

# The Fifth Province: Myth and Metaphor in Twentieth Century Ireland

## Abstract

This paper explores the ancient Irish myth of the Fifth Province as described in *The Settling of the Manor of Tara*, tracing its transformation into a powerful cultural metaphor in twentieth-century Ireland. It argues that the myth's symbolism — a central unifying force among divisions — was reimagined by thinkers, artists, and politicians to promote dialogue, healing, and postcolonial reflection. Drawing on figures such as Richard Kearney, Seamus Heaney, and Imelda McCarthy, the study shows how the Fifth Province served as a philosophical and creative space during key moments in Irish political and spiritual renewal, including the peace process and the cultural liberalization of the Republic. The paper concludes by considering how this mythic structure offers practical tools for contemporary Druids seeking to balance personal, communal, and ecological harmony.

Welcome to The Fifth Province.

As you step into this space, you are entering a territory both mythological and metaphorical. As we explore it, we will meet inhabitants ranging from magical angelic giants to modern day politicians and playwrights and hear them speak in the languages of philosophy and poetry. You will see that it's a nearly impossible space to map – its magic lies in how it blurs boundaries and defies definition. On our journey, we'll discover uncanny parallels between the mythic past and the mundane present before we bring the idea home to our own Druidic practice, examining how we might make use of it.

## Divisions of Ireland

Like many Irish tales, the fifth province focuses on the ways in which Ireland is divided, and how it might be united.

For most of our history, Irish people were aware of Ireland as an island but had no concept of a nation state. We were a patchwork of small tribes or Tuatha<sup>1</sup>. We clashed regularly and delighted in raiding each other's cattle<sup>2</sup>.

In the fifth century CE, there were myriad petty kingdoms. Some grew in strength and subdued others. Overkingdoms emerged. These varied in number as fortunes rose and fell, but four reasonably stable power centres arose and were called provinces: Ulster, Munster, Leinster and Connaught. A fifth, Mide (meaning middle), existed for a time and at one stage was the home of the Ard Ri, the High King. He was not King in the sense of the ultimate authority on the island. He could not command the rest of the island, except in very specific circumstances. However, he provided symbolic unity (MacCana).

Over time, Mide or Meath's independence declined, and its lands were drawn into the neighbouring provinces of Ulster and Leinster. Yet the memory of that fifth province persisted.

Partly, that's down to the Irish language. In Middle Irish, the word for province was *cóiced*, which carried the sense of a unit of territory and literally meant "one fifth". From that derives the modern Irish word for province, *Cúige*. Which is very similar to the word *Cúig*, five, and *cúigiú*, fifth. The Irish for "the fifth province" is "an cúigiú cúige."

The enduring memory is also due to our mythology, in which the fivefold division looms large.

## **Mythology – Pagan or Christian?**

One thing we all know about Irish mythology is that it wasn't recorded by Druids, who preferred remembering rather than writing things down. After all, who's going to pay a professional to remember their history and genealogy if they can simply read it themselves?

However, when Christianity came to Ireland, the monks were people of the book. They began to record our stories. There are those who say the monks so loved their native tales that they could not bear them to be lost. Others have argued that major parts of the tales are fictional, concocted to give Ireland the prestige of a mythic tradition akin to that of Greece and Rome (Carney)<sup>3</sup>. Yet others say that they preserved only a fraction of Ireland's old Gods and tidied them up into a pantheon in mimicry of classical literature (Williams). My instinct is that our ancient manuscripts do contain much authentic material, but we can all see the evidence of Christian alterations.

## **Biblical Pseudohistory**

The texts we have contain strong elements of Biblical pseudohistory. There's no Irish creation myth because no monk was going to write down anything which contradicted the book of Genesis. If we look at texts like *The Lebor Gabála Éirenn* (The Book of Invasions) – one of the core texts of early Irish mythology – it's explicitly constructed to mirror the biblical model of history, tracing Ireland's peoples back to Noah<sup>4</sup>.

It tells us that the first person in Ireland was Cessair, grand-daughter of Noah, who could not get a seat on the ark. So she brought with her fifty women and three men and came to the uninhabited land of Ireland to settle<sup>5</sup>. However, all of them died in the deluge except for one man, Fintan Mac Bócra, who survived by transforming into a salmon. Keep an eye on that salmon – he'll surface again.

Other arrivals also perished until a people called the *Fir Bolg* arrived. They were the first to divide Ireland into five, giving one fifth to each of five brothers<sup>6</sup>.

At various times, mythical Irish figures and events are tied to major Christian events, for example King Conchobar of Ulster dies upon learning of the crucifixion, the Children of

Lir return to human form only to be baptised by Saint Patrick, Mad Sweeney is cursed by Saint Moling, Oisín returns from the Otherworld only to age rapidly and convert to Christianity before he dies. The later Immrama (voyage tales) also begin to shift, reinterpreting journeys to the Otherworld as Christian allegories. I think of these as *Myths of Transition*, in which authority passes from the old ways to the new religion.

## Background to The Settling of the Manor of Tara

One of these transition myths is also one of the major mythical discussions of the Fifth Province – it is known as Suidiugud tellaig Temra, commonly translated as The Settling of the Manor of Tara.

This is recorded in various manuscripts, including the Yellow Book of Lecan. Though it survives in later manuscripts, the tale likely dates back to the ninth century. Written in Middle Irish, it has been translated by R.I. Best (Best 121-172) with literal grandeur, and by Morgan Daimler (Daimler), whose version may be more accessible to modern readers.

The story references two specific locations:

Tara, which in our fifth province of Mide, was the centre of sacred Kingship. You will be aware of it as the place where the Lia Fáil stands, the stone which cries aloud when touched by a true High King of Ireland.

The other location, is less well known outside of Ireland. It is the Hill of Uisneach, where stands a massive rock known as The Catstone. This is said to be the omphalos, the navel of Ireland<sup>7</sup>. It is also known as the Ail na Mireann, the stone of divisions, the point where all the provinces meet, and is often regarded as being a Goddess site which acts as a balance to Tara.

As Anthony Murphy, an author who also runs the Mythical Ireland blog and YouTube channel, points out:

*“Uisneach was also where ‘men were accustomed to worship Fohla’, one of a triune of tutelary goddesses representing the sovereignty of Ireland. Another of this trio is Ériu, and it could be said that symbolically the most significant meeting of the LGE takes place when the sons of Míl, led by their spiritual figurehead Amergin Glúngéal, encounter Ériu at Uisneach, the centre province, the omphalos that connects the earthly world to the divine one.”<sup>8</sup>*

He then quotes the LGE account of the meeting:

*“They had colloquy with Ériu in Uisnech. She spake thus with them: Warriors, welcome to you. Long have soothsayers known of your coming hither. Yours shall be this island for ever, and no island of its size to the East of the world shall be better..... (Macalister)”*

The Goddess requests that the island be named after her and Amergin of course consents, saying “Ériu shall be its name for ever.” Thus Éire is the Irish name for the island of Ireland today, as well as for the 26-county state known as the Republic of Ireland.

## Telling the tale

The tale itself opens with High King Diarmait son of Cerball sitting in Tara, his head in his hands, doing his accounts. Every three years, the men of Ireland come to him for a great feast, and he has to feed each of them according to their rank. Each one brings a great appetite and a partner who is equally hungry. Looking out of the window, he sees the demesne of Tara stretching in each direction, uncultivated. It occurs to him that planting crops there and building houses might help with his expenses.

When the people arrive for the feast, the King mentions he is thinking of making alterations to Tara. This is a matter of such import that the people say they will not eat a bite until the decision has been made.

Diarmait is uneasy about making this momentous decision himself. Therefore, he decides to summon the wisest man he can think of. However, as Caitlin Matthews observed in her commentary on this tale “a wise man is hard to find”<sup>9</sup>.

Diarmait begins by calling on Fiachra. Fiachra in turn says he knows one wiser and recommends Cennfaelad. Cennfaelad had received a mighty blow at the Battle of Magh Rath and had the brain of forgetting knocked clean out of his head, so that he remembered every detail and could forget nothing. However, even he knows others who are wiser. Eventually, they arrive at the wisest man in Ireland – Fintan Mac Bóira.

Here our salmon surfaces again, for this is the same Fintan who had arrived with Cessair, and who alone had survived the flood. He had transformed into a salmon and later to a hawk and an eagle. In his various forms, he had lived in Ireland ever since. So long had he been among us that his legend had risen and fallen, and only the wisest had even heard of him.

When Fintan arrived, he was given a great welcome, but he told the people not to fuss, for he was sure of his welcome anywhere in Ireland. Ireland was his foster mother, and Tara was her knee upon which he sat<sup>10</sup>.

He told them the story of his life, which was also the story of Ireland, including his eventual conversion to Christianity.

Diarmait was much impressed with Fintan’s age and wisdom, and asked him about partitioning Tara, to make it profitable. Fintan reflected, and told this story:

Long, long ago, during the Kingship of Conaing Bec-eclach, we saw a giant passing by. He was tall as the trees of the wood. The sun and the sky could be seen between his thighs. He was clad in a garment of shimmering crystal and was fair to look upon, his hair long and blond curling down as far as his thighs. He carried with him a most marvellous branch, on which grew nuts and acorns and apples all at once.

When the people asked him to come and speak with the King, he agreed and said: “I come from the place of the setting sun, and I go to the place of the rising sun. My name is Trefuilngid Tre-ochair. This day a man has died upon a cross in a distant land and I am going to see what ails the sun”. (The sun, that day, had refused to shine upon those who killed Christ).

In turn he asked the people who they were and how they came to Ireland. They told him they were the sons of Mil, from Greece and Spain. Trefuilngid Tre-ochair asked how many of them there were, and if he could see them all together. He tells them not to worry about feeding him while they wait for the assembly to gather, as the scent of his magical branch will sustain him.

When the people were all assembled, he asked them for the history of Tara. But they told him they had no real seanachies (storytellers, historians, rememberers) who held the tales.

This is the most shocking moment of the tale – Tara without storytellers, a Tara which had lost its own history. You can almost hear the shame in their voices as they confess this forgetfulness.

"Ye will have that from me," said Trefuilngid. "I will establish for you the progression of the stories and chronicles of the hearth of Tara itself with the four quarters of Ireland round about; for I am the truly learned witness who explains to all everything unknown."

So Trefuilngid asked the people to bring him the seven wisest people and the seanachies from each of the four quarters of Ireland, and they would establish its history. He told the history of Ireland to all the seanachies, he told the King how to partition the land and he had Fintan Mac Bócra explain the qualities of each province.

"Easy to say," said Fintan: "knowledge in the west, battle in the north, prosperity in the east, music in the south, kingship in the centre."

"True indeed, O Fintan," said Trefuilngid, "thou art an excellent shanachie. It is thus that it has been and will be for ever."

Before his departure, Trefuilngid gives Fintan five berries from his branch, which Fintan plants in various parts of Ireland, giving rise to five mighty and long-lived trees. Fintan remains with the people of Ireland, telling them tales, until the last of these trees has passed away.

His story complete, Fintan brought his mind back to the present day and told Diarmait his judgement. He announced that no alterations should be made to Tara. "Let it be as we have found it," said Fintan, "we shall not go contrary to the arrangement which Trefuilngid Tre-ochair has left us, for he was an angel of God, or he was God Himself."

"Then the nobles of Ireland then accompanied Fintan to Usnech, and they took leave of one another on the top of Usnech. And he set up in their presence a pillar-stone of five ridges on the summit of Usnech. And he assigned a ridge of it to every province in Ireland, for thus are Tara and Usnech in Ireland, as its two kidneys are in a beast."

His task complete, Fintan headed for home, but while on the journey he felt his age fall upon him and knew the end was nigh. He reflected on his long life, made confession, took communion and died. It is recorded that the spirits of Patrick and Brigit came and were present at his death. It is not known where he is buried and some say his body was taken into heaven, like those of Enoch and Elijah.

## Unpacking the Myth

There is much to reflect on in this tale.

In Fintan's ritual cartography, the attributes of each province are spelled out, including Battle in the North. "It is thus that it has been and will be forever". As a Northern Irish woman whose first thirty years of life were shaped by The Troubles, I will always remember this giving me the chills on first reading – it felt like a prophecy or a curse.

Continuing, Fintan lists the attributes of Tara, and this tale implicitly links the fifth province with Kingship, with truth telling, with the continuity of memory and tradition. It is the King at Tara and the Goddess at Uisneach, balanced in right relationship, that make the fifth province a sacred centre.

For me, a key feature of this myth is what it teaches us about leadership and sovereignty. Consider poor old Diarmait, with his money worries, who wants to make profit from the land. He doesn't just go ahead and build houses all over the place. While hosting his people, he tells them what he is considering. He calls upon the wise for advice. He then accepts the inconvenient judgement of the wise, backed as it is by memory, tradition and divine authority. What we are seeing in action here is not just Tara the place, but Tara the process: a dynamic of listening, discerning, and integrating.

Harking back to our theme of transition myths and biblical pseudohistory, The Settling of the Manor of Tara is also a powerful piece of spiritual and political propaganda. It shows the fifth province acting as a sacred centre of sovereignty and gives this the backing of both ancient tradition and the will of God. It also places the will of the Christian God above the wishes of any individual king.

In many ways, it functions as the ultimate transition myth. In it, Ireland is almost a living being, possessing all the excellences of a human being divided between her provinces, with sovereignty and spirituality at her heart. It is no great step from there to see Ireland, already personified as Fintan's foster mother, as a living Goddess.

Yet, on the day of the crucifixion, a being appears whom the wisest man in Ireland describes as either an angel of God or God himself. He restores to her people the lost knowledge of their histories and ratifies their ancient divisions of land, adding the stamp of divine approval. This signals that, though the ways of ancient Ireland are acceptable to the new God, the new God has the power to either approve or overturn them<sup>11</sup>.

However gently it is done, however many gifts Trefuilngid gives to the people of Ireland while he is with them, he nevertheless asserts the authority of the masculine Christian God over the sovereignty Goddess of Ireland.

It may be considered that, in describing her attributes and defining her borders without making any changes to the existing order, Fintan and Trefuileid together show the sovereignty Goddess the greatest respect. It is also possible that, in defining Ireland to herself and making that existing order a permanent settlement, they commit the ultimate act of mythological mansplaining and domination. By subordinating Ireland's sacred feminine to Christian

authority, Fintan risks desacralizing the land. It is the first step in Ériu's journey to become the lost and dispossessed figure of Cathleen ni Houlihan.

## Spiritual Uses of This Myth

Many spiritual practitioners have found inspiration in this story, seeing in it a method for integrating diverse qualities into a harmonious whole, connected with the divine.

Esoteric author Michael Dames writes:

“Many scholars think that the elusive fifth [province] stands for something more fundamental. The likelihood is that ever since the Stone Age (and despite numerous boundary changes in detail), Ireland has been subdivided into four provinces, held together by a mystical fifth, territorially elusive, yet vital to the cohesion of the whole sacred array... Mide, the notional centre of Ireland, was conceived as a point where an umbilical cord attached the country to the womb of the gods, who endlessly created and sustained its existence from above and below.” (Dames)

For Dames, the Fifth Province is not only geographical but cosmological—an energetic link between the land and the divine.

Others, seeking to connect with the Land or The Divine, have translated this thought into a ceremonial practice. Pagan author Christopher Scott Thompson has developed a personal ritual based on *The Settling of the Manor of Tara*, in which one turns to face each direction and invokes the relevant *buada* (excellences) from each province, integrating and orienting oneself to the land<sup>12</sup>.

Molly Stanton, the author of the *Elven Elysium Blog*, has transformed the story into a kind of medicine wheel (Stanton). Frank MacEowen, in *The Celtic Way of Seeing* (MacEowen), links it to what he calls the Celtic Spirit Wheel—a meditative system aligning perception, wisdom, and place.

More structurally ambitious is the work of the Irish group formerly known as The Irish Order of Thelema, now The Tuatha de Mián. Their entire ritual and initiatory system is built around the fivefold division described in *The Settling of the Manor of Tara*. At this point, I would like to thank their National Sovereign, Anne Bleakley, for sending me this overview of their system:

“The Tuatha de Mián—formerly the Irish Order of Thelema—are a group who’ve been working on synergy between Irish culture and traditions and the Western Hermetic tradition since the 1990s. In recent years, they have concentrated on Irish source material and cultural heritage, creating a ritual structure and initiatory pathway that reflects the fivefold division of the Irish provinces.

Using the attributes of the provinces as presented in *The Settling of the Manor of Tara*, the initiate journeys around the island, working through the mysteries of:

- Cath – Warriorship; the fight for freedom (Saoirse)

- Fís – Wisdom through the light of inspiration (Solas)
- Bláth – Prosperity through labour, right conduct, and generosity (Saol)
- Seis – Harmony through balance and bardship (Síográ)
- Mide – Self-mastery and sovereign service (Ríogacht)

Further initiations allow the candidate to deepen their relationship with one or more provincial attributes in service to the community.

The Order seeks to apply the ancient wisdom of Ireland to modern life. While they offer rites of passage and seasonal celebrations for those following earth-based or pagan paths, their system is open to practitioners of any tradition—or none.”

These are just a few examples of how the Fifth Province continues to serve as a framework for spiritual exploration. Later in this paper, we will return to its spiritual uses as we examine both the work of Imelda McCarthy and its potential use for Druids.

## **Fast Forward: A Thousand Years in a Thousand Words (More or Less)**

At this point in our story, we leave the fifth province behind for about a thousand years, as Ireland loses control of its sovereignty and official spirituality. The theme of the sacred unifying centre will re-emerge in the late twentieth century.

However, to understand its new manifestation, the reader needs to know a little Irish history. Rather than arrogantly assume that everyone knows all about my country, I will offer a condensed overview of key events which continued to shape Ireland’s politics at the end of the twentieth century.

Those who are familiar with the story should feel free to skip this section.

## **Norman Ireland**

Ireland has a neighbour: the island of Britain, made up of England, Scotland, and Wales. After the Normans invaded England in 1066, it wasn’t long before their land-hungry nobles began casting covetous eyes across the Irish Sea. But, like vampires, they needed to be invited in. And in 1169, they were.

Diarmait Mac Murchada, an unpopular Irish king known for stealing other men’s wives and then giving them back a year later, was driven out of his kingdom. He turned to Henry II of England for help reclaiming his throne, thus opening the door to Norman military involvement in Ireland. Soon enough, Norman nobles were claiming Irish land. In 1171, Henry II declared Lordship over Ireland in order to keep them in line and just like that, Ireland fell under English dominion. In a bitter echo of Trefuilngid approving the settlement of Tara, Pope Adrian IV (allegedly) gave this new arrangement his blessing<sup>13</sup>.

## **Reformation, Plantation and Famine**



Over time, the English became Protestants, while the Irish remained doggedly Catholic. England, nervous that Ireland might ally with foreign Catholic powers against it, began a program of colonisation.

To ensure loyalty, it settled large numbers of mostly Scottish Protestants in Irish territory. This was especially true in Ulster, the most rebellious of provinces. This process, known as “plantation,” began in the 1550s, some 70 years before the Mayflower sailed to Plymouth Rock. The most significant wave came in 1609 with the Plantation of Ulster.

The centuries that followed were marked by repression, resistance, and An Gorta Mor, The Great Hunger, in which people starved to death for the want of potatoes, while shiploads full of grain and beef were exported from Ireland to feed others. A million starved, a million emigrated, and the population of our island still has not regained pre-famine levels.

## **Partition – 1921**

Ireland eventually won its independence. But not everyone in Ireland wanted British rule to end. Many Protestants, especially those settled in the north, feared being left as a vulnerable minority in a Catholic-majority country. To resolve this, Britain retained six of Ireland’s thirty-two counties, creating the state of Northern Ireland as part of The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, so the Protestant community could remain British.

Within this new mini-state, a Protestant majority now found itself surrounded by a Catholic majority island-wide, and living alongside a significant Catholic minority within its own borders. The result was a state structured around repression and control, designed to keep the “disloyal” Catholic population in check<sup>14</sup>.

## **Civil Rights Movement**

By the 1960s, Civil Rights movements were breaking out worldwide, and Northern Ireland was no exception. Northern Irish Catholics began demanding fair access to housing, jobs, and voting rights (“one man, one vote”). These demands were met with suspicion and hostility from many Protestants, who saw them as cover for an attempt to force a united Ireland.

The situation deteriorated quickly. Violence erupted between Protestants and Catholics. The British Army was deployed, ironically, to protect the Catholic minority. As the local government lost control, the British government imposed Direct Rule from Westminster.

At this point, I will stop referring to Catholic and Protestant, as it became more acceptable to refer to the two communities in terms of allegiance.

- The community which was mostly Catholic in religion and indigenous Irish by extraction became known as Irish Nationalists, or as Republicans because of the aspiration to have Ireland united in a 32-county republic.
- The community which was mostly Protestant by religion, and of British extraction, came to be referred to as Ulster Unionists, because of their support for Union with Britain, or Loyalist because of their loyalty to the British Crown.

All these terms are generalisations.

## **The Troubles in the North**

While most Irish Nationalists protested peacefully, some turned to armed resistance. Groups like the IRA began fighting for a united Ireland. In response, British forces and Loyalist paramilitaries clashed with them in increasingly brutal and tragic ways. Events like the Ballymurphy Massacre and Bloody Sunday, where unarmed Catholic civilians were killed by British soldiers, deepened the trauma. Mass internment without trial worsened the tensions.

Northern Irish news became one long cycle of atrocity and murderous reprisal. It was no heroic military conflict, but a squalid cycle of hatred which claimed thousands of lives, mostly civilian.

England grew increasingly weary of the whole mess and, by the late 20th century, mostly just wanted out...

## **Identity in the South**

Meanwhile, the South, having gained its freedom, was struggling to reinvent itself. De Valera, who had fought in the Easter Rising and went on to serve as Taoiseach and later President, had an idealised vision of Ireland:

“The ideal Ireland that we would have, the Ireland that we dreamed of, would be the home of a people who valued material wealth only as a basis for right living, of a people who, satisfied with frugal comfort, devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit – a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contest of athletic youths and the laughter of happy maidens, whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of serene old age. The home, in short, of a people living the life that God desires that men should live.”<sup>15</sup>

Before ever decolonisation and postcolonial became common terms, De Valera embarked on a program which detractors call cultural nationalism and admirers call decolonisation to build this ideal nation.

- He was the architect of a new constitution which valued the Irish language and promoted Irish culture, with social policies very much in keeping with the advice of the Catholic Church.
- The passage of the Republic of Ireland Act in 1948 broke the remaining ties with Britain and made Ireland a Republic, outside the British Commonwealth.
- Economically, he favoured a program of self-sufficiency which at times slowed economic growth.
- In international diplomacy he favoured a neutral stance, which kept Ireland out of WWII.

## Changing times

However, by the 1970's, the Republic was entering a period of upheaval. It had joined the European Economic Community (the precursor to the EU) and was now facing new challenges: the rise of women's and minority rights movements, battles over the right to contraception, and the aftershocks of violence in the North.

Historian and political scientist Liam de Paor observed of DeValera's vision:

“Looking back, we can now see that de Valera's « Ireland that we dream of » was quite impossible of fulfilment, because the world's technological and other revolutions simply will not permit the necessary measure of isolation. It is not possible to build a wall, paper or otherwise, around Ireland and to maintain here a kind of frugal republican virtue, while the outside world indulges in an orgy of greedy affluence. (De Paor)”

De Paor believed, as did many, that Ireland's state-supported sense of national identity was faltering, that it no longer matched people's sense of themselves and that it was time for Ireland to become a more open, modern and pluralistic society.

## The Rediscovery of the Fifth Province

In this time of crisis, the Fifth Province re-emerged, or was rediscovered, not as a territory on a map but as a realm of the mind and spirit.

In this modern portion of the tale, I am going to ask you to look at mundane events with magical eyes. None of the people involved are practising Druids, and yet they each, in their way, perform as Druidic Philosopher Priests, as Ovate healers or as Bards.

Together, they helped pave the way for the Northern Irish peace process by breaking down old mindsets, causing people to reflect critically on their own traditions, and promoting empathy. They also played a part in the Republic of Ireland's transformation from one of the most conservative societies in Europe to one of the most liberal.

In a time of Ireland's trouble, an ancient myth, which had left a seed of itself in the Irish language, was reborn in the minds of a group of people who could contribute to Ireland healing and reimagining itself.

Although there is not a robe-wearing Druid in sight, it is Druidry in action in our modern world.

## The Crane Bag

In 1977, Irish philosopher Richard Kearney, along with his former teacher, Benedictine monk and scholar Mark Patrick Hederman, founded a journal called *The Crane Bag*<sup>16</sup>, the title of which is another one of those druidic parallels. It was published twice a year until 1985 and

was a forum for exploring Irish politics, culture, mythology and identity. It took the fifth province as its guiding metaphor<sup>17</sup>.

Long before Andrew Breitbart observed that “politics is downstream of culture”, Kearney and Hederman decided to aim their publication directly at the cultural heart of Ireland – at thinkers and artists. They invited them into a dialogue which might blow the dust off Irish politics, breaking public discourse wide open and letting in new ways of seeing. They attracted contributions from leading thinkers and artists in Ireland.

“The Crane Bag was meant as a cultural intervention into politics. Kearney and Hederman thought that politics in Ireland had been stifled by a rhetoric of fixed positions defending vested socio-economic interests. Through the symbol of Ireland's « fifth province », they invoked a vision of an Ireland which would be open, tolerant and culturally inclusive”. (Boss)

It was a very odd publication, heavily influenced by postmodernism and occasional bursts of mysticism. It stated from its very first issue that it was “an anti-journal”, designed to “dispel the myth of literacy” that reading would lead you to clear and logical understanding.

Kearney emphasised that it would put forward no definitive statements, but would rather provoke and confuse the reader, who should use it as a tool to get in touch with their inner seer and artist:

“The purpose of The Crane Bag is to promote the excavation of unactualized spaces within the reader, which is the work of constituting the fifth province. From such a place a new understanding and unity might emerge. (Kearney, Editorial Endodermis)”

Attempts to unify Ireland had, up until then, revolved around territorial unity, erasing the border between the North and South from the map. Yet this would leave the people of Ireland as divided as ever. Hederman and Kearney both saw in the fifth province a means of rephrasing the Irish question, of working towards a more meaningful union.

In a move which would prove typical of this eccentric journal, the two editors had different takes on their central metaphor. Hence issue one of the Crane Bag had two editorials, one at the beginning and one at the end of the magazine, titled respectively Endodermis and Epidermis, literally the inner layer and the outer layer.

Both agreed that the fifth province began in history and mythology, and continued to exist through language:

“Modern Ireland is made up of four provinces, whose origin lies beyond the beginning of recorded history. And yet, the Irish word for a province is coiced, which means a 'fifth'. This fivefold division is as old as Ireland itself, yet there is disagreement about the identity of the fifth fifth.

There are basically two traditions. The first claims that all five provinces met at the Stone of Divisions on the Hill of Uisnech, which was believed to be the mid-point of Ireland. The second is that the fifth province was Meath (Mide), 'the middle'. Neither tradition can claim to be conclusive. What is interesting is that both divide

Ireland into four quarters and a 'middle', even though they disagree about the location of the middle or 'fifth' province.

Although Tara was the political centre of Ireland, this second centre was just as important and acted as a necessary balance. It was a non-political centre. It was sometimes described as a secret well, known only to the druids and the poets. The two centres acted like two kidneys in the body of the land.

The balance between the two was essential to peace and harmony in the country. It seems clear to us that in the present unhappy state of our country it is essential to restore this second centre of gravity in some way." (Kearney, Editorial Endodermis)

For each, the key to the power of the fifth province was exactly the fact that it no longer existed in any material form – that it was less a position than a dis-position, or state of mind.

## Contrasting views

Let's consider where they differed. In his critique "Rhyming Hope and History in The Fifth Province", Aidan O'Malley states that Hederman's view "leaned towards a transcendental reading of the site", while Kearney's "articulated its potential in terms of human interaction (O'MALLEY)".

Hederman's transcendental view of the fifth province focused heavily on art:

"The notion of a 'fifth province' is an aesthetic analogy which describes a space which is neither physical, geographical, nor political. It is a place which is beyond or behind the reach of our normal scientific consciousness. It therefore requires a method and a language which are sui generis both to reach it and to describe it. The only method available to us at the moment is a certain kind of art. (Hederman)<sup>18</sup>"

Kearney, meanwhile, being the more political of the two, was moving towards thinking of Irish unity in terms of European unity and "a Europe of the Regions". As the European Union made the nation state seem increasingly irrelevant, Kearney considered the principle of subsidiarity, the idea that decisions should be made at the lowest level of governance that can effectively address a problem. This would render questions of Britishness and Irishness less relevant than e.g. Galway-ness or Belfast-ness<sup>19</sup>.

## The Diaspora

Paradoxically, by breaking identity free of the islands of Britain and Ireland, it would open it up to the world, allowing us to make room for the 70 million members of the worldwide Irish diaspora, many of whom yearn to belong yet feel excluded by geography and nationality<sup>20</sup>. As Boss put it:

"... he suggested a new notion of a non-territorial, cultural Irish nation in which the local community and Irish diaspora merged into an entity beyond the nation-state."

If Irishness were to extend beyond the land of Ireland, it would need to be grounded in the mythology which is the very soil of the fifth province. Kearney argued:

“Without mythology, our memories are homeless; we capitulate to the mindless conformism of fact. But if revered as ideological dogma, and divorced from the summons reality, myth becomes another kind of conformism, another kind of death. That is why we must never cease to keep mythological images in dialogue with history. And that is why each society, each community, each nation, needs to go on telling stories, inventing and reinventing its mythic imaginary, until it brings history home to itself. (Kearney, Postnationalist Ireland)”

## **The Legacy of The Crane Bag**

The strength of *The Crane Bag* was also its weakness. *The Crane Bag* was never intended for a mass audience. Its contributors were among Ireland's leading intellectuals. They tossed around references to postmodernism, to Foucault, to Derrida. They slaughtered sacred cows. They produced ideas that, to many readers, must have seemed wildly avant-garde.

While this guaranteed *The Crane Bag*'s impact among other intellectuals, it also limited its reach. Its deliberate intellectualism and frequent obscurity meant it was never going to have a wide popular readership<sup>21</sup>.

In 1985, the editors took the controversial decision to publish an interview with a serving member of the IRA, resulting in the withdrawal of their Arts Council funding. There were not enough readers to sustain the magazine without this, and it folded.

Unfortunately, the various dialogues about art, history and politics in *The Crane Bag* had gained little traction with the Unionist community North of the border. Conor Cruise O'Brien said that Irish nationalists talk about Unionists a great deal but rarely talk to them. In truth, there was little in the *Crane Bag* project to draw Unionists in: it was grounded in Irish mythology, devoted many pages to the Republic of Ireland and spoke of promoting unity within Ireland. For a population which regarded itself as British and had no wish to get involved with Ireland, it held little appeal.

Nevertheless, the magazine had played an important role by hosting a dialogue which modernised Irish nationalism, helping to prepare at least one side of the Northern Irish conflict for peace. Richard Kearney went on to consult with both John Hume, the architect of Northern Ireland's peace process and Nobel Peace Prize winner, and Mary Robinson, who became The Republic's first woman President – more about her later.

*The Crane Bag* was gone, but the fifth province was not – others had found their way there and begun to explore it.

## **The Field Day Theatre Company**

In 1980, two men founded a theatre company called Field Day. Their intention was to give Irish audiences new drama from Irish writers. Their names were Brian Friel and Stephen Rea. Friel, the author of plays such *Philadelphia Here I Come*, was working on a new one, called *Translations*. Rea was a handsome young actor who was becoming a regular on the telly, appearing in everything from *The Moonstone* to *The Professionals*. He would go on to major roles in films such as *The Crying Game*, *Michael Collins* and *V for Vendetta*.

Needing a board of Directors, they decided to recruit people who would be creative, and chose novelist and critic Seamus Deane, film maker and folk singer David Hammond and the poets Seamus Heaney, and Tom Paulin. These were Northern Irish voices, a few from Belfast, most from a city so divided that Northern Irish people routinely name it twice, to avoid giving offence to either community – Derry/Londonderry.

Field Day had no mission statement or manifesto, but they adopted The Crane Bag's metaphor of The Fifth Province. Each interpreted it in his own way. Like the shapeshifter it is, it adapted to their needs. In their hands it became what Friel called a "province of the mind" and "a place for dissenters, *traitors to the prevailing mythologies in the other four provinces.*" In other words, the fifth province would be a place for subverting the grand, stale narratives of unionism and nationalism which kept the population divided.

## **Translations**

The first play they put on was staged in Derry/Londonderry, and was Brian Friel's *Translations*. In a deliberate attempt to reach out to people who would never normally go to the theatre, they staged it in the Guildhall, the main civic building in Derry.

*Translations* is set in 1833 in a small town called Baile Beag, where everyone speaks Irish and where the local hedge school teaches Greek and Latin but no English.

A company of soldiers arrive, escorting Yolland, an English Ordnance Survey man who is going to map the territory, and put the place names into English. Owen, the schoolmaster's son, functions as his translator, and is conflicted over this. A local girl, Máire, falls for Yolland, even though they speak not a word of each other's language, and there is a very tender and funny love scene where they woo each other by reciting the place names of the area where they were born. Then, maybe because some locals were hostile to the English, maybe because Máire had a jealous suitor, maybe for some other reason entirely, Yolland vanishes. The play ends with the old schoolmaster deciding to teach Máire to speak English and the English soldiers threatening to first shoot the livestock and then level the town unless Yolland is found.

## **Impact and Aftershocks**

There is so much to unpack in this that a lifetime wouldn't do it. Even today, with the play being taught in schools, new perspectives are still surfacing. The central premise, the coloniser mapping the territory and putting the place names into his own language, is clearly an act of colonial assimilation, making what Declan Kiberd calls "a new England called Ireland

(Kiberd, *After Ireland: Writing the Nation from Beckett to the Present*)". Hugh the schoolmaster acknowledges the harshness of English rule when he says to Yolland that Irish is:

"A rich language. A rich literature... full of the mythologies of fantasy and hope and self-deception – a syntax opulent with tomorrows. It is our response to mud cabins and a diet of potatoes; our only method of replying to... inevitabilities. (Friel)"

But the narrative unfolds in ways which serve neither Unionist nor Nationalist clichés. Yolland admires the Irish language and shyly loves the woman who speaks it. She desires him and is aroused by the adventure of the world beyond Baile Beag. The play defies the expected narrative in a host of ways.

It was so unexpected and subversive that many who saw it needed time to process and understand it. In that space, where the mind reaches for familiar certainties and does not find them, but must cast around for another way of understanding – that's a part of the fifth province.

Drama in the North had been in the doldrums during the 1970's. Both stage and television served an unrelenting diet of grim, soul-destroying dramas about sectarianism, which often left audiences feeling depressed and defeated. This happened to the point where critic Imelda Foley entitled one of her essays: "Not Another Troubles Play"<sup>22</sup>.

The works served up by Field Day, however, triggered a resurgence of interest in local drama because they did not preach<sup>23</sup>. They asked questions which people genuinely wanted to discuss. They freed people to speak truths outside the standard narratives. They were so successful that, when you read about the fifth province or encounter someone who knows about it, they are often under the impression that the idea began with Field Day.

## Postcolonialism

Translations travelled round the world, speaking as it did to every colonised people. It has been translated into Irish, Welsh, Belarusian, Catalan and Māori. A Ukrainian version was produced in 2022 in response to the Russian invasion.

It has been described as the seminal postcolonial play. Kiberd once remarked that "Ireland was England's first colony and the first to fight for and gain at least partial independence (Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of a Postmodern Nation*)". Some theorists exclude Ireland from the field of Postcolonial studies due to the length of the occupation, the racial similarity between colonised and coloniser and the number of Irish people who became complicit in British imperialism. Others – such as Edward Said, one of the founders of the field – consider Ireland an important case study.

Seamus Deane had originally been in accord with the other Field Day Board members that they should not become identified with any one side of the conflict. Deane had said:

"Politics is a danger to us but then we're maybe a danger to politics as well." (Delaney)

Out of all Field Day's members, it may be argued that only Deane succumbed to that danger.



He was the great theorist on the Field Day board – Stephen Rea referred to him as its “driving intellect” - and had been a guest editor on *The Crane Bag*. He had argued that both Northern Unionism and traditional Irish Nationalism were reactions to British colonialism. Only by critiquing both could a space be cleared to create cultural and political unity.

“... as Northerners, no matter what our individual tendencies and concerns might involve, is it not an obligation to create an equivalent centre from which the four broken and fragmented pieces of contemporary Ireland might be seen as in fact coherent? (Boss) <sup>24</sup>”

Deane’s fifth province was to be found in the space beyond the binaries of oppressor/oppressed, colonised and coloniser, of settler and planter. He did not deny those basic relationships but transformed them by fully acknowledging their layers and complexity.

Under his influence, Field Day moved from focusing solely on drama to direct engagement with global postcolonial thought. They published a series of political pamphlets from international thinkers such as Terry Eagleton and Edward Said. These, together with his own writings, established a solid tradition of postcolonial thought within Ireland<sup>25</sup>.

However, as Deane dealt increasingly with theory, he grew immersed in the internal debate shaping Northern Irish Republican politics, to the point where Colm Toibin began to refer to Field Day as “the literary wing of the IRA (Toibin)”.

One of the two Field Day founders, Stephen Rea, had said that the fifth province ideal described “an organisation that could be above politics and still be about politics”. The other, Brian Friel, was unwilling to see his theatre company become aligned with one side of the sectarian conflict. Some critics such as Pelletier and Jong say that this led to tensions with Deane,<sup>26</sup> which may have been reflected in Friel’s final play for Field Day: *Making History*.

## **Making History**

*Making History* focuses on the great historical figure of Hugh O’Neil and dramatizes his life during the period where he rebelled but eventually fled Ireland in the event known as *The Flight of the Earls*. This was a watershed event, widely viewed as the end of traditional Gaelic culture in Ireland, and one which paved the way for the Plantation of Ulster.

Hugh is shown as a very human figure, with loyalties, affections and doubts, deeply conflicted. With him during these traumatic events is Archbishop Peter Lombard, making notes on events for a history he will write later. Eventually, Hugh flees Ireland and ends up as a broke and embittered exile in Rome. Much to Hugh’s despair, Lombard keeps labouring away at his history, writing him for posterity as a grand, patriotic myth. The play closes with Lombard reciting a passage from his work which describes Hugh as “a godlike prince”. As the lights dim, Hugh grieves over how this story betrays the life he lived and the woman he loved.

There is one final play, written expressly for Field Day, which I wish to quote. That is Seamus Heaney’s *The Cure at Troy*. However, to appreciate its impact, we must catch up with momentous events outside the theatre.

## **“Here’s To You, Mrs Robinson”**

I mentioned earlier that the Republic of Ireland in the 1970’s was experiencing social upheaval as it struggled to modernise. It had only become legal for women in the Republic to have bank accounts in 1965. In 1973, they gained the right to keep their jobs in banks or the civil service after they were married, and the right to equal pay in the public sector would follow in 1976. Ireland had joined the EEC and for the first time more people lived in towns or cities than in the country.

However, women were still denied the right to contraception, divorce or abortion. Gay sex was still illegal. The Catholic Church still held a place of unquestioned power.

In the 1980’s there was a crisis of unemployment and a neo-conservative cultural backlash. Although it became lawful to supply contraceptives to married couples in 1979, to sell condoms over the counter in 1985, a constitutional ban on abortion was introduced and an attempt to legalise divorce failed.

In the middle of these troubled times, a feminist law professor who had resigned her Seanad seat decided to run for President. Her name was Mary Robinson.

There had never been a female President. The Presidency had been uncontested for the previous 17 years. Now, along came a woman with progressive views, who had campaigned for the right to contraception and who spoke of gender equality and gay rights. Yet she struck a chord with the electorate, and she won.

As she took up residence in Áras an Uachtaráin, she brought with her many of the ideas developed by the thinkers and artists of The Crane Bag and Field Day:

“With her background in academia, Mary Robinson was familiar with the cultural and intellectual debate in Ireland in the 1980s. She was personally acquainted with many of its leading figures, and she later acknowledged her debt to both The Crane Bag and Field Day. Ideas and sentiments expressed there filtered into her presidential speeches, and, on a few occasions, they even provided drafts.” (Boss)

Significantly, one such occasion was when she called upon Richard Kearney for assistance with her inaugural address as President:

“The Ireland I will be representing is a new Ireland, open, tolerant, inclusive. Many of you who voted for me did so without sharing all of my views. This, I believe, is a significant signal of change, a sign, however modest, that we have already passed the threshold to a new pluralist Ireland.

The recent revival of an old concept of the Fifth Province expresses this emerging Ireland of tolerance and empathy. The old Irish term for province is coicead, meaning a 'fifth'; and yet, as everyone knows, there are only four geographical provinces on this island. So where is the Fifth?

The Fifth Province is not anywhere here or there, north or south, east or west. It is a place within each one of us - that place that is open to the other, that swinging door which allows us to venture out and others to venture in.

Ancient legends divided Ireland into four quarters and a 'middle', although they differed about the location of this middle or fifth province. While Tara was the political centre of Ireland, tradition has it that this Fifth Province acted as a second centre, a necessary balance. If I am a symbol of anything I would like to be a symbol of this reconciling and healing Fifth Province.”

In addition, she commits to Kearney’s Irish cultural nation, comprising the diaspora, his global and local ideas of subsidiarity: and, crucially, the concern for peace with Northern Ireland:

“I turn now to another place close to my heart, Northern Ireland. As the elected choice of the people of this part of our island I want to extend the hand of friendship and of love to both communities in the other part. And I want to do this with no strings attached, no hidden agenda. As the person chosen by you to symbolise this Republic and to project our self image to others, I will seek to encourage mutual understanding and tolerance between all the different communities sharing this island.”<sup>27</sup>

Robinson was a President who kept her word. Although in her role as Head of State she lacked the political power of the Taoiseach, she used her influence to champion social justice causes and guide Ireland towards greater openness and inclusivity. During her time, it became legal to be gay (1993) and to get a divorce (1996). In addition, she became the first President of Ireland to pay a state visit to Northern Ireland, a significant gesture of reconciliation.

Meanwhile, North of the border, an atrocity had brought about a moment of reflection.

## Hope and History

On Remembrance Sunday, the 8<sup>th</sup> of November 1987, the Provisional IRA detonated a bomb at the war memorial in the town of Enniskillen, as people were gathered to remember the war dead.

The bomb killed 11 people, ten civilians and one police officer, with an additional person dying later of wounds. 63 were injured.

Something about this bombing put it beyond the usual slaughter. It was not the number of casualties, which was not unusual. There had been greater slaughters in the past.

It was something about the callousness of bombing people as they gathered in a quiet moment to remember the fallen. Remembrance Sunday is particularly important in Ulster, a sacred day to many unionists who remember the vast number of their community who died at the Somme.

The Provisional IRA apologised and said they had made a mistake.

Gordon Wilson, who lost his daughter Marie, told a harrowing story of being trapped under the rubble with her before she died. His words “I bear no ill will. I bear no grudge”

broke hearts wide open across the whole of the North. Suddenly attempts to bring peace, which had been faltering, gained a new momentum.

It would be too simplistic to attribute the peace to this one incident, just as it would be to credit it to any one person. Even just getting warring enemies together for talks about talks was a heroic undertaking in which politicians risked their careers, and many others risked their lives. The British government, the Irish government, with support from the US government, all laboured, persuaded, negotiated, applied pressure.

## **Peace comes dropping slow**

Eventually, eleven years after Enniskillen, The Belfast Agreement was finally signed. The border continued to exist, but was a “soft” border, with everyone in Ireland enjoying free movement to and fro without so much as a checkpoint along the way. Everyone in the north would be entitled to dual citizenship, to consider themselves British or Irish or both if they so desired.

It was a very fifth province kind of solution, as it allowed everyone to live as if they had the Ireland of their choice, divided or united as they preferred.

Three things in my lifetime have seemed miraculous. One was when the Berlin wall fell without a war. One was when apartheid ended without bloodshed. The third was when bitter enemies Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness put aside a lifetime of hatred to serve as First and Deputy First Minister of a peaceful Northern Ireland.

By all accounts, they even achieved a measure of friendship.

Here I will ask you to cast your mind back to our opening myth, The Settling of the Manor of Tara, and recall that Trefuilngid came to Tara on the day of Christ’s crucifixion, and then went on to settle the borders of Ireland’s provinces. The Belfast Agreement, was signed on April 10th 1998, which was Good Friday. The peace settlement quickly became nicknamed The Good Friday Agreement.

Now, at last, I get to follow in the footsteps of President Clinton, of Joe Biden, Gerry Adams and John Hume and numerous others who celebrated the peace, by quoting the climax of the play which Seamus Heaney wrote for Field Day. It was, of course, The Cure at Troy. It contains the following frequently quoted words:

History says, Don’t hope  
On this side of the grave...  
But then, once in a lifetime  
The longed-for tidal wave  
Of justice can rise up,  
And hope and history rhyme.

So hope for a great sea-change  
On the far side of revenge.  
Believe that a further shore  
Is reachable from here.  
Believe in miracles  
And cures and healing wells  
(Heaney).

## **Cultural Impact and Legacy**

It is difficult to quantify the extent to which the concept of the fifth province contributed to the Republic's transformation from a highly conservative state to a more liberal and inclusive one, or to the peace process in Northern Ireland. It operated by influencing influential people, who then created art and ideas which reached out to many.

As we have seen, Richard Kearney, the philosopher who helped revive the fifth province and turn it into a metaphor, worked with both Mary Robinson<sup>28</sup> and with John Hume, Northern Ireland's most dedicated peacemaker and eventual Nobel prize winner. Field Day (a number of whom were friends with Hume) were inspired by the idea of the fifth province. They were influential in breaking down entrenched mindsets and sectarian myths, and helping people to imagine the "great sea change on the far side of revenge"

When the people of Ireland voted to accept the Good Friday Agreement, 94% in favour in the Republic<sup>29</sup>, 71% in favour in the North<sup>30,31</sup>, many of them would have been touched by ideas which rippled out from either The Crane Bag or Field Day.

It is my opinion that the concept of the fifth province was insufficiently defined to consider as a philosophical or political principle. It functioned more as an inspiration for those needed ways to break out of binary thinking, to think creatively or to subvert existing cultural stereotypes. As such, it was a powerful tool wielded by the people who helped to reshape Ireland's cultural climate and helped to make change possible.<sup>32</sup>

## **A Surprise Legacy**

After the highpoint in the 80's and 90's, the fifth province began to fade from public discourse in the 2000's. The North was engaged in desperately nursing the fragile peace, the South preoccupied by the Celtic Tiger on one hand and the full impact of the clerical child sexual abuse scandal on the other.

In addition, the fifth province metaphor, having passed through the hands of so many poets and playwrights, and being reinterpreted by each one, was becoming too diffuse to be useful.

However, there were those who had been inspired by the fifth province and were putting it to work in their own fields. These included psychotherapist Imelda McCarthy.

## **The work of Imelda McCarthy**

Imelda McCarthy was a systemic family therapist – that is, her field of therapy did not consider that a troubled individual stood alone but rather viewed them as part of a group or system of people. Most commonly this would be a family but could be any network of relationships.

The British Association for counselling and Psychotherapy says:

“Systemic therapy focuses on relationships between a group of people, rather than solely on an individual’s thoughts and feelings... [It] focuses on the interactions and relationships between the group to help them address any problems and to move on. It gives all the members of the group the chance to explore their feelings and say what they think in a safe, non-judgmental environment.”<sup>33</sup>

In a range of papers, McCarthy describes how she, along with colleagues Nollaig Byrne and Philip Kearney, found inspiration in The Crane Bag, where the central metaphor of the fifth province seemed to offer possibilities for enriching their practice.

In recounting her understanding of the myth, it is apparent that McCarthy had reflected on it and made it her own. In her version, she focuses on Uisneach as a meeting place:

“It was thought that leaders and chieftains from the four provinces came to this site to settle conflicts through talking together. Because of its siting at the meeting of the provinces it was seen to be both apart from and a part of the four provinces and was imagined to constitute a province of imagination and possibility. (McCarthy, Fifth Province Re-versings: the Social Construction of Women Lone Parents' Poverty and Inequality)”

“What appealed about this metaphor was that it referred to a domain where language and conversation was important in the negotiation of different viewpoints and realities. “

McCarthy was deeply concerned with conducting conversations in ways which addressed the power imbalance between therapist and client, privileging the client. She was also an advocate for constantly critiquing oneself during therapy, to detect and intercept any personal biases which might lead to passing judgement. She has written about The Politics of Listening and The Ethics of Speaking.

“The metaphor of the fifth province came to refer also to the possibility of holding together and juxtaposing multiple and often conflicting social realities. In this way it specified a domain of imagination, possibilities and ethics.”

Drawing on Hederman’s work, she came to consider it a place where transcendence and immanence could co-exist, as one both went within oneself, while remaining open to others beyond oneself:

“It is the prospect of this process which opens possibilities for one to confront one’s deepest recesses while at the same time opening to another. (McCarthy, *The Spirit of The Fifth Province*)”

It is apparent how those ideas can be helpful when working with groups of people. It is also, however, beginning to sound not just like therapy but also a lot like spirituality. McCarthy realised and embraced this. Claiming “we are Divine not deficient”, she went on to say:

“There is little place in this scheme of things for a pathologising language which describes people in terms of their deficits and deficiencies instead of their wonderful resourcefulness even in the face of desperate and tragic circumstances. A language of strengths opens us to the indomitable nature of the human spirit. A language of deficit closes us to it. When we join at the level of Spirit within a therapeutic conversation then anything is possible and we feel ‘led’ from within the relationship. The ‘miracle’ of therapy occurs in these moments. (McCarthy, *The Spirit of The Fifth Province*)”

In addition to becoming widely referenced and admired in her career as a psychotherapist, McCarthy went on to develop the fifth province as a spiritual tool. She founded The Fifth Province Sangha and has developed her ideas into a systemic meditation practice.

For anyone wishing to explore this approach further, [imeldamccarthy.net](http://imeldamccarthy.net) has a wealth of material, including a wide array of her published papers available to read.

## **Druidry**

Before I move on to consider how the fifth province might apply to Druidry, I invite the reader to pause and consider our journey through its late twentieth century re-emergence.

Earlier, I mentioned that there would no robe-wearing Druids in this part of the story, and that is true. But consider – an ancient myth, which left an echo of itself in the Irish language, is reborn in the minds of Richard Kearney, a philosopher, and Mark Hederman, a Priest. Druids are sometimes described as philosopher-priests.

Just as Druids sometimes advised Kings, so Kearney consulted with a President, as well as other movers and shakers of his day.

Their ideas inspired poets and playwrights – modern day Bards, who made new art out of old history and gave it to the people.

And Imelda McCarthy, our inspired spiritual psychotherapist – does she not have a flavour of the Ovate about her?

Fanciful though this is, I have occasionally imagined that, in her time of need, Ireland reached out and recruited for herself some modern-day Druids to help solve her problems – even if they would never in a million years cast themselves in that role!

## Coming Home to OBOD

Now, with great pleasure, I get to bring this story home, not just to Druidry but to OBOD Druidry. The sophisticated thinkers and writers we've been discussing considered the fifth province deeply and used it in noble and beautiful ways. But there is a key element which all of them missed. Maybe they missed it because it's not explicitly spelled out in *The Settling of the Manor of Tara*. Or maybe they knew about it, but did not see how it applied to our modern lives or to the work they were doing.

They all saw the four separate provinces. They saw the sacred centre which unified them and made them a coherent whole. But they never asked – *what made that centre sacred?* What made it strong enough, sound enough, whole enough to harmonise a nation?

For our answer, we turn to John Michell, author of *The View Over Atlantis* and a past Presider of OBOD:

“One of the main functions of the High King in old Ireland,” he wrote, “as in ancient China and widely elsewhere, was to look after the interests of the land itself - to maintain its harmony and vitality, and to watch over the natural order within it.  
(Michell)

In a brief and seemingly whimsical pamphlet called *The Concordance of the High Monarchists of Ireland*<sup>34</sup>, Michell proposed a new settlement for Ireland's divisions:

- Each of the four provinces would govern itself as it preferred, while a High King or Queen would serve as the ritual centre of the island – the Fifth Province personified.
- The Provinces would select the monarch together, each choosing in their own way.
- It would be beneath the Monarch's dignity to impose taxes – instead they would live on the income from their generous estates and from providing the provinces with their currency, postage stamps and ordnance surveys.

This High Monarch would wield no direct political power and would be forbidden to advocate any ideology or religion. However, Michell assigned them one sacred duty: *the care and guardianship of the land*.

To this end, he suggested something which, I imagine, would be a popular employment choice for OBOD Druids - a modern College of Geomancy. It would be tasked with researching and applying ancient geomantic wisdom. These state geomancers would have the authority to modify or forbid land development projects if they were deemed harmful to the ecological harmony of the island.

It was the only area in which he gave his imagined High King the power to over-rule others.



It seems to me that, in putting right relationship with the land back at the heart of the fifth province, Michell reinstated the quintessential Druid insight.

(Even as I type this, I am reminded that “quintessential” comes from quinta essentia, meaning “fifth essence”. It harks back to the Greek *pemptē ousia*, referring to the Greek fifth element of Aether – the ultimate stuff of the universe.)

## Conclusion

Finally, we have followed the fifth province through all its various domains of myth, and metaphor and method of thought. I would encourage everyone to view it as a potential tool, and consider whether or not you want to tuck it away in your crane bag for future use. If you do, feel free to shape and interpret it to your own ends. As you have seen in this paper, that’s what everyone did. Whenever you want resolve conflict, open dialogue or enable healing, it will serve you well.

For myself, I see two urgent uses for it in the present day:

One is happening in Ireland, and possibly in your country as well. Our country, which once suffered from excessive emigration, is now experiencing high levels of immigration. People are scared of how fast their society is changing and scared there will not be enough resources to go around. The sense of Irish identity which once served as a shield against a colonial power is now in danger of being used as a sword to lash out at migrants who come to us in need.

Here the fifth province could take the form of reminding people of what unites us, our common human experience and our historic memories of hardship. It could be useful in finding creative ways to open dialogue, or to subvert the stale old stories about each other that keep us apart, so that whatever political choices are made, they are at least made in the full and compassionate knowledge of each other’s stories and shared humanity.

The second is part of our core service as Druids, and that is to live constantly with the awareness that, if we, or our families, or our societies, are to thrive, we must be in harmony with the Land. The idea of the fifth province includes welcoming everyone into an inclusive dialogue, and we need to include the Land. One recent creative approach has come from The Rights of Nature Movement. This campaigns for ecosystems and species and sometimes rivers and mountains to have legal personhood, so that they can be represented and defend their rights in court. Maybe a Druidic fifth province invites us to speak for the rights of non-human lifeforms outside court as well, in any situation where their welfare is imperilled. Consider the opportunity to invite ecosystems and organisms into our dialogues by speaking for a river, advocating for an ecosystem or being a barrister for badgers.

Those are just my choices. If you choose to visit the fifth province, you will find your own way there, in your own time, and map out your own territory.

Happy exploring!

---

<sup>1</sup> “One's tuath was one's patrie and beyond its boundaries one became an outlander, a foreigner ..., and however this definition may have been blurred by political expansionism in the historical period the conceptual and indeed the practical autonomy of the tuath long remained a basic feature of Irish social organization. But kingdoms were not islands, and relations were maintained, through the persons of king, overking and king of a province, by a system of treaties, bonds of allegiance . . . and by fighting.” Notes on the Early Irish Concept of Unity Proinsias MacCana *The Crane Bag* Vol. 2, No. 1/2, *The Other Ireland* (1978), pp. 57-71 (15 pages)

<sup>2</sup> Cattle-reiving in a cattle-caring society can be a source of profit as well as of honour, but one thing it requires is that there is frequently sufficient to neutralize the lust for territorial conquest. Secondly, where war was governed by the heroic ethic, as was largely the case in early Ireland, it constituted its own justification and, as with the Indian dharmavijaya or 'righteous conquest', it had for its reward honour and glory rather than annexation of territory. Notes on the Early Irish Concept of Unity Proinsias MacCana *The Crane Bag* Vol. 2, No. 1/2, *The Other Ireland* (1978), pp. 57-71 (15 pages)

<sup>3</sup> James Carney, in *Studies in Irish Literature and History* (1955) put forward the anti-nativist argument that the myths we have today are more literature written by Christian monks than any real continuation of the oral tradition

<sup>4</sup> Gerry Smith, in *Space and the Irish Cultural Imagination*” says: “Lebor Gabála is not historiography, however, but the accumulated work of a number of imaginative story-tellers who combined biblical, first millennium and folkloristic sources with their own aspirations and persuasions.”

<sup>5</sup> Carey, John. (1994). *"The Irish National Origin-Legend: Synthetic Pseudohistory."* *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*.

Carey notes that earlier traditions may have had simpler origin stories involving individuals like fishermen, which were overwritten by the later synthetic Christianized narrative of LGE. There is also a summary of pre-LGE traditions in Ó hÓgáin, Dáithí. (1991). *Myth, Legend & Romance: An Encyclopaedia of the Irish Folk Tradition*.

<sup>6</sup> The full sequence of invasions is as follows: After the people of Cessair came the Partholonians and then the Nemedians, both of whom perished. Then a people known as the Fir Bolg, the men of the bag, arrived and survived. It was under the Fir Bolg that, according to the LGE, Ireland was first divided into five, with a fifth going to each of five brothers. After them came the Tuatha Dé Danann, the magical people many of whom we regard as Irish deities, and then the Milesians, the ancestors of today's indigenous Irish. Please note – there are other accounts of how Ireland came to have five provinces.

<sup>7</sup> “Yet, the perception of Uisneach as the centre-point of Ireland could just as well be based on an older tradition that places far greater emphasis on its role as the centre of the cosmos, an axis mundi. It is this concept of centrality that is most pervasive in the early literature, with Uisneach consistently portrayed as a place of origins and beginnings, linked to the Otherworld; as a place where druidic and other divinely inspired judgments and proclamations are made, particularly regarding the cosmological divisions of the island; as a place of assembly, with traditions of a fire-cult; and as the site of an omphalic stone, a mystical well and a sacred tree.” Roseanne Schot, ‘From cult centre to royal centre: monuments, myths and other revelations at

---

Uisneach', in Roseanne Schot, Conor Newman and Edel Bhreathnach (eds), *Landscapes of Cult and Kingship* (Dublin, 2011), pp. 96, 101–2.

<sup>8</sup> Anthony Murphy's full article is at: <https://mythicalireland.com/blogs/news/the-division-of-ireland-a-mythic-theme-and-historic-reality>

<sup>9</sup> Caitlin Matthews: *The Encyclopedia of Celtic Wisdom – The Settling of the Manor of Tara*

<sup>10</sup> "Medieval Irish literature contains a number of passages where features of insular space are described as parts of a human or divine body.<sup>8</sup> Some remarkable examples are found in the Middle Irish tale 'The settling of the possessions of Tara' (Suidigud Tellaig Temra, later STT),<sup>9</sup> where Fintan mac Bóchra 'domesticates' the island of Ireland. STT shows Fintan's intimate relations with the land of Ireland. When he arrives at Tara, he calls Ireland his 'foster mother' (buime; note that the nobles called Fintan their aiti 'foster father') and the hill of Tara 'the familiar knee' (glún gnáthach)." Bondarenko, Grigory. 'Ireland as Mesocosm', in E. Lyle (Ed.) *Celtic Myth in the 21st Century* (University of Wales Press, 2018).

<sup>11</sup> In other tales which mention these events, like the Airne Fingéin, Fingen's Vigil, Fintan Mac Bóchra does not even speak for himself but a spirit of angelic prophecy speaks through his lips, adding emphasis to the fact that this settlement is in accordance with the will of God

<sup>12</sup> <https://abeautifulresistance.org/site/2020/2/12/the-manor-of-tara>

<sup>13</sup> This claim has been widely repeated for centuries, but there are historians who dispute it, including Professor Anne Dugan, who claims the supposed Papal Bull was the falsification of an existing letter: *History Ireland*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (May - Jun., 2005), pp. 07-08

<sup>14</sup> In 1962 Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd of South Africa said he would gladly exchange all his own state's apartheid legislation for one clause of the Northern Ireland Special Powers Act. Cited in Michael Farrell, *Arming the Protestants* (Dingle: Brandon Books, 1983), pp. 89–92

<sup>15</sup> The English equivalent of this might be John Major's vision of England as eternally a country of warm beer and old maids cycling to church through the morning mist.

<sup>16</sup> *Kearney explained the journal's title as follows: "In Irish legend, the Crane Bag belonged to Manannan, God of the sea. It had been made from the skin of a woman who had magically transformed into a crane. ... What the crane-bag contained were alphabetical secrets known only to the oracular priests and poets. Cranes were supposed to make letters as they flew. These letters were then translated into written characters. That the crane-bag filled when the sea was in flood, but emptied when it ebbed, means that this alphabet made sense to the poets, but made none to uninitiated outsiders. - The Crane Bag is what this journal sets out to be. As such, it is not a tangible object. It exists only as a metaphor or as symbol. One's apprehension of a symbol is a matter of insight. The « scope » of a symbol's reference cannot be limited to a particular concept. The « full » content of the symbol cannot be expressed in other words. There can be no definitive exegesis."*

<sup>17</sup> In an interview with *The Sunday Independent*, Kearney said his intention was to « translate the fifth province into reality, to bring it to bear on reality in such issues as Irishness, the North, the family, Church and State and the language." » 22 January 1984

<sup>18</sup> *This certain kind of art is poetry as described by Heidegger. This fact may explain why Crane Bag contributors and members of Field Day engaged more with Kearney's vision than Hederman's – both Tom Paulin and Seamus Deane have been outspoken on their disdain for Heidegger. His concept of poetry does draw on his deeper völkisch project, and I suggest many were unwilling to engage with it for fear of importing the underlying toxic baggage*

---

<sup>19</sup> He also considered Britain and Ireland forming a joint “Council of the Isles”, a prospect from which the overwhelming majority of Irish Nationalists recoiled – they had no interest in exercising influence over Britain, and no desire to let Britain exercise influence over the part of Ireland which had successfully freed itself.

<sup>20</sup> Members of the diaspora have often seen themselves in the Fifth Province. In *American Wake* (1995) Greg Delanty said: “[...] the fifth province is not Meath or the Hy Brazil of the mind. It is this island where all exiles naturally land.”

<sup>21</sup> I remember encountering *The Crane Bag* as a teenager and being drawn to its central idea. However, when I tried to delve deeper, the magazine was far above my head – I flung myself over and over again against its completely impenetrable prose and came away with nothing. This seems to have produced the result Hederman and Kearney intended, sending my thoughts inwards so that I could construct my own interior version of the fifth province.

<sup>22</sup> “The title, *Not Another Troubles Play* echoes a common dictum, a familiar response to the new work of the 1970s and ’80s, a reaction based more on a plethora of television dramas than theatre representation and a perceived genre of realism, an interpretive re-enactment of events from which audiences wished to escape at the doors of auditoria. The title also defies a superficial preconception that the specific setting of a text, its time and locale, may deny enduring potential or more universal resonance.” Imelda Foley, *Theatre of Conflict in Northern Ireland, 1968 to 1998*.

<sup>23</sup> “The resurgence in the modern era came primarily through the work of Field Day and Charabanc. Field Day’s call for the creation of an imaginary Fifth Province of the imagination has inspired many, leading to a new vitality and diversity, now embodied in a host of companies .... Along with these developments the critical historical aspect, vital to the development of any art, is now making up for lost time.” Eamonn Kelly *Books Ireland*, No. 268 (Summer, 2004), pp. 149-150

<sup>24</sup> *Sunday Independent*, 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1984, cited in Boss Michael. *The Postmodern Nation : A Critical History of the « Fifth Province » Discourse*. In: *Études irlandaises*, n°27-1, 2002. pp. 139-159

<sup>25</sup> “This is not to say that Irish scholars had not previously sought to explain the peculiarity of Ireland through a colonial or postcolonial frame of analysis. Yet much of this previous work was insufficiently self-critical, falling victim to the mentalities that Deane sought to identity and transcend.” *Jacobin*, 04.03.2023 - <https://jacobin.com/2023/04/seamus-deane-writer-irish-nationalism-imperialism-cultural-criticism>

<sup>26</sup> “Field Day has always been very much interested in culture as providing possible solutions, or at least as a field where the status quo can be broken or avoided, symbolised by the often-quoted concept of the “fifth province”. Part of the impetus behind the creation of Field Day was Friel’s growing awareness that the political discourse in Ireland could only reinforce the deadlock, leading to more violence, and the misinterpretation through polarisation and caricature of the arguments of all sides. Art, and particularly drama, could offer an alternative discourse, one in which deep conflicts of loyalty at stake could be voiced more adequately and more powerfully.” “*Whispering Private and Sacred Things* » Field Day, Brian Friel’s *Dancing at Lughnasa* and Seamus Heaney’s *The Cure at Troy* Martine Pelletier Perro DeJong *Études Irlandaises* Année 1992

---

<sup>27</sup> “There is yet another level of community which I will represent. Not just the national, not just the global, but the local community. Within our State there are a growing number of local and regional communities determined to express their own creativity, identity, heritage and initiative in new and exciting ways. In my travels throughout Ireland I have found local community groups thriving on a new sense of self-confidence and self-empowerment. Whether it was groups concerned with adult education, employment initiative, women's support, local history and heritage, environmental concern or community culture, one of the most enriching discoveries was to witness the extend of this local empowerment at work” ADDRESS BY THE PRESIDENT, MARY ROBINSON, ON THE OCCASION OF HER INAUGURATION AS PRESIDENT OF IRELAND 3RD DECEMBER, 1990

<sup>28</sup> By her own later acknowledgement, as given to Michael Boss, author of the Postmodern Nation article which I have cited so often.

<sup>29</sup> In 1998, ninety-four per cent of citizens in the Republic voted to ratify the Belfast Agreement, which recognized that the six northern counties were British or Irish or both. This recognition of the multiple nature of identity was a triumph, in its way, for those writers of the Field Day Theatre Company who had posited a ‘fifth province’ beyond current conflicts. It was primarily, of course, the outcome of skilful diplomacy from Washington, London and Dublin. Declain Kiberd *After Ireland* p411

<sup>30</sup>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1998\\_Northern\\_Ireland\\_Good\\_Friday\\_Agreement\\_referendum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1998_Northern_Ireland_Good_Friday_Agreement_referendum)

<sup>31</sup> For anyone who wants to celebrate this vote, the final episode of *Derry Girls*, while a comedy show, is a highly effective portrayal – its impact can be judged by the number of Northern Irish people in the media over the following days who said they were moved to tears by it.

<sup>32</sup> Michael Boss also credits Mary Robinson’s adoption of Kearney’s ideas about the diaspora with influencing the Irish constitution, being responsible for the article which relates to Ireland’s relationship with the diaspora. Boss Michael. *The Postmodern Nation : A Critical History of the « Fifth Province » Discourse*. In: *Études irlandaises*, n°27-1, 2002. pp. 139-159

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.bacp.co.uk/about-therapy/types-of-therapy/systemic-therapy/>

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.carrowkeel.com/files/brennan.html>

## Bibliography

Best, R.I. *\*The Settling of the Manor of Tara\**. In *\*Ériu\**, Vol. 11 (1922): 121–172.

Boss, Michael. *\*Yhr {odtmofern Nation” Études Irlandaises (2002)*

Carey, John. “The Irish National Origin-Legend: Synthetic Pseudohistory.” *\*Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies\** 8 (1984): 1–28.

Carney, James. *\*Studies in Irish Literature and History\**. Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1955.

Daimler, Morgan. *\*The Settling of the Manor of Tara: A Translation\**. Moon Books, 2015.

Dames, Michael. *\*Mythic Ireland\**. London: Thames & Hudson, 1992.

De Paor, Liam. *\*Divided Ulster\**. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970.

---

Deane, Seamus. *\*A Short History of Irish Literature\**. London: Hutchinson, 1986.

Friel, Brian. *\*Translations\**. London: Faber & Faber, 1981.

Heaney, Seamus. *\*The Cure at Troy: A Version of Sophocles' Philoctetes\**. London: Faber & Faber, 1990.

Hederman, Mark Patrick. *\*The Haunted Inkwell: Art and Our Future\**. Dublin: Veritas, 2001.

Kiberd, Declan. *\*Inventing Ireland: The Literature of a Postcolonial Nation\**. London: Vintage, 1996.

Kiberd, Declan. *\*After Ireland: Writing the Nation from Beckett to the Present\**. London: Head of Zeus, 2017.

Macalister, R.A.S. *\*Lebor Gabála Érenn: The Book of the Taking of Ireland\**. 5 vols. Irish Texts Society, 1938–1956.

MacCana, Proinsias. "Notes on the Early Irish Concept of Unity." *\*The Crane Bag\** 2, no. 1/2 (1978): 57–71.

MacEowen, Frank. *\*The Celtic Way of Seeing: Meditations on the Spirit Wheel\**. Novato, CA: New World Library, 2007.

McCarthy, Imelda. "The Fifth Province Re-Versings: The Social Construction of Women Lone Parents' Poverty and Inequality." *\*Context\** 93 (2007): 16–20.

McCarthy, Imelda. "The Spirit of the Fifth Province." *\*Human Systems: The Journal of Therapy, Consultation and Training\** 15 (2004): 1–10.

Michell, John. *\*The View Over Atlantis\**. London: Garnstone Press, 1969.

Michell, John. *\*The Concordance of the High Monarchists of Ireland\**. 1981.

Kearney, Richard. "Editorial Endodermis." *\*The Crane Bag\** 1, no. 1 (1977): 3–7.

Kearney, Richard. *\*Postnationalist Ireland: Politics, Culture, Philosophy\**. London: Routledge, 1997.

O'Malley, Aidan. "Rhyming Hope and History in the Fifth Province." In *\*Field Day Review\** 4 (2008): 135–151.

Stanton, Molly. "Medicine Wheel of Ireland." *\*Elven Elysium Blog\**

McCarthy, Imelda. "Publications and Fifth Province Sangha." *\*imeldamccarthy.net\**. <https://www.imeldamccarthy.net>

BACP (British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy). "What is Systemic Therapy?" <https://www.bacp.co.uk/about-therapy/types-of-therapy/systemic-therapy/>

---

Bleakley, Anne. Personal communication with the author, March 2025.

## Biography

Pat Booker holds qualifications From Oxford, Queens University Belfast and the University of Ulster. However, she has never used them for anything sensible or lucrative. Currently she is a trainer who lives in the Northern Irish countryside with a dog and a cat and too many books. Ten years ago, she wandered into a Druid retreat out of curiosity, and she liked it so she stayed and has been in the Bardic grade ever since.