The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry

In the last fifty years Irish poets have produced some of the most exciting poetry in contemporary literature, writing about love and sexuality, violence and history, country and city. This book provides a unique introduction to major figures such as Seamus Heaney, but also introduces the reader to significant precursors like, Louis MacNeice or Patrick Kavanagh, and vital contemporaries and successors: among others, Thomas Kinsella, Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill and Paul Muldoon. Readers will find discussions of Irish poetry from the traditional to the modernist, written in Irish as well as English, from both North and South. This Companion provides cultural and historical background to contemporary Irish poetry in the contexts of modern Ireland but also in the broad currents of modern world literature. It includes a chronology and guide to further reading and will prove invaluable to students and teachers alike.
THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO
CONTEMPORARY IRISH POETRY

EDITED BY
MATTHEW CAMPBELL
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PREFACE

Much has happened to Irish poetry since October 1916, when Yeats wrote about the nine-and-fifty swans that he saw at Coole Park:

Unworned still, lover by lover
They paddle in the cold
Companionable streams or climb the air;
Their hearts have not grown old;
Passion or conquest, wander where they will,
Attend upon them still.

(‘The Wild Swans at Coole’)

We might expect ‘Passion or conquest’, love and war, from the Irish poem. Indeed such epic material must ‘attend’ Yeats’s wandering swans, servile to the history which follows them. The reader, too, Yeats seems to demand, must ‘Attend upon them still’, to concentrate on hard stuff: mysticism, history, poetry. These lines, though, are about more than coldness and power. Swans may be imperious in flight, but on the water they ‘paddle’, and it is hard to disconnect this word from the bathos of tentative human paddling or the comic duck. While the poem imagines immortality, and a long history of power and desire, it also has time for what the swans might say for us, more grounded, creatures. These are love birds, and their paddling is in ‘cold / Companionable streams’: the swans are companionable with the cold water and one another. They are also, adapting Coleridge, ‘companionsable forms’, the chance discovery of something fluttering, paddling or soaring in nature which is analogous to the passion or conquest which preoccupies poet and reader. The swans provide the company of symbol for Yeats, as his symbol may do in turn for his readers.

Yeats’s swans are ‘brilliant creatures’, and this Companion looks at the continuation of the ‘brilliant creatures’ of the generations of Irish poets which followed. Yeats shadows some of the following pages, but one of the stories
they tell is of a sense of confidence and cultural achievement no longer de-
pendent on cultivating heroic indifference or intellectual disdain. The com-
ppanionable streams of this book are those occupied by a poetry finding its
feet among the traumatic times of the divided island of Ireland in the lat-
ter half of the twentieth century. Yeats might have recognised the rural and
parochial concerns of much of the writing, even if he might not have ap-
proved of the ambivalence of its attitude to its own pastoralism. He might
also have recognised the meditation on historic events, local or internation-
al. But this meditation may speak less of passion or conquest, and more in
the voice of the ‘Lost people of Treblinka or Pompeii’ in Derek Mahon’s great
poem of 1975, ‘A Disused Shed in County Wexford’. They cry: ‘Let the
God not abandon us / Who have come so far in darkness or in pain / We too
had our lives to live.’

It is hoped that this book will be companionable for those who seek to
understand the history and development of Irish poetry in the second half
of the twentieth century. Its chapters focus on individual figures, groups of
poets or important movements and sub-periods within the broadly ‘contem-
porary’. The usual dates for what this word might mean in Irish literary
history vex many commentators. Frequently its threshold is placed around
the deaths of Yeats and James Joyce, in 1939 and 1941 respectively. Others
though, like Mahon along with Peter Fallon in their Penguin selection of
contemporary Irish verse, would rather that the ‘contemporary’ referred to
those who are still writing. This book opts for a middle way: the example
of Yeats, say, may be taken as given, but the work of Patrick Kavanagh or
Louis MacNeice or Séan Ó Riordáin still reverberates for living Irish poets,
some of whom still work within or against their differing examples.

No less contentious is the notion of what constitutes ‘Irish’ verse, since
Irish literature continues to be written in the UK, Europe or the US. It is
also written in two languages, English and Irish (when speaking in English,
the ‘Gaelic’ poet would nowadays say that he or she speaks and writes in
‘Irish’). Ireland as well, might ostensibly be said to be two places, the twenty-
six counties of the Republic of Ireland and the six counties of Northern
Ireland, a state which is still part of the United Kingdom. This book offers
no solutions to these questions, but attempts to be a companion to those
who would wish to encounter the range of poetry written by Irish men and
women, parochial and international, Irish and English, North and South.

The chapters in this Companion also suggest the breadth of the practice of
Irish poetry in its local and international contexts and the range of its forms,
giving some sense of the characteristic imagery, metric and aesthetic scruple
of the Irish poem, while allowing a grasp of both continuity and tradition
and the innovatory and the new. The ‘relevance’ of the Irish poem is not
PREFACE

just to Irish history or politics, important and pressing as that must always be. It is also to many of the reasons why we read poems, looking to answer questions relating to passion – love and sexuality, longing and loss – as well as conquest. The American critic and publisher Dillon Johnston here describes the current brilliant generation of Irish poets as likely to be remembered for their quality along with other great literary generations, the Elizabethan, Jacobean and Romantic English poets and those American poets who followed the Depression. This book seeks to be companionable with those brilliant creatures and the place from which they have come.

Ray Ryan at Cambridge University Press set this book in motion and has watched it with vigilant enthusiasm throughout its preparation. Initial planning is indebted to the comments of four anonymous readers at the Press and the contributions of David Ford and Kevin Taylor. Thanks are due to Martin Fanning of Four Courts Press and David Crone for the cover illustration. The editor would also like to acknowledge the contributions and advice of Alex Arnison, Brian Campbell, Claire Connolly, Valerie Cotter, Alex Houen, Dillon Johnston and Neil Roberts.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>January, death of James Joyce.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1942</td>
<td>Patrick Kavanagh, <em>The Great Hunger</em>.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td>End of Second World War. Labour landslide in United Kingdom.</td>
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<td>1946</td>
<td>Denis Devlin, <em>Lough Derg</em>.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1949</td>
<td>Republic of Ireland declared and Republic leaves the British Commonwealth. Ireland Act passed by Westminster Parliament, guaranteeing status of Northern Ireland within UK.</td>
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<td>1950</td>
<td>Death of George Bernard Shaw.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>Noel Browne’s ‘Mother and Child’ scheme fails in the Republic.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>Seán Ó Riordáin, <em>Eireaball Spideoghe</em>.</td>
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<td>1953</td>
<td>Austin Clarke, <em>Ancient Lights</em>.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1957</td>
<td>Máirtín Ó Direáin, <em>Ó Móirn agus Dánta Eile</em>.</td>
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<td>1959</td>
<td>Eamon De Valera becomes President and Sean Lemass becomes Taoiseach.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>Radio Telefís Eireann (RTE) begins broadcasting.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>Thomas Kinsella, <em>Downstream</em>.</td>
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CHRONOLOGY


1970 Establishment of Provisional IRA. Innti founded in Cork with Michael Davitt as editor.

1971 August, British government introduce internment without trial.


1979 August, Murder of Lord Mountbatten and eighteen British soldiers at Warrenpoint on same day. Seamus Heaney, Field Work.


CHRONOLOGY

1984 British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher survives Brighton bomb attack. Seamus Heaney, Station Island.
1986 Republic votes against divorce in referendum.
1989 Death of Samuel Beckett.
1990 Election of Mary Robinson as President. Eavan Boland, Outside History. Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill, Pharosah’s Daughter.
1993 Downing Street declaration of no British ‘strategic interest’ in Northern Ireland. Cathal Ó Searcaigh, Homecoming / An Bealach ‘n a Bhaile.
1994 IRA ceasefire.
1997 New IRA ceasefire. Mary McAleese elected President.
1999 Northern Ireland Assembly meets, briefly, in Belfast for first time. Flood committee hearings begin to investigate political corruption in South. Derek Mahon, Collected Poems.
2000 Assembly revived, with nationalist and unionist ministers in cabinet.