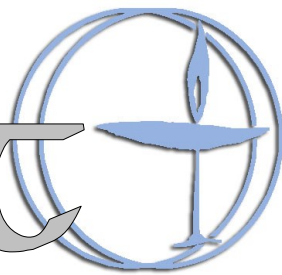


Oscailt



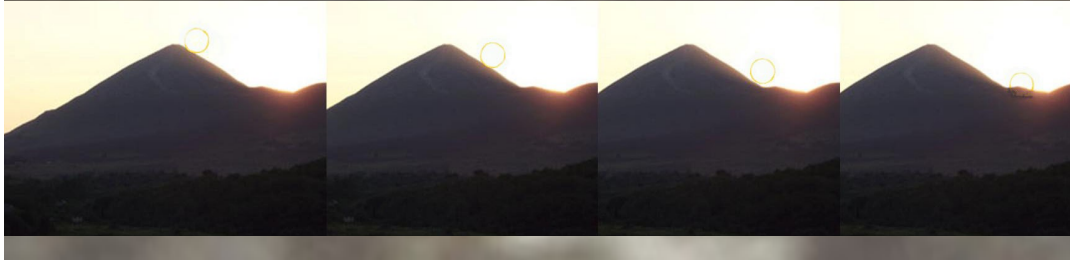
September 2021

IRELANDS UNITARIAN MAGAZINE

Vol.17 Nº



Our bond of union is religious sympathy, not the declaration of
a creed bound faith. In the love of truth and the spirit of Christ,
we unite for the worship of God and the service of our fellows.



Oscailt

Oscailt since January 2005 has become the monthly magazine for Irish Unitarians. Originally it was the calendar for Dublin but due to popular demand by non members this new format was born and continues to grow and flourish.

Oscailt is Published by the
Dublin Unitarian Church
112 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin D02 YP23.

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Front Cover: A picture of Croagh Patrick taken from the Boheh Stone.

At the bottom four picture of the sun as it appears to roll down the side of the mountain (photo P.Spain)

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Oscailt

Our magazine title, *Oscailt*, is inspired by the account of the **Healing of the Deaf and Mute Man** in St. Mark's Gospel, Chapter 7. Jesus commands the mans ears to open up with Aramic word "Ephphatha" - open ! The Irish word *oscailt*, (from the verb *oscail*, to open), means an opening, or, metaphorically, it could mean a revelation or a beginning.

DUBLIN UNITARIAN CHURCH

112 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin D02 YP23, Ireland.

Service: Sunday at 11a.m. Phone: Vestry 01-4780638

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Vice Chairman: Dennis Aylmer; Secretary: Trish Webb-Duffy; Treasurer: Rory Delany;
Tony Shine; Andy Pollak; Peter White; Will O'Connell;
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Recordings of the church services are available on the church website.

LOVE IS THE DOCTRINE OF THIS CHURCH
THE QUEST OF TRUTH IS ITS SACRAMENT
AND SERVICE IS ITS PRAYER.

TO DWELL TOGETHER IN PEACE

TO SEEK KNOWLEDGE IN FREEDOM

TO SERVE MANKIND IN FELLOWSHIP

TO THE END THAT ALL SOULS SHALL GROW IN HARMONY

WITH THE DIVINE

THIS DO WE COVENANT WITH EACH OTHER AND WITH GOD.

UNITARIAN CHURCH Prince's Street, Cork.

Service: Sundays at 11a.m. www.unitarianchurchcork.com

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Dublin Unitarian Church

112 St.Stephens Green Dublin D02 YP23.

Service 11.00a.m.

Sunday Rota for September 2021

5th September

Service	Rev.Bridget Spain	<i>The Subject is God</i>
Reader	Doireann Ní Bhriain	

12th September

Service	Rev.Bridget Spain	<i>Reclaiming Religion</i>
Reader	Janet Mulroy	

19th September

Service	Keith Troughton	<i>TBA</i>
Reader	Elaine Harris	

26th September

Service	Tony Brady	URGENTLY REQUIRED
Reader	Clive Geraghty	<i>Firefighters for Planet Earth</i>

Services are broadcast live from the church each Sunday at 11a.m.

On our WebCam, click and connect at

www.dublinunitarianchurch.org

Recordings of the church services are available on the website.

Pilgrim Souls

I have heard it said that there are a small, number of events that have the power to fundamentally change society. One is a general mobilisation of a population in time of war, second is a political revolution and the third is a pandemic.

The fourteenth century plague the Black Death was even more destructive than this current pandemic. It killed about one third of Europe's population; the huge loss of life led to a shortage of labour. This shortage of labour allowed farm workers to improve their working conditions.

The Black Death was also partly responsible for the proliferation of superstition and magic into religious practice. In the face of almost certain death those who survived attributed their survival to a relic, talisman or good luck charm. Later many of these items were given the status of relics that became a focus of pilgrimage for the faithful.

The Reformation set out to sweep away unscriptural practices such as pilgrimages.

There was of course dishonesty in some perhaps or even in many of the shrines. For example Pamela who was working with Unitarian churches in East Lancashire told me that the local Catholic Church has a shrine containing the bones of some saint. Recent DNA testing of the bones confirmed that the bones are the remains of two different ponies!

However despite the skulduggery there is something in our DNA that is drawn to pilgrimage. From the mists of time undertaking a pilgrimage was part of religion. Before churches were built people made pilgrimages to features of nature in the landscape. Croagh Patrick was a place of pilgrimage for thousands of year before Christianity came to Ireland.

Post the Reformation the practice of making a pilgrimage declined in popularity. In recent times there is a rediscovery of these ancient pilgrim routes. The Camino in Spain and many other routes are once again being walked by pilgrims. These ancient pilgrim ways are now holiday destinations! The Guardian newspaper has a list of ten best pilgrim routes in Europe.

Following the journey of a group of Pilgrims even makes for

good television. Put together a varied mix of public personalities and different religions, send them on a challenging walk and drama is guaranteed. Aside from television ratings the pilgrims are always affected by their experience. The pilgrimage may reignite forgotten religious practices. It may confirm someone's sense being a contented atheist. It may give the pilgrim a different perspective on their life experiences.

All participants leave with deeper appreciation of the value of being alive. They have a greater sense of being part of the flow of life. They are part of the human chain of souls who were born, who lived and died. All of them have a greater understanding that other people may have a different relationship with the sacred.

By in large Ireland avoided the Reformation so pilgrimages and pattern days have always flourished here. The best known pilgrimage is the annual climbing of Croagh Patrick at the festival of Lúnasa which now takes place on the last Sunday of July. During Victorian times attempts were made by clerics to stop the practice of climbing the Reek. This was because of the perception that it was an occasion where there was too much alcohol consumed and there was too much social mixing of genders!

To undertake a pilgrimage is to interrupt the everyday rhythms of life so that we shake ourselves out of the rut of habit. It is an opportunity for reflection and to find fresh perspectives on life and to refocus.

While not essential travel to somewhere different is usually part of pilgrimage as is walking. Being outside of routine and walking are ways to be in the present moment; it is mindfulness in practice. The physical challenge of walking longer than usual or climbing a mountain brings us back to our body. The ache of tired muscles and blisters focuses the mind into the present.

Ancient pilgrimages involved going to a feature of the natural world. Often the destination was to a well but most often it is a mountain that draws the spiritual searcher. Mountains are closely linked with religion. It was on Mount Horab that God spoke to Moses and on Mount Sinai that Moses received God's commandments. Solomon built his temple on the Mount.

The most concise summary of Christian teaching is in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Jesus was transfigured on Mount Tabor, he was crucified on a hill, he ascended into heaven from a mountain. The second holiest shrine in Islam is the Dome of the Rock on Tem-

ple Mount. There is a deep connection between human longing for the spiritual and the world of nature particularly mountains.

Religious leaders would have us believe that God is found in their temple, their church and that God speaks from their sacred scripture. God is not confined to a religion. The sacred is found when humans find truth, compassion and all that is best within ourselves. God is found where we return to the divine spark in our nature.

The world is such a noisy place where demands are constantly made on our time and attention that we easily lose sight of essentials of life. We need to take time out to reset our focus on what is important. Making a pilgrimage is a way of resetting that focus whose value has been tested over time. A pilgrimage is self care.

We don't need to make logical sense of why we make a pilgrimage. Pilgrimage is more about feeling the rightness of something we engage in. Last week we were at Croagh Patrick. We chatted with a number of people who had just climbed the Reek and it was interesting to hear the reasons why those pilgrims made the climb.

For one it was a way of noticing his aging; a reminder of his mortality. This was a veteran of the pilgrimage who noticed that with each climb he was slowing down. Some walkers were keeping a family tradition alive. One group of young men had made the climb a few years ago, recently one of them had died the others made the climb in his memory. Climbing that mountain did not benefit the dead its value was for those still alive. There are many reasons for making a pilgrimage.

The Reek is the dominant feature of this part of Mayo. The surrounding landscape is rich in archaeology. There are the remains of many ruined monasteries which have connecting Christian pilgrim paths. Less obvious are ancient standing stones scattered in the fields. These stones are set there to mark the sun's passage on Croagh Patrick.

It is difficult to find these stones. A helpful farmer giving us direction told us to look for a field with stones and sheep in it. Of course EVERY field there had stones and sheep. The standing stones were placed there in ancient times. Separate from the standing stones is a natural outcrop of rock. Its called the Boheh stone. This is just limestone sticking out of the ground. It is decorated with two hundred and sixty Neolithic carvings. The carvings probably date to when Newgrange was built - three to five thousand years ago.

The carvers left these marks in tribute to their sacred moun-

tain. Standing at the stone twice during the year at sunset on the 18th April and the 24th August the setting sun appears to roll down the side of the mountain. These dates in April and August together with the Winter Solstice divide the year in thirds.

These were a people closely in tune with the rhythms of the earth and the movements of the planets. They have left us their marks carved in circles on rocks. We try to try decipher their meaning. It was in 1990 that a local archaeologist re-discovered this phenomenon.

Standing at that ancient stone I thought of the people who thousands of years ago carved their marks on rocks. Without any tools they tried to leave behind their knowledge and wisdom. These were our ancestors, like us pilgrim souls now long dead. Their legacy to us is the carvings –five thousand later their work tells us to look at the natural world and be amazed.

What legacy will we leave for the people who will come after us? Will it be something of value? Or is our legacy likely to be mountains of plastic waste? Making a pilgrimage or making time to consider the purpose of life is an essential part of self care. We are all pilgrim souls journeying through a few short years on earth. It behoves us to live those years as best we can and to consider the souls that will follow in our footsteps.

Rev. Bridget Spain
Minister Dublin Unitarian Church

Dublin 29th August 2021

A Labour of Love

In 2018 we celebrated the 100th anniversary of the installation of The Wilson Window. The anniversary was marked with the republication of the sermon delivered by Rev. Savell Hicks at the 1918 dedication service and, in June, by a series of readings and sermons that addressed different aspects of the window. The subjects of the sermons included the design and manufacture of the window, the theology behind the design, and the somewhat blemished history of the man to whom the window is dedicated, Thomas Wilson, a former treasurer and trustee of this church. Later that year our late friend Professor Barbara Wright used the image of the scientist in the window as the basis for a fascinating sermon on Unitarian connections with scientific developments and discovery.

Discovery is one of the five illustrated themes that rise upwards and blend together to make up the overall composition of the design of the window. The other themes are Truth, Inspiration, Love, and Work and each theme is represented by an image of an historic figure in separate panels at the bottom of the window. At the centre is 'Inspiration' represented by a young Jesus and he is flanked on the left by Christopher Columbus representing 'Discovery' and Martin Luther 'Truth' and on the right by Florence Nightingale representing 'Love' and William Caxton representing 'Work'. It is significant that of all the people that could have represented 'Work' the design team chose someone associated with the print trade. The inclusion of these five historic figures and the overall design of the window provides us with a very good insight into Unitarian thinking in this part of the world 100 years ago.

As you may be aware, the window is the third to be installed in this location, the other two having been lost to two fires first in 1892 and again in 1916. If we ever had to replace the window which of these historic figures would make it into the design? An image of Jesus would (I hope) still be central but I think there would be strong debates about which, if any, of the other four figures should be included with him. I think Caxton would be the most likely to be selected, if only because he is the least known and, to my knowledge, unlike the others, he has attracted no controversy in recent years. However, although he is the least known of the people in our window, Caxton remains a very important historical figure and there are other memorials to him apart from this one. There is a memorial tablet to Caxton in St Margaret's Church in London that was provided to the church by the Roxburghe Club, a pres-



Detail from the Wilson Memorial Window.

tigious group of bibliophiles who at their annual dinner toast the memory of Caxton as 'Father of the British press'. There is also a memorial to him close to Poets Corner in Westminster Abbey which was unveiled by the Chairman of the Press Council In November 1954 and for some reason unknown to me there is a tiled panel containing his image featured among a collection of images of historic figures who adorn the walls of the Café Royal in Edinburgh.

Caxton is credited with bringing the printing press to Britain (and by extension to Ireland). The printing press was a huge technological advance that allowed for a much faster dissemination of information and knowledge. The right to disseminate information was a key battle ground in the reformation. Access to the written word and the knowledge that flowed from reading was limited to a Latin speaking elite. The reformers wanted the written word to be far more accessible to a far wider range of readers, and for it to be accessible to them in their own language. So, the availability of the printing press was a significant weapon in the battle for people's minds. Although literacy and the cost of printing limited access to publications, the introduction of the printing press was still a huge step in the democratisation of knowledge and the development of civilisation. Of course, when the protestant reformers eventually became established, they too tried to put the brakes on what people could read, especially if what they were trying to read was written by protestant dissenters.

The better-known historical publications connected with this congregation of dissenters are records of disputes with the authorities, state and religious. Indeed, one publication was the source of a dispute that has defined our history for over 300 years. I refer of course to the publication of *An Humble Inquiry into the Scripture Account of Jesus Christ*, written by Rev.Thomas Emlyn, a minister at the Wood Street Meeting House from which this congregation descends. The Unitarian views expressed by Emlyn caused a scandal and resulted in him being hauled before the courts and sentenced to a term of imprisonment. His views would eventually lead to a split between Trinitarian and Unitarian Presbyterians

Other records available include an account of the Trial of Emlyn's trial; the sermons and verse of Rev.Joseph Boyse; a history of Dublin Presbyterianism by Rev.James Armstrong that was appended to a record of James Martineau's ordination at the Eustace Street Meeting House; the proceedings in the courts and in the House of Lords regarding 1844 Eustace Street Case that resulted in

the Dissenters Chapels Act. All of these publications relate to major events and involve people who were prominent in church affairs. But what of the ordinary day to day events and the ordinary members of the church? Some information can be gleaned from minute books and registers but one of the best sources of information is '*The Calendar*', the monthly four-page church newsletter of which there is a collection of late 19th and early 20th century editions stored in the vestry. The contents of single editions of '*The Calendar*' appear to be unimportant but when read collectively they provide an interesting insight into the ordinary life of the early 20th Century congregation

The congregation hasn't been central to any events of national importance for a very long time so any history of the congregation of recent years will have to rely on the records of ordinary day to day events. However, while recent history might not involve much drama, there is still an interesting story to be told. So, where will a future student begin his or her research for their thesis? let's call it. '*St Stephen's Green Unitarians in the early 21st Century*'. Well, there is an invaluable resource available. The last edition of *The Calendar* was published December 2004 and was replaced by *Oscailt* in January 2005. Any of you extremely quick with figures may by now have calculated that the edition that was issued today, 1st August 2021, is the 200th edition of *Oscailt*. With the exception of 2 or three editions I have collected and kept a copy of every edition of the magazine since it made its first appearance. A recent requirement to search through my collection stirred up many congregational and quite a few family memories for me and made me realise how important the publication is for us as a community and how useful it could be to others in years to come.

The first edition of *Oscailt* arrived with a cover photo of a section of the far-off expanse of open space dotted with the light of a fraction of the planets and stars that are beyond our earth. On the inside page there was a welcome to the first edition of the magazine by Rev. Bill Darlison followed by a note from Diarmuid Harte to explain the meaning of the Irish word *Oscailt*. Diarmuid also provided an example of the word being used in an Irish Language Bible at St. Mark Chapter 7 Verses 33 -36. The eclectic mix of contents included two book reviews by Paul Murray and a report by Nuala Kelly on her trip to Venice to receive an award for a short film that she had acted in; *The Carpenter and His Clumsy Wife*. There were printed versions of two recent addresses: one by Gavin Harte under the title *An Earth Ethic* and the other by Andy Pollak under the title *A Little Bit of Hope*. There was an interview with our man in the west, Joe McDermott and a poem, *Churchgoing*, by our dear depart-

ed friend John Ward. Finally, there was an opinion piece by Keith Troughton under the title *Badge of Faith* in which he set out the elements he would like to include in a Unitarian badge design.

The second edition also included an opinion piece under the title *Badge of Faith*, this time by Jennifer Flegg who was responding to Keith's January article. The February front cover was adorned by a photo that included yours truly (with just a hint of a few grey hairs) joining the celebrants, organisers and participants in our very first Coming of Age Ceremony and I am pleased that one of those participants is with us here today. A study of these two editions and the 198 editions that have followed should provide our future student with ample research material. He or she will be well equipped to report that our early 21st congregation was a lively one and; That we had opinions that we were encouraged to share in the pulpit and in print.

That we socialised together and got to know each other through book clubs and meditation groups and choir practice and over coffee and during cake sales and flower sales and during walks around the city and walks through the hills.

That we considered the bigger questions of life and that we didn't always agree but that we could disagree without being disagreeable. That we not only had two fine much loved and respected ministers but that we ordained ministers who went on to provide sterling service in other cities.

That the ruling body of the church was the Annual General Meeting of members and that each member had a voice and a vote. That we welcomed new members every October, some of them stayed with us for just a short while but others became pillars of our community.

That each November we remembered the young men of the congregation who lost their lives in the First World War and that at Good Friday we remembered all those who died as a result of the conflict in Northern Ireland.

That we suffered grief at the loss of those familiar faces that once occupied some favourite seat around the church.

That we took care of the building that was put into our trust by a previous generation; That through huge collective efforts we rose to the challenges and brought successful conclusions to the major restoration of the roof and walls followed by the restoration of the organ, then the installation of the lift and most recently the restoration of the Hutton window.

That the baptisms and marriages of our children were great celebrations but that they had to compete very hard with the enthusiastic

build up and celebrations that accompanied the coming-of-age ceremonies.

That there was an openness about our church that made the marginalised feel welcome.

I'd like to think that our student will also say that we had a sense of humour and that we didn't take ourselves too seriously. That the 2nd edition of Oscailt included an item headed, *On Unitarians*. The name of the person who submitted the item isn't identified but the wording of the tongue in cheek send-up of our UU cousins across the Atlantic is attributed to Garrison Keillor of Lake Wobegone Days fame.

Finally, our future student should be able to report on the developments in opinions and changes in personnel that made up the tapestry of the life of our congregation. In the period under study the church had two ministers, three Chairmen, five treasurers, five secretaries, two caretakers and two organists. A really diligent student though will notice and include commentary on something very important, and it won't be the developments or the changes noticed while studying our 200 Oscailts. Rather, it will be the things that remained constant.

Three features of the Oscailt remained constant and consistent in the 200 editions published from January 2005 to August 2021. The logo at the top of the front page never changed and the following words always appeared on the bottom of the front page -

Our Bond of Union is religious sympathy not the declaration of a creed bound faith. In the love of truth and the spirit of Christ we unite for the worship of God and the service of our fellows.

The third feature that remained constant during all 200 issues was the name of the editor; Paul Spain. And Paul was not just an editor. He contributed some excellent articles and many beautiful photographs to the pages of the magazine. What our history student won't know is that he also brought the content to the printers, collected the printed magazines, brought them to the church and posted off copies to subscribers near and far.

When speaking of the panel containing William Caxton in his 1918 sermon Rev. Hicks said;

The invention of the printing press and the consequent rapid dissemination of human knowledge seemed to be a worthy example of the power and value of work. It is the craftsman who has, since his day, carried and who does daily carry, the thinker's thoughts to a thousand or a million other minds. It is the worker who makes possible and carries out in practical and lasting form much of the thinker's

vision and the seer's dream. Not only the diffusion of knowledge and the carrying out of tremendous undertakings; not only the bridging of great gulfs, and the rearing of vast temples, but the carrying out of our dearest desires for a heaven on earth must depend on the will to work as well as to pray.

Paul has freely given to this congregation an enormous amount of consistently good work that he has never sought credit or praise for. So today, on the occasion of the 200th edition of the Oscailt, on behalf of everybody I wish to say, thanks Paul for all your work, it has truly been a 'Labour of Love'

Rory Delany
St Stephen's Green Unitarian Church

1st August 2021

William Hazlitt

Albert Einstein said ; “ coincidence is Gods way or remaining anonymous” or to put it another way, according to the sci fi author, Emma Bull; “coincidence is the word we use when we can’t see the levers and pulleys”.

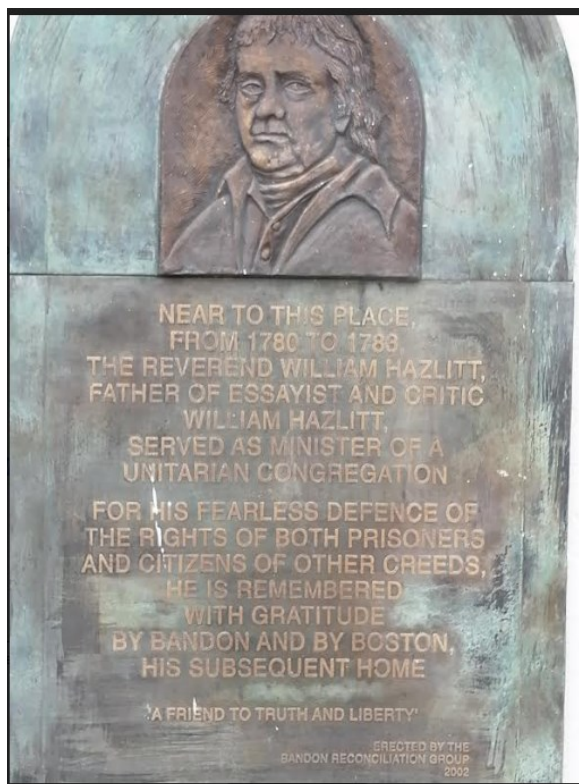
While preparing a recent service (August 1st), I included a quote from the English essayist and painter, William Hazlitt (1778-1830). Hazlitt’s father, William senior was a Unitarian minister, who having been born and raised in Shronell, Co.Tipperary, abandoned his Presbyterian upbringing, becoming a Unitarian while a student at the University of Glasgow. Following his graduation, he was ordained and took up an appointment in Wisbech in Cambridgeshire, marrying his wife Grace in 1766.

His appointment lasted for four years following which, with wife and two young children in tow, he moved to Mansfield. In 1880, Hazlitt decided to move back to Ireland and that year took up an appointment to the Unitarian meeting House in Bandon, West Cork.

His time in Bandon was not a happy one both professionally and personally. Professionally he angered locals and it seems members of his congregation by highlighting the mistreatment of American prisoners in nearby Kinsale. In what was a very protestant town, he drew ire, anger and threats of physical violence over his defence of local Roman Catholics and their treatment at the hands of British soldiers. It seems that when he walked down the streets of Bandon, locals would shout; “ Beware of the black rebel”.

Personally, shortly after his arrival in in the town, his infant daughter Harriet died. In 1783, fearing it seems for his life, Hazlitt and his family made a hasty retreat and headed for America. He had always a keen love for America and was friends with Benjamin Franklin. However, like many Irish immigrants, the streets were not paved with either success or fortune. His first port of call was Philadelphia where here despite his Unitarian ideals, he failed to find a pulpit.

1783 had seen the founding of Dickson College, now a liberal arts university with over 2,400 under graduates. Situated in the town of Carlisle in Pennsylvania, Hazlitt found himself being offered the



job as its first principal. The job offered a house attached to the local congregation and a very handsome stipend of 400 guineas per annum. In his life, nothing was easy for Hazlitt and the job came with one condition from the congregation, that he sign a *Confession of Faith*. He refused, as his daughter Margaret would later say; “he would sooner die in a ditch than submit to human authority in matters of faith”. His principles would cost him the most prestigious post and the biggest stipend he would have earned. While in America, he lectured at Universities on the Unitarian view of faith and although it seems well re-

ceived, he failed to land a teaching position or a pulpit. Having had some success as a writer he returned to England.

It seems on his return in 1786, he had set upon the idea of a pulpit in London but again he was disappointed. The only pulpit offered to him was in the rural Shropshire village of Wem, where he ministered for the rest of his life on what was a paltry stipend of £30 per year. His son would later write of his father; “After being tossed about from congregation to congregation in the heats (*sic*) of the Unitarian controversy, he had been relegated to an obscure village where he was to spend the last 30 years of his life”. William Hazlitt died in Crediton in Devon on the 16th of July 1820.

But lets go back to the Unitarian meeting House in Bandon. My research from the National Folklore Collection at UCD and other local sources reveals the church was opened in 1813 by the Rev. Ed-

ward King, who built the church on land he leased from the Earl of Shannon for one shilling a year. Its last minister was the Rev.M.Hunter and the church closed in 1908. After its closure, the building became a bakery until it become a storage area for a hardware shop in 1971. A plaque to honour Rev.William Hazlitt was erected at the courthouse in Bandon in the summer of 2002.

Now lets go return to Einstein and Emma Bull. When I was ordained and installed as minister of the Cork church in 2017, I became the first Cork man to hold the post in almost 200 years. Before even considering my present path in life, I had met, fell in love with and married a Bandon girl. Bandon has been my home now for the best part of thirty years. Remember the hardware shop, that was once the local Unitarian church, well, that hardware shop is owned by my next-door neighbour.

Levers and pulleys!!!

Rev.Mike O' Sullivan

Minister Unitarian Church Cork.

Addendum : Today, Bandon remains a hotbed of religion. Within the town (pop about 5,000) there are Roman Catholic, Church of Ireland and Methodist churches. As well as a Jehovah Witness hall, an Evangelical church, two Baptist churches and the West Cork Community church. There was also a Quaker meeting house in the town and a Presbyterian church which closed in 1952.



**Dublin Unitarian Book Club's
choice for July 2021.**



Solar Bones

by
Mike McCormack

Marcus Conway is at the kitchen table in his home in West Mayo. He can hear the angelus bells pealing on this November day, the day of All Souls when the dead can return to the land of the living.

Marcus is reminiscing about his life, about his marriage to Mairead and their life with their two grown children, Agnes and Darragh, and his job as an engineer with the local Council. The author tells this story in one long sentence of stream of consciousness which lends the story an otherworldly element. This lack of punctuation and chapters does require the reader to pay attention but once you adapt to its style you can appreciate the writing which is certainly good enough to pull it together.

It's a book about an ordinary man and how he, as a son, brother, husband, father relates to the people in his life. Marcus is trying to make sense of an unstable world and tries to put some control or order into it by making the right decisions as a family man and engineer. His father was aware of the randomness of life as a fisherman and farmer, he deconstructed things to see how they worked. There is logic and order to machinery, construction, things, like the tractor his father took apart and put back together again so he would know how to fix it if he knew how it was made. But life is not a machine, order can collapse into chaos when events happen. The orderly routine life of Marcus' father rapidly disintegrates when his mother, Onnie, dies. It is a very real and moving description of how vulnerable we really are to the realities of life which are beyond our control, such as death.

Marcus also tries to keep some order in the world by making the right decisions in his job despite coming up against constant pressure from contractors wanting to take short cuts, the local politicians manoeuvring for votes, and the Council's pressure to get the jobs done on time and in budget. Marcus knows that bad decisions lead to bad consequences. It is civic incompetence that leads to an outbreak of cryptosporidium in the town and locality. Mairead contracts the disease by drinking water in a restaurant where she, Marcus and their daughter Agnes are celebrating Agnes' debut art exhibition. The exhibition consists of the text of court reports from local newspapers written in Agnes' own blood. Marcus struggles to understand this commen-

tary which shows a very unstable world, where a country and culture changed during the boom years of the Celtic Tiger and the bad decisions made then are having their repercussions as all collapses and goes bust, the country is bleeding.

Mairead is gravely ill and we are brought through the illness and it's indignities as Marcus nurses her back to health. We are reminded of how fragile life can be and how our bodies can disintegrate through disease, viruses and injury.

Marcus skypes his son Darragh who is on a working/backpacking year in Australia. Darragh rages against the incompetencies of home, especially as his mother is so ill as a result of such incompetencies. But Marcus knows how difficult it is to stick to your decisions and not bend under the pressures of short cuts, corruption and politics, there are many grey areas to negotiate to try keep order and control in the world.

This is a very relatable story of a family, it is the 'Solar Bones' of family relationships and our community that hold us together in an unstable world which we cannot control for the most part.

I felt sad at the end of this book, sad for Marcus as he struggled to do the right things in life, to repair the damages of bad decisions. And yet, that is the way of the world, not all stories have a happy ending, but I could have done with a bit more hope.

Alison Claffey

Dublin Unitarian Church

Solar Bones

Sometimes a book can really surprise you. Two years ago my brother handed me a copy of "Solar Bones". I had never heard of the book before that. I placed it on the table and later moved it to the bookcase without looking at anything except the front cover. Sometime later I picked it up again and opened the first page.

From that moment I was completely hooked by the unique character of the story and by the complete absence of full stops throughout the text. Initially I thought this would stop me reading the book but by the time I turned to the second page I was oblivious to this feature. As I read on and realised that the fictional narrator was actually dead I gradually began to understand that the absence of full stops gave the story its very unique quality, Conventional sentences and full stops would have broken up the flow of the narrative and made it read like a much more pedestrian story.

The context for the story is a belief that the dead return to us on All Soul's Day as the mid day angelus bell tolls. The story begins as the soul of



Marcus Conway, now dead, comes back to the home he has lived in with his wife Mairead and their children Agnes and Darragh for twenty five years. The house is empty, the children have left, his wife Mairead is at work and it will be hours before she returns. He decides to go out to buy a paper before he notices that unopened national and local newspapers on the table suggesting that Mairead expected him to come back that day. And so begins his hours of waiting, reading the papers and then reminiscing on the significant moments of his past life which form the core of this novel.

In just 223 pages the author Mike McCormack skilfully narrates the life story of Marcus Conway in the second half the twentieth century and in the first decade of the twenty first century. This is all contextualised in his descriptions of the lives of Marcus's parents, grandparents and forebearers and in all the beauty, historical poverty and religiosity of county Mayo where the story is situated. Twentieth century local and national politics with all its corruption and shady deals add more interest to the story. The protests against bringing gas ashore at Killala, the imprisonment of many of the protesters, the deaths of three Mayo people involved in the "Troubles", the sometimes endless rainfall, the uniqueness of town squares, every detail sets the scene for Marcus' life. The author's great command of English has helped him enormously in creating the character of Marcus and in sustaining what must have been a challenging narrative.

Like so many other young people of the time Marcus went to secondary school and then on to college to study and qualify as an engineer. He returns to Mayo and begins to work in the local government office in Westport. He progresses rapidly in his chosen discipline and marries Mairead, a secondary teacher who had spent several years abroad before getting a job in the local convent secondary school.

As an engineer Marcus is constantly battling with local and aspiring national politicians to spend scarce money on projects which benefit them electorally rather than being used to improve roads and other infrastructure.

Marcus and Mairead's first child Agnes becomes an artist. Their second child is Darragh who at the crucial moment in the story is working in Australia. Agnes, now 22 years of age opens an exhibition of her work in Galway. Essentially it is an exhibition of snippets from the court reports of local newspapers all written in a vivid red script on the studio walls by Agnes using some of her own blood. Because of this neither Marcus nor Mairead liked the exhibition but agreed to do their best for their daughter.

Mairead is the only one of the party to drink water at a restaurant meal after the exhibition. Shortly afterwards she gets violently ill with cryptosporidium. This is all due to flaws in the regional water scheme which makes hundreds of people very ill. The sickness continues for a long time and Marcus has to take time off work to care for her. Eventually she does begin to recover and one morning Marcus goes into Westport to get medication for her. On his way home the indigestion which has been

bothering him all day suddenly becomes a full blown heart attack. He pulls in to the side of the road and dies in the car.

There is a gap of approximately 5 months between his death and his “appearance ?” at the house on All Saint’s day.

The midday Angelus Bell has a central role in the story for it is its ringing which brings Marcus’ spirit back to his home on All Saints day. In the four or more hours he has to wait until Mairead, his wife , returns to the house the interior monologue which this story is delivered. There is nothing to suggest that he ever gets to meet or communicate with Mairead.

The closing lines are grim without any real prospect of a blessed eternity to come. The very best that maybe on offer is

***“...nothing else for it but to keep going one foot in front of the other
the head down and keep going
keep going
keep going to f..k”***

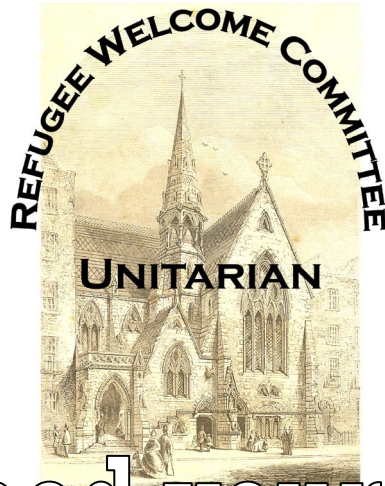
The majority of members of the book club liked “Solar Bones” . Several of us had read it twice. For myself I feel I gained a lot from reading it a second time and I know I will dip into it again from time to time.

We wondered why the story had not achieved international fame and could come to no conclusion other than that the language might be too Mayo and Ireland centric for many readers outside of country.

For myself, I hope that this review might encourage others to read this book. If you do I hope you will enjoy it as much as I did.

Tony Shine

Dublin Unitarian Church



We need your help

In securing a home.

The Unitarian Refugee Welcome Committee has committed to support and sponsor a family for a period of two years.

It will act as guarantor for the family.

This guarantee offers the landlord peace of mind as there will be no issues with payment of rent or the condition of the house.

Please contact us for more information.
email address: unitarianrwc@gmail.com

Urgent Accommodation Appeal:

Do you have a property available for rent in Dublin?

The Dublin Unitarian Church has decided to sponsor and support a refugee family under the Department of Children Community Sponsorship programme. These families have been invited to Ireland by the Irish Government as UN refugees from either Syria or Afghanistan. As refugees, they are entitled to full Irish Social Welfare supports from the day of arrival e.g. children's allowance, job seeker's allowance, housing assistance payment (HAP), medical card etc.

The Unitarian Refugee Welcome Committee has committed to support and sponsor this family for a period of two years. It will act as guarantor for the family, offering landlords the following assurances:

- Act as primary point of contact for both the landlord and the family
- Rent guarantee should there be any issue with HAP payments
- Commitment to do any reasonable work required in the house during the tenancy period
- At the end of the tenancy, a commitment to return the house in the same condition in which it was received
- Rent of €1,950 based on a family with 3 children under the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) (Family size will be based on the size of the accommodation)
- Sign a letter of guarantee re the above

This guarantee offers the landlord peace of mind as there will be no issues with payment of rent or with the condition of the house. Please contact us if you have any additional queries on this.

email address: unitarianrwc@gmail.com



William Caxton representing 'Work'