

Our Literary History

IN PRAISE OF MINOR POETS

Limerick has even literary associations, though not many. At No. 5 Clare Street, on the Kilmallock Road, died Bryan Merryman, the Gaelic poet. Admittedly Merryman was a Clareman, but so are most other Limerickmen". Thus wrote Frank O'Connor in his travel book "Leinster, Munster and Connaught".

While it is true to say that Limerick and Clare have had a long and neighbourly affinity, and that such Clare-born writers as Bryan Merryman, and Eugene O'Curry lived, worked and contributed to the literary reputation of their adopted city, one does not have to be a Limerick chauvinist to know that O'Connor's sweeping judgement on our writers was harsh and unfair.

Frank O'Connor, for all his great talents, was not the most reliable critic of Limerick's literary history. He had some blind spots, and was inclined to be perverse on occasions.

Our literary history is not an unworthy one. Leafing back through its pages, it soon becomes clear that no objective critic could dismiss the contribution of the writers, poets, papermakers and publishers to the world of literature "on the dark edge of Europe" in one sentence.

In the context of history and literature, it is worth recalling that one of the first known histories of Limerick, part of which survived as the Davis Manuscript, was written in verse, thus combining the two branches of writing in one work.

Limerick has not produced a Yeats, and our best poets are rated as minor poets in the annals of English literature. But there is no need to be ashamed of that classification. Further the division between major and minor poetry is marked by a thin and shifting line.

W.H. Auden in his anthology "Nineteenth Century British Minor Poets", wrote: Every genuine poet, however minor, is unique, a member of a class of one". Auden selected the work of three Limerick poets, John Francis O'Donnell, Sir Aubrey de Vere and Aubrey Thomas de Vere, for inclusion in his book. Gerald Griffin and Michael Hogan are also worthy of inclusion in any representative anthology of nineteenth century verse. And a similar claim can be made for the work of Desmond O'Grady and Michael Hartnett in this century.

So, let us celebrate our poets. They may be minor, but they are unique for all that. We are in good company. No less a writer than Henry W. Longfellow, in a poem of praise of minor poets "The Day Is Done", led the way in this celebration:

Come, read to me some poem,
Some simple and heartfelt lay,
That shall soothe this restless feeling
And banish the thoughts of day.

Read from some humble poet,
Whose songs gushed from his heart,
As showers from the clouds of summer,
Or tears from the eyelids start.

Then read from the treasured volume
The poem of thy choice,
And lend to the rhyme of the poet
The beauty of thy voice.

And the night shall be filled with music,
And the cares that infest the day,
Shall fold their tents, like the Arabs,
And as silently steal away.