

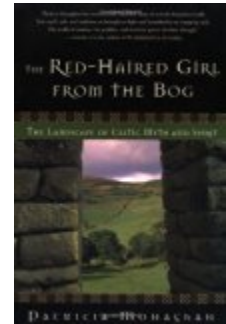
H-Net Reviews

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Patricia Monaghan. *The Red-Haired Girl from the Bog: The Landscape of Celtic Myth and Spirit*. Novato: New World Library, 2003. 295 pp. \$22.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57731-190-4.

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Ireland's Storied Landscape

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Two years ago I had the opportunity to interview Patricia Monaghan. We met beneath a New Zealand pohutukawa tree at the Krone Conservatory in Cincinnati on a bitterly cold February day. As the tree shed its bright red flowers, Monaghan stopped periodically to pick them up, tuck them into her hair, then mine, and finally she offered them up to young children in a school group passing by. The setting, sitting in a place with the word "crone" in its name, handing out bright blossoms in winter, seemed somehow appropriate to talk about the subjects that fill Monaghan's vision: place and story, native and immigrant, myth and meaning. Life.

During the interview she told stories, something Monaghan does with great ease. "Storytelling is based in iteration," she said. "It's not a story if it's told once. It's only a story if it's retold." In her latest book, *The Red-Haired Girl from the Bog*, Monaghan participates in that process of iteration as she takes stories she has lived and learned in Ireland and shares them with a new audience. These are stories of cows and cottages, of Cuchulainn and Connacht. They are not held as inaccessibly holy tales nor myths frozen in time, but told as stories with a very modern life force flowing through them. They are her stories. They are ours.

Set on her personal journey of discovery by the simple question posed by an Alaskan elder, "You. Now: Where are you from?" Monaghan takes the reader through an intricately woven landscape of Irish story, myth, politics, geography, and spirituality to answer the

elder's question. Monaghan's work, like Keith Basso's *Wisdom Sits in Places*, directly addresses the power of place on personal identity, cultural mores, and spiritual practice.[1] *The Red-Haired Girl from the Bog* is not a book of anthropology with the narrator looking from the outside in. Instead, it is the best of place literature, mirroring the rich qualities of the storied landscape of Ireland. Monaghan's writing reads like a meadow of wildflowers at the edge of an ancient wood. Her stories are filled with the laughter of discovery, the depth of spirituality discovered in the unlikeliest of places, images of grinning hags, fairy women, white cows, and ancient saints offering their stories from the past as a way of leading us into a future.

As both a poet and Goddess scholar, Monaghan has a rich tradition from which to draw: "The lore and love and specificity associated with Irish places grow directly from Ireland's residual paganism." She writes not, however, with an interest in creating a dualism between Christianity and Paganism; instead, Monaghan's intention is to explore the complexities of unions. Her ancient Sheela (the stone sculptures of women that dot Ireland with bodies of old women, but ones inviting sexual play) are springs of sexuality and creation; her fairyland has a deathless sterility, but from that understanding of sterility grows the love of life. She is both of Alaska and Ireland yet not at home in either. With Ireland's intricate knot of storied places as her center, Monaghan embraces paradox to find that "survival means not stasis, but endless renewal. And that to live that fully we must learn to dance, naked and laughing and wild" (p. 43).

The book follows a series of thematic chapters which each focuses on the complexities of deep relationships with ancestral places. Beginning with the Sacred Center and the sedimentary storied geography of Ireland, Monaghan moves to the landscape of the hag and the traditions of the sexual power of the hag stories. From there she encounters the story from which the book derives its title, and deconstructs the deeper meaning of the role of fairies in Irish myth. She moves through stories of intoxication, of Medb and Morrigan, the revival of the flame of Brigit, and perhaps the most poignant chapter of all, one called "Wisdom Galore"—a sensitive and fascinating exploration of the relationship between the ancient Beltane fires, the modern day foot and mouth epidemic, and the death of a dear friend and storyteller to cancer. Monaghan is intimate without being invasive, both a storyteller of the old tradition and a modern interpreter of the power of myth.

As Monaghan readily admits throughout the book, she is not *from* Ireland, since she was born in the United States. However, as she explores the landscape of myth and culture, she finds that she is *of* Ireland just as she is *of* Alaska. Through her stories of the hag we come to know the cycles of nature and the power of life from death. Her Red-Haired Girl beckons us to fairyland only to show us that a deathless place offers no life. Instead, we learn to embrace the marriage of light and darkness, beginnings and endings, as we follow stories of ancient caves and modern-day cancers. We see the shaft of light piercing Newgrange, and discover that there are ways to bring traditions back to life not for the sake of having old

traditions, but because those traditions still have strength and power to teach us about how to live today. Monaghan tells us that it is possible to come to know a place, to love it, and to become part of it.

When I interviewed Monaghan, one of the pieces that struck me was her assessment of the United States and the role of storied places. "We are not land-based as a culture in America. We don't know the stories. So how do you begin to root in a land where you're denied the storied link? ... How does one begin that process? I think that we made a big mistake here in America by detaching story from place."

In *The Red-Haired Girl from the Bog*, Monaghan seems to have resolved that question for herself by learning from the experience of Ireland. We need not be "native to a place" she tells us, since all natives are transplants, too. Instead, we need to come to honor, respect, and revel in the storied places we all come from. "I have news for you," Monaghan tells us with a wise, laughing smile, "spring comes everywhere with sweetness and hope ... just as Ireland is sacred, so all land is sacred, as we are all sacred. This is my news." We would do well to listen to this news, and with Patricia Monaghan as our guide, we are well on our way to finding our own way through past, present, and future, too.

Note

[1]. Keith H. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996).

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