

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-54755-0 - The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney

Edited by Bernard O'Donoghue

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SEAMUS HEANEY

Seamus Heaney is a unique phenomenon in contemporary literature, as a poet whose works (such as his *Beowulf* translation, and volumes of poems such as *Electric Light* and *District and Circle*) have been high in the best-seller lists for decades. Especially since winning the Nobel Prize for Literature, he has come to be considered one of the most important English-language poets in the world. This *Companion* gives an up-to-date overview of his career thus far, and of his reception in Ireland, England and around the world. Its distinguished contributors offer detailed readings of all his major publications, in poetry, prose and translation. The essays further explore the central themes of his poetry, his relations with other writers and his prose writing. Designed for students, this volume will also have much to interest and inform the general reader and admirer of Heaney's unique poetic voice.

A complete list of books in the series is at the back of this book.

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CONTENTS

<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	page vii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	x
<i>Note on the Text, and Abbreviations</i>	xi
<i>Chronology</i>	xiii
1 Introduction	
BERNARD O'DONOGHUE	I
2 Seamus Heaney's Working Titles: From 'Advancements of Learning' to 'Midnight Anvil'	
RAND BRANDES	19
3 The Context of Heaney's Reception	
PATRICK CROTTY	37
4 Heaney in Public	
DENNIS O'DRISCOLL	56
5 Heaney and the Feminine	
FRAN BREARTON	73
6 Heaney and Eastern Europe	
JUSTIN QUINN	92
7 Heaney's Classics and the Bucolic	
BERNARD O'DONOGHUE	106
8 Professing Poetry: Heaney as Critic	
DAVID WHEATLEY	122

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-54755-0 - The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney
 Edited by Bernard O'Donoghue
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CONTENTS

9	Heaney and the Irish Poetic Tradition ANDREW MURPHY	136
10	Irish Influence and Confluence in Heaney's Poetry DILLON JOHNSTON	150
11	Heaney and Yeats NEIL CORCORAN	165
12	Heaney's Wordsworth and the Poetics of Displacement GUINN BATTEN	178
13	Heaney, <i>Beowulf</i> and the Medieval Literature of the North HEATHER O'DONOGHUE	192
14	Crediting Marvels: Heaney after 50 JOHN WILSON FOSTER	206
	<i>Guide to Further Reading</i>	224
	<i>Index</i>	229

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-54755-0 - The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney

Edited by Bernard O'Donoghue

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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RAND BRANDES was born in Batesville, Indiana and educated at Hanover College (BA) and Emory University (MA and PhD). He is the recipient of two Fulbright Fellowships to work with Seamus Heaney in Dublin. Along with Michael J. Durkan (1925–96), he has published *Seamus Heaney: A Reference Guide* (1996) and *Seamus Heaney: A Bibliography 1959–2003* (2008). He is the Martin Luther Stevens Professor of English at Lenoir-Rhyne College in Hickory, North Carolina.

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Cambridge University Press

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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DILLON JOHNSTON has published two editions of *Irish Poetry after Joyce* (1985 and 1977), and *The Poetic Economies of England and Ireland* (2001), as well as many essays, mostly about Irish and British poetry. He was founder and director of Wake Forest University Press. He currently lectures in the graduate program at Washington University in St Louis.

ANDREW MURPHY is Professor of English at the University of St Andrews. He contributed the *Seamus Heaney* volume (1996) to the British Council's 'Writers and their Work' series. His other books include *But the Irish Sea Betwixt Us: Ireland, Colonialism, and Renaissance Literature* (1999) and *Shakespeare for the People: Working Class Readers 1800–1900* (2000).

BERNARD O'DONOGHUE is a Fellow in Medieval English at Wadham College, Oxford. His study *Seamus Heaney and the Language of Poetry* was published in 1994. He has published five volumes of poems, and his *Selected Poems* was published in 2008.

HEATHER O'DONOGHUE was born in Stockton-upon-Tees, Co. Durham, and grew up in Middlesbrough. She was educated at Westfield College, University of London, and Somerville College, Oxford. She is currently Vigfusson-Rausing Reader in Old Icelandic at the University of Oxford, and Vice-Principal of Linacre College. She is the author of *The Genesis of a Saga Narrative* (1991), *Skaldic Verse and the Poetics of Saga Narrative: An Introduction to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature* (2004) and most recently, *From Asgard to Valhalla* (2007), a study of the reception history of Old Norse myth. Her present project is a book about the influence of Old Norse myth on poetry in English.

DENNIS O'DRISCOLL has worked as a civil servant since the age of sixteen. His eight books of poetry include *New and Selected Poems* (2004), a Poetry Book Society Special Commendation, and *Reality Check* (2007–8). A selection of his essays and reviews, *Troubled Thoughts, Majestic Dreams*, was published in 2001. He is the editor of *The Bloodaxe Book of Poetry Quotations* (2006) and its American counterpart, *Quote Poet Unquote* (2008).

JUSTIN QUINN was born in Dublin in 1968, and educated at Trinity College. He is the author of four collections of poetry, most recently *Waves & Trees* (2006), and he has written two studies of twentieth-century American poetry. His books include

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-54755-0 - The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney

Edited by Bernard O'Donoghue

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

the *Cambridge Introduction to Modern Poetry, 1800–2000* (2008); translations of the contemporary Czech poet, Petr Borkovec, *From the Interior* (2008); and, as editor, *Irish Poetry after Feminism* (2008). He is Associate Professor of English and American Literature at the Charles University, Prague.

DAVID WHEATLEY was born in Dublin and lectures at the University of Hull. He has published three collections of poetry, and edited the poetry journal *Metre* with Justin Quinn. His *Contemporary British Poetry: An Introduction* is forthcoming from Cambridge University Press.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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NOTE ON THE TEXT, AND ABBREVIATIONS

Most of Heaney's works have been published both in Britain and Ireland, and in America. When there is any divergence, I have given the British Isles English titles and dates of publication as the editions most readily available. In the 'Further Reading' I have given the English or Irish place of publication first because, when there is any difference in publication dates, those are always earlier.

Abbreviations

Titles of books frequently referred to, especially individual volumes of poetry and the four collected volumes of prose essays.

<i>B</i>	<i>Beowulf</i>
<i>CP</i>	<i>Crediting Poetry</i>
<i>DC</i>	<i>District and Circle</i>
<i>DD</i>	<i>Door into the Dark</i>
<i>DN</i>	<i>Death of a Naturalist</i>
<i>EL</i>	<i>Electric Light</i>
<i>FK</i>	<i>Finders Keepers</i>
<i>FW</i>	<i>Field Work</i>
<i>GT</i>	<i>The Government of the Tongue</i>
<i>HL</i>	<i>The Haw Lantern</i>
<i>N</i>	<i>North</i>
<i>OG</i>	<i>Opened Ground</i>
<i>OL</i>	<i>An Open Letter</i>

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Frontmatter
[More information](#)

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<i>P</i>	<i>Preoccupations</i>
<i>RP</i>	<i>The Redress of Poetry</i>
<i>SA</i>	<i>Sweeney Astray</i>
<i>SI</i>	<i>Station Island</i>
<i>SL</i>	<i>The Spirit Level</i>
<i>ST</i>	<i>Seeing Things</i>
<i>WO</i>	<i>Wintering Out</i>

CHRONOLOGY

(*Italics* denote political events)

- 13 April 1939 Born on a farm, 'Mossbawn', in Tamniarn, Co. Derry, Northern Ireland, to Patrick and Margaret Heaney. Eldest of nine children – two girls and seven boys.
- 1945–51 Attends the local Anahorish school, a mixed primary school with Catholic and Protestant pupils. Played Gaelic Football for St Malachy's, Castledawson up to minor level, at age 18.
- 1951–57 Attends, as a boarder, St Columb's College, Derry City.
- 1953 Family moves from Mossbawn farm to 'The Wood', at the other end of the parish, following the death of his brother Christopher (an incident commemorated in both his early poem 'Mid-Term Break' and the late poem 'The Blackbird of Glanmore' in *District and Circle*).
- 1957–61 At Queen's University Belfast, doing a degree in English. Graduates with First Class. First poems published in Queen's literary magazines.
- 1961–2 Studies for a postgraduate teachers' training diploma at St Joseph's college of education, Andersonstown, Belfast. While at St Joseph's, writes an extended essay on literary magazines in the North of Ireland, and is led to the collections of the Linen Hall Library, Belfast, and the works of the Ulster poet John Hewitt, and the British poet Ted Hughes.
- 1962 Begins teaching at St Thomas's Intermediate School, Ballymurphy. The headmaster, the short-story writer Michael McLaverty, introduces Heaney to the poetry of

CHRONOLOGY

- Patrick Kavanagh. Registers for a part-time postgraduate degree at Queen's.
- Begins writing in earnest. In November 1962, 'Tractors' is published in the *Belfast Telegraph*; other Irish journals, including the Queen's University magazine, *Interest*, soon publish other poems.
- Spring 1963 'Mid-Term Break' is published by *Kilkenny Magazine*.
- Autumn 1963 Leaves school teaching and returns to St Joseph's as a lecturer in English. Meets poet and lecturer Philip Hobsbaum at Queen's, and becomes part of the 'Belfast Group'. The group would meet in Hobsbaum's flat until his move to Glasgow in 1966; 1966–1970 they would meet at Heaney's flat. Its members included at various points Michael Longley, Derek Mahon, Stewart Parker and James Simmons, and later Paul Muldoon and Frank Ormsby.
- 1965 Mary Holland publicises the Belfast Group in the *Observer* in London, as part of the Belfast Festival.
- August 1965 Marries Marie Devlin, whom he had first met in October 1962.
- November 1965 The Belfast Festival publishes Heaney's first slim collection, *Eleven Poems*.
- 1966 Awarded a lectureship at Queen's following Hobsbaum's departure. Begins to write topical articles for the *New Statesman* and the *Listener* and to make broadcasts for BBC radio and television. Becomes known for his cultural and political communications.
- The Manchester publisher Phoenix Pamphlet Poets publishes *A Lough Neagh Sequence*.
- May 1966 Faber publishes first full-length poetry collection, *Death of a Naturalist*. Receives the Gregory Award for Young Writers and the Geoffrey Faber Prize, setting the pattern of prizewinning which was maintained by all his poetry volumes.
- July 1966 Son, Michael, is born. Writes about Belfast in the 'Out of London' column in the *New Statesman*, focusing on political rather than cultural issues.

CHRONOLOGY

- February 1968 Second son, Christopher, is born.
- 5 October 1968 *Civil rights march in Derry City – first major violent clash of the ‘Troubles’.*
- 24 October 1968 Writes a piece in the *Listener*, ‘Old Derry’s Walls’, in sympathy with the marchers, and a satirical song, ‘Craig’s Dragoons’, for Radio Eireann.
- June 1969 Second volume, *Door into the Dark*, is published. Wins the Somerset Maugham Award.
- 12 August 1969 *Sectarian clashes in Derry; would become known as the ‘Battle of the Bogside’.*
- 14 August 1969 *The British Army enters Derry.*
- January 1970 *The Provisional Irish Republican Army is officially formed in Dublin.*
- 1970–1 Spends the academic year at the University of California, Berkeley. Returns to Northern Ireland in September 1971.
- 1971 *The Provisional IRA’s bombing campaign is stepped up.*
- 1972 Publication of *Soundings*.
- 30 January 1972 *‘Bloody Sunday’, in which thirteen civilians are killed by the British Army in Derry. Would write a lament for the dead, ‘The Road to Derry’, and would commemorate the event in ‘Casualty’, published in Field Work.*
- August 1972 Having resigned from Queen’s, the Heaneys rent from Anne Saddlemeyer a cottage in Glanmore, Co. Wicklow, where Heaney begins work as a freelance writer (rejoicing in the local association with J. M. Synge).
- November 1972 Publication of *Wintering Out*.
- 1973–7 Hosts, intermittently, a radio show, *Imprint*, on Radio Eireann.
- April 1973 Daughter, Catherine Ann, is born.
- October 1973 Visits Denmark, where he sees the bodies of the Bog people at the museum at Silkeborg.

CHRONOLOGY

- 1975 The Belfast/Honest Ulsterman Press publishes prose-poetic sequence *Stations*, completed in May and June 1974, as a pamphlet. The publication reflects a vital moment in his career when he acknowledges the impact of sectarianism on his poetry.
 Ted Hughes's sister, Olwyn, publishes a limited edition of the whole series of bog poems – as *Bog Poems* – from her Rainbow Press.
- June 1975 Publication of *North*.
- October 1975 Joins the English department at Carysfort, a teachers' training college in Dublin.
- November 1976 The Heaneys move to Sandymount, Dublin.
- 1976–81 Employed as Head of the English Department at Carysfort.
- 1979 Spends a semester teaching a poetry workshop at Harvard University as one of several temporary successors to the American poet Robert Lowell, who had died in 1977. Publication of *Field Work*, thought to have been influenced by the poetry of Lowell (Heaney had given an address at his memorial service in London). Lowell had praised *North*, while an elegy to him is included in *Field Work*.
- 1980 Joins the Board of the Field Day Company, founded by his close friend, the playwright Brian Friel and the actor Stephen Rea to produce Friel's *Translations* outside the commercial theatre. A director of Field Day along with the poets Tom Paulin and Seamus Deane. Publication of *Selected Poems, 1965–1975*, and *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968–1978* (in October).
- 1980–1 *Ten Republican prisoners die on hunger strike, including Heaney's neighbour Francis Hughes, from Bellaghy.*
- January 1982 Begins five-year contract at Harvard, teaching one semester a year.
- 1983 As a director of Field Day, Heaney publishes, in Ireland, *Sweeney Astray* (started in 1973), a version of the long

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CHRONOLOGY

- medieval Irish poem, *Buile Suibhne* ('the madness of Sweeney'). Publishes a pamphlet poem, *An Open Letter*, dissociating himself from the adjective 'British' (Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion had included him in their 1982 edition of the *Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*).
- 1984 Elected to the Boylston Chair of Rhetoric and Oratory, Harvard University, which he holds until 1996. Heaney divides his time between Dublin and America, running poetry workshops at Harvard for four months of the year.
- October 1984 Publication of *Station Island* and of *Sweeney Astray* in England. Death of his mother, commemorated in 'Clearances'.
- 1984 Publication of *Hailstones*.
- 1986 Death of his father, commemorated in 'The Stone Verdict'.
- 1987 Publication of *The Haw Lantern*, which wins the Whitbread Award.
- 1988 Publication of *The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and Other Critical Writings*.
- 1989 Publication of *The Place of Writing*.
- 1989–94 Takes up five-year appointment as Professor of Poetry at Oxford; lectures published as *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures* in 1995.
- 1990 Publication of *New Selected Poems 1966–1987*, and of *The Cure at Troy: A Version of Sophocles's 'Philoctetes'*; performed by Field Day Company in Derry.
- 1991 Publication of *Seeing Things*.
- 1994 Co-edits *The Rattle Bag*, a poetry anthology for older children, with Ted Hughes.
- 31 August 1994 IRA ceasefire.
- 1995 Awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Publishes *Crediting Poetry*.

CHRONOLOGY

- 1996 Publication of *The Spirit Level*. Commonwealth Literature Award. Named Whitbread Book of the Year.
- 1998 *Good Friday Agreement reached on 10 April between the British and Irish governments and most Northern Irish political groups, restoring devolved government to Northern Ireland; seen as making an official end to the 'Troubles'. Omagh Bombing: the exploding of a Real IRA bomb in Omagh, Co. Tyrone on 15 August, in which 29 people were killed.*
- 1999 Publication of the translation of *Beowulf*, which also is named as Whitbread Book of the Year.
- 2001 Publication of *Electric Light*.
- 2002 Publication of *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971–2001*.
- 2003 Opening of the Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry at Queen's University Belfast.
- 2004 Publication of *The Burial at Thebes*, a translation of Sophocles' *Antigone*, to mark the centenary of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin.
- 2006 Publication of *District and Circle* which wins the T. S. Eliot Prize.