metaphor for how in love each is defined by the other:

Did sea define the land or land the sea?
Each drew new meaning from the waves' collision.
Sea broke on land to full identity.

Heaney, who won the Nobel prize for literature in 1995, carries on in his work the Irish tradition of nature sharply observed, interwoven with human experience.

9. "Love Thee, Dearest? Love Thee?" by **Thomas Moore** (1779-1852).

Born on Aungier Street, Dublin, Moore became one of the most popular poets of the 19th century, famed for his sweet, melancholic lyrics such as:

Love thee, dearest? Love thee?
Yes, by yonder star I swear,
Which through tears above thee
Shines so sadly fair . . .

Many were put to music and remain popular to this day.

10. "On Raglan Road," by **Patrick Kavanagh** (1904-1967).

The Monaghan born poet was not known for his love poetry, but this lyric is justly celebrated as one of the finest he ever wrote:

On Raglan Road on an autumn day I met her first and knew
That her dark hair would weave a snare that I might one day rue;
I saw the danger, yet I walked along the enchanted way,
And I said, let grief be a fallen leaf at the dawning of the day.

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