

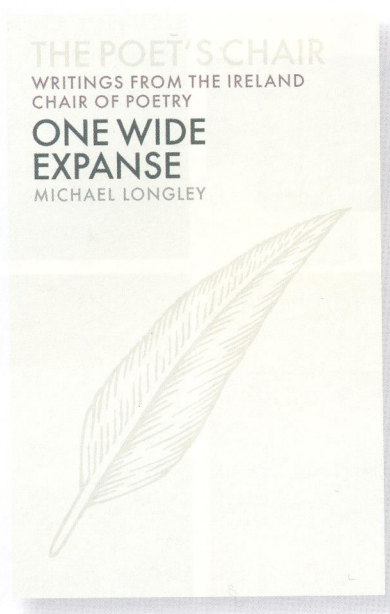
The beautiful things are difficult

One Wide Expanse. Michael Longley.
UCD Press; 78pp; €20/£17 hb; 22cm;
978-1-906359-89-8.

Michael Longley takes a quasi-religious view of poetry, believing that it is a 'calling', not a profession, as he recently stated on RTÉ's *Arena*: 'It's my life, it's my religion, it's the way I make sense of the world'. That world has encompassed growing up in Belfast before the Troubles, an education in Classics at Trinity College Dublin, and time divided between his two homes, in Belfast and Carrigskeewaun, a remote part of south-west Mayo where the landscape and nature have inspired much of his verse. His training in the literatures of ancient Greece and Rome gave him his love of the architecture of form or shape in poetry and his concern with formal syntax in his language. The twin locations of Belfast and Mayo are the settings for the various poetic genres that have preoccupied him—mainly elegies, including verses that in their focus on the pity of war are really anti-war, and poems on the natural world and love poems.

In the BBC Radio Three programme *The Essay Series: Letters to a Young Poet*, broadcast last year, Longley told a young correspondent that 'love poetry is at the heart of the enterprise ... if poetry is a wheel, then the hub is love poetry and branching out like spokes are all the other involvements and attachments, family, children, friends, nature'. So, love poems celebrating nature have been central to his writing, although his poems on the Troubles, such as 'Ceasefire' and 'The Ice-Cream Man', and those on World War I are probably better known.

This book contains the three public lectures that he gave in three Irish



universities—Queen's, Trinity and UCD—during his tenure as the Ireland Chair of Poetry (2007–10). It is the first of the series of lectures by the Ireland Professors of Poetry to be published by UCD Press, which will continue with Harry Clifton's lectures and then those of the current professor, Paula Meehan, when she concludes her term. In 2008 Lilliput Press published a volume containing essays by the first three occupants of this post, John Montague, Paul Durcan and Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill, in *The Poet's Chair*.

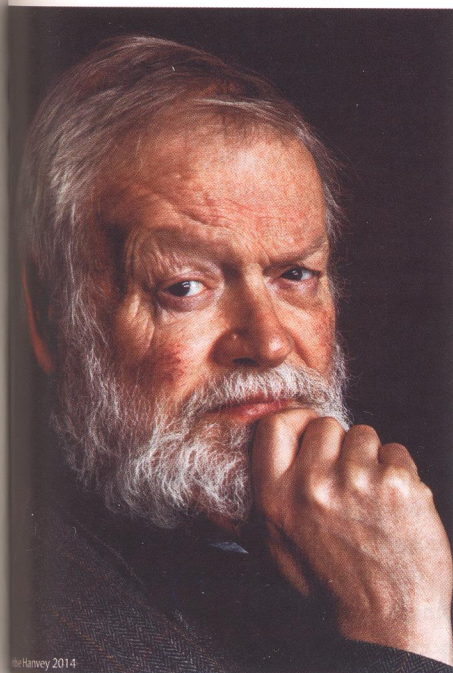
The Queen's University lecture, given on St Valentine's Night 2008, is entitled 'A Jovial Hullabaloo'. It is dedicated to his old schoolteacher from 'Inst', Joe Cowan, who, he writes, 'awakened in me ... a passion for poetry', and also to Alec Reid, the Redemptorist priest from Clonard Monastery at the interface between the Falls Road and the Shankill, who courageously acted as a go-between for the warring factions in the North for years leading up to the ceasefires.

'A Jovial Hullabaloo' starts by

quoting the American poet Wallace Stevens from his verse 'A High-Toned Old Christian Woman': 'Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame. / Take the moral law and make a nave of it / And from the nave build haunted heaven' (novelists, eat your hearts out!). Reflecting on his poetic craft, Longley combines reminiscence of his school and college days with a survey of some of the poets and poems that influenced his development. He recalls that there was little or no Irish literature on the school curriculum, although his teacher, Joe Cowen, xeroxed poems by then-living Irish poets such as Patrick Kavanagh, Louis MacNeice and W.R. Rodgers. The curriculum included the mainstream English canon, of which he was taken by John Keats's 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' and Walter de la Mare's 'The Listeners'. When he won a prize for his English studies in Third Form, Longley chose for his book *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*—this was a choice that alarmed his family, he tells us.

But it was during his time at TCD that his interest in poetry became an obsession. There he befriended Derek Mahon, a fellow Northerner, and the poet-academic from Kerry, Brendan Kennelly, who encouraged his writing. For his 21st birthday a friend gave him Patrick Kavanagh's *Come Dance With Kitty Stobling* (1960). He says that if he had to choose 'two Irish poetic uncles' they would be Kavanagh and MacNeice. At this time he was also excited by new work from three English poets: Philip Larkin's *The Less Deceived*, Ted Hughes's *Lupercal* and Geoffrey Hill's *For the Unfallen*. He bought the early collections of Thomas Kinsella, John Montague and Richard Murphy from the Dolmen Press, which also published the Sixties series of *Poetry*

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Ireland, edited by John Jordan, then lecturing at UCD.

Longley writes how he regrets that during this stay in Dublin he did not get to know the circle of poets connected with *Poetry Ireland* and UCD, including Jordan, Michael Hartnett and Paul Durcan, which indicates the cultural ‘apartheid’ that existed between the two universities. He also recalls that when he returned to Belfast in the autumn of 1963 he did not pick up at first on the early poetry of Seamus Heaney and that initially he was not inclined to join Philip Hobsbaum’s Belfast ‘Group’. But eventually he did go along to their meetings, with his fiancée Edna, and befriended Heaney and James Simmons. Later, he introduced Mahon to Heaney and these friendships became very important for the development of his art.

The second lecture, ‘One Wide Expanse’, subtitled ‘A Return to the Classics’, was given in TCD on 28 January 2009. The title, of course, is

taken from Keats’s great sonnet ‘On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer’, in which the Romantic poet pays tribute to the Renaissance translator who introduced him to the ‘realms of gold’ in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Longley states that he has been ‘haunted by Homer for fifty years’, and points out that Irish writers—including Heaney, Mahon, Tom Paulin, Brendan Kennelly and Longley himself—have found in Greek tragedy ways of dealing with the Troubles. Other Irish writers, such as Brian Friel, Tom Murphy, Frank McGuinness, Marina Carr and Aidan Mathews, are also indebted to the Classics. He recalls the 2002 campaign against the removal of the Classics from Queen’s University, lamenting its ultimate failure. He quotes his former professor of Greek at TCD, W.B. Stanford, who used to tell his students *chalepa ta kala*, ‘the beautiful things are difficult’, the Socratic proverb beloved of Plato.

His third lecture, ‘The West’, delivered at UCD on 1 February 2010, discusses the profound influence that the west of Ireland—its landscape, environment and people—has had on his poetry. He recalls how as a teenager his parents took him and his twin brother on a caravan holiday to west Donegal, and how he awoke to his first glimpses of wilderness in the Atlantic light and ‘discovered my soul-landscape’. He fell in love with the area and wrote ecstatic letters to friends back in Belfast about the view across Sheephaven Bay to Marble Hill Strand and beyond it his first ‘holy mountain’, Muckish. Here the incipient poet in him awoke.

But his connection to the western landscape, its environment, natural habitat and wildlife is more closely associated with the area of west Mayo around the townlands of

Carrigskeewaun and Thallabawn, along the Owennadornaun River. When he made an inventory of his writing a few years ago, he discovered that one third of all his poems are set in this area.

He takes issue with the opinion of Declan Kiberd, who in his *Field Day Anthology* essay castigated writers and artists not originally from the west setting their work ‘on the Aran Islands, or in West Kerry or on the coast of Donegal,—all written by artists who act like self-conscious tourists in their own country’. Longley even takes issue with his late friend Seamus Heaney for criticising the renowned naturalist Lloyd Praeger’s point of view as ‘visual, geological, not like Kavanagh’s, emotional and definitive’. This criticism cannot be levied against Longley, because he has made the area so much his own and has invested so much of his imaginative energy and emotions in this landscape and its fauna and flora that it really has become part of him and his work.

He has spent a part of each year over the past 45 years living in west Mayo. He has come to love the place deeply and to care for the protection of its environment and habitat. In the process he has become a naturalist, an ornithologist and a botanist, influenced by his friends and neighbours David Cabot and Michael Viney. He has campaigned on environmental issues there and in the Burren, where he is a patron of the Burrenbeo Trust. In a eulogy in 2007 for another friend, the botanical artist Raymond Piper, he quoted lines from Christopher Smart’s ‘Jubilate Agno’: ‘For flowers are good both for the living and the dead / For there is a language of flowers’. Longley is fluent in that language, believing, as he says, that ‘we shall die if we let the wild flowers die’. ■