

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-01245-4 - The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry

Edited by Matthew Campbell

Excerpt

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## I

MATTHEW CAMPBELL

## Ireland in poetry: 1999, 1949, 1969

## I

Ireland in 1999 appeared to be ending its trouble-strewn twentieth century as a remarkably prosperous, culturally confident and optimistic place. The Good Friday agreement of the previous year had moved the Northern Irish Peace Process further towards the cessation of the thirty years of violence that since 1969 had cost more than 3,500 lives. The new Northern Ireland Assembly met, briefly, for the first time. Capitalising on the benefits of a highly-educated workforce, the Irish embraced an increasingly globalised market. The Irish phenomenon of rapid growth based on foreign investment in new technologies mirrored the achievements of Asia, and the Irish economy became known as the 'Celtic Tiger'. To the world, though, Ireland still had the glamour of its ancient traditions, music and poetry. It represented a mix of authenticity and the intellectual and spiritual integrity of a cultural development which the popular stage hit of the 1990s, *Riverdance*, pictured stretching forwards from pre-history.

Irish literature was widely represented in the bookshops and campuses of the anglophone world, and new Irish poetry shared in that world's appetite for Irish music, cinema and art. Translated into many languages, the poet Seamus Heaney had received the Nobel Prize in 1995 and was a Harvard and Oxford Professor. The President of the United States, Bill Clinton, was so taken by the miracles of justice envisaged in a chorus from Heaney's 1990 version of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, *The Cure at Troy*, that he hung a copy of it on the wall of his study in the White House. Heaney's chorus desired that 'hope and history might rhyme', and Clinton couldn't resist yoking it to his hometown of Hope, Arkansas in the title of his 1996 campaign manifesto, *Between Hope and History*.<sup>1</sup> Yet Heaney's international success had followed those of his fellow poets, Thomas Kinsella and John Montague, who had both held prestigious posts at American universities. Eavan Boland, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Derek Mahon were to follow. Paul

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Muldoon was Professor in Princeton, and soon to be Oxford Professor of Poetry.

Irish poetry appeared to be thriving, in Ireland and further afield, as writing from a small country on the Atlantic seaboard of Europe assumed central importance for readers of contemporary literature in Ireland, Britain and the USA. In the years around 1999 a succession of prestigious collected or selected editions of Irish poets appeared, along with substantial and internationally-read anthologies. The 1990s had begun with the publication of the monumental *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, and its three volumes represented over a thousand years of writing in Latin, Irish and English. The anthology had its detractors, particularly those who felt it laid too much emphasis on the politics of Irish literature, or those who felt that it downplayed writing by Irish women. The literary history of the 1990s, though, tells of a renaissance of women's writing, for the stage and in fiction, as well as by poets. By 2000, an influential US-published anthology, *The Wake Forest Book of Irish Women's Poetry* portrayed a wide-ranging and diverse canon of writing. In 2002, two further volumes of the *Field Day* anthology appeared, a massive act of collaborative scholarship dedicated to the women's tradition in Irish writing.

Significant collections of Irish poetry, by men and women, in English and Irish, were also published by English, American and Irish presses throughout the 1990s. In 1999 the Irish-based Gallery Press published Derek Mahon's *Collected Poems*, and further substantial collections appeared from Richard Murphy and Pearse Hutchinson in 2000 and 2002. The British publishers Faber and Faber, and the American press Farrar Straus and Giroux, had long supported Irish poetry, and they published Seamus Heaney's *Opened Ground: Poems 1966–1996* in 1998. In 2001, Paul Muldoon's *Collected Poems, 1968–1998* also gathered together thirty prolific years of writing. Thomas Kinsella produced his second collected volume within ten years, from the British press Carcanet in 2001. Carcanet published Eavan Boland's *Collected Poems* in 1995, and she was also published by Norton in the United States. The work of Irish language poets, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Cathal Ó Searcaigh, appeared in handsome collaborative volumes, translated by leading Irish poets of the day. Irish poetry readings filled auditoria, with Ní Dhomhnaill, Brendan Kennelly and Paul Durcan popular performers of their poems and satiric commentators on the public realm. Durcan's 1999 volume, *Greetings from our Friends in Brazil* contained a long elegy written for the twenty-nine people who had died in the Omagh bombing of the previous year, but it also contained poems about the years in which Mary Robinson had been the first woman President of Ireland. Supporter of the arts, dedicatee of volumes by Durcan and Boland, she was

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one of the great liberalising influences on a changing Ireland. She was later to serve as a United Nations High Commissioner.

However, the investigations begun in 1999 by the Flood Tribunal in the Republic of Ireland, were the most prominent reminder of the corruption that had long attended southern Irish public life. Neither was optimism encouraged by the atrocity at Omagh nor the difficulties that the new Northern Ireland Assembly experienced in its early meetings. Nonetheless, constitutional and social change had come. In Northern Ireland, the devolved powers granted to the Northern Ireland Assembly matched those the Labour government of the United Kingdom had granted to similar assemblies in Scotland and Wales. From the 1980s onwards, not only politicians, but also historians, novelists, poets, critics and journalists, had shared new ways of thinking about the culture and history of Ireland, in relation to Britain, Europe and beyond. This being Ireland, controversy attended every part of this new thinking, but it centred around assumptions about its history as a colonised and now postcolonial country, and of the challenge of its new status as an important part of the European Union in a global market. There was still the continuing fact of the partition of the island, and other divisions existed, social and economic as well as sectarian and political. But these began to take new forms.

Emigration, for instance, has long been a fact of Irish life, and much Irish writing still took place outside Ireland. The enormous popular success of Irish-American writer Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* (1996) perpetuated the view that exile was the only antidote to poverty, repression and endless rain. But in a shrinking world, the poetry still told of the sense of place, voice and community, even from displaced locations. The poets Matthew Sweeney and Bernard O'Donoghue wrote Irish verse from London or Oxford. Eamon Grennan pursued a successful critical and poetic career in the USA. A younger poet like Justin Quinn could move to Prague and still co-edit the influential magazine of the younger Irish poets, *Metre*, exploring connections between the Irish experience and the no-less historic changes of the Eastern Europe of the 1990s.

Exile and change, however, did engage the Irish poet and his or her characteristic mode of elegy, still preoccupied with the sense that change may also mean loss, the loss of the traditions and certainties of a recognisable national identity. As the Irish poem was written in a world facing environmental as well as economic and social change, so it adapted its traditional concerns with elegy or nature, to these new conditions. Paul Muldoon's 1994 volume *The Annals of Chile* was written from the United States, and contained two great elegies, 'Incantata' for a former lover, and 'Yarrow' for his mother. They are concerned with the failing of the human body and the eradication

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of the rural past. Both poems end, grief-stricken and barely articulate before the facts of death from cancer, as they also watch a fast-disappearing pastoral world, in which even the singing birds – corncrake, bittern – face extinction.

The paradox may be that such writing about loss – personal, environmental or social – can come together in work such as Muldoon's, major poetry written with confidence for an increasingly international audience. That sense of its own confidence meant that Irish poetry could pursue its assimilation not just of the English, American or Irish language traditions, but also various world literatures, Eastern European, Hispanic, Modern Greek. Seemingly assured of modern classic status, in the 1990s Irish poetry also sounded an older classical note. As the poets tiptoed through the possible peace of the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, Michael Longley, Seamus Heaney, Eavan Boland and Muldoon all turned to the eclogue or the pastoral elegy. The models were Homeric or Virgilian, and their recurrent note was of exhaustion after war. Written from an old world, they faced the unknown world of the future in poems of homecoming or retreat. But they knew that peace was the first pre-requisite. In his sonnet 'Ceasefire', first published in 1994, Longley re-imagines a conversation from the Trojan wars, between Achilles and Priam. It reminds its reader of the difficulty of a necessary forgiveness, as it is allowed to conclude with the full rhyme of the concluding couplet of the English sonnet: 'I get down on my knees and do what must be done / And kiss Achilles' hand, the killer of my son'.<sup>2</sup>

## II

Fifty years previously, around 1949, such confidence was hard to find. In the cinema, popular perceptions of Irish culture and politics veered between those in the English film-maker Carol Reed's dark tale of a wounded gunman on the run in Belfast in his 1947 *Odd Man Out* and the Irish-American director John Ford's piece of 1952 west-of-Ireland paddywhackery, *The Quiet Man*. Yet in 1949, Ireland had made a constitutional assertion of its independence. On a state visit to Canada the previous September, the Irish Taoiseach (Prime Minister), John Aloysius Costello, announced that he was going to declare Ireland a Republic. Since 1921, twenty-six of the thirty-two counties of the island of Ireland had been self-governing while remaining within what was left of the British Empire, the Commonwealth. In 1937, the previous Taoiseach, Eamon de Valera, had framed a Constitution for the new state which allowed it effective independence from Britain. The aim was to further the establishment of the institutions of an Ireland which was rural in population, agricultural in economy, Roman Catholic in religion and Gaelic

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in culture. Irish was to join English as the official dual language of the state. Ireland also sought to be non-aligned in foreign allegiance. Neutrality was to follow through the 1939–45 ‘Emergency’, as the Irish referred to the period of war in which much of the rest of the world was to participate. The further break-up of the British Empire followed the war, with the British granting independence to India, Pakistan, Ceylon and Burma, and the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 on former British territories in Palestine. In 1949, Ireland and India declared themselves Republics. Unlike India, Ireland also left the Commonwealth.<sup>3</sup>

Surely now, Ireland was free and confident, self-sufficient in politics and culture? Given that it had secured its independent status, could it not also continue to contribute to the growing artistic culture of international modernity for which its writers had been so important? In the early years of the century, the establishment of the Irish Literary Theatre had proved a significant example to national theatrical movements across the world. In 1922, James Joyce had published a novel set entirely in one day in Dublin, *Ulysses*, from which world fiction has yet to recover. In 1923, William Butler Yeats won the Nobel Prize for Literature, and in 1925, George Bernard Shaw was to receive the same accolade. All of these achievements had been gained in writing in the English language, a language which the Irish had used to establish a powerful national culture with an international readership. However, Yeats and Joyce died in 1939 and 1941 respectively. Joyce had lived across Europe, and Shaw had lived in London. The writer who was to be Ireland’s next Nobel Laureate (1969), Samuel Beckett, had left the safety of Dublin to return to Paris in 1940, deciding that it was better to lend resistance to the occupied French during the war than maintain the neutrality that his Irish citizenship gave him. ‘You simply couldn’t stand by with your arms folded’,<sup>4</sup> Beckett later said, in marked distinction from the policy of the Irish government. After the war, he decided to write in French.

Politically, the April 1949 declaration of the Republic of Ireland was followed in June of that year by a reminder of one reason why the constitutional future of the new Republic might not be entirely settled. The recently-elected British Labour government retaliated with the Ireland Act, confirming the status of the six counties of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom as long as a majority within that state voted to remain British. While it was to benefit greatly from the post-war health and educational reforms of the nascent British Welfare State, the culture and government of Northern Ireland was still remarkably conservative. The example of the poets Louis MacNeice and John Hewitt was to be important for a later generation of Ulster writers, but it was received with ambivalence in mid-century Ulster. The son of a Church of Ireland bishop, MacNeice was educated at an English

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public school and at Oxford, and had lived through, and participated in, the highly politicised movements of British 1930s writing. He was closely involved with a leftwing set that included W.H. Auden and the Soviet spy Anthony Blunt. While MacNeice was ambivalent to the politic commitment of his friends, he had directed a diatribe towards Ireland in the sixteenth section of his 1939 *Autumn Journal*. It contained a swingeing attack on factionalised Ulster and Irish politics. ‘Kathleen Ni Houlihan!’ MacNeice had exclaimed, ‘Why must a country, like a ship or a car, be always female / Mother or sweetheart?’ ‘Yet we love her forever and hate our neighbour’, he continued, ‘And each one in his will / Binds his heirs to continuance of hatred’.<sup>5</sup> While MacNeice worked for the BBC in London for most of his life, Ireland exercised a strong pull even on this self-consciously deracinated intellectual. He was to write his best poetry just before he died in the early 1960s, but this uncertainty of identity – an Ulster protestant Irish poet writing at the heart of the English Establishment – and the uneven quality of his work in the late 1940s and 1950s, meant that his influence was not as great then as it has become for those, like Derek Mahon or Michael Longley, who have paid tribute to his sceptical intelligence.

Hewitt was an Ulster Protestant of Scottish descent, and his work emphasised regional identities within the United Kingdom. He could still describe himself, though, in the title of a 1945 poem, as ‘Once Alien Here’. The poet movingly sought to speak with an ‘easy voice’, while aware that his British or southern neighbours possessed ‘the graver English, lyric Irish tongue’.<sup>6</sup> A socialist in a state run by a Unionist party still dominated by the landed interest, his career as a museum curator was balked and in 1957 he had to leave for a job in Coventry, in England. There he helped in the cultural rebuilding of a city destroyed by war. It would take a particularly unusual imagination to find succour in the climate of the unreconstructed Belfast Hewitt left behind, like that of the English poet Philip Larkin, who travelled the other way. Coventry-born, he arrived to a job in Belfast in 1950. Belfast taught him, in the title of one of his poems, ‘The Importance of Elsewhere’ (1955). His strangeness in that part of the United Kingdom kept him ‘in touch’ with his characteristic sense of social ‘difference’.<sup>7</sup>

As Ireland faced the second half of the twentieth century the poetic mood was one of estrangement, division, cynicism and aftermath. The best writing continued to take place in exile, and both parts of Ireland appeared to be turning their backs on the great changes which were about to beset a post-war world. In the South, the poets were, in the main, dissenting voices. With a few exceptions – Beckett’s friends the poet and curator Thomas McGreevy and the diplomat-poet Denis Devlin, or the Irish-language poet Máirtín Ó Direáin – they were attuned neither to world movements in modern art

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nor the isolationist project of the new Republic. The farmer-poet Patrick Kavanagh's 1942 *The Great Hunger* had shown the pastoral ideal of the new nation suffering from spiritual and sexual famine. Alluding in his title to the potato famine of a century previously, in which a million Irish had died and after which many more had emigrated, Kavanagh had presented the actualities of toil and cultural repression in a rural world in which the future might only be viewed with cynicism and despair. His elders and contemporaries, the poets Austin Clarke, Padraic Fallon or Sean Ó' Ríordáin, the novelists and story-writers, Flann O'Brien, Seán O'Faolain and Frank O'Connor, and the playwright Brendan Behan, made for a conspicuously disaffected group when they could be conceived of as a group at all. Memoirs of late 1940s and 1950s Dublin, such as the poet Anthony Cronin's *Dead As Doornails*, tell of begrudgery and anti-modern inwardness in the environs of Dublin's Palace Bar.<sup>8</sup>

The great danger, according to Kavanagh, was a settling down into provincialism. While Hewitt emphasised regionalism, Kavanagh contrasted the provincial with the parochial, since the parish was the basis of 'all great civilisations . . . Greek Israelite, English'. An embrace of the parish would then enable Irish poetry to return to international relevance, since, 'Parochialism is universal: it deals with the fundamentals'.<sup>9</sup> A signal moment thus occurs in the sonnet 'Epic' (1951), where he compares a dispute over a field boundary to the 1938 Hitler-Chamberlain agreement over Czechoslovakia. 'Which / Was more important?' he asks, and is answered by the ghost of Homer: 'I made the Iliad from such / A local row. Gods make their own importance'.<sup>10</sup> Epic may be made out of the 'local row' of a parochial poetry and politics, and Kavanagh shows it gaining expression in the small-scale sonnet form. The poet Eavan Boland recalls meeting with the older Kavanagh in the 1960s. She remembers that for all of her distinctness from him, not least that of gender, she found in work such as this 'an example of dissidence . . . someone who had used the occasion of his life to rebuff the expectations and preconceptions of the Irish poem'.<sup>11</sup>

Emphasising the small-scale and the parochial as he did, and then turning to satirise the provincial culture around him, Kavanagh's example was to be great for the generation that began to publish in the years following his death in 1967. Just as pastoral or anti-pastoral had given way to satire in Kavanagh's post-1949 work, so even established poets like Austin Clarke felt bound to mark their distinctness from the burgeoning institutions of the new Republic. Under the influence of the Catholic Church, censorship had been prolific throughout the period of the Free State, and even the spiritually-inclined came to find themselves satirically removed from the growing cultural and sexual repression of Church and State. Kavanagh's great hunger

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had been in one sense that of frustrated male sexual desire. Padraic Fallon's love poems from this period, too, tell of the fantasies of the Irishman. Fallon's goddesses, nuns or whores are placed in modern surroundings, influenced by Freud or anthropology. As in the poem 'Women', however, they still remain uncertain of how to move beyond an imagery inherited from Yeats:

But a woman is a lie  
And I have a tower to climb, the tower of me,  
And a quarrel to settle with the sky  
But 'rest' says the woman. 'O lean back more:  
I am a wife and a mother's knee,  
I am the end of every tower.'<sup>12</sup>

There is ambivalence here: the poem either rejects Yeatsian self-sufficiency in the embrace of domesticity and marriage or it reiterates the auto-erotic's ultimate fantasy. But it does tell of an adaptation of the Irish poem to changing conceptions of sexuality, no matter how awkwardly male that new form initially was.

In 'The Siege of Mullingar, 1963', a poet of the next generation, John Montague, viewed with delight the frank sexuality of the youth at that year's Fleadh Cheoil (music festival). The poem's refrain parodies Yeats, before taking a dig at his dissident elders (his emphasis): '*Puritan Ireland's dead and gone / A myth of O'Connor and O'Faolain*'.<sup>13</sup> Maybe the conflation of political and personal dissidence with the sexual repression of Church and State was passing, but one important poem remained to be published from these dry years, Clarke's 1966 *Mnemosyne Lay in the Dust*. His long career had suffered in conditions of personal breakdown, religious crisis and political trauma, and the attention that his early work gave to instilling the rhythms of Irish-language poetry within the English poem had given way in the 1950s to satire and frequent polemic. Clarke's breakdown occurred in 1919, a year of revolutionary insurgence, and the poem tells of personal crisis against a background of initial political upheaval and liberation, written through conditions of reaction and repression. The poem of alienation and recovery was not to appear until the year of the celebrations of the fiftieth anniversary of the 1916 Easter Rising.

One of those executed after that rising, the poet and critic Thomas MacDonagh, had taught Clarke much at University College Dublin. But Clarke's later style was to show ambivalence towards what MacDonagh called the 'the Irish Mode', the mixing of the accents of Irish language poetry with the metric of the English poem. In these revisionary conditions, though, the Irish language poem continued to thrive. The leader of the Rising, after all, was an Irish language poet, Padraic Pearse. The Irish poetry of the 1950s



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is marked by innovation and an openness to experiment that is rare in the corresponding English-language poem. Seán Ó Riordáin, Máirtín Ó Direáin and Máire Mhac an tSaoi produced poetry influenced by American and English modernist models. Ó Riordáin's 1952 *Eireaball Spideoige* introduced a poet influenced alike by James Joyce and the Catholic theology with which Joyce quarrelled for so long. The poet Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill has complained that accounts of Irish poetry around mid-century ignore these poets.<sup>14</sup> Yet the audience that spoke and read Irish was small and dwindling. An Aran Islands writer like Ó Direáin knew that the western rural areas in which Irish survived was suffering waves of emigration which rivalled those of the nineteenth century.

The new beginning of 1949 was not matched with a new beginning in Irish culture. In the two decades that followed, the continuing partition of the island, the conservative political majorities associated with the dominance of non-conformist Protestantism in the North and Roman Catholicism in the South, and the struggle between that conservatism and attempts to modernise the Irish economy, seemed to be returning Ireland to a provincial backwater, unnoticed by the world. Yet as Montague's 'Siege of Mullingar' suggests, even this Ireland couldn't ignore the 1960s. The growing affluence of western economies did not leave Ireland alone. And the struggles for Civil Rights in the American South and the student risings of 1968 in the US and France were not unnoticed by the Irish of 1969.

## III

After a decade of economic modernisation, the Ireland of the late 1960s was lambasted by Thomas Kinsella, in his long modernist poem *Nightwalker* (1967). Kinsella had served in the office of T.K. Whitaker, the Irish Secretary for Finance. Working with the Taoiseach, Sean Lemass, Whitaker suggested that one reason for Ireland's economic problems was the country's isolationist approach to economic, and by association foreign, policy. He recommended that the Irish economy expand, and that it open itself up to increased foreign investment. Kinsella, for one, saw danger in what such changes might mean for an Ireland which had recently left the Commonwealth but would soon exchange it for the Common Market (in 1972, the Republic voted to join the European Economic Community). In *Nightwalker*, the disillusioned civil servant Kinsella described an Ireland suffering from the odd mix of residual Republicanism, Catholic conservatism and a freed entrepreneurial business class, sponsored by a new class of politician, often less than scrupulous in its dealings. Rather than be faced with a statue of liberty, say, or even Kathaleen Ni Houlihan at the mouth of Dublin harbour, the Irish are greeted

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by another female allegorical figure, 'Robed in spattered iron . . . Productive Investment'. She asks of the nation that would treat with her: 'Lend me your wealth, your cunning and your drive, / Your arrogant refuse'.<sup>15</sup> Kinsella is ambiguous on the subject of the dissenting poet: whether this means that the arrogant who refuse are mere refuse, rubbish, to Productive Investment, or whether Ireland's refuse be allowed the arrogance of a wasteful modern economy is not clear. What is clear is the poem's turn to elegy for the loss of the Gaelic culture which was supposedly supported in the constitution of the greedily modernising state. The third section ends with Irish silent across irrecoverable time: 'A dying language echoes / across a century's silence'.<sup>16</sup>

Kinsella's concerns in *Nightwalker* were primarily with the South, with language, and the unaccommodated self of the modern poet. They were not, explicitly at least, with the unsettled 'national question' of how to accommodate a divided island. But events in Northern Ireland were soon to affect the whole island, and the United Kingdom as well. In January 1967, the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association had been formed, pledged to restore the equal electoral representation of Catholic and Protestant, primarily within the increasingly segregated and ghettoised cities of Northern Ireland. Poet and critic Seamus Deane's 1996 memoir-novel of the 1950s and 1960s, *Reading in the Dark* presents a grim picture of the poverty and repression suffered by working-class Catholics in the city in which he was born.<sup>17</sup> To its majority Catholic and nationalist population the city was called Derry. Its Unionist City Council – guaranteed a majority by electoral divisions which were engineered or 'gerrymandered' according to religion – insisted on its seventeenth century colonial title, Londonderry. Divided by class and religion, Northern Ireland was unable even to agree on the names of places. For the Civil Rights protestors, Northern Ireland was like the southern US states, a divided part of a supposedly liberal modern democracy.

The initial years of protest for civil rights were non-violent, but the ruling Unionist party was slow to grant the legitimacy of the claims of the minority. After all, they could point to the religious intolerance and corruption of the new Ireland south of the Border as a warning against conceding too much to those who wished to rejoin their co-religionists. A subsequent escalation of violence followed, through rioting and the heavy-handed response of the police. In August 1969, increasing civil disorder meant the arrival of British troops on to the streets of Derry and Belfast. By November 1969, eventual electoral reform righted the civil wrongs which had led to this state of affairs. Instead of peace and political settlement, however, the violence was to get worse. The Irish Republican Army (IRA) was conspicuously absent from these early 'troubles', but the actions of armed police and troops quickly led to increased support. In January 1970, the Provisional IRA was born,