



HEROES AMONGST US

HUGO O'DOHERTY

What is a name, and what is a hero? In the pantheon of mythological heroes, there is a place reserved for those who resonate more deeply with us today. Their names, for one reason or another, have become more than merely a means of identification, instead evoking the great acts they accomplished and the values they exhibited. The ancient story of Achilles is perhaps as well known today as it ever was, with his name lending itself not only to a part of the human anatomy, but also toward an acknowledgment that even the strongest among us usually have a fatal flaw. Robin Hood has in some sense become a byword for social justice, while Odysseus is best known for his legendary cunning.

There is a Celtic warrior, however, who stands comparison with any of the world's great mythic heroes. Cúchulainn, despite the lingering air of tragedy around him that is a component of just about all Celtic mythology, was a classic hero, a man's man, a young warrior who mastered the Gae Bolga, a spear molded from the bone of a sea monster which split open like an umbrella upon entering a body.

Flamboyant and aggressive, Cúchulainn single-handedly defended Ulster from invasion by the queen of Connacht, Medb, who sought to kidnap the extremely fertile stud bull Donn Cuainge. While probably not being as ripe for Hollywood depiction as Helen of Troy, this bull was a great source of wealth, not to mention honor, and Cúchulainn alone was the bulwark between Medb's greed on the one hand, and the prosperity and reverence of his people on the other.

There is a song, *Dearg Doom* (a rough translation would be "Red Destroyer"), which glorifies Cúchulainn's deeds. Like the hero himself, the tune has a transcendental aura, opening with one of the most swashbuckling, snarling riffs you are ever likely to hear. For Horslips, who probably did more than anyone to bring Celtic music to a new stage by adapting traditional folk music for a rockier sound, *Dearg Doom* remains their finest hour. But as with mythology itself, the riff is borrowed, inevitably, from a traditional folk standard, *O'Neill's Cavalry March*. For myth and music alike, what one sees and hears is all influenced by something that came before. It is a manifest trait of Celtic culture that what is truly valuable passes through the generations, in turn being recycled to fit a contemporary audience.

What truly inspires the Celtic mind, as it did for both Cúchulainn and Horslips, is the land one comes from – how it is an unmistakable part of them. "You are the song ever singing in me," sings **Celtic Thunder** in *My Land*, the Brendan Graham composition and finale for this tour, "And you are the heart ever true / For you are my land and you always will be, The voice ever calling me home to you." For them the land is personified, an entity worthy of the pronoun "you", a substance with a heart, and therefore a heartbeat. The land and people beat as one, and bleed as one.

**"THERE IS A CELTIC WARRIOR WHO STANDS
COMPARISON WITH ANY OF THE WORLD'S
GREAT MYTHIC HEROES – CÚCHULAINN."**

Returning to the opening questions, what is a land, and what are a people? Throughout the western fringes of Europe – from Galicia in northwest Spain to Ireland, from Brittany to Cornwall to Scotland – Celts are defined by the land they came to inhabit. You can see it in their festivals, their idiosyncratic and unmistakable humour, their music, their art, their food, and more besides. But if Celts must leave their land, and history reminds us that emigration to new lands is a recurring theme, they always bring their culture with them. Entering a local bar in Quebec, the air is often filled by traditional music with a distinctly Celtic flair. The literature of the American South has been influenced by the very myths that inspired this tour. There have been Gaelic-speaking Newfoundlanders in Canada and Welsh-speaking Argentines. They may have moved, but they never forgot their land. They never do.

Adapting and transforming those old traditions and cultures from old lands to new has been the signature trait of the diaspora – the descendants of Celtic people who moved to the New World. "Voices call from the old days, Voices tell from the past / Ancient laws and ancient old ways to recast," they sing in *Voices*, another original composition. To recast is to fashion something new out of something aged, giving fresh impetus to the ancient world and making it relevant. Indeed, the very idea of recasting can be thought of as not only the singularly most important concept for the nomadic Celts, but also for this show itself.

The initial formation of cultures and lands of the Celtic world are said to have mythic origins. Consider The Giant's Causeway, a truly extraordinary series of interlocking basalt columns on the coast of County Antrim in Northern Ireland. Legend has it that the 40,000

or so columns were built by Fionn mac Cumhaill (Finn MacCool in English, the sort of name television producers spend hours trying to think up) as a walkway to fight the Scottish giant Benandonner. When Fionn was then chasing the giant away from his land, he picked up a huge clump of earth and flung it. He missed his target, with the clump creating the Isle of Mann and the void becoming Lough Neagh. The heroes of Celtic mythology are always tied to the land in some way, just as the Celtic people are.

Celts sing about the land in a relatively unique fashion, usually attaching an unhurried melody with lush texture and lyrics brimming with nostalgia – though Horslips' more ostentatious *Dearg Doom* is very much an anomaly in that regard. Dick Farrelly's *The Isle of Innisfree*, once a hit for Bing Crosby and the theme song for the romantic-comedy movie *The Quiet Man*, is one of those timeless and international favourites, enduring in the hearts of many as one of the great songs of the Celtic world in general and Ireland in particular. Ireland, given the moniker "Innisfree" in this case, is given a mythical quality. It is a place where rivers laugh, valleys dream, and birds make music. It is a land that, when missed, can bring a sort of wild trauma to the mind of the emigrant and, when that same person returns to the physical soil whence they were sprung, it naturally brings about an ecstatic reaction.

Some of the greatest songs elicit those same feelings, be it for a lover or for a place. In the case of the songs in this set list, it reminds us that patriotism can be a positive, perhaps even necessary, force in all our lives. When channeled correctly, patriotism is love, something for which we are all constantly yearning.