

# Leader 2

Saturday April 6 2013

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# Reclaiming Michael Hartnett

To coincide with the upcoming Éigse Michael Hartnett festival, the Limerick Writers' Centre has just published a book of poetry dedicated to the legendary poet, writes **John Rainsford**

**É**IGSE Michael Hartnett, the arts and literature festival mixing music, song, poetry, storytelling and drama in honour of one of Limerick's favourite sons, will have a particularly poignant note this year.

The three-day festival, this April 25 to 27, will coincide with the launch of a new anthology of poetry, inspired by the Limerick-born poet.

Dominic Taylor, director of the Limerick Writers' Centre, explains how the literary dedication came about.

"I approached Limerick County Council arts officer, Joan MacKernan, in late 2011, resurrecting an idea for a similar type of book to that first mooted by poet Theo Dorgan some years earlier. This time, however, Joan was in a position to lend her

**"Our job description was simple, to gather the best poems that had been written in praise of Michael Hartnett"**

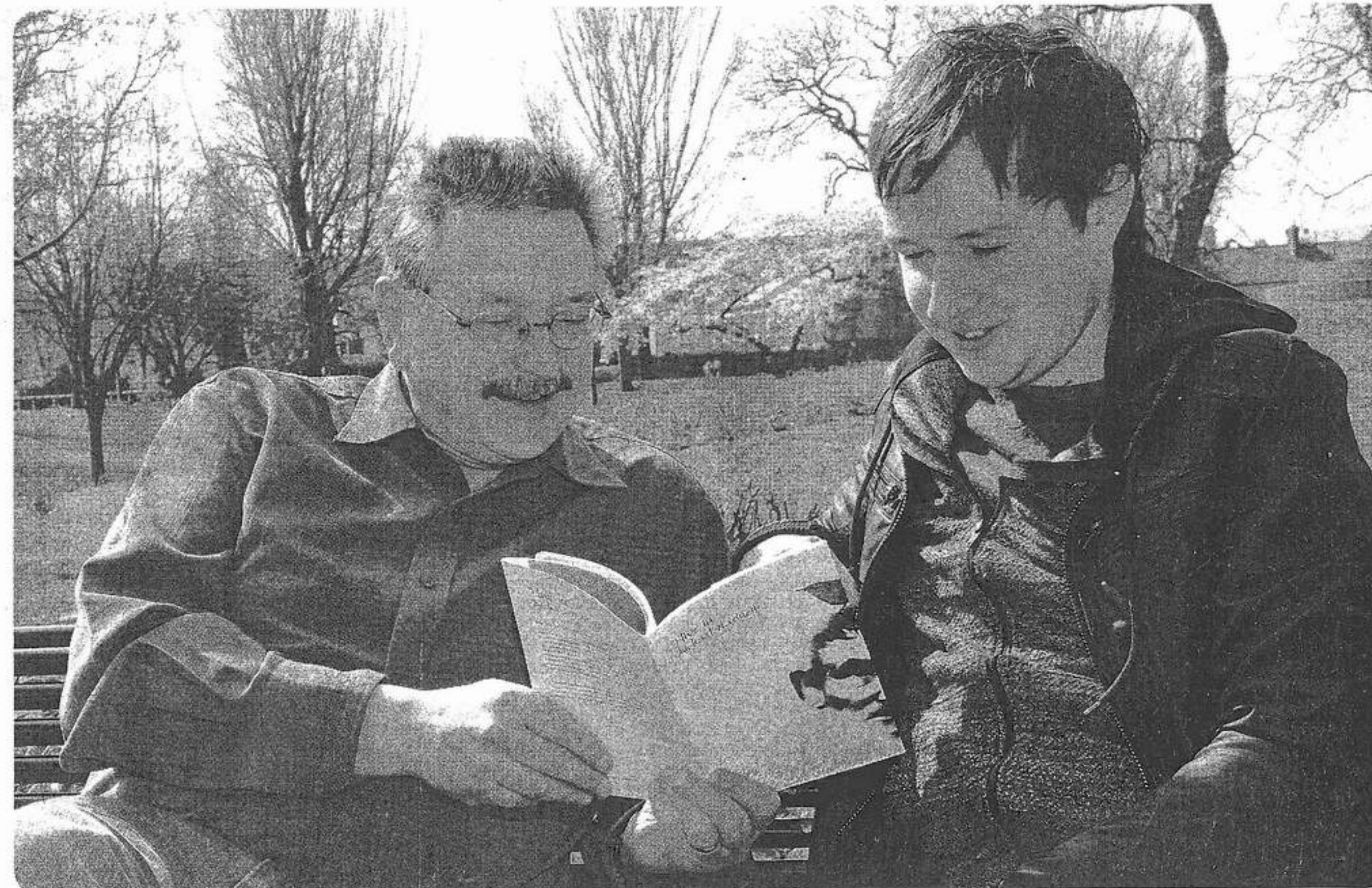
assistance to the project. "James Lawlor, whom I got to know through his work for the Frank McCourt Museum, mentioned that he had just completed an MA on Michael Hartnett at Queen's University in Belfast. The writers' centre was working on a special edition of our

Revival Literary Journal dedicated to Michael Hartnett and we asked James if he would like to contribute to it.

"Later, we asked him to consider being editor for the proposed anthology, I Live in Michael Hartnett. When the County Arts Office agreed to get involved, in early 2012, work began on compiling the poems to be included in the publication.

"Our job description was simple: to gather the best poems that had been written in praise of Michael Hartnett since he died. The collection includes poems by Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, Eavan Boland, Theo Dorgan, Peter Fallon, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin and Paul Durcan amongst others," Dominic explained.

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Dominic Taylor and James Lawlor with the newly published book of poems dedicated to Limerick poet Michael Hartnett

Picture: Adrian Butler



# Tribute to poet in a style most fitting

Continued from page 1

➔ Subsequently, the writers' centre put out a call for papers on the internet looking for submissions. However, they already had a number of relevant poems which they knew had been published in various books and journals.

The goal now was to investigate all the available sources in order to make sure that they had the most comprehensive number of poems available, especially from people who knew Michael well. The book is published as a co-production between Limerick County Council and the Writers' centre.

Michael Hartnett (1941 - 1999) was a native of Newcastle West and spent part of his childhood in the townland of Camas, Monagae. He later lived for 10 years in Templeglantine.

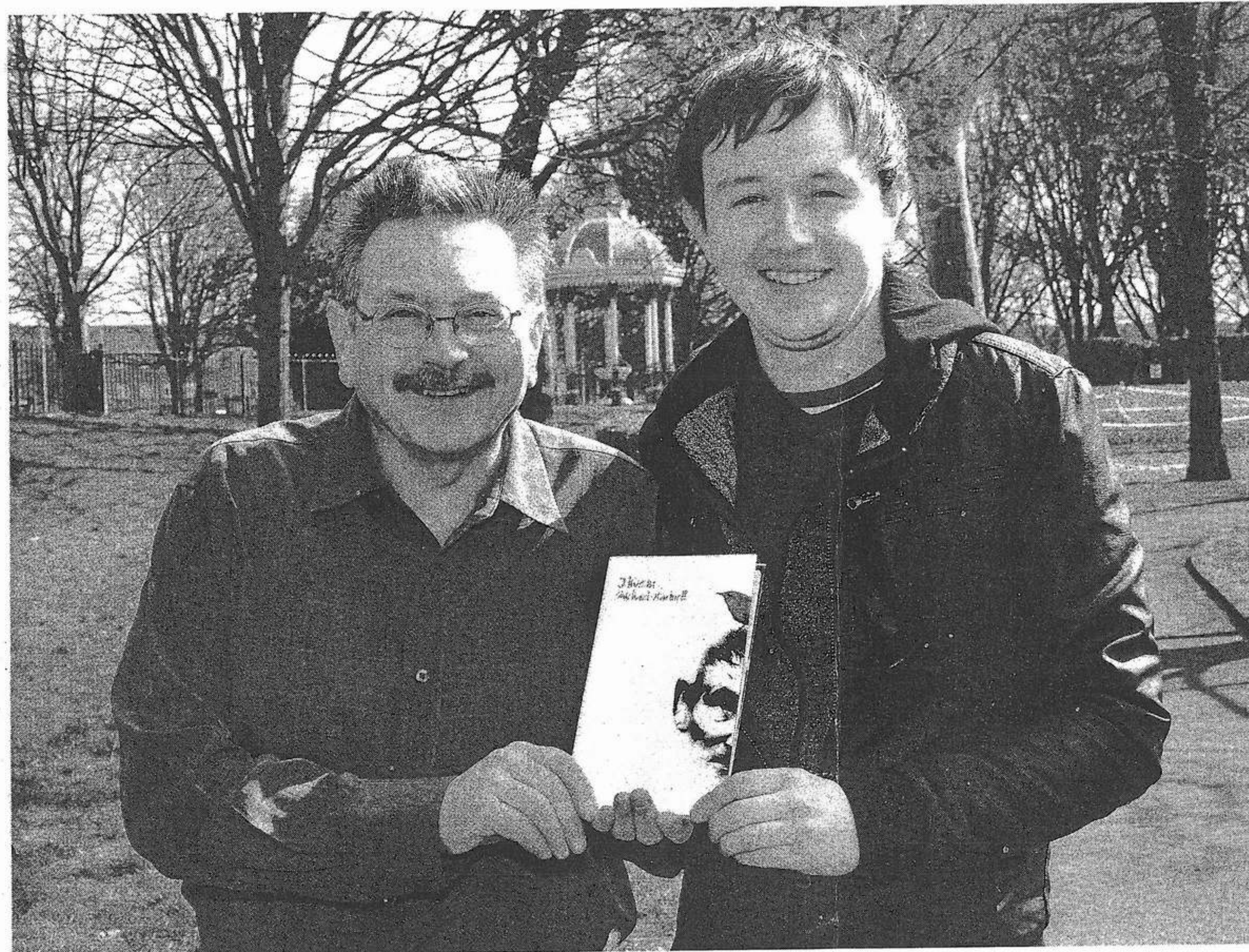
He was a unique poet in that he wrote comfortably both in English and Irish for most of his career and has been called 'Munster's poet laureate'.

Although, his family name was actually 'Harnett' a mistake on his birth certificate meant that it is recorded officially as 'Hartnett'. He preferred the latter and continued to use it believing that it was closer to the Irish name. 'Ó hAirtneide'.

His love of Irish was instinctively acquired by listening to the native tongue of his grandmother Bridget O'Halpin, one of the few remaining Gaelic speakers in Limerick.

The book's Editor, James Lawlor, sees the project as another milestone in his own burgeoning commitment to the work of the Limerick born poet. A native of Carrickerry, Co. Limerick, James was educated in the local National School and at Desmond College, in nearby Newcastle West.

He says: "I was drawn to Michael Hartnett's work quite early in my life. I was always curious about the 'Poet Hartnett' persona that people would speak about, when I was a child. When I started studying English and Media at the University of Limerick I began to examine his work more closely. For my final



Brought to book: Proudly showing off the new volume dedicated to Michael Hartnett were Dominic Taylor and editor James Lawlor

year thesis I examined 'place' in his work. As part of my course work that year, I also had to design a website, so I decided to merge these two facets of my academic work.

"Soon I had emails coming in from around the world from fellow Hartnett readers. Michael's own son, Niall, happened to come across the website and emailed me, asking who I was? I have met him a few times since when he comes over from the United States. He edits the website with me now and has been very supportive all round."

In 2006 The Irish Times published a piece on Michael stating that he was becoming 'an icon', an observation with which James Lawlor very much agreed. Indeed, global artists, dramatists, musicians, composers and

poets have started to use his iconic image in their own work. It is a trend increasingly compatible with alternative forms of 'Irishness' emerging in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland.

"When Dominic Taylor of the Limerick Writer's Centre approached me about the book, in 2011, I did not say 'yes' immediately to the project," states James Lawlor. "I was a little bit concerned that once you had collected all of the poems and officially took note that something unique was happening then the magic might cease."

"Nonetheless, in 2011, big things started to happen. One of Michael's poems was adapted to music by composer Bill Whelan and was subsequently performed in the White House to President Barack Obama, and of course, a

statue to Michael, by Irish Sculptor, Rory Breslin, was erected in Newcastle West.

"However, the worry was there that these poems, dedicated to Michael, might perhaps disappear and by collecting them together

working class in mid-20th century Ireland. The odds, therefore, were very much against him getting any type of a good education. Like a lot of people, at that time, he grew up in a house with a mud floor and no

as being concealed but ever present. It is his singular achievement, therefore, to have gone from utter poverty to being celebrated and read, at third level institutions, all the way from the USA to Japan. Indeed, along with Frank McCourt, Limerick is able to lay claim to two of the most outstanding figures in Irish literature.

"I am conscious of Michael's legacy," comments James Lawlor. "I have no doubt that in a hundred years from now Michael Hartnett will still be read. His poetry captures an element of Ireland that is shadowy, mysterious, and utterly authentic."

"The poet Theo Dorgan has said that there was something 'other worldly' about him. I believe that he acquired this quality when he was fostered out to his

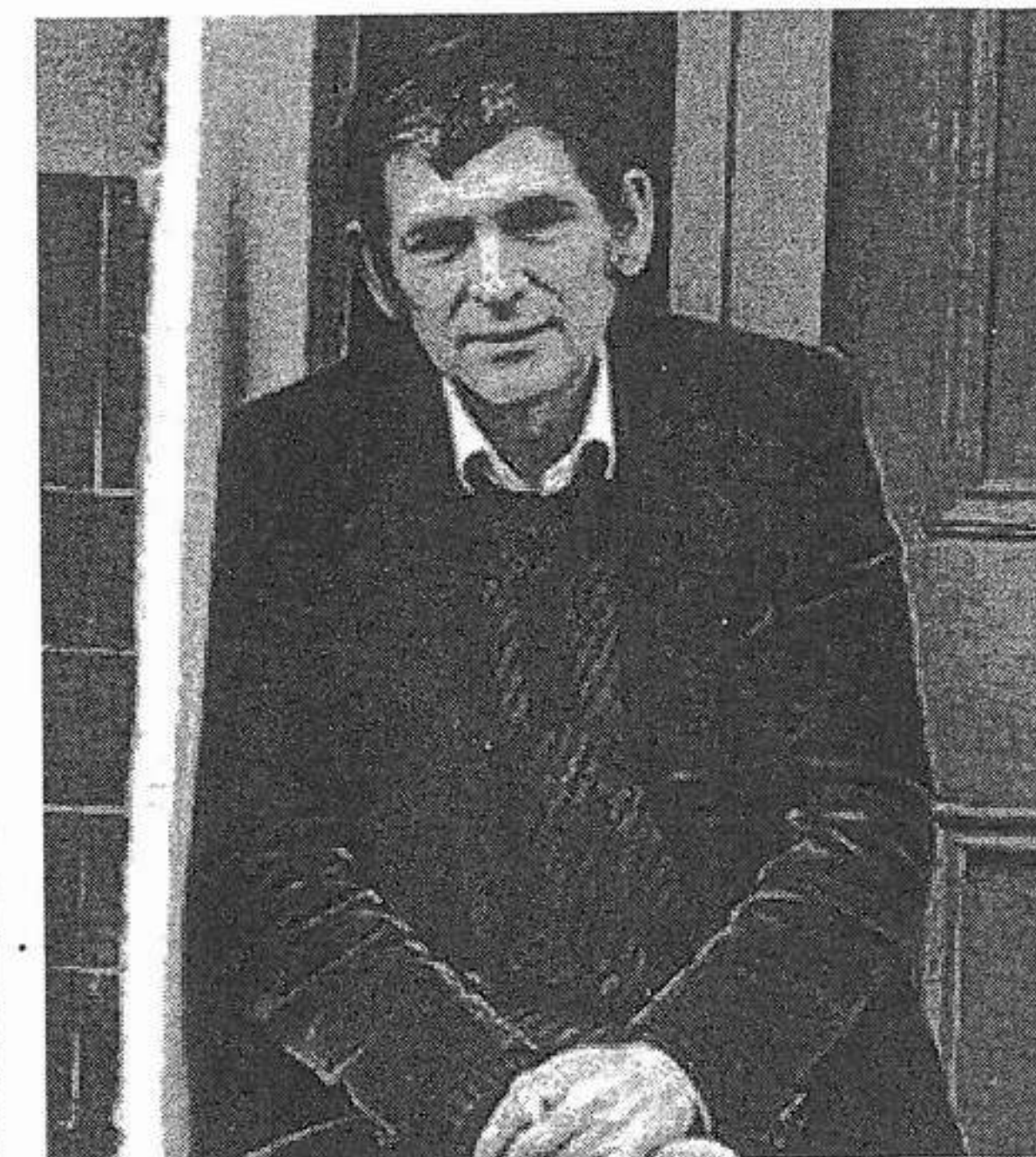
**"I have no doubt that in a hundred years from now Michael Hartnett will still be read"**

they would be safely preserved in perpetuity. I was especially delighted when Co. Limerick Arts Officer, Joan Mac Kernan, came on board, I have a great working relationship with her office and I greatly admire the quality of the work that they do."

Michael Hartnett was

running water or electricity. As a result, he was largely self-taught, although, he was lucky enough to have acquired a 'second level education.

Nevertheless, even when he was a teenager, he read widely. In later years, he would speak of class divisions, within the town,



A truly brilliant poet, the late Michael Hartnett could write equally well in both English and Irish

grandmother as a child. In her cottage he would lie awake, in the loft, listening to a rambling house at night time. This is where Michael Hartnett, the poet, was born.

"I read an interview with novelist, Colm Tóibín, recently, where he said, that his writing emanates from 'silences' within himself. That was a very interesting insight, and of course, the same could be said of Michael Hartnett. He was able to tap into reserves deep within himself, and subsequently, to produce literature of an outstanding quality."

In the 1980s, Hartnett's marriage broke down and he began a second relationship with Angela Liston. He left for Inchicore, in Dublin, in 1984 and in 1985 returned to writing English, after a long break, with the book *Inchicore Haiku*. This was followed by *A Necklace of Wrens* (1987), *Poems to Younger Women* (1989) and *The Killing of Dreams* (1992). Nevertheless, he also continued to write in Irish at this time.

With his alcoholism worsening, Michael Hartnett died tragically in 1999. Although he is gone, he has not been forgotten. His *Collected Poems* appeared in two volumes in 1984 and 1987 with *New and Selected Poems* appearing in 1995. A new edition

of *Collected Poems* was published in 2001.

"I Live in Michael Hartnett will be launched at Eígse, in Newcastle West, in April, by Dublin poet Paula Meehan," says James Lawlor. "She was one of the poets that I studied in my M.A thesis on contemporary working-class Irish poetry."

"Indeed, the title of this bilingual anthology, *I live in Michael Hartnett*, has been taken from Paula Meehan's own inspiring poem 'Hagiography'. I really admire her poetry; she was also a close personal friend of Michael Hartnett. All the events at Eígse are designed to be uplifting, so it is sure to be a truly great festival!"

*I Live in Michael Hartnett* will be launched at Eígse Michael Hartnett Literary and Arts Festival, at the Red Door Gallery, in the Square, Newcastle West, on Saturday April 27th, at 3pm, by poet Paula Meehan. For further details please access: [www.limerickwriterscentre.com](http://www.limerickwriterscentre.com) or [www.eigsemichaelhartnett.ie/](http://www.eigsemichaelhartnett.ie/)

To read more about poet Michael Hartnett please see the website: [www.michaelhartnett.com](http://www.michaelhartnett.com) and [www.eigsemichaelhartnett.ie](http://www.eigsemichaelhartnett.ie)