

The Poet's Chair: Writings from the Ireland Chair of Poetry

BY TOM WALKER

IN THE WINTER 1955 issue of *Studies*, the English poet-critic Donald Davie published his "Reflections of an English Writer in Ireland." Having lectured at Trinity College Dublin for five years, he noted his strong impression that "the literary independence of Ireland" was by now "an accomplished fact." Part of what characterized this difference was that, by contrast with England and America, "the ties between poetry and society" in Ireland had "not yet been snapped." But Davie also argued that "nothing is more striking in the Anglo-Irish tradition than the absence of any true critic at all, certainly of any tradition."

John Montague.

THE BAG APRON: THE POET AND HIS COMMUNITY

DUBLIN: UNIVERSITY COLLEGE PRESS, 2017.

Hbk €20.

Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill.

CEAD ISTEACH / ENTRY PERMITTED.

DUBLIN: UNIVERSITY COLLEGE PRESS, 2017.

Hbk €20.

Paul Durcan.

THREE EUROPEAN POETS.

DUBLIN: UNIVERSITY COLLEGE PRESS, 2017.

Hbk €20.

Much of Davie's critique rings true down to the present. For all that Ireland's poets and their poetry are, of course, connected to a host of non-Irish works and figures, they now lie within a distinct set of traditions that constitutes the ongoing, multi-faceted story of Irish literature. A country in which a poet's funeral attracts live television and radio coverage, as happened with the death of Seamus Heaney in 2013, is also one where poetry still plays a notable social role. Yet any sense of a dearth of worthwhile criticism is thankfully no longer the case. Indeed, Davie's comments were partly made in response to an article by Denis Donoghue and in turn provoked a further intervention by Vivian Mercier—two fine critics already starting to undermine the plausibility of such judgements.

Moreover, while many important critics of the Irish literary tradition have, like Donoghue and Mercier, been academics, much valuable criticism has also over the past sixty years been offered by practicing Irish writers. In this regard, Heaney himself not only wrote poetry but also vigorously professed it, becoming a major literary

figure by virtue of his compelling criticism as well his poems. It seems fitting, therefore, that one of the characteristically generous outcomes of his winning of the Nobel Prize was the establishment in 1998 of the Ireland Chair of Poetry. Jointly held between Queen's University Belfast, Trinity College Dublin, University College Dublin and the Arts Council, and modeled on the Oxford Chair of Poetry that had been held by Heaney (and that has since been held by Paul Muldoon), one of the three-year post's responsibilities includes giving annual public lectures. This has offered a further forum for contemporary poets to reflect critically on poetry, steering a welcome course between the ivory tower and the confines of reviewery.

The chair is now on to its seventh distinguished incumbent, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin. The lectures of the three previous incumbents, Paula Meehan, Harry Clifton, and Michael Longley, were published in standalone volumes by University College Dublin Press. And the same publisher has now also republished as separate books the lectures of the first three incumbents, John Montague, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Paul Durcan—which had originally been brought out in a single volume, *The Poet's Chair*, by Lilliput Press in 2008. Beautifully printed and bound, this substantial series of published lectures pays testament to the rich diversity of contemporary Irish poetry and its criticism. It also offers the opportunity to consider how several important Irish poets have variously gone about the challenge of professing poetry in the public sphere.

Before becoming the first holder of the chair, Montague (who died in 2016) had long been an important critical voice within the modern history of Irish poetry. Going back to his contributions to *The Bell* in the early 1950s, he is perhaps most famous for calling on Irish poets to look outwards for rejuvenation towards the innovations then happening in the United States and France. Throughout his career he also appraised the achievement of many Irish forebears and contemporaries, and reflected on the challenge of writing of and to Ireland.

Such threads run through his opening lecture in the chair, "The Bag Apron or the Poet and his Community." While offering a personal memoir, Montague also reflects more generally on how poets come to sound like themselves. A wealth of local and foreign influences, ranging from the local South Armagh *aislingí*, recited by his Irish teacher at school, to the *Journals* of André Gide, which his pious father dared not open,

are depicted as gradually giving a way to a need to write about his "own wellsprings," "the hills of Tyrone" and "a Belfast man in the Crown Bar," traveling far "in order to write about homely things" (4–6). A further paradox also offered is that finding "your own voice [...] does not isolate you, but restores you to your people." Yet in making such connections to his home place and people, Montague is crucially not seeking to deny the forces that are breaking down "the unit of the parish" across the world. Rather his poetry seeks in such circumstances to hold a particular receding way of life "in the heart and the head" (11–12).

A similar sense of poetry's delicate ability to offer momentary imaginative and musical harmony against the fractured realities of history is arrived at by the end of the second lecture, "Short Thoughts on the Long Poem." It again reflects biographically on Montague's own practice, while also placing the genesis of the polyvocal, musical recorded performance of *The Rough Field* in the context of a whistlestop historical survey of the long poem across several literary traditions. The lecture then ends by reflecting back from Ulster's problems to the deep, unresolved tensions they reveal about the history of Western Europe, going back to the Reformation.

Indeed Montague's critical observations repeatedly cut across critical truisms about the supposed dichotomy between the local and the international, and the modern and the traditional within contemporary Irish poetry. This is also seen in his final lecture, "Samuel Beckett, Neighbour." Its affectionate memoir of the poet's friendship with Beckett while living in Paris suddenly shifts to a telling reflection on his own "increasing disaffection" with the modern French literary scene's indifference towards contemporary poetry. Those who, like Montague, knowingly followed Beckett and other Irish modernists often self-consciously chose to retrace seemingly more homely or formally traditional paths. Yet this was not done out of an indifference to modernity but rather through a searching sense of its evolving challenges.

The rich complexity of the Irish poetic tradition, though in another language, is also comparatively explored in "Kismet of the Workings of Destiny," the second of Ní Dhomhnaill's wonderful lectures. Likewise framing her observations within a memoir, she recounts her five fascinating years living in Turkey in the 1970s. Paradoxically, coming to feel "at home in a language so

entirely different from Irish," while also being "outside an English-speaking world for so long," helped her to "focus more than ever on Irish" (55). Again, to go away is actually to come back to a newly enriched and complex sense of home.

The historical and vernacular richness that Ní Dhomhnaill has come to access in learning Turkish and reading its literature stands in implicit contrast to the subject matter of her first lecture "Níl Ceard Isteach ag an bPobal / Public Access Denied." By way of series of pilgrimages to unmarked sites of literary significance to the Irish language in Counties Westmeath, Roscommon, Wicklow, Cork, as well as in Belfast and Dublin, she evokes something of the "deeply coded heritage of Ireland, which is well-nigh invisible to the ordinary citizen" (17). Arriving map in hand at the site of Ballinacor near Glenmalure in Wicklow to see the site where "the famous poems that make up the *Leabhar Branach* (*Book of the O'Byrnes*) were composed" (20), a sign stops her "dead in my tracks—PUBLIC ACCESS DENIED. I sigh. I suppose I should be pleased that the raths are still there at all. At any moment someone could take a JCB to them and no one would be any the wiser. For all their praise in poem after poem, they have no public monument status" (25).

Different and more recent kinds of byways within Irish poetry are also followed in Paul Durcan's impassioned lectures. They focus in turn on the work of three contemporaries, Anthony Cronin, Michael Hartnett, and Harry Clifton. Less biographical and more traditionally literary-critical in mode than the other two poets' lectures, they do a wonderful job of illuminating each poets' cultural and historical reach, and sheer intellectual complexity through several sustained and sensitive acts of close reading. They more than make their overarching case that these three poets' work has not been given the critical acclaim and attention it deserves. Like all the best literary criticism, they leave you itching as well to delve back into the poems themselves. Clifton's stock has thankfully risen since Durcan's lecture was first given, as evidenced by his own subsequent appointment to the Ireland Chair of Poetry. But one hopes that the lectures on Cronin and Hartnett also provoke others at home and abroad to re-engage closely and critically with their work, further enriching the remarkable story of modern Irish poetry. •

—Trinity College Dublin

"Idir dhá chomhairle": Aifric Mac Aodhá's *Foreign News*

BY CAITRÍONA NÍ CHLÉIRCHÍN

AIFRIC MAC AODHA'S poetry is sensitive and subtle. At the same time, many of the new poems in this collection by Gallery Press contain ludic and more playful elements. She is very precise, exact and concise as a poet. Her verses are neat, highly strung, full of tension and rich in musicality. Don't be fooled by the gentle voice throughout; if we don't listen (and read) closely we may miss the point entirely. How fitting is to see her translated by David Wheatley whose careful yet

quirky translations resound with the echoes of the inner rebellion of Mac Aodha's verse.

Aifric Mac Aodha.

FOREIGN NEWS.

TRANSLATED BY DAVID WHEATLEY

GALLERY PRESS, 2017. €11.95.

Aifric Mac Aodha is a contemporary Irish-language woman poet and is well aware of the sometimes dual cruelties of such a fate as we see in the poem "A Crow's Wisp":

Well she knew that holding
an eye isn't having an ear:
and beyond that she knew
how silence improves lipstick.

A woman a man drops
is called a crow's wisp:
something the wind takes
when a bird lets it slip.

(25)

A certain "hidden fury" lies beneath the calm surface of her work, which makes her a truly feminist poet. Everywhere there is a

sophistication and a deep awareness of the power of language. There's a holding back, a standing back, a reserve and almost a fear of the "unguarded tongue" which makes what she does say more powerful. In "Chicane" we sense a prohibition or a taboo around uttering the word "soul":

The gap between
this and that means
it's best not breathe
a word to a soul.

Best forbid it –