

GERALD DAWE

Introduction

*Never but imagined the blue in a wild imagining the blue celeste
of poetry.*

– Samuel Beckett¹

This volume begins with a prolegomena – a critical or discursive introduction – not on an Irish poet but on Edmund Spenser. The reason is clear. The use of English in Ireland and how this colonisation came about, and what its effects were, carried throughout the following centuries to the present a lasting and unavoidable challenge, along with much else. It seemed appropriate, therefore, to raise the matter from the beginning of this *Companion to Irish Poets* since in one form or another this issue of language mattered so deeply to Irish poets from the earliest of times to the present, including *our* present in the twenty-first century. As will become obvious from reading the essays gathered here, how Irish-speaking Ireland was turned into a mostly English-speaking country by the turn of the nineteenth century and the role played in this radical political and cultural transformation by Irish poets – either as enraged chroniclers of the change, such as Aogán Ó’Raithille; or as reimagining the impact, such as W. B. Yeats; or recalling its bruising, brutal realities, such as John Montague and Thomas Kinsella – the language shift caused a deep and lasting wound which, perhaps only now, has been salved. Irish poetry has been part of that healing process.

It has also meant that Irish poets have since the time of Jonathan Swift been made conscious of the language they use in a manner and intensity that is reflected here in the work of such diverse literary talents as the London-based eighteenth-century playwright, novelist and journalist Oliver Goldsmith as much as in the haunted self-lacerating figure of the mid-nineteenth-century Dublin *poete maudit*, the short-lived James Clarence Mangan. While language in the hands of Mangan’s contemporary, the superb lyricist Thomas Moore, became a bright and at times brittle medium to entertain, and yet, as Jeffrey Vail points out here, the shadows of history are never far below the surface.

It was W. B. Yeats, born in 1865, just a little over a decade after Moore’s death, who transformed the fortunes of Irish poets and their standing in the world. Straddling the nineteenth-century traditions of both popular Irish

and English literary culture, and publishing in both capitals of Dublin and London, Yeats produced an extraordinary volume of writing devoted to restoring the country's self-confidence, traumatised in the wake of failed political uprisings against British rule in Ireland in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries but also, more importantly, shocked to the core by the devastating impact of the Great Irish Famine (1847).² The famine saw between 1 and 1.5 million dead of starvation and related disease and the emigration of approximately a further million people, leaving behind a hugely damaged society.

Yeats, along with other writers and artists, was the catalyst for a national movement of reconstruction, variously referred to as the Irish Literary Revival or the Celtic Revival. But behind the rhetoric and dedication of Yeats's indisputable nationalism there was an utterly committed writer, who, as Nicholas Grene amply demonstrates, was completely focussed on the making of poetry. Yeats' achievements, spanning the decades from the 1890s to his death in 1939, encapsulate one of the most intense moments of Irish history.

As the nationalist movement cohered increasingly around the agenda of political and cultural separatism from Britain, in the period leading into World War I (1914–18), other voices emerged such as Francis Ledwidge, a young 'peasant' poet who, like his somewhat younger contemporary, Thomas MacGreevy, would be exposed to the terrible brutalities of modern warfare in the trenches. MacGreevy survived his wounding at the Front to produce his own poetry of war, along with much else, and became a lasting friend and close confidant of Samuel Becket. Ledwidge, along with some 27,000 to 35,000 Irish soldiers, was tragically killed at the Front.³

In 1928 in Paris, MacGreevy introduced the young Beckett to James Joyce, author of the iconic novel of Irish self-analysis, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) in which the central character, Stephen Dedalus, famously responds to his fellow-student Davin's exuberant nationalism. 'When the soul of a man', Stephen 'vaguely' remarks, 'is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion, I shall try to fly by those nets.'⁴ The widespread catchment of these 'nets' would gather in the decades immediately after the Easter Rising of 1916 as a younger generation of poets, including Austin Clarke and Patrick Kavanagh, struggled, as both Lucy Collins and Tom Walker show here, to find a new *poetic* response to the society that was beginning to emerge by the time Ireland had won its independence in the mid-1920s. But for Yeats, the Rising and the loss of its leaders, many of whom were writers and poets personally known to him, had a profound impact upon his imagination; as he wrote in the wake of

their executions in May 1916, in a letter to Lady Gregory, his patron and fellow dramatist: ‘I had no idea that any public event could so deeply move me – and I am very despondent about the future. At the moment I feel all the work of years has been overturned, all the bringing together of classes, all the freeing of Irish literature and criticism from politics.’⁵

Not only was ‘Ireland’ by the late 1920s independent of Britain, it was also partitioned into two separate states – the Irish Free State and Northern Ireland. In the now-divided island, parallel lines of educational and cultural development started to take root, with poets born and bred in the North, such as Louis MacNeice and John Hewitt, placed in the incongruous (for the time) situation of being both Irish poets and citizens of Britain – a bifurcation that produced much tension in the years that followed. For by the late 1930s and early 1940s it was clear that the two parts of Ireland were beginning to go their separate ways. The Irish Free State, by the time of the declaration of World War II (1939–45), pursued a policy of neutrality, while the North would become an essential part of the Allied war effort. This critical division between the twin-states, notwithstanding the fact that many thousands of Irishmen and women from the south also enlisted, had produced, as Chris Morash explains, a deepening sense of difference, such as the ironic spleen of MacNeice’s ‘Autumn Journal’ (1939) and the unapologetic rage of his stinging riposte, ‘Neutrality’ (1942):

But then look eastward from your heart, there bulks
A continent, close, dark, as archetypal sin,
While to the west off your own shores the mackerel
Are fat – on the flesh of your kin.⁶

By the time the Republic of Ireland was declared in 1948, it was one of John Hewitt’s aesthetic and ethical priorities, as Guy Woodward charts, to try and recover some of the lost common ground in the Ireland of the 1950s and 1960s.

While maintaining his ongoing efforts in Belfast to promote a form of regional identity that drew upon the various strands of Northern Irish literary and cultural traditions from the Gaelic roots of the named landscape, the Scots vernacular of accent and ballad-making and the philosophical imperatives of Protestantism, Hewitt, along with John Montague, also attempted to challenge the unionist hegemony of the Northern Irish state. For Montague, as Maurice Riordain clearly demonstrates, the play of non-Irish influences has as much a role in shaping his poetry as the scars of local sectarian history, particularly for those of an Ulster catholic background.

One of the abiding features of the *Companion of Irish Poets* is the extent to which poets such as Montague, Richard Murphy and Thomas Kinsella are deeply conscious of a need to embrace literatures, languages and cultures

other than Irish. This open-mindedness and cosmopolitan interest in poetry from very many different parts of Europe and beyond suggests how foolhardy it is to segregate Irish poets into neatly conforming boxes of 'traditional' and 'modernist'. For, as this *Companion* shows, more than anything else, Irish poets have been part of the global world while remaining keenly aware of the conflicts and developments of their individual presents and local and national cultural inheritances.

Michael Longley and Derek Mahon are perhaps two of the most notable figures in this regard, with their deeply felt engagement with, respectively, the Classics and the literature of France. Translation, therefore, can be seen as a key to the achievements of those poets born in and around the end of World War II and towards the second half of the twentieth century. One thinks here of the bilingual poet Michael Hartnett, alongside the multilingual Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin as well as the prolific Ciaran Carson, whose versions of Dante, Baudelaire and Rimbaud are an integral part of his own very distinctive voice as much as his versions of Irish epics such as *The Táin* and Brian Merriman's *Cúirt an Mhéan Oichel* *The Midnight Court*.

The painful struggle of language-consciousness in Séan Ó Ríordáin, the production of a contemporary idiomatic Irish-language poetry so poignantly revealed by Louis de Paor's essay, should remind readers of the psychic and physical cost that remained such a telling part in the making of poetry solely *in Irish*, even as late as Ó Ríordáin's *Eireaball Spideoige* (1952) and *Brosna* (1964).

By the late sixties, the Northern 'Troubles' emerged as the over-arching narrative within which Irish poets, those based in Ireland and those living elsewhere, had to in one form or another contend. While Thomas Kinsella reacted against the notion of there being a 'Northern Poetry' separate and distinct from the rest of Irish poetry – he referred to the idea as 'journalistic'⁷ – there was an abiding sense during the thirty years of the conflict in the North,⁸ in which 3,600 people were killed and many thousands more injured from its beginnings in 1968 until it was effectively concluded with the Good Friday Agreement (1998), that poets from the province had caught the eye of the international literary world. In the figure of Seamus Heaney, his achievements as a poet, first and foremost, but also his negotiating with the contradictory tensions of historical conflict, proved captivating for both critical and popular audiences.

With the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995 Heaney's influence and significance was widely acknowledged and, as Terence Brown shows here, the moral felicity and formal control of his many volumes of poetry brought poetry itself to a global stage, such as it hadn't achieved since, one could say, the great age of Eliot or Auden. Heaney's influence is recorded

too in the generation that followed his, in Medbh McGuckian, for instance, and Paul Muldoon – complicating figures made all the more excitingly accessible here in the essays of Maria Johnston and Peter McDonald.

Since his earliest successes of the 1960s until his untimely death in 2013, Seamus Heaney's legacy continues with the Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry in Queen's University Belfast, the HomePlace library and community centre dedicated to his memory in Bellaghy, County Derry, and the Ireland Chair of Poetry which connects three universities in Belfast and Dublin with a mission of promoting the art of poetry. During this self-same half century, the social and political landscape of the Republic underwent substantial and, at times, deeply hurtful change, particularly in regard to the role and influence of the Catholic church but also the failings of government oversight of the economy which led to a major economic collapse in the mid-2000s.⁹

In his introduction to *The Penguin Book of Irish Poetry* (2012), Patrick Crotty identifies Brendan Kennelly, Eavan Boland and Paul Durcan with playing a major public role in 'the process of liberalization' in Ireland during the final decades of the twentieth and early part of the twenty-first centuries. It is a view Richard Pine, Justin Quinn and Alan Gillis fully corroborate in their respective essays here. In their contributions, for example, to the national broadcasting network, RTÉ, alongside very popular readings throughout the Republic, all three poets created a form of creative conversation about the state of the country and the unfolding issues of civic and social rights, particularly those involving women, the secularisation of a maturing democracy, the hypocrisies and mendacity afflicting the Catholic Church in Ireland as much as provocative revisions and satires of Irish history, including Kennelly's scurrilous re-reading, *Cromwell* (1983/87).

While taking a long backwards look at the various strands that make up Irish poetry from the 1210–1650 'bardic' period and its renaissance, where the present *Companion* begins, Crotty notes that 'it is hardly fanciful to say that there are vestiges' of an 'ancient primacy in the deference and public attention paid to poets and poetry in present-day Ireland'.¹⁰

Indeed, there is no better illustration of this view than in the achievement of Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill, who brings the *Companion* to its close – or maybe returns us to the beginning, as another way of putting it.

For there is no conclusion to be reached. In the post-Heaney world of Irish poets, slam/spoken voice festivals are currently hugely popular. The publication of *The Penguin Book of Irish Poetry* produced its own moment of 'public attention'¹¹ with heated responses to the editor's selection appearing in the leading Irish broadsheet newspaper, *The Irish Times*,¹² well-known for its ongoing publication of poems in its weekend edition.

Like most other parts of the literary world, the world of Irish poets has altered greatly, and with it the place and authority of the poet has had to adjust to these changes in the culture. The manifest challenges of popular entertainment and media expectations alongside the impact of global online publishing, the pull of marketing and the realities of the book-selling business are bound to affect the place of the poet in the twenty-first century in Ireland as much as anywhere else.

The Heaney generation that stretched from the final years of Patrick Kavanagh to the mature collections of John Hewitt, Thomas Kinsella, Richard Murphy and John Montague, and which embraced many of the poets with whom this *Companion* reaches into the twenty-first century, may be viewed as the last of their familial kind. For poets now born in the 1980s and '90s inhabit a very different map to the one this *Companion* attempts to outline. Responding to the much-changed and still-changing sense of mobility and place and of representations of self and gender, of global concerns and conditions substantially different from those which played out in 'the deeps of the minds'¹³ of Patrick Kavanagh, say, or MacGreevy or Goldsmith or O'Raithille or O'Riordain, simply makes the tradition of Irish poetry all the more fascinating to think about.

However, as many of the poets included here – and the many more who are not, but could well have been, subjects of an essay – continue to produce work of the first order, one suspects that no matter what else happens, by way of the *poetic* legacy, if nothing else, 'Irish' will still have an unerring part to play in what Beckett's 'V' in *Footfalls* called 'it all'.¹⁴

NOTES

1. Samuel Beckett, 'Lessness', *The Complete Short Prose 1929–1989* (New York: Grove Press 1995), p. 199.
2. Alvin Jackson, *Ireland 1798–1998: Politics and War* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2nd rev. edn. 2010) is a lucid, reliable and comprehensive study.
3. John Horne, 'Our War, Our History', *Ireland and the Great War: The Thomas Davis Lecture Series* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2008), p. 6.
4. James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* ([1916] London: Penguin Books, 1992), p. 220.
5. W. B. Yeats, 'Letter to Lady Gregory, 11 May 1916', *Letters of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade (London: R. Hart-Davis, 1954), p. 613.
6. Peter McDonald (ed.), *Collected Poems of Louis MacNeice* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), p. 224.
7. Thomas Kinsella (ed.), *The New Oxford Book of Irish Verse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1989), p. xxx.
8. See David McKittrick, Seamus Kelter, Brian Freaney, Chris Thornton and David McVea, *Lost Lives: The Stories of the Men, Women and Children Who Died as a Result of the Northern Ireland Troubles* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 2nd revised edn. 2004).

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9. Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland* (New York: Overlook Press, 2005), explores aspects of these changing times in Irish society.
10. Patrick Crotty (ed.), *The Penguin Book of Irish Poetry*, with a preface by Seamus Heaney (London: Penguin Books, 2010), p. xlix.
11. There is a history to be written on the public spaces and 'roles' Irish poets have played in the modern past, such as (and at random) Yeats's controversial edition of the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936), the legal battles Patrick Kavanagh faced (and instigated) during the 1940s and 1950s, through to Thomas Kinsella's *Butcher's Dozen*, an excoriating response to the British government's Widgery Report on the 'Bloody Sunday' killings in Derry January 1972 and the poet's championing of Viking Dublin at Woodquay (1978), to Seamus Heaney's *Open Letter* (1983) on his inclusion in the *Penguin Book of Contemporary British Verse* (1982), to the controversies surrounding the publication of the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (1992) and which under-represented Irish women poets – poetry in Ireland has indeed been 'in the wars', to quote Edna Longley's collection of essays of the same name (*Poetry in the Wars* [Bloodaxe Books, 1986]), published in 1986 at the height of the arguments over poetry and politics in Ireland.
12. Patrick Crotty, 'The cut and thrust of Irish poetry', *The Irish Times*, 4 October 2010; Michael O'Loughlin, 'Missing: Have you seen these poets?' *The Irish Times* ('Culture', 26 October) and 'Exclusion and inclusion of Irish Poetry' ('Letters', 29 October 2010).
13. W. B. Yeats, 'Certain Noble Plays of Japan', *The Cutting of an Agate*, in *Essays and Introductions* (London: Macmillan Press 1961), p. 224.
14. Samuel Beckett, *Footfalls* (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), p.10.