

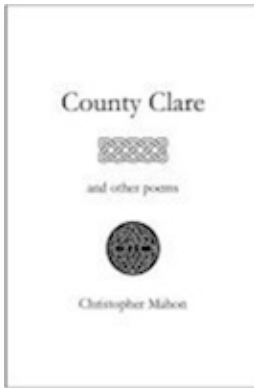
County Clare



and other poems



Christopher Mahon



County Clare and Other Poems is a collection of love poems - for the natural world, for the dying, for mysteries of life, and for fellow travelers. Perhaps, implicitly, they speak of love for the imagination. They range from a pilgrimage to the land of Celtic spirituality, a church in San Francisco, the death of an infant bird, Walt Whitman, imaginary cowboys, and the growing necessity for peaceful revolutions (in our hearts and in our world).

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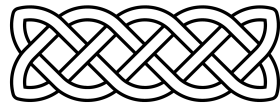
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ISBN: 978-1-63263-485-6

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Published by Two Birds Press, Mammoth Lakes, CA

Printed on acid-free paper.

Two Birds Press
2015

Second Edition

For information:
Diane Eagle Kataoka
Two Birds Press
P.O. Box 7274
Mammoth Lakes, CA 93546
Two-Birds-Press.com

For Robin Kobayashi

Dad's Day

“Very deathly,” he said. “But at least I could swim. Some of the guys just sank to the bottom.” But we never knew if we could believe him. He never even mentioned D-Day until much later in his life, talking first to a newspaper reporter for Veterans Day. He told me about being wounded above the eye, sent out to the hospital ship and back again. I believed all his stories about the Battle of the Bulge, though, the young soldier lying dead in the stream under a bridge, water flowing in through a bullet wound in one temple and flowing out through a second wound in the other. And the story about marching prisoners through the snow, how the other MP with my father wanted to double time them with their shoes off and shoot them if they fell. Why? He was mad because he could not go home for Christmas.

"That's not right," my father said.

And I always loved my dad for not wanting to kill those German prisoners, loved him for that sure light of mercy that shined through his soul even in the midst of war, even in the depths of winter, even though I hated him for other things that have become a cliché for Baby Boomers like me. The sounds of domestic wars echoing through the homes in the suburbs. *Boom. Boom.* All those traumatic explosions of fathers screaming at wives and kids, chasing them up the stairs in the aftermath of the eternal arguments. Long, slow fire fights amidst the lamp light in the living room or the plates on the kitchen table. Oh, Dad, you were just one among so many, a holy host of strong young men sacrificed to the dark shadow crossing the earth.

And you're dead now, too, sleeping peacefully through some greater eternity. Peace has arrived for you now, and, in fact, peace has always arrived. It covers the world like a liquid sky, covers the sky like a galaxy of exploding stars, and covers the galaxies like the infinitely expanding universe of dreams of young soldiers or young mothers or young women wanting to be mothers as they make love to the sweaty young men in their arms, making love through their cries in the night.

Poets for Peace

Come, my friends. 'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.
– Alfred, Lord Tennyson

The poets have always said it best. They've understood the deepest meanings in the oldest words; they created the vernacular for peace, saw how light shined through every letter of every word that ever contained a message for peace. Let's think of the word *compassion*, and how only the poets understood it could be found in a black shoe worn by a frail woman who crosses the street in the rain. A woman who needs peace as much as anyone else in the world. Let's think of the word *liberty* and ask what we need freedom from or freedom for. Let's be free to march for peace or fight for peace; let's be free from the ignorance of war and hatred. Only the poet can see that liberty begins in silence, as a meditation, really, a long prayer that is not so much for peace but is peace itself. Oh, if only the poets could rule the world! But they will not. They are hidden like flowers. They grow like weeds. They walk the streets of New York City like everyone else, smiling. And so now let's consider the word *beauty*, long a favorite of all the poets who have ever lived. Only the poets have clearly defined in words how beautiful this world is, even though everyone knows that what they say is true. Everyone has experienced in his or her own heart the beauty of this world. The single brightest star in a field of stars at midnight. The thousand leaves on the birch tree shimmering in the morning light. The light dancing on a wave. The blue sky. The green grass. The smell of coffee or magnolia flowers or the wet fur of a dog. Every little thing in this world is beautiful; we all know it. Too beautiful to lose. There are ten thousand reasons to wish for peace. As many reasons as there are words – like *home* or *soul* or *song*. But as for the poets, they wish for peace because the world is beautiful.

This poem is dedicated to and inspired by the work of Paul K. Chappell.

Feathers and Fire

Growing up in those beautiful suburbs of Detroit,
where birch trees lilted into the breeze
and maples and elms spread their dreamy leaves

across the yards, I lived next door to a great guy
named Danny who fought in the Vietnam War.
Just a kid when he went in, he took the psychological

tests as a joke. "What scares you more," they asked,
"feathers or fire?" Feathers, he said. And so,
when the assignments were passed out, he was surprised

to get *land mines and booby traps*. He was there when
his closest friend in the unit was blown up in the night,
"flesh cut open like a fillet," Danny said. And in the summers,

when he came outside to set up the sprinklers on his lawn,
wearing only Bermuda shorts, we could see the shrapnel
welting up from underneath his skin in the summer heat.

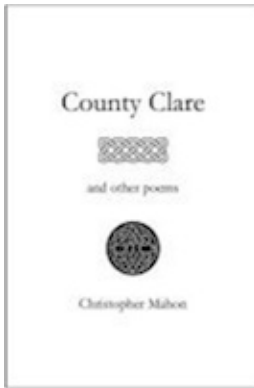
Shrapnel everywhere. When I myself was hospitalized
that summer after that horrific auto accident, Danny was
the one who came to the hospital to make me laugh.

He was so funny, loved all the other young wives
in the neighborhood like his own. They were so beautiful
in their tennis dresses and swim suits. "We should have

a beauty contest for all the wives in the neighborhood,"
he said, and then, nodding to my mother, who was
twenty years older, he added, "And you'll win, Maryann!"

Even my best buddy from New York City got caught
in the war. "They just wanted bodies," he said of his year,
1973. I had just started college then, had escaped like

some distant angel or bugle call across the hills. So let's fight
for peace now, with Christ, and with all those angels, too, who fall
like feathers from the heavens with swords of fire in their hands.



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