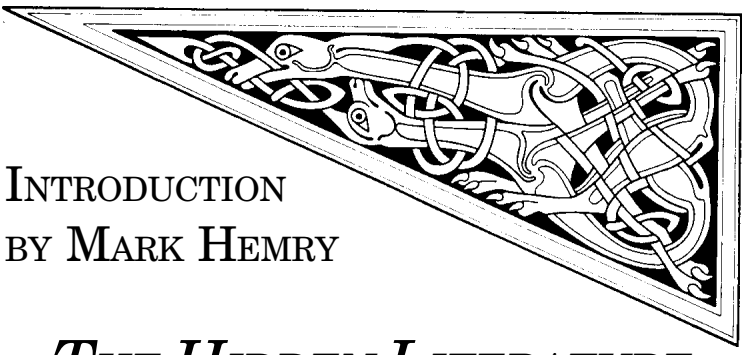

Introduction
by Mark Hemry

The Hidden Literature of Irish Culture

On June 23, 1993, the government of the Republic of Ireland finally liberated the apartheid state of homosexuality. That summer night, coincidentally my first night in Dublin, sex between consenting same-gender adults became legal. The draconian laws that had persecuted Oscar Wilde and sent him to jail were abolished. Watching the celebration in one of Dublin's gay pubs, I saw a diversity of men free at last, joyous, celebrating their independence. In that happy brawl, the first thought of uncloseting the till-that-night hidden literature of Ireland became for me a concept finally actualized in this book.

The pursuit of the Irish is older than the invading Vikings and the occupying British. The latest invaders, American tourists, myself included, come to Ireland chasing our roots, chasing Irish culture, chasing Danny Boy. My own Irish-born great-grandfather, after emigrating to the United States, where he lived for twenty years before he decided to marry, chased after Irish eyes, Irish blood, and Irish culture, by chasing back to Ireland to choose between a pair of twin sisters from County Mayo. He chased the black-haired one until the red-headed one caught him and they married and he carried her off to St. Louis, Missouri. The erotic quotient of Irish culture, as well as the eros of emigration from Ireland, both long sentimentalized heterosexually in rhyming love songs,

can as of that historic date, June 23, 1993, the "Gay Bloomsday," finally embrace the love that once dare not speak its name.

These seventeen stories by eight authors are the first collection of gay Irish eros to be published in America.

The quest was to create an anthology of emergent fiction focusing on the Irish male experience of same-gender eros throughout Ireland and the world. Authors and storytellers were eligible from any nationality, gender, race, or age. Good writing was the only criterion to tell erotic stories—subliminal eros to overt sex—revealing gay male Irish soul, culture, sexuality, issues, problems, troubles, and triumphs in any time from myth to cyber, any place from coffin ship to Aer Lingus; and any societal setting of local color from tribal clan to soccer scrum to post-modern gay pub. A good story creates specific characters in a specific place at a specific time. Cliches turn inside out. New archetypes emerge. The universally ignored masculine-identified homosexual is ideally the man most needing investigation, but that still allows stories of sissies, queens, and drag. Perhaps one, in fact, surely needs to know a multitude of long suppressed gay stories to know how the Irish really saved civilization. The final criterion was that erotica should appeal to the intellect and the emotions as much as to the naked Id.

Gay writing, at heart, is the hidden literature of Irish culture.

The storytellers in this book live in Ireland, England, Germany, and the United States.

In the story giving title to this collection, "Chasing Danny Boy," San Francisco writer Jack Fritscher, whose mother is Irish, reaches back into Celtic myth in his modernizing the classic old story of Dermid and Grania. His backstory detailing Dermid's adventures in Dublin in the last summer of the twentieth century references the ancient Irish folklore collected by Lady Augusta Gregory in the late-nineteenth century. Perhaps, if Lady Gregory were alive today, she'd be collecting this update of an ancient Irish folktale that investigates the male psychology of the young hunter Dermid before he meets Grania and before he receives his love

spot—his erotic sex appeal—that makes him the most desirable man in the world to all who see him.

In addition to insight on why some young Irish men emigrate, the title story also furnishes a keen, comic, whiplash satire of Irish-American tourists traipsing about Ireland on buses, looking for their roots, in search of their own "inner Danny Boy." Of course, women, as well as men, chase Danny Boy, because the Irish race itself has been hit with a love spot gorgeous enough to give any tribe a bit of justifiable vanity. One breederish Brigid lectures the sexually ambiguous Dermid that wasting Irish blood is a crime against the Irish nature. Their mission is to head out from Ireland to populate the world. Driven by irony and eros, this story races through Dublin to a climax on the last summer solstice of the last June 20th of the twentieth century.

Incidentally, as editor, respecting the essential storyteller, I treated the texts the way a stage or film director might read a script, keeping the writer front and center, while keeping the reader absolutely centered, in that editing was—beyond consistency of format—a simple matter of re-ordering words in a sentence, or a sentence in a paragraph, or a piece of dialog in a line of dramatic exchange, all the time merely pressurizing the absolutely basic story, characters, dialog, drama, and psychology through the standard tools of the editor who cares for exhibiting the core kernel of universality in each story sequence's specific time, place, person, action, and dialogue. Short glossaries quickly explain readers' multicultural questions of geography, culture, and language.

As in Peter Paul Sweeney's story, "Flight," which occurs in Los Angeles International Airport, most of these stories are journey fables told as hunting stories wherein the chase is the journey, where desire pursues love, where the object of desire most likely lives in an uncharted part of the forest, the town, the road, where maybe the journey takes the hunter out of bounds, beyond the pale, searching deep into the present state of love to find the archetype of the "true past of manhood" too long so denied that action must be taken, taboos broken, new totems hoisted. In a Celtic culture driven by warriors and monks, the Irish with the emigrant gene seem

most likely to be carriers of the DNA of homomasculine sexuality. For that reason, in Sweeney's crisp story of a confession heard late on an autumn night in Cork, flight is sometimes survival; other times, displacement of the heart. The hunters in these stories are chasers, sooner or later, and they take no prisoners.

In the story by Bob Condron, "Lost and Found," for instance, the straight man chases the gay man until the straight man is caught. Again the old axiom of labels pertains: a man can have heterosexual sex a thousand times with girls named Zoe, but one time of homosexual sex shifts his shape and his reputation forever. In parallel to the Irish legalization, the Catholic Church itself finally admits that the state of being homosexual is not a sin, because it's a thing a man cannot repent, because one cannot, despite doctrines of original sin, logically repent one's own nature, and by extension the actions that proceed from one's essential being. Homosexuality is a gift of God, a vocation, an internal calling often announced kindly by another homosexual or pointed out cruelly by straight bullies or frightened parents. Accepting this call to character change is central to the story, "Lost and Found," which succeeds as filmic storytelling in author Condron's talent for comic action, swift dialog, and poetic sex. Furthermore, Irish eros has little of the typical hardness of American porno, because carnal expression is still somewhat hesitant, innocent, and fresh. In Condron's "Visions of Sean," the boys genuinely try to find themselves by trying to be someone else, until identity–personal and sexual–teaches them to be true to their real natures.

To give this collection depth as well as breadth, most of the authors, where possible, are represented by two stories. Dublin's Michael Wynne actually authored five incredibly subtle stories of the deep feeling and homoerotic anxiety of contemporary gay Irish psychology.

In what can be called his four or five "Abbeyview Stories," Michael Wynne supports a positive vision of masculine-identified man-to-man love. In the *pas de deux* of the storyteller and Duck in "Puppydogs' Tails," Wynne's gift for language fills in the angles of sex with the colors of poetry,

and humor, with sensitivity that is romantic, a bit psychedelic, and very modern. Sex and politics mix, or don't mix, in school and beyond school when rebel music style becomes ideology. Parental guidance ends up deadly when a gun becomes the ultimate lover to the archetypal rebel who develops a conspicuously masculinised version of himself. Wynne writes an erotic poetry of "spatulate fingers," "carnal fecal whiff," and "boys sexy in a highly skittable way." He conjures dramatic development on the repetition of the words *determined* and *dead* in the phrases "determined father and dead mother." Born and raised in the rural West of Ireland, Michael Wynne embodies a type of legendary oral tradition that accounts for his inherent flair for writing the spoken word. His amazing narrative voice carries his stories' dramatic arcs, characters, and dialog about fathers in "Quare Man, M' Da," about mothers in "Me and Mam: On the Lake," about families in "The Lake of Being Human: Dead Sea Fruit," and about young lovers in "Loman."

His sardonic story, "Quare Man, M' Da," makes bitterly ironic the role of religion in life as actually lived, because caste and class and commandments themselves cannot stop the flow of nature in men who are their father's sons. In the drawling, easy vernacular of "Me and Mam: On the Lake," a quite lovely confessional tale reveals that while the family name comes down from the father, sometimes the family story comes down through the mother, and the telling comes only after a mutual truce directed by the gay son. The style is a brilliant use of designed dialect that is easy to read and conveys local color. Wynne offers cutting insight into the kind of sensitive boy who has no idea he's gay, or that the feelings normal to him are gay, until told so–outed, taunted–by straight bullies who see his difference and exploit it. The direct pairing of the hot-tempered feelings of the mother and son bonding as they row across the surface of the lake, gliding across the deep subconscious from which they both pull the submerged secrets of their lives, integrates like a film edit into another Wynne story, "The Lake of Being Human: Dead Sea Fruit."

This second water-borne story, "The Lake of Being Human," is a psychological tale of an adolescent boy coming to

grips with not only his own sexual identity but also with his mother's. In the undertow of the plot, the boy's distant father appears and recedes in a story of male potency and impotency symbolized by the Tarot-like reality of "The Drowned Man" floating—like the corpse of another father—in the lake where the boys swim. Sorcha, as the artist and the boy's mother's lover, is also the boy's psychic mentor into art, sex, and the lake of being human. The psychology of the story is spun in terms of intuition, sexuality, and magic that sets up the existential question: if events can be foreseen, then what is the nature of free will? Can a father leave his child, a husband leave his wife, a mother abort a child, or a daughter desert a father? Is any one of them responsible for their actions? Or do characters swim predestined through the lake of their lives, at various depths, or out of their depth, so far out that they drown.

Michael Wynne layers his narratives with intermixing stories that at first seem episodic, but, in fact, are totally connected in the free-floating psyche of the young boy who is the storyteller of the summer when they all fed each other chunks of their lives, their "dead sea histories," wondering about the predestination of sexuality.

Just as Neil Jordan conjures up "the quality of the raised aura of green light" in "Last Rites," Michael Wynne in "Loman" takes on the high June twilight, the mist over Galway Bay, and the moon rising as two friends travel the journey of the Pride Parade to step out of ordinariness into a kiss that bonds the sexual predestination they've felt towards one another since infancy. A certain symbolism, specifically in circumcision, drives this story as well as the story, "Dublin Sunday."

In the suffocating burial cairn of "Dublin Sunday," P-P Hartnett tells a fairy story as haunted and weird as any ancient myth from the heath. His shape-shifting fiction compares to Tennessee Williams' gay short stories in narrative, character development, poetic sense, and abject feeling of loss. Hartnett's tale is as erotically romantic as Tennessee's physical-and-psychic mutilation story, "One Arm," yet he is as brutally realistic as if Foucault directed at Falcon Video

studios in Los Angeles. Claustrophobia confronts desire when the tired old queer, Paud, meets Keith, the lad in apartment #8A. Hartnett integrates an astonishing range of *blue* into his jazz riff on the ritual "blues" party-boys universally feel late on Sunday when the weekend crashes down toward Monday. Hartnett's cautionary fairy tale probes into the stereotype of old queens to stick pins–quite literally–in the archetype of seniority: no person needs to grow into the cliché of himself.

Is it possible that a little onanism leads, if not to self-actualization, then at least to survival of the ego's identity for one more day? Perhaps, and perhaps not, in Neil Jordan's filmically impressionistic "Last Rites" where the transformative magic of autosexuality seems to drown in the June heat. (Is it the summer solstice that makes June such an important month in Celtic storytelling?) Jordan swims laps in the existential Irish Sea. Water imagery of erotic birth and sexual baptism abounds: the working-man's public bath becomes the sea, the rain, the "green rising mist," the transcendent "raised aura of the green [Irish] light." Jordan's adolescent, blue-eyed protagonist sinks, hard-on in "the self-immersed orgy of driving water," like stone, hardened by his cement work in England. Propelled by a "hidden purpose," this unnamed "Danny Boy," an immigrant out of Dublin, walks through this tale of anonymity "slowly, stiffly" because of the "unnatural straightness of his back," because of "anticipation he never questioned fully," because of "the secret thread of his week's existence emerging," because of sexual desire closeted and erotic personhood yet unidentified.

Neil Jordan's "Danny Boy" is innocent literary cousin to the flaming Anthony Burns who finds ecstatic love and death at the baths in the short story, "Desire and the Black Masseur," by Tennessee Williams, who, like Jordan, authored poetic fiction, drama, and screenplays. Jordan's "hard-biceped" boy, "black hair like a skull cap," enters his closet, his confessional, his coffin when he strips in his ritual chamber, a solo shower-stall where each anonymous man, aware of every other anonymous man—like Everyman caught in the curving infinity between two mirrors—waits in line for the next of the seventeen cubicles. The unidentified adolescent, readying himself

to masturbate himself into identity, reflects his self in search of his self: first, diversely, in the outcast otherness of immigrant blacks in the streets; second, culturally, in the resentment of overheard, isolated Irish voices in the bath; and third, literally, in the steamed mirror of his shower. This Danny Boy is no Narcissus, but this Danny Boy is chasing himself. His reflected body, measuring pleasure versus pain, life versus death, cuming versus not-cuming, is all that is real to him, precisely because he is so horny, adolescent, and alone. Adolescence shifts the shape of the body on whose physicality boys invoke the erotic magic that makes their sex rise.

While the twenty-something Neil Jordan, himself working as a labourer in London, wrote "Last Rites," he was scripting in intimate detail a nude erotic sequence in a screenplay: narrative, characters, flashbacks, voice-overs, multiple points of view imagined in italics, editing shot-by-shot insert cuts (blood and semen mixing with water) that punctuate the "ultimate solitude of the boxed, sealed figure." As in the fast edit of the shower scene in Hitchcock's *Psycho*, the quick verbal cuts of the shower scene in "Last Rites" pierce with sensual detail: the flap of hot plastic shower-curtain against wet skin, poppies of blood on the summer sand, stalactites of water dripping from each finger tip. When the boy orgasms, Jordan match-cuts elegantly to a cinematic close-shot of lemon-soft shampoo squeezing out in a pop into the brown hands of a young Trinidadian man in the next shower. The object of this young Irish lad's double-taboo affection is intimated in his inter-racial curiosity about other colors, same gender.

At the end, ambiguity is the wonder of any adolescent's tale. The texture of local color comes from the writer's experience, but the psychology of the character is a created fiction. Fiction is not autobiography. The storyteller, spinning a character's erotic consciousness so subjectively, cannot be forced to separate what really happens from what the character imagines happens in his masturbatory fantasy of ego identity. ("I'll kill myself and then see what they do!") As psychological dramatist, Jordan knows the cliché of suicide is rarely a satisfactory resolution in the coming-out genre. He demonstrated for all time that he is a trickster-storyteller at

the pivotal moment of erotic identity revelation in his film, *The Crying Game*. He spins the reader, from appearance to reality, with the sheer weight of sensual detail which grounds the "Last Rites" masturbatory fantasy on the first page, in reality, as a "solipsistic victory," and reveals that *le petite morte* is just the wonderful *grand mal* seizure of eros.

Neil Jordan's not-yet-out teenager is resentful, on the one hand, of "lipstick girls" whose "blonde pubes" cannot keep him straight. He is "bored to death," on the other hand, with the social pressure to be straight—itself more boring and brutal than the work week. He can be played—a surviving archetype—as alternate younger version of the older men in Hartnett's rather horrific "Dublin Sunday" and in "The Story Knife," a second tale by Jack Fritscher. The protagonists of both these narratives are gay men in their fifties, each peddling as fast as he can not to star in *Death in Venice*. Hartnett's existentialism vies with Fritscher's romanticism which takes a positive spin on Irish-American Catholicism, priests, Aids, and sex. Technology arms both the warrior-heroes. One sets on his journey with a video player; the other sets out on his hunt with a video camera. The way Hartnett works "blues," Fritscher works words, objects, and sexual psychology around the word "crystal." Both writers, as much as Michael Wynne, love language as much as Neil Jordan loves "directing" his story.

As a voice speaking, P-P Hartnett has the gift of a stand-up comedy performance artist in his oratorio: "E-Mail: Remember When We Weren't Queens?" Hartnett's emigrant Rory cannot escape orbit around Planet Ireland. (If you catch Danny Boy, then what are you going to do?) Avoiding the cliché that all Irish writing relates to James Joyce, one can fantasize in all the inventive styles in *Ulysses* that Joyce in a way anticipated the E-mail style which itself is often so freely associative. If form follows function, then E-mail, with its streaming stream-of-consciousness content instant on the worldwide web, replaces telephone calls which have replaced the letter. For Irish people in a world diaspora, in this way, the delivery of the Irish gift for language changes.

Lawrence W. Cloake is a Dublin writer of three stories in this collection: the ancient Irish setting of "Fiachra's Cath,"

the updated myth of "Bike Boy: Transporting," and the contemporary sex-politics of "Checkpoint." As true-toned a popular culture tale as any Celtic myth gathered by Lady Gregory into her canon, "Fiachra's Cath" peeks beneath the action-adventure genre that usually censors the sexuality of most old stories of warriors defending the rath (ringed fort) where they live. Lawrence Cloake writes in the present tense which reads as crisply as the description introducing the camera directions and dialog of a film script. Subtly, tribal life folds back and Fiachra, as a young man recognized as different in the rath, chases no man who does not chase him first. Bravery among men opens up the rubric of fertility rites to include love and comfort between warriors in a way that complements the mythic story, "The Lad of the Skins," collected by Lady Gregory. Fiachra, chased and penetrated by an enemy warrior, gives new, internal meaning to "shape shifting" as he shapes his anal ring to accommodate the hardening, shifting shape of his enemy. Finally, in the protective shape of male birds, Fiachra finds protection: much the same as in the legend of Finn and the Lad of the Skins, who did not return to live with his wife, instead leaving to live with his wife's father, Manannan.

In the great tradition of Irish stories of enchantments and changelings, of ghosts and horror on the fringes of the Other World of Myth, Cloake's "Bike Boy: Transporting" proves the age-old axiom that "what you are looking for is looking for you." Eventually, one becomes—shifts shape to—what one is looking for as an individual person and as part of a group. The enchantment of the changeling in "Bike Boy" parallels the personal psychological journey of coming-out from the straight to the gay. Bike Boy feels himself transforming, and sees himself actually changing in the mirrors of the Dublin shop windows he roars past late at night when all the spirits and fairies come out to play. Bike Boy spends every night chasing the gang, the clan, the other bike boys. This story is a wonderful sexual pun on the mechanics of sex. Lawrence W. Cloake gives a short prologue to his storytelling in the first person, and then for the body of the story, switches smoothly to the third person, using an abrupt stream-

of-consciousness interior monolog that keeps the character of Bike Boy focused extremely tight into the exact moment of what he is feeling, thinking, and experiencing. Bike Boy finds personality in community. His mentor, rising from the fog, references Finn MacCool, who in Irish legend is the leader of the ancient warriors and hunters, the Fianna.

Cloake's briefest story carries the biggest punch. His bike courier, Tony, stalled in a British checkpoint on the border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic in the south, is a protagonist on a journey. Distracted by sexual heat for young British soldiers, Tony is caught at a dramatic kind of Romeo-Juliet impasse: will the sexual message be delivered or not? Cloake interestingly works the attraction-repulsion of heterosexuality-homosexuality as well as British-Irish politics. Will love's message, or sex's message, cross through the star-crossed borders? Storytelling in the immediacy of the present tense heightens the crackle of the fireplace, the glow of the lamp, the roar of the bike, the sheen on the guns, the lust in the lonely night.

American author, Kelvin Beliele, also tracks a pair of erotic hunters in "Love's Sweet Sweet Song," a conscious gesture toward "forbidden" Joyce. In this story of a summer afternoon in Dublin, two young men, (one a leatherman, the other a young drag queen), cruising along the bank of the Liffey, override all the disguises, the masks, and roles, the switching trickster identities, the politics and the religion that so confuse their chase and infiltrate their consciousness. By trying to define the undefined desires of men together they make themselves human to each other so that love diversifying itself, always new and fresh and helixed beyond explanation, is possible. The negotiated peace talk between the lovers in this story brings up the beginning success of folding sexual liberation into Irish liberation.

For gay people in Ireland, the twenty-first century began on June 23, 1993, the night Irish storytelling came out of the closet and into the world.