

TEN YEARS OF BARD

The following article was written by Dr.Máirín Ní Nualláin to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Bard Summer School.

Ten years of Bard. What is it that we now celebrate?

Ten years of Summer Schools on Clare Island and, in the early years, weekend winter schools in the famous Pearse College in Rathfarnham, Dublin.

Ten years of exploring early Irish myths, of allowing these stories to percolate our minds and give new meaning to our lives.

Ten years of the history of Bard.

Clare Island is the place from which the great pirate queen Grace O'Malley (Gráinne Mhaol) reigned supreme and challenged the fleets of Queen Elizabeth I of England. Reaching back through Christian times it is a place of monastic dwellings, and further back into pagan times there are the holy wells, fairy mounds and other places of ancient and mystic significance.

It is on this island each July, at the Bard Summer School that we explore themes like - Exile and Return, Traditions and Transitions, Abundance and the Wasteland etc. Here we use the myths to bring us into contact with the significance of these themes in our lives.

Leaving the mainland and coming away to an island has been significant. Sometimes, (even in July) storms have been brewing, the seas have been high and the island itself hidden in the mists of the Atlantic.

In the early years the summer school took place in a marquee attached to the local hotel. With the high winds and rain, the noises made by the canvas of the marquee would resonate with the starkness of the material emerging from the myths. Now the school is held in the new Community Centre that has recently been built on the island. It is a fine space, allowing plenty of room for group work. In this large room, a powerful atmosphere emerges created by the amazing posters of Bard's artistic designer, Bill Felton. He has crafted artistic representations of all the major figures in Irish mythology. He studies the character and energy of these figures and then creates images to represent them.

It is in this atmosphere that we meet each year with the group of 25 - 40 people who attend. It is here that the chosen myth of the year is narrated on the first morning, followed shortly afterwards by the re-telling. During the re-telling, the story is told again with people chipping in bits that have been embellished by their imaginations. This is followed by a variety of activities that help to bring the myth to life for us today. We look together at the characters in the story, their relationships, the meaning of their actions, their passions etc.

Over the ten years we have looked at some of the major myths from the Mythological, the Ulster, the Fenian and the historical cycles of Irish mythology. At times we have also worked with early Christian themes. In our re-enactments we have at times used the island space and on one occasion, when studying Deirdre and the Sons of Uisneach we sailed to Cahir Island to illustrate the theme of Exile and Return. There, while we enacted

the sorrowful exile of Deirdre and Naoise, we encountered a place of sacred beauty full of pre-Christian and early Christian essences - holy wells, a mass stone, ancient hermetic dwelling places.

During the summer school, visiting lecturers help us to deepen our knowledge of the myths. Chief among these is Daithí O Hogain from the Folklore Department from the National University, Dublin. He has an amazing capacity to reveal the mysteries hidden in the language of the stories. He entralls the group with his deep knowledge.

John Moriarty, philosopher and author has also come to speak and stays each year to participate in the activity. He has a unique ability to bring us into the depths of archetypal meanings of the myths and sometimes a very interesting and fruitful tension emerges between that and the tendency of the group to personalise and judge the material by modern day standards.

People from all over the world have attended the Bard Summer School. This mixture has created a fertile field for exploring issues of exile, homeland, exclusion, inclusion, a search for values etc.

In the latter part of the week, retellings of the myth are created in ritual or dramatic form by the participants. These concentrate on chosen elements of the myth that has special significance for the participants. Over the years Karina Tynan, with her special artistic gifts, has collected a variety of props, costumes and accessories for these retellings.

Music, poetry and drama is a large part of the Bard experience on Clare Island. On the Tuesday evening we are entertained by the people of the island. It is a very great honour to have the Islanders young and old coming together to give us their best songs, dances and poems. They are a very creative people - the young always have some new song or poem while the elders sing the songs that have been sung for hundreds of years in the West of Ireland. The following evening we have traditional Irish music rendered by two of Ireland's best traditional players, Dan Delaney and Derbhla Ryan.

On the final evening we have the Feasta, a Celtic feast of food, drink, poetry and song. held in The Bay View Hotel. Over the years we have had poetry readings by many well-known Irish poets - Mary O'Malley, John F Dean, Katie Donovan, Eavan Boland, John O'Donoghue, Karina Tynan, Father Ned Crosby and others. The Bard participants are invited to give renderings of their own poetry and talents. It is a great night of entertainment and song, usually finishing up in the small hours of the morning. On the last day we meet to speak some last words and bring things to a close.

Bard is the brainchild of Ellen O'Malley Dunlop and Sandy Dunlop. Sandy is an able and scholarly director while Ellen is the heart and soul of the school. They have gathered around them an enthusiastic team - Karina Tynan, Elena Keany, Aoife Diamond and myself, Máirín Ní Nualláin. All of us there because we love the myths and stories and are passionate about the wisdom from within them.

We are at this stage looking forward to the Summer School of 2004, at which we hope to explore together the Return of the King. This brings us right back to the Mythological Cycle, to the early creation experiences, to the beginning place.

Máirín Ní Nualláin March 2003