

A Vision of Whitemeats

The 11th century ‘Vision of MacConglinne’ begins by outlining the parts of a story: *The four things to be asked of any composition must be asked: place, and person, and time, and cause of invention.* This composition will circle close to the creameries of south Limerick. Its people are farmers, butter-makers, dairymaids, co-op workers, creamery managers, scholars in varying states of hunger. Its first time is the straight line joining the Butter-mount of MacConglinne’s vision to the EU’s butter mountain. Its other times pleat the first and then extend it to release hidden notes. Its cause of invention is this pleating and extension, hunger and restlessness, the seizing of attention. In the beginning was a scholar, hungry for dairy and poetry, withered from reading. While this is McC, he will soon cede to other scholars and even here he finds himself folded with another ‘I,’ a 21st century scholar/poet addled from the sources she’s trying to string into a dairy story.

Greedy and hungry for whitemeats

but they left that sage to fast

poets to scathe and revile

spears of old butter had each

I grieve to see him eating

my fill of generous juicy food

cut me not off from heaven

the soundness of my slumber

In the name of cheese!' said he
a plague of heavy disease
the vapours of bad feeding
the consumption of whitemeats

Whitemeats were the masses of spun milk that fed this island before the tubers got here. They were curds and soft cheeses, milk in stages of sourness needing chewing, porridges and pottages enriched with yellow cream, sweet and salted butter. Fed like babies on flummery and posset, at night sated dreams were filled with butter and soft cream. The lists of food come from the apocryphal MacC, as do the words from which these poems write themselves in the seven syllable lines of *dán díreach*. Hunger was an anguish that kept the scholar awake, his pen stringing syllables together that are all that remains of the cheese they praise and grieve.

In dearth of food or raiment
not a morsel of butter
spring wind in the flank of March
like a young fox approaching

Dropping a stone on a tree
looking for sense in an oaf
butter in a dog's kennel
corn in a basket full of holes

There are moments that seem so far from our time that, strain as you will, they will not come into focus. When I read of curdled milk, stringy enough to chew on, I shudder. One morning, coming down to breakfast, I saw that the cat had knocked the butter off the island and was sharing it with the dog. The givens of animal behaviour were shaken and MacC's admonition against keeping butter in a kennel became timely once again. While I would not put myself in the way of crucifixion over insufficient rations, MacC and I have both been known to speak rashly when hangry. Saltiness preserves more than butter in our tiny-windowed stone-built homes.

Honeyed Butter-roll his name

sung by every chosen tongue

son of smooth clustering cream

son of cheese without decrease

He was son of Butter-lad

with his hood of flummery

hairy rags of soft custard

a white bed-tick of butter

This creature should strike fear, poppin' fresh like Pillsbury Doughboy and equally liable to possession and the destruction of New York. And yet I hear a choir in unguent voice singing his name. Our school choir sang a truly awful dirge about Betty stirring porridge

with a feather, but if you let go of the words
and the rage at having to sing them your soul,
or whatever that loose part was, floated up to
join the crows on the tree outside, giving over
the croaking for a moment to bask in the
soundwave. Butter-lad just should not be. He
is thrown together from all the wrong things
and his butter bed, made of himself, promises
slow suffocation to the unwary. But his soft
song charms all who hear it, however salty,
into singing along.

Hedge of butter fenced it round

a welcome of red, firm men

they fasted on the same night

prayers were offered for the king

Sing them against thy children

a brimming vessel of milk

a butter draught-board and men

as big as a heath-fowl's egg

A meaty crew circling the butter fence and
praying for the well-being of their king may
be a welcoming vision for some. Others flinch
at the sight of so much blunt flesh in service
of power. If these prayers mass against our
children what do we care how sweetly they're
sung? Crystals form in beaten cream, clump
into butter. From this luscious substance we
might picture ourselves crafting smaller and
more malleable men to lord it over.

*When I get to Butter-mountain
may a gillie take my shoes
tribes of butter pat and cheese
chieftains of the tribe of food*

*To the bird of a cross – salt
a broken head – butter roll
milk of long thickness for chewing
a cow out of every close*

There are milky rewards for those who serve the powerful well. Gratitude takes the shape of a cow, the means of satisfying a scholar's own hunger. In this hierarchy, scholars do the chieftain's bidding and are waited on by the chieftain's gillies. Power is transferred temporarily to the momentarily useful. If blows are traded and heads are broken, this plays out within a circle fenced in by the tribe where movement follows established pattern. In shallow tubs of slowly curdling milk, curds form themselves into chewy strings.

*A white-spotted, red-eared cow
a halter of fresh butter
luscious waves of buttermilk
a sea sand of fresh cheese curds*

*Across New-milk Lake she went
melodious as soft strings*

yellow-skinned cream protect thee

boat with a stern of butter

This vision has one woman in it, besides the love-struck cipher Lígach whose haunted apples unleashed age-old mayhem in the shape of a ravenous king, and she is Bridget. Saint, bringer of chaos, cow. These are the three feminine forms. If grace is infrangible substance, what is the quality of this white stuff whose strength is in its splitting?

To Bridget we give our thanks

the seven-fold spirit's grace

of infrangible substance

from Butter-mound to Milk Lake

(Source: Anon (2000) 'The Vision of MacConglinne,' trans. Kuno Meyer, Ontario: In parentheses Publications)