

SAINT JOHN'S EVE

BY

MICHAEL GARDNER

TWO SHILLINGS

With sincere good wishes—

Michael Gardner.

SAINT JOHN'S EVE

POEMS FROM CELTIC
AND LATIN COUNTRIES

by

MICHAEL GARDNER



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SAINT JOHN'S EVE

St. John's Eve is upon us,
The fires burn up to heaven,
There are five witches in the flame
And there are phantoms seven.
This is a time when men, ice-eyed,
See cold shades through the half-night ride.

And I am ill. I stir not,
And the blinds are drawn quite down,
But I see against the windows
The ghosts from moor and town.
Like silhouettes across the sky
They focus, blur, then seem to die.

St. John's Eve! O thin crust of time!
A step breaks Time in two.
The least of nights, no more than veil
The lightest soul steps through.
The flotsom-ghosts are with us, sing
One dirge for all old suffering.

EDEN TREE

I saw on the moor, a while ago,
A tree of light in the early snow,
Blazing lonely radiance into the sky.
Every branch, every twig, every pointed leaf
Shivered white, till each star,
One by one, ceased to try.
I sat on a gate, far
Up near the summit,
And watched them all die.

'O tree of light, O Christmas tree!'
I cry in my childish ecstasy.
But the words on my lips are frozen, for out
Of the shadows come seven thin, sunk-eyed priests,
And with heavy night-incense they flood
The still air ; and they shout
As they sprinkle with blood
The stiff tree ; and then, with quick glance,
They withdraw, as in rout.

I approach, but a voice cries back at me,
'O touch not the boughs, 'tis a poisoned tree!
'Tis a tree of evil, a tree of Hell,
A tree which bears all the fruit of sin.'
I turn, run for home, draw the iron bar,
But when pure morning breaks the spell,
There is no devil's tree, there are
No relics near nor far,
But a circle of burned harebell . . .

And a heady, brimstone smell . . .

HAUNTED

They loom dark against the windows
They hurl heavy on the door ;
Their breath shakes down the chimney
And it twists across the floor.
The devils of the earth howl to and fro ;
With drunken gait on swollen legs they go.

And Christopher lies sleeping
Beneath the cool soft sheet :
And Margaret, pale and trembling,
Has crept up to the ingle-seat.
But how the candles gutter, sway and die!
I fear dark arms will snatch if children cry.

I fear the mountain devils,
I fear the wrath in the night ;
O would that we had the Saints again
And the angel's swordpoint bright.
For our doors are knocked by the hands of Hell —
O send us a wandering priest with book and bell.

THE BOAT OF TRESPASS

Its sails are full of fire,
Its sails are like Raphael's wings,
The earth blows into the sky with red ;
O where shall we lay our throbbing head
On a deck where the bell in panic rings
And the men of music tire?

O this is the last of boats ;
This is the last to slip
The sand-bar to the open sea.
Where, in a day's span, shall we be,
Under the lash of the Northern whip
Where a strange crew stares and gloats?

The night's flesh opens as we toss,
Reddened and wild and creaking,
With a loose cargo all star-list.
There are no ports for us, nor are we missed
When the office fingers run the papers, seeking
Profit or idle loss.

And even seers upon forgotten beaches,
Seeing us rocking into dawn
Behind the islands,
Bend, more intent, about their heap of shell,
And all the sound that reaches
Is the break of a higher wave,
And the bell . . . the danger bell.

HEARD AT EPIPHANY IN THE WEST

Lord Jesu, dost thou understand
The Gaelic of Atlantic land?
For with no other tongue can I
Offer my gift or soothe thy cry.
Of us there are so few ; so few
Can answer make . . . and thou, Jesu?

O cradled infant, let me teach
Thee our laments of moor and beach.
Earth has no deeper sound of sorrow ;
Our dying language O Christ borrow.
So when thou on cruel cross art hung
Thou mayest find use for our Gaelic tongue.

GOLDEN BOY

To-day is all miracle.
Tell me not philosophy
Had numbered and enclosed it ;
Miracle has posed it
Outside the calendar.
To-day is all miracle,
Wind, sun and star.

There are
Times of no time,
Orbs without axis,
Hours without chime.
All miracle is to-day.
None plotted its short course
Yet its rhythms sway
It surely, without force,
To its last rhyme.

Whose labour brought to birth
This day immaculate?
Which gate
Flew open upon this ruled earth,
Set free this golden boy?
This was a boy of miracle
Who sleeps now his last sleep.
Soon, as the stars
Flow out to sea on the old tide,
To-day, like a toy,
Will be flung aside,
Grey, on the beach,
A drowned divinity.

RUINS OF A MANSION NEAR RAPHOE

When night's strong fingers tie and twist
Black scarves about a million throats,
And winds towards the ocean list,
And toneless Dies Irae floats
Across the earth, O walk not past
Raphoe's square ruin while the shadows last.

For there are vicious memories here
Cowering beneath the broken walls,
Their eyes through every crevice peer,
Their whisper in each chimney calls.
The earth itself rears frightenedly,
The sinful hold the imprisoned just in fee.

Even from here, beside the fire,
I see them, frailties, white and cold,
Search door to door until they tire.
And was not that a bell which tolled?
Another . . . O give ear to them
Singing their own, unheeded requiem!

A WILD PLACE

We used to be . . .
For here, before us, lie the dead,
Completed Worlds shut in by long closed eyes,
The moss grown thick to soften the rock bed.
Come close, my friend, and see . . .
We used to be . . .

But now forget . . .
The four winds have caught up the firstborn men,
And left us unelected.
What we were looks through at us and seems to
shiver, then
Twitches as though by old remembrances beset.
But O my friend, forget . . .

Here fell the snow,
Tenderly to the brother cold of death.
See, my friend, our arms, feet, head,
Caught in its recognition, breath
Bereft. Even upon our lips there's frost.
Here fell the snow . . .
Here fell two travellers . . . lost . . .

ARRIVAL IN SLIGO

O joy
To be in holy country ;
Employ
Once more lost prayers ;
Hear again 'sin' and 'grace,'
And words which find no place
On English lips
Except they be
The uncrushed lips
Of shepherd or fisher-boy.

Cold
Are the hunched hills ;
Old
Is the scattered race.
Renewed are all things
If Heaven through them sings.
O joy to be
Where the air fills
With evening truths, and men tire not
How ever often told.

HOLY WELLS

Cornwall is full of eyes,
Eyes and their tears ;
St. Keyne, St. Neot, St. Cleer's . . .
The earth must be full of pain
As it gently, very gently,
Lives and dies.

There's a sweetness in Celtic sorrow ;
To itself it is both sad and proud ;
Nor is there elsewhere sorrow
With a head so sweetly
Bowed.

If you, from unsensing countries,
Wipe Celtic tears away,
We shall weep for our lost sorrows,
For they, our holy-water springs,
Keep a strange sacrament
Both desolate and gay.

CARN BREA

There is treasure under these hills,
Chariots, orbs cast away
Like a false god his weary Worlds of clay.
There is gold of the obliterated Kings,
And the bruised glory of them still
Sighs in the heather of dead, noble things.

But, at the foot, mines, wrecked,
Moan their own losses loud,
Not royally, but hustled, as a crowd,
A humbled, ruined tribe
Whose debased currency high Worlds reject
And nothing for interment will subscribe.

AN OLD SHRINE

This is a place of the old songs . . .
This is a place where the mind longs . . .
This is a place where the night lingers . . .
This is a place which the wind fingers . . .
 Old, old, old . . .
 There is nothing left
 But the silence of stories
 Told, told, told . . .

This is where much began
Where now lives no man.
This was the death and the birth.
Time has shaven the earth
As an executioner the beard
Of one who fears but was feared.

 Past, past, past . . .
 All the battles are forgotten
 But the one to which all steered,
 The last, last, last . . .

This is a place where the gulls curl . . .
This is a place where the tides swirl . . .
This is a place from which sailed the ships . . .
This is a place of the tight lips . . .

 This is a prayer
 Said, said, said . . .
 Here where the living sips the chalice
 Of the dead, the dead, of the dead . . .

THE WORLD ROCKED

One night sorrow rocked the World
As it lay in rough and homely cradle,
Still, in that year, a child.
Round the logs, the purple flames were curled,
Devouring with their kiss,
And, at the pane, the storm beat sharp and wild,
And the East wind,
Like a thousand devil's tongues,
The whole night long contrived to hiss
And spit, and fill to groaning-point
Its wrath-distended lungs.
One night sorrow rocked the World,
While guardians all were absent,
And when sun rose
There lay the shivering child,
Eyes glazed, its holy confidence defiled,
And all fair dreams interred
In little graves beneath deep valley snow.

And thus the World grows lonely and withdrew
With sorrow's hand now rested on its sleeve,
And so becomes itself a wandering Jew
To take no rest 'till God return at eve.

CONFESSORS

The wings of an old sadness
Fly through the World to-day ;
The reason and the madness,
Spent passion and lost way.
O keep frail joys secluded
From this great disarray.

The gulls are wheeling, ocean
Shakes newly round old rocks ;
There's a sense of broken motion
As earth's memory unlocks ;
And all the windows rattle
And the hands move back on clocks.

And then the earth grows calm. But how?
And how do its cheeks grow dry?
How does the smile return to Man?
The star to his tall night sky?
If there be not Confessors here,
O earth give ear or die!

CHURCHYARD

There's not a hill, no rock,
No heathered waste,
Nor any life nor healthy rebel-simmer,
But the presiding stiff-beaked weather-vane,
And the cough of the clock.
I would have so preferred
The ragged skyline,
Or a long sea-disclosing lane,
Or a point where the islands glimmer
And glint in blue, precious oil ;
Where the earth murmurs
In fond rebellion.
I do not like this place.

Then something told me I was dead.
O No!
Tell me, my mimic weather-vane,
Can it be so?
But the weather-vane turned to East
From due South ;
And the clock backwards wound,
And made a sound
Like old, gnarled fingers
Patting a yawning mouth.

SONNET

My love, there is such little hour before
We of the evening must lie down to sleep
Under our load of World. And now, no more
Clocks strike for us since Time mounts swift and steep,
And, at the next stroke, as a sand-glass turned,
Dust will shake from the sky, a cloud compressed.
My love, rejoice that we are not so spurned
By death, but are with tender speech addressed
And, with consent, are given hostelry :
For there's no joy can outlive Autumn's grief,
But all's despair for him who cannot see
The proof of favour is not stone but leaf.
Then O my love, away with small desires ;
At death's smooth touch, nothing but death expires.

UTES

Across the lawn
There is a lost-key cavern
Where, in the night,
The old-year magic sighs
And turns in sleep,
A grey, disquieted ghost.
And, of earth's other captives, most
Of those who feel the underplay of Time
Beneath day-dated soil,
Catch first and last
The treble notes of Spring, the toil
Of joyful births, the climb
Through spheres, to bright
And billowed domes which are to be.

But some there are who, in the ground,
Feel other strange affinities
And know they share the womb
With those who name it shroud.

Across the lawn, where the woods begin,
There is a tomb
On which, in May, they crowd,
The bluebells and the celandines ;
Self-chosen wreaths upon the grave
Of each his buried twin.

GERMAN PRISONER AT LAUNCESTON

Goldheaded in the English Autumn,
Lighting the grey lane, he bends
Over the unsubtle pickaxe,
Singing his homeland into Launceston,
As he mends the road of enemies.
Songs of dead armies, songs of desert and pines,
And fjords where the blood hangs on deep rocks
Like strands of seaweed :
Songs of goldness
And the childish lines
Once learned in helplessness, remembered in the
same.

The blocks
Of tar steam in a cauldron,
Sending dark fumes into the stiff, wet sky. —
The first schismatic requiem
For the conqueror.

PAX VOBISCUM

Young, wrinkled ghost,
Of all things most
Desired, yet born away
From the round day ;
And your flesh grey,
Shot through with darkness.
The earth was a cold host
To you, who even outran
The pace of the heart's decay,
The pace of the death of Man.

And must we lay
You, all with the disarray
Of age, into your tomb,
An infant's, from the womb
So few years? O this dark demise!
Had you not caught affinity
From wandered Worlds . . .
But see, you had our eyes!

ADVENT

Evensong has sunk,
The last notes frozen,
The two flames snuffed,
Gas burners dead but glowing,
Book-places for tomorrow chosen,
A noisy choirboy cuffed,
The cathedral dark
From the lost vault to floor :
You fight with columns
To attain the door,
And, in the street,
Expressionless,
The whole curved sky is snowing.

And who would dream,
On this black, Advent night,
That soon, so soon,
Amidst such cold,
The hosts of the Light of Light,
Besides which sun and moon
Are but two waxen tapers,
Would here so ready shine?
O may thy swaddling bands,
That are for us a sign,
Be soft and warm, Lord Jesu,
For our saddened lands
Grow bleaker than of old.

MAYO CAROL

In Mayo is Christ born.
Around the stable sough the Western gales,
And fishing boats drift into port, their sails
Wrapped close, as though all other Worlds were ended.
O speed to where light sways and the thatch is torn.
In Mayo is Christ born.

In Belfast is Christ crucified.
Between the factories and the docks his feet,
Thrice heavily, plod on. The women meet
Him ; women shawled and stricken, undefended,
Now that the carpenter's hands, the hands of God are tied.
In Belfast is Christ crucified.

All earth is Bethlehem, all earth
Is Calvary forlorn.
Here is the Lord Christ hung on Tree,
Here is the Saviour born.
And kings no more need set out with star-sight,
Nor rocky tomb be scooped in Eastern hill,
For stars hang over every roof tonight,
And in the city die crushed prophets still.

CAROL

O Jesu sweet,
O Jesu sweet, my sweet,
Here at the manger
I adore thy feet
And, with an ill-trimmed lamp,
The new-born day I greet.
O Jesu sweet, O Jesu sweet, my sweet.
O Jesu sweet,
O Jesu sweet, my sweet,
I offer thee
My stack of fresh-cut peat
For cold winds blow
Across the sky, and sleet.
O Jesu sweet, O Jesu sweet, my sweet.
O Jesu sweet,
O Jesu sweet, my sweet,
Around thy cradle
Lambs still frisk and bleat.
O Lamb of God
How rough thy Judgment Seat.
O Jesu sweet, O Jesu sweet, my sweet.
O Jesu sweet,
O Jesu sweet, my sweet,
I'll sow for thee
A field of golden wheat ;
For vines my soil
Lacks richness and lacks heat.
O Jesu sweet,
O Jesu sweet, my sweet.

O Jesu sweet,
O Jesu sweet, my sweet,
The dawn now breaks
And the kings come, foot-fleet,
But, even now, the holy virgin sees
Wounds in his tiny feet,
And sighs, O Jesu sweet,
O Jesu sweet, my sweet.

DESOLATE COASTS

The spires are down — the spires are down :
The World lies flat with proof :
And over the lands pale horsemen ride,
You can hear the ring of hoof.

The Saints of granite are fallen low,
And the angels roam threadbare,
And the crowns are stored in caverns
Which are sewn with tyrants' hair.

Hot city sounds no Angelus,
Cold land no carol makes,
And midnight sees the clay feet tread
The roads which day forsakes.

But is there, in the whirlpool's eye,
With ragged angels round,
A peace? And do, in circles, move
Such Worlds to Magi ground?

AN ENEMY

An enemy hath done this thing!
And Man, withdrawn
To a place called his own,
Unknown
To the seraphim most widely wandered,
Sprawls, limp with his swollen sting.

An enemy hath done this thing!
The silence is no peace,
For 'tis a stillness,
A chillness,
Of the place where the air is stagnant
With the absence of golden wing.

An enemy hath done this thing!
The serpent's teeth
Chased him from East to West,
And rest
Was bought by blindness : now, divorced, he draws
From his finger his once precious ring.

An enemy hath done this thing!
And when bell music falls
On him from every side,
Bright tide
Against his dark cocoon, he wakes,
He doubts . . . slow dies his proffered Spring.

EASTER 1949 IN DUBLIN

Much holier all earth wakes,
Serener flows the sea ;
Ireland, this Easter, breaks
Last prisons for liberty.

Old fighting hands now fall
On weary laps. Behold
Young men grown suddenly tall!
O 'tis a day of gold!

And Saints of hill and moor
Stay gazing where they stand ;
Dead rebels young and poor
Come down to kiss their hands.

O Resurrection morn,
Death dead and chains forsaken!
Praise to the Son reborn!
All Celtic lands awaken!

AFTER TOLEDO

As though in Bethel,
His head upon a boulder lain,
My son lies sleeping.
And, as the light descends,
A long, black shadow, the pain
Of dreams, extends
Across the hot ramparts :
A sentinei, watch-keeping.

You were a boy
Born with a tender frown
And with an anger
Which was more of love than hate.
You fought, you dreamed,
It seemed
You tried to roll Time backwards,
For you were born
A World of days too late.

My son, my little son,
You had that antique glory, that renown
Which makes of you my ancestor.
You whom our century has slain,
Sleep now,
And, when the long, dark guardian shadow
Has dissolved, I'll know
That you have woken.
Be there then no frown.

THE OLD SAINTS

The candles burn elsewhere ;
Murmur gnaws at the vault
Of other chantries, and the air
Is seldom thickened with the incense smoke :
Silence is left alone
To raise its prayer
And keep alive what tongues would sepulchre.
For, one by one, the Saints
Creep off the lips
Which daily breathed their names,
And fashion lights the eyes
To newer sanctities,
And these grow dark
As though the World's reclaiming arms
Spread eagerly about them.
But I have heard, in Winter,
When Vespers are intoned,
A long sigh echo up the Nave,
As of a prince of power and grace
Dethroned
The sigh of the now disfavoured brave
Loosing celestial envy
Into this soaring place,
Till, growing littler,
All his sanctity falls from him
And it seems a giant's robe
Worn by a child at Christmastime.

OLITE

Vanished the Kings, vanished the turretted boys,
The scullions in the vaulted corridor, the friars ;
Vanished all laughter, all the sarabands,
All tortures, penances and joys :
Buried their echoes with their buried limbs ;
The jewelled throat, the white and workless hands,
Vanished all, all . . .
The great, State plots,
The sunny, fragile whims,
Born to the sound of rustled taffeta,
In boudoir, or the shade of some cool hall.
Vanished the Kings, vanished the turretted boys,
The minstrels and the tellers of far tales ;
Vanished the Kingdom of Navarre
Like toys
Thrown out on to the dust-white plain
By giants grown up, to reign,
Sterile upon the World's grim thrones
And children from succession quite debar.

Vanished the Kings, vanished the turretted boys,
Vanished the foreign Queens of the pale eyes,
Silent the drum upon the battlement, the sobbing
Less than an unrecorded hour's demise.
Vanished the Kingdom of Navarre,
All sunstruck,
Into the darkness,
Who once stood beneath the surest of sure skies.

SANTA MARIA DEL PILAR, ZARAGOZA

When you stood here upon the Ebro bank
Seven years had passed, a small degree of space,
Since from your heart the sword its rich wine drank,
Since Calvary's wonderment swept through your face.
The ruffled blooms lay still across His grave,
Few healing Springs had yet made good earth's scars ;
Disused the path and dark the angel's cave,
But small the redispersal of the stars.
His footprints still, in less frequented track,
Fall undisfigured over mount and plain ;
Split and thrown clear, the Cross lay on its back,
While three far Kings still on their same thrones reign.
Your mantle, Virgin of the Pillar, spread
Round Spanish sons who for your own son bled.

SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA

It is not chance
That the Son of Thunder
Sleeps his sleep
In the land of the people of fire.
It is not chance
That a burning star
Led shepherds, with their sheep,
Eyes lit with wonder,
To the hidden tomb :
For this was Christ's young cousin,
Apostle of fire and doom,
The Saint of Spain,
The sword to heresy,
Who shared Transfiguration, Passion, pain,
Gethsemane ; chosen was he to share,
With the Son of Peace, despair.

The Apostle of fire
Sleeps his sleep
In the land of the people of fire ;
And the people of fire bow knee
To the Prince of Peace on his tree.
But their close-gripped sword
Is his sword,
Unsheathed like a flame for their Lord,
If the Lord's own cousin decree.

SPAIN

In the land of fire, the land of the dust and the stones,
Here
The hidden, wandered Europe breathes
And draws life through its age-old roots,
A poor but glorious Continent.
While the men of East and West
Stand ready with new funeral wreaths
To place upon his tomb,
He still lives on across the hills
Where no false friends can mock.
And this same outcast is the heir to thrones,
To Kings, to Saints and to the steps of God.
He bears the marks of many a traitor's rod.
"Away with him!" the sleek usurpers cry,
Away with him before the chime of clock!
Bury him cautiously in unfrequented sod!"
But all in vain, O all, O all in vain :
For see, the cradles rock!
Europe will grow again!
O Spain, O guardian Spain!

By the same author :

STORM AND CALM. Out of print.

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