

Jasper



ANTHONY ESOLEN

MAGDALEN COLLEGE
OF THE LIBERAL ARTS

Song of the day:

“The Mistrel Boy”

If you look at a map of the world, you will see an island called Ireland, separated from the larger island of Britain, with the Irish Sea between them. You probably know that pretty much everyone in Ireland speaks English, and that is because the island had long been under the rule of the English crown. It was not to the liking of the Irish. Most of the Irish people were Roman Catholic, and for several hundred years they owned very little property and had no say in making and enforcing the laws that governed them. The English owned the rich farms. The Irish scabbled about the marshes. The English had warm houses and plenty of cattle. The Irish hoed in the bogs for potatoes.

When the colonies that became the United States fought for their independence from England, and won it, many people in Ireland thought that their turn for independence would come soon. Most of those were Roman Catholic, but some were Protestants who did not belong to the Church of England. And in 1798, just a year after George Washington went back home to Virginia after serving for eight years as America’s first president, the Irish people broke out into rebellion.



It was a terrible thing, setting English against Irish, and some Irish against their countrymen. War is never clean and sweet, but the English used forms of torture against the rebels that you don’t want to know about, including hanging people until they were half dead and gasping for breath, and pressing caps of scalding tar upon their heads, ripping them off and taking hair and scalp with them. The French, who for their own reasons were enemies of the English, tried to assist the Irish, but the English put the rebellion down, and the Irish had to wait more than a hundred years for their independence.

At that time an Irish poet named Thomas Moore wrote a song in memory of a couple of his friends from the university, who had left their comfortable studies to take up arms for Ireland, and had died in the war. The song is “The Minstrel Boy,” and it’s short enough for anybody to learn by heart:

The minstrel boy to the war is gone,
In the ranks of death you'll find him;
His father's sword he has girded on,
And his wild harp slung behind him;
“Land of Song!” said the warrior bard,
“Though all the world betrays thee,
One sword, at least, thy rights shall guard,
One faithful harp shall praise thee!”

The Minstrel fell! But the foeman's chain
Could not bring that proud soul under;
The harp he loved ne'er spoke again,
For he tore its chords asunder;
And said, "No chains shall sully thee,
Thou soul of love and bravery!
Thy songs were made for the pure and free
They shall never sound in slavery!"

You will ask, "But why is the boy taking a harp with him to fight in a battle? What good is a harp for that?"

The harp was fairly big, but you must not think of those enormous harps that people set upright, resting on the floor between their knees, with strings they sweep with both hands. The wild harp that the boy plays belonged to his father, and his father also played it when he fought in battle. It was called the *clairseach* (say it: CLAR-shah). It was shaped like a triangle, and if you wanted to play it well you'd have to start learning when you were small. On it the Irish sang their old songs, not in English but in the old tongue, the Irish. They were songs of the Irish kings, and the heroes in the days long before the English had come, and of great holy men like Saint Patrick and Saint Brendan.

So you see why the boy would bring the *clairseach* with him. It was like bringing all of old Ireland; like bringing his father and grandfather and their grandfathers going back for hundreds of years.

"It was like bringing old Ireland; like bringing his father and grandfather and their grandfathers going back for hundreds of years."

You would play on it and sing, to stir the heart, so that when you might be tempted to think that Ireland would never be free, you would hear of the great Finn and Cuchulainn (say it: coo-HHUL-ehn), and how Cuchulainn was only a teenage boy when he defended all of Ulster against the wicked Queen Medb (say it: MEHV). It's one thing to know what you should do. It's another thing to do it, and that is where the music comes in. When you hear the strains of a song for soldiers, you want to swing the sword and fight, and your arm that was weak and tired now fills with blood again. If soldiers don't

have good songs, they won't be good soldiers for long.

But in the song, the minstrel boy falls, just as the Irish lost in their fight against the English. But isn't it true that a real hero shines brighter sometimes when he loses than when he wins? The

minstrel boy, before he dies, does what a hero would do. Rather than have his wild harp, the *clairseach*, fall into the hands of some fat and rich Englishman, who would pluck on the strings and make fun of the instrument, the boy makes sure that the harp will join him in death. He tears the strings out – they will never sound in slavery! And when he does that, he shows that his heart is free. Some people are slaves even though they can go wherever they want, because their hearts are cowardly. The minstrel boy is no slave. He is free, and his harp is free, because his heart is brave, even in death.



Anthony Esolen is a lecturer, translator, and writer. Among his books are *Out of the Ashes: Rebuilding American Culture*, and *Nostalgia: Going Home in a Homeless World*, and most recently *The Hundredfold: Songs for the Lord*. He is a professor and writer in residence at Magdalen College of the Liberal Arts, in Warner, New Hampshire.

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