
UNBOUND

POET



In 1955 I wrote a very bad piece of verse which was published in the **Limerick Weekly Echo**. I was thirteen: I wrote the piece for no good reason, unless it were to make up for my poverty. One of my teachers descended on me wrathfully; it was a copy of the work of that great poet, T.D. Shanahan, he said. The headmaster, Frank Finucane, defended me. The other teacher challenged me to write a set poem in two weeks. Frank Finucane called his class to a halt, and with his encouragement I finished the poem in ten minutes. The other teacher retreated, and never spoke to me again. So, at thirteen, I found that being a poet in Ireland is, contrary to what the Americans think, an incongruity.

That was in Newcastle West, Co. Limerick... I left the national school in 1956 and lost an ally. Secondary school came then, and I wrote many poems (all, fortunately, lost) and made a new enemy, my English teacher. For five years I was beaten more often for "meditating the Muse", as he called it, than for lack of learning. But my poetry changed for the better, not because of the school, but because I partook of an old Irish custom: the girl I loved at the time entered a convent. This, and the claustrophobia of Newcastle West, its rich and its poor, its bullying priest, turned me to write about myself. Any oppression I encountered was not direct. I was oppressed by what was inherent in the town's way of life, the patronising society doled out bread and boots to the poor; the reading of subscriptions from the pulpit, the quashed scandals, dark secrets about the "Troubles", and I was a poor man's son in a secondary school, a place I had no right to be, as I was often reminded.

So the poetry went on. I had published another bad piece of verse in the **Irish Weekly Independent** and got a guinea for it. This brought me some small recognition in the town, as a few people there read that paper. As the Dublin literati never really appreciate a poet unless the **Observer** or **Sunday Times** mention him, so the people of Newcastle West would not believe I was a poet unless they saw it "down in black and white" in a Dublin



Michael Hartnett, from a portrait by Edward McGuire.

by MICHAEL
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newspaper.

I left home in 1961 and went to London, out of pure instinct. I worked as a tea-boy in a factory there, every scrap of poetry melting away. Then the coincidences began. I met a friend from home. He introduced me to his uncle, who was working on the **Sunday Review**; he read some of the poetry I

had brought with me and liked it. Shortly afterwards my photograph appeared in the **Sunday Review**, captioned with an awful pun, "Teaboy of the Western World". A short article said I was a poet. The **Sunday Review** had a good circulation in Newcastle West; I had achieved my myth, because in small towns in Ireland, unless a man has a nickname (a reputation, good or bad), he hardly exists at all.

I returned home and was accepted. Coincidence rested awhile. I got a job as a postman; the poetry, which rose to meet the occasion of acceptance, now

dwindled again.

I was badly read at this time, and had no knowledge of modern poetry, although I had read Yeats. I thought that at his death in 1939 Ireland had faded out of the literary picture, and from reading the English Sunday "heavies", I thought England, especially London, was vibrant with poetic life. Of course, I was totally wrong. But I did not feel up to London again, and I had a fine job cycling around the countryside, finishing just after midday, and I was beginning to be lulled into the soft security of my own myth.

Then the second coincidence came. I got a wild letter and numerous poems from Dublin from a young man called Paul Durcan early in 1962. He had read the article in the **Sunday Review**. He wanted my opinion of his work, and also to see some of mine. His poems were mad, rich and full of classical allusions. I was delighted: there was another poet in Ireland! I sent him some of my poems, which I had written in 1958/9, and heard no more for a long time.

One day I went to Galway to see a girl. Paul Durcan arrived in Newcastle West, I had missed meeting my first poet and was furious, but calmed down when my mother told me he had come in a car. So he was rich - and ordinary; from his poems I had expected him to come on a yak, at least. Then one morning in September I was sorting the letters in the post office and there was one for me with a Dublin postmark and in a strange hand. It praised my poetry, said six of my poems were accepted for **Poetry Ireland**, and it also invited me to a reception to mark the launching of the magazine. So on September 12th, 1962, I borrowed a suit, hitch-hiked to Dublin, and set off to discover the literary world.

I was very nervous. I had never met

a poet before, let alone that revered and able personage, an editor. I found the Bailey and went in. I was too early: there were very few people there, but a proliferation of liquor put me at my ease. John Jordan introduced himself and I found that he, as an editor and a man, lived up to my preconceived notions of reverence and ability. The room where the drink was soon filled up. I was shocked to find there were so many poets in Dublin, but a swift per capita comparison between Newcastle West and the Capital showed me the number was just.

John Jordan had many guests to entertain, so I was left alone for some time with the first glass of sherry I had ever tasted and I watched. The talk was not the literary iambic I expected and I learned that the poets and writers did not talk shop in public.

I heard snippets of scandal straight from the Vatican, the names of various racehorses; a novelist sang a bawdy song in his braces and a publisher sprang to the middle of the floor and shouted: "Bring on the mots!" (I thought he was calling in mock French for sublime aphorisms: later I found out exactly what a mot was).

Although there were many poets present there were at least as many more not; later I noticed that while magazine A published its own brood of writers, magazine B excluded that particular brood. I thought this strange: literary products are merely commodities at magazine level, and the only rule of non-publication should be lack of quality: but this is not the criterion. In the next few years I looked carefully at certain publications and formed these opinions: lack of quality is no bar to publication if the writer is compatible to the editor in personality and sect. However, incompatibilities on those scores may be a bar to publica-

tion whatever the quality of the work.

I do not pretend to know the tastes of the editors at first hand, but these can be deduced from the work and from the writers they publish. I mentioned "sect" because I found the main cliques (one of which I knew was split into sub-cliques) to be "Irish Catholic" on one side and "Anglo-Irish" on the other. But perhaps this is too much of a generalisation: a small percentage of these groups appeared in the publications of both ... (there were poets who did not associate with either group but who were categorised, nevertheless). Of course, poets of more than Irish standing were patronised by both parties, whatever their origins.

But to return to 1962. When the Bailey reception ended I was introduced to my first literary pub. Again the hope of sparkling talk foolishly came to me: again I heard racing results, the rapid solution of world crises and the extra bonus of gossip of the shady love lives of absentees. John Jordan introduced me to Patrick Kavanagh, whom I did not know. I leant over to shake his hand but he declined saying: "I don't know him", gruffly.

I asked John Jordan what he was: he referred me to the biographical notes in **Poetry Ireland**. I was not impressed, so I read the poem he had contributed. I was young and foolish and not aware that Patrick Kavanagh was listening and I said: "It's not poetry at all: it's got the word 'garage' in it". He towered up, scattering drink on the floor, shouted: "You insolent pup!" and left the table. I had not realised he was the pub idol. I thought he was a boor: I reversed this opinion when I read his poetry later and saw he was a poet indeed. But he played to the stalls: he went into the pub for company and he had to make the best of the company he found.

The fees which enabled me to spend my first year in Dublin in U.C.D. were supplied by a man who suffers that rare disease in this practical world, generosity: a man who gave with no ulterior motive like kindness, but merely because of the need of the recipient, and who asked for no interest, material or metaphysical.

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. Then I got the opportunity to co-edit **Arena** with James Liddy and Liam O'Connor: two years later it unfortunately ceased and I was left without an income. My parents, of course, did not approve of my leaving the postman's job: less still of leaving U.C.D. It would not be easy to return to Newcastle West and my position on **Arena** had closed some literary doors to me in Dublin. So, on the 13th of January, 1965, I was on the Irish Sea again, London-bound.



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