

Early Days in the Green Movement: A Personal Account / Rosemarie Rowley

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From someone who from an early age had wanted to be a poet, and whose favourite poet was Wordsworth, it is not difficult to imagine that in some way I would relate to nature as a mature woman. For me it was not the difficulty of being a woman poet which offered the greatest challenge, since my father, a traditional musician, and my aunt who was a songwriter in America had encouraged me to write poetry, but the difficulty was of combining political activism with poetry.

The post-Hiroshima age I grew up in, is in some way unique from the ages that preceded it historically. The invention of the atom bomb has had a profound effect, none more so on the young people who came to maturity, as I did, in the sixties. We were the first generation who had grown up since the war, and became the first who reacted against the atom bomb by becoming pacifist. We all lived with the dream of doing away with war, and put some of the lessons we had learned from history into practice. We were the love generation because we believed we could change the death threat of Hiroshima into the fertility and flowering of the human spirit.

There was one unforeseen element in reaction to the bomb – the throwaway society was born, as the Cold War increased, and we lived life to the utmost, with no thought of tomorrow. Before the Second World War, there was minimal packaging, and with the rise of the plastics industry in the thirties, there was now invented, as well as the bomb, all kinds of plastics which had a far greater lifespan than any of the relatively natural materials which decayed quickly. With the rise of consumerist culture after the war, and the need to promote economic advances over the communist Eastern Bloc, the wisdom of previous generations was thrown out the window with all the cans, plastic packaging, and nuclear waste, and these non-perishable items accumulated in the atmosphere to the point where today we are facing unprecedented threats to the planet.

I was brought up in a frugal household, my parents were from the country and never wasted anything. Pieces of string and paper were kept in drawers. We received clothes from our relatives in America, and when they no longer fitted us, we passed them on to our country cousins. We had rubbish collections once a week where the only thrown away item, if any, was newspapers. My father smoked and lit cigarettes at least three times from the same match. There was nothing in my home to prepare me for the throw-away society.

Our political leaders, our newspapers, and the relatively new media of television all promoted consumer goods and throwaway. They were desperately anxious to prove that capitalism was the only successful economic system. With the deposition of religion and the rise of science, people had goals which had never been fulfilled in history, – to meet the need completely for the basic urges of human beings, food and shelter. For the first time also fulfillment through sex became an achievable goal with the invention of the pill and the mass manufacture of contraceptive devices. Women could have sexual relations without fear of pregnancy – in theory it sounded great, and our generation of sixties people, what came to be called the baby boomers generation (since most people were born just after the war), experienced unprecedented wealth, food, sex and stimulation in the form of music and drugs. We were post-pill and pre-AIDS, so we were lucky indeed.

In the words of the politicians of the day, the British conservatives, “we have never had it so good”. The age of consumerism arrived, and at the time, theorists such as Marcuse and McLuhan were the only ones to raise questions. The newspapers and mass media were anxious to silence critics, since the Cold War situation was such that all power groups were on the side of capitalism, and the way to win was to promote consumer goods for the masses of people. Perhaps the leaders elected in the eighties, Reagan in the US and Thatcher in the UK, did not believe that there would be a future for the planet, since as impressionable teenagers in 1945 they had witnessed the atomic bomb’s destruction of the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Or perhaps they had at heart the deep human need for freedom, and were willing to gamble the future of the planet away rather than force millions to live in fear as they did in the communist world. By the eighties, greed and individualism in Western society became the norm, and ownership without any kind of responsibility was the order of the day.

THE MAIN

It’s wrong to think you have a special place
Where mirror’s bane can’t hurt
Where in ideallic world
You can transcribe your real calling.
The house built on sand will go away
Down to the seas, you must not counter
The lost distance, with an emblem of farewell
Or dress it up to mourn the rag of youth.
So each galleon that sails from America
Pregnant sails heavy with spoil
Leaves a legacy to tear out mystery
Spell it out in heaves and sobs of loss.

Remember, while you dreamt of blessed lovers
You encountered the sons of reality.

It is not surprising, after the activism of the sixties, when I had been the usual student rebel hoping for a better world, that some of this idea of political activism at community level resided in my convictions. I had written poetry in the sixties, but influenced by Marxist rhetoric, also wanted to change the world, and make it a better place than it had been. As time went on, I developed my poetry, deploring the state into which the natural world had fallen. Of course I had read Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* published in 1961, and I tried to find a way of connecting with nature other than by the then received philosophy of pouring pollutants onto the earth. My time on the earth coincided with the rise of plastics, the invention of the bomb, and the invention of DDT, here I was living in a completely different way from my parents, who had grown up on a self sufficient small farm. Their new life in the city was estranged from Nature. However, I learnt from them a love of Nature which, combined with a Nietzschean imperative to put my ideas into practice, found me responding to an invitation to activism one evening when I visited a ship, "The Sirius" which had docked in Dublin. This was in 1983, and the ship was one of the first vessels owned by Greenpeace, who used it to visit ports in every country with the message that the proliferation of nuclear waste into the sea, particularly the Irish Sea, made it the most radioactive sea in the world, and for generations to come.

There was a meeting after my visit to the ship, and I picked up some leaflets. I always had a strong attachment to the sea, and perhaps here was an opportunity to do something about it. I was now a mother, and felt the urgent need to do something for the future, for the planet my child would inherit. There was a group named the Green Alliance which left some contact information on the ship, and when I found the group had offices in 15 Lower Stephen Street in Dublin, I made my way there one evening. I already was a member of H.E.L.P. or Help Eliminate Lead in Petrol, which was headed by Jerusha McCormack, an energetic woman who was also an academic. I knew I was a pacifist and one of the attractive things about the Green Alliance was that peace was one of their foundational aims, with a commitment to nuclear disarmament being a priority. <9> I signed up for membership that evening, when the boat sailed, and attended my first meeting with Janice McNair and Tim Spalding at 628 South Circular Road, not far from where I lived at the time, Dolphin's Barn. Our local group was known as Eco 8, after the Dublin postal district.

<10> One of the first things we did was to make a submission to the Status of Children bill, which was being prepared by Nuala Fennell and was later put through the Senate by Senator Mary Robinson, who later became the first woman President of Ireland (Robinson has always been, and is still, deeply involved with human rights). In recent years, she was the first person

internationally to raise the question of the treatment of the prisoners in Guantanamo Bay.

At the first Convention of the Green Alliance that I attended the following spring, Christine Warner and Phil Kearney put the group through an exercise in non-violence and consensus. I felt this to be truly momentous since we were at the height of the Cold War and there was a huge build-up, with Thatcher and Reagan of the nuclear arsenal. The focus on consensus was new to me, and I felt it to be profoundly important. There were five levels of consensus, and at each point the group could make a decision. There was one level that if one person had an ethical objection the decision to act could not be made by the group. This proved to be a difficult point later on.

At this Convention, I met greens from other groups, including Christopher Fettes, who had initiated the first ecology party in Ireland, by putting an advertisement in the newspapers and inviting membership. He later on became the first green candidate at European elections. However, because of the great number of unemployed at the time, people were first and foremost interested in bread and butter issues, not in the long term problems of the planet. There was some difficulty in the office on the grounds of payment for the coordinator. Christopher financed this out of his own pocket, but could not pay as much as he would have liked. The coordinator later resigned, and myself and two others, Phil Kearney and Roger Garland became a triumvirate of coordinators, a situation which lasted for a number of years. Roger Garland had an original view of many issues, and later in 1990, became the first green parliamentary deputy in Ireland. However, he could be adversarial at times, and although we agreed on a policy about advertising, he was not very enlightened about women's issues.

The Conference on Security in Europe was meeting in Stockholm in 1984 and I received the encouragement of many people to attend, including a journalist who was an expert on Esperanto and basic income. Whilst I felt lukewarm on the subject of Esperanto-it probably was the poet in me-I believed basic income could solve many of the social welfare problems we had as a democratic western state. To this day basic income has not been achieved by any society, although in theory it provides answers to the problems of parents looking for childcare and for artists who need time and a basic income to develop their work. At a certain point, it creates a level playing field for women as it provides an income to all women and men, and can be deducted from either partner's taxes after it reaches a certain amount. An answer to the economic independence of women and mothers! However, in real terms, governments are reluctant to hand out money for fear of it being abused by people too lazy to work, so I advocated, in an article published later in the eighties, that it be tied to five years' work in the community. So far it remains a pipe dream. The reason I felt it important to solve these day to day economic issues is that many believed the Greens had the answer to the divisions between West and East,

which lay at the heart of the Cold War. Once the nuclear threat were removed and there was the prospect of peace, people could then work for sustainability and the environment.

I succeeded Christopher Fettes as the European delegate and one of my first duties was to attend the Conference on Security in Europe, which took place in Stockholm, Sweden. It was very fulfilling to feel one had a role in nuclear disarmament. I met greens from Germany, Finland, Sweden and Luxembourg, and the leader of the group was Andres Malmen from Stockholm. We presented the case for disarmament to eight delegations, including Ireland. Philip McDonough, the Irish representative at Stockholm, has these days, published a volume of poetry, so I am not the only person to find that politics and poetry can be compatible. Everyone at Stockholm was exceptionally courteous, many feeling the urgency of disarming but hoping to negotiate it through agreement, confidence-building measures being high on each country's agenda. Later I gave papers of this visit to the Conference in the green office.

At supper that week in Stockholm, I met representatives from the Green movement in Canada, such as Miles Goldstick, who was knowledgeable on the American and Canadian nuclear industry and the dangers it represented to the environment, as the waste, known as "yellow cake," was driven all over America at night. With him was John Graham, from the American Indian Movement (AIM). I invited them to come to speak in Ireland and personally guaranteed their air fares.

When I returned I asked a local group, the Green Action Now Group-the GANG-to arrange for the meeting which was held in the Electricity Supply Board's offices for the Women Workers' Union hall in Fleet Street. John Graham spoke about the malformations of species and the sicknesses and sores in children which had broken out since the nuclear industry of Kerr McGee dumped their waste into the traditional Indian fishing grounds in Canada. We tried to get press attention, but hardly anyone came to the press conference. This was fairly typical for the 1980s. Because of the nuclear threat in the Cold War, newspapers were reluctant to publish anything which might diminish confidence in the West's build-up of arms. We prepared countless press releases and faxed them off to the newspaper offices, where they were ignored by practically all journalists and editors. However, Elgy Gillespie, an Irish Times journalist whom I had known in my Trinity College days, came to the meeting, and wrote a column, which was printed in bold, on the plight of native American women who, when they came to the big cities, were sterilized against their consent or knowledge. Native Americans often had a hard time adjusting to urban life and ended up dependent on alcohol. In the meantime, their numbers were still dwindling. As I wrote in my poem "Letter from an Indian in Prison":

My vision has robbed my mouth
My taste is of stale dry bread
But I do not hunger
For the white man's feast
But call it famine
I do not long
To share your tap
Of water and call it truth
Only to find
A metallic taste
Where you have poisoned our inheritance
Our lands are robbed
Our children full of disease
Our animals wasted

It may be interesting to note that the AIM people were meat-eaters, because a lot of my green colleagues were vegetarians. But these first world people prayed for the spirit of the animal as they ate, a kind of memento mori, that they too would be part of the nurturing cycle of the earth one day. Their ancestors would not have approved of present day farming methods or the cruel and barbarous treatment of animals in transport and in batteries.

Also in 1984, I attended the International Green Convention in Liege. Tommy Simpson drove us, in his green van, across the sea to England, with my former employer in the British Broadcasting Corporation, Isa Benzie in her eighty-fifth year and my son in his fourth year. Jonathon Porritt, who was a Green Party candidate, and later became very prominent in Friends of the Earth, gave a very inspiring speech.

During my time as Foreign Representative I attended international green meetings in Brussels, and my French came in useful. I compiled the minutes and wrote reports. Jeremy Waites, of the Irish environmental movement based in Cork, Earthwatch, came along as an observer, and his practical down to earth comments were always useful, as he was an activist as well as being political. He wrote trenchant letters to The Irish Times which courageously published them. Newspapers therefore to some degree allowed freedom of expression. At European green meetings, I met Sara Parkin and other British greens, who spoke on the importance of gaining a foothold in the power structures of the UK. I also had the privilege of meeting Petra Kelly, a German green, who invited me to breakfast when she visited Dublin and who was very passionately concerned about the removal of the nuclear arsenal. She was totally against the militarization of Europe. The tragic circumstances of her death, when she was found with her partner in what appeared to be a double suicide, later on has fuelled conspiracy theories.

The Greenpeace ship "Rainbow Warrior" was bombed by the French on 10 July

1985. I organized a demonstration outside the French Embassy and I wrote to David Lange, then President of New Zealand, who supported Greenpeace. He wrote a very courteous reply, thanking the Green Alliance for their support.

As mentioned, I always had been interested in the sea, as my ancestors were sea-farers. On behalf of the Green Alliance and with the help of the Clean Seas campaign, headed by Robert Blackwith, we drafted a submission to the British government, to their House of Commons Committee on the Environment, on Sellafield, the nuclear reactor which was pouring radioactive waste into the Irish sea, and where many accidents had taken place. One such incident, a fire, had taken place in 1957, and was held responsible for birth defects of children born to mothers in the Dundalk area who had been schoolgirls when the wind had blown radioactive dust over their town. I have followed since then the actions of a group based in Dundalk, for the closure of Sellafield, but so far no tangible results have taken place, even though the cause has been taken up by prominent celebrities such as Ali, wife of the pop star and activist Bono of U2.

DEAD MAN'S FINGERS

(a poem on Sellafield, the British Nuclear Reactor – in an advertisement in the London Observer in the eighties, when the owners invited the public to come and look at their clean nuclear power station)

No compass, lodestar nor muted caul-born child
Could have taken away our chancery
So much, nor in the abandoned wild
Of seafarers' destinies, scrawled this history
On faces chiseled by the sea, to doom
Of blood and breath. Sea thrift, a waste
Of what the verb to be, means. Boom
Of nefarious husbandry, they will reap
From the spendthrift sea a wreck of haggards
Scratch on the sand a white, deformed defeat
And the advertising in the paper, braggarts
That what is only visible is meat
For enterprise where maiden wombs will shape
Children born to die of master rape.

After the accident at Chernobyl, the newspapers took some interest in green activities, and The Irish Times features editor, Caroline Walsh, came to the green office to interview the “green women” present. It was a fine in-depth article, and since Caroline was pregnant at the time, I gave her a recipe which would remove additives from the bloodstream. There were reports that some of the radioactive waste had reached Ireland on winds from Chernobyl. This recipe, created by Joe Dunne, also a coordinator in the early days, was made up

of orange juice and seaweed, and while there was still lead in petrol, green people gave it to their children and themselves to eliminate lead and other toxic elements from the blood.

Despite this good coverage by The Irish Times, I was not given a profile as a poet although in the following year Rowan Tree Press and Comark published my second collection, *The Sea of Affliction*-the first eco-feminist book of poetry. My being a literary person seemed not to fit into the “green” box. Neither did I practice free verse in my poetry – I believed in form, having grown up with music, but the received wisdom of the day was that form was patriarchal. For these reasons, scholars looking for my work would have a very hard time finding it.) Thanks to the world wide web, *The Sea of Affliction*, now out of print, can be downloaded free of charge in the creative commons website “The Irish Literary Revival” hosted by the poet and novelist Philip Casey: <http://www.irishliteraryrevival.com/rosemarierowley.html>

I hold the view that we are living in exceptional times, when the duty of everyone is to do what they can to improve the situation of threats to the planet, and I felt then that as a poet, it would be remiss of me to write about environmental disaster without also doing something in the sphere of action. I think if Wordsworth were alive today he would have at least gone on a demonstration, although he himself was traumatized by the excesses of the French revolution. Initially an activist and lover of nature, he retired to become a postmaster, much to the disgust of later poets such as Robert Browning, who satirized him. Those people who blame Wordsworth for retiring from the field of action are often the very ones who castigate poets for trying to live out their ideas and become involved in the future of the planet.

With the advance of mass education, there had arisen a whole generation of people in the academy who were quite happy to be inactive. So competitive had the academic field become that they had to direct all their efforts to over-specialization. The academy has, in the past, intimidated many brave souls who have been frozen out by suggesting that there is more to life than the ivory tower. In the broader field of education for young people, there are now many efforts now to involve school children in recycling and awareness, which will hopefully result in the near future to a complete change of heart and attitude for the planet. And at last, after thirty five years of doubt, the newspapers have become convinced that global warming is a definite and real threat, and now the general public is much better informed. But many of these newspapers were informed by green activists, as long ago as the first Earth conference in 1969, that such threats were imminent, but editors preferred to advance consumerism and encourage their readership to greed and irresponsibility on an unprecedented scale. This is, I feel sure, because of the Cold War situation, and also the fact that there was no scientific consensus, until a few months ago when the Stern report was published in the UK, that global warming had become a reality for the planet.

Now that the cat is out of the bag, and with the rise in oil prices, there will, I hope, be radical change in the very near future. Bio fuels and hybrid cars are now a reality. Back in the eighties, it was a very frustrating time since groups of people all over the world were involved in environmental activities and yet they were not allowed the space in the bigger newspapers to get their views across, being dismissed, almost universally, as “tree huggers” and hippies.

From time to time, after Chernobyl, there would appear an article, but the newspaper editorials on the whole debunked the threat. As I have said, it was partly the need of the West to win out on propaganda in the Cold War, and downplay the bad side effects of unlimited capitalism and consumerism, but at what a cost to the planet! One day, listening to the radio, a public persona of Irish television chat show fame, actually said that they would never close down Sellafield, and when we wrote to ask him to show some responsibility for the future of the planet, he reprimanded us for our adversarial attitude, i.e., writing to him in a critical tone.

The planet did not feature anywhere during the Cold War, and it wasn't until 1989 that environmentalism came of age, and Time Magazine put Planet Earth on their cover as “Man of the Year” – then started a momentum with the German Greens coming to the fore and the first appearance of green delegates in national parliaments in Europe.

We had our first green candidate in the Dail, the Irish government's Lower House, Roger Garland, but often the sheer complexity of the problems confused people. I began to understand the merits of a “clear message”. In the meantime, as with all Irish political groups, there had arisen the “split”. This split took place between the radical activists and those who wanted to be parliamentarians, i.e., to take up public representation in what we in Ireland call “The Dail”. I had never been a member of the Green Action Now Group, known as the GANG, although supporting some of their aims. in acting locally, and trying to make practice and theory cohere. From 1988, the Green Alliance became a purely political party, changing its name to the Green Party. The Green Party has dropped certain important ideas, such as consensus, and basic income, and now are a moderate green party. During the crisis about consensus, Grattan Healy and Paul O'Brien, both politically gifted people, were concerned that the anarchists could block consensus by holding, or stating they held, a moral objection. I had recently been following the reports from China, which was emerging at this time from totalitarianism, and there were pictures of Democracy Wall in the newspapers, where people could post their opinions and objections. This was to be short-lived, culminating in the killings in Tiananmen Square. However, a sort of democracy wall was needed by the greens, and I suggested that if the party achieved consensus by 80% they could publish the objections, and thus remain open. Grattan said I had saved the party at least five years, although the situation now is that the Green Party seems to have abandoned consensus altogether.

I had been asked to draw up the women's policy for the greens, but some people, with no real interest in children, or in having good relationships with men, took over and gave me an opportunity to reconsider. The right to choose now reared its head in the Green Party, and while I understood that women's autonomy was very important, as well as their new found freedoms, I had become acquainted with some literature which had discovered the phenomenon of post-abortion trauma in women. Some writers, found correspondence of the symptoms of post-abortion women and survival syndrome from the Vietnam veterans, so I was unable to lend my support to pro-abortion campaigns, while recognizing that there are always difficult and exceptional cases. (NOTE added – some of these cases such as rape and non-consensual sex can be solved by the morning after pill)

By now I had published three books of poetry, my latest, published in 1989 being *Flight into Reality*, a long poem written in terza rima, which was based on the myth of Isis and Osiris in Egypt. I had looked for fraternity and sorority with women and men, but the gender wars were increasing and people were increasingly becoming more fixed in their positions. My long poem is resolutely on the side of both sexes.

My treatment of myth in Egypt meant my subject matter was close to this state of affairs, the disembodied corpse of the beloved being object of the search by Isis, just as the disembodied corpus of knowledge in the academy had, in the past, led to stultification, ossification and estrangement from the real world of our shared planet. Now, with increased awareness, the active engagement of academics is very important, which is very much to be welcomed, as they have real influence on debate, and ultimately, action.

The Green Party today in Ireland is one of the internationally established parties and has six representatives in the Dail. They have been spokespersons for environmental issues while being in opposition. My own feeling is that they should do all they can to join the government as only then can they have input into policy making, decisions and actions. However, I am glad to report that they still hold on its seven principles of their first constitution, [NOTE This was written before the new Green Party entered government which along with international factors brought about the economic collapse and recession we are currently suffering)] which were the guiding ones of the green movement in its very earliest inception where I am proud and privileged to have played a small part.

Rosemarie Rowley, *Eco Writings: Select List of Publications*

The Sea of Affliction

A collection of poems which can be described as eco-feminist

Comark, Rowan Tree Press, Dublin, 1987, ISBN 1870267109HB / ISBN

187026726PB available

online:<http://www.irishliteraryrevival.com/rosemarierowley.html>

Seeing the Wood and the Trees (editor with John Haughton)

An Anthology of Poems about Trees: Published Forest Friends Ireland with Rowan Tree Press, 2003 ISBN 1 872224016

Voices from Wollaston Lake (contributor)

An account of the campaign, with prose and poetry, to highlight the situation in Wollaston Lake, Canada, where radio active waste was being poured into the lake, thus destroying the fishing grounds of the indigenous population.

Eds. Goldstick and Graham, Canada 1986

Thinking Globally, Acting Locally (Across the Frontiers, contributor)

An account of the early days of green politics and their philosophical basis

Ed. R. Kearney, Wolfhound, Dublin, 1988

Byron and His Constant Love, the Sea

Paper delivered to International Byron Conference, University of Liverpool, 2003, published in the Journal of the French Byron Society, 2004.

Notes

[1] Principles of Green Party, Ireland:

- The impact of society on the environment should not be ecologically disruptive.
- Conservation of resources is vital to a sustainable society.
- All political, social and economic decisions should be taken at the lowest effective level.
- Society should be guided by self-reliance and co-operation at all levels.
- As caretakers of the Earth, we have the responsibility to pass it on in a fit and healthy state.
- The need for world peace overrides national and commercial interests.
- The poverty of two-thirds of the world's family demands a redistribution of the world's resources. [^]

- See more at: <http://www.rosemarierowley.ie/early-days-in-the-green-movement-a-personal-account-rosemarie-rowley#sthash.b0eXjKLw.dpuf>