

Open Letter to Westmeath County Council from People of Athlone and the World

We refer to the new Church Street sculpture intended to “address Athlone town's urban context, the location of the artwork close to the River Shannon and the Old Rail Trail cycleway, as well as the heritage, memory and environment of the town.” As you know, the piece selected by Westmeath County Council is adapted from the Custom House in Dublin where it is claimed to represent a Shannon river deity.¹

On behalf of hundreds of people from Athlone, people who have settled in Athlone, and Athlone's national and international diaspora, and on behalf of concerned people nationally and the world over, we object to the intended statue. It represents misappropriation of Athlone's and Ireland's heritage, an affront to Mná na hÉireann and to people who value parity.

The Custom House iconography is neo-classical and is not at all connected with Irish heritage. It claims a vacuous male god to represent our river while in Irish mythology the river is female. The name Shannon stems from Sínann (Sinann, Sionann, Sionnainn, Sinand, Sineng, etc.)² and may derive from “Old Honoured One”. It is personified as a goddess – it is female, not male, and millennia older than the Custom House. The Metrical Dindshenchas (our native recount of the origins of place-names and traditions, committed to writing over a thousand years ago) relates how Sionann drowned at Connla's well in her pursuit of wisdom. “Rivers in Ireland ... were envisaged as divine figures to whom were attributed the gift of poetical inspiration, mystical wisdom and all-encompassing knowledge.”³ Ours is a rich and ancient mythology, one we should be proud of and take inspiration from.

In contrast, the Custom House in Dublin is devoid of cultural meaning. It was designed in the 18th century by James Gandon whose world was one of privileged nobility. Beneath that world lay “the impoverished underclass ... still struggling for their basic civil rights.” Elitists like John Beresford, the first commissioner of revenue in Ireland who conceived the construct, insisted that they “should be kept down by a policy of unyielding repression.” When Napper Tandy (co-founder of the United Irish movement of Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter) et al protested, Beresford instructed Gandon to carry on and to “laugh at the folly of the people.”⁴

Thus, and as pointed out previously in public, the use of Custom House motifs for Athlone is a discordant move to say the least. The Custom house ornamentation positions Shannon mythology away from Irish sources and closer to the classics. This echoes the Ossian debacle 250 odd years ago – an attempt to supplant Ireland's mythological heroes to position a concocted narrative away from Irish mythological sources and close to the classics.⁵ It represents arrogant and brutal misappropriation of Irish mythology.

The Custom House theme also misappropriates gender; although our town has no female iconography, you, our Council, deem it appropriate to commission a concocted male figure instead of the authentic female one which is steeped in our heritage and story.

You claim “the reverse of the piece depicts a complex weave of circuitry. Visually this refers to the increasing ‘connectedness’ of our world and the myriad of connections within Athlone, both geographical and infrastructural (road, rail, river).” Athlonians consider the town to have value in its own right, not merely as a conduit from between one location and another. And we find it inappropriate to represent our town on the reverse – or backside - of any statue. The council have indicated that the piece may ultimately end up somewhere less conspicuous. But even that is unacceptable - if it's wrong, it's wrong.

The public were allowed to view three shortlisted models for two weeks (although their observations would “not be counted”). But the above iconographic information was not available for our people to deliver fully informed opinions. The council's claim that “the process for the selection of the art piece

was a detailed and considered process”, “conducted to a standard that adheres to policy and procedures” does not refute any of our points. Indeed, since the process delivered an inappropriate piece, rejected by the people in the light of new information, then that very process is flawed and should be annulled.

Some of the above concerns have been delivered to the council by the first signatory of this letter. The local authority’s response, claiming to have been “fully cognizant”, that the decision was “a fully informed one”, and that “the process is underway and cannot be reversed”, more resembles Beresford’s instructions to “laugh at the folly of the people” than it does Sionann’s pursuit of wisdom. In her article ‘The Fate of Sinann’, Kiltoom-born Celtic scholar Maud Joynt (1868-1940) discusses how the “the original legend perhaps foreshadowed the dangers” of insufficient expertise.⁶ As elucidated by Professor of Irish Studies Noémie Beck, “knowledge was believed to be perilous when not handled correctly”.⁵ Thus, in Sionann’s story it appears that our ancestors warned of the danger of knowledge without context – the very pit that the council appears to have lead us into.

We call for these words to be heeded and this folly to be halted. The Council, and our representatives, still have a chance: Follow our much loved Sionann and embrace the new knowledge and context you previously did not have. In doing so, they will be remembered as enlightened representatives who listened to the people of the present and sages of our past. Or follow Berresford and associates, carry on without regard for our heritage, and be remembered in an altogether different light.

The choice is yours.

Ralph Kenna, Orla Donnelly, Fiona Lynam and over 100 co-signatories as listed below.

References:

1. Viola Barrow, “Dublin Custom House: The River Heads”, in *Dublin Historical Record* Vol. 29, No. 1 (Dec., 1975), pp. 24-27.
2. Patricia Monaghan, *The Encyclopedia of Celtic Mythology and Folklore* (Facts on File Inc., New York, 2004).
3. Noémie Beck, “Goddesses in Celtic Religion - Cult and Mythology: A Comparative Study of Ancient Ireland, Britain and Gaul.” PhD thesis, Université Lumière Lyon 2, University College of Dublin, December 2009.
4. *Jame Gandon: A Life*, Loonline Collection, Documentary (1996), retrieved from https://ifoplayer.ie/james_gandon.
5. Joseph Yose, Ralph Kenna, Pádraig MacCarron, Thierry Platini and Justin Tonra, “A Networks-Science Investigation into the Epic Poems of Ossian”, *Advances in Complex Systems* Vol.19 (2016) 1650008.
6. Maud Joynt (ed. and tr.), “The Fate of Sinann”, in Bergin, Osborn & Marstrander, Carl (eds), *Miscellany presented to Kuno Meyer*, Halle, Max Niemeyer, 1912, pp. 193-197.

Signatories¹:

1. Professor Ralph Kenna, St Brigid’s Terrace, Athlone and Coventry University.
2. Orla Donnelly, Actuary and Community Volunteer, Athlone.
3. Fiona Lynam, Programme Manager & Social Democrat, Athlone.
4. Professor Timothy R. Tangherlini, Folklorist, UCLA, Los Angeles, USA.
5. Dr. Arnaldo Donoso, Venezuelan Institute for Scientific Research, Caracas, Venezuela.
6. Mr Mark o Hanlon, painter & decorator, Athlone co Westmeath.
7. Professor Nikolay Izmailian, Yerevan Physics Institute, Yerevan, Armenia.
8. Mr Dominic Parker, Microsoft certified professional , Athlone.
9. Ms Aisling Kenny, poet & activist, Athlone.
10. Mr. Eunan Keys, Film and Theatre Critic, Athlone.

¹ This letter is not a petition. Signatories on the letter demonstrate diverse of people with diverse backgrounds from diverse places are unified with the same opinion about the statue. These signatories represent only a snapshot of the people, taken within a short period. There is also a petition with 600 signatures. This letter is also posted online and will continue to gather signatures.

11. Professor Igor Мриглюд , National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, Lviv, Ukraine.
12. Aislinn Campion-Ryan, teacher, Athlone, Co Roscommon.
13. Tina (Martina) Elliffe, Administration, Athlone Drug Awareness Group.
14. Suzan Gunbay, Research Staff, Athlone Institute of Technology.
15. Caroline Coyle Performance Artist Researcher, Athlone.
16. Martin Kelleher, Writer, Athlone.
17. Ursula Ledwith, Artist, Athlone.
18. Rose Finerty. Visual artist, Athlone.
19. Delores Crerar. Family Support Worker. Athlone.
20. John Madden, National Coordinator, Athlone and Reporter at Travellers' Voice.
21. Professor Bertrand Berche, University of Lorraine, Nancy, France.
22. Sonja Quinn, Coosan, Athlone.
23. Anthony Keane, student, Athlone.
24. Mary Campbell, BA(hons) MA, Athlone.
25. Alison Hough BL, Lecturer, Athlone.
26. James Delaney, Designer, Athlone.
27. Olga Corrigan, Book Restorer, Athlone.
28. Tim Ellis BSc, MSc, Application Developer, Rugby, Warwickshire, England.
29. Dr. Maxym Dudka, National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, Lviv, Ukraine.
30. Catherine Mc Gaughey, Music promoter, radio stn, pr company, booking agent, Fleetwood England.
31. Sarah Durney, Massage Therapist, Cornafulla Athlone.
32. Rosaleen West ,Downtown Hairstyles, Athlone.
33. Dawn McManus, Athlone, Co. Westmeath.
34. Jim and Liz Kearns, Athlone.
35. Toby Rackliff MSc, Diploma Course Tutor for students from Irish Rail.
36. Mr Petro Sarkanych, PhD student, Coventry University, Coventry, UK.
37. Stefania Oggioni, artist/office administration, Tyrrellspass, Co. Westmeath.
38. Annette Kinsella, education civil servant, Coventry UK.
39. Ian Kinsella, technical manager, Coventry, UK.
40. Michaela Fox, Photographer, Athlone.
41. Bindiya Chauli teacher Coventry, UK.
42. Chrissie Keane, Coosan, Athlone.
43. Dr. Olesya Mryglod, researcher, National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, Lviv, Ukraine.
44. Dr Andrij Trokhymchuk, Natl Acad Sci of Ukraine, Lviv, Ukraine.
45. Gráinne Gaynor, Librarian. Tara, Co. Meath.
46. Aisling Dixon, midwife, Athlone.
47. James Sammon , social care worker, kiltoom, Athlone.
48. Fiona Milton, healthcare assistant, Athlone.
49. Elaine Morrissey, Athlone.
50. Rev. Anna Coote, Holistic Counsellor, Moate.
51. Brenda Mannion, COO, Mother & Feminist, Athlone.
52. Rida Nadeem, Freelance Digital Marketer, Athlone.
53. Ms. Rhona Quigley, Carer, Glasson, Athlone.
54. Mags Glennon BA (Hons), Local Historian, Mullingar, Co Westmeath.
55. Olwyn O'Sullivan, Holistic Therapist, Coosan, Athlone.
56. Breegen Hegarty Care Support Worker, Earth Healer, Athlone
57. Eilish Behan, Optical Assistant, Athlone.
58. Deirdre Hughes, Teacher, Coosan, Athlone.
59. Marie Weldon, Energy Therapist, Longford.
60. Brenda Burke, Social Care Worker, Athlone
61. Dr Thierry Platini, Physicist, Sentsich, France.
62. Noel Tighe, sculptor, Glasson, Athlone.
63. Lisa Dwan, actress, London, UK.
64. Ms Cath Kenny, Social Worker, Athlone.
65. Ms Caoimhe Kenny, Student of Performing Arts, Athlone.
66. Janet Meade, Herbalist, Holistic Therapist. Athlone.
67. Eimear McKeown, Radio Producer and Journalist, Athlone.
68. Jean Morgan, former wages clerk, Coventry, UK.
69. Michael Butler. Senior Mechanical Engineer, Lower Coosan Road, Athlone.
70. Ostap Kalyuzhnyi, PhD student, National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, Lviv, Ukraine

71. Jason mc Donnell, Culture equality, society and local interests, Athlone.
72. Mairead Burke, Nurse and IT Technician, Ballinasloe.
73. Shaunah Kenna, primary school pupil, Ballinasloe.
74. Rory Farry, HGV driver/coordinator, Monksland Athlone.
75. Declan Prendergast, Painter and decorator, Athlone.
76. Laura Brohan, Athlone.
77. Pete Casey, Radio Presenter, Athlone.
78. Liz Fletcher, Musician, Athlone.
79. Ms Annemarie Lough, School secretary, Athlone.
80. Lionel Lyster MSc. Business Consultant, Athlone.
81. Pdraig Hegarty, Sinn Féin Spokesperson, Athlone.
82. Gail Farrell Coosan cupcake maker.
83. Bianca Fachel singer songwriter, Roscommon.
84. Janet Webster, Co-ordinator, Drug Awareness Group, Curraghboy, Athlone.
85. Carla Lennon, Social Care Worker, Athlone.
86. Raymond Gillespie, Athlone.
87. Patsy Preston, Visual Artist, Westmeath.
88. Clare Deane, Social Worker Child Psychotherapist Athlone.
89. Professor Yuriy Holovatch, National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, Lviv, Ukraine.
90. Fiona Corry, teacher, stay-at-home mum, Athlone.
91. Elaine Donnelly, BSc Youth worker, Melbourne, Australia.
92. Liam Hodge, Civil Construction PM, Melbourne, Australia.
93. Mary McLoughlin, retired family social worker, Athlone.
94. Michael McLoughlin, retired teacher, Athlone.
95. Karl Picard, Communications Consultant, Moate, Co Westmeath.
96. Paul Coffey, Autoelectrician, Tyrrellspass, Westmeath.
97. Dermot Payne, retired postal worked, Athlone.
98. Jennifer Dowling, sales assistant, Athlone.
99. Caoimhe O'Connell, Director, Shannon Academy, Athlone.
100. Sionann, authentic goddess, Shannon River and Athlone.
101. Professor Tomas Ising, retired Professor of Economics, Purdue University, Indiana USA.
102. Olivia Caffrey, Actor, Athlone.
103. Kevin Connaughton Student Lanesborough Co Longford.
104. Ian Bell, musician, Athlone.
105. Ann Marie McCormack, retired Midwife, Athlone.
106. Emma Lennon, Sales Agent, Athlone.
107. Gerardine Durney, deli worker, Athlone.
108. Karen O'Brien, passionate about equality and fair representation, Athlone.
109. Mona Reeves (nee Hanley) ,Retired Athlone.
110. Prof. Dan Mc Carthy, computer scientist, medieval chronology & computistics, Royal Irish Academy, Dublin.
111. Dr Pádraig Mac Carron, postdoctoral researcher, University of Limerick.
112. Cathal McCormack, Radio Producer, Athlone.
113. Roza Izmailyan, PhD, Institute of Molecular Biology. Yerevan, Armenia.
114. Prof. Juan J. Ruiz-Lorenzo, Physicist. Extremadura University. Spain.
115. Sonje Heelan, M.A., Trinity College Dublin.
116. Susanne Wunsch, Sound Healer, Silver Sonic Scape, Gort, Co Galway.
117. Professor Silvio Dahmen, physicist, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre, Brazil.
118. Theresa O' Reilly Senior Staff Nurse, Athlone Co. Roscommon.
119. Margaret Franklin, Retired AIT Lecturer, Athlone.
120. Dr Máirín MacCarron, historian, medievalist, Department of History, University of Sheffield, England.
121. Sionann O'Reilly Collins, Sports attendant, Athlone.
122. Valerie Foy, Retired, Athlone.
123. Andréa O'Brien, artist, musician, Coventry, England.
124. Dr. Taras Yavorski, Physicist, Coventry, England.
125. Morgan Fagg, Poet, Madrid, Spain.
126. Madeleine Janickyj, Masters Degree student, Coventry University, England.
127. Daniel Curley, Manager, Rathcroghan Visitor Centre, Tulsk, Co. Roscommon.