

News

Durcan tips hat to county town for 'mighty project'

■ 'Reincarnation in bronze' of Michael Hartnett, a man of words with a brilliant mind

Norma Prendiville

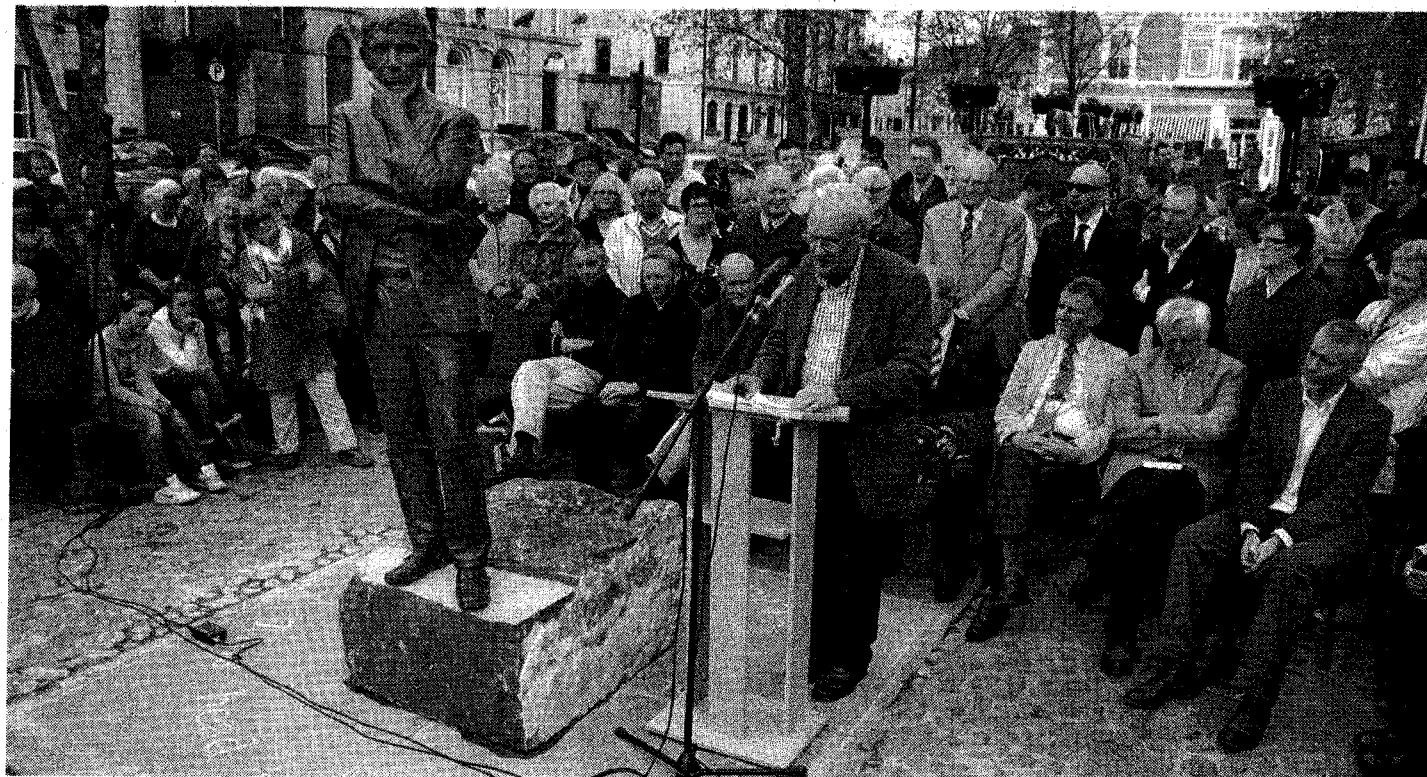
THE statue stands, a "bronze re-incarnation" of Michael Hartnett, *file*, in the middle of Newcastle West. "You should be proud of yourselves for having undertaken such a mighty project. Congratulations," said Michael Hartnett's great friend and fellow-poet Paul Durcan as he officially "unveiled" the sculpture and saluted the Newcastle West Community Council who commissioned the work.

"Where other towns and cities would have dithered and procrastinated or simply neglected their duty, the Newcastle West Community Council has had the vision and courage and commitment to commemorate a man of words by deeds of action culminating in this powerful statue in bronze of Michael Hartnett standing at his ease on a plinth of glacial erratic stone."

And in a powerful and commanding speech, Paul Durcan conjured through words the great heart and spirit of his dead comrade-in-arms.

Michael, he said, was a "trueborn, lifelong, radical democrat" and "a man of words" whose deepest sense of himself was as a file, "one who belonged to an ancient aristocracy that would never and could never be defeated".

And in a series of cameos, he told stories that revealed Michael as a countryman with a deep affinity to nature



Poet Paul Durcan speaking at the unveiling of the Michael Hartnett commemorative sculpture

PICTURE: DAVE GAYNOR

and a cosmopolitan with a brilliant mind, a teenager who had read widely and deeply, a student who had achieved the highest score it was possible to attain in an IQ test.

And he spoke too of Michael's love of music and sounds and of the music that is in his poetry. Poetry, Paul Durcan said, was a form of music to him as well as a means of communication.

"Rory Breslin's statue of Michael Hartnett portrays him in his customary street posture as a thinking man and it brings to mind straightaway, Rodin's famous sculpture

known to the world as "Le Penseur" or "The Thinker". For Michael Hartnett was just that – a thinker. He was a poet with an extraordinarily brilliant mind."

However, he said: "If I had to single out one preoccupation in all his work from start to finish, it is his theme, his anthem, his torch-song of the necessity to defend and uphold the individual humanity of each and every human being on this earth. Conversely, any hint of inhumanity in word or deed used produce in Michael great grief. In his person and his work, he celebrated

the unique humanity of each and every one of us, especially of children, and by the same token, he denounced, with savage indignation, inhuman behaviour and inhuman values."

And he concluded, saying: "And so as we unveil the statue of Michael Hartnett with his back to the bank and instead looking east towards Maiden Street and home and the rising sun, let us celebrate a new era in Newcastle West with Michael Hartnett as a central landmark in the town around whom parents and children and courting

couples and friends and peaceable corner-boys like myself will arrange to rendezvous. Wait for me at the Hartnett statue! We'll hook up at the Hartnett Statue. I'll see you at the Hartnett. Oh yes, I will!"

The unveiling attracted hundreds of locals and visitors, as well as Michael Hartnett's adult children Niall and Lara, his former wife Rosemary, brothers and other relatives.

"It is a fantastic piece of work," Niall Hartnett said of the sculpture. "It just captures his posture; the way he would stand in dead on."

His father's legacy was still growing, he continued. "What my father achieved in the past, we all know; what he is going to achieve in the future we are still learning."

Poems of Michael's in both English and Irish were recited and visitors, as well as Michael Hartnett's adult children Niall and Lara, his former wife Rosemary, brothers and other relatives.

The event concluded when Courtenay Boys NS pupils and rap duo Size2Shoes performed "Hartnett Unrapped" using lines from Hartnett's poetry.

Fun, laughter, poetry and song at Eigse 2011

Norma Prendiville

THEY came in their numbers to enjoy the fun of Eigse Michael Hartnett, to laugh and sing, to feel the energy and to pay some small tribute to a poet whose legacy continues to gain strength.

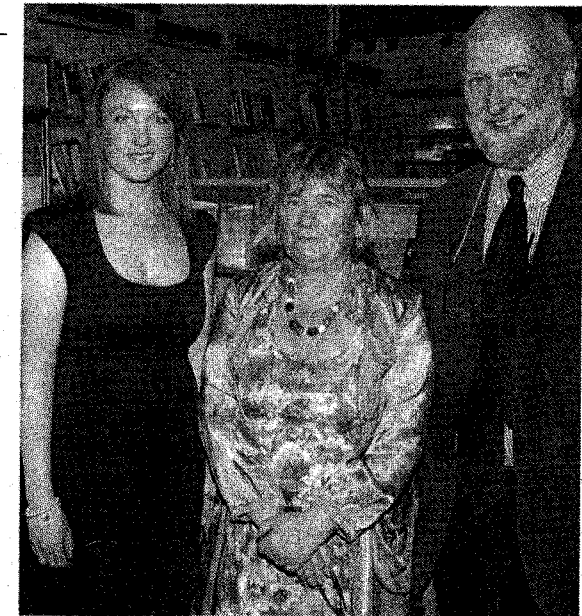
"It is the warmest and most imaginatively programmed literary festival in the country," poet Theo Dorgan said, following a reading with David Whyte and singer Brian Kennedy. "Who doesn't feel at home with the mighty spirit of Michael Hartnett presiding over all our doings?"

And he added: "I think it is a great sign of a place that it has enough confidence in itself to honour its poets."

Peter Sirr, the 2011 winner of the Michael Hartnett Poetry Award, was equally strong in his praise. "It has been fantastic, a lovely, warm atmosphere. I enjoyed it all, the town itself, the posters in the windows, the unveiling. We had a fantastic time here."

And for Noel King, from Tralee who walked away with the Viva Voce prize for an original poem, it was a day to remember. "I am wearing my necklace of wrens with pride," he grinned.

Eigse Michael Hartnett 2011 will remain memorable for many things – the commanding presence of poet Paul Durcan paying honourable tribute to Michael Hartnett; the haunting voice of singer/songwriter Juliet Hartnett; the fun of Size2Shoes and the Courtenay Boys in rap mood; the winning recitations from Sean Kelly and Margaret Cahill; the intensity of



Brid Bradshaw and Joan MacKernan, Arts Office and Fergus Finlay at the launch of Eigse Michael Hartnett Festival

PICTURE: BRENDAN GLEESON

motivational speaker and poet, David Whyte; the sheer pleasantness of Brian Kennedy.

Fintan O'Toole spoke to the heart as he launched Gabriel Fitzmaurice's new collection "Songs of love and faith", beautifully illustrated by Brenda Fitzmaurice's paintings.

But for sheer exuberance, the performance of Day Dream Believers, a collaboration involving Transition Year students from Scoil Mhuire agus Ide and residents of Rathfredagh Cheshire Home along with Size2Shoes, was not to be surpassed. They sang, they danced, they rapped, they recited. They were creative together – and it rocked.

For others, the performance of the festival came late on Friday night when the Co Limerick Youth Choir, under their director Maura Keary-Scanlon performed their choral interpretation of Michael Hartnett's poem

"Sibelius in Silence." In a river of sound stretching over an hour, the powerful words of the poem, read splendidly by Fiona Quinn, were married to songs from Sibelius, Tchaikovsky, Bill Whelan and others.

It was a piercingly beautiful achievement – and a notable premiere that sprang from an idea by Limerick County Arts Officer, Joan MacKernan who oversaw the running-out of what was regarded by many as one of the best Eigses yet.

And perhaps, in launching the festival, social commentator and CEO of Barnardos, Fergus Finlay was most pertinent. We can change the small things, he said. "We have the capacity to rebuild ourselves. We have the capacity to change all sorts of little things about the way we do stuff in Newcastle West, thanks to Eigse, a lot of little things changed for a lot of people. And hope, and light, crept in."