

Red Pencil

CINDY VALLAR analyzes the work behind polished final manuscripts. In this issue, she profiles Cora Harrison's *A Secret and Unlawful Killing*.

South of Galway, Ireland, in County Clare is a place known as the Burren. Cora Harrison chose to set *A Secret and Unlawful Killing* here, for she lives “only a few miles from the Burren . . . a wonderful place to walk in with many ‘green roads’, almost forgotten tracks where you can wander for a day without meeting anyone . . . with . . . unique limestone pavements, terraced mountains and collections of rare wild flowers . . . the most beautiful place in Ireland and probably one of the least known. I wanted everyone possible to share in my love for the place and in my delight in its beauties.” For example, in chapter two, she writes:

She looked regretfully back at her garden and at the exquisite flowerbed that she had been making. It was laid out in a series of small diamond shapes, each one outlined by the dark blue strips of limestone and filled with flowers of all the richest autumn hues. There were clumps of cranesbill, their intensely magenta flowers velvet-soft, then a patch of pale blue harebells and then, in the next space, some purple knapweed.

Mara paused for a moment looking at the effect and watching how the colours blurred and merged with each other. She had once seen a stained-glass window in an abbey church in Thomond; the glory of the jewel-bright colours, each in its black-edged diamond, had stayed with her and this was the effect that she aimed at.

But setting is only half of what the writer needs to recreate the world of her characters. Time is also essential, and Cora's story takes place in 1509. “I chose . . . the first year of the reign of [the English king] Henry VIII . . . so most people . . . will immediately orientate themselves within the period. Secondly those early years of his reign were characterized by extraordinarily good summers that lasted well into autumn, and I must confess the Burren does always look a lot better in warm sunny weather. My third reason was this was a turning point in Irish history. English kings, though nominally considering Ireland to be their own property since the 12th century, had, in fact, seen their power shrink to a narrow strip of land on the east coast of Ireland. Henry VIII (and his daughter, Elizabeth) changed all this. So what I am writing about here is, in a way, a *fin-de-siècle* piece of nostalgia, an evocation of a time when the clans led their lives under the humane and advanced system of laws known as Brehon laws.”

Against this backdrop murder occurs, and Mara uses her intellect and knowledge to uncover the truth. She is a Brehon, “an anglicisation of

the Gaelic word for ‘judge’ and it is also used to refer to the system of laws which are the most ancient in Europe.” A Brehon's “standing in Irish society was . . . twice as high as a doctor, for instance, and almost as much as a king of one small kingdom.” Each chapter begins with a passage from these laws. In an early draft of the first chapter, *Críth Gablach* – ranks in society – is the first example.

Each kingdom in the land must have its Brehon, or judge. The Brehon has an honour price, lóg n-enech, (literally the price of his or her face) of 15 sêts. King and Brehon should have a close relationship. At feasts in the king's house, the Brehon should sit beside the king. The Brehon has the power to judge all cases of law-breaking within the kingdom, to allocate fines and to keep the peace.

In the published book, a new opening chapter was inserted, but it retained this same law with a few changes.

Each kingdom in the land must have its Brehon, or judge. The Brehon has an honour price, lóg n-enech, [literally the price of his or her face] of sixteen sêts. The Brehon has the power to judge all cases of law-breaking within the kingdom, to allocate fines and to keep the peace.

The original chapter one became the second chapter and included a law related to murder.

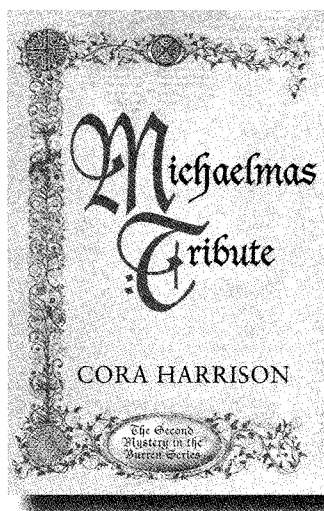
An Seanchas Mór
(*The Great Ancient Tradition*)

There are two fines that have to be paid by anyone who commits a murder:

1. *A fixed fine of forty-two sêts, or twenty-one ounces of silver, or twenty-one milch cows*
2. *A fine based on the victim's honour price, lóg n-enech*

In the case of duinetháide, a secret and unacknowledged killing, then the first fine is doubled and becomes eighty-four sêts.

The American book title stems from this law. The British title, *Michaelmas Tribute*, refers to the time of year when the people gather to celebrate Michaelmas and pay the annual tribute due the MacNamara, the clan chief. During this gathering, the first signs of friction surface that lead to the murder of his steward. I asked Cora why the two titles were chosen and whether she felt one provided us with a better idea



of what the book entails. "I prefer the UK title *Michaelmas Tribute* as it specifically refers to the subject matter of this particular book[,] i.e. the trouble caused by the increased tribute (a sort of rent) demanded by the newly elected *taoiseach* of the MacNamara clan at Michaelmas Tide, whereas, to my mind, 'A Secret & Unlawful Killing' could refer to any of the books. My American publishers felt the UK title would be too difficult and too unfamiliar for American readers, but my website guestbook has had many Americans writing in disagreement with that point of view."

The new opening chapter focuses "on building up the atmosphere and setting the characters in place before dealing with the murder." We meet Mara, the judge, as well as many characters she will question to unearth the murderer. In chapter two, we meet Mara, the woman, who has a quandary to unravel – whether to marry, and if so, whom?

'She's too beautiful!' said Mara, gazing anxiously at the superb Arab mare. It was truly a gift from a king, but gifts, as she knew well from her fifteen years as Brehon, or judge, in the kingdom of the Burren, often brought a price with them. Turlough was getting impatient; she realised that. She looked up into his pleasant face with those gentle pale green eyes, which belied the pair of huge warlike moustaches that curved down from either side of his mouth. A man of warmth and integrity, she thought, a man that any woman would be proud to call a husband. But was she any woman? Was her position as Brehon of the Burren too important to give up for the sake of husband? He would expect an answer from her soon; that was sure. 'I don't know how to thank you enough,' she continued.

'Well, that half-bred garron, you gallop around on, wouldn't do for a king's wife,' he said gruffly, eyeing her hopefully.

She rose to the bait immediately. 'Oh, who is this king's wife, then?' pretending to scan the Brehon's house and garden, where her neighbour, Diarmuid, was waiting patiently for her. She had inveigled him into breaking a few pieces of limestone for her new flowerbed just before the king arrived. Her eyes surveyed Diarmuid with affection, now. He would be the perfect husband for her, she thought. Tolerant, easy-going, he could move in to her house, carry on with his farm half a mile down the road, and she could continue with her busy life as Brehon of the Burren and Ollamh, professor, of the law school at Cabermacnaghten. A king of three kingdoms was a different matter.

'You know that I want us to get married as soon as possible,' said Turlough lowering his voice slightly. 'I don't think I can...'

'Hush,' said Mara urgently. There were interested faces all around them, but it was not that which made her interrupt him – she had learned to ignore the public curiosity about

the relationship between Mara, Brehon of the Burren and King Turlough Donn, lord of the kingdoms of Thomond, Corcomroe and Burren – but just as he spoke, her quick ear caught the sound of ponies galloping at a break-neck speed up the lane from Noughaval.



This works better in the second chapter, allowing Cora to tighten her writing and remove information better placed elsewhere in the story. In doing so, a three-dimensional character emerges.

'She's too beautiful!' said Mara, gazing anxiously at the superb Arab mare. It was truly a gift from a king, but gifts often brought a price with them. Turlough was getting impatient; she realised that. He would expect an answer from her soon: four months had now passed since his surprising offer of marriage. She had pondered the matter during the quiet days of the summer, but she still could not make up her mind. She looked up into his pleasant face with those gentle, pale green eyes, which belied the pair of huge, warlike moustaches that curved down from either side of his mouth. A man of warmth and integrity, she thought, a man that any woman would be proud to call a husband. But was she any woman? Her present life was a happy and satisfactory one. Did she want to change it for all that was entailed by being his queen? 'I don't know how to thank you enough,' she continued.

'Well, that half-bred garron you gallop around on wouldn't do for a king's wife,' he said gruffly, eyeing her hopefully.

She rose to the bait immediately. 'Oh, who is this king's wife then?' she asked, pretending to scan the Brehon's house and garden, where her neighbour, Diarmuid, was waiting patiently for her. She had inveigled him into breaking a few pieces of limestone for her new flowerbed just before the king arrived. Her eyes surveyed Diarmuid with affection now. He would be the perfect husband for her, she thought. Tolerant, easy-going, he could move in to her house, carry on with his farm half a mile down the road, and she could continue with her busy life as Brehon of the Burren and ollamh, professor, of the law school at Cabermacnaghten. Turlough Donn O'Brien, king of the three kingdoms, Thomond, Burren and Corcomroe, was an altogether different matter.

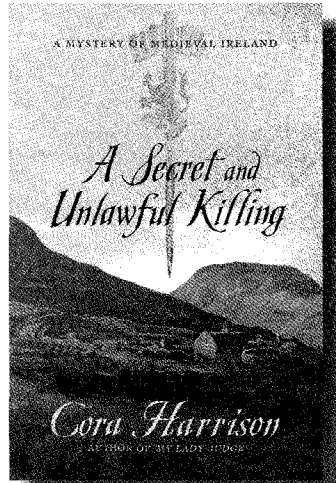
'You know that I want us to get married as soon as possible,' said Turlough, lowering his voice slightly.

He stopped at the distracted look on her face. Mara's quick ear had caught the sound of ponies galloping at a break-neck speed up the lane from Noughaval.

Getting to know Mara is important, for the time and place in which she lives play crucial roles in how she solves crimes. "I don't really enjoy 'police procedurals' and I very much dislike the emphasis on autopsies etc. I like to think my Mara solves her crimes by a mixture of sharp intelligence, intuition, reasoning power, but above all by a deep understanding of people, which arises from her interest in their personalities and their lives. . . . I want my readers to feel as though they are . . . going at the slow pace that walking or even horseback does dictate, and gradually getting to know the people that live there and seeing them through the eyes of Mara, who by her questions and pondering will 'unlock the truths'". These interviews reinforce our sense of time and place.

Cora believes the environment greatly influences a person, and she creates her characters with this in mind. "The climate is, and was, relatively mild. With industry, and help from family and neighbours, a man could build a solid house for himself and his children in the space of a few weeks, as the stone was literally lying around, ready to be picked up and oat straw or reed, or even rushes could be used to thatch it. Animal husbandry with the big stretches of common land on the High Burren and on the mountainsides encouraged a neighbourly way of life. . . . More importantly, the population in the hundred square miles was very small in the 16th century and there was little tradition of village life so people lived on well-spaced-out farms. . . . [T]here would have been no smells, no pollution and probably far less disease and far longer life spans [than that of London of the same period]. In addition, since the limestone was freely available, it could be burned to make lime which seems to have been the traditional way of keeping the walls, inside and outside, or houses and sheds clean and . . . free of germs."

Noughaval was a small settlement of a few houses, a church and a fine market cross at the edge of the market square. The market square was empty today, but yesterday had been the day of the Michaelmas Fair when it seemed as if every trader in the three kingdoms of Burren, Corcomroe and Thomond had set up stall. There had been the usual butter and cheese stalls, the fish fresh from the nearby Atlantic waters, the leather stalls selling belts and satchels, the wool stalls with lengths of rough fustian, the honey cakes and hot pies stalls and, also, more exotic stalls selling silks and laces brought in from foreign countries. Now nothing was left but the odd cabbage leaf and a fly-speckled fish head by the gate to the churchyard. . . . The linen merchant, Guaire O'Brien, surrounded by a crowd of indignant women, had been beside the cross, hastily measuring out new lengths of cloth against the one-foot measure marked at the base, Fiabhra, the O'Lochlainn steward, had been collecting the O'Lochlainn tribute beside the church wall.



Writers would say this passage is told rather than shown. We read about an event, instead of being present to watch it unfold. With the revision, Cora expanded this passage; instead of remembering past events, Mara now experiences them as they occur.

Noughaval was a short walk to the south of Cabermacnaghten. It was a small settlement of a few houses, a church and a fine market cross at the edge of the square. The market square was crowded today. It seemed as if every trader in the three kingdoms of Burren, Corcomroe and Thomond had set up stall. Their wares were varied: the usual butter and cheese; fish fresh from the nearby Atlantic waters; leather stalls selling belts and satchels; wool stalls with lengths of rough fustian, honey cakes and hot pies for the hungry; and more-exotic stalls selling silks and laces brought in from foreign countries. . . .

The crowd had gathered around a trader selling linen. He was a small man with a thin face and a back that looked permanently bowed by the weight of his pack. . . .

'That was supposed to be four yards,' Aine told her. 'That was what I asked for and that was what I paid for.'

'Measure the cloth for me,' Mara firmly requested, holding it out to the man, Guaire.

He took it from her and held it stretched between his two hands as he lined it up with the stark black horizontal lines on the well-scrubbed base of the market cross. It was almost half a foot short of the four yards.

This revision allowed Cora to incorporate historical tidbits from her research. "This cross base actually still has marks on it – inch, and foot, so the traders could measure cloth and ribbons etc. and thereby sell a standard measure at the market that took place there in the late medieval years. It plays an important part at the Michaelmas Fair where the steward was murdered." Similar research also served to create Mara. Initially Cora's detective was a man, but "Fergus never came to life – he was a bit too sensitive and introverted. . . . I . . . came across something about a wise female judge, who puts a young male judge in his place, and this was the source of my inspiration for my Mara."

Lest we think Mara isn't true to medieval Ireland, Cora responds, "It has to be said that the Celtic society was very different to the Anglo-Saxon, or Norman societies. The women of the Celts were always fairly liberated (look at Boudicca, the warrior woman of the British Celts). There were women lawyers, women doctors and even women blacksmiths in early and late medieval Ireland.

"The nearest historical female example of a liberated woman was Grace O'Malley, born in the same year as Queen Elizabeth I. Though there is nothing in Irish historical records about her, she does appear



The Burren

in the Elizabethan papers. Despite having at least one brother, she was the one who inherited her father's position as chief of the clan, his main castle and also his shipping interests (which like those of Drake and Raleigh, included quite a bit of piracy). She had three husbands, two of whom she divorced. She was a thorn in the side of the English, who by the end of her life were gaining control over the west of Ireland. When in her sixties, she sailed to London, visited Queen Elizabeth at Whitehall (where they conversed in Latin), and gained quite a few concessions out of her. Mara is very ladylike in comparison!"

Should you wish to step back in time to a uniquely Celtic place in Ireland and meet a detective who uses her brain to solve a crime, I invite you to read *A Secret and Unlawful Killing*.² As Susan Wilson wrote in her review of this book, "Cora Harrison brings 16th-century Ireland beautifully to life and her Brehon detective, Mara, is a fantastic protagonist – an absolute one-off and yet refreshingly real."³

Notes

1. On page three of her book *Writing Mysteries* (Self-Counsel Press, 1999), Margaret Lucke uses this phrase to explain mystery, a word that "suggests secrets and intrigue, an opportunity to peek behind closed doors, shine light into shadowy corners, and unlock truths about the human mind and heart."
2. According to Cora, this title stems from the following: Brehon law stipulates that if a murder was committed, but the person regretted his act, he could make restitution by openly admitting his/her guilt and paying the appropriate fine. Secret killings were those where the doer failed to acknowledge his crime or pay the fine before a stated time period elapsed. The killing in her novel is deemed unlawful because it was not one sanctioned as a "lawful killing," such as slaying an outlaw or killing in self defense.
3. See *Historical Novels Review* (May 2008), 24.

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