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The Robin on the Path

BY DIAN KILLIAN, PH.D. · THE GAELIC EFFECT: HOW THE IRISH LANGUAGE CAN SAVE THE WORLD · 7 AUGUST 2026



The path... and the portal (Photo by author; all rights reserved.)

Comhghairdeas! (Congratulations!) The winner of this month's Grá Mór ("Big Love") raffle is Micheál McEvoy. A heart felt *míle buíochas* ("a thousand thanks") to Micheál for his support and to each *chara* (friend) backing *The Gaelic Effect*. Thank you for being here. Stay tuned for the next Grá Mór—more fabulous prizes coming up! All paying subscribers are entered to win. GRMA arís (thank you again).

everything breathing

Last week I was in County Clare, near the Burren. I was walking in a forest bursting with life and reflected on how Ireland was, at one time (*fadó, fadó*—a very long time ago) a temperate rain forest. What would it be like? As I walked along, a bird suddenly appeared in my path about two

feet before me. I stood completely still—still as a tree, even stiller, as the trees around me moved in the wind. I felt completely part of the forest—all that was breathing. The bird came closer still. Rather than flying off or heading back to safety, she hopped closer—hop, hop. She walked past my feet, almost between them. She stood still for a moment, turning up her head, listening—for what? I thought for a second she might hop on my toes—my feet a kind of stone. Yet she moved past me, hopping along on her way as if a big human in her path was a normal, every day thing. I wanted to tell her—*bí cúramach* (be careful): don't trust us humans. You never know what we might do! But she was *misniúil* (plucky and courageous, with good spirit). She thoughtfully stepped along the dirt path and, once a few feet away, flew off to the branch of a small tree. I turned slightly to see her once more and, in a second, she was gone.

The day before I was at a *ceardlann* (a workshop) where I had no idea what would happen. I was enchanted with the title, *Fox and Star*. There was no other description—just the title. Like the “Drink Me” bottle in *Alice in Wonderland*, I found it compelling so I eagerly signed up. At the workshop, the two presenters shared a few words about their work, their journey together, and then told us to get up. We were all to become trees. We could be any tree we liked: any kind—young, slender saplings or old knotted trees. We were all in the forest together, moving in the wind. We were a forest of dancing trees. Next we were told that one of us would become a fox. Who would it be? A fox emerged from the deep, moving woods—stepping lightly. The fox was delighted, walking among us, the trees. Next, several people were asked to transform from trees into rabbits. The rabbits moved with the fox in the forest. We were next told that we needed a star in the night's sky, and a star appeared. While all this was happening, we were listening (like a heartbeat) to the prayer-song *Reír Dé* (click on the video above to hear it). All of life was happening at once: Fox walking happily among us, the trees moving, and his friend Star lighting the way; rabbits dancing in the night. Everything was alive—and we were all part of it.

Who else would enjoy this or find it interesting?

led astray

Then suddenly everything changed: it became completely dark. Star was gone. Fox was lost, in every way. Star had been his constant companion; she had lit the way. Where was she now? As if blindly feeling our way along a garden wall, we had been led into the story one step at a time, not knowing where we would go. Now our joy was gone. We all felt it. The music we heard now was *I've got a Darkness* (listen below). The chorus goes:

“I've got a darkness, Help me see in the light.”

(I hope you are listening to the music; it is part of the journey!) We re-enacted all this together—a mystery play from a different sacred text. It's epic of course, and universal: loss, and the loss of hope. Feeling lost. And alone. *Tá eagla orm*. I am afraid (in Irish, “I have fear on me.”) *Táim i m'aonar*. I am alone. (In Irish, I am in my alone-ness; I am “in” a lone, sin-

gular-person-place). In a culture where being together *le chéile* (literally, “with the other”) is so resonant and prevalent (see *Being Together*), being in your alone-ness is especially stark.

Fox felt it. He was so bereft, he huddled in the ground. He no longer wanted to go out in the forest. He didn’t know where to go. The grief grew bigger: several more people were touched on their shoulders, told to be foxes too. More of us went into dark holes: the room was full of lonely, hiding *madraí rua* (foxes). The song continued: “I’ve got a darkness, Help me see the light. The pain you leave unfelt, Shall pass to someone else.” The song speaks to inter-generational trauma. Yet it’s about all our pain (*pian*) and how we hold it (or don’t). In Irish, this word rhymes with the word “knife:” *scian*.

Now we are told that some of us will become beetles. In teams of two, we console the foxes. We go to them, huddled in their dens. We put our arms around them, in their dark holes. Eventually, Fox has the energy to crawl from his hole again and discover that his one star is still no longer there but the whole sky bursting with stars for everyone.



A sacred portal... (Photo by author; all rights reserved.)

the stone circle

Since meeting the *spideóg* (the robin) on the path, I have learned this is not unusual: robins often come quite close to humans. Yet I still see it as a moment of grace: The bird didn't fly off—and neither did I. It doesn't seem coincidental: The Fox and the Star prepared me for it. One opened the door to the other. I experienced the whole world being connected and in sync (lost and regained) and then experienced it real time, the next day, walking down a path to a stone circle where I met, unexpectedly, a small bird. In each case, I was intoxicated—bewitched—with the present moment.

All of this brings me back to two words that Manchán Magan re-visited repeatedly: *ceantar* and *alltar*. *Ceantar* very literally in Irish refers to a dis-

trict, area or region. You can talk about very mundane and administrative things with this word: *ceantar bardasach* (a municipal district), *ceantar toghcháin* (electoral district/constituency) or *ceantar pleanála* (a planning zone). You can also use it in familiar ways, similar to the word *áit* (place): *Tá pobal an-chairdiúil sa cheantar* (There's a very friendly community in the area) or *Fásadh aníos mé sa cheantar seo* (I grew up in this area). It goes back unchanged in its meaning from Old Irish, so is thousands of years old. Yet similar to the word *baile*, that means both "home" and "town," *ceantar* has a larger meaning, discovered through its opposite, *alltar*. Inviting in (via contrast) the not so ordinary or everyday, *ceantar* just doesn't refer to a zone or district; more broadly, it's the material, tangible, visible world. *Alltar* in contrast is the netherworld, the other realm (*Manchán*). In Old Irish, *alltar* meant "the next world, the hereafter; a remote place" [WikiD]. It still retains much of this meaning, as a "hinterland," the "far country, the other world" [WikiD]. That the "other world" is also "the far country" is seen in Irish mythology. *Tír na nÓg*, a magical land of abundance and eternal youth, is located far to the west, across the sea. Oisín gets there by riding a magical horse across the water. The supernatural *Tuath Dé* (tribe of the Gods) or as better known today, the *Tuatha Dé Danan* ("folk of the goddess Danu"), live in the Other world but interact with humans in this realm. Many believe they went to live under the earth, in fairy mounds, and are synonymous with the *aos sídhe* (people of the fairy forts), the *sídhe* [Wiki].

What's compelling for me is how the natural world (the world of *ceantar*) is often the portal to the *alltar*. The *sídhe* and *Dé Danan* are very much associated with specific places in the landscape; sacred wells and ancient burial mounds such as *Brú na Bóinne* (Newgrange) are entrances to these other realms. In Irish folklore, the robin can also be a kind of portal. Similar to the faeries, they can bring good or bad luck depending on how you treat them; they are also sacred messengers from deceased loved ones. It's said in Ireland, "when a robin appears, a loved one is near" [Robin]. It's not surprising that C.S. Lewis, who was very much influenced by his time growing up in Antrim and Country Down, would have in *The Chronicles of Narnia* a robin lead the Pevensies to safety. In Yeats' poem "The Stolen Child," it is also through the natural world that we enter the enchanted. This deep connection between the natural world and the spiritual/unseen is the basis of Celtic spirituality. That your *ceantar* can both be a voting district and, when you go to the *tobar* (the well) a portal to the *alltar*, shows how deeply the two worlds co-exist.

who are you?

In the *ceantar*, it was just a robin on the path. But was it? When I saw the robin, I thought, who is this? I realize now it was August 2nd—the birthday of my step-father. We were very close; he passed a few years ago. More, how did a group of people without even knowing it—with no preparation or costumes or lines—shapeshift into a forest of foxes, rabbits and beetles? How did it seem so real—as real or realer than anything hap-

pening in the “real” world? This was a moment of shape-shifting where *ceantar* (what’s happening in the visible), morphs into the *alltar*. The children’s book that our “mystery play” was based on (which I hadn’t read before) has a slightly different plot. The beetles don’t just console the fox; they go and feed him, with their own bodies. This is the circle of life. Yet I am reminded of the original meaning of “sacrifice:” to make something holy. Again, the physical world morphs into the sacred.

There is much more connected to all this—a web of re-wilding, decolonizing of the mind, the work of John Moriarty (who very much inspired Manchán Magan), more gems in the Irish language, and the good work of Kathy Scott—who, through Scoil Scairte, created the space where all the above *draíocht* (magic) occurred. Yet for now I will leave you with these words:

“Magic and music and mystic are only separated by letters. They are the same thing. They are our soul’s call to a connected experience that allows us to recognize that [...] we are a people who live in a universe that speaks to us constantly in every being, and even those things that we consider non-beings, but who just have different voices and different dialects. The rocks shout out praise, the trees beckon us. The birds sing because we don’t often enough.”—Brother Richard Hendrik

Thank you again for being *anseo* (here) and taking this journey with me to the *alltar*,

Dian (*i mBaile Átha Cliath*—in Dublin)

P.S. Hear the pronunciation of Irish words and phrases in different dialects at <https://www.abair.ie/> Just copy and paste.



In memory of Séamus, my familiar.

Or support The Gaelic Effect and its mission by “buying me a cupán tae —making a one-time donation [anseo](#) (clicking here). Thank you!



