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**Celtic Revivals:  
Jim Fitzpatrick and the Celtic Imaginary  
in Irish and International Popular Culture**

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**Introduction**

In 1993, *Travel Weekly* magazine included a feature on new tourist attractions in Ireland, with a brief but hyperbolic description of Celtworld in Tramore, a recently opened theme park:

A treasure trove of Celtic myth and legend is featured at this custom-built, \$7 million complex, said to be an entertainment and technological first for Ireland. Combining the images of Jim Fitzpatrick, an internationally acclaimed Celtic artist, with the latest technology – computer graphics, sound, animation, video projection and other visual aids – this attraction provides visitors with a three-dimensional experience of life in Ireland when the Druids and Celtic heroes reigned.<sup>1</sup>

This short description provides some indication of Jim Fitzpatrick's celebrity status as a 'Celtic' artist, suggesting that his association with the project served as a guarantee of quality, even authenticity. In the early 1990s, Fitzpatrick was perhaps best known for his graphic depictions of Celtic heroes and heroines in illustrated publications such as *Celtia* (1975), *The Book of Conquests* (1978) and *The Silver Arm* (1981) as well as a succession of album covers for *Thin Lizzy*. He also seems to have claimed the ethnicity of a Celt in the autobiography that forms part of his illustrated book *Erinsaga: The Mythological Paintings of Jim Fitzpatrick* (1985). In one section of this narrative, he proclaims his pride in his 'racial and artistic heritage' and specifically locates the 'ancestry' of his art in 'the spirals of Newgrange' and *The Book of Kells*.<sup>2</sup> Fitzpatrick has cited numerous international influences

for his work, extending from Polish poster art and political magazines such as *Stern*, to a wide range of artists and illustrators from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including Hokusai, Harry Clarke, Gustav Klimt, Egon Schiele, Aubrey Beardsley and Alphonse Mucha. Yet his quest for Celtic origins provides an obvious point of connection with eighteenth and nineteenth century antiquarian and literary discourse in Ireland.<sup>3</sup>

Focusing on Fitzpatrick's art, this article examines the various factors that might have contributed to a revival (or indeed successive revivals) of Celtic mythology and iconography in Irish and international popular culture since the early 1970s. In addition to noting some of the differences between the Celticism of the Anglo-Irish Literary Revivalists and that of Fitzpatrick, I identify a range of cultural and economic factors that may have shaped the development and reception of the latter's work. These include the renewed interest in Art Nouveau during the late 1960s and early 1970s and also the brief flowering of 'psychedelic' themes in popular art and music. My analysis is specifically informed by theorisations of remembrance and 'kitsch' in Irish studies, and by recent developments in contemporary art discourse that have directed attention towards the connections between popular culture and political protest in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In particular, I draw upon an interview with Fitzpatrick conducted by the artist Aleksandra Mir in January 2005, which investigates the production and circulation of his iconic two-tone image of Che Guevara. Informed by Mir's research, I trace the development of Fitzpatrick's design work for *Thin Lizzy* and the production of his illustrated books during the 1970s and early 1980s. Finally, in the latter part of the article, I theorise the brief emergence and subsequent revival of a 'celto-psychedelic' current across a range of popular cultural forms, from posters and album covers to comic books and animation.

### **Revivalism, Celticism and Kitsch**

It is impossible to consider the production and reception of Fitzpatrick's work without at least acknowledging the extensive debates within Irish studies concerning the relationship between Celtic revivalism and cultural nationalism. Marjorie Howes has emphasised the significance of Matthew Arnold's thinking in the development of Yeats' concept of Celticism, noting the latter's assertion of a 'masculine' model as a

counterpoint to Arnold's emphasis on the supposed femininity of the Celt.<sup>4</sup> The peasant was a key figure in Yeats' account of the Celtic imaginary, elevated 'to a position of great importance in national life – creator and guardian of the oral tradition that gave Irish literature its power and uniqueness'.<sup>5</sup> Howes points out that even though he sometimes styled himself as a Celt, Yeats was far more comfortable in the role of Celticist, interpreting the peasant 'other' for a community of readers. She also notes that he tended to essentialise rural poverty as the *origin* rather than the setting for this Celtic imagination, presenting spiritual wealth as a compensation for economic failure.<sup>6</sup>

Joep Leerssen has argued that the Celticism of the nineteenth century revivalists and antiquarians operated upon chronological as well as geographical axes. He traces the creation of an image of Gaelic Ireland that was 'inherently characterised by its pastness', configured as a living fossil, in keeping with a more general 'proclivity for ancient ruins and archaic settings' in Gothic literature.<sup>7</sup> He notes the recurrence of 'inaccessible mountain ranges and glens, castles in liminal settlements like islands or on the seashore, [...] mansions in deserted, no-longer-fashionable part of Dublin' in Irish versions of this literature. Perhaps most importantly, Leerssen also emphasises the remarkable anachronism at work in both historical and literary representation, to the extent that Irish past comes to resemble an 'ill-organised museum of antiquarian curios and collectibles' and history is reduced to 'an undifferentiated pool of diverse mementos and memories'.<sup>8</sup> While Leerssen generally restricts his analysis to the nineteenth century, he does discuss Thomas Kinsella's more recent re-telling of *The Táin*, first published (as a limited edition) in 1969. This publication was accompanied by a series of 'brush paintings' by Louis Le Brocquy as well as several maps. Although Jim Fitzpatrick does not cite Kinsella's version of the story directly it seems highly likely that he would have been aware its existence when he began developing *The Book of Conquests* in the 1970s.

Leerssen is particularly interested in the 'paratextual' aspects of both popular culture and nineteenth century literary and historical discourse. Kinsella's version of *The Táin* includes footnotes, maps and appendices, offering a point of comparison with various popular cultural explorations of mythology, such as graphic novels and comic books.<sup>9</sup> Noting that Kinsella's version exaggerates some of the 'primitive and grotesque' elements of the story as a means of stressing the 'cultural and historical distance' between present and past, Leerssen suggests that an emphasis on 'alienation' is particularly

apparent in the design of the maps, which feature familiar geographical markers but unfamiliar place names:

There is at the same time a national sense of familiarity and an exoticist sense of difference at work: an ancient culture is mediated to a modern readership with an emphasis on shared identity [...] but at the same time there is an exoticizing element, in that the [place] names are kept deliberately alien.<sup>10</sup>

These competing attempts at authenticity are, he argues, particularly ironic given the fact that no unified homogenous original for *The Táin* actually exists. In fact an ancillary story (or *réamhscéal*) entitled ‘The retrieval of the Táin Bó Cuailnge’, relates how ‘each poet of Ireland remembered only a small portion of the complete narrative’ and quest had to be undertaken in order to find the full tale.<sup>11</sup>

There are obvious connections here with Luke Gibbons’ theorisation of the ruin and the fragment within Irish modernity (and postmodernity). Gibbons points out that while Romantic ruins typically represented the triumph of nature over culture, signalling decay but also ‘trans-historical communion *with* nature’, Irish ruins were the result of a clash *between* cultures. Commenting upon the cult of the fragment in the writings of Baudelaire, Benjamin and Simmel, he notes that the modernist emphasis on ‘disintegration [and] presentness’ should be understood as ‘pre-eminently *spatial*, the result of a new topology of social relations in the metropolis’. He points out that in the Irish context, by contrast, the experience of fragmentation was always bound up with history and temporality.<sup>12</sup> Elsewhere, in an analysis of the relationship between montage, disintegration and Joyce, Gibbons includes a collage by Irish artist Seán Hillen as an illustration of this thesis regarding fragmentation.<sup>13</sup> In Hillen’s image, entitled *The Oracle at O’Connell St. Bridge* (1996), the broken columns of the classical ruin occupy the foreground while in the background a forest of vast glass and steel sky scrapers seems to have appeared as if from nowhere. Hillen’s juxtaposition of ancient, modern and invented worlds (particularly in the ‘Irelantis’ series of collages) is also widely cited by theorists of Irish postmodernity because it draws upon an extensive history of ‘Atlantean’ mythology and so offers a direct connection with the more fanciful aspects of nineteenth century antiquarianism.

Hillen's work also features in Colin Graham's analysis of various utopian musings, including those of nineteenth century Irish American writer Ignatius Donnelly. Claiming to have identified the location of Atlantis (somewhere between Ireland and the US), Donnelly attempted to prove that it was the source and the site of the mythical 'Tír na nÓg'. While dismissing Donnelly as an eccentric, Graham nonetheless endorses certain aspects of his position, noting that this 'view of Ireland makes emigration normal, makes Ireland a migrating entity, disallows the possibility of Irish culture keeping Ireland secure to itself' because in Donnelly's model, Ireland itself was home to successive immigrant Atlanteans.<sup>14</sup> According to Graham, Donnelly's Atlantean scheme and Hillen's collages are linked by a kind of 'deferred utopianism', in which Irelantis can be either 'archaically Eden' or 'apocalyptic'. As such, the images signal *both* anteriority and futurology, suggesting that Ireland exists both in the past and also 'everywhere and nowhere'.<sup>15</sup> This doubled temporality seems, for Graham, to index the parallels between nation-states and globalised capitalism, alluding to the processes through which both formations attempt to compensate for the fragmentary quality of the (postmodern) present through reference to the imagined coherency of a future that has yet to be achieved.

### **Origins, Ruins and Retrievals**

If Hillen's collages could be said to index, if not critique, the fragmented temporality (and spatiality) of postmodernity by reworking romantic 'ruins', then Jim Fitzpatrick's Celticism operates somewhat differently. Firstly, his graphic images are not marked by any obvious formal concern with the materiality of the fragment, since he does not use collage techniques. Secondly, both *The Book Of Conquests* and *The Silver Arm* tend to assert narrative and stylistic *coherency* rather than disjunction or contradiction. This is despite the fact that (like the nineteenth century antiquarian) Fitzpatrick draws upon a range of 'original manuscript sources' in his research. At this point, it is useful to consider the perspective offered by David Lloyd in his analysis of kitsch and national culture. For Lloyd, the production of kitsch artefacts constitutes a kind of 'retrieval' and a 'rerooting of cultural forms that have survived colonization in the deep history of a people', ostensibly in opposition to the 'hybrid and grafted' cultural forms that emerge through colonization.<sup>16</sup> But these retrieved forms are not simply aligned with the past – instead

they have a relationship to the *future* of the national cultural formation since they refer to a whole that has yet to be constituted. It is precisely because they must play a role within this process of constitution that these cultural forms are widely disseminated, becoming highly commodified and standardised in the process, circulating as ‘ballads, newspaper articles, symbols and images’ so that their ‘authenticity’ gradually devolves into kitsch.<sup>17</sup> Lloyd goes on to cite various examples of Irish souvenir kitsch, from ashtrays embossed with harps to Celtic crosses made from Connemara marble. He also notes the persistence of an allegorical mode in the form of ruins and monuments and, invoking Adorno’s analysis, suggests that the ‘positive aspect’ of kitsch lies in its melancholy recognition, and revelation, of the ‘disjunction between desire and its objects’.<sup>18</sup> The disjunction is most pronounced, he argues, in the case of communities where history is determined by ‘domination, displacement and dislocation’.<sup>19</sup>

Turning his attention to the use of Celtic iconography in political art, Lloyd argues that some of the ‘most powerful’ West Belfast murals by Gerry Kelly derive their iconography from ‘Jim Fitzpatrick’s post-Marvel Celtic comic *The Book of Conquests*’. He emphasises that Kelly’s appropriation of popular images is quite deliberate and directly informed by his experience of the H-Blocks, in which prisoners were encouraged to ‘paint hankies of the Pope, the Virgin Mary, Mickey Mouse’.<sup>20</sup> The replacement of Disney characters by the ‘post-Marvel’ imagery of Jim Fitzpatrick is, Lloyd argues, indicative of ‘a conscious transfer’ in which one form of kitsch is deliberately replaced by another. He focuses upon the juxtaposition of different temporalities in a mural from 1988 that commemorates eight IRA volunteers killed at Loughgall, and features portraits of the dead against the backdrop of a stylized landscape ‘retrieved’ from Jim Fitzpatrick.<sup>21</sup> He seems to suggest that this act of retrieval differs from the ‘rerooting of cultural forms that have survived colonization in the deep history of a people’, since it involves appropriation from a ‘post-Marvel’ comic book and so refers explicitly to the context of industrial production. It is worth noting that, despite his interest in the iconography and temporality of kitsch, Lloyd actually attributes much of the power of Kelly’s murals to their *location*, emphasising that a mural derives meaning from its relation to a ‘very definite community’ as well as from its obvious ‘vulnerability’ within a contested public space.<sup>22</sup>

Colin Graham suggests that, for Lloyd, the oppositional potential of kitsch remains located in ‘intentionality which is the evidence of subaltern agency’.<sup>23</sup> This is because the murals themselves are temporary artworks and so not ‘properly kitsch’ (according to Graham) unlike related objects such as the postcard images of murals or the guided tours around West Belfast that mediate these works to tourists and other visitors. Yet, perhaps because he focuses on ambiguous cultural objects, Lloyd’s analysis seems to illuminate the complex relationship between ruins, fragments and post-industrial obsolescence. In the closing section of his analysis, he focuses attention on the ‘wasted particularity’ of the kitsch artefact, which is recovered as ‘the emblem of cultures that have been *lost from futurity* by the state’ in much the same way that ‘commodities are thrown out of circulation’.<sup>24</sup> This alignment between obsolescent ‘futurity’ and the abandonment of commodities seems particularly significant in relation to Fitzpatrick’s Celticism, because of the latter’s involvement in many different contexts and forms of industrial production and distribution. Lloyd himself does not fully address this issue, however, because by describing *The Book of Conquests* as ‘post-Marvel comic book’, he positions Fitzpatrick’s work unproblematically within the comic book industry. In fact, Fitzpatrick’s status in relation to this industry has always been highly ambiguous, not least because of the fact that he has operated in many different roles and fields.

### **From Counter-Culture to Popular Culture: Jim Fitzpatrick’s Graphic Art**

Fitzpatrick has cited certain Marvel artists (particularly Jack Kirby) as a direct influence on his work and, during the early 1970s, he apparently developed his own short-lived comic strip for the Sunday Independent.<sup>25</sup> But there are few comic book scholars or readers who would define either *The Book of Conquests* or *The Silver Arm* as comic books or even ‘graphic novels’. This is primarily because there is little or no integration between text and narrative; the text is typeset, rather than hand-lettered and the speech-bubbles, frames and gutters usually found in comic strips or other graphic narratives are absent.<sup>26</sup> In addition, the images (defined by Fitzpatrick as ‘mythological paintings’) appear on separate pages and are individually titled, signed and dated with the month listed in Irish (e.g. ‘Marta 89’). Also, there is no evidence of the usual collaboration found in comic books; Fitzpatrick acknowledges the assistance of an editor in the production of the text

but otherwise he seems to have worked largely in isolation, in a manner that is not typical of the comic book industry in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>27</sup>

Leaving both the graphic qualities and the production model to one side, Fitzpatrick also does not claim to be the *author* of the stories that are presented in *The Book of Conquests* and *The Silver Arm*. The defining feature of both publications is that they draw heavily and overtly upon the ‘Ulster Cycle’ of Irish mythology, featuring tales of battles, druids and the ‘warp spasm’ that are all familiar from Celtic mythology. In keeping with the emphasis on ‘paratext’ that Joep Leerssen identifies in nineteenth century literary and historical representation, Fitzpatrick places great emphasis on citation and the inclusion of various supplementary materials. This is particularly true of *Erinsaga*, which frames the earlier illustrated books within an overarching narrative, that of Fitzpatrick’s autobiography.<sup>28</sup> In addition to an annotated list of bibliographical references it features a detailed catalogue of related works by Fitzpatrick such as posters, portfolios, limited edition versions. This emphasis on cataloguing seems to have been shaped by Fitzpatrick’s experience of working outside the established conventions (and on the geographic margins) of the graphic design and comic book industries. He often operated independently of established distribution and publishing structures, establishing his own publishing company (De Dannan press) and promoting his own work through projects like *Erinsaga* and, more recently, his website. Ironically, however, Fitzpatrick remains best-known in many contexts for the iconic two-tone poster of Che Guevara, made in 1967, which was self-published and freely distributed, generating no direct income for the artist.

In January 2005, a group exhibition at Project Arts Centre in Dublin, entitled ‘Communism’ (curated by Grant Watson), featured an artwork by Aleksandra Mir that involved the appropriation and reworking of Fitzpatrick’s image of Che. Mir produced a limited edition two-sided poster that was freely distributed from the gallery. One side displayed the original image, superimposed with a small cut-out of a Concorde in flight in the upper left, passing through Che’s line of sight.<sup>29</sup> The other side of the poster featured the transcript of a dialogue between Mir and Fitzpatrick, exploring the relationship between art practice, popular culture and the aesthetics of resistance. The dialogue between the two artists provides considerable detail on the production and circulation of the image as well as spanning broader issues of copyright and intellectual



property. It also highlights the existence of very different notions of artistic practice and skill; while Mir is the very epitome of the contemporary nomadic, post-conceptual artist, travelling extensively and working within the commercial gallery system, Fitzpatrick relies largely on direct commissions from patrons or the royalties generated from sales of his calendars, postcards and posters. These tensions are not external to Fitzpatrick's practice but instead find expression in his attempts to negotiate between the economic demands of self-publishing and his stated interest in the free circulation of certain images.

My focus here, however, is not on the oppositions (or interdependencies) between artisanal and other forms of skill. Instead, I am interested in the interview because it sheds light on the international context within which Fitzpatrick's practice evolved and emerged. In particular it highlights the significance of 'psychedelic' themes in popular culture during the 1960s, from posters and album covers to clothes, badges, club flyers, and other ephemera. Much of the conversation focuses directly on the production of the Che image in 1967. The Che poster was based upon a photograph by Korda published in *Stern* magazine and a version of the portrait was originally devised (prior to the death of Guevara) as an illustration for an Irish periodical called *Scene: Ireland's New International Magazine*. The image was intended to form part of a satirical series called 'A voice in our times', which featured cartoons of politicians such as Lyndon Johnson and Harold Wilson. Fitzpatrick notes that he decided to make reference to Guevara because he 'wanted to be a bit more radical' and he describes the process of making the image:

Initially I was working in a very Art Nouveau-ish style, like Beardsley, and the first image I did of Che was psychedelic, it looks like he is in seaweed. His hair was not hair, it was shapes that I felt gave it an extra dimension. That was the image I produced for the magazine and that was done before he died and that is the important thing about that image.<sup>30</sup>

The image was rejected as 'too strong' for publication so it never featured in *Scene*. Around this time, however, Fitzpatrick also produced various other graphic versions of the Korda photo in his studio, redrawing the image (to make a 'line drop-out') and creating a second generation version with poster proportions. Following the execution of

Che in October 1967, Fitzpatrick printed 1000 copies of the poster in black and red, each with a hand-coloured yellow star, and distributed them through friends in Ireland and London, apparently as an act of protest. In response to the popularity of the Che image, Fitzpatrick set up his own poster company (called Two Bear Feet) and continued to produce psychedelic variations, also freely distributed. By the early 1970s, Fitzpatrick had moved away from overtly political poster art and was instead designing covers for *Thin Lizzy* and developing graphic representations of Celtic mythology. Although this would seem to suggest a radical shift in his interests, a focus on the figure of the 'hero' is common to political propaganda, rock music and comic-book fantasy.

In 1974, Fitzpatrick's De Dannan press published a portfolio of poster images entitled *Celtia*, which seems to have consisted largely of female figures derived from Celtic mythology.<sup>31</sup> The following year, Fitzpatrick was commissioned to produce a trilogy of illustrated books, including *The Silver Arm*, *The Book of Conquests* and a third book (never actually completed) by a company called Paper Tiger. Established by graphic artist Roger Dean and his brother Martin, Paper Tiger seems to have been an attempt to capitalise on the popularity of psychedelic posters and fantastical graphic art during this period and does not appear to have been involved in comic book production. By the early 1970s, Dean had become well known primarily as the designer of fantastical cover art for various *Yes* albums, but also produced art work for some UK folk rock acts on the Vertigo record label. Vertigo was home to the *Thin Lizzy* at that time and it is possible that Fitzpatrick's connection with Paper Tiger was established through the band.<sup>32</sup> Fitzpatrick had already designed the covers for several *Lizzy* albums, including *Vagabonds of the Western World* (1973, **Fig. 2**) and *Night Life* (1974) and subsequently went on to produce over 250 separate pieces of artwork, including the logo, numerous posters as well as covers for *Jailbreak* (1976), *Johnny the Fox* (1976, **Fig. 3**), *Black Rose* (1979) and *Chinatown* (1980).<sup>33</sup>

It is possible to track a gradual shift in Fitzpatrick's exploration of Celtic iconography through his early work for *Thin Lizzy*. The cover of *Vagabonds of the Western World* is particularly interesting, as it marked by a complex fusion of Celtic and science fiction imagery. The poses adopted by the three band members are vaguely heroic, echoing Fitzpatrick's two-tone portrait of Che Guevara. But the setting is fantastical rather than propagandistic; the band are depicted as travellers through time and space

and they occupy a lunar landscape, complete with both a space rocket and relics of an ancient civilisation in the form of standing stones decorated with ‘Celtic’ spirals. In later cover designs, this fusion of the psychedelic, fantastical and Celtic is far less pronounced, giving way to the narrower focus on Celtic motifs evident in *The Book of Conquests* and *The Silver Arm*. For example, the gatefold sleeve of *Johnny the Fox* is decorated with detailed ornamental borders in the manner of an illustrated manuscript. Instead of a two-tone style portrait, the back cover features photographs of each band member bounded by ornate decoration. The only hint of psychedelia or science fiction fantasy lies in the small central image of a fox against a night sky that is dotted with stars, billowing purple clouds and a huge white moon.

Before turning to more recent explorations of Celticism and celto-psychedelia in popular culture it is useful to note another possible influence in the development of Fitzpatrick’s graphic art. The late 1960s and early 1970s were marked by a renewed interest in the fantastical forms associated with *Art Nouveau*, particularly the poster art and advertising of Alphonse Mucha and the illustrations of Aubrey Beardsley.<sup>34</sup> Although Beardsley is far more closely associated with the Anglo-Irish Literary Revival (via Oscar Wilde), the connection between Fitzpatrick and Mucha is perhaps more interesting. The latter first came to prominence for a series of promotional images of Sarah Bernhardt in the 1890s, which were so popular that they contributed to the expansion of the consumer market for posters.<sup>35</sup> The framing of the *Celtia* images, which generally focus on an individual female figure framed within a circular decorative border, is clearly influenced by Mucha’s famous posters. Fitzpatrick’s women are not the fragile or languid creatures usually associated with Art Nouveau; instead their body shapes and poses evoke the powerful physicality of 1950s comic book heroines. But Fitzpatrick appears to borrow at least one vaguely psychedelic or hallucinatory motif from Mucha in later representations of Celtic heroines in *The Silver Arm*. The illustration of ‘Dagda and the Women of Uinnis’ (1979, **Fig. 4**) features a cluster of five-pointed stars, which has no obvious place within the visual repertoire of Celtic revivalism, but strongly resembles a motif found in one of Mucha’s best-known images of Bernhardt, ‘La Dame aux Camélias’ (1896). Intriguingly, Fitzpatrick and Mucha also shared an interest in the iconography of cultural nationalism. In the latter part of his career, Mucha designed currency, stamps and national emblems for the Czechoslovak Republic, established in

1918, and created a large-scale series of paintings entitled the 'Slav Epic'. Financed by an American patron, the paintings were influenced by Symbolism and they employ mystical imagery and spectral lighting effects to depict a succession of significant moments in the history of the Slav people.<sup>36</sup> While the composition and scale of these works would appear to situate them in relation to history painting, both the subject matter and form are characterised by ethereality rather than realism. Perhaps because they have not been widely exhibited outside the Czech Republic, they have also become somewhat dislocated from the history of art and (like certain forms of mural art) they now occupy an ambiguous place somewhere between art-work, political propaganda and kitsch artefact.

### **Celtic Myths, Comic-book Worlds: The Familiar and the Exotic**

If Fitzpatrick's graphic art was informed by the convergence of Celticism and psychedelia in the late 1960s and early 1970s, then the late 1980s seems to have witnessed a brief revival of this celto-psychedelic current, in the form of 'Sláine: The Horned God' a story published in the British comic *2000 AD*. Originally created by writer Pat Mills and artist Angie Kincaid in 1983, the character of 'Sláine' is loosely based upon Cúchulainn and the myths and legends surrounding Tír na nÓg and the Tuatha de Dannan.<sup>37</sup> Just as Thomas Kinsella's version of *The Táin* is accompanied by a map, the boundaries of Sláine's world were also outlined in graphic form in the first issue. The story is set in a time *before* the separation of the landmasses that now make up Ireland, Britain and France and the map features a doubled coastline in which the geography of 'legend' is overlaid on the present-day coastline. Although it does not include present-day political boundaries, the map might be read as a somewhat utopian image, proposing an image of 'unification' at a moment when political and cultural relations between Ireland and the UK were less than cordial. Therefore 'Sláine' seems to suggest a possible extension of the Atlantean project outlined by Graham. In a text entitled 'Sláine: The Origins', originally published in *2000 AD* during the early years of the story, Mills explains that the stories of Finn and Cúchulainn are more complete than other Celtic mythologies but he emphasises that the character of Sláine is 'as much British as Irish'.<sup>38</sup>

During the early years, the visual style of Sláine changed continually as successive artists took on the character. The densely detailed and relatively static artwork of Angie

Kincaid quickly gave way (after negative feedback from *2000 AD* readers) to Massimo Belardinelli's more active style. Of the early artists, Mike McMahon was the only one to incorporate elements of recognisably 'Celtic' iconography. Curved letterforms evoking illustrated manuscripts feature on some of his pages in place of conventional gutters and frames, alongside an explanatory Ogham alphabet in one instance. Sláine's costume also changed rapidly; initially wearing little more than a loincloth, serpent-headed metal torc and armband, he soon acquired tartan trousers as well as an elaborate 'hero-harness' that was intended to survive his frequent 'warp-spasms' in battle. This introduction of tartan could be read as a reference to Scottish national and local identity, but when combined with jewellery and Mohican hairstyles it carries other (post-punk) associations. The only graphic element that persisted unchanged during these early stages was the Sláine title, the first letter of which featured animal motifs and strap work.

By the late 1980s *2000 AD* was being published in colour and, with the arrival of Simon Bisley as artist, the artwork began to acquire a painterly and distinctly psychedelic quality. Mills writing, particularly in 'Sláine: The Horned God' (1989-1990), also seems to have been at least loosely informed by feminist and ecological critiques. Instead of the usual battles and skirmishes, the story of 'The Horned God' focuses on themes of magic, betrayal and sexual pleasure and the first volume follows Sláine on a journey through a magical cauldron into the underworld, ruled by the Goddess Danu. Sláine's appearance is also overtly feminised, despite (or perhaps because) of the fact that he remains almost comically muscle-bound. Wearing his customary jewellery and face paint, he swims in lily ponds and wanders through the forest and meadows, populated by strange creatures. In many of the frames, Sláine and Danu are surrounded by flower motifs, loosely evoking psychedelic poster art of the 1960s and recalling the era of 'flower power'.

It seems likely that Bisley's artwork was influenced by the short-lived resurgence of psychedelic imagery in UK 'rave' culture, across design, fashion and music, strongly associated with the use of psychotropic drugs such as MDMA.<sup>39</sup> Interestingly, Danu does not resemble the benign 'mother earth' figure often found in 1960s counter-cultural representations of nature. Instead, she is the symbol of a dangerous, potentially destructive, force and there are definite echoes of a threatening and explicitly 'alien' form of maternal femininity during Sláine's journey to the underworld. As he descends through the cauldron in a foetal position, Sláine hears a voice calling him to return:

[To] an era when women looked after the earth, an era men have conveniently chosen to forget or deny...yet secretly yearn to return to, even though they dread it...yearn... because it is a return to the mother... to the pleasures and comfort of the womb...to the cauldron of plenty that feeds all who came before it.

The creatures that populate this shadowy 'womb' bear the same open protruding jaws, reptilian features and grasping bony fingers found in H.R. Giger's creature designs for the *Alien* films, which have been theorised by Barbara Creed as an articulation of archaic fears concerning the 'monstrous feminine' and points towards the evolution of science fiction themes within popular cultural explorations of Celticism.<sup>40</sup>

More recently, the 'celto-psychedelic' current within popular culture seems to have resurfaced within Irish animation. *The Secret Of Kells*, a feature-length animation released in March 2009, centres on the struggle to protect the Book of Kells from marauding Vikings. It is a Belgian, French and Irish co-production involving the Kilkenny-based Cartoon Saloon, and the visual style seems to have shifted significantly at various points during the lengthy development and production process.<sup>41</sup> Initially veering towards a classical (even Disneyesque) approach to the representation of space, the aesthetic of the film evolved over a period of several years, within an increased emphasis on stylization (**Fig. 5**). The final version features numerous sequences that draw directly upon fantastical hybrid forms found in the Book of Kells and other illuminated manuscripts. The backgrounds also incorporate decorative elements that recall aspects of Art Nouveau design as well as the paintings of Klimt and even Klee. In addition, extensive use is made of spiral patterns derived specifically from *ferns*. This may be an attempt to emphasise the organic source of the spiral images that are widely used in Celtic ornamentation but it is also possible to offer an alternative interpretation. This image could be read as a further recurrence of celto-psychedelic iconography, recalling the brief convergence of scientific theory and psychedelic imagery in popular culture during the late 1980s, when graphic representations of 'fractals' found their way into textile patterns, posters and music videos.

## **Conclusion: Celtic Revivals after the Celtic Tiger**

In a commentary written to accompany the 2008 publication of *Sláine: The Horned God* in book form, Pat Mills reflects upon an image of a fantastic animal created by Simon Bisley as part of the ‘underworld’ sequence in which the hero ventures into the realm of the goddess Danu: ‘I love that image [...] It shows a crazy Celtic animal running through the woods and I originally wanted Sláine to be surrounded by such fantastic creatures in the Underworld scenes, rendered in a more stylised Celtic way. A kind of Celtic Disney World’.<sup>42</sup>

In fact, not long after Mills and Bisley completed *The Horned God* for *2000 AD*, a ‘kind of Celtic Disney World’ was actually launched in Tramore, Co. Waterford. Forming part of a much broader convergence of heritage, enterprise and technological innovation during this period, the Celtworld theme park seems to have been founded upon a convergence of history and mythology, as well as a mix of ‘cutting-edge’ technologies and craft. Located in a purpose-built facility and launched in May 1992, it cost over IR£4 million, including EU tourism aid of IR£1.81 million. But by 1995 it had already proved commercially unviable and when it closed, generating significant financial losses, controversy ensued at both local and national level.

Enda Kenny, then Minister for Tourism and Trade, initially attempted to defend the project as ‘innovative’ in its depiction of ‘Irish mythology and legend through the use of modern technology and audio-visual effects’.<sup>43</sup> In subsequent comments, however, he seemed to acknowledge the inbuilt obsolescence of such initiatives. ‘People were looking for new and imaginative concepts and this was one’, he noted, ‘The lesson to be learned from involvement in such projects is that a repeat of “newness” is required. The reason Celtworld ultimately failed was that it was unable to attract new and ongoing overseas visitor business.’<sup>44</sup> Subsequent attempts to repurpose the Tramore facility for other forms of tourism also failed, and it was eventually demolished in April 2008 to make way for a shopping mall.<sup>45</sup> Although Kenny and others argued that this failure to attract visitors was partly due to under-capitalisation it is possible that there were also certain difficulties inherent in the promotion of the Celtworld ‘brand’. Unlike Disney World, for example, Celtworld could not assert ownership over a set of characters, narratives or concepts; instead, the theme park relied upon a much looser set of associations between Fitzpatrick’s images, Irish history and Celtic mythology. There also seems to have been

no direct connection between the ‘celtic experience’ offered by Celtworld and the Tramore site, even though such linkages are usually a crucial component of traditional heritage-based attractions.

More recently, Fitzpatrick has made another foray into the realm of Celtic-themed entrepreneurialism. This time, however, it is as an artist commissioned by the airline CityJet to produce a series of paintings of Irish islands for the company’s new headquarters in Swords. The paintings were exhibited in November 2007 at the Centre Culturel Irlandais in Paris, an institution which is apparently sponsored by CityJet.<sup>46</sup> Each of the six paintings in the series focuses on a different island and most of them combine a recognisable landmark such as a castle or archaeological site with a more fantastical image of a living creature, usually a young woman. Some of the women, such as ‘Eithne, Daughter of Balor of the Evil Eye’ are obviously mythological characters but others, like Gráinne Uaile, are historical figures. The ‘pirate queen’, however, wears a costume that would not have been out of place in Celtworld (or a Marvel comic) and her stance is both heroic and flirtatious as she pulls up her skirt to reveal part of her thigh.

These images are replete with scenes of ‘castles in liminal settlements’, suggesting a continuation of the Gothic tradition that is described by Leerssen. By comparison with Fitzpatrick’s earlier works, such as *The Book of Conquests* or *The Silver Arm*, the Island images are marked by an explicit juxtaposition of historical and mythological references, recalling the tension between the familiar and the exotic in Sean Hillen’s collages as well as the paratextual maps of *The Táin* and ‘Sláine’. As such, these recent works seem to hint at a possible shift in Fitzpatrick’s exploration of Celtic-themed imagery and mythology, emphasising the anachronism of revivalist discourses in which history figures as an ‘ill-organised museum of antiquarian curios and collectibles’. But even when his work seems to derive meaning specifically from the co-existence of multiple temporalities, Fitzpatrick’s compositions tend to emphasise coherence, drawing disparate fragments together to form an image that is (at least graphically) unified and whole.





Fig. 1: Che: Jim Fitzpatrick.

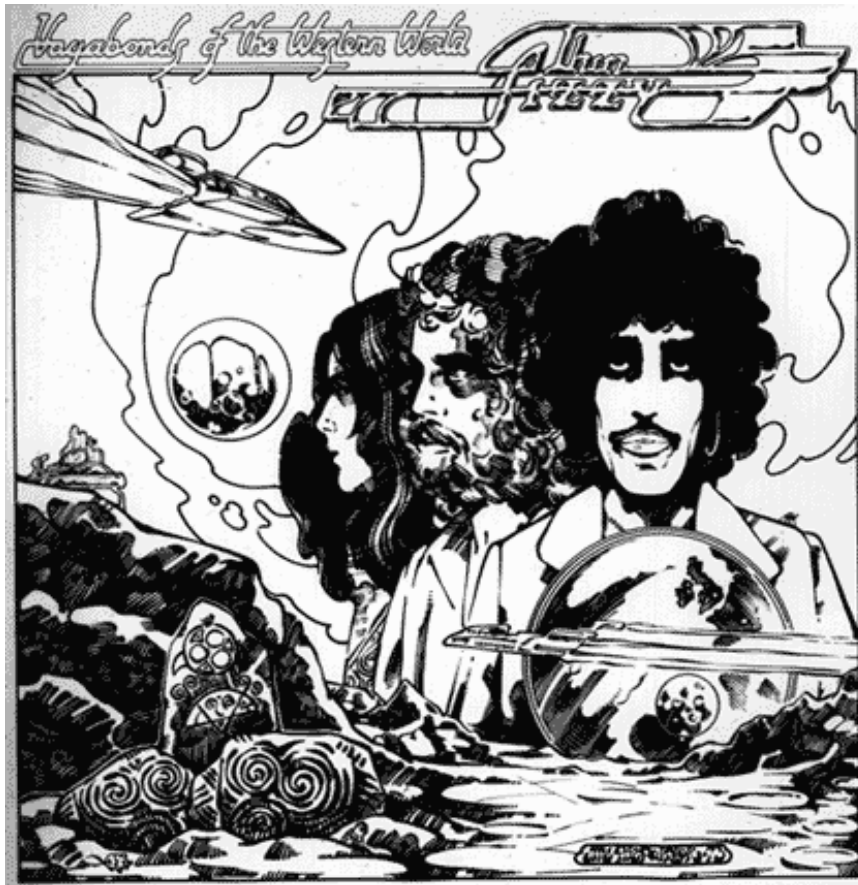


Fig. 2: Vagabonds of the Western World (1973); copyright/permission Jim Fitzpatrick..



Fig. 4: Johnny the Fox (1976); copyright/permission Jim Fitzpatrick.



Fig. 4: “Dagda and the Women of Uinnius” (1979) from *The Silver Arm*,  
copyright/permission Jim Fitzpatrick.



Fig. 5: The Secret of Kells, 2009, Images copyright Cartoon Saloon/Les Armateurs/Vivifilm.

## Notes



- <sup>1</sup> 'Attractions: Country Offers More Diversions for Tourists', *Travel Weekly*, 25 Jan. 1993: 16.
- <sup>2</sup> Jim Fitzpatrick, *Erinsaga: The Mythological Paintings of Jim Fitzpatrick*, (Dublin: De Dannan Press, 1985) 14. Much of this text can also be found on Fitzpatrick's website, <http://www.jimfitzpatrick.ie/public.html> [Accessed September 2008]. The somewhat unfortunate use of the term 'racial' might explain why *Erinsaga* has proved popular with one regular contributor to the Stormfront White Power website. See the posting by 'O'Cathasaigh' <http://www.stormfront.org/forum/showthread.php?t=93762> October 2003 [Accessed September 2008].
- <sup>3</sup> Joep Leerssen notes the existence of a 'pre-Romantic' Celtic revival in English literature, prior to the widespread adoption of 'Gaelic' design and iconography, in *Remembrance and Imagination: Patterns in the Historical and Literary Representation of Ireland in the Nineteenth Century* (Cork: Cork University Press in association with Field Day, 1996) 11-12. See also Jeanne Sheehy, *The Rediscovery of Ireland's Past: The Celtic Revival, 1800-1830* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980).
- <sup>4</sup> Marjorie Howes, *Yeats's Nations: Gender, Class, and Irishness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 17.
- <sup>5</sup> Howes 39.
- <sup>6</sup> Howes 36.
- <sup>7</sup> Leerssen 49
- <sup>8</sup> Leerssen 50.
- <sup>9</sup> Leerssen notes that the *Astérix* comic, for example, is set in a part of Brittany that is 'always and forever' unconquered by the Romans, 189.
- <sup>10</sup> Leerssen 20.
- <sup>11</sup> Leerssen 204. This ancillary story is also explored by Luke Gibbons in his analysis of *guaiRE* by James Coleman (1985), in *Transformations in Irish Culture* (Cork: Cork University Press in association with Field Day, 1996) 129-133.
- <sup>12</sup> Gibbons 159. Emphasis added.
- <sup>13</sup> Gibbons 164. For an alternative perspective on Hillen's work and its place in Irish studies see Mick Wilson, 'Terms of Art and Tricks of Trade: A Critical Look at the Irish Art Scene Now', *Third Text* 19.5 (2005): 535-544.
- <sup>14</sup> Colin Graham, *Deconstructing Ireland: Identity, Theory, Culture*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001) 22. There are parallels here with the work of filmmaker Bob Quinn. See Elizabeth Butler-Cullingford, *Ireland's Others: Gender and Ethnicity in Irish Literature and Popular Culture* (Cork: Cork University Press in association with Field Day, 2001) 150-152.
- <sup>15</sup> Graham 26.
- <sup>16</sup> David Lloyd, *Ireland After History* (Cork: Cork University Press in association with Field Day, 1999) 89. For a further exploration of the material culture of 'returning' see Stephanie Rains, *The Irish-American in Popular Culture 1945-2000* (Dublin and Portland: Irish Academic Press, 2007) 99-143.
- <sup>17</sup> Lloyd 90.
- <sup>18</sup> Lloyd 91.
- <sup>19</sup> Lloyd 92.
- <sup>20</sup> Gerry Kelly, cited by Lloyd 95. Celtic mythology and iconography has also been claimed by Loyalist muralists. See Jack Santino 'Public Protest and Popular Style: Resistance from the Right in Northern Ireland and South Boston', *American Anthropologist* 101.3 (1999): 519-522. See also Belinda Loftus, 'In Search of a Useful Theory', *CIRCA* 40 (1988): 18.
- <sup>21</sup> Lloyd 98.
- <sup>22</sup> Lloyd 95.
- <sup>23</sup> Graham 168.
- <sup>24</sup> Lloyd 100. Emphasis added.
- <sup>25</sup> During the 1950s and 1960s, American comic books were widely available in Ireland, at a time when many other forms of international popular culture would have been subject to regulation if not outright censorship. Comic books were also recognised as potentially useful tools for propaganda and education by various Irish cultural nationalist organisations. See Mike Catto, 'Them and Us: Region and National Stereotypes in British Comics', *CIRCA* 44 (1988): 22-24. Fitzpatrick apparently developed a comic strip entitled 'Nuada of the Silver Arm' for *The Sunday Independent* in the early 1970s and he has posted images from the strip on the photo-sharing website Flickr: <http://flickr.com/photos/jimfitzpatrick/2440978786/> [Accessed September 2008]
- <sup>26</sup> For an overview of recent scholarship in relation to comics and other forms of graphic narrative see Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven, 'Introduction: Graphic Narrative', *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 52.4 (2006): 767-782.
- <sup>27</sup> For an analysis of norms and changes in production see Glen Norcliffe and Olivero Rendace, 'New Geographies of Comic Book Production in North America: The New Artisan, Distancing and the Periodic Social Economy', *Economic Geography* 79.3 (2003): 241-263.
- <sup>28</sup> *Erinsaga* was also the title of a 'concept album' released by Fitzpatrick in 1989, with music by the Irish band *Pulling Faces*.
- <sup>29</sup> Mik explains that she added the Concorde image as a 'sad nod' to the end of another sort of idealism. See Aleksandra Mir and Jim Fitzpatrick, 'Not Everything is Always Black or White', *Make Everything New: A Project on*

*Communism* ed. Grant Watson, Gerrie van Noord and Gavin Everall (London and Dublin: Bookworks/Project Arts Centre, 2006) 17.

<sup>30</sup> Jim Fitzpatrick in Mir and Fitzpatrick 11.

<sup>31</sup> The portfolio was republished in London (by Motif Editions) in 1975. Some of the images from the series are displayed on Fitzpatrick's website ([www.jimfitzpatrick.ie](http://www.jimfitzpatrick.ie)) but several are dated from 1975 or 1976 suggesting that they may belong to a later version of the *Celtia* portfolio (published by De Dannan in 1980).

<sup>32</sup> Fitzpatrick's work is still well known in this field and a Greek band, *Airgead Lamh*, have even taken their name from *The Silver Arm*. See the interview conducted with their guitarist 'Sargon the Terrible' in February 2005, <http://www.metalcrypt.com/pages/interviewsframe.php?intid=164>. [Accessed September 2008]. In recent years, Fitzpatrick also produced cover art for *The Darkness*, a band who seemed to veer between sincerity and *Spinal Tap*-style parody.

<sup>33</sup> Fitzpatrick's own account of his involvement with the band (chronicled in the 'Lizzy Days' section of his website), emphasises his personal connection with Phil Lynott from the early 1970s onwards and details a number of private commissions as well as official artwork.

<sup>34</sup> Ronald F. Lipp, 'Alphonse Mucha: The Message and the Man', *Alphonse Mucha: The Complete Posters and Panels*, ed. Jack Rennert and Alain Weill (Uppsala: Hjert & Hjert, 1984) 19.

<sup>35</sup> Lipp 15.

<sup>36</sup> See Lipp 17-19. The Slav Epic paintings were widely exhibited internationally in the 1920s and 1930s and then donated to the city of Prague, on the basis that a permanent exhibition space would be provided, eventually housed in a purpose-built museum in a relatively remote part of the Czech Republic.

<sup>37</sup> The use of Celtic mythology in comic books extends beyond 'Sláine' in *2000 AD* to include *Hell Boy* and, more recently, *Captain Britain*, which draws upon Arthurian legend amongst other sources.

<sup>38</sup> The text was republished in Pat Mills et al, *Sláine: Warrior's Dawn*, (Oxford: Rebellion, 2007). n.p.

<sup>39</sup> See Simon Reynolds, *Energy Flash: A Journey Through Rave Music And Dance Culture*, (London: Picador, 1998) 34-68.

<sup>40</sup> Barbara Creed, 'Alien and the Monstrous-Feminine', in Annette Kuhn (eds) *Alien Zone, Cultural Theory and Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema* (London: Verso, 1990) 128-141. See also Richard Kearney, 'Myths of Motherland', *Postnationalist Ireland: Politics, Culture, Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997) 108-121.

<sup>41</sup> See Maeve Connolly, 'Theorising Irish Animation: Heritage, Enterprise and Critical Practice' *Film History and National Cinema*, ed. John Hill and Kevin Rockett (Dublin: Four Courts Press 2005) 87.

<sup>42</sup> Pat Mills and Simon Bisley, 'Sláine: The Horned God Commentary', *Sláine: The Horned God* (Oxford: Rebellion, 2008). n.p.

<sup>43</sup> Enda Kenny (Minister for Trade and Tourism), Parliamentary Debates, Dáil Éireann, Volume 456, October 3, 1995, Adjournment Debate: Tramore (Waterford) Project, See <http://historical-debates.oireachtas.ie/D/0456/D.0456.199510030139.html> (Accessed September 2008)

<sup>44</sup> Kenny, *ibid*.

<sup>45</sup> See Jamie O'Keefe, 'Celtworld "Legend" Finally Laid to Rest', *Munster Express*, 11 Apr. 2008.

<sup>46</sup> Lara Marlowe, 'The Accidental Icon Creator', *The Irish Times*, 23 Nov. 2007: 14.