

A Blackthorn Stick for Borges: Reflections on *The Crane Bag*, Special Issue on Ireland and Latin America (1982)

Ronan Sheehan¹

Abstract: Ronan Sheehan revisits his editing of a special issue of *The Crane Bag* (1982) on Ireland and Latin America. Beginning with his introduction to Spanish culture at school and his memories of football matches with Latin American Jesuit seminarians, he recalls the intellectual concerns that underpinned the issue which concentrated on the Theology of Liberation, Paolo Freire's educational praxis, contemporary politics and literature. Two personal memories are recounted: Nuala McCullough's recollections of Amando Lopez SJ (later martyred in El Salvador) and Sheehan's memory of his meeting with Jorge Luis Borges on Bloomsday, 1982.

My introduction to Latin America happened at school in the 1960s. Fr. Stephen Redmond SJ's course in Church History featured an account of the *Reducciones*, the mission his order had established in Paraguay in the eighteenth century. Gonzaga College SJ in Ranelagh adjoined Milltown Park, the Jesuit House of Studies, in Dublin, which in those days attracted a throng of students from different countries including many from Latin America. A corps of us teenagers drifted to the football pitches after classes to play soccer. The players were drawn from families who lived within walking distance of the school: us (the Sheehans), the O'Buachallas, the Feeneys, the Candys, the de Bhaldraithes, the McCulloughs, the Kennys and so on. Every so often we were invited to our neighbours pitch for a challenge match. On the Milltown Park side, Latin American students were to the fore-but there were Africans, Asians, Irish, and Europeans too. Contesting midfield with a Jesuit Pele was not easy. Sometimes our opponents communicated with one another in Latin. One phrase echoes down the years: "Da mihi pilum! Da mihi pilum! Give me the ball! Give me the ball!"

Joseph Veale SJ taught English, Religious Knowledge and Debating at Gonzaga in my time. To quote Bobby McDonagh (2017), the author of his entry in the *Dictionary of Irish National Biography* (DINB), "he was central to the

¹ Ronan Sheehan (born in Dublin, 1953) is a novelist, essayist and short-story writer. Educated at Gonzaga College SJ, University College Dublin and the Incorporated Law Society, he is also a solicitor and Latinist. He was an early member of the Irish Writers' Co-operative and its Secretary from 1975 to 1983. His publications include the novels *Tennis Players* (1977) and *Foley's Asia* (1999), the latter which has been taught as a postcolonial text at third-level. His collection of short stories, *Boy with an Injured Eye* (1983), won the Rooney Prize in 1984. The collection included the story "Optics" which won the Hennessy Award in 1984.

conception and development of Gonzaga College as a school with exceptional academic standards, in which the emphasis, in practice as well as theory, was on education and expression rather than on examinations". Veale's article "Men Speechless" (1957) articulates his philosophy of education and constituted an important intervention at that time. To quote again from the entry in the DINB, Veale was "a teacher of exceptional insight, ability and dedication" and one whose "rare understanding of language, and his skill in using it, equipped a great many of his pupils with a greater ability than they could otherwise have had to analyse the spoken and written word, to evaluate ideas, and to express their thoughts effectively" (McDonagh 2017).

A key element in the strategy was that we should sit the Matriculation Examination in fifth year, leaving sixth year open to a range of possibilities. That era preceded the present era of the points system which determines entry to the university. In 1970/71, in sixth year, I opted for Spanish with John Wilson from whom I had previously learned Latin and Greek. John was an inspirational figure. He had played in goal for Cavan in the Polo Grounds, New York, in the 1949 All-Ireland winning team. In 1969, at the final Fianna Fáil election rally in O'Connell Street, Dublin, I had been amused to find my classics teacher acting as a kind of bouncer-or bodyguard-for Charles Haughey, Minister for Finance and star of the cabinet. John was first cousin of the West-Belfast priest, Des Wilson. The first couple of Spanish classes were taken up with his account of the loyalist attack on the Falls Road in West Belfast the previous summer.

Then it was over to Federico Garcia Lorca and the Spanish Civil War. John set me the task of translating a lyric of Lorca's which presaged the poet's own death at the hands of the Fascists:

Cancion de Jinete (Lorca 2001)

*Cordoba,
Lejana y sola*

*Jaca negra, luna roja
y aceitunas en my alforca
aunque saepe los caminos
Yo nunca llegare a Cordoba*

Song of the horseman,

Cordoba
Distant, solitary

Black horse, red moon
And olives in my saddle-bag
Although I know the roads
I will never reach Cordoba

The sinister, haunted mood goes a stage further in "Romance de la Guardia Civil Espanola" or "Ballad of The Civil Guard":

*Los caballos negros son,
Las herraduras son negras
Haben, por eso no lloran,
de plomo las calaveras*

Their horses are black
Their saddles are black
They have, which is why they do not weep,
Souls of leather

(Lorca 2001)

In June 1971 I left Gonzaga College, with Lorca planted firmly in my heart.

In 1975 I completed a BA degree in English and Latin at UCD, having published some short stories and reviews in *The Irish Press* and the college magazines. I teamed up with the group of young writers who formed *The Irish Writers' Co-operative*: Des Hogan, Neil Jordan, Fred Johnston, Steve McDonagh, and Peter Sheridan. Neil played saxophone in a band and he introduced me to the music of Bob Marley of Jamaica with his own version of “No Woman No Cry” (Bob Marley and the Wailers, 1973). And he introduced me to Latin American literature proper by lending me his copy of Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. I was enchanted by the stories of the several generations of the Buendia family and their magical-realist Colombian world.

At the same time I studied to be a solicitor and worked as an apprentice to my father. I met Bill Graham, the *Hot Press* journalist, who is believed to have brought U2 and manager Paul McGuinness together. I did some small piece of law work for Bill (now sadly deceased) and in return he offered me a ticket to the Bob Marley concert in Dalymount Park, Dublin, on, I think, September 1st 1980. Everybody danced. Everybody sang the songs. A Hailie Selassie banner dominated the stage. Bob Marley had an authentic spiritual power that seemed to well upwards from the soles of his naked feet. When he uttered phrases like “You can fool some of the people some of the time, but not all of the people all of the time”, he said it with a simple conviction and insight as if he had invented the line himself. It was as if you were listening to a disciple of Jesus – one who had walked with Jesus himself just yesterday.

I tried to put together a collection of short-stories. I read and reread the stories of Borges, the Argentinian master, whose metaphysical tales defy conventional literary analysis. Some stories, for example “The Theme of the Hero and the Traitor”, offered Irish connections (Borges 1944). More so his essay “The Argentine Writer And Tradition” in which Borges draws an analogy between the situation of Argentine writers – outside the mainstream of Spanish literature – and Irish writers, outside the mainstream of English literature (1951). At the start of his career he had wanted to produce emphatically Argentine literature. He dwelt upon the romantic, prairie experience of the gauchos and the colourful argot of the street people of Buenos Aires. It didn’t work. What it amounted to was tourist literature. The identity of Argentinians

should be expressed in terms of their universal experience: the manner of their living, loving, dying.

Neil Jordan's first book appeared in 1976. It was a short-story collection entitled *Night in Tunisia* which I am pleased to say I had a hand in publishing through *The Writers' Co-op*. Some people objected that he was getting rid of the Irish out of Irish culture. The title story is about a father-son relationship. Jazz, specifically Charlie Parker's classic "Night In Tunisia", is the motif which expresses the father's bringing forward of the son. A universal. Neil Jordan was thinking along the same lines as Borges.

I was fascinated by Mario Vargas Llosa's novel *Aunt Julia and The Scriptwriter* and its complex narrative structure (1976). A student in Lima (like myself, a law-student) gets work on a commercial radio station producing soap-operas. Aunt Julia, recently divorced, comes to stay with his family and he falls in love with her. The radio-station hires Pedro Camacho, a veteran scriptwriter, to help out with storylines. Every second chapter of the novel tells a story which appears to be quite unrelated to the main narrative which concerns the student and his effort to seduce Aunt Julia. All narratives converge towards the end. You realize that every second chapter is a story by Pedro Camacho.

I may have discovered Mario Vargas Llosa through reading a review of one of his books. Or it may have been through Neil. Forty years on, I'm not certain. But I am pretty sure that Neil was reading "Explosion in a Cathedral" (1972) or "The Lost Steps" (1998) by the great Cuban novelist, essayist and musicologist Alejo Carpentier before I read his "The Kingdom of this World" (1957). This describes the slave revolt in Haiti in 1796, so near and yet so far from the United Irish revolt of 1798.

The conventional novels of Europe and North America of the nineteenth century and of today offer characters who have a position in a well-defined society who progress through space and time in a linear fashion. Like many of their Latin American counterparts, many Irish people's experience is that of a colonized or post-colonialist world in which one's experience of life may not validly be expressed in terms of a linear progression through time and space within the parameters of a well-defined society. Thus the magical-realism of García Márquez, the multiple narratives of Vargas Llosa, the profound culture clash of Carpentier (French rationalism versus African animism) may all or each echo in the Irish psyche in ways in which the works of Anthony Trollope or Henry James might not. Thus Latin American literature may offer the Irish reader the delight of surveying a new territory, as it were, and also the prospect of surveying the old territory from a new perspective.

About 1976 my friend Richard Kearney returned to Dublin from postgraduate studies in Montreal and Paris determined that Ireland should have a cultural and political journal along the lines of the French journal *L'Esprit*. Mark Patrick Hederman OSB, Richard's mentor at Glenstal, became co-editor. I and five or six others formed an editorial board. As the project advanced at the rate of two substantial issues a year, beginning in 1977, writers, academics, journalists, politicians and artists came to support it.

The Crane Bag received a grant from the Arts Council of the Republic of Ireland and sponsorship, often intermittent, from various other sources. This covered the printer's bill and perhaps the cost of launching an issue. The Arts Council of Northern Ireland withdrew its grant when we published an interview with Seamus Twomey, then chief-of-staff of the Provisional IRA (Hederman, 1977). We had no money to pay contributors. The obvious limitations imposed by this factor were offset to some degree by the modest success which the journal obtained early on. It became a point of reference for Irish Studies throughout the world. The Department of Foreign Affairs promoted it in its embassies. Launches of particular issues might attract generous coverage in the newspapers. Frequently, columnists responded to the essays we published.

After ten issues – one hundred articles about Irish culture and politics – it was time to try something new. Richard supported my idea to bring out an issue about Latin America. The object would be to gain an insight into an aspect of the Latin American dynamic – one with an Irish inflection. Two currents of this excited me.

Firstly, the Theology of Liberation often expressed as the Catholic Church's option for the poor, meaning its choice to identify with the poor and their struggle. Secondly, Paolo Freire's praxis in education as articulated in his classic work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. At the core of this was the concept of "conscientization", meaning the development of a critical political awareness in tandem with literacy. In other words, a pedagogy of liberation.

In penal times in Ireland the Catholic Church had been committed to the cause of the Irish poor. In more recent times, some Irish priests had been involved with the political efforts of working class people, like the Jesuit Fr. Smyth who had supported the Dublin Housing Action Committee which I had been involved with in the late 1960s; or Fr. Eamon Casey who had worked for Irish emigrants in Britain seeking housing and employment. Paolo Freire's object to foster critical thinking through literacy in the South American masses echoed Fr. Veale's object of developing critical independence through teaching rhetoric in Gonzaga College. Both systems aimed to foster independent minds.

The Latin American issue benefitted from the work of Peadar Kirby, then writing for the *Irish Times*. He interviewed Helder Camara, Archbishop of Recife, who was closely identified with the Theology of Liberation. He contributed an essay which considered the lessons which the Irish church might draw from Latin America. He interviewed Paolo Freire. The issue opens with an essay by Peadar which describes the atrocious violence suffered by Rigoberta Menchu of Guatemala who some time later was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace.²

² From the Latin-American Issue *The Crane Bag* (1982) came the following four contributions from Peadar Kirby: a) "A Guatemalan peasant woman tells her story"; (1982: 4-6), b) "Interview with Archbishop Helder Camara of Recife and Olinda Brazil"; (1982: 24-27) c) "The Latin American Church: Lessons for Ireland"; (1982: 35-44) d) "Interview with Paolo Freire" (1982: 45-48).

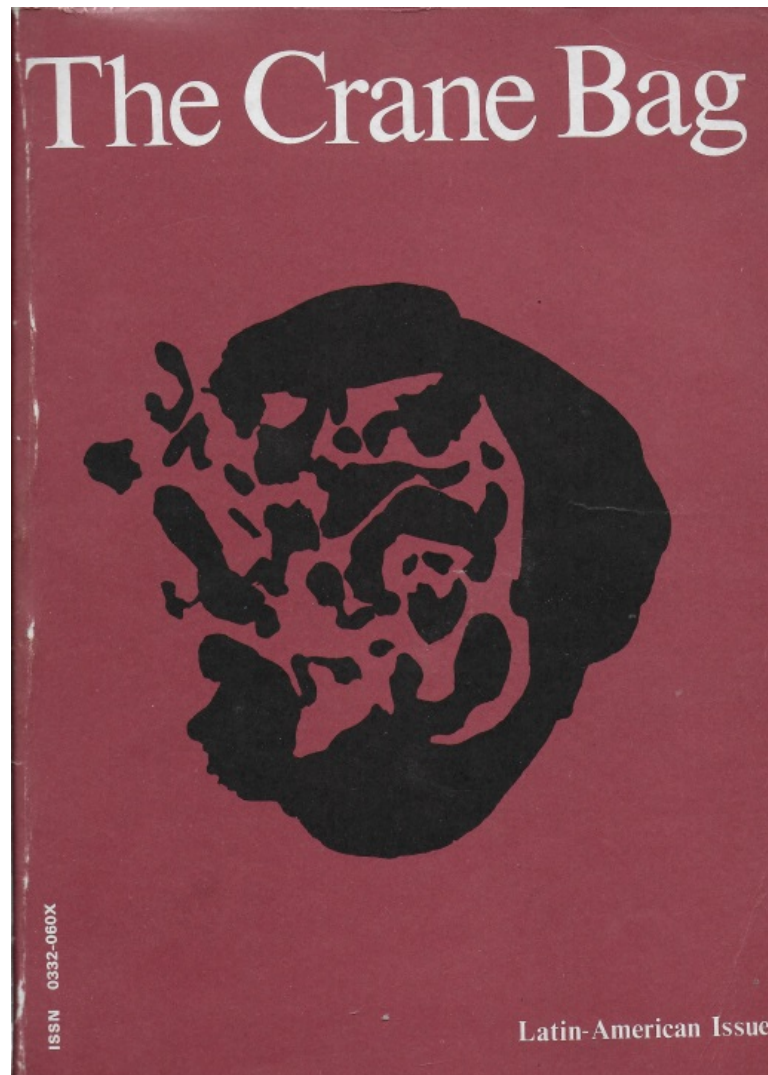


Fig. 1. Front cover of the special issue on Latin America of *The Crane Bag* (1982)

I interviewed Paddy Dundon, a Holy Ghost father (Sheehan 1982). He described his work in the towns and cities of Brazil and then in rural areas. He first associated with the well-off people, then with the poor. Being with the poor meant suffering with the poor: for Paddy, that was the starting point of the Theology of Liberation. It meant learning hospitality, openness, endurance, hope: all of these, plus Marxist economic analysis. In the vast, ever-expanding urban sprawl that was São Paulo, the traditional concept of the parish was outmoded. At that time, people came together to form small basic Christian communities. The priest helped the people in their struggle to survive – asking the mayor for water, for example. “You don’t start with a theory”, he said. “You do something and you reflect on it and then you go on again. You make your mistakes and you try to correct them. There must be presuppositions that are there undeniably. But you don’t start by saying I have truth. You’re working towards the truth. And sometimes you got clobbered” (Dundon, cited in Sheehan 1982: 29).

Fr. Joseph Stephen O’Leary of Cork, theologian, and diocesan priest, considered the challenge which the Theology of Liberation offered to Ireland

(O'Leary 1982). He argued that a stranger to the Latin American context could not understand the meaning of the Gospel for grassroots communities in their struggle for justice. One had to find an equivalent horizon in one's own culture. The Theology of Liberation sent shivers down the spine of conventional theologians in the European and American academies who were accused of not taking the gospel seriously enough. No significant current of similar self-awareness had flowed in Ireland in the wake of the Vatican Council. The petrified power-structures which had refused the laity any effective voice in the affairs of the church had persisted. Yet the charisms of the Irish laity were still there, he wrote. Latin America hinted at how the shape of the Christian project might emerge. The word was a talent to be invested, a seed to be planted. Liberation Theology had suggested what was possible in Latin America. Who knew what it might have produced in Ireland?

Sally O'Neill of Trócaire (the official overseas development agency of the Catholic Church in Ireland) had been involved in a Paolo Freire-style conscientization project in Honduras. In the early 1970s she had been a nutrition educator. She had experienced the "extreme difficulties of implementing education for political action" in a country "where economic and social policies are explicitly directed towards the maintenance of the status quo" (1982: 49). O'Neill explained how state policies had included atrocious levels of repression and outright murder. She described how it had been a search for answers as to how to approach adult education in rural communities, blighted with understandably fatalistic attitudes, which led a team of Honduran women to Paolo Freire in 1971. Within six years they had built up a mass-movement of rural women whose level of organization and whose demands and concrete activities for change were to make a profound impact not only on their village communities but also on national institutions. To begin with, the group realised that only a village elite benefitted from the technical information provided by the state. So they gathered people who were representative of the poor. According to Sally O'Neill, on the first day of their leadership training-course, these women were incapable of lifting their eyes from the floor to report their own names. Within three months, using Freire's method, these fifty women were literate and able to identify concrete situations of need and to articulate them. O'Neill's piece, aptly entitled "Creating Critical Consciousness in Honduras" powerfully described Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed in action.

The importance and influence of Paolo Freire's work was re-stated in three further contributions.³ Fernando Cardenal, Nicaragua's Minister for Education, and Valerie Millar describe how Freire's vision had been central to the revolution there. A massive literacy drive had been launched among the population (1982: 64-70). Also, within this issue, Mark Patrick Hederman (1982: 58-63) and Paddy Quinn (1982: 53-57) contributed Irish responses to *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, to detail which is unfortunately beyond the scope of the present essay. In addition to what I have already mentioned, in the opening section, Dermot Keogh wrote of peasant revolt in Guatemala in the

³ The in-text citations in the following three paragraphs refer to the contributions to *The Crane Bag* special issue on Ireland and Latin America (1982). Full titles for each contribution and authors are presented in Fig. 2, a screenshot of the issue's contents page.

1930s (1982: 7-14). Colm Regan contributed an essay about the then influential Latin American economic theory – Dependency Theory – and its relevance to Ireland (1982: 15-20).

The literature section was the largest section in the issue. It comprised eight essays and the transcript of a discussion involving Richard Kearney, Jorge Luis Borges and Seamus Heaney (1982: 71-78). The encounter occurred in Richard's house in Donnybrook, Dublin on Bloomsday, the 16th June 1982. This was the centenary year of Joyce's birth and this Bloomsday was a festive day in Dublin. Borges had been the first to translate Joyce into Spanish. In addition to the discussion transcript, there was an essay about Borges by Arminta Wallace (1982: 79-83).

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Fig. 2. Contents page of the special issue on Ireland and Latin America of *The Crane Bag* (1982)

We published an essay by Robin Fiddian called “A Preliminary Study of Joyce’s Influence upon the Latin American Novel”, in which are mentioned Borges (Argentina), Octavio Paz (Mexico) Julio Cortázar (Argentina), José Lezama Lima (Cuba), Augustin Young (Mexico), Carlos Fuentes (Mexico) Guillermo Cabrera Infante (Cuba), and Fernando del Paso (Mexico) (1982: 84-88). There was an appraisal of aspects of Mayan culture in the writing of Ernesto Cardenal and William Burroughs (USA) by John Lyons (1982: 89-96). Ciaran Cosgrove of TCD wrote about the Mexican poet, Octavio Paz (1982: 97-101). Clare McNamara wrote about the poet César Vallejo (Peru), whose poem “Los Nueve Monstruos” President Higgins quoted in a recent speech in Lima (1982: 106-107).⁴ “The theme of the double” in the fiction of Gabriel García Márquez was discussed by Stephen Meckled of the University of Essex (1982: 108-117). The by then considerable Chilean refugee community in Ireland was represented by Manuel Riquelme whose essay “Chile: The Culture of Resistance” was illustrated by Ger O’Leary and translated by Eanna O’Broin and my sister Cathy Molloy (1982: 118-121). Teresa Thornhill considered the fiction of Mario Vargas Llosa (1982: 102-105).

In a brief editorial (See Fig. 3), I highlighted how “the Latin American experience demonstrates that it is helpful to consider culture in its broadest terms” (1982: 2). I stressed that the murder of Oscar Romero had made a strong impact in Ireland, not least because the event was covered by our own journalists: Anne Daly of RTE and Peadar Kirby of *The Irish Times*. I quoted Pablo Neruda’s famous poem “I am explaining a few things” about making the transition from a poetry that was romantic, nature and landscape-rooted to one that was politically engaged:

*Venid a ver la sangre
por las calles*

Come and see the blood
On the streets

(Neruda 1979)

Around this time, George Schulz, Ronald Reagan’s Secretary of State, visited Ireland. At UCD, Richard showed him the Latin American issue of *The Crane Bag*. He read the first few sentences of the editorial then pushed the issue aside in disgust.⁵ Some considerable time afterwards I travelled to Belfast to hear Mario Vargas Llosa read from his work. I presented him with a copy of the issue, hoping he might mention it somewhere. He never made any remark whatsoever, ever. Complete silence. I did not then know about his notorious rupture from García Márquez over Cuba. He would not have shared the views expressed in the editorial.

⁴ This speech is quoted in full in this current issue (pp. 72-86).

⁵ As recounted by Richard Kearney in conversation with Ronan Sheehan c. 1984.

Preface

In this issue *The Crane Bag* begins to look outside Ireland, a development we shall continue with our next issue "Socialism and Culture". In the past people have queried the inclusion in a cultural review of material that does not deal directly with poetry, fiction, painting, film or whatever. The Latin American experience demonstrates that it is helpful to consider culture in the broadest terms. Take the case of the celebrated Nicaraguan poet, Ernesto Cardenal. He is a priest, also a government minister. He played a part in the Sandinista revolution, formerly he founded and lived in a commune at Solentiname, a radical experiment in Christian living. His life and work, including of course his poetry, integrate matters we here consider under separate headings: literature, politics, education, theology and economics.

The murder of Oscar Romero made strong impact upon the consciousness of the Irish people. That impact was due in part to the fact that we had excellent coverage of the event from our own sources: the Radharc television crew, Anne Daly of R.T.E. and Peadar Kirby of *The Irish Times*. In communicating the nature of the conflict in El Salvador, their reports highlighted the work of Irish missionaries and of Trocaire, the third-world relief organisation. Since our own people and institutions are involved there, the El Salvador issue cannot be for us as remote as, say, Vietnam or Afghanistan. Our government supports the Franco-Mexican line rather than the American one. Bishop Eamonn Casey has publicly urged that we cut diplomatic relations with the U.S.A. while that country abets the slaughter of the poor. This is an unprecedented stand for a member of the Irish hierarchy to adopt. Taken together, these factors portend an ever-increasing Irish awareness, not just of El Salvador, but of the continent. We hope that this issue of *The Crane Bag* can serve that awareness.

The dominant political features of Latin America — the military governments, the wealthy elites, the repressed and impoverished masses — are in the main familiar. What may not be so familiar, and what the articles published here I think demonstrate, is that the repression of so many millions of people has been the source of the new and exciting developments in theology, economics, education and, largely though by no means exclusively, literature. The career of Oscar Romero, beginning as the private, almost aloof minister of orthodox devotionism and ending as outspoken critic of oppression and injustice, was foreshadowed by the career of the great Chilean poet Pablo Neruda. The early poetry of Neruda had to do with, in his own words "lilacs/and poppy-petalled metaphysics/and the rain repeatedly splattering/its words and drilling them full/of apertures and birds."¹ The Spanish Civil War moved him to join the Communist Party and become a poet who sought to address and articulate a public consciousness:

"And you will ask: why doesn't his poetry
Speak of dreams and leaves
And the great volcanoes of his native land?

Come and see the blood in the streets
Come and see
The blood in the streets
Come and see the blood
In the streets".²

Ronan Sheehan.

NOTES

1. Pablo Neruda. *I'm explaining a few things*. Trns. Nathaniel Tarn.
2. Op. Cit.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Versions of the interview with Freire and the article on the literacy campaign in Nicaragua have already appeared in *The Irish Times* and *Ramparts* respectively. They are reproduced here by permission of the authors. I would like to thank Ciaran Cosgrove, Peadar Kirby, Sally O'Neill and Ger O'Leary for their invaluable assistance in the compilation of this issue.

Fig. 3. Preface to the special issue on Ireland and Latin America of *The Crane Bag* (1982)

In 1989, six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her sixteen-year old daughter were murdered by Salvadorian army soldiers at their residence on the campus of José Simeon Canas, the Central American University (UCA El Salvador) in San Salvador. The soldiers involved were members of the Atlacatl Battalion, a rapid response counter-insurgency force created in 1980 at the US Army's School of the Americas, then located in Panama. The *New York Times* described the murdered priests as "leftist intellectuals". Their names are: Ignacio Ellacuría SJ, Segundo Montes SJ, Juan Ramon Moreno SJ, Joaquín López y López SJ, Amando López SJ, and their housekeeper Elba Ramos along with her sixteen-year old daughter, Celina.



At Milltown Park, a monument commemorates the Jesuits and the two lay women (Fig. 4). Amando Lopez had studied there. Nuala McCullough, mother of one of the families I mentioned earlier as living within walking distance of the school, remembers him perhaps forty years on. He met the McCulloughs through a Spanish girl he knew who was working with them at the time as an au pair. They became friendly and he often visited. Nuala describes him as light-hearted and with a good sense of humour.

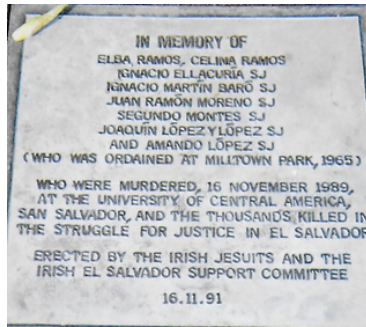


Fig. 4. Monument in Milltown Park, Dublin, commemorating the six Jesuit priests and two lay women who were murdered in El Salvador in November 1989; and a plaque in remembrance of Archbishop Oscar Romero, assassinated on 24 March 1980. (Photographer: Ronan Sheehan.)

When they went to Spain for a holiday, Amando insisted they stay in an apartment in Madrid belonging to his father. He gave their daughter a teddy-bear which she named Amando. He played football in the back garden with the MacCullough boys.⁶

It was Richard who introduced me to Borges when I joined the group that were doing the public discussion that Bloomsday in 1982.

“This is my friend Ronan Sheehan. He has just written a collection of short-stories”.

I felt like an undergraduate with a one-act radio play under his belt being introduced to Samuel Beckett as a playwright. Seamus Heaney, tongue-in-cheek, made some such remark to that effect, in a playful manner.

“Pleased to meet you,” said Borges. “I write short-stories too.”

⁶ Nuala McCullough remembers Amando Lopez SJ: Nuala McCullough in conversation with Ronan Sheehan, 2017.

He was modest, witty, and erudite; unbelievably erudite. Richard had at one time or another written about every Irish philosopher who had ever existed. Borges quoted from memory passages from pretty much all of them. He told us some scurrilous stories circulating in Buenos Aires portraying sexual congress between Galtieri and Margaret Thatcher.

Anne Kearney, Richard's wife, took photos. They hang upon my wall to this day. Especially treasured is the photo of the group that was there: Marie Heaney, Seamus Heaney, Richard, Borges, me, and Dorothy Walker.



Fig. 5. Dinner with Jorge Luis Borges (Dublin), 16 June (Bloomsday) 1982. Left to right: Dorothy Walker, Ronan Sheehan, Jorge Luis Borges, Richard Kearney, Kathleen Bernard Fitzpatrick, Seamus Heaney and Marie Heaney. (Photographer: Anne Bernard Kearney.)

I had a question I was determined to ask him. It concerned a reference to Tacitus, my hero of Latin prose.

“Senor Borges, in one of your stories you say that Tacitus records the crucifixion but does not perceive it...”

“Did I write that? I don't think I'm a very good writer you know. But maybe in sixty years trying I'm entitled to one or two good lines”.

He was blind. He collected sticks along whose surface he liked to run his fingers. We were due to give him a lift back to the Shelbourne Hotel, passing my flat in Leeson Park. I had an Irish blackthorn stick. Would he like that? He said he would be delighted to have it. So I got out of Richard's *Deux Cheveux*, walked into the flat and returned with the stick. I also brought a book of his, which he signed.



Fig. 6. Ronan Sheehan and Jorge Luis Borges, 16 June (Bloomsday) 1982. (Photographer: Anne Bernard Kearney.)

Richard guided him, holding the stick, into the hotel. That, I thought, is the last I see of the great Jorge Luis Borges.

Not quite. Some weeks later he was guest-of-honour at a literary festival in the north of England. The *Times of London* printed a photograph of him there. Gripping my stick.

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