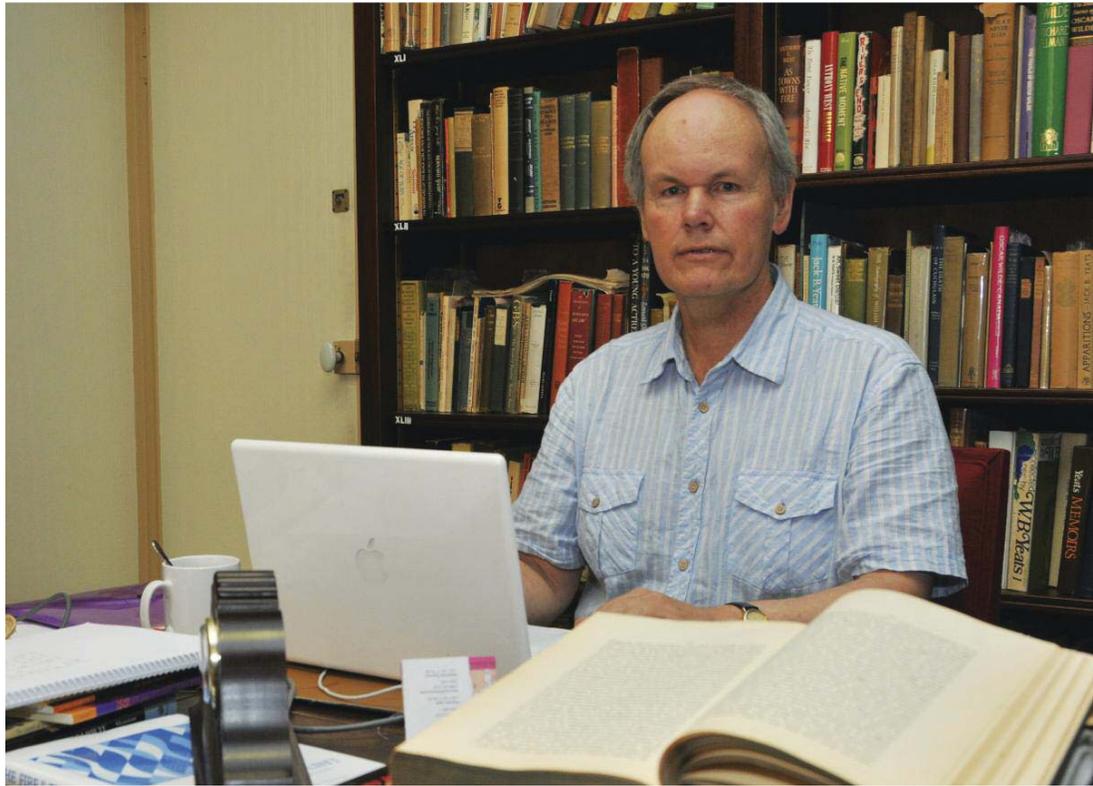


James Harpour



Monaco is a theatre of dreams and fantasies and nothing could be better for a writer. It is a unique place, grounded on medieval history but insistently modern, its tower blocks surging towards the sea like a standing ovation. I had in fact visited the Principality before, way back in 1976, when I was Inter-railing around Europe with a school friend. Returning in 2010 was like walking into a déjà vu—a sense of the familiar blending with the new. And this time I glimpsed what it was like to be an insider—thanks to the warmth, friendliness and sage advice of Judith and her back-up team of Géraldine and Síle, a triumvirate of guardian angels whose practical help and sense of fun made the month a constant delight.

Writers, they say, need a room of their own, or a room with a view, and the view I had in the First Editions' Room was of the spines of more books I wanted to read than I could shake a stick at. The daily danger was the lifting of the head from my own writing to think a thought and inadvertently spot the first edition of *Ulysses* or some other bibliographic treasure: my writing would grind to a halt while I investigated the volume in question. The task I'd set myself for the four precious weeks was to progress a long poem inspired by the Book of Kells. And of course the library contained that most valuable of tomes—the 1990 facsimile of the book published by Faksimile-Verlag Luzern, a most extraordinary work that even reproduces the holes in the original vellum. I felt like a medieval scribe, poring over Kells and scratching away at my notepad. It was pure joy!

It was a wonderful four weeks of serious endeavour and new friendships and I'd like to thank the Ireland Fund of Monaco for their generosity in making it a month to remember, as well as Judith, in particular, for all her support and good humour. I returned home to the grey October mists of West Cork but the fierce sunlight, tanned faces, magical book spines and reflecting surfaces of Monaco turned, and still turn, like a revolving door in my mind.