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## Important Places

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# Important Places

*Shaun O'Connell*

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Indeed, as soon as the least of us stands still, that is the moment something extraordinary is seen to be going on in the world.

— Eudora Welty, “Place in Fiction”

This place, The University of Massachusetts Boston, has been important for most of us for many years. This elegant Campus Center, open to the Boston skyline, the Harbor and the sea beyond, stands as an emblem of UMass Boston’s enduring vitality, its tenacious capacity, despite setbacks, to rebuild and renew itself. Just over forty years ago this peninsula was a landfill. Now it holds the JFK Library, the Massachusetts State Archives, and a great public university. All around us this evening, as we stand still, we can see that something extraordinary has indeed gone on in this important place.

Forty years ago, almost to the day, I was at a meeting in the office of Al Ryan. He and Paul Gagnon drew up UMass Boston curriculum, hired its founding faculty, and shaped its urban mission. Al’s splendid office, with its rich wood-paneling and long windows, was on the thirteenth floor of the former Gas Company building, on the corner of Arlington and Stuart streets, the first site of UMB. Looking north out of the office window, I was transfixed then, as I am now again, by the moment and the perspective — by, as James Joyce put it, “the now, the here, through which all future plunges to the past.”

Suddenly, in September, 1965, I was *above* the Boston skyline, truly seeing this city for the first time: the Garden, the Common, Beacon Hill; the low, jagged, downtown skyline and the tangled streets, winding toward the harbor. Before this moment, high above Park Square, I had known Boston only through its playing fields and jazz clubs, from Fenway Park to the Hi Hat; but now I could see this “walking city” all at once — an urban landscape open with invitation and wonder, a city of large, undefined promise, for me and for the university. That was the first of many enduring gifts UMass Boston gave me: Boston. The nine years we spent in Park Square — when the university and everyone in it seemed brand new, making things up

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as we went along — were simply wonderful, and Boston was the stage set on which we acted out our personal dramas and joined in larger public demonstrations. Boston in the 1960s became for us what Ernest Hemingway called Paris in the 1920s, our “moveable feast.” And so it has remained forty years on.

Three places have mattered most to me. First, Boston — the hub of the solar system, the center of my world — and New England. Then New York City, an alternate world, the Empire City. Finally, Dublin — James Joyce’s “dear, dirty Dublin” — and Ireland.

Seamus Heaney notes that “there are two ways in which place is known and cherished . . . . One is lived, illiterate and unconscious, the other is learned, literate, and conscious.” So is our abiding sense of place shaped by what is *seen* and *said*. “The spirit of place is a great reality,” said D. H. Lawrence in *Classic Studies in American Literature*. But any place, invested with perception at the pitch of passion, as Henry James put it, takes on importance, though some places have accrued undeniable significance because of their rich histories, their structural beauty, and their memorable bodies of literature. All that is true of these three important places.

Boston and New England represent the given world for me and for most UMass Boston students; it is at once a literal place, a site of historical significance, and a symbolic landscape. John Winthrop’s “city upon a hill” — a phrase and a vision frequently invoked by presidents — has become a national emblem of purposeful aspiration and occasional overreaching. New York City, America’s Gotham — always more raffish, open, and various than Boston — embodies the wider American world. And there is Dublin, an ancient city well east of the American Eden.

All important places change, sometimes utterly, in our mind’s eye and in fact. Dublin, for example, is in the process of dramatic transformation. The shock of the new overwhelms even this frequent visitor. Now, next to Stephen’s Green, slides the sleek Luas tram system, and before the General Post Office on O’Connell Street, site of the 1916 Easter Rising, soars a new, 150 foot steel spire — not a memorial to past battles but an emblem of Ireland’s futuristic aspirations. Yellow building cranes reach over the city, erecting more glass towers. Even the diesel fumes have disappeared from the city’s air, as have the smokers from Dublin’s pubs. When I look around glitzed-up McDaid’s, a pub where tourists sip Guinness, I wonder what the plumed playwright, Brendan Behan, whose picture hangs on McDaid’s wall, would say about *this* Dublin. I can only say that the personal and literary journey from Boston to New York to Dublin and beyond is an occasion of inescapable realization of all that is past, passing and wonder at what is yet to be.

But even as a presence of absence, *place matters*. Our sense of traditional place might be *displaced*, but it is also renewed, for, as Elizabeth Bowen succinctly put it, “nothing can happen nowhere.” “Locality gives art,” wrote Robert Frost, whose second book of poems offers a title, *North of Boston*, which provides a literal and symbolic directional map that we can follow to discover the land he farmed in Derry, New Hampshire, and the fields of tropes and metaphors he nurtured into matchless poems of place.

My title is lifted from Patrick Kavanagh’s 1938 sonnet, a poem that both honors the local and infuses the parochial with Homeric importance. “Epic”:

I have lived in important places, times  
When great events were decided, who owned  
That half a rood of rock, a no-man’s land  
Surrounded by our pitchfork-armed claims.  
I heard the Duffeys shouting “Damn your soul”  
And old McCabe stripped to the waist, seen  
Step the plot defying blue cast-steel —  
“Here is the march along these iron stones.”  
That was the year of the Munich bother. Which  
Was more important? I inclined  
To lose my faith in Ballyrush and Gortin  
Till Homer’s ghost came whispering to my mind.  
He said: I made the *Iliad* from such  
A local row. Gods make their own importance.

Kavanagh, in Heaney’s words, “cherished the ordinary, the actual, the known.” With close focus on his home place — Inniskeen, County Monaghan, a village north of Dublin — in the foreground, Munich and Chamberlain’s capitulation to Hitler’s territorial demands recede to a distant bother. Kavanagh impishly reduces the vast scope of the classic epic to fourteen lines, but Homer is invoked to establish the grandeur of “a local row,” so Kavanagh’s mock-epic becomes a true epic by centering on the vast importance of a small place.

Paddy Kavanagh labored some thirty years as a farmer, working the “stony grey soil of Monaghan,” as he called it, before he escaped to literary Dublin in the late 1930s. (The first time he went, he walked the sixty miles one day and back home the next.) Peter Kavanagh, Patrick’s brother, later recalled a row over that half-a-rood of rock in 1938. The ownership battle between the two farmers was arbitrated by the local schoolmaster, who also served as the region’s unofficial surveyor. Neither farmer was happy with his boundary-line (or “march”), so the feud smoldered for years. By 1972, Peter wryly adds, “all the surrounding

farms including the disputed rocks are owned by the same farmer.” Today, more than another thirty years on, most of the farms have been abandoned and Inniskeen is a tourist site that commemorates Kavanagh. In Dublin a bench beside the Grand Canal holds a seated statue of Kavanagh, marking the poet’s celebration of his second important place. “O commemorate me where there is water,” Kavanagh wrote, “Canal water preferably, so stilly/Greeny at the heart of summer.” And so does Dublin, like Inniskeen, honor Ireland’s poet of the parochial.

But Paddy Kavanagh went back-and-forth in his attitudes toward Inniskeen, suggesting that a deep sense of place often is accompanied by ambivalence. In *Tarry Flynn* he described its poignant beauties — “the simple fantastic beauty of ordinary things growing — marsh marigolds, dandelions, thistles and grass.” Then Kavanagh cursed the tyranny of farm life in his long poem, *The Great Hunger*, where “Poor Paddy Maguire, a fourteen-hour day/ He worked for years” and where winds “blew through Brannagan’s Gap on their way from Siberia.”

So, the sense of place, intensified by primary or secondary experience, nourished by poetry and prose, can stop time, hold or recover the moment or the era, lift us out of our limited, personal perspectives and allow us to see anew an altered, refreshed world. But the sense of place also, as we have seen with Kavanagh, can become a burden of history, a nightmare from which one is trying to awake, as Stephen Dedalus put it in James Joyce’s version of the Irish epic, *Ulysses*.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, New England’s great prose-poet of the local, felt the burden of history on his back in one not-so-dear, perpetual place, Salem, Massachusetts. There, he absorbed two centuries of Puritan history, which also constituted his family’s dark, punitive, Puritan past. Then Hawthorne reconfigured that past to the requirements of his imagination. In turn, he shaped our vision of Boston’s and New England’s dark history and divided character. Samuel Eliot Morison complained that “Hawthorne, more than any other man, was responsible for the somber picture of early New England [as a region] embalmed in tradition.” Hawthorne focused his attention on what his friend, Herman Melville, called “the power of blackness,” uncovering the dark side of Greater Boston’s past. The secret history of Boston, purportedly revealed in the preface to Hawthorne’s romance, is discovered in a set of documents that tell the tale of Hester Prynne, victim of Boston Puritanism’s righteousness and hypocrisy. The “A” that she was forced to wear on her breast burned in Hawthorne’s hands when he claims to have found it in the upper chamber of Salem’s Custom House. Hawthorne says that Hester’s “A” was stitched with “a new forgotten art,” an art that he imitates in his embellished prose, taking up Hester’s story. That is, the “A” that the Puritans intended to stand as a symbol of punishment for this sinful woman, a fixed emblem of adultery, stands instead, in

Hawthorne's transforming mind, as the considered creation of an *artist*. Perhaps, like himself, she was an *author* who composed the world in her imagination. In Hawthorne's radical, revisionist imagination, Hester, condemned as a sinner by the Boston community, takes her stand as the boldest heroine in American fiction. "Begin all anew," Hester challenges Rev. Dimmesdale, her guilt-ridden, paralyzed, and Puritan-bound lover.

But Hawthorne would not let Hester loose from Boston's clutches to begin all anew. Place was fate for Hawthorne. Even after Dimmesdale publicly confesses and dies; even after their daughter, Pearl, becomes a rich heiress in Europe; even after Hester leaves Boston, she grudgingly returns. "Here had been her sin; here, her sorrow; and here was to be her penitence." Hawthorne has annoyed generations of readers with this ending. (Hawthorne even happily noted that the book broke the heart of his wife, Sophia, and, as he put it, "sent her to bed with a grievous headache, which I look on as a triumphant success!") But Hawthorne's point about the determining power of place is forcefully made. There is, for Hawthorne, no future, personal or communal, without an understanding of the past, and there is no understanding that comes from escape, or from lighting out for the territories, as Huck Finn would.

Yet, Hawthorne wrote *The Scarlet Letter* at a point of personal crisis. He had lost his job in the Custom House, his family was poor and hungry, his mother had just died. He wrote with the hope of escaping his home place, Salem, so he might, as he put it, become "a citizen of somewhere else," beyond the Boston pale. Hawthorne did manage to flee New England for several years in the 1850s, living in England and Italy, but he returned to Concord, where his New England provinciality deepened. Hawthorne had trapped Hester in Boston. Now the local closed around *him*. Just as Patrick Kavanagh's celebration of the parochial in County Monaghan made him indifferent to momentous world events ("the Munich bother," indeed) and prevented him from grasping the comprehensive idea of Ireland we see in W. B. Yeats's poetry, so too did Hawthorne's ever narrowing sense of place keep him from understanding Lincoln's insistence on preserving the Union during the Civil War. If "the worst comes to the worst," Hawthorne wrote, "New England will still have her rocks and ice, and be pretty much the same sort of place as heretofore." As far as Hawthorne was concerned, "New England might be a nation by itself."

In the century after his death, the ghost of Nathaniel Hawthorne walked the local landscape and the minds of Boston writers — James, Wharton, Eliot, others. Hawthorne's spectral presence became vivid for Robert Lowell, another Puritan-haunted Boston writer with an acute sensitivity to the nuances and moral implications of place. Visiting Salem, Lowell has a sudden vision of Hawthorne, walking the streets of the city,

his head down, searching for large significances in commonplace objects, meditating “on the true and insignificant.”

So, too, in his great poetic meditation on Boston as a symbolic place, “For the Union Dead,” would Lowell distinguish the true from the insignificant by celebrating the heroic sacrifice of Col. Robert Gould Shaw and the African-American soldiers he led into battle, as well as their noble representation in the great public monument by Augustus Saint-Gaudens, the bas-relief that faces the State House. For Lowell, Shaw, his troops, and the monument stand in judgment above Boston Common, which had been ripped open for a parking garage to store what Lowell called the “giant-finned cars” that “nose forward like fish” in a Boston where “savage servility/ slides by on grease.” Like Hawthorne before him, Lowell set his post-Puritan moral conscience and faith in the transformative powers of language against the slackness and cupidity of his day. As he put it, “Their monument sticks like a fishbone/ in the city’s throat.” Lowell invoked a Boston-New England ideal that had been ignored, violated. Like Hawthorne, Lowell called upon Bostonians to renew their faith in the high purpose of place, but without Puritanism’s religious righteousness.

Soon after he read this poem — in June, 1960, at the Boston Arts Festival — Lowell left Boston. He was always ambivalent about the city where he, like Henry Adams before him, was born under the shadow of the State House. Though the Lowells lived on Beacon Hill, “less than fifty yards from Louisburg Square,” his mother saw them “barely perched on the outer rim of the hub of decency.” Lowell mocked her pretensions in his essay, “91 Revere Street,” and he married two women who hated Boston: Jean Stafford, author of *Boston Adventure*, and Elizabeth Hardwick, author of “Boston: The Lost Ideal.” For Hardwick, Boston was, like Joyce’s Dublin, the center of paralysis, symbolized by its winter snows, its early darkness, its suppressed passion, and its self-indulgent sense of *loss*. Still, Lowell remained attached to Boston. Joseph Brodsky said Lowell was a porcupine who “sharpens its golden needle/ against the Boston bricks,” and he always returned to the brick walkways of Boston and Cambridge. For years, though he lived in Manhattan, he also taught at Harvard. For Hardwick, who never came back, New York City was all that Boston was not.



New York City, as Red Sox fans need not be reminded, has long stood as the anti-type to Boston — the “Evil Empire,” as Larry Lucchino, Red Sox President and CEO, calls the Yankees. But New York City can hardly be summed up in a phrase, or even in thousands of words, as I discovered when writing *Remarkable, Unspeakable New York*, a title I took from Henry James because it suggests the range and contradictions of the city. As we read the text of the city — so extravagant in its tropes, so intense and varied in its rhythms, so bold in its presence, so pervasive in its

reach, so insistent in its grasp — it also reads us; indeed it *is* or it should *be* us. After September 11, 2001, it was often said that we are all New Yorkers, even those of us who live, as they say in Manhattan, Elsewhere. New York's vast and various literature, from Washington Irving's burlesque *History of New York* to Tom Wolfe's satire of the city, *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, invokes the American dream of transformation, self-consciously and persuasively — not Boston's aspiration for salvation, but Manhattan's transcendent pursuit of happiness. "The old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailor's eyes" represented, in the words of F. Scott Fitzgerald, "a fresh green breast of the new world," a landscape that pandered "to the last and greatest of all human dreams" of unrealized possibilities.

When New York City was still a village on the lower end of Manhattan Island, Walt Whitman understood what the city represented. Whitman urged the readers of *Leaves of Grass* to "remember the book arose out of my life in Brooklyn and New York . . . absorbing a million people . . . with an intimacy, an eagerness, an abandon, probably never equaled." It was "a great city," he insisted, the epitome of "modern civilization." This self-described "Dweller in Mannahatta my city" created a persona: the poet pronouncer, "Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son," whose poetry was his "barbaric yawp," his advertisement for himself, for New York City, and for America. Though he fretted about the gangs and grime of New York, he loved his open city, wandering its streets, bellowing Italian arias from the tops of Broadway omnibuses. At Castle Island Whitman heard a Donizetti opera, listened to Jenny Lind sing, and greeted many of the seven million immigrants who arrived in the city between 1855 and 1890, when Ellis Island opened to *more* newcomers. Whitman celebrated *all* Americans, indeed insisted that America itself was a great, inclusive poem, like *Leaves of Grass*, and he named New York City as its ideal embodiment. "Mannahatta!," he said. "How fit a name for America's great democratic island city!"

In his great poem, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," Whitman transcends the limits of his own life and unites himself with all those — including all of us — who "cross from shore to shore," then and now. His vision fuses, indeed embraces, the city's masses — living, dead, and yet-to-be-born — into one amative whole, for in the end, Whitman insists, "place avails not":

I too lived, Brooklyn of ample hills was mine,  
I too walk'd the streets of Manhattan island, and bathed in  
the waters around it,  
I too felt the curious abrupt questionings stir within me. . . .

New York City stirred curious, abrupt questionings in generations of writers, particularly in the young men and women from the American provinces, none more eloquent than Scott Fitzgerald, descendant of a line of



Irish immigrants once welcomed by Walt Whitman. For Fitzgerald, as for so many writers, New York City was the heart of the matter of America, a city commensurate to his capacity for wonder, a diamond as big as the Ritz. "New York had all the iridescence of the beginning of the world," he rhapsodized. A young man from St. Paul, via Princeton, Fitzgerald arrived in 1920 and soon conquered the city with a sensational best-seller, *This Side of Paradise*, the novel that named "The Jazz Age" and shocked the nation by revealing that college students drank and petted! Then, in Saint Patrick's Cathedral, he married Zelda Sayre, whom he called "the most beautiful girl in Alabama and Georgia." Fitzgerald admitted that he then "knew less of New York than any reporter of six month's standing," but suddenly he and Zelda were living high at the Ritz, Manhattan was very heaven, he was a spokesman for his generation and the chronicler of New York City's manners and morals.

By the time he published *The Great Gatsby*, in 1925, Fitzgerald knew a good deal about the city and its surrounding regions as a symbolic landscape. The novel's narrator, Nick Carraway, is at first enchanted with Manhattan. "The city seen from the Queensborough Bridge is always the city seen for the first time, in its first wild promise of all the mystery and the beauty of the world." But the enchanted city becomes the heart of darkness, which ends in death. Nick comes to understand that the dream of felicity was lost "somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night."

By 1931, Fitzgerald saw that New York City "*had limits.*" Returning from Europe he went straight to the top of the newlyopened and mostly empty Empire State Building, "the last and most magnificent of towers," and he saw that the city faded out of sight and mind into the country on all sides, into an expanse of green and blue that alone was limitless. And with that awful realization that New York was a city after all and not a universe, the whole shining edifice that he had reared in his imagination came crashing to the ground.

Still, in *our* imaginations Scott Fitzgerald's vision of the City as shining edifice of empty towers remains vivid. Like Whitman, the incorrigible optimist, Fitzgerald, the poignant pessimist, taught us how to see the city and realize ourselves in it.



When I was a boy a large painting hung on the west wall in the living room of the house where I lived with my aunt and uncle. Early on bright, spring mornings the rising sun transformed its surface into hammered gold. I loved to watch the painting glow, burn bright, then fade into shadows as the sun rose in the sky.

In the painting a path wound through banks of flowers and led to a thatched-roof cottage surrounded by more explosions of floral color. The top of the cottage's half-door was open, in apparent welcome, but the doorway stood empty. I imagined that a woman might be busy inside, baking scones, just as Aunt Jane sometimes did. Above the cottage and the rich green trees that hovered over it, a deep, blue sky was streaked by wisps of white clouds. There, I thought, was Ireland.

I believed this because Aunt Jane told me that the painting represented "some place in Ireland, where our people came from." Though she had never been to Ireland and her parents, who had come over to "the other side" in the 1870s, refused to talk about their hard homeland, she felt that she knew what Ireland must look like. So, when she found this painting in an antique shop in Boston, her romantic expectation met its sentimental representation. For Aunt Jane, the painting revealed the true Ireland: a little bit of heaven that dropped out of the sky one day.

She passed on this idealized vision of Ireland to me. As a result, when I stared at this painting, this image of an enchanted place, so different from my ordinary life in a small town west of Boston, I imagined Ireland as the Garden of Eden. God had made His Garden for Adam and Eve to dwell in, said the nuns in Sunday School; Adam and Eve were supposed to know God and love God, just as we had been instructed in the Catholic Catechism, but they allowed themselves to be tempted by Satan. After Adam and Eve sinned, they were banished from the Garden, just as, I figured, our people must have been banished from Ireland. But, why? What sort of place was Ireland, anyway?

"Don't be talkin' such nonsense," Aunt Jane said.

"But I want to know," I whined.

I am still trying to find out. As I grew up, I lost interest in my aunt's sentimental vision of Ireland. But then I read James Joyce's *Dubliners* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, works of fiction that criticized Dubliners, but made them seem interesting, tense and complex, in ways that Irish-Americans, sustained by sentimental Bing Crosby songs and movies about pious priests, were not. When my family and I traveled to Ireland in 1971, it was something of a literary pilgrimage. Our first stop after landing in Shannon was at Lady Augusta Gregory's Coole Park, where Yeats once saw wild swans rise, and Thor Ballylee, Yeats's Norman Tower in Gort — his "ancient bridge, and a more ancient tower," where he saw a soldier shot during Ireland's Civil War. There, we, like Yeats before us, stared from the battlements at the serene, green countryside that hid a history of violence and victimization. *This* was Ireland!



That summer we lived outside Dublin, in Genageary, near the tower at Sandcove where Joyce set the opening chapter of *Ulysses*, not far from the house along Sandymount Strand that Seamus Heaney would one day own. In subsequent visits my interest in Ireland remained more literary than genealogical. Ireland's poets, playwrights, and prose writers became our extended family, most particularly, Seamus Heaney who took this American cousin and his family into his home and showed us how to read and love his adopted city; and Peter Fallon — poet, publisher, and sheep-raiser — whose life and poetry bring Paddy Kavanagh back to mind.

For three decades I have been making regular summer stops in North Meath, not far from Kavanagh's Inniskeen, to visit Peter, watching him evolve from a confirmed bachelor farmer to a devoted husband and father. All seems serene where the Fallons live: The Garden Lodge, Loughcrew, Oldcastle, Country Meath, Ireland. Along with his wife and publishing partner, Jean, and their two children, Peter owns ten or so acres, which, until recently, remained part of an estate, land appropriated from Catholic peasants more than three centuries ago, land that was held by the same family since Cromwell's day. In that time the land has been sculpted and planted to suit the designs of the big house masters: rolling hills, copses of trees, open fields for grazing cattle and sheep, high walls, streams, lakes — all arranged with a painterly eye. "This all did not just happen," says Peter, admiring its artfulness.

The Fallons live in a stone cottage, the former gardener's lodge, set within the twenty-foot walls, which enclose three of his acres and sometimes pen in a flock of some eighty sheep. In the mornings, the sheep's plaintive bleats wake you. From the second-story guest room, through the heavy morning mist, while your eyes are clearing, you can see them drift around their walled-in demesne in groups that appear like moving clouds.

Within a second walled-in section, a souterrain is a reminder of the tribesmen who, two thousand years ago, dug tunnels not only to bury their dead but also to escape their enemies. In Peter's souterrain these tunnels branch off so that pursuers would be confused and become trapped, while those on the run could find their way to an enlarged inner chamber to wait out the attack. Above ground, Fallon's walled-in area also holds the remains of an elaborate garden, which, a century ago, supplied daily flowers and out-of-season fruits to the now dismantled big house. Thus buried images of pre-Celtic, hidden Ireland and faded ascendancy rule concentrate in this significant place.

Each time I come to Loughcrew I think it is right that an Irish poet has inherited these once flowering fields and subterranean tunnels and has cultivated the land in his own way. This Meath demesne has *placed* Fallon, his family, his poetry and has provided Ireland a vital publishing center.

He writes in “The Heartland,”

I came on a place and had to stay  
that I might find my feet, repair  
the mark of human hand, and repossess  
a corner of my country.

While Kavanagh left Inniskeen for Dublin, Fallon abandoned Dublin for Loughcrew, searching for what he calls his “lost field” in County Meath.

Ireland has long been divided into four provinces — Connacht, in the West; Leinster, in the East; Ulster, in the North; and Munster, in the South — but it is said that a Fifth Province existed more than a thousand years ago, in the days of the Celtic kings. Legend holds that this Fifth Province was County Meath. Certainly Peter Fallon likes to think so. So do I when I visit Loughcrew, for there I too sometimes think I have found my own lost field. But, then, when I am not in Ireland I like to think that the Fifth Province is a metaphorical place that lies beyond the shores of the island of Ireland — that place where all of Ireland’s émigrés and their descendants dwell.

Near Fallon’s home and fields stands Loughcrew Hill. From its rounded top we gaze out on the undulant Boyne Valley, site of ancient burial tombs and telling military battles, as well as far beyond, to the hills of Slane (where Patrick lit the flame of Christianity in 432) and Tara, former seat of Celtic High Kings and site of Daniel O’Connell’s political rallies in the early nineteenth century. Atop serene Loughcrew Hill, long paroled by cows and sheep, a massive mound holds a megalithic tomb, perhaps five thousand years old. Inside the tomb or cairn are rocks carved with mysterious swirls and designs, means by which ancient peoples communicated with the spirit world, emblems by which we can still feel their living presence while running our fingers over the stone surfaces as we might touch tomb engravings.

On a rare sunny afternoon in Ireland in 2002, my wife Dorothy, my daughter Kate, and I climbed Loughcrew Hill to the cairn. Scudding clouds spread moving shadows across the fields of sheep and cattle below. Twenty years before I had climbed up there with Peter. Now I was struck by how much had changed in all our lives, but the cairn, just as it was and had been for thousands of years, represented a reassuring sense of permanence. The sun-swirl designs carved in stone within the cairn at once suggested both something pure and direct, like kindergarten drawings, and something infinitely mysterious, beyond my understanding but within the grasp of my hand, a poem I could almost read.

I realized that day how much I have loved Meath since I first saw it: Lush Meath, with its sudden rains; its cloud-heavy skies; its sloe-eyed, stately cows who stare as you pass; its stillness, but for the whoosh of passing cars and lorries. The Fifth Province. The center of Ireland. The point of some

buried memory, perhaps, in my own heart or imagination. Now it is part of our family history and mythology, as well.

A week after we three climbed Loughcrew Hill, Kate, my newly-arrived son, Liam, and daughter-in-law, Feng, went up on a wet and windy afternoon. Amazingly, they were met at the cairn by a lone, forlorn, and soaked bag-piper, dressed in kilts. He was waiting, he told them, for the “army” to arrive by bus from Fore Abbey, to perform a ceremony honoring the *Tain*, the ancient Irish epic about territorial wars. The now delayed reenactment of a battle in the *Tain* had been scheduled as part of the Kells Heritage Festival. The piper wondered where his “army” was, but guessed that their bus was probably pulled up in front of some dry pub; the battle would have to wait until the sun appeared, he supposed. My children said the piper was wonderfully welcoming to these American visitors, telling them tales from the *Tain* — how Cuchulain and his army fought Queen Maeve and her army over ownership of a sacred brown cow that turned out to be a bull, though the piper was not sure if he had got that straight. He was fairly certain that the so-called army did not have a brown cow, much less a bull, on the bus with them! So they blathered on, the piper and my children, standing next to the Loughcrew cairn, oblivious of the downpour. As Kate, Feng, and Liam made their way back downhill, past the cows, through the rain, the piper stayed behind, playing a lament on his pipes, faithfully waiting for his army to arrive.

Only in Ireland, I thought, could such an event occur — resonant with actual and kitsch history, at once generous and sweetly silly. I was sorry I missed it, but I was delighted to hear them tell me about it. My children, gathering around the Fallon breakfast table, talking over each other, recalling their comic encounter with the piper on Loughcrew Hill as they dried off, were joining in the ancient art of Irish story-telling and making Ireland into their important place.



This place — Boston behind us, Manhattan down the coast two hundred miles, Ireland & Dublin across the Atlantic some three thousand miles — is at the heart of what matters to me. The Hill at Loughcrew remains my spiritual home and Dublin my literary center. Manhattan holds the story of a personal narrative of an alternate life I might have lived if I had gone to the City in my early twenties and the stories of so many who did, from Walt Whitman, crossing from Brooklyn, to Scott Fitzgerald, coming from Saint Paul. But this important place, Boston, where I stayed and where we are, is my, perhaps it is our, true center.

James Joyce’s fictional hero in *Portrait* imagined himself at the center of the universe: “Stephen Dedalus, Class of Elements, Clongowes Wood College, Sallins, County Kildare, Ireland, Europe, The World, The Universe.” Now and here, at least for this time and this place — UMass, Boston, New England, America, the world, the universe — we are centered in our important place.