



Belinda McKeon – The Early Years in Stonepark N.S.

EAMONN BRENNAN
 STONEPARK N.S. (1981 -2009).

If you take the Athlone road from Longford town you will pass Stonepark N.S. and Curry Church. A mile or so further on there is McGiff's cross where you turn right for Newtowncashel. Just before Mc Giff's cross you will pass the townland of Clonanny. Clonanny is known only to those who live there and its immediate neighbours. It's like any rural farming townland but from now on it is forever captured in print by Belinda McKeon.

Mark knocked three meadows the first warm evening and Tom followed after him with the turner whipping up the long blades of grass setting them down as neat as potato drills. As Mark began to bale two mornings later Tom took the child to the edge of the meadow to show her the way it was done: the lines of grass the huge yellow bales lurching out of the red machine and the shape of her father in the tractor cab, a hand on the steering wheel his head turned to watch the progress of the bales hitched behind. Solace 2011.

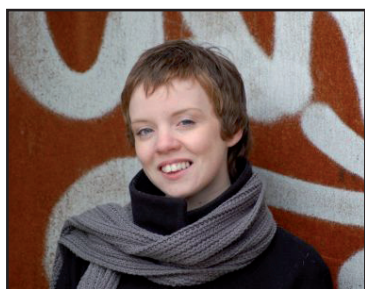
Belinda is the author of *Solace* for which she won the Irish Book Awards as best newcomer. Belinda the eldest child of Oliver and Angela McKeon grew up in Clonanny with her sisters Rebecca and Alice and her brother Michael. Belinda attended Stonepark N.S. Stonepark was a five teacher school then with each teacher teaching mixed classes. Mixed classes bring their own vibrancy to the day with the different age groups complementing each other. There were five of us in Stonepark then; principal Anthony Casey, Deputy Principal Eilish Mulligan, Marian O'Reilly, Pat Hanley and myself. We shared learning support teachers with Melview, Mary O'Boyle and later Margaret Walsh. I taught Belinda in fourth class and I remember her as being popular with her classmates with a good sense of humour and full of beans like any nine or ten year old.

Undoubtedly it was clear to all of us who taught her that she loved to write stories. The weekly English essay was the highlight of her week. Two features stood out in her essays; one was her original ideas and the other her expression of those ideas. When Belinda had time to spare in class she wanted to write more stories. She read a lot too but more than anything else she wanted to write.

The first story I remember Belinda writing was a Halloween story. The preparation was done, the vocabulary discussed with ghosts, goblins and ghouls appearing on the list. Rather than the usual offering Belinda went off on a tangent. Her story was the story of Jonathan and Penelope – a story of love and tragedy. They had attended the local school in a previous century. Later in life they marry but tragedy struck and they died young. Now their spirits lived on under Stonepark school where they were united forever.

There were many stories like this, it didn't matter whether it was the school tour, a day at the seaside or my favourite pastime; one was always assured of an interesting read and her consistency of expression was always evident.

One of the highlights of the school year for the pupils was the arrival of the Christmas annuals... Sugradh Spraoi, Siamsa and Sonas were a series of Christmas annuals full of puzzles, quizzes, games and art pages. They were delivered to the school in early December every year. The pupils got to do them in class which was a nice treat. That year when I taught Belinda the money was collected and delivery



Author Belinda McKeon

date agreed. Bad weather threw the schedule into disarray and the pupils waited anxiously for over a week. Everyday the pupils asked for their annual and a few of the more vocal ones wanted their money back, others talked of strike! I enjoyed the banter and was trying to spot the next James Larkin. I pointed out to one boy whose father was a builder that the builders don't always come on the day they promise. He quickly replied 'true, but they don't get paid in advance like you'. That same boy once told me when I was trying to get to the bottom of some devilment 'that he had the right to remain silent'!

Unknown to me while all this was going on Belinda was writing an account of the events. Like a true journalist she had an account full of detail. It had narrative, direct speech, indirect speech, short sentences, long sentences direct quotes and humour. Without being conscious of it, this nine year old girl was showing us her future. I remember saying to her after reading it that you can be a journalist as well as a writer.

The year continued on and the stories kept coming, the pupils knew as well that her stories were different and they liked to hear them read out loud. We entered her stories in competitions and among her first successes were the winning of a competition sponsored by Longford Library. Her story 'The Ghost in the Library' had all her imaginative traits. She also had a story published in a book sponsored by McDonalds Restaurant called 'The Bees Knees'.

Finally I want to finish with what Belinda wrote about Stonepark national school at the launch of 'A Hand in the Future' a collection of poems from Stonepark school published in 2008.

when I was a pupil in Stonepark N.S. my classmates and I were just as immersed in poems and stories as we were in spelling tests, in comhrá, in long division, in games of football and rounders in the school yard. In our classrooms, we were encouraged to create our own worlds, to imagine our own possibilities, to play with words and ideas in the same way that, on our first day as Junior Infants we had played with marla and the stickle bricks. At Stonepark our teachers did not just teach us how to read and write, they taught us how to unlock the great realm of pleasure and possibility within the acts of reading and writing. Within those words printed on the page and within those pages yet waiting to be filled with words: our words. The teachers in Stonepark allowed us to hold on to our wonderful unblinkered perspective on life no matter where we went what we became or what we did. Belinda McKeon 2008.

I think the above piece from Belinda captures the beauty and the possibilities of the Primary School and what teachers can do.

Stonepark NS gave Belinda many opportunities to write but her unique talent and determination to succeed made it happen for her.

Wishing Belinda every success in the future.

Stonepark NS

Last September saw us welcome our new Junior Infants to the school. They are all settling in very well and enjoying "big school." They have made lots and lots of new friends including Rocai Rua, Snake, Inky and Bee. The following Junior Infants joined Stonepark NS last September: Abigail Gibbons; Abigail Macko; Amy Barry; Andrea O'Connor; Bradley Malonne; Callum Duggan; Charlie Flanagan; Cora Nulty; David Cowan; David Maher; Teagan Elliot; Hailie Jai O'Rourke; Jack Tiernan; Jessica Gorman; John McDonnell; John Nevin; Kate O'Connell; Katie Reilly; Lara O'Connor; Liepa Vilkiene; Lucy Jones/Donnellan; Maria Gorman; Patrick Clancy; Phoenix Nowell; Rachel Fitzpatrick; Roisin Warde; Ryan Stokes; Saidbh Nerney; Shannon McDermott; Shirley Dempsey; Stephen Carroll.

We are all very happy with the new playground which was built across the road from the school.

Third Class wrote some poetry about the Queen's State visit to Ireland. They wrote and published a collection of poems called "New Roots" which they subsequently sent to the Queen and to the then President Mary McAleese.

The received a wonderful personal letter from the Queen and also a letter from President McAleese. Miss Leavy was delighted that the Queen would write to us.

We held a Jersey Day for GOAL. A big thank you to everybody who contributed to the GOAL Wear Your Jersey Day. We collected €413 euro. Well done.

Stonepark NS played in the Division 2 League Football Final recently in Pearse Park. The team played excellently, and had won all their matches up to the final. However we did not come out on the winning side this time. The whole panel is now really looking forward to the championship next year.

Our Girl's team played a Camogie blitz in Mostrim in October. They are really looking forward to the Girl's Camogie and Football competitions in the Springtime. Congratulations to the boys and girls from the Swimming team Tadhg McNiven, Eve Nerney & Emer Kyle, who competed in the *Connachts* in Galway recently. Thank you to their manager Mr McNiven and congratulations to Tadhg who made it through to the All Irelands.



Flor Leen, Michael O'Sullivan and Killien Burns pictured with the Stonepark Senior team who beat Fermoy in the Division 2 League Final : Matthew Duffy, Niall Flynn, Paul McKenna, Adam Ryan, Jamie Preece, Tadhg McNiven, Robert O'Connell, Gerard Flynn, Rory Howlin, Jack Carey, Diarmuid Sheahan, Dylan Smith, Rian Cox, Feidhlim Maher, Darragh Maher, Christopher Gibbons, Conor Campbell, Andrew Dillon, Jordan Rohan, Callum Healy, Cian O'Nuallain, Niall Donnelly, Michael Nevin, Jack Magan, Liam Elliot.

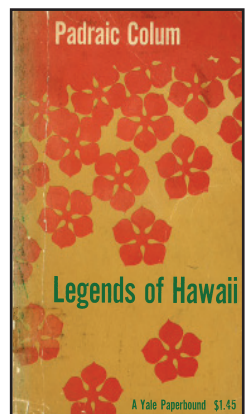
A gift for President Obama: Padraic Colum's Legends of Hawaii

MARY CARLTON REYNOLDS

2011 was not a great year for many people living in Ireland because of the ongoing economic crisis but for one memorable week in May we all parked our problems and basked in the excitement of two historic visits to our shores. Our first visitor was the Queen of England followed a few days later by the arrival of the first black President of the United States Barack Obama and his lovely wife Michelle.

We especially shared in the joy of the small town of Moneygall as they welcomed President Obama of the 'Moneygall Obamas' to their town and dreamed of what it would mean for Longford if we could find a way to bring one of the most powerful figures in the world to our town. Sadly Barack Obama did not come to Longford but he did leave Ireland with a special gift which should make all Longford people proud of our rich literary heritage. An

Taoiseach Enda Kenny presented President Obama with a beautiful first edition of a book written by one of Longford's most gifted storyteller's Padraic Colum. Many of us will know Colum's delightful story *The King of Ireland's Son* but we might be less familiar with the book of folktales written by him in 1937 called *Legends of Hawaii* which was presented to President Obama. Padraic Colum was invited to Hawaii in 1923 to make a study of all the folklore collected by Polynesian scholars in Honolulu and from these he chose the nineteen enchanting tales that appear in this book. These folktales which have been treasured by Hawaiian adults and children from time immemorial have been beautifully retold by Padraic Colum. We hope that *Legends of Hawaii* by Padraic Colum will have pride of place in the White House Presidential library as indeed they have in the special Padraic Colum Collection in our County Library in Longford.



Padraic Colum's Legends of Hawaii



Pictured are pupils from Scoil Eimear and Stonepark with visiting French exchange students.