INTRODUCTION

You, the curious reader, are probably perusing these pages not altogether unfamiliar with the Irishman, Edmund Rice (1762-1844) whose life work set up a movement of followers, Presentation Brothers, Christian Brothers, and what is now called the Edmund Rice Network. You might be in the Brotherhood, or part of this network, or a traveller seeking enlightenment from one who knew success and tragedy and seemed to be able to weave the two together as in an Aran sweater.

TWO INTERESTED PARTIES

While the Brothers’ movement has a very definite history from those early founding days, it might seem that the Edmund Rice Network is of only recent origin. But from the very beginning Edmund Rice had a vision of giving the poor their ‘place in the sun’ and inviting his business colleagues and parliamentary friends to be part of his enterprise in any way that their circumstances and genius would allow. His first workers were in businesses similar to his own. In fact one, James Quan, sought to buy Edmund’s business when he found teaching rowdy youth to be more than he could handle. This business transaction provided the much needed cash for Edmund to replace his trial stable school with Mount Sion, a very substantial school by nineteenth century standards. It was specifically aimed at providing education and employment opportunities for large numbers of poor youth. There was a whole network of people from different social strata and public office who were thus brought into this endeavour. Similarly, a colleague engaged in the wine trade, impressed by Edmund’s efforts, was not to be outdone in generosity. He built his own school in Carrick-on-Suir. The effort nearly killed him and he had to withdraw. Nevertheless, this was the unlikely seedbed for the second of the foundations which would in time expand throughout ‘the Kingdom’ as was Edmund’s desire.¹

¹ Though wishing to free the Catholic Irish poor, Edmund had no desire to join with the different rebel movements in overthrowing the British rule.
Today there are many who draw inspiration from Edmund Rice in working to provide some sunshine for the poor—hence the title, and one of its meanings of restoring to people their ‘place in the sun’. It was to enable them to reclaim their spiritual, material and cultural inheritance. Initially lay people became part of the network as the Brothers sought to enrich the curricula on offer in their schools. They also wished to release Brothers to move more to the margins of society, which has always been their primary call. In this process it was quickly appreciated that the contribution of lay people has been an ever-enriching one.

Not surprisingly, associated with the lay participation in Edmund Rice ministries, there was beginning to emerge a greater awareness and sensitivity regarding the first forty years of Edmund Rice’s life. Here could be observed the successful businessman, married but suddenly left a widower with a young infant, who grew up somewhat disabled. Edmund now became a businessman for God and a charismatic financial supporter of people in need.

This breadth of life experience with its focus on opening one’s heart to the poor and alleviating need in society appealed to young people in particular who began to run Edmund Rice Camps for disadvantaged young people, letting a bit of sunshine into their lives. The movement began in Melbourne in 1988 and has blossomed throughout Australia and other parts of the world. An energetic conference was held in Perth in 1999 involving some of these young people and others associated with the Brothers as they sought to both celebrate the emerging network and to understand its direction and dynamic more closely.

**A BUSINESSMAN’S HERO**

To say that Edmund Rice became a saint through the just use of money might seem surprising but it is not far from the truth. Edmund grew up with much beauty and security in his country setting of Callan. However, he would have observed the poverty around him. Crisis seemed to open his eyes to the need to address deprivation. Francis of Assisi, we are told, literally stepped out of his merchant’s clothing and embraced the sack-cloth of the poor with knotted rope tied around his waist. Edmund on the other hand maintained his business attire (in public at any rate) and used his financial expertise and knowledge of the law to champion the rights of the poor. It was as if he wished to bring the sacred domain into the corridors of power and business, backed up by good law. There is much that our business community can learn from this. So here is a third category for those interested in Edmund Rice: business people who include a social dividend as part of their balance sheet.
FORGING A NEW CHAPTER IN CELTIC SPIRITUALITY

Many people today wish to be able to bring together all aspects of their working, social, and family lives into a quilt which reveals vibrancy, energy, crises faced wholeheartedly, and a sense of interaction with community far and wide. For some, religion still plays a major role in this assimilation. For others they feel the current religious message has trivialised the story of life. However, both groups have been getting much nourishment from discovering something of the treasures of what is called Celtic Spirituality. Its themes of beauty, blessing, the all-pervading sense of the sacred, hospitality to the poor and myth take us down to the common stream of the spiritual quest to those life-giving waters which seem to quench the thirst of all spiritual searchers. Edmund Rice grew up with this type of spirituality as his ‘mother tongue’. For pilgrims in this quest, it will be of much interest for them to discern with me how Edmund was transformed in his soul-searching and was ultimately able to see every ‘bush as a burning bush’ and every stone as an a-ston-ish-ment when he saw the potential to transform the lives of the poor with increased opportunity. The question arises: Was Edmund dictating a new chapter in Celtic Spirituality in the emerging industrial or modern era when most writers were seeing its demise? And if so does he affirm our desire to translate Celtic Spirituality for our post-modern era? He attempted to ‘find his monastery in the streets’ as the challenge was put before him by a woman friend. Is that the very same challenge which is put before us in terms of more consciously being co-creators with God in everything we do?

TODAY’S READERSHIP REQUIRES A DIFFERENT STORY

Most authors on Edmund Rice have been more concerned with placing him in the context of the Founder of the Christian Brothers. They have been reluctant to speak much about the first part of his life, unable to find sufficient documentary material; but

2 Images gratefully borrowed from the great Irish story teller John Moriarty who will feature prominently in the story.
they also believed this had little bearing on his subsequent actions. However, I am led to believe that the first half of his life, with the tragic loss of his wife occupying such a prominent place in it, was instrumental in providing him with a vision of what could be, and furnishing him with the spiritual/psychic energy which animated his actions. Certainly, the well-documented actions speak with their own voice; but it is tantalising to wonder just what motivated him and how that was coloured by the Irish cultural/spiritual landscape he inhabited.

The image which presents itself, when looking at Edmund Rice, based on much previous writing, is of a fine imposing manor house representative of the actions and legacy left by him. But on stepping inside, one beholds the heavy curtains are drawn revealing only dim outlines which do have their own glow as one gets used to the half-light. What would happen, however, if one were to draw back the curtains and let in the sunlight, so revered by the Celts, to illumine that historical interior? Indeed, once the curtains have been drawn back there are many different windows through which one might look into this imposing dwelling place.

Over the lintel at the entrance there is a plate, similar to that of the birthplace of Edmund, Westcourt, with the popular Irish welcome Cead Mile Fáilte—a hundred thousand welcomes—to the vast international groups of visitors wishing to make contact with the spirit of the man they have become associated with in no matter how small a way. For someone wanting to get their first glimpse of the person, they might need to patiently make their way around the different windows noting the well worn pathway around the mansion as many people have sought their own view of the interior.

What needs to be borne in mind is that the light, which penetrates each window, is that of story. There are the windows of poetry, history, recreating dialogue, illustrations, music, science and archaeology. They each capture the light of the story in their own way and offer possibilities for making the story available to a wide range of readers. The aim has been to give children, through their teachers, access to the childhood parts the story window is a rich source of illumination in enlightening us in appreciating Edmund Rice. The reader will continually be invited back to this window.

3 This might seem axiomatic since material will not be preserved which is not thought to be valuable. In fact even though a General Council (1841) had resolved to gather as much information about Edmund as it could, subsequent to his resignation, very little was done until sixty years later
of Edmund’s life. Similarly Eddie Rice Campers might be curious about Edmund’s adventures as a young man and his journey towards romance and marriage. Teachers and leaders of Edmund Rice ministries need to know something of the detail of Edmund’s business and educational endeavours which were greatly influenced by the death of his wife and how he came to terms with it.

At the top of each window is a richly coloured glass panel. The spilling of colour into all these rooms is the illumination, which Celtic Spirituality casts on Edmund Rice and his surroundings. This colourful story window of Celtic heritage in the telling of Edmund’s story is needed following on from Desmond Kyne’s marvellous icon, rich in colour and Celtic allusion. It will be necessary, initially, to take note of the stained glass illustrations, which depict the Celtic Spirituality story (Vol 1) and then observe how the light of this story plays on that of Edmund and how he makes his own contribution to it. This is in sharp contrast to the glare of fluorescent lights as a way of illuminating the interior, which is Edmund Rice. This artificial harshness is worse than even leaving the curtains drawn with Edmund bathed in half-light. However, allowing these colours to play their part as a gift of the sun would seem to be an enlightening attitude.

**LINKS TO THE CELTIC GOLDEN ERA**

Certainly, at his funeral the eulogists were at pains not to introduce artificial light to garishly distort the memory, but rather to reflect on the extraordinary man they had just lain to rest. Stephen Curtis, barrister, and life-long friend drew attention to:

> the prominent place in Irish history that just man filled, and filled with honour, which requires not comment, which needs not panegyric, but which must ever make him stand out before the eyes of mankind as a Christian, a patriot, a public benefactor... We shall find few indeed to compare with him, with one illustrious exception of the present time, Daniel O’Connell.4

Are we to see in those two words: Christian and patriot, and the link the barrister made between Rice’s movement of monasteries and schools, with those which had bloodily been destroyed by Cromwell’s forces as a definite attempt to place the recently deceased Rice in truly Celtic soil? Certainly, the following speaker, Thomas Francis Meagher, left nobody in any doubt in linking the two eras. He quoted Gerald Griffin,5 said by some6 to be Ireland’s most illustrious poet and novelist of the nineteenth century:

5 Gerald Griffin, like Edmund Rice who renounced his business empire, forsook a future in literary writing to join the fledgling Christian Brothers in Cork in 1838 but died only two years later of influenza at the age of thirty seven. Even in that short period he was able to write “I have since been enlightening the craniums of wondering Paddies in this quarter, who learn from me, with profound amazement and profit, that o-x spells ox…” I Gerald Griffin, The Collegians (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1828) xviii.  
6 For example, Padraic Colum in the introduction to The Collegians (p. ix)
I speak of that time when the cells of the west
Gave voice after voice to the choir of the blest;
When the church of the isles saw her glories arise,
Columba the dove-like and Carthage the wise;
And the school and the temple gave light to each shore,
From clifted Iona to wooded Lismore.  

Are there other sign posts which point towards a connection between Edmund Rice and this Celtic landscape? Certainly, Daniel O’Connell’s naming him as the ‘Patriarch of the Irish Monks’ has allusions to monks, monasteries and learning. It was the admonition of his woman friend who challenged him to find his monastery in the streets and redeem the very poor of the towns and cities; and his subsequent efforts in feeding and clothing these people that this monastic bond was strengthened in the notion of ‘hospitality to the poor’ which had been the hallmark of monastic activity in those earlier periods.

THE CONNECTION FROM AN IRISH-AUSTRALIAN PERSPECTIVE

Why would a fifth generation Australian, devoid of the Irish language and so much of a sense of history and cultural heritage, wish to undertake this study when deep immersion in the people and the landscape would appear to be so necessary to such a task?

I have often felt my life, in common with many others, has had rather more downs than ups. While I might be a little more relaxed about embracing the seemingly chaotic parts of my life today there have been crisis periods which were in no hurry to dissipate. However, it was in trying to come to terms with cancer that I particularly found Edmund’s story very moving for the way in which he did not ‘run away’ from issues but seemed to turn and face them. My cancer now seems to be a thing of the past, thank God—through wonderful medical help. However, Edmund endured a multitude of trials right up to the time of his death. There was never any ‘woe is me!’ protest from him and in fact the opposite seemed to be the case. His own trials seemed to draw out more compassion from him. This total embracing of life in the face of loss and harassment, and using every ounce of his talent to give people their place in the sun—all nurtured by a deeply contemplative spirit and a love of beauty in creation—has been what has endeared him to me.

ON THE RECONCILIATION TRAIL—FINDING SIMILARITIES IN OUR STORIES

Our lives are not lived in a vacuum and as a Brother and teacher I was relatively young (25) when asked to be one of those commencing our first school, specifically for Aboriginals, in Broome, Western Australia in 1971. Here, once I moved beyond the notion that I was the messenger by way of education, and began to tread a little more respectfully on their land and culture, I became increasingly awestruck by the ways in which their culture revealed the closeness of their spirit world. But at some point this deep appreciation of the God of Presence required me to walk my own journey to realise it fully. Thus in 1988 I had the opportunity of travelling overseas, of making a pilgrimage, of journeying to my cultural roots. Since that period I have been exposed to a story that seemed to resonate with what I saw in Aboriginal people. This Celtic story with its

7 Burke, History of the Institute 426.
8 Ibid. 217.
9 Edmund Rice and his followers, though initially called Presentation Brothers were more affectionately termed ‘monks’ by those who came in contact with them. The term has become an in-house one by the Brothers: “Hey, Monks, who wants a game of footie this afternoon?”!
10 Burke, History of the Institute 7
myths, art, song and relationships with the land formed the landscape for Edmund Rice it seems to me. To be mindful of this landscape or Celtic pulse is not only to understand more fully the life of Edmund as a colourful three dimensional diorama, but it explains much of the reason for Edmund’s actions.

When Pope John Paul II addressed Indigenous peoples at Alice Springs in 1986 it was the result of deep listening by the Church to the spirituality of the first Australians:

You lived your lives in spiritual closeness to the land, with its animals and birds, fishes, waterholes, rivers, hills and mountains. Through your closeness to the land you touched the sacredness of men’s and women’s relationship with God, for the land was the proof of a power in life greater than ourselves. You did not spoil the land, use it up, exhaust it, and then walk away from it. You realised that your land was related to the source of life.

It would seem that there are strong implications for all in learning to appreciate this unique spirituality when the Pope went on to observe:

You are part of Australia and Australia is part of you. And the Church herself in Australia will not be fully the Church that Jesus wants her to be until you have made your contribution to her life and until that contribution has been joyfully received by others.\(^{11}\)

Australia is currently trying to engage in reconciliation with the Indigenous peoples of this land in a process that is progressing, but not uniformly well. For too long Indigenous people and their culture have been ignored, or seen as troublesome and unadapative. There has been a conspiracy of silence regarding the degree to which Indigenous people have been deprived of land, family and culture. A turning point was the High Court’s Mabo decision in 1992 which recognised the traditional ownership of the land and debunked the notion of terra nullius. Although both successive Governments and the courts have given greater recognition to Indigenous aspirations the movement has been uneven and not pursued with any enthusiasm in most quarters. This Reconciliation Movement or Walking Together is an attempt to recognise Aboriginal rights associated with the original ownership of the land. It also appreciates their need to realise their identity through the land that contains their stories and song lines.

It is apparent that those with a Celtic connection hasten this spirit of reconciliation when they too can be in touch with their deepest story (in this case Celtic), and become

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\(^{11}\) Pope John Paul, “Address by Pope John Paul to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People at Alice Springs,” (Canberra: Department of Aboriginal Affairs, 1987). It would be interesting to imagine the effect of the pope of the day making a similar speech to the Celtic peoples on the slopes of Tara!
Edmund Rice: Restoring the Circle to the Celtic Cross

aware of the many points of contact that deep story sets up. It is a story of connection to the land, myth making and religion—which means tying one back to one’s original connections. It is about noting what is trampled upon when oppressive forces are rampant; but yet when cultural roots go deep there can be absorption of the new and weaving it in with the old. In this one can more easily see the need for brotherhood and sisterhood among all people and a desire to remedy the wrongs of the past. It is possible too that for many Indigenous people who have mixed heritage, knowing something of this Celtic story might allow for their own reconciliation appreciating that humanity at its deepest and fullest has a unity which links it to the divine. It need not be necessary to acknowledge one part believing that the other is antipathetic to it.

Throughout this story we allude to Edmund Rice as a steam engine with many carriages attached. The spirit of Edmund drives this train throughout the length and breadth of Australia now and it is possible to see both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians sharing a carriage and exploring what Travelling Together can mean at this time. We will not be alluding to this dialogue in the course of the story, but interested parties may well be intrigued at the ways in which such themes as land, myth, presence, spirit/otherworld, and oppression and fight-back occur. one who bridged the old world and the new. No longer was the world as numinous as in the past. Edmund, a product of the Enlightenment Era, was able to live out of that spirit filled past but yet was open to the modern business world, new forms of communication. He was conscious of a growing confidence shaping the modernist world view that man (sic) was the centre of the universe. While accepting the demands of a changing world he resisted a secular view of education and insisted that the sacred dimension permeate all aspects of life.

PROVIDING THE FOUNDING STORY FOR NEW INITIATIVES

There is a great diversity of works which members of the Edmund Rice network are engaged in that might broadly be termed educational. In the same way that Edmund Rice and his followers were wrestling with the need to be inclusive of more than the poor

LIVING AND WORKING TOGETHER IN THE SPIRIT

Artist William Parmbuk’s icon. Christ at the centre expressing forgiveness and reconciliation. The rays of the cross representing the four Australian Christian Brothers’ Provinces. The black dots are Indigenous Peoples, white dots non-Indigenous Peoples. The Spirit figures represent young people and movement into the future. The didgeridoo shows the breath of the Spirit going out. All this is embraced by strength and represented by the boomerangs.

Shortly after their invention and opening in Dublin, Edmund took his men on a pioneer journey. The train is still travelling and now extended through many lands.
in their work of teaching and preparation for life, so, in many countries, there are schools in the Edmund Rice tradition which work with a more financial clientele. There is plenty of scope to note in Edmund Rice’s life how he continued to move in the upper echelons of society to gain their cooperation and participation in his principal project on behalf of the poor. But perhaps more importantly his continuous reliance on business, law, and political expertise as he reached out to many, particularly women, whose financial circumstances made them marginal, provides us with both an example and inspiration for what acting ethically in the world of business and finance can be.

However, in new initiatives the thrust has been more towards seeking to be in solidarity with the poor and empowering them in similar ways to Edmund Rice but which are appropriate in the modern context. This work aims to provide the founding story for all these initiatives and to suggest ways in which people might be able to articulate for themselves what they are trying to achieve and what benefits flow back to them.

**A CHEQUERED HISTORY**

This is not a ‘feel good’ story. There is so much of it which has us groaning at the age old saying of ‘power corrupts’. We behold it initially in the power of the state to use religion as a means of economic control and marginalising those who do not conform. Initially it is seen in...
Edmund had his fair share of conflict with religious and secular authorities.

This story of Edmund Rice confronts us all with the need to be fully alive to ourselves and seeks to harness all our competing needs and energies into a project which is ultimately for the good of all as well as being deeply fulfilling. As Edmund Rice showed in his life this does not mean bliss at all times, but a depth of faith in oneself, tested by crisis, affirmed by others, graced by God's supportive action, and promoting a vision which has us striving against all obstacles.

**A NEW FORM OF HAGIOGRAPHY**

Of recent times the spotlight has been turned on many business leaders and politicians whose corrupt business practices have been exposed. In one such case a businessman of questionable ethics, has been laid to rest in his haven of exile. Conjecture about the possible publication of a family memoir about the man with a view to saving the family from poverty has met with something of a cynical response. It was not so much a question of how impoverished they might be, but of the writing itself. It would be nothing less than a pious hagiography, it was thought.

Even with more worthy subjects, hagiography, throughout the ages, has been infamous for reworking the lives of extraordinary people with far more devotion to religious sentiment than allowing the persons to speak for themselves. Of more recent times there have been valiant attempts to allow more factual accounts to be the witnesses to such people. To the modern taste this has seemed the commendable thing to do. However, such writing can also be counter-productive if it means that these works lie unread because of the uninteresting treatment.

One of the ambitious aims of this work is to recapture some of the charm of the hagiographies of the Celtic golden age, not by weaving in all sorts of fanciful legends—which

12 No, not the study of witches! Rather, in the very well established tradition of looking at people remarkable for their total self-giving.
have their own particular truth attached to them—but rather to allow the drama of his life, to be told in the full colours available. The use of imagined dialogues between Edmund Rice and key figures that influenced him will play their part. Poetic and literary sources also play their role; but so do the uncovered facts from the many researchers. It reveals a man, not immune from the loves and tragedies of life; one who is deeply inserted into the political and social milieu around him; and one who is imbued with the Irish ‘Faith of his Fathers’, though diplomatically independent when it came to listening to the Church hierarchy. He becomes a much sought after role model for many today.

**PADDLING DOWN THE RIVER**

Hopefully we are all aware of how our dream images keep changing in kaleidoscopal ways. If you are at all uncomfortable at the many changing images used to describe the Edmund Rice story you might be a little more placated by the abundant images which Jesus uses to describe the ‘Kingdom of Heaven’, including nets cast, a woman cleaning her house, a man selling all that he has to buy a field etc. Each provides its own insight.

Reading this story is like paddling down a river. The upper reach of that river is actually a long tributary containing the Celtic Spirituality story. Some will be quite happy to put their canoe into the upper reaches and follow the meandering twists in that part of the river. They will note how it flows with nothing to mark its change of name to the wider reaches of the Edmund Rice story. (The Presentation Sisters might see their own Nano Nagle in this part of the river!) However, for our purposes we are depicting this change with a change of volume. So it is easy to put your canoe into this part of the river. However, as all rivers have their little tributaries flowing into them or form little islands midstream one is tempted to interrupt one’s journey and feel the river in its many dimensions. Well, there are plenty of these in the course of our journey. It ensures that the purpose of the reading is not so much to get to the end as to savour the trip along the way and appreciate the richness of the surrounding Celtic landscape. I can only hope that if anyone is intent in ‘getting to the facts of the matter’ and skipping the colourful diversions that you are not too frustrated in the process. It might even be that you are particularly visual in which case the illustrations might be the extent of your explorations. Hopefully, given some leisure time, the text might welcome you to paddle your canoe. If you do you will be in good company because we are told Edmund was quite a keen rower!

Eventually, after much canoeing, you pull into the quays of Waterford. There you spy this steam-drawn train preparing to depart the city with an expanding line of carriages containing hordes of rowdy children and a number of gentlemen and ladies. Some of

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13 This is to follow in the footsteps of Br Dominic Burke who wrote the first, and in this writer’s view, the most fascinating account of Edmund Rice. His dialogue between Edmund Rice and Bishop Hussey has made for a most memorable event and was used by subsequent writers. Burke, History of the Institute 13.
CHAPTER ONE

THE THINNESS BETWEEN THIS WORLD AND THE OTHERWORLD

CREATION AS A REFLECTION OF THE DIVINE ENERGY AT WORK

At the heart of any appreciation of Celtic Spirituality is the notion of the thinness between this world and the ‘Otherworld’. We are talking here of a multifaceted diamond. One face of it is the sense of immanence between the Divine energy and creation. What we are wishing to experience more strongly in contemporary thought and spirituality has a history of articulation in all indigenous cultures, and that of the Israelites, which became the Christian inheritance.

To touch the fleshiness of the earth is to touch sacred ground and there are hundreds of monuments to this all over the countryside particularly in Ireland. Stonehenge in England and Brú na Bóinne (New Grange) in Ireland would be the pre-eminent examples of it stretching back 5000 years. Terence Meaden likens the awesomeness of the light and shadow play exhibited at summer and winter solstices at these two places as a communion between the Sun God and Earth Mother.1 Particularly in Ireland, there is such a numinous sense about these mounds as homes for the Tuatha de Danann (the folk of the goddess Dannu), who were inhabitants of the land before choosing to go underground and controlling the fertility of the crops as their compromise with the conquering Milesians who chose the surface of the land. 2

There are numerous stories telling how at Samhain and Beltaine people cross over from the Otherworld to this and vice-versa.

The Christianisation of Samhain to Halloween or All Saints/Souls Days has ensured

1 George Terence Meaden, The Goddess of the Stones (London: Souvenir Press, 1991), Terence Meaden, Stonehenge the Secret of the Solstice (London: Souvenir Press, 1997). I felt greatly privileged by having him give me a tour of Stonehenge and Avebury while he expounded on his theories surrounding these two places. It seems to me that his attraction to the sense of the divine feminine and fertility as the profound mystery of the time resonates with Aboriginal allusions to Mother Earth and the shaping of their relationship to her. He was very interested in my discovery that the triple spiral so famously depicted at Newgrange has its own meaning for Western Desert Aboriginal women and is part of their Law Business.

2 The story has been charmingly told by Sean O’Duin based on researches regarding the Book of Fermoy. Sean O’Duinn, “Celtic Mythology and the Otherworld” (paper presented at the Celtic Vision-Conference on Celtic Spirituality, Glendalough, 1998).
that religious sentiments can sit comfortably with children at play as they go from door to door soliciting ‘trick or treats’.

But while admonitions might have been directed at children to safeguard them from evil at night, for any folk who had a parlous hold on property, possessions, and even a place to lay their heads, fear of those over them could easily lead to increased sensitivity to the spirit world around them. Storytelling around the hearth on a chill night would be one way of drawing comfort from each other as well as having a good laugh. The Christian equivalent of Lucifer versus the other angels is the flip side of the coin representing all that is otherworldly and could be held close to one’s person just as surely as the hard won coppers of the day. Thus the Christian overlay of the feasts of All Saints and All Souls could be interpreted as the transformation of these old pre-Christian practices; or helping a people to maintain their heritage embracing the ‘Otherworld’ even as they fulfilled their Christian devotions.

The supreme force of safety against the forces of evil, either of this or the other world, of course was Christ,

3 The modern ritualising around these days which involves children dressing up and going from door to door requesting nuts and apples is meant to depict the quest by the Tuatha de Danann (the ‘Little People’) seeking payment for bestowing fertility on the crops. What might be amusing for some is taken very seriously by others and not to be messed around with!
appealed to in that mighty Breastplate of St Patrick:

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\text{Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,} \\
\text{Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,} \\
\text{Christ on my right, Christ on my left,} \\
\text{Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down, Christ when I arise,} \\
\text{Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,} \\
\text{Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,} \\
\text{Christ in every ear that hears me.}
\]

It will be interesting to see if the person who is the focus of our attention in this study, Edmund Rice, will seem as if he carries Christ in his being and whether he can inspire confidence in others that they too carry Christ with them, no matter what their circumstances.

In viewing this multifaceted diamond we are soon aware of the role of imagination in tracking different textures and overlays that ensure the thinness between these two worlds. Along with it go humour, poetry, story telling and the mystique of the feminine.

**COLOURED BY CHRISTIANITY**

The coming of Christianity to Ireland is often spoken of as a painless marrying of this nature religion with the story of Christ. Certainly Patrick wished to plant the structure of the European church with its bishops and priests tending their ‘flocks’. However, there were no towns and cities but rather little kingdoms with king and poet ruling over little more than extended families. This seemed to be just right for the flowering of monasteries of monks and nuns. What also might have contributed to this spread of monastic settlements was the fact that celibacy was not the necessary condition of life in a monastic setting it later became. Certainly the similarity between the monastic and wider feudal lifestyle provided a framework for endowing the monasteries with the position of abbot often being an inherited position.

The love of poetry in these people was now given extra scope with the arrival of language tools for reading and writing in either the new languages of Latin and, to a lesser extent, Greek, or in their own native language. Poetry became a means of expressing the monks’ joy at meeting the child Jesus or his Mother, Mary; of describing the beauty of God’s creation, or merely taking time out to describe the parallels between the cat hunting and the scribe writing.

If the story might seem charming and neat, we have to make room for the sense of paradox permeating

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ing so much of it. How do we explain the zest for life and beauty extolled in the lives of the mythical heroes and yet note how the lives of the Celtic saints abound with tales of rigorous asceticism? There is poetic lyricism when describing the beauties of nature or longing for homeland in the case of Columba bound for Iona. Yet the desire to live on the isolated craggy outcrops of Skellig Michael is its own lyrical statement—an embrace of fearsome nature both within and without. Rather than seek to solve the paradox, it seems that the monks of old chose to hold the two extremes in tension and live with the consequences. Some of the stories bear this out. While one abbot is proclaiming the virtue of abstinence in drink another is celebrating the life it offers:

‘The drink of forgetfulness of God shall not be drunk here’, said the abbot of Tallaght. ‘Well, my household shall drink it,’ replied the abbot of Finglas, ‘and they will be in heaven along with your household.’

A QUESTION OF SALVATION
A similar sense of paradox prevailed over the question of salvation. But it went even further than that and embraced the whole question of what is sacred. The lesson to be learnt from the following story seems to be that one bows down to the Mystery rather than fathom the depths of it:

St Cadoc, that curious Welsh character who founded Llancarvan and who was reputed to be at once hermit, abbot, bard, and feudal chieftain, was educated at Liss-mor and had a passion for Virgil, whom he taught his pupils to learn by heart. “One day while walking with his friend and companion the famous histo-

rian Gildas, with his Virgil under his arm, the abbot began to weep at the thought that the poet whom he loved so much might be even then perhaps in Hell. At the moment when Gildas reprimanded him severely for that ‘perhaps’ protesting that without any doubt Virgil must be damned, a sudden gust of wind tossed Cadoc’s book into the sea. He was moved by this accident and, returning to his cell, said to himself ‘I will not eat a mouthful of bread, nor drink a drop of water before I know truly what fate God has allotted to those who sang upon the earth as the angels sing in heaven.’ After he fell asleep and soon after, dreaming, heard a soft voice addressing him, ‘Pray for me, pray for me,’ said the voice; ‘never be weary of praying. I shall yet sing eternally the mercy of the Lord.’ The next morning a fisherman of Belz brought him a salmon, and the Saint found in the fish the book which the wind had snatched from his hands.”

So rather than speculate on what salvation might mean and for whom it was available the myth pointed to mystery which was to be celebrated rather than analysed. However, in referring to Virgil’s poetry as: ‘those who sang upon the earth as the angels sing in heaven’, one is left in no doubt as to the value these people placed in poetry as a vehicle for praising the Creator who blessed them with such beauty and power.

**IS YOUR GOD A GOD OF BEAUTY?**

Supposedly at the dawn of the Irish Christian story it is reported by Bishop Tírechán (seventh century) that the daughters of King Loiguire, Ethne and Fedelm, met Patrick and his followers at a well and initially thought they were men of the si, the people who come from under the earth. Intrigued they asked Patrick: ‘Are you really there? Where have you come from?’ Patrick replied to them: ‘It would be better for you to confess faith in our true God than to ask questions about our origin.’

The first girl asked: ‘Who is God? And where is God, and whose God is he, and where is his house? Has your God sons and daughters, gold and silver? Is he alive forever? Is he beautiful? Have many people fostered his son? Are his daughters dear and beautiful to the men of this world? Is he in heaven or on earth, in the sea, on mountains, in valleys? Give us some idea of him: how he may be seen, how loved; how may he be found—is he found in youth or in old age?

In his reply, Patrick, filled with the Holy Spirit, said:

‘Our God is the God of all people, the God of heaven and earth, of the sea and of the rivers, the God of the sun and the moon and of all the stars, the God of the high mountains and of the deep valleys. He is God above heaven and in heaven and under heaven, and has as his dwelling place heaven and earth and the

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sea and all that are in them. His life is in all things. He kindles the light of the sun; he builds the light and the manifestations of the night; he makes wells in arid land and dry islands in the sea, and he sets the stars in place to serve the major lights.

'He has a son who is coeternal with him and of like nature. The Son is not younger than the Father nor the Father than the Son; and the Holy Spirit breathes in them. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are not separate. Truly, now, since you are daughters of an earthly king, I wish that you will believe and I wish to wed you to the king of heaven.'

With such an offer of marriage as that who could refuse?! The questions are as intriguing as the answers! What it reveals is that these people are great lovers of beauty and have a profound sense of the cosmos. We shall return to the place of the sun in this view but need to stay with their love of poetry to describe the beauty that surrounded them.

It was in their little rhyming verses of the eighth century:

To praise God in his might,
When the tiny mindless birds
Praise him in their flight.8

It can be seen in the everyday actions of the common folk:

I smoor the hearth
As Brighid the foster-mother would smoor it.
The holy name of the foster-mother
Be upon the hearth and the herd,
Be upon each of my household.
The encircling of God upon myself and the hearth,
The encircling of God upon myself and the door,
Upon each herd and flock,
Upon each of my household.10

THE COSMIC CHRIST

Now if we return to the breastplate of St Patrick the full cosmic dimension is celebrated as well:

I arise today

Through the strength of Heaven
Light of sun
Radiance of moon
Splendour of fire
Speed of lightning
Swiftness of wind
Depth of the sea
Stability of earth
Firmness of rock

I arise today
Through God’s strength to pilot me
God’s eye to look before me
God’s wisdom to guide me

7 Liam De Paor, Saint Patrick’s World (Blackrock: Four Courts Press, 1993) 163.
9 To smoor the ashes was a ritualised action, last thing at night, of applying a coating of protective ash over the smouldering peat fire which could be brushed off the next day. In this way the fire was rekindled.
10 Caitlin and John Matthews, The Encyclopaedia of Celtic Wisdom (New York: Element, 1994) 329
When we look a little more closely at the predilection the Irish had for monasticism we can see how this poetic yearning flowed through the pens of many a scribe. However, in tracing their affinity for seeing creation as both divine play and enticing the human response of longing, there opens out a full flowering of this creative impulse in all those of a literary disposition, often mixed with patriotic fervour. When we move beyond the rich Middle Ages period to the Enlightenment era, and follow the footprints of poetry reflecting the intimacy between God and creation, we find the byways well marked. Among the most beloved was Thomas Moore (1779-1829). In writing his own introduction to a published anthology of his poetry he strongly declared his social activism lest anyone mistake his parlour orations for weakness:

To those who identify nationality with treason, and who see in every effort for Ireland a system of hostility toward England—to those, who, nursed in the gloom of prejudice, are alarmed by the faintest gleam of liberality that threatens to disturb their darkness...—to such men I shall not deign to apologise for the warmth of any political sentiment which may occur in the course of these pages...  

If not the first, Moore became one of many poet-patriots (including O’Reilly, mentioned in the previous footnote). One of the main instigators of the Easter Uprising of 1916, Padraig Pearse (1879-1916), was another who was inspired by the love of nature to seek justice for the people. They became known as poets and martyrs for their country. In this segment Moore relishes both the landscape and the friendship that accompanies it, the more poignant owing to the shadow of oppression cast upon it:

11 Adam, The Cry of the Deer: Meditations on the Hymn of St Patrick 3-4. This is beautifully celebrated in song as part of The Pilgrim a Celtic Suite for Orchestra, Soloists, Pipe Band and Choir composed by Shaun Davey (who in lighter vein composed the music for Waking Ned Divine!).

12 Note Thomas Moore was almost an exact contemporary of Edmund Rice (1762-1844) who enjoyed his poetry immensely, even if later critics do not.


14 In the remarkable Allen Library of the O’Connell Schools in North Richmond Street (Edmund Rice’s headquarters in Dublin), I was shown the roll book that Padraig Pearse had filled in for his class ending on Holy Thursday of 1916. By the close of class at the end of the day he was in revolution mode. The Easter Uprising was bloodily put down. Pearse and his companions were executed for treason, a bad miscalculation by the British. ‘They were men of such beautiful character—such literary attainments—mystics who kept the light burning’ was how they were eulogised. Kenneth Neill, An Illustrated History of the Irish People (New York: Mayflower Books, Inc., 1979) 171.
There is not in the wide world a valley so sweet
As that vale in whose bosom the bright waters meet!
Oh! The last rays of feeling and life must depart
Ere the bloom of that valley shall fade from my heart.

Yet it was not that nature had shed o’er the scene
Her purest of crystal and brightest of green;
’Twas not the soft magic of streamlet or hill,
Oh! no—it was something more exquisite still.

’Twas that friends, the beloved of my bosom, were near,
who made every dear scene of enchantment more dear,
and who felt how the best charms of nature improve,
when we see them reflected from looks that we love.

Sweet vale of Avoca! How calm could I rest
In thy bosom of shade with the friends I love best,
Where the storms that we feel in this cold world should cease,
And our hearts, like thy waters, be mingled in peace!  

Poetry was the very acceptable vehicle for underlining penmanship of the Divine One at play with creation and constantly bringing forth a world of much beauty even if sullied with human machinations. Warrior strength and subtlety then came into its own seeking to restore justice where the Creator was being thwarted by human greed.

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15 O’Reilly, ed., The Poetry and Song of Ireland 34.
ANAM CARA

The theme of friendship whether of a natural bond or anam cara (soul friend) is a rich one in the Celtic story. The saying: “A person without a soul friend is like a person with his head chopped off” has been ascribed to St Brigid; but, irrespective of the merits of that, it underlines just how crucial this bonding is and how the heroic tales of the mythic figures and the saints underline it. Certainly, in Edmund Rice it will re-emerge as crucial to appreciating how he saw his mission and was encouraged to follow it.

The different literary genres of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries abound with themes of love of nature and justice-seeking in the form of patriotism. We look below at the notion of hospitality to the poor and how this was yet another facet of the diamond which was so lustrous because of the heightened sense that this was God’s creation: it demanded justice for all, or at least hospitality to those who were suffering scarcity for any reason at all. Celtic Spirituality in its pre-Christian form had no trouble proclaiming that what you saw was not all you saw. Not only was it possible to see through creation to an Otherworld but that, in the beauty of creation and how it might be adorned, the divine is made manifest. With the coming of Christ this was made more certain. However, there seemed to be two additions. Creation might be holy but that did not stop people from wanting more of it than was their share. In fact greed and avarice seemed to be natural consequences of a longing that was part and parcel of the beauty of creation. The major sagas of Celtic folklore including that between Maeve and Cúchulainn pointed to the double-edged sword that land and possessions were. The pioneering Celtic monks were sensitive to beauty even as they desisted from its allurement. Not only did they choose wild places to dwell in but undertook fasts and penances. This was not so much because they despised the fleshiness of creation but because they aspired to treat it with due reverence.

HOSPITALITY TO THE POOR

The other gift of Christianity to the Celtic fascination with creation was its enhanced sense of showing hospitality to the poor. It might well have been part of a sharing charism which went before, just as the Indigenous people of Australasia are famous for it; but in the Christian dispensation when property rights were defended with fire and sword, these early Celtic Christians pointed to this new reality. The new Christian folklore contained endless examples of it. There was Brigid who gave away her father’s sword to a leper in need, and Aidan who gave away his horse, in full liveried splendour, which had been recently gifted to him by the king, to a beggar. In both cases the authorities who questioned them about the foolishness of such actions came away humbled by a sense that they were the ones who were overpowered with such simplicity and reverence for God’s lowly ones.

The Iona Community today, mindful of this tradition of hospitality have made it a special quality which they practise most graciously. A Celtic Rune of Hospitality used by them is:

I saw a stranger at yestere’en.
I put food in the eating place,
Drink in the drinking place,
Music in the listening place,
And in the sacred name of the Triune
He blessed myself and my house,
My cattle and my dear ones,
And the lark said in her song
Often, often, often,
Goes the Christ in the stranger’s guise

As David Adam so aptly says: ‘The Celtic Church did not so much seek to bring Christ as to discover Him: not to possess Him but to see Him in “friend and stranger”; to liberate the Christ who is already there in all His riches.’

And after the evangelisation of Scotland by Columcille and his disciples it is not surprising that they have their version of what hospitality to the poor means:

The Lyke Wake Dirge
If ever thou gavest hosen and shoon
—Every night and all,
Sit thee down and put them on;
And Christ receive thy soul.

If hosen and shoon thou never gavest nane
—Every night and all,
The whins shall prick thee to the bare bane;
And Christ receive thy soul.

If ever thou gavest meat and drink
—Every night and all,
The fire shall never make thee shrink;
And Christ receive thy soul.

If meat and drink thou never gavest nane
—Every night and all,
The fire will burn thee to the bare bane;
And Christ receive thy soul.

NO DUALISMS
This is what modern writers like John O'Donohue and others mean when they say: ‘the Celtic mind was not burdened by dualism...The dualism which separates the visible from the invisible, time from eternity, the human from the divine, was totally alien to them.’ This insight is an important one to grasp because as we look at Edmund Rice against this Celtic landscape it will enable us to appreciate why feeding and educating his impoverished students was not in some way a lesser priority to saving their souls as some would like to see it.

And it seems that despite his falling out with institutionalised religion a writer such as James Joyce, if he were to be a true observer of his people, could not help but inject the unity between secular and sacred into his writing. There is one two-in-one scene in Ulysses: A beautiful romantic scene at the beach is juxtaposed with the sacredness of Devotions and Benediction being celebrated in the church just over the road at Sandy-mount. On the one hand there is the playing of ball on the strand with little sub-plots of girls competing for the affections of the gentleman joining in the game and the twin children competing to get the biggest kick in ‘till at last Master Jacky who was really as bold as brass—there was no getting behind that—deliberately kicked the ball as hard as ever he could down towards the seaweedy rocks’.

No sooner are we at home with this little domestic scene than our attention is drawn to the fragrant incense wafting through the open church window adjacent,

...and with it the fragrant names of her who was conceived without stain of original sin,
spiritual vessel, pray for us, honourable vessel, pray for us...And careworn hearts were there and toilers for their daily bread and many who had erred and wandered, their eyes wet with contrition but for all that bright with hope for the reverend Father Hughes had told them what the great Saint Bernard said in his famous prayer of Mary, the most pious Virgin’s intercessory power that it was not recorded in any age that those who implored her powerful protection were ever abandoned by her’. 

In the meantime ‘the twins were now playing again right merrily for the troubles of childhood are but as fleeting summer showers...’

Whether one sees in this juxtaposition the split between the secular and the sacred and would see in the chaining of the litany a desire to seek refuge from the ‘vale of tears’ which so many lived in is open to question. I lean to the view that James Joyce is forced to see the two scenes as part of the whole. Popular piety, by this time, was very heavenly oriented but no matter what the preachers might have been saying the incense and the mantras were a vehicle for allowing the people to place Christ and his mother in the midst of their trials and tribulations, not as an escape, but as a means of weaving them into the web of life and seeking their intercessors’ protection in the process.

In spiralling fashion we have seen something of the multifaceted diamond which reveals the ‘thinness’ between the divine realm and the human. Back through the mists of time we observe the numinous presence of other beings whose dwellings are marked by the mounds and dolmens. The choirs of angels and archangels became the Christian overlay while the main feast of Christmas and Easter heightened the drama of the pre-Christian ceremonial. Nature herself in all her beauty and storminess inspired that awe and wonder which has provided the palette of colours for the visual and literary artists, but especially the poets who have always enjoyed a greater prominence than anywhere else. With the advent of Christianity the Christ child and his mother became the ultimate expressions of this imprint of God on creation and they were quick to see Christ’s special relationship with the poor. Consequently, ‘hospitality to the poor’ became a key trait in ensuring there be no flaws in God’s creation. However, as nature, once it becomes property can be so alluring, there rose up communities of monks and nuns who radically tried to temper this allurement with ascetical practices not to despise beauty of form but to be more single-minded in its appreciation.

POINTS FOR REFLECTION

1. What Do you think accounts for the modern interest in Celtic Spirituality?
2. What are the different facets of the diamond of Celtic Spirituality? To what extent do they hold appeal for you?
3. Literature and, particularly poetry, has always been a good vehicle for exploring spirituality. What are your favourites in this regard?
4. What role are the maths and sciences playing in enhancing our spirituality today?
5. Is ‘hospitality to the poor’ just about feeding and clothing them?