

This Landscape's Fierce Embrace



This Landscape's Fierce Embrace:  
The Poetry of Francis Harvey

Edited by

Donna L. Potts

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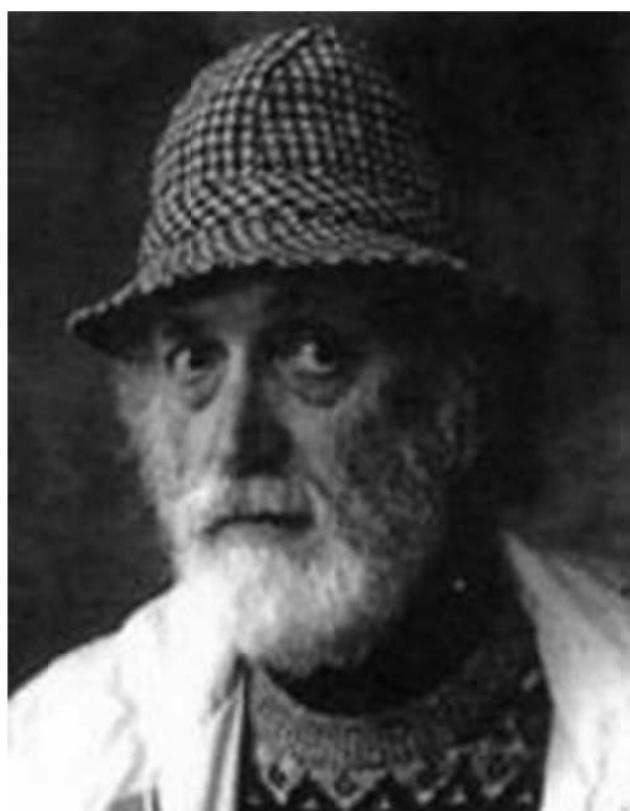
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*For Charles Edward Wright,  
who first taught me about poetry and painting*



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## PREFACE

I must first express my gratitude to Moya Cannon for introducing me to the poetry of Francis Harvey. Her ebullient praise of his poetry prompted me to take her advice and read his poetry—even while caring for a new baby—certainly not the ideal time to read and absorb new poetry. I ordered his *Collected Poems* (2007), and I had to read only a few pages before recognizing that she was right. As much as I loved the thematic range of his work—from love to family to landscape to religion—I was especially taken with his poem, “The Rainmakers,” dedicated to his daughter, Esther:

We shake the young birches  
hung with fat raindrops:  
local showers that drench  
only you and me; witch  
doctors, I know, do it  
better but this is personal rainmaking,  
private weather. Listen  
to the laughter of myself  
and my daughter under  
the dripping birches.

I had my own small daughter at the time, who was always on my mind, and I had begun writing poetry. I knew how difficult it was to write unsentimentally but lovingly of the small joys of parenting. To this day, I’ve managed only one decent poem about my youngest daughter. Yet Harvey had managed to illuminate the profound and subtle joys in the all too often caricatured and trivialized work of parenting. I was so moved I wrote a “fan letter” to him—my first ever to a writer who was a complete stranger to me. I was surprised to receive a kind, hand-written response. The hand-written letter, from someone whom I knew only through poems, beckoned me, and its Donegal return address reminded me that I needed to return, to learn a landscape I’d seen only once before, in the dead of winter, through a tourist’s eyes. I needed to see Donegal through eyes the likes of Harvey’s.

When I received a fellowship from the Irish-American Cultural Institute and the Centre for Irish Studies in 2011, I spent my sabbatical in

Galway, where, Moya reminded me, her recorded interview with Harvey, as well as his 2009 reading at Cúirt, were on a CD that Louis de Paor kept in his office at the Centre. As soon as I heard her introduction to his reading at Cúirt, followed by his reading, which began with “Gates,” I was all the more eager to meet the poet behind the poems.

Shortly thereafter, I had the amazing good fortune to see the premier of *Living Colour*, directed by Éamon Little, the first film of the season in the Galway International Film Series. Éamon stood up and said a few words to the audience (it took a couple of days for it to register with me that the director himself stood before us that night, apologizing for a slight technical difficulty), and the next day, when I told Louis de Paor how much I loved the film, he said, “I can give you his mobile number if you’d like to talk to him.” So I called Éamon, who turned out to be as interested in interviewing Harvey as I was: in fact, he’d recorded the Cúirt reading I heard in the center. So we decided to go to Donegal to interview and record Francis Harvey.

Harvey’s wife, Agnes, and his daughter Esther, were at the house to greet us as well. We spent a couple of hours talking, had lunch, and then resumed the interview. We returned to the hotel, where Éamon converted the recording into an MP4 file that I then saved on my laptop. By the time we returned to Galway, Éamon was considering how he might find funds for a documentary on Harvey, and I had decided to edit a collection, *This Landscape’s Fierce Embrace*, its title taken from a line in his poem “The Deaf Woman in the Glen”, who is “locked in this landscape’s fierce embrace.” It expressed so vividly the relation between humans and land, a relation that is particularly striking in Harvey’s Donegal, where people are more likely to live directly off the land, with an economy that still depends to a large extent on agriculture. I issued a call for papers which quickly found its way to Harvey’s many admirers on both sides of the Atlantic. They were painters, poets, and prose writers whose work ranged from creative nonfiction to critical essays. It came as no surprise at all that his work would appeal to scholars and artists alike, and that the contributors were fiercely loyal to Harvey and his poetry. I thank everyone involved for the sheer joy they expressed for poetry and for their selfless dedication in and enthusiasm for the project.

My thanks to the Centre for Irish Studies for their full support for this slight detour from my original research proposal, “The Wearing of the Deep Green,” on Irish Literature and Environmentalism. The Centre’s director, Louis de Paor, is a poet and professor who has participated in some major environmental protests, including one in support of the Rossport Five—five farmers in County Mayo who were jailed for their

protests of the Shell Oil pipeline there. Louis and John Spillane collaborated in a protest song, "Tonight I Sing for the Rossport Five." Nessa Cronin, who served in his stead while he was on sabbatical in Australia, has an extraordinary knowledge and understanding of, as well as a deeply felt commitment to, ecological issues in Ireland. She advocated for my proposal, I got the fellowship, and she regularly updated me about environmental issues, research, and activism in Ireland. Thanks to Louis, Nessa, Samantha Williams, Méabh Ní Fhuartháin, and other members of the Centre, who so graciously supported my research, attended my presentation on Harvey, and generally took an interest in my well-being during my time in Galway and even thereafter.

I'd also like to thank members of my seminar on Irish Literature and Environmentalism. Their thoughtful comments on Harvey and on environmental issues greatly enriched my reading of the poetry. Steven Kelly, in particular, agreed to proofread the manuscript, and his comments not only on usage, but on content, doubtless have made it more accurate as well as more readable and thorough. Thanks as well to my department at Kansas State University. I'm grateful for my colleagues' and students' support over the past year, and especially, their many excellent questions and observations following the colloquium I gave on Harvey in 2013. Deepest gratitude to Amanda Millar for her patience, care, and good humour throughout the editing process. Finally, my thanks to Deborah Goins and Betsy Edwards at Hale Library for their patience with my last-minute questions about formatting the manuscript.



## INTRODUCTION: CLARITY WITH MYSTERY

MOYA CANNON

Francis Harvey was born in Enniskillen but has spent much of his life in County Donegal. In addition to radio plays, he has published four collections of poetry—*In the Light on the Stones*, which appeared in 1978, and *The Rainmakers*, both from Gallery Press; and *The Boa Island Janus* and *Making Space*, both from Dedalus Press. Dedalus Press has also published his *Collected Poems*. Among the many prizes awarded to him have been The Irish Times/Yeats Summer School Prize, the Guardian/WWF Prize and a Peterloo Prize.

Francis Harvey has done for Donegal and, by extension, for the west of Ireland, what Norman McCaig did for Scotland and what R. S. Thomas did for Wales. He has accorded the landscapes of South Donegal and the people who have lived in them a dignity which has been stripped away as much, almost, by tourism as by earlier forms of invasion. This he has achieved with a naturalist's passion for precision and with an utter lack of sentimentality. The people whom he portrays in "Thady," and "The Deaf Woman in the Glen" are so finely drawn, so much part of the bone and nerve of their landscape, that they remain with the reader like characters in a novel or a John Berger essay.

Perhaps what is initially most striking about Francis Harvey's work is the fineness of the sensibility which informs both the craft and the art. Through his attention to landscapes and to the lives lived in them, he brings us into high, wind-bleached spaces and down into shadowed valleys. His work is raw and refined, grounded, generous and revelatory. His commitment to the craft of poetry is absolute. In his work there is an acute visual awareness of and a deep sympathy towards both people and landscape. There is a closeness to, and a meticulous awareness of, the alterations of season and growth among natural things. He says himself, "In poetry it is the concrete image that appeals to me. I try for clarity with mystery. Clarity on its own is not enough. You also need mystery." In a short poem called "Map Lichen on Slievetooley" he gives us the vividness

of a hare in winter light after a long day's hill-walking, when every detail of a mountainside is cast into relief:

*I check my route and  
watch a hare white  
in its winter coat  
sit back in a gap of light  
scanning a stone whose  
lichen maps  
worlds  
unknown to me and  
cartography.*

A haiku-like combination of attention and playfulness throughout, reminiscent of the hare's own darts and shifts of direction, serves to animate the work. In "Hail and Farewell," he juxtaposes the birth of a bull-calf—"all sea-legs after nine months afloat..."—with the death of his mother's brother on the same day:

*And me listening to him  
grinding out the last sounds he'd ever make  
in this world from the depths of his throat like stones  
scraping the keel as Charon landed his boat.*

The energies of rhythm, onomatopoeia and imagery combine here with a meticulous attention and with the depth of feeling that makes poetry possible.

The rendered beauty of the landscapes which he views with a painter's eye is all the more convincing because he does not flinch from the harshness of those landscapes or from the material poverty of the lives lived by the sheep farmers who cling to them, the people who, like "The Last Drover," "*left no deeds or songs at all*". With a depth of compassion, which marks the work throughout, he plumbs the humanity of these men and women. He affords these survivors of decayed communities the dignity of understated tragedy. He shows how they were, literally, bonded to their land, as in "The Death of Thady":

*He could not tell you why,  
he loves the place so much—and  
love's a word that he would never use.....*

or as was "The Deaf Woman in the Glen," whom he describes as being

*locked in the landscape's fierce embrace as  
the badger is whose  
unappeasable jaws only  
death unlocks from  
the throat of rabbit or rat.*

This compassion is also manifest in the many poems which refer, directly or indirectly, to the Northern Irish troubles. Born to a Presbyterian father, who died when Harvey was six years old, and to a Catholic mother, he was better placed than most to experience and articulate the pain of both communities, as he does in “Mixed Marriage”:

*Loyal Iniskilling or  
Inis Ceithleann, fierce  
Ceithleann's island,  
forged me true; bred*

*its acid loam into my  
soul: sconced acres  
lapped by dividing  
waters,*

One would be tempted to say that Francis Harvey's work combines a naturalist's passion for precision and a poet's yearning for grace except for the fact that a passion for precise naming is also part of the bedrock of poetry. In the later poems there is a vivid sense of how we are all moving, “*free but tethered, through time's inexorable weathers.*” In the context of Irish poetry, Francis Harvey is a Basho-like figure, guided by an unwavering sense of true north, always moving to the washed light on higher ground.



# A DOOR HELD OPEN: FRANCIS HARVEY'S INVITATION TO LISTEN

CHRISTINE CUSICK

I first encountered Francis Harvey's poetry in 2001. I was on a research trip to Galway and my reward for a day's work was a long wandering through the aisles of Kenny's while its storefront was still on High Street, as much a part of the city landscape as the cobblestone path. With tired eyes but an eager spirit I was intent on discovering all the voices of contemporary Irish poetry that an American graduate student did not have the luxury to stumble upon at home. Searching through prints of maps and landscapes, I saved the poetry section for last—the ultimate reward that also permitted the most indulgence. The slim volumes meant that I could choose as many as my wallet would allow me to carry back across the Atlantic.

But there was something distinctive about one particular volume, tucked away with its thin bind, the plain white cover with the stone carving of the Janus figure at its center: *The Boa Island Janus*, a title that immediately resonated with my fascination for place and paradox. I had never been to Boa Island, but it was sufficient that it was terrain on the edge of a continent, of a sea. The apparent contradiction embedded in the title stirred the same impulse that drew me to Yeats, Blake and Whitman. And so I unapologetically judged the book by its cover, and that was that. I didn't choose any other volumes of poetry that day. Instead I sat crossed legged on the floor of the aisle and was lost in Harvey's poetry, in the honest conflict of competing identities, "half in and half out," in the intimacy of an elderly couple "holding hands in bed," and in the sacredness of scavenging for mushrooms that are "the perfection of God's handiwork." I packed my other treasures in my satchel that day as I prepared my walk back to my room in Salt Hill, but I held Harvey's poetry in my hands and clutched it close to the wool of my sweater as I crossed the River Corrib and made my way along the mist-hidden bay, somehow knowing that his words came to me at just the right moment.

Graduate school has a way of creating pretense around one's subject of study; hoards of mostly good-intentioned, curious souls seek answers to what they think are original questions. But they are wrong, and this is where the true discovery occurs. We ask the same questions as those centuries before us, and we do so because they are good questions, because they may take infinity to answer. How do we mourn? How do we love? How do we carry on? The contexts and textures of these experiences are of course complex, which is why we study language and politics, oppression and inequality. But the impulse to ask the question spurs scholarship as much as it does poetry.

I dedicate a good portion of my professional life to seeking an understanding of the significance of physical terrain within an Irish cultural and historical context. I do so in part from a selfish desire to better understand the lives of my Mayo-native grandparents, and I suppose I do so as well because of a sort of affinity to the elemental force of Ireland's terrain, an affinity that to even name risks simplification. But I will always come to this place as an outsider, as someone who has not grown up in the rural depths of Donegal or as someone who has not known the textured lives of its inhabitants. When I first encountered Harvey's poetry I was feeling paralyzed by this status, a self-imposed fear that I would tread too loudly, that the very desire to take a step might be irreverent. But Harvey's poetry invites a reader to take this step, to move through his poetry as he does, "to pick your step from stone to stone," as he writes in "The Language Bog" and most importantly, to listen, to pay attention. Harvey's poetry, in its acuity and tenderness, is an act of listening. Whether it is to barking dogs, the neighbor's fate, or the cormorant's swoop, the lines enact attentiveness, and in so doing invite the ear of the reader as a wooden door held open to baking bread, a fire's warmth and to the crying child. Acceptance of this invitation means seeing what is there, tears and all.

Academics are stubborn sorts, always seeking to analyze when listening should be enough. And so since the time that Harvey's poetry graciously invited me to be more attentive to the physical textures of Irish places more than a decade ago, I have done so as an ecocritic, as someone who is concerned about how we care for nonhuman nature and how we might turn to human stories, especially those shared through the written word, to know how to live more sustainably. Our present reality demands that we move human nature away from the center of our thinking and that we study the inherent logic of our ecosystems. We no longer have the luxury of creating our own boundaries of state and politics because when it comes down to it, watersheds don't care who governs whom if the rain

levels are dissipating, but how we interpret who governs whom does in fact affect what we do about these watersheds.

Bioregionalism is a movement that formally began in the 1970s in the American northwest when activists like Peter Berg sought to create environmental solutions through more intimately understanding our local sense of place. A primary tenet of bioregionalism is that we must engage with local communities—both the natural history of our habitats as well as the human lives that these habitats do and do not sustain. Although this theoretical framework may have been first named by this American social movement, the actual practice of these principles has been long-lived in the rural communities such as those to which Harvey's poetry gives voice. In "The Death of Thady" for example, he gives voice to the intimacy of human connection to physical earth: "He could not tell you why he loves the place so much—and / love's a word he would never use." As Moya Cannon points out in her incisive introduction to Harvey's *Collected Poems*: "He affords these survivors of decayed communities the dignity of understated tragedy. He shows how they were, literally, bonded to their land."<sup>1</sup>

Harvey's poetry is inherently attuned to the local; his hill-walking giving him access and knowledge enough to write elegies for the "solitary" elderly people who live in the mountain valleys of south Donegal. Cannon observes: "The rendered beauty of the landscapes which he sees with a painter's eye is all the more convincing because he does not flinch from the harshness of the granite landscapes or from the material poverty of the lives lived by the sheep farmers who cling to them."<sup>2</sup> If the written word is to give voice to the landscapes that we seek to understand, then it must, without exception, include the stories of human inhabitants, of the intricacies of their dependence on soil, water, and air. Harvey's poetry inscribes these stories without simplification of the human predicament and without the reduction of the landscape into mere symbol or context. His poetry does not tell the story of nameless farmers, but rather, of "James" who has "put up notices on the bit of scrub / he owns" or of "John" who "has a few acres of bog and rock / Mostly rock." Moreover, what we find in Harvey's poetry is an intuitive understanding that we come to know a terrain through our senses as well as through human engagement amidst the sensory as he so perfectly captures in "Mnemonic" when he writes, "I'll not easily forget Dunlewey today. / And neither will you. Not because / the sun shone on the mountains and the lake / and the

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Harvey, *Collected Poems*, Dedalus, 2007. All subsequent references refer to this edition.

<sup>2</sup> 2.

first cuckoo was calling beyond / the hill [...] I will remember Dunlewey / today but because, when we walked down towards / the glen together, we both kept talking / for miles and miles of someone we loved."<sup>3</sup> And while his poetry gives witness to inhabitants' sense of the vastness of place, in poems such as "Condy," where "the horizon is his fence," Harvey is rigorously attentive to the specificities of place, to the naming of the local and the honoring of the implicit inevitability that human lives are bound to the hills that cradle us and to the sea that humbles us. A close reading of Harvey's poetry quickly reveals that through his words and the manner of dwelling that they reveal, his life embodies an ecological, bioregional consciousness without ever having to define it as such.

As I reflect upon the connection between that serendipitous discovery in the narrow aisle of Kenny's and the words I write more than a decade later, I take a moment to scan the field that lies beyond my window and notice a family of white-tailed deer scavenging the spring snow for a night's meal beneath a roaring skein of Canadian geese. My academic training may teach me that these are mere distractions to my writing, anecdotes best left unspoken, but Harvey's poetry suggests otherwise. His words remind us that the lives we pursue and the work we do have a context. There are elderly neighbors dying, ravens soaring, priests serving islanders, grandchildren following the sea winds, and a mother deer trying to feed her young. If we are truly committed to caring for the places in which we live, or even those that we choose to study, we cannot see our day's work as separate from any of these actions. We must pay attention. We must listen.

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<sup>3</sup> 110.

## AN INTERVIEW WITH FRANCIS HARVEY

MOYA CANNON

M.C.: You didn't publish your first collection of poems, *In the Light on the Stones*, until you were over 50, but you had been writing quite a lot before that, you'd been writing radio plays and short stories. Could you tell me, what do you think made a writer out of you?

F.H.: What made a writer of me really was I became a member of the library in the town I was born, in Enniskillen, the Carnegie Library, and I discovered Dickens and I discovered Thackeray. I discovered D.H. Lawrence and umpteen others. I began to read. And then a young civil servant who was a subscriber to *The New Statesman* (I think it was called *The New Statesman and Nation* then), edited by Kingsley Martin, he used to pass on his copies to me and *The New Statesman* was a left-wing periodical. The first half of it was devoted to left-wing politics and the other half to literature and there were people like V.S. Pritchett and Raymond Mortimer and William White Bate and Phillip Toynbee writing. And I discovered that there were people alive and writing because at the school where I attended, we all got the idea that they were all dead and buried, you know, and this was a revelation to me and I began to think, you know, I might have a try at that. So I submitted a few things to RTE that were used and my first poem was published in the *Irish Weekly Independent* and I believe Patrick Kavanagh's first poem was published there as well. It was a sonnet about digging potatoes ... Not a very good one.

M.C.: A theme that's been taken up by other people in the meantime.

F.H.: Oh, yes.

M.C.: And in the context of the Irish literary landscape at the time, who are the people that you would have been aware of writing in or about the time, or perhaps writing shortly before the time that you were writing? We hear a lot about a generation of writers, Patrick Kavanagh's generation,

who felt that they were writing in Yeats' shadow, but you were a generation later.

F.H.: Well, writers then—I was interested, although I read quite a bit of poetry I was also interested in prose but Sean O'Faolain would have been a towering figure; Frank O'Connor, and another figure who was a very important influence on me, and I think he's a wonderful short story writer, is Michael McLaverty, the northern writer, and I discovered his work through Phillip Toynbee, writing in the *New Statesman and Nation*, and he had a very high opinion of the work of Michael McLaverty, and I began to read his short stories and his novels and I still think he's one of the finest short story writers this country has produced. And of course, though it was perhaps later, Mary Lavin, I admired her very much. I thought she was a marvellous short story writer.

M.C.: And in the areas of poetry, who were the people whom you would have been aware of at that stage?

F.H.: Yeats would be the overpowering figure. Rory McFadden, of course; people like that, but Yeats was the towering figure.

M.C.: And in terms of your own work, anybody who comes to mind? When I started to write myself, I remember the incredibly fine craft and music of your work, and I was wondering, in terms of just learning to write, who were the poets you would have turned to specifically for the craft of writing poetry? Who were the poets who would have influenced you in that area?

F.H.: Well, I had very deep feelings for the natural landscape, and Wordsworth was the first poet, and I read him, and *The Prelude* in particular was a favourite poem of mine and he certainly had a very powerful influence. Robert Frost would have been another influence. Because a lot of my work is about the countryside, you know. It's not exclusively so. I write about religious matters as well.

M.C.: There are two poets who come to mind when I read your work: one is Norman MacCaig, and the other, specifically because of that interest in the countryside and also the metaphysicals, is R.S. Thomas.

F.H.: Yes, I've always been a great admirer of R.S. Thomas. Yes, I thought he was a very, very fine poet, and I had the pleasure of hearing him read in Galway some years ago.

M.C.: You write with a precise naturalist's eye and it is obvious from your work that you have a deep interest in botany. How do you think the naturalist's precision relates to your own writing? Which came first—the botanizing and ornithology or the writing, and how do they relate to one another?

F.H.: Well, the writing came first, and the interest in natural history and in flowers and birds came after, especially when I moved from Enniskillen to a farm in Ballyshannon, and you know it was a working farm and I was observing all, and I used to walk along the River Erne and I used to walk up to a big heronry and observe the herons there, and the birds on the river. But writing came first, and the interest in natural history came after that. I'd been reading some of the English people like Richard Jeffries and Massingham. You know there's a great tradition in English writing about the countryside. Ireland didn't have that writing then, but things have changed.

M.C.: You speak of moving to Ballyshannon. You were born in Enniskillen. "Loyal Enniskillen," as you said in an earlier poem, and you were the child of a "mixed marriage." Your father was Presbyterian and your mother Catholic.

F.H.: That's right.

M.C.: Do you think that was important in your emergence as a writer, or an important fact of being caught between the two traditions?

F.H.: I think it has, yes, it has. Although a child of a mixed marriage, I was brought up a Catholic, but I haven't been practicing. I really would consider myself an agnostic, but I've never been able to let God go, just like Anthony Kenny, the English philosopher and former priest. He's been an agnostic for years but he's never been able to let God go. I haven't either, you know, and I think I have various hang-ups, whether it's the mixture of the Presbyterian, you know this Catholic guilt, you know this thing that comes with Catholicism. I have that baggage, if you know what I mean.

M.C.: And your father died when you were quite young.

F.H.: Six. When I was six, he died. I have some memories of him, not very many. There's actually a poem in the collection set in the Dublin Zoo. He was allowed out for an hour or two. He died in a Dublin hospital, and that's one of my last memories, of my mother and himself and me in the zoological gardens.

M.C.: You address it in "The Art of Letters," but it's in *The Boa Island Janus* that you mainly address the question of being born between two cultures and trying to negotiate that. Do you think that when you are given two world views and have to constantly figure out which is appropriate, do you think that that area of questioning is an important space for a writer to find himself or herself in?

F.H.: I think it is, yes, I think it is. I don't think it's going to make you very happy though. Certainly not in my case.

M.C.: Yes, because even in some of the quite early poems you address the question of the troubles in the North of Ireland.

F.H.: Yes, in the first collection there are quite a few poems. Well I would have been in favor, in the early marches, the civil rights movement, I took part in some of those but then I withdrew when it became violent.

M.C.: You write with extraordinary eloquence about the people and landscapes of Donegal. Can you tell me about your relationship to Donegal and to that landscape, and how it developed? Because I can think of nobody else really who writes with such a precision and such very deep compassion as well.

F.H.: Well, of course I love the landscape of Donegal and I like the people. Yes, landscape does something for me. It turns me on, you know, landscape. The bleakest landscape, you know. I'm more at home in the middle of a bog than I would be in the middle of a city, you know. A city is not my place, you know. And I love looking at the shape of the land and the contours, sometimes the lovely sensuous contours that land has, like a human body, you know. A haunch or a breast, you know, I love that, and I like the roughnesses in the landscape in Donegal too. I don't think I could live in some place—a garden in England, Kent, you know, I need roughness, I need wildness. I'd like to have a mountain in sight and be