My News for You
ALSO BY GEOFFREY SQUIRES

Drowned Stones*
Figures
XXI Poems
Landscapes and Silences*
Untitled and other poems*
Abstract Lyrics and other poems

Hafez: translations and interpretation of the ghazals

*also translated into French by François Heusbourg
and published in bilingual editions
My News for You:

Irish Poetry
600-1200

translated by
Geoffrey Squires

Shearsman Books
Contents

I. Preface 7

II. Translations
   Translations 1-20 14
   Translations 21-40 42
   Translations 41-60 67
   Translations 61-81 94

III. Contextual Notes
   Physical and human geography 127
   Language 128
   History 131
   Society 134
   Poetry 137
   Sources 143
   Translation 144

IV. Textual Notes
   Textual Notes 1-20 155
   Textual Notes 21-40 174
   Textual Notes 41-60 187
   Textual Notes 61-81 199

V. Originals 215

VI. Glossary (with pronunciation) 224

VII. Bibliography 229

VIII. Acknowledgements 237

IX. About the author 238
I. Preface

The poems translated here were, with some exceptions, written between the 7th and 12th centuries AD, making them the oldest vernacular poetry in Europe. Latin, which arrived with Christianity in the 5th century and brought a script, was the only other language in play, although there are occasional loanwords from Norse and other tongues.

Scholars can roughly assign the poems to centuries, on the basis of changes in syntax and word forms, but many that were written earlier exist only in later manuscripts. Dating is thus hazardous, nor do we usually know the author. It is likely that one was written by a druid, six by women and rather more by professional bards; the remainder are probably by clerics or scribes.

This poetry gives us a window onto a world that is in some respects very different but in others seems strangely close. There are poems about war and warriors, the geography and topography of the country, the religious life, nature and the seasons, the Viking threat, about love, exile, old age and death. They comprise a mixture of pagan and Christian in a period when the two cultures intermingled, with the latter gradually displacing the former. However, there is no simple shift or trend here, but rather a complex and emerging accumulation of pieces, as in a mosaic.

Even for people who know Modern Irish, Old and Middle Irish require specialised study and this book has been facilitated by the recent appearance of a new grammar and the placing online of the magisterial Dictionary of the Irish Language. In addition, almost all the early editions and translations from the great initial flowering of Celtic scholarship between about 1880 and 1920 are now available online and modern websites have brought together much of this material.

This book represents only a small proportion of extant early Irish poetry, which includes many more bardic and religious poems and longer, narrative combinations of poetry and prose, most of which have been translated elsewhere. Many of the poems here
can be read straight off, referring if necessary to the Glossary of unfamiliar names and terms near the end. Readers who would like some initial sense of the background should turn first to the Contextual Notes. These are followed by Textual Notes which provide more detailed information on the sources and content of each poem. Seven originals with brief explanatory comments are appended so that readers who do not know Irish can see what they look like and understand a little of their prosody. There is a general Bibliography at the end.

Literal translations of almost all these poems are already available, although scattered across a wide variety of often arcane sources. Here, however, my over-riding aim has been to make of these originals an equivalent poetry in English, and without attempting to reproduce the very different Irish prosodies, to capture something of their form, dynamics and style. The translations are typically close without being literal, and draw on the painstaking scholarly work that has been done in the field over the last century and more. But they are offered as poetry, as texts that despite the great chasm of time, and without in any way diminishing their otherness, still somehow speak to us.
## Index of Poems

### TRANSLATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Over the sea comes Adzehead</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>How many Thirties in this noble island</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Each one has his double his like</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>I see a fine fair-haired man</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>I invoke the seven daughters of the sea</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Like a red tide</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Hush woman do not speak</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>The three sons of Ruad</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>I gird myself today</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>O king of the stars</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>My cat and I are of one mind</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Little strength left in my heels</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Lord God we worship thee</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Happy the reign of Cormac and Finn</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>Alas my hand</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>In this sorry world of ours</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>A bank of trees overlooking me</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>If you climb up Croagh Patrick</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td>Midsummer</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>I have three wishes</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.</td>
<td>Sweet bell</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.</td>
<td>My news for you</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23.</td>
<td>The fort over near the oak wood</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24.</td>
<td>Sound of a blackbird</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.</td>
<td>The cold is interminable</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.</td>
<td>How beautiful</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.</td>
<td>I am ashamed of my thoughts</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.</td>
<td>Sad retinue</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29.</td>
<td>My sweet pet crane</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30.</td>
<td>If you are head of a household</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
31. Ever since I have been parted
32. To go to Rome
33. I set off alone for the mountain
34. It is fortunate for that greybeard
35. All kinds of food and drink
36. Look out northeasterwards
37. It is my wish O Son of the Living God
38. Like an acorn from an oak
39. A large dwelling
40. Settle in to your corner of the gaol
41. The wind is cold
42. Feed my son’s hound
43. Who knows
44. Arran island of stags
45. Were the bright waves of the sea
46. The bay echoes
47. Piece after piece
48. O King of that glorious kingdom
49. Three sides I have loved
50. Season of well-being
51. Brigit ever the best of women
52. A busy yellow bee
53. Cu Chuimne ordered his life well
54. Birds of the world
55. O God grant me
56. Would that I were
57. Freezing tonight on the Great Moor
58. Once I had golden hair
59. I have heard
60. The flour that the mill grinds
61. Is it time for me O God
62. There is one I wish I could see
63. My life ebbs like the tide ebbs
64. A little bird pipes up
65. These arrows that pierce sleep
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>66.</td>
<td>You raise a kitten</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>67.</td>
<td>These hands are wizened now</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>68.</td>
<td>Did you see Aed</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>69.</td>
<td>It is time I set out my will</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70.</td>
<td>Of all the generations</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>71.</td>
<td>May your holy angels</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>72.</td>
<td>A gale blowing tonight</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>73.</td>
<td>My hand is weary</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>74.</td>
<td>The days are long for one like me</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75.</td>
<td>Crinoc</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>76.</td>
<td>It is for this</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>77.</td>
<td>What radiance what blessings</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>78.</td>
<td>What fools men are</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>79.</td>
<td>May-day perfect day</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80.</td>
<td>A moist eye will look back</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>81.</td>
<td>No longer unapprised of the terrible news</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Originals**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Irish</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td><em>Tíofa táilcend</em></td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td><em>Atomriug indiu</em></td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td><em>Messe ocs Pangur Bán</em></td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td><em>Dom-farcai fidbaide fál</em></td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.</td>
<td><em>Scél lém dúib</em></td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.</td>
<td><em>Fuitt co bráth</em></td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>79.</td>
<td><em>Céttemain cáin ré</em></td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
II. Translations
Over the sea comes Adzehead
off his head
with a hole in his cloak for his head
and a stick with a bent head

he stands in front of a table in front of his house
intoning impieties
and his followers all respond
amen       amen
How many Thirties in this noble island
how many half-Thirties allied to them
how many townlands side by side
how many yoke of oxen in each townland

how many townlands and Thirty-hundreds
in Ireland rich in goods and chattels
I tell you straight
I defy anyone else to work it out

and do not presume to challenge me
I who am known as Fintan the wise
the most learned man that ever was
in the whole of Scotland or Ireland

ten townlands in each Thirty-hundred
and twenty more to be precise
and although they might seem small to us
together comprising a great country

a townland sustains three hundred cattle
with twelve ploughed fields to be exact
four full herds can roam there without
one cow rubbing up against the next

eighteen Thirties this is my tally
for the rich and fertile county of Meath
and one score and ten Thirties
belonging to the fair-haired men of Connaught

and fifteen thirties and another twenty
I can tell you as a matter of fact
and without fear of contradiction
in the mighty province of Ulster
eleven Thirties and another twenty
in crowded affluent Leinster
from the mouth of Inver Dublin
as far west as the pass of the drovers
ten thirties and another three score
living together in harmony
in the two illustrious provinces
of the far reaches of Munster
of the Thirty-hundreds I have reckoned
nine score altogether
and not a townland or half a townland
short in any one of them
five thousand five hundred and twenty townlands
by enumerating them and adding them up
believe me
this is how I have arrived
at the number of townlands in Ireland
Each one has his double his like
though their origins differ

the O’Neills and the Scots
Saxons and Munstermen

Ulstermen and Spaniards
their ranks massing on borders

Welshmen and the men of Connaught
Leinstermen like Franks
I see a fine fair-haired man
who will perform great feats of weaponry
despite the many wounds on his noble flesh

with the fierce brow of a warrior
his forehead the meeting-place
of manifold victories

his eyes shine with the light of seven gems
his spear-head unsheathed
clothed in a red mantle fastened with clasps

he is good-looking
women fall for him
this handsome young man who in a fight
turns suddenly into a dragon

his prowess suggests he is
Cu Chulainn of Muirthemne
I do not know who this is but this I know
he will spill the blood of your army

four flashing swords in each hand
with which he attacks those surrounding him
each weapon used in its own particular way

and when he carries his gae bolga
as well as his sword and spear
no one can keep this man
wearing a red mantle
from the field of battle
two spears lashed
to the rim of his chariot-wheels
he transcends bravery
this is how he appears to me
but he might come in another form

he approaches the fray
and if he is not warded off
he will wreak havoc
for he will seek you out
Cu Chulainn mac Sualtaim

slaughtering dozens of you
decimating your forces
you will leave him nothing but your heads
on the battlefield

I    Feidelm    the prophetess
will not hide this from you

the blood of warriors shall flow
and it will be remembered for a long time
men's bodies cut to pieces
women weeping

all because of this Hound I see
I invoke the seven daughters of the sea
who spin youth's threads of longevity

may three deaths be spared me
may three lives be granted me
may seven waves of good fortune wash over me

may the spirits not harm me as I make my rounds
in my flashing breastplate
may my good name endure
may I enjoy long life  let death
not come to me until I am old

I call upon my silver champion
who has not died and will not die

may my life be as fine as white bronze
as valuable as gold
may my status be enhanced
my strength increased

may my grave lie unprepared
may death not come to me
while I am travelling
may I return home safely

the visceral snake shall not take hold of me
nor the pitiless grey worm   the mindless black beetle
no robber shall assail me      nor coven of women
nor band of armed men
may my lifespan be prolonged
by the King of the universe

I invoke the Ancient One of the seven ages
whom fairy women suckled on their flowing breasts
may my seven candles be not extinguished

I am a strong fort
an immovable rock
a precious stone
a weekly benediction

may I live a hundred times a hundred years
one succeeding another
enjoying all the blessings of life
may the grace of the Holy Spirit be upon me

Domini est salus (thrice)
Christi est Salus (thrice)
super populum tuum Domine benedictio tua