

features

Leader2

'Michael was a man with a gift for poetry, a wonderful human being'

With the literature festival in Michael Hartnett's honour starting this weekend **Gerard Fitzgibbon** profiles the poet

Travel upheaval impacts on line-up for Eigse Michael Hartnett

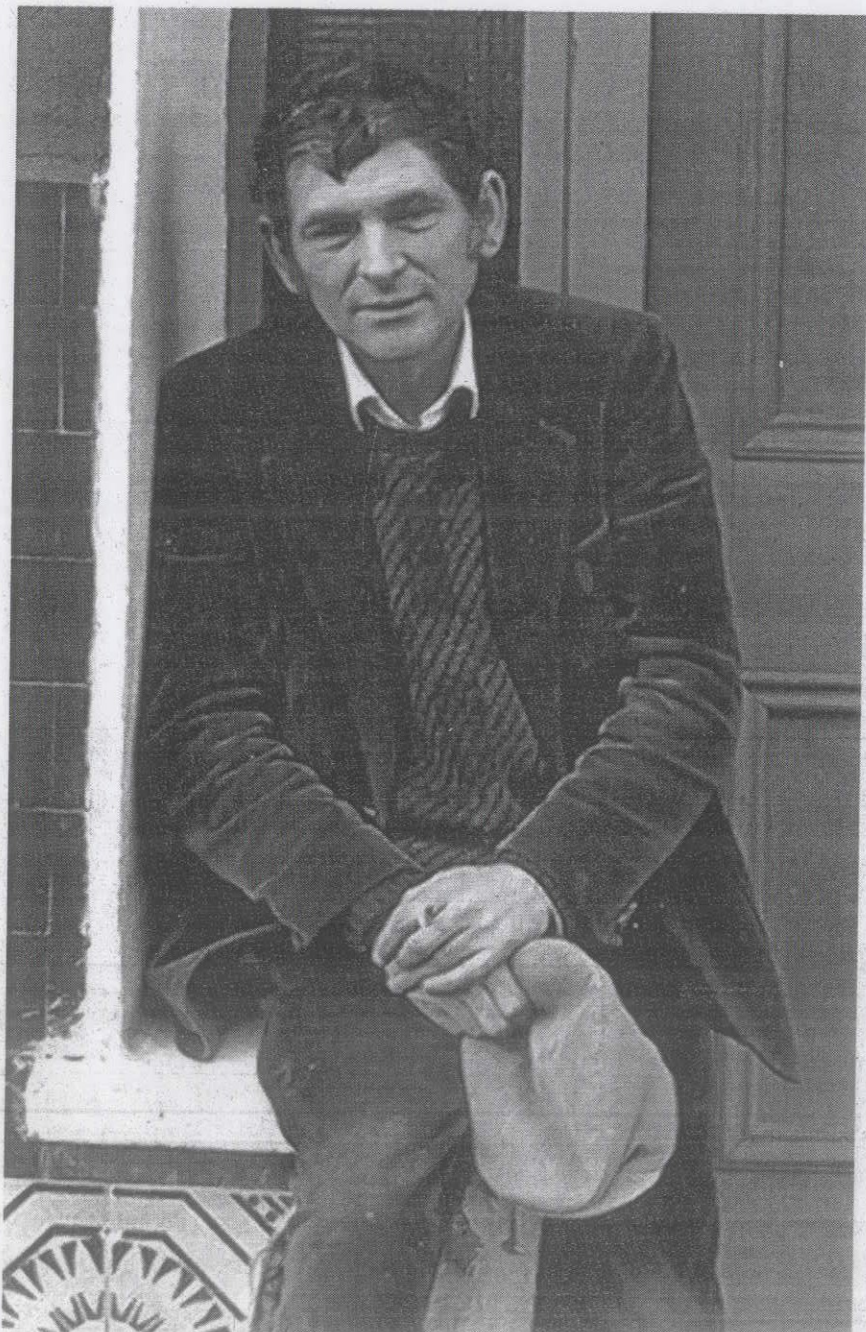
POETS meet in tiny arguments and smoky corners, and every time they do Michael Hartnett is there. The Limerick poet who warred with languages and with himself passed away in 1999, but to this day he is still a presence, and it's not just about the poetry. It's about the man.

"There's one extraordinary thing - and I don't think I'm the only one to remark on this - I find that when I meet writers Michael somehow always finds his way into the conversation," says Michael Coady, poet and peer of Aosdána, the Arts Council's group of the most prominent Irish artists.

"There was something magical about the man. He had a dimension that was in the best sense, populist. Wherever he went, even if he only went into a supermarket, somehow or other he would talk to somebody. There are people everywhere who have a recollection of Michael Hartnett, and what he said or what he did and where they met him."

Since 2000 poets and writers and friends have gathered in Newcastle West, where Hartnett grew up, and have shared with each other the simple joy of literature that he lived by.

This weekend David Whyte (volcano permitting), Fintan O'Toole, Rita Ann Higgins and many more will do the same dur-



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sion of the Romancero Gitano of Federico Garcia Lorca' (1973) when he chose to turn his back on the English language in 'A Farewell to English'.

For the next ten years Hartnett embarked on one of the most prolific periods of his career writing solely in his grandmother's native tongue, but this was at a time when to be so overtly Irish was to provoke controversy and critical thought.

"He was a man who liked a bit of dramatics," enthuses Coady. "There was a political atmosphere at the time which was a bit hysterical... It was at a bad stage during the Troubles and the Fine Gael-Labour government was quite repressive to the idea of

literature."

Hartnett's quiet personal conflict was all around him as he tried to carve out a simple family life in Templeglantine with his wife Rosemary and their two small children in the late 1970s. His burgeoning alcoholism began to break the home apart just as he was writing stunning works such as 'Adharca Broic' (1978) and later 'An Phurgóid' (1983) and 'Do Nuala: Foighne Chrainn' (1984).

As Coady describes it, Hartnett "voluntarily relinquished one of his great gifts... the English language" in order to grow and further seek acceptance as the artist that followed the raconteur student.

Kiss' and his bi-lingual 'A Necklace of Wrens'.

In 1988, he published 'Poems to Younger Women' and admitted that he had become "romantic, sentimental and vicious", and that he no longer held any fear of those emotions.

In his later years he found love and support in his partner Angela Liston, but the alcoholism that seeped into his youth as a court jester in Doheny and Nesbitt's had begun to tear away his diminutive frame.

Later works included Haicéad (1993) and New and Selected Poems (1995). He died in late 1999, weeks after he had been working on translating from Latin the works of the Roman poet Catullus.

His work stands and will

Kevin Corbett

THE line-up for this year's Eigse Michael Hartnett in Newcastle West is in a state of flux due to the havoc in international flight schedules.

Last Wednesday, Pulitzer prize winner Jorie Graham had to regretfully pull out prior to travel becoming an issue, to be replaced by the equally renowned Fanny Howe.

Recipient of the 2009 Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize in honour of her lifetime achievements in literature, Howe is one of America's most celebrated and influential writers.

Author of over twenty books, her recent poetry collections include On the Ground (2004), Gone (2003), Selected Poems (2000), Forged (1999), Q (1998), One Crossed Out (1997), and O'Clock (1995).

Howe has published several novels and prose collections, most recently, The Lives of a Spirit / Glasstown: Where Something Got Broken and Nod.

She has written short stories, books for young adults, and collections of literary essays, The Wedding Dress: Meditations on Word and Life and The Winter Sun: Notes on a Vocation (2009).

With the current uncertainty over air travel, however, even she may not be able to make it.

A question mark also hangs over the participation of English poet David Whyte, who had been due to travel from the USA.



Rita Ann Higgins: set to line up at Eigse 2010

Should restrictions on jet travel be lifted in time, then both will, of course, take part.

In the event that they can't make it, however, county arts officer Joan MacKernan has pledged to replace them with other distinguished participants and assures festi-

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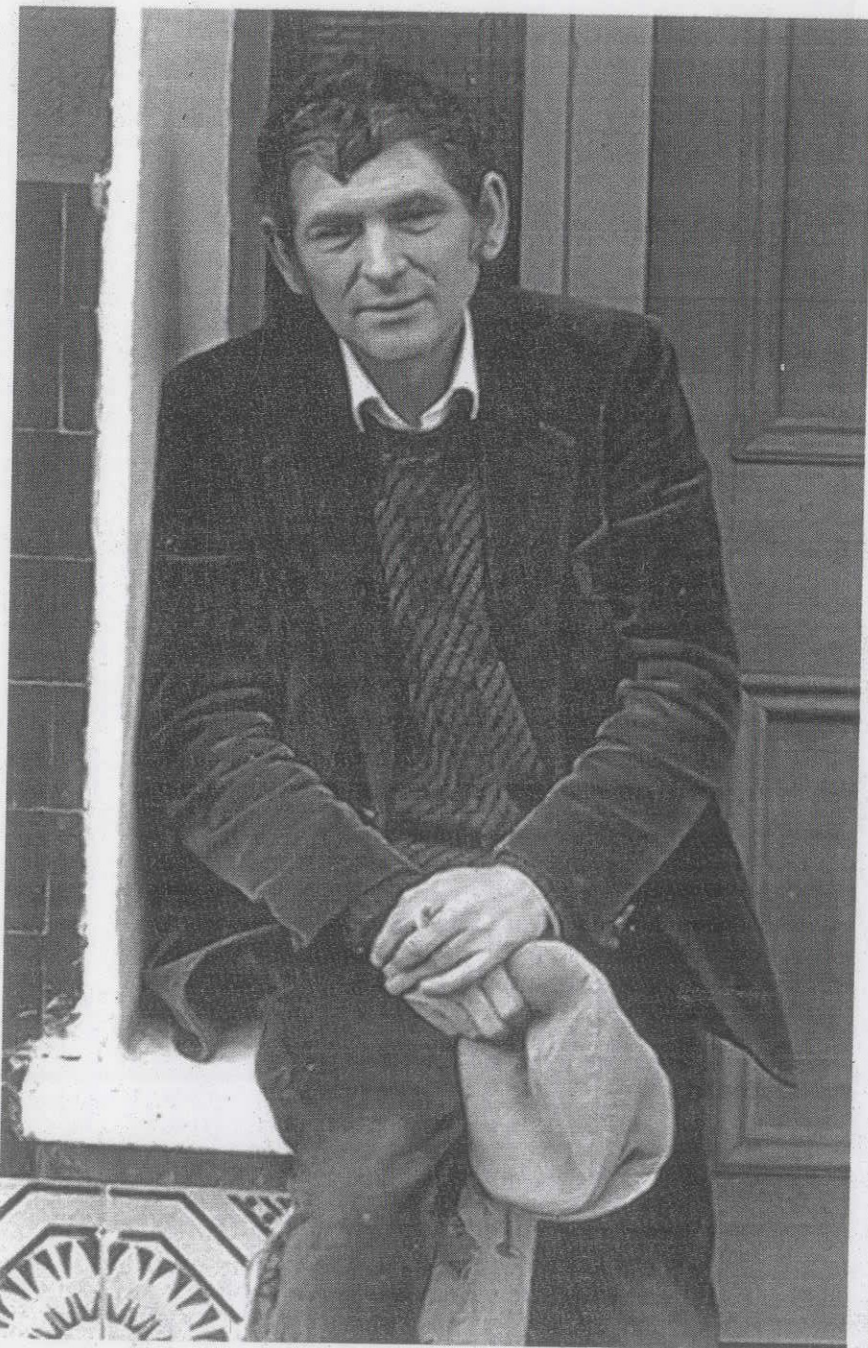
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This weekend David Whyte (volcano permitting), Fintan O'Toole, Rita Ann Higgins and many more will do the same during the myriad readings, lectures and performances of Eigse Michael Hartnett 2010. Like the man and the poetry that inspired it, the festival is diverse and intimate and open.

"Michael was somebody who was known far outside what you might call the literary circle," says Coady. "I don't like the idea of poetry being confined to colleges and universities and academics. I think that's pernicious myself. I think poetry should belong to everybody and it should



His sudden departure from English reflected Hartnett's liking for dramatics

be seen that way. I think Michael had that kind of a gift; he could talk to people and be somehow remembered."

Hartnett was born in Croom in September 1941 and was raised in Camas, just outside Newcastle West. He was fostered from the age of three by his matriarch grandmother, Bridget Halpin, who he would later immortalise in his poem 'Death of An

Irishwoman'.

His father Denis was a painter who read Taoism and had a radical leftist streak at a conservative time. His childhood was not uneventful and it was not ordinary, and Hartnett developed an innocent love of literature and language.

He studied for a year at UCD on the invitation of English professor John Jordan, who admired his already accomplished

poetry at a time when Paul Durcan and Macdara Woods were also reading literature in Dublin and Patrick Kavanagh was still holding court at McDaid's, hurling tables of glasses at Hartnett when he voiced displeasure at some of the old bard's new work.

By 1975 he had already enjoyed attention for writings such as 'The Old Hag of Beare' (1969) 'Tao' (1972) and 'Gypsy Ballads, a ver-



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sion of the Romancero Gitano of Federico Garcia Lorca' (1973) when he chose to turn his back on the English language in 'A Farewell to English'.

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"He was a man who liked a bit of dramatics," enthuses Coady. "There was a political atmosphere at the time which was a bit hysterical... It was at a bad stage during the Troubles and the Fine Gael-Labour government was quite repressive to the idea of Irishness, because it was inevitably associated with the Provos."

"There was that atmosphere, and I think Michael wanted to make a dramatic gesture that enabled him to come truly to grips with the Irish language. I think it is a polemical, quite dramatic work... but I don't think 'A Farewell to English' is his best work."

Michael said that English was a language fit to sell pigs in, but he didn't really mean that. He loved Shakespeare and English

literature."

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As Coady describes it, Hartnett "voluntarily relinquished one of his great gifts... the English language" in order to grow and further seek acceptance as the artist that followed the raconteur student.

When he separated from his wife in 1984 he made a painful move back to Dublin, where he settled in Inchicore and re-married another love, English, to produce 'Inchicore Haiku' in 1985, a visceral and sharply intimate work: "My English dam bursts/and out stroll all my bastards/Irish shakes its head."

Hartnett turned ever more to confessional poetry, evidenced particularly in his beautiful lament for his father 'That Actor

Kiss' and his bi-lingual 'A Necklace of Wrens'.

In 1988, he published 'Poems to Younger Women' and admitted that he had become "romantic, sentimental and vicious", and that he no longer held any fear of those emotions.

In his later years he found love and support in his partner Angela Liston, but the alcoholism that seeped into his youth as a court jester in Doheny and Nesbitt's had begun to tear away his diminutive frame.

Later works included Haicéad (1993) and New and Selected Poems (1995). He died in late 1999, weeks after he had been working on translating from Latin the works of the Roman poet Catullus.

His work stands and will be read and re-read. He has been described by peers as a man who carried everything with him; a natural raconteur. Coady leaves a simple epitaph: "Michael was not academically endowed. He didn't have a string of degrees after his name. As Kavanagh said, 'I have a feeling that through the hole in reason's feeling, we can fly to knowledge without ever going to college'. Here was a man with the gift of poetry, definitely. A wonderful human being."

Impacts on line-up for Eigse Michael Hartnett

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In the event that they can't make it, however, county arts officer Joan MacKernan has pledged to replace them with other distinguished participants and assures festival goers that Eigse 2010 will be as vital and vigorous as ever.

Thankfully, Michael Smith who is due to give extensive readings on the Polar endeavours of Tom Crean, has made it over to Ireland on ferry and will line up as per the programme.

His presence is complemented by the numerous leading Irish poets and speakers on the schedule like Abbot Patrick Hederman, Eileen Sheehan, Rita Ann Higgins, Gearóid Mac Lochlainn and Fintan O'Toole who are unaffected by the travel restrictions.

There are also some wonderful singers on the programme in Roisin Elfafty and Dorota Konczewska.

For young children there is late evening theatre, puppet shows and lots of street theatre on the Saturday afternoon. The show goes on.

For updates on the festival programme visit www.eigsemichaelhartnett.ie