

WRITING LEITRIM

Monica Corish

Spark

In May 2014, forty assorted artists and writers boarded a bus to visit the offices of the Leitrim Observer. The newspaper had been chosen to take part in the 2014-2015 SPARK Creative Residencies in Companies project, funded by Leitrim County Council, the Local Enterprise Office and the Arts Council.

Claire McGovern, editor of *The Leitrim Observer*, told the group of the 125-year history of the paper, of the days when the news was made by hand, and of today's digital "paper-free newsroom". During the site visit I sifted through stacks of back copies and photographed front pages. One from the archives caught my eye: "No Fish Will Be Left in Lakes, Warns Priest". Although the priest was warning about the dangers of poaching, I read in his words a warning about fracking. I wrote a poem in response to the headline: When Christ returns to Leitrim... to the gravelled shore/of a lifeless lake...he almost dies of grief.

I included this poem in my SPARK residency application. One month later, I met with Claire and with Philip Delamere, Leitrim Arts Officer. We agreed: over the coming year I would write poems in response to the stories in the *Observer*, and edit a monthly Writing Leitrim Page featuring the work of established and emerging writers from Leitrim and environs.

Gleanings

Twelve months later, Leitrim Arts Office published "Gleanings – Poetry Inspired by the *Leitrim Observer*". The book also features essays and stories by Brian Leyden, DBC Pierre, Vincent Woods, Belinda McKeon and Tom Sigafos; poetry from Alice Lyons, Owen Gallagher and Angela McCabe; and contributions from four Leitrim writing groups: The Pig Executive; The Poets' Cauldron; Kinlough Women's Writing Group; and Scriobh Carrigallen Writing Group.

Brian Leyden contributed an essay in praise of Leitrim, the mug of tea intimacy of the county, where locals live side-by-side with blow-ins, in a fertile cultural cross-pollination of Leitrim designers, holistic hillbillies and haiku horticulturalists. But the threat of fracking cast a shadow over Brian's essay: Its small population, he wrote, has lately made it vulnerable to encroachment by shale gas fracking interests who consider Leitrim a wilderness ripe for plunder.

The Pig Executive paid heartfelt tribute to Dermot Healy, the man they had known as a writer, mentor and friend. Booker Prize-winning novelist DBC Pierre, who moved to a hillside hideaway in Leitrim upon first signing a book deal, entertained readers of the *Observer* with a quirky tale of a ghostly novelist who haunts the byways of South Leitrim and the pubs of Ballinamore. My own poems celebrated Leitrim



Gleaning

Poetry Inspired By The Leitrim Obs

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Monica Corish

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With Prose And Poetry From

Brian Leyden, DBC Pierre, Alice Lyons, Vincent Woods, Belinda McKeon, Angela McCabe, Owen Gallagher and Tom Sigafos

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And Leitrim Writing Groups

The Pig Executive, The Poets' Cauldron, Kinlough Women's Writing Group and Scriobh Carrigallen Creative Writing Group

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Design House, the Leitrim Ladies football team, the 20th anniversary of the Organic Centre in Rossinver, Debs Balls, the 60th anniversary of the Irish Farmers' Association...

But woven in between these celebrations there is a strong sense in "Gleanings" of the county as a place that could easily be damaged beyond repair. My own poems responded to the bad news as well as the good. The titles give a flavour: MBNA Jobs Shock; Save the Abbey Manor Hotel; The North West Hospice Needs Your Help; Will South Leitrim now be forgotten?

Alice Lyons' poetry and Belinda McKeon's radio play

address the impact of the boom and the bust on the county. In *Developers*, Alice wrote: doorbells, rows of them, glow in the night village/a string of lit invitations no elbow has leaned into // (both arms embracing messages). In Belinda's play, *Dropping Slow*, a woman, Maeve, lives in a rented house in a housing estate: A place that is more rubble than it is ground. The estate is located near Arigna, A mountain full of coal... Gone to hell twice over. Yet Maeve loves it. This place, she tells us, is not nothing...Do you think it's less the day here than it is somewhere else?

Fracking

My first poem in the *Observer*, *Pinprick*, was a response to Tamboran's attempts to drill an exploratory borehole in Belcoo, just over the border in Fermanagh: A scientific borehole/6 inches across/750 metres deep. The comparison with vaccine trials In Namibia, Nigeria/in the laundries of the slighted Magdalene, was unavoidable: Now why are you crying,/ a big girl like you?// Over such a little thing?

The threat of fracking looms large over Leitrim and Fermanagh. Leitrim County Council voted to ban fracking, but the government has ignored this. At present, a deeply flawed research study is underway, commissioned by the Environmental Protection Agency on behalf of the government. It is led by CDM Smith, a company with a long association with the fracking industry. The focus of the research is on project-level Environmental Impact Assessments – on how to frack rather than on whether to frack – and community groups are denied

access to the interim reports of the study.

In December 2014 the Governor of the State of New York banned fracking on the advice of the Health Commissioner, following a review of emerging evidence on public health impacts. Members of the Fracking Free Network, including Love Leitrim and Good Energies Alliance Ireland are calling on the government to Stop the Fracking Study and to initiate a review of health impacts, led by public health experts in Ireland.

A National Issue

"In Wildness", Thoreau wrote, "is the preservation of the world". The wildness of Leitrim is the intimate wildness of hedgerows, of lake water lapping with low sounds, of lives lived away from the rush of motorways. Vincent Woods' contribution to "Gleanings" speaks of the fragility of small places. In his moving prose-poem, *Tarmon: By Grace of Life*, he writes: The year before she died, my mother wrote to me in Sydney. She described seeing a lorry pass our house carrying a load of stones from the bridge at Cartronbeg... "That's the end of Tarmon", she wrote. I resisted the implication. That a place can be contained in symbol and stone. That its essence can be lugged away on the back of a lorry. That we are not stronger than we are. That place may not live forever.

Leitrim is a sparsely populated county of 32,000 people, with a small voice at the national table. But, because of Ireland's geology, fracking is not only a local issue. The Shannon Basin is a maze of shallow groundwater and interconnected aquifers, at high risk of

pollution from fracking. As Dublin grows, it will need water from the region. There are other risks: short-term economic gains from fracking could be offset by nationwide losses to the tourism and agribusiness sectors.

The October 2015 report of the Concerned Health Professionals of New York makes for sobering reading: Findings to date from scientific, medical, and journalistic investigations combine to demonstrate that fracking poses significant threats to air, water, health, public safety, climate stability, seismic stability, community cohesion, and long term economic vitality.

The time to act is now. You can email your TD to ask them to publicly support a ban on fracking through the Friends of the Earth website (www.foe.ie/takeaction/ban-fracking/), and you can raise the issue with all general election candidates.

"Gleanings" is available through bookshops in Leitrim, Sligo, Donegal and Cavan, and through www.lulu.com. Profits from the sale of "Gleanings" go to Doctors Without Borders/MSF Ireland. The Writing Leitrim Page, edited by Monica Corish, appears in the Leitrim Observer on the last Wednesday of every month.

Websites cited in this article: <http://www.loveleitrim.org/>; <http://goodenergiesalliance.com/>; <http://concernedhealthny.org/compendium/>; <http://www.foe.ie/takeaction/ban-fracking/>.

This article appeared previously on The Irish Times online: <http://www.irishtimes.com/>



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