

'Teaboy of the Western World'

Seamus Heaney said Hartnett was this country's 'most under-rated poet'

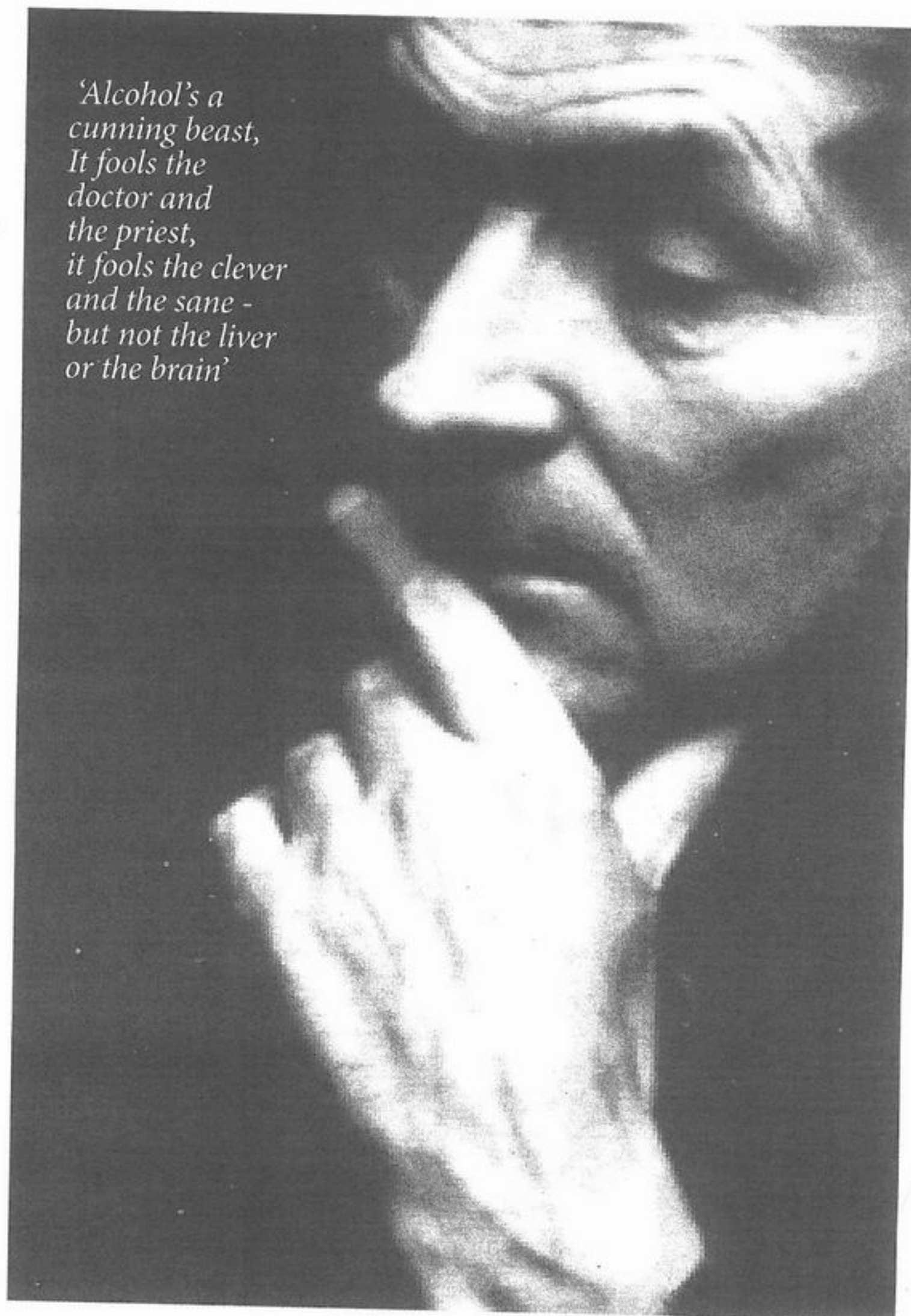
RACHAEL KEALY

It was an early education in duality, an interesting start for a boy who would grow to become one of Ireland's best-known poets, a man who would write in both English and Irish, and struggle with the choice between the two.

Michael was the eldest of eight children, although only six would

ON September 18 1941, in Croom Hospital, Co. Limerick, Denis and Bridie Hartnett were delivered of a baby boy. Due to an error, his birth certificate was registered with the name Michael Hartnett, a mistake he later chose to live with, as it was closer to the Irish version of his surname, Ó hAirtneide.

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*'Alcohol's a cunning beast,
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it fools the clever
and the sane -
but not the liver
or the brain'*

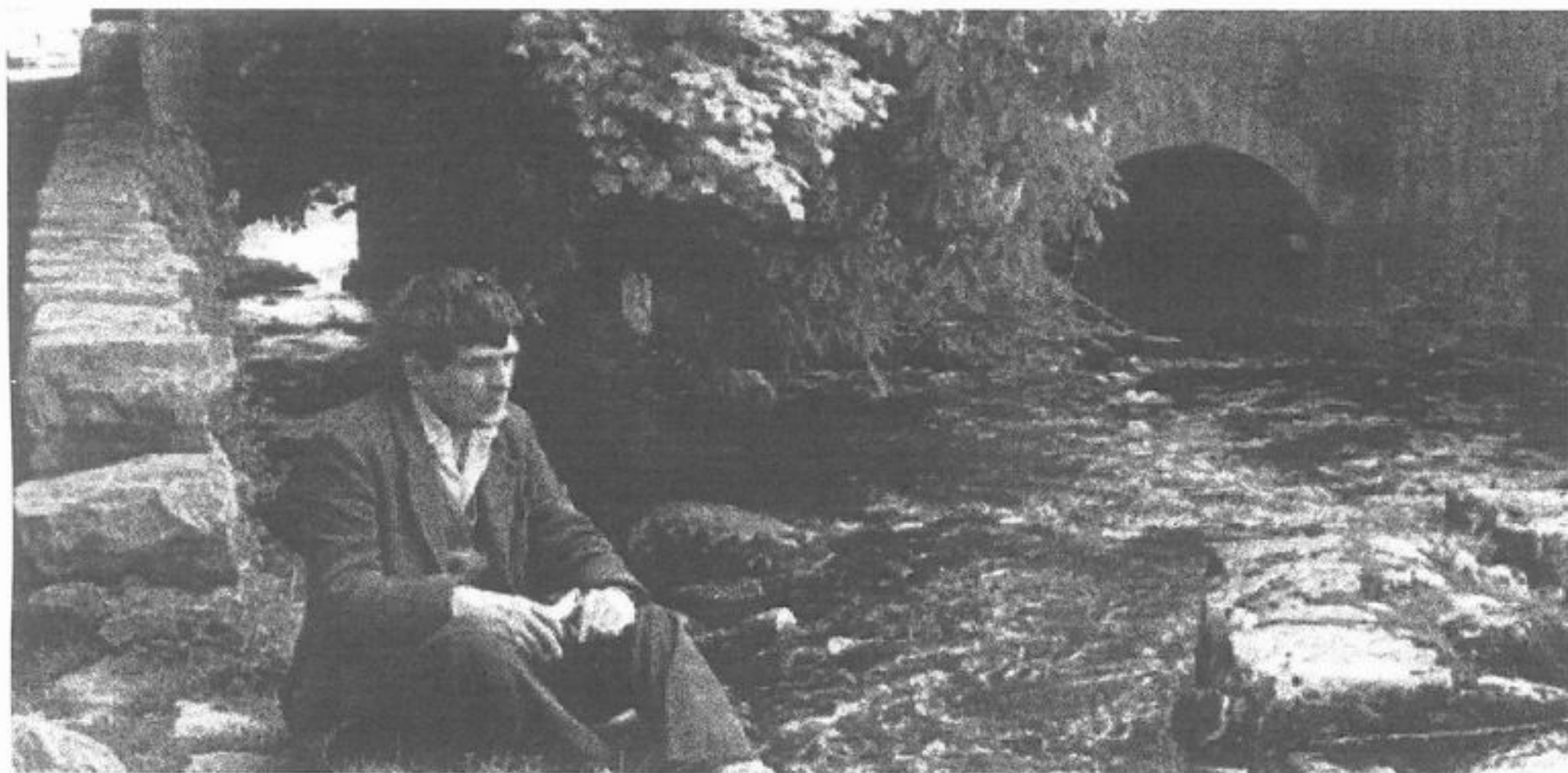
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Michael Hartnett: The Fresh Food Emporium



Michael Hartnett in contemplative mood



Suitcase full of the collected, and mostly unpublished works of Michael Hartnett

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survive into adulthood. It is said that his father – a house painter – was inclined towards a pint or two, and with six children to feed during

war-time rationing, life must have been difficult. He grew up on Lower Maiden Street in Newcastle West, Co. Limerick, in a house with mud walls and a leaking roof. Later he moved, at the age of ten, to a

Council house at 28 Assumpta Park.

A sickly child, Michael was partly raised by his grandmother, Bridget Halpin, who lived on a farm in Camas, a townland in Killeedy,

Newcastle West. Originally from North Kerry, Bridget was, at that time, one of the few remaining Irish speakers in the County Limerick area. As the little boy pottered about by her side, he would listen to her converse in both languages, moving freely between the two. In this way, he must have become keenly aware of the differences between both languages, and their strengths and weaknesses in conveying feeling, meaning and emotion.

Despite the less-than-ideal circumstances of his youth, Michael was a regular reader at the local library and achieved his Leaving Certificate at St. Ita's secondary school, an unusual feat at a time in which over 50% of school-goers in Ireland dropped out after their Inter Cert. The young man was not, however, hopeful that the slip of paper would guarantee him employment in his own country. The day after he graduated, he set off on a well-trodden path to England, joining some half a million others who left Ireland in the 1950s looking for work (at a time in which the population stood at around 3 million).

In London, he met up with a friend called Jimmy Musgrave and settled, like most of his compatriots, in Kilburn. He found work first as a factory tea-boy and then as a restaurant table cleaner. This type of employment would have been an education in itself, as he toiled among people far removed from his small town in the south west of Ireland. One can imagine the different faces he saw, the dialects he heard, the busy, noisy,

industrious world he had been thrust into.

He had been writing poetry since secondary school, and, according to his reminiscences later in life, "earned a guinea" for a "bad piece of verse in the Irish Weekly Independent". In London, he had a couple of pieces published by local newspapers and journals. He gained some attention, too; the Sunday Review featured an article on his work, written by Donal Foley (an uncle of Jimmy Musgrave), entitled "Teaboy of the Western World".

In 1962, when Hartnett was working as a postman at home in Newcastle West, a young Irish poet named Paul Durcan contacted Michael on foot of the Sunday Review piece. They exchanged letters and samples of each other's work. Durcan brought Hartnett's writings to the attention of John Jordan, editor and founder of *Poetry Ireland*, an English professor at University College Dublin and a poet himself. The academic arranged for and generously sponsored the young Hartnett during his first year studying in UCD. Fellow poet James Liddy also helped to subsidise him with "day to day pint money". It was not, however, a successful venture. In his own words, Michael later said, "my first and only year in university was not distinguished. I was more interested in the streets of Dublin than in the infallibility of the Angelic Doctor."

Despite his scholarly struggles, Michael became ever more enmeshed in the literary milieu of Dublin. He was introduced to Patrick Kavanagh

in a pub, a meeting which did not go altogether well, given the youngster's unabashed confidence and burgeoning 'artistic temperament'. The confrontation was notorious as a 'young prodigy confronting an old master' among the set, according to Pat Walsh, author of the comprehensive *A Rebel Act: Michael Hartnett's Farewell to English*. However, the two poets were later reconciled and often shared a drink or two. Together with James Liddy and Liam O'Connor, Michael co-edited the literary magazine *Arena* from 1963 to 1965. In 1964 the magazine published an extract from a short novel he'd written, entitled *Golgotha, Gentlemen, Please*. He also travelled to Madrid and Morocco and enjoyed a brief stint as caretaker of Joyce's Tower in Sandycove during this time.

He returned to London, and after a brief courtship including visits to Kilkee and Newcastle West, married Englishwoman Rosemary Grantley on the 4th April 1966. He had, Rosemary later recalled, arrived for their first date toting a "suitcase full of the collected, and mostly unpublished works of Michael Hartnett." The marriage was initially a happy one, blessed with two children: Lara, born in 1968 and Niall, born in 1971. Michael charted this contented time in his life in a book of love poetry entitled *Anatomy of a Cliché*, which was dedicated to his wife. It was published in 1968 and received critical acclaim.

The family moved back to Dublin that year and Michael, like many artists both then and now, had to balance a regular paying job – as a night telephonist at the exchange on Exchequer Street and a reviewer for the Irish Times – alongside his poetry. During this time he published three books with New Writers Press: *The Old Hag of Beare* (1969), *Selected Poems* (1970) and *Tao* (1972). He



Drinking was part of him and necessary for writing



Storyteller Micheal Rowsome strikes a pose in honour of the poet Michael Hartnett in Newcastle West, County Limerick, where the poet is permanently honoured.

later worked with Goldsmith Press, publishing with them his translation of the *Romancero Gitano* of Federico García Lorca, entitled *Gypsy Ballads* (1973).

In 1974, when Michael was thirty-three ("the age Christ died"), he underwent something of an epiphany. He took a leave of absence from his job with the telephone exchange and left Dublin with his family, buying a small cottage and an acre of land in Templeglantine, near his grandmother's home, five miles from Newcastle West. In June of that year, he announced from the Peacock Theatre that he would no longer write poetry in the English language, choosing Irish instead. The *Irish Independent*, interviewing him on the subject, proclaimed: "He is doing it not just because he finds Gaelic a beautifully rich and flexible language and the language of his ancestors, but also as a protest against long-held attitudes towards the language".

According to Pat Walsh, it was famed poet Brendan Kennelly who advised Michael that "if he was going to quit writing in English, he should do it in style". He did so, with the publication of *A Farewell to English* in 1975, with the title poem dedicated to Kennelly. The poem makes it clear that English, for Michael, was "the perfect language to sell pigs in", while Gaelic was "our final sign that / we are human, therefore not a herd".

In Limerick, he began lecturing in creative writing at Thomond College of Education. He was awarded a bursary from the Arts Council and a £2,000 grant by the Irish-American Cultural Fellowship. He published a number of books in Irish, including: *Adharca Broic* (1978), *An Phurgóid* (1983) and *Do Nuala: Foighne Chraim* (1984). In 1984,

His meeting with the poet Patrick Kavanagh was notorious



his first volume of *Collected Poems* appeared, with a dedication, "For Rosemary, whom I do not deserve".

By then, Hartnett's marriage was in trouble. The cause of the break-up, Rosemary wrote, was "alcoholism and its effect on family life". The artist had succumbed to that terrible cliché of the profession; "he justified all his actions," she recalled, "by saying that he was a poet and drinking was part of him and necessary for writing."

He returned to Dublin and based himself in a bed-sit in Inchicore. It was there that he wrote one of his most famous works, *Inchicore Haiku*, containing the lines 'My English dam bursts / and out stroll all my bastards. / Irish shakes its head.' Published in 1985, the book details the difficulties within his personal life over the previous years. It was also dedicated to his new partner - with whom he would enjoy a loving relationship until his death -

Angela Liston, 'who saved my life'. He continued to write in English, later completing and collating *A Necklace of Wrens* (1987), *Collected Poems, Volume II* (1987), *Poems to Younger Women* (1989) and *The Killing of Dreams* (1992).

That is not to say he had abandoned Irish, or Irish literature, as he also published various volumes of translations of important Gaelic works into English, including *Ó Bruadair, Selected Poems of Dáibhí Ó Bruadair* (1985) and *Ó Rathaille, The Poems of Aodhaghán Ó Rathaille* (1999). His *New and Selected Poems* appeared

in 1995, and a new *Collected Poems* was published in 2001. He was elected to the Aosdána, receiving a Cnuas, an annual benefit of £5,000 granted to enable him to concentrate on his art full-time.

For the last few years of his life, Hartnett enjoyed a relatively structured life with Angela, although he struggled with financial difficulties and continued to drink to excess. His health suffered as a result, and he marked in his diary in 1989 that

he had been diagnosed with cirrhosis of the liver. He wrote: 'Alcohol's a cunning beast. / It fools the doctor and the priest, / it fools the clever and the sane - / but not the liver or the brain.'

He continued to be involved in the Irish literary scene, giving poetry readings and attending writers' festivals. It was at one such event - Listowel Writers' Week - that he became quite ill. He died on October 12 1999. He is buried in his home town of Newcastle West.

In his essay, *The Double Vision of Michael Hartnett* as part of *Remembering Michael Hartnett* (edited by John McDonagh and Stephen Newman), Declan Kiberd writes that "Hartnett was...this country's most under-rated poet." That situation may well be rectified in years to come, and great efforts have been made to see this change affected.

Each year Newcastle West plays host to Éigse Michael Hartnett Literary and Arts Festival: distinguished guests speak and perform (this year's list included Donal Ryan and Colum McCann) at the local school, library, art gallery, hospital and, of course, pubs, celebrating the legacy of the town's famous son. In addition, for some fifteen years now, a generous prize had been awarded to a poet of special merit, writing in either English or Irish. A bronze statue of Michael Hartnett by sculptor Rory Breslin was unveiled in 2011.

Pages and pages have been written about the man referred to by his son, Niall, as a "poet, friend, punster, seer, scholar and satirist". But perhaps it is best to leave the final word to another great master of the English language, and a fellow Irishman, Nobel Prize-winning poet Seamus Heaney. "Michael Hartnett's inspirations," he once wrote, "affected Irish poetry the way a power surge affects the grid: things quickened and shone when he published."



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