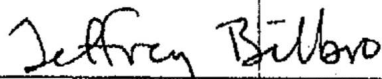


**The Power of Homeplace: The Hospitality of Celtic
Christianity in Wendell Berry's "Watch With Me"**


By
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Introduction

Wendell Berry is well known as a writer and scholar on the importance of place and community in daily life; while his works speak to the importance of caring for a place, the way he lives in turn influences the way he writes. For Berry, the experience and scholarship of place and community go hand in hand, each affecting the other. For this reason, it is logical to look at Berry's own homeplace to see how it shapes his writings; his emphasis on the value of place should lead to an analysis of *his* place. While scholars have looked to the community of Henry County, Kentucky—Berry's lifelong home—for answers on how place outside of Berry's writing has affected his perception of place within his writing, there is another community that Berry is directly connected to, one that has not yet been explored in context of Berry's ideals of home and community: Ireland. Berry's ancestors hail from Ireland, the land of rolling green hills that produced the place-and-community-orientated tradition of Celtic Christianity. Ireland, and therefore the traditions of Celtic Christianity that have so greatly shaped the culture of the Emerald Isle, forms part of Berry's place, though removed a few generations.

Interestingly enough, Berry's portrayal of Port William significantly reflects the monastic communities of ancient Celtic Christianity, with the addition of a few modern amenities. It may seem like a fantastic leap to say that Wendell Berry is influenced by the ideals of Celtic Christianity, but it is Berry's argument of the importance of place that makes this comparison a helpful lens to view Berry through. This thesis will argue that, because of his connection to the physical place of Ireland and the significant similarity between the ideals of place in Celtic Christianity and Berry's own writings, Celtic Christianity can be used as an appropriate lens through which to view the fruits of Berry's attention to place and community. It is also important to understand that Celtic Christianity was not simply found in Ireland, but also all across the

British Isles. Therefore, the monasticism in England, Scotland, and Wales does, historically, have many similarities to the monasticism of Ireland. However, because of Berry's particular connection to Ireland and Ireland's role as the birthplace of Celtic Christianity, this thesis will only look in depth at the Christian tradition as represented on that island.

Berry's short story, "Watch With Me" is a particular example of the reflection of Celtic Christianity in his work. Ireland is, in a sense, a homeplace for Berry, and therefore influences his life and work as any homeplace does. With Celtic Christianity set as a lens, Wendell Berry's "Watch With Me" can be read in light of a tangible connection to place, and the ancient themes come through. Berry may not make a direct claim that the value he puts on place is styled after the Celtic Christians, but his argument of the importance of place and his own connection to Ireland hint at this reflection. Celtic Christianity has not only the potential to be a lens, but also a direct influence on Berry's understanding of place. He says of his home in Kentucky, "I have lived mainly in, and mainly know about, one little stretch of country in Henry County, Kentucky, and so I assume that my sense of that place has an inestimable importance to me. To imagine myself without knowledge of that place would be to imagine somebody else" (Grubbs 22). This is just a small part of Berry's continual conversation about how homeplace shapes a person, so if we extend this to include his ancestral homeplace, we can see how Ireland's cultural influence is significant in the life and writings of Berry.

While Berry uses his familiarity and love for place to enter into many diverse conversations about the economy, politics, the church, and relationships, this thesis will focus on how Berry imagines how a community can make their place hospitable, in light of the Celtic Christian traditions of hospitality. In particular, Berry's representation of hospitality in his short story "Watch With Me" shows a series of relationships that are akin to those found in the

monastic communities of ancient Celtic Christianity. For the purposes of this thesis, hospitality will be defined as community relationships that not only give care to the other, but also make room in the community for a give-and-take relationship. In other words, hospitality is about welcoming a person into the community in a way that lets them give back and offer their own hospitality. Reading “Watch With Me” with the understanding of Berry's distant connection to Celtic Christianity, a tie made through corresponding values of place, reveals evidence of Berry's own argument about the power of place. Berry's love of place stretches across time to an island where he never lived, but that his ancestors cherished and cultivated. Their love of that place resides in Berry, and this connection gives credence to his entire claim of remembering one's homeplace and letting that love influence our life and work.

Wendell Berry and the Place of Ireland

Before an analysis can be made regarding how Wendell Berry inherits the traditions of Celtic Christianity and how that partnership provides a new lens through which to view Berry's writings, it is important to establish Berry's connection to a homeplace. Henry County, Kentucky has been the immediate homeplace of Wendell Berry for nearly his entire life; he grew up in New Castle, working the land with his fellow community members and immersing himself in the natural world (Grubbs 61). Currently, Berry and his wife live in Port Royal, Kentucky, a mere ten miles away from his childhood town. Most of his life has revolved around this one community, and the stability has influenced how he writes about community and hospitality. In a *Ploughboy* interview, Berry says, “It's love that keeps you walking over a place, and it's love that makes you imagine what can be done on it” (Grubbs 5). Berry found a love for his place of Henry County and planted himself firmly in the community. Through this love of place, Berry has become an advocate for community in his life and writings, especially with regards to how

people interact with the land to build a strong, healthy community. Berry has lived out the life portrayed in his writings, showing that his ideology of place is not just a factor in how he writes, but also who he is as a man. At the same time, his life in Henry County was the inspiration behind the fictional world of Port William, once again showing how Berry blurs the line between life and writing, especially when it comes to an understanding of place.

Beyond an immediate homeplace, Berry also shows care for an ancestral place. His essay "The Irish Journal" is a personal diary he kept on his second pilgrimage to Ireland. The first was made in 1962—which he briefly mentions a few times in this journal—and the second happened twenty years later, in 1982. On both trips, Berry visits one Irish town in particular: Cashel, a small farming community in County Tipperary, in the south of Ireland. This town is where his great-great-grandparents, Edward and Mary Mathews, raised their son, James, who later immigrated to America and settled in Kentucky ("Irish Journal" 27, 25). Here, among the rolling green hills and imposing ruins of the Rock of Cashel Castle, Berry's family went from their Celtic homeland to America, only three generations before him. In his journal, Berry writes, "Cashel is the only family source that I know for certain outside of Henry County, Kentucky" (25). Though he does not live there, Ireland is still a part of Berry's place, just as Kentucky is, through the connection of blood and pilgrimages, as well as an uncanny similarity between the lands that made him feel right at home.

Berry himself recognizes the similar landscapes that can be found in parts of Ireland and Kentucky. He writes of Ireland,

It is a countryside that any lover of grassland and livestock would feel at home in, and I do look at it with a pleasant sense of familiarity. It is green, as obviously rich and

abounding as the best bluegrass pastures of Kentucky, but it is different from them in having been used much longer and far more intimately. ("Irish Journal" 28)

Riding a bus from point to point across the island, Berry notices that the land is like that of his American home, only richer from centuries of use and care. It is almost as if parts of Ireland were picked up and transplanted into the Southern region of America, forming the landscape of Kentucky.

Not only is the physical landscape a reflection of Celtic traditions, but the people, too. The demographic corroborates this idea; according to "Statistical Atlas," 26% of Kentucky ancestry is from the British Isles, 16.1% from the Celtic Regions, and 12.2% is pure Irish blood (Graph 1). The connection of Celtic Christianity can be traced back, not only through words and ideals written on a page, but also through the tangible reality of blood connections and environmental factors.

Berry never writes about the similarities between his views and those of Celtic Christian communities, though he does address the value of place that the Irish people have to this day. He writes about the great Celtic Christian history of Cashel, telling how Saint Patrick baptized one of the powerful pagan kings and helped lead the Province of Munster into Christianity ("Irish Journal" 26). As he looks back on the past of Ireland, he says, "There was something peculiarly touching to me that day about the presence there of the grazing sheep and the loafers, for then Cashel's past and its present daily life so unassumingly reached to each other for daily reasons. The place's history and its presence were the same" (27). Berry can see how the history of place affects the land and people of Ireland today, and even claims part of this history as his own, but he does not make the bold claim of saying that the ancient Celtic Christian ways influence his own love of and care for place. Berry is not actively seeking to model the Celtic Christians, yet

he does so anyway; that is how powerful his connection to the place of Ireland is, it runs through his blood and cultural memory. His ancestry and even the amazing similarities between Ireland and Kentucky speak to the inescapable traditions of Ireland, including its faith tradition.

A Brief Overview of Celtic Christianity

Because place is so important to the life and works of Wendell Berry, we must look at Ireland and the tradition of place and community, as understood in Irish culture. Though the ancient strain of Celtic Christianity is certainly not as active in Ireland as it used to be, the values of place and community that the monasteries sustained are still part of the culture. So what was Celtic Christianity, this movement that is still reflected in the lives of the Irish and Berry's own life and writings? As its name would suggest, Celtic Christianity is a branch of Christianity that took root in the ancient Celtic regions of Europe. These included Ireland, parts of Britain, Scotland, and modern-day Wales. Each of these regions was almost entirely pagan until one very important man showed up on the shores of Ireland; Saint Patrick was kidnapped and brought as a slave to the shores of Ireland in 403 AD (Hunter 13). While he was held captive in Ireland, Patrick fell in love with the land and the people, so much so that he came back years later after escaping in order to bring the Gospel message to the pagans of Ireland (de Paor 99, Hunter 15). Thus began the tradition of Celtic Christianity, a strand of Christianity that was built on a love of place and community, birthed from both the pagan traditions of caring for the land and Saint Patrick's development of community.

The hospitality of the Celtic Christians began with Patrick's communal form of evangelism. He would travel with an entourage of missionaries across the country, and "upon arrival at a tribal settlement, Patrick would engage the king and other opinion leaders, hoping for their conversion, or at least their clearance, to camp near the people and form into a community

of faith adjacent to the tribal settlement” (Hunter 21). This “community of faith” was the driving force behind the rapid spread of Christianity across the pagan Celtic-Irish lands, and what led to the sending of missionaries to other Celtic regions, and even non-Celtic kingdoms of mainland Europe. Like Berry—as he describes in his interview “Toward a Healthy Community”—Patrick recognized the need for a solid community in the role of strengthening and building the church. In this interview, Berry says,

I think that if Christians quit worrying about being "Christians" or a church member and just undertook what Christ told them to—love one another, love their enemies, take care of the helpless and the friendless and the unworthy and the no-account—then the "church" might sooner or later dissolve into something much better. (Grubbs 119)

The Celtic Christians grew to greatly value this sort of bond with one another, to the point that full monastic communities grew from these small missionary caravans. They were not so concerned with perfectly correct doctrine or following set-in-place rules of life, like other monasteries at the time; the Celtic monastic communities were based on community and relationships with others.

The monasteries were like small towns, except they were based entirely on the message of the Gospel and expanding that Gospel community. Joseph Cahill puts it this way: “But the structuring of monasticism in Ireland, while obviously following in principle the theoretical structure inherent in monastic life, seems to have followed the societal structure of the early rural farm life it replaced” (12). Like Berry's community of Port William, the Celtic monasteries were farming communities. Bernard Meehan, in his commentary on the Book of Kells, describes the ancient communities as being more monastic than episcopal (10). This means that there was no one in complete authority over the rest of the community; rather, leadership was placed on

different people when the time and setting was appropriate. With this more fluid hierarchy based on the farm communities, the Celtic Christian monasteries were able to easily and readily welcome strangers and grow their community. This contrasts with the episcopal tradition of other monasteries and churches of the time, setting Celtic Christianity apart. The love of place and community gave the Celtic Christians a unique form of hospitality, one that Berry demonstrates in his writings.

As Celtic Christianity developed, the religious tradition began to find its footing outside of the pagan roots that it was born from. It developed its own set of guidelines and characteristics, which parallel the ideals Wendell Berry espouses. Graham Duncan, theologian and historian, categorizes the aspects of Celtic Christianity in the following way:

- Love of God's creation and care for the environment.
- Closeness between natural and supernatural (immanence/transcendence).
- Hospitality: love and respect for others.
- Desire to become Christ-like – simple life of prayer, peace, and love in tune with the natural world.
- High regard for women and children, especially orphans.
- Love of higher learning, especially in monastic communities.
- Knowledge of scripture, especially the psalms and gospels, with their intimate sense of God's presence.
- Trinitarian theology in creation, redemption and pervading all life with the divine presence.
- Closeness to God through pilgrimage to remote locations.
- Inculturation in hostile contexts.

- Prayer related to normal living. (Duncan 2-3)

Each of these points can find an echo in Berry's writing, but for the sake of using "Watch With Me" as an example of the ways that Berry draws on Celtic Christianity, we shall only look at the idea of hospitality.

"Watch With Me" as a Story of Hospitality

"Watch With Me" (WWM) is one of Berry's many short stories that take place within the larger community of Port William; some focus only on one family while others, WWM included, spread out to follow the winding paths that connect these families to the community. WWM is the story of many different people of Port William, each playing a different role in extending hospitality. Through the multitude of characters and interactions between different characters, it is easy to draw multiple conclusions to the connection of Celtic Christianity. While other stories, such as "The Solemn Boy," or novels, such as *Hannah Coulter* portray hospitality between different members of Port William, WWM manages to display many different angles of hospitality in one short story, making it ideal to begin this conversation regarding Berry and Celtic Christianity.

If we look back to Duncan's list of Celtic Christianity qualities, he describes hospitality as "love and respect for others" (2). But what does this broad umbrella of "love and respect" look like? J. Matthew Bonzo and Michael R. Stevens, in their book *Wendell Berry and the Cultivation of Life*, break down Berry's representations of hospitality into six categories that give a clearer shape to this Celtic Christian way of hospitality: Tend to the Stranger Among You, Just Passing Through, Various Shades of the Prodigal, Come and Stay Awhile, Internal Wounds, and Membership at the Margins (145-146). Bonzo and Steven's categories of hospitality all fit with Duncan's explanation of hospitality, and in that way they are one way of articulating the Celtic

Christian way. Nightlife, the main character of WWM, manages to fall into three of these categories: Membership at the Margins, Tend to the Stranger, and Come and Stay Awhile. Nightlife walks the path of community and hospitality by first living as a member at the margins, then he becomes alienated as a stranger among the people of Port William, and finally he is welcomed in as a member to stay. Through these three movements of hospitality, Berry paints a picture of a community like the ones of the Celtic Christians, portraying how a hospitable place can practice a genuinely Christian love for the least of these.

Membership at the Margins

Thacker Hample (known as Nightlife) lives, at best, on the margins of the community of Port William. Like many in his family, Nightlife is nearly blind, though the narrator tells us that there is something else about Nightlife that sets him apart:

Nightlife was incomplete, too, in some other way. There were times when spells came on him, when he would be sad and angry and confused and maybe dangerous, and nobody could help him. And sometimes he would have to be sent away to the asylum where, Uncle Othy Dagget said, they would file him down and reset his teeth. (WWM 82)

This “incompleteness” of Nightlife causes estrangement between him and the community, even to the point that they send him away to an asylum. His integration into the community is not the same as others—such as Tol Proudfoot or Uncle Othy, who both play a leadership role as elders of the community, tying back to the Celtic layout of farming monasteries—because he is someone the others of Port William cannot quite understand: “Even as a Hample, Nightlife was an oddity, and nobody could quite account for him” (88). While the people of Port William know who Nightlife is, they do not know how to live in relationship with him. This makes him more of a marginal member than a complete stranger, at least at the beginning of the short story.

When describing the six categories of sustainable hospitality, Bonzo and Stevens use Burley Coulter and Wheeler Catlett as their examples for Membership at the Margins, yet their descriptions can also be applied to Nightlife. These are "men whose lives are woven deeply into the healing community but who, at the same time and in different ways, don't quite fit. Each dwells at the margins of the farm and the land, attached but not wholly so" (Bonzo and Stevens 159). Though Burley Coulter does show up in WWM, the focus of Membership at the Margins will remain on Nightlife, for his example is more extreme and changes throughout the story. In another essay, Stevens refers to Nightlife as a marginalized community member labeled as one of "those walking in the shadow of the hedge" (Stevens 124).

While a large part of Nightlife's marginal status is because of the unique workings of his mind that set him apart from the others, much of it is the same as Burley Coulter and Wheeler Catlett; he is a man who was born into the general community of Port William, yet for more than one reason, he is different and left on the outside. Like these men, Nightlife physically lives on the outskirts of the community, on a farm that is on the edges of Port William. The Hample place is described as being "left out of the surveys of the larger boundaries that once surrounded it, or it had been sold off one of the larger boundaries at some time" (WWM 86). Nightlife's home is quite literally on the boundaries and margins of the community. However, unlike Catlett and Coulter, Nightlife is forcibly removed from the community when he is sent to the asylum, making his marginal status greater than the other two men. His mental status, the reason behind this forced removal, also places Nightlife further on the margins than the other two men, making him a more challenging example of how far hospitality must extend to those on the edges of a community.

Nightlife not only receives hospitality on the margins, but he also tries to give hospitality to others. The tension of the story begins when Nightlife tries to enter the community during a service at the Goforth Church annual revival; "Unbeknownst to anybody but himself, Nightlife decided that on the third night he himself would be the preacher" (WWM 82). Nightlife comes in from the margins, not only wanting to be welcomed into the community, but also wanting to contribute to the growth of that community. The narrator says, "Nightlife wanted to tell what it was like to be himself. It had to come out because, at that time anyhow, it was all he had in him" (82). Living on the margins finally got to be too much for Nightlife, and he needed to move in on the hospitality of Port William, both in giving and receiving. Nightlife desires to break into the community of Port William and become a full member, but because of his marginal status, people do not understand and Nightlife is further blocked from the community. They are content to offer him hospitality while he was on the margins, but the moment that he, in turn, tries to give back to the community by offering the hospitality of serving the people with the Word of God, the community of Port William is not ready to make themselves the margin to Nightlife and let him offer hospitality.

This marginal hospitality that Nightlife desired is akin to the marginal evangelism of Celtic Christians. The missionaries and ministers of the monasteries went out to people like Nightlife—or those on the boundaries in the same way—and intentionally sought out communities outside of their own Christian understanding. However, rather than establishing themselves as the main community and infiltrating the pagan marginal community, the Celtic missionaries made *themselves* the marginal community. They established camps outside of pagan settlements and made it known that, while they were different, they only desired communion with the Irish pagans. Saint Patrick himself practiced this, coming into the community from the

"underside," or in a way that does not automatically assume power over the local community because of the knowledge of the Gospel that he was bringing (Hunter 14). Outside of their monasteries, the Celtic Christians relied on the hospitality of the pagans, and within the walls of their sacred homes, they offered hospitality to those on the margins. Like Nightlife, they portrayed the relationship of giving and receiving hospitality on the margins; or at least portrayed it in the way that Nightlife desired to engage with the community of Port William. In this way, Nightlife is an example of how to rightly engage in hospitality with others, from and to the margins, but the other members of Port William do not follow through to make this hospitality effective.

One of the reasons for Nightlife's breaking in mind and spirit, getting lost within himself, is because the people of Port William are not willing to accept hospitality as the margin dwellers themselves. Bonzo and Stevens write:

Permeability [hospitality] here means an authentic, embodied meeting of human beings, rather than just transference of goods, services, and information. If the apertures are people-sized, then there is opportunity for hospitality to be both extended and embraced. For a healthy community to exist, such hospitality must be possible. People must be able to come as they are, without being forced into any role or niche except that which naturally evolves as the whole community shifts to make room. (141)

Hospitality must be given and received; it is a two-way street that the members of Port William do not follow in this particular short story. The fact that Nightlife's break from reality happens after he is refused the chance to practice such hospitality shows that the community of Port William did something wrong, at least in Nightlife's understanding of hospitality. This is a difficult situation, because any good church leader knows they cannot just let anyone stand up

and speak in a service. It is the way this rejection is done that causes the problem, for they made Nightlife feel completely unwelcome. Port William wanted Nightlife to keep quiet, to change to fit their idea of his place in the system of things. The narrator even tells us that their refusal to let Nightlife speak is "when Nightlife's time of quietness came to an end and, as the eyewitnesses all agreed, he threw a reg'lar fit" (WWM 83). Nightlife already did not have much of a voice in the community as a margin dweller, and the events at the Goforth Church revival worked to first let his tongue loose in anger, then quiet it in his soon to come stranger status.

In contrast, the Celtic Christians welcomed people as they were. There was no call for the pagan people of Ireland to change their lifestyles completely, but rather to shift their worship to the One True God. This conversion in itself was a massive change, as it should be for any new Christian, but the change of heart did not have to mean a change of all traditions and lifestyles. In fact, the acceptance of the marginal pagan traditions into the new way of Celtic Christianity only helped to advance the religion across the island. Cahill writes, "In the Celtic mentality there seems to have been a positive orientation to the world, to nature, and therefore to the creator" (17). The early missionaries, by placing themselves on the margin of paganism, were able to integrate the long-held pagan traditions in a way that helped build the community. By writing the Goforth Church and the people of Port William in a way that directly opposes the Celtic Christian acceptance of the margin dweller giving their own hospitality, Berry displays the tragic consequences of not following this method of hospitality.

Even so, there are still some things that the people of Port William do well, according to the values of hospitality as laid out in Berry's writings and Celtic Christianity. They recognize who Thacker Hampel is, know of his ailments, and even go to him for mechanical services. In Berry's terms, he is part of the economy of Port William. Berry is fond of using the term

"economy" to refer to the intricate workings of a community, how the individual aspects come together to create a well-working whole. In his essay, "Christianity and the Survival of Creation," Berry says, "To be uninterested in economy is to be uninterested in the practice of religion; it is to be uninterested in culture and in character" (3). The economy of a community is how every little aspect interacts with the bigger picture and builds a stable community. With Nightlife as part of the economy of Port William—in that he has a sort of place carved out for him—he is part of the culture and his character is known. Hospitality on the margin does not mean that they completely discredit him or ignore his presence and worth as a human being. However, it does mean that they do not see clearly enough; they fail at full hospitality of those at the margins by not letting Nightlife establish a stronger place within the community. Unlike Burley Coulter and Wheeler Catlett, Nightlife's marginal status places him in danger; he is closer to the edge than these other men are, close enough to be pushed into the realm of "stranger."

Tend to the Stranger Among You

In an ironic twist, the moment Nightlife tries to come in from the margins of the community is the moment that he becomes a stranger in his own homeplace. When the preachers shut him down, Nightlife's first reaction is anger, threatening them with the wrath of Christ because they thought His church was theirs (WWM 83). His anger with those of the community, however, quickly subsides "into confusions of sorrow, regret, and self-pity" (83). Nightlife goes from feeling raging emotion, driven by the actions of others—the lack of hospitality from his own people—to retreating completely into himself. The sorrow, regret, and self-pity that Nightlife lands on are not emotions directed outwards, towards the community; they are all directed inward, separating himself even more from the other people of Port William. Nightlife took a chance on making himself more known within the lines of the Port William community,

and when the preachers and the people of the annual revival blocked that chance, Nightlife closed in on himself and became a stranger to his own place.

As he walks along, Nightlife's stranger status is established in how he interacts with others. Not only do the people of Port William not fully understand him, but Nightlife also looks upon his friends as if he has never known them. When Nightlife is in Uncle Othy and Aunt Cordie's kitchen, he is in his own little world; "[Uncle Othy] and Aunt Cordie sat there with their heads down while that good fish got cold on the platter and Nightlife prayed, but not for them or at them; he prayed as if he were off somewhere by himself" (WWM 95). Nightlife, even when he is standing in the middle of the kitchen of his neighbor's home, cannot see the community that he is a part of. He is even performing the very act he had wished to use to break in from the margins—leading people in some form of worship, though it is prayer rather than a sermon—but he has not come far enough for this prayer to crash through the wall of "stranger." A few paragraphs later, the narrator says, "But Nightlife just stared at her and at Uncle Othy, too, as if they, who had known him all his life, were strangers. His face was covered by a sort of blur of incomprehension, as if he not only did not recognize them but had no idea where he was" (96). Nightlife, even in the midst of his community, is lost.

It is true Nightlife's situation varies from the monasteries giving aid and care to strangers; after all, he is a known face in the community. His family is a name that has been in the line of Port William for generations, and he himself is a man who has a place in the economy of Port William, as a maker and fixer of tools. So how can he be considered a stranger like the ones a monastery welcomed? It is because, in this story, he is no longer the man that the community of Port William knew; he is a man driven by unknown desires, walking an unseen path through the forest, leaving the men trailing him in constant bewilderment of what his next step will be. Not

only does Nightlife look on his community as strangers, but they also look to him as a stranger. Tol and the others do not know Nightlife in this moment, yet they choose to walk with him in community and hospitality to get to know him as he now is and welcome him in again.

Early in the story, we are told, "Tol had known Nightlife as long as Nightlife had been in this world to be known, but when one of his spells was on him, Nightlife was a stranger to everybody" (WWM 86). If anyone in this story really knows Nightlife, it is Tol Proudfoot, and even he admits to viewing the man as a stranger while he wanders through the woods. He describes it as walking into another world, "a world and a day in which he intended only to follow Nightlife and foresaw nothing" (85). Tol does not follow Nightlife into the woods because he knows how the hospitality will play out; rather, it is the complete opposite. He and the other men follow Nightlife because they do not know what he might do, and they are obligated in hospitality to care for the stranger among them. "Tol's vantage is that this painfully marginalized soul needs to be accompanied, tended, neighbored, whether he wants it or not, wherever he goes, to the ends of the earth and time, to the limits of their own lives" (Stevens 125). Because they live in a community that, while it has made mistakes in hospitality, still strives to welcome and care for others, the men feel compelled to offer hospitality to Nightlife. He has placed himself in their life in a position that calls for hospitality, and "they were following a man whom it had never occurred to them to follow before, who now had become central to their lives, and who perhaps was trying to find his way out of this world" (93). Now that Nightlife has placed himself as a stranger among the people of Port William, Tol and the other men are doing their best to welcome him with the hospitality of the Celtic Christians, one that is ready to offer care to the stranger without any conditions or expectations, so that the stranger might find his place in the community.

One of the greatest ministries of the ancient Celtic Christian monastic communities was the outreach hospitality they practiced, giving care to the strangers who found their way inside the walls of the community. This was more than offering a warm bed and food to the weary traveler; it was about engaging with the very being of a person and giving them a place to belong in the community, so that they can also give back. Hunter labels it as "hospitality in ministry with seekers, visitors, refugees, and other guests" (52). James Mackey, in his book *An Introduction to Celtic Christianity*, says that one of the distinguishing characteristics of the Celtic Christians was their "'inherent ability to assimilate and to enrich whatever the peoples they encountered had to offer', in short, their 'ability to adapt'" (Meek 15). This adaptation is clearly seen in how Celtic Christianity was formed, by taking the traditions of other European monasticism and combining them with the Celtic Pagan traditions of nature and worship. As this particular branch of Christianity grew, the adaptation was seen in how they allowed individual communities to grow and change with incoming strangers. Hospitality of the stranger is not just for those passing by, a kind word to someone who may never be seen again; it is the act of opening up the community to fully welcome the stranger and let them integrate in, even to the point that the community shifts themselves to fit the newcomer in where they are comfortable. This is similar to how the Celtic missionaries went to the margins to invite the other margin dwellers into the community; they also adjusted how their community lived together to make room for others. This is what the members of Port William do for Nightlife, after their initial failure of understanding the role he had to play in hospitality from the margins; they shift their way of thinking about Nightlife to see him more fully as a member, making room for him to eventually leave behind the stranger mentality he has found himself in.

The moment that Nightlife tries to break into the community through his sermon marks his desire to move in from the margins and be accepted as a full member. While the rejection does make Nightlife strange to himself and his neighbors, it also opens the door for the other people of Port William to consider his full membership. Before he was just an oddity that resided on the edges of town and sometimes made an appearance that caused people to scratch their heads and marvel at the strange ways of Nightlife Hample. Once the tie of recognition is cut, however, the people of Port William are faced with a stranger right before them, someone who might do anything with that gun as he walks through the forest. Tol sees himself as irreversibly tied to the pilgrimage of Nightlife, thinking, “he knew even so that, helpless or not, hopeless or not, he would go along with Nightlife until whatever happened that would allow him to cease to go along had happened” (WWM 101). They are in this until the end, for the hospitality of membership can call for nothing less than a full commitment to understanding the stranger.

Come and Stay Awhile

Nightlife is not left to the status of the marginalized community or walking as a stranger. By the end of this short story, the community has grown in their practice of hospitality, to the point that they finally see Nightlife as the true community member that he is, and watch with him, as he has been calling them to. Nightlife takes a pilgrimage through the woods, leading Tol and the other men on a journey of what it is like to be him so that they might welcome him not just as a stranger, but also as a member of their community. This is not to say that the other two forms of hospitality are wrong; after all, as already explored, they mirror the steps of hospitality taken by the ancient Celtic Christians. The pilgrimage of hospitality in WWM only points out the need for communities to change and grow over time as they welcome more people into the folds of relationship and place. For Berry, membership in a place is not stagnant; it shifts and flows

with the changes of time and people. According to Bonzo and Stevens, “The permeability of the membership’s boundaries also allows for ‘strangers and aliens’ to come within the healing space and to dwell, without strings and with full acceptance as ‘members’” (153). Before one can be a member that stays, one has to be a stranger or outsider of some sort. This is the journey that Nightlife takes to be welcomed into full membership.

The title of this short story, “Watch With Me,” is the call that Nightlife gives to the men following after him in community. He begins this call when he wishes to share his story at the church service, to let the community know what it is like to live his life as a man who is blind, both in his eyes and to the community around him. At the same time, Nightlife’s call is also to lift the blindness of the rest of Port William, so that they can see how they have left him out of the community. This call persists through this entire story, for it is the reason for the pilgrimage; Nightlife wants to open the eyes of the Port Williamites so that they can welcome him into the community. As the men sleep around the fire in the woods, having lost Nightlife’s trail and not wanting to stumble upon the gun-wielding man in the dark, he appears in the dim light of morning. Standing over the prone bodies of the men he used to know but does not recognize in this journey, he asks one question repeatedly: “Couldn’t you stay awake?” (WWM 116). While this passage is a clear reference to Jesus in the garden—when he asks His disciples why they could not stay awake to pray with Him in this great time of need—it also carries threads of hospitality (Matthew 26:40-41 ESV). Could they not stay vigilant in keeping him in community, in offering hospitality to him? Could they not stay awake to the experience of what his life was like? Could they not keep their eyes open to his need for full membership? Christ is asking the same thing of His disciples: Could they have not stayed awake with Him in community, so that He could have had their hospitality of the heart? In this way, the people of Port William failed in

the hospitality they were to offer to the stranger, so that he could become one of their own in membership. They did not adapt, as Mackey tells us the Celtic Christians did, to offer the hospitality Nightlife needed in that moment.

Yet this is not where the story ends. Berry does not leave Nightlife on the outskirts of the community, but he allows the men to welcome him in after the journey is done. In the same place that the whole adventure began, the hen house on Tol Proudfoot's property, Nightlife is finally given the chance to be heard and seen; he is finally allowed to share his sermon that he wanted to give at the revival. After a long night in the woods showing hospitable care to a stranger, the men finally open up to the hospitality of one of their own, by listening to what Nightlife has to say. They have been shaped by the journey of hospitality to be ready for the final lesson from Nightlife. He tells the parable of the lost sheep, a sermon that the church-goers of Port William had heard countless times, but he tells it in a new way that matches with the call for hospitality. The narrator says, "Though Christ, in speaking this parable, asked his hearers to think of the shepherd, Nightlife understood it entirely from the viewpoint of the lost sheep, who could imagine fully the condition of being lost and even the hope of rescue, but could not imagine rescue itself" (WWM 121). The men realize that Nightlife is sharing the story of what it is like to be him, to be a sheep that is lost on the outside, and through giving him this chance to speak, they are offering him the very hospitality he is desiring. As he finishes his sermon and then comes to, "he looked around like a man just awakened, and it was plain to the others that he saw that they were there with him and that he knew them" (122). Nightlife is no longer on the margins, nor is he a stranger to the men or them to him. He has been heard in hospitality and brought into full membership. The other men of Port William opened their hearts and minds to listen to Nightlife in hospitality, and allowing him to speak also gives Nightlife the chance to

show hospitality to them through sharing the Word of God. The realization of this hospitality shifts the hierarchy of the community, in ways that align with the Celtic Christian idea of a flexible community.

As mentioned in the "Overview of Celtic Christianity," membership in the Celtic monasteries was based on a monastic style rather than an episcopal one. There was a fluid hierarchy so that newcomers could have a place in the community. As Hunter writes:

They were populated by priests, teachers, scholars, craftsmen, artists, farmers, families, and children, as well as monks and/or nuns—all under the leadership of a lay abbot or lay abbess. They had little use for more than a handful of ordained priests, or for people seeking ordination; they were essentially lay movements. (28)

Note that there was no absolute line of authority; the monastic communities still had a head over the people to maintain some control, but the abbot or abbess was not in complete authority, thus the term “lay.” The position was not held so much on the basis of advanced education or training, but rather on the personal skills to step into a situation when leadership was needed. Cahill describes it as “independent, nonhierarchical, [and] mystical” (18). With this form of leadership in the community, the teachers, artists, farmers, and families could rise to their own station of leadership as the community needed.

In Port William, the structure of leadership is much the same. Anyone familiar with the collection can name off a few key players in the roles of leadership, such as Matt Feltner and Wheeler Catlett, but no one person stands out as being above the rest. In WWM, it is clear that Tol Proudfoot is in some sort of leadership role, for the story follows his interactions with Nightlife as he directs the rest of the men. However, his authority is only present when it benefits the community. The younger men look to him for most of the journey, but when he defers to

someone else, the others follow a new leader. In particular, Tol hands the mantle over to Burley Coulter—a man much younger than him and one who is on the margins himself, though not to the extreme that Nightlife was—because he is more suited to lead the party through the night. As darkness falls and the men begin to lose Nightlife in the shadows of the forest, Tol turns to them and says, "We can't all stay close enough to see him after dark...So let Burley follow Nightlife, and we'll follow Burley" (WWM 109). Because the men have formed a lay community while journeying together through the woods after Nightlife, Tol can turn the leadership over to Burley when it is necessary. The men follow Burley because he is a welcomed marginal member of the community, a man who has a place within the lay leadership of Port William, even though he is only in his early 20's. Until the very end of the story, Nightlife does not have that same place of leadership, even though he is a marginal member like Burley.

In an odd twist of fate, though a very necessary one, Nightlife rises to a point of authority by the end of the story. He is an example of the Celtic Christian way of welcoming in strangers and those on the margins, so that they might eventually join in the flexible rotation of leadership. As he stands before the men in the hen house, preaching and leading them in song, Nightlife is in authority over everyone present. Part of this is because they stand in fear of the gun, Old Fetcher, in his hands, showing that he has not yet been fully accepted into membership. Yet as they sing and Nightlife preaches, the shutters on their eyes swing open wide, and the men of Port William finally see and hear Nightlife, finally let him into a place of complete membership. The narrator recounts the communal way the men sing, saying, "They lifted the fine old song up against the rattle of hard rain on the roof and up over the roof and out into the gray, rainy light—as if in them the neighborhood sang, even under threat, its love for itself and its grief for itself, greater than the terms of this world would allow" (WWM 121). Through these men, the neighborhood of

Port William welcomed Nightlife in, even as he posed a threat with the gun, because they heard his story and knew that he belonged. In the love of the community itself, Port William makes room for Nightlife within the borders of full membership. Fritz Oschlaeger, in his book *The Achievements of Wendell Berry*, describes that final scene as Nightlife coming back to himself and back into community with the others:

He now knows himself again as part of the membership—a kind of relationality that is prior, for us, to our cherished individuality. Tol tests Nightlife to see if he has any memory of what has occurred, and he does not. From being completely in and “at himself,” he has turned outward toward others and the common life of ordinary time.
(132)

Nightlife is back in community with the people of Port William, but it is with a greater connection than his previous marginal status. Like the pagans that the Celtic Christians ministered to, Nightlife is brought in from the outside, listened to, and understood by the community in a way that allows him to have a place of full and lasting membership.

Conclusion

When the Celtic Christian lens is used to analyze the hospitality displayed in “Watch With Me,” it argues the proper practice of hospitality. Separated from the connection to place, viewing Berry’s hospitality through Celtic Christianity is powerful simply in the way it validates Berry’s ideals. Adding Berry’s personal connection to the place of Ireland, along with his and the Celtic Christian’s reverence for a person’s place, the similarities take on a whole new meaning, one that reaches past hospitality to the whole idea of place itself. Had Berry been connected to the place of Ireland without representing the virtues of Celtic Christianity, or had he held to the ancient Irish way of community but had no ancestral connection to the island, the similarities this

essay has traced could perhaps be dismissed as coincidental. But as it is, Berry writes and lives the Celtic Christian way through his ancestry, his pilgrimages to Ireland, and his imagined vision of community in Port William.

While it is true that the virtue of hospitality is present in many religions and traditions, Berry's personal connection to the place of Ireland brings significance to this particular comparison. Homeplace is so integral to Berry's vision of hospitality and community that it would be remiss not to look at the representation of place given by his ancestral home. He may not himself make the direct connection to the ancient religion of Celtic Christianity, but his lifestyle and writings do, in his encouragement to cherish and know a place. In an interview with Vince Pennington, Berry says, "So if you are thinking about practical issues of how you settle in a place, how you establish a human community in a place, and bring about some kind of preserving relationship with that place, the members of the community would have to remember the past" (Grubbs 37). Berry's ancestral past is Ireland, and the religious past of Ireland is Celtic Christianity. However subconsciously or implicitly, Berry is remembering the past of Celtic Christianity, remembering not only the place that he comes from, but also the value of hospitality and community that his ancient place holds.

Just as the Christian Celts formed communities based on hospitality and care of place, Wendell Berry lives and writes out the six forms of Sustainable Hospitality that reflect the Celtic Christian hospitality of love and respect for others, particularly through *Nightlife*. While the Celtic missionaries sought out those in membership on the margins, Berry created a character of margin-hospitality in *Nightlife* and sent him through the pilgrimage paths of membership. The way that the people of Port William, particularly Tol Proudfoot, sought out *Nightlife* after he estranged himself from the community is the same care that monastic communities showed to

outsiders and strangers. Finally, the admission to full membership through hospitality in place that travelers could find within the walls of Celtic monasteries is handed down to Nightlife, as his pilgrimage is completed and hospitality is given and received from every party. Berry may not intentionally be seeking out to reflect Celtic Christianity, but his own argument of place urges scholars and historians to dig deep and see how he is calling up the traditions of a place running through his blood.

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