

Zooming through life

THE BURREN DAYS by John Ennis (Gallery Books). £3.60.

CAST IN THE FIRE by Greg Delanty (Dolmen). £4.95.

INTERNAL EXILES by Dermot Bolger (Dolmen). £4.95.

THE BURREN DAYS is a longish poem of some one thousand lines. It signals an important advance in the writing career of John Ennis. A countryman, Ennis has combined in this poem his feeling for the Irish landscape and his knowledge of, and disgust at, technological Ireland. He has managed to do so with a craft and control that distinguish this poem from his last flawed but fascinating long poem, *Orpheus*.

The Burren Days is as much a story as a poem. Based on the legend of Diarmuid and Grainne, it tells of Ray Daly and his girlfriend, Grainne, who zoom to a world of landscape and legend on their Yamaha. Ray works as a laboratory technician, and much of the poem's interest stems from the way Ennis sets down the scientific world in which Ray Daly works and the scientific processes he used in the Bord Bainne laboratory. I have never seen this done before in Irish poetry; elsewhere, I have not always seen it done so well.

Set against managerial reductionism in the poem, the Burren is rich in plant-life and lyrical, subterranean mythologies. It is not a sentimental opposite to the other world: it is a psychic counterpart if anything, and between them both modern Ireland is encapsulated as in a test-tube containing two different substances straining against each other.

Set in the attractive typeface, which is important for a long poem, *The Burren Days* shows the same delight in language as Ennis's other books have displayed, but there is not the same prolixity. There are echoes of Kavanagh: the line "Applause. Applause. Ray Daly was not missed" is a straight echo, for example, of the line "Applause/Applause/The curtain falls," in *The Great Hunger*. Yet Ennis is not a Kavanagh clone: there is something of Kavanagh in anyone who writes poetry in Ireland by now, and Ennis remains his own man. *A Selected Poems* is about due: the best of Ennis, even when his often daring explorations of language and method do not completely work, is a rich and rewarding experience. He leaves many other poets looking watery and confined to limited forms, like people who never stir out of the house.

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Greg Delanty's *Cast In The Fire* is a first book from a poet who has a number of significant awards:

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the Patrick Kavanagh in 1983; the Alan Dowling Poetry Fellowship in 1986. He is currently in America, spending the latter, huge award of \$20,000 — enough to fill the black hole in the economy!

His book is divided, like Caesar's Gaul, into three parts. There's a prelude and two separate sections the first of which is by far the most successful part of the book.

Delanty's poems are tightly-made; the sonnet is favoured form, and while at times this can cause him to tighten the poem until it becomes more wrought than felt, it is obvious that such finished form is state his work inhabits comfortably like a favourite room.

He is fond of rhyme. He is also fond of shapes: the hieroglyph a poem makes. Animals and bees provide him what metaphors for his concerns. And what are his concerns? They are personal: the death of his father, a broken affection. Those written for his father are the best in the book: they marry feeling and form in a way that leaves neither looking awkward.

Much of their success stems from the delineation of details: a black tie borrowed for his father's funeral; a white teacup in which false teeth were kept; the strangeness of his father's voice taped accidentally over a recording of Yeats. The sense of loss is measured in such details.

Greg Delanty's poems have humour as well, but the final note, in a disturbing, haunted and haunting poem named *The Bridegroom's Tale*, is one of ominous, chilling prophecy.

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Dermot Bolger's book has the distinction of having more misprints than any poetry book I have ever read. Many of them are embarrassingly obvious, and they detract from the worth of a book that contains some important poems. They are important literally because they have import and impact, and Bolger is giving voice to aspects of Ireland that are seldom the stuff of poetry. Two poems in this book, *The Widow Of A Pious Man* and the superb *Lament For Arthur Cleary*, stand out from all the others. It is probably too much to hope that the latter of these poems, a modern version of *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire*, should be on the Leaving Cert curriculum. Seeing it would certainly open the minds of students to the way poetry can be about the real world of modern Ireland.

The Lament is a love poem: its landscape is Dublin, but not the Dublin of a caricature Moore Street and a Donnybrook mews. Rather, it is Dublin of the drugs and flats, of unemployment, emigration and death. The poem zooms through the pages like a motorbike. Bolger's work has a terrific energy about it, an energy that is a counterpoint to the lethargy he pinpoints in the official version of Irish life.

SEAN DUNNE.

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folksinger is silenced by the publican: 'We'll have no Pakistani music here'. The Irish place-name Clais an Mhictire ('Wolf Hollow') is misheard by the English as Clashavictory ('Their thoughts ran wild on victory... conquest-gloating.') The poems offer a wide range of reference, and a view of life as a hard affair brightened by sudden unexpected graces - music, colour (which 'matters everything/and not at all') and nature.

One of Pearse Hutchinson's poems, 'Manifest Destiny', satirises an Ireland 'tugging green plastic forelocks' to a future American President. John Ennis's ambitious new poem takes a long look at this new, Irish Development Agency Ireland, land of EEC subsidy and Papal Visit. The book is a single long poem, an adaptation of the story of Diarmuid and Grainne, undated so that Diarmuid becomes Ray Daly ('Durex Daly') - a lab technician working for the Irish milk board - remembering his trips all over Ireland on his Yamaha 850 Special with Grainne - a student of Irish history. The trips duplicate the flight of the lovers in the original. The erotic and timeless is juxtaposed with the detailed life of the new Ireland:

Grainne beckoned to him in the naked shower.
He sank into the trailing barley of her hair
Finecombed in the evergold prickly river of his
memory of her.

One day I'd like four sons and one daughter,
she'd whispered

As the operator called testily for more 10p's.

The poem is full, full to bursting, of the language of Ray's Bord Baine job. We hear of the Toluene distillation and the Van der Ploq quadruple evaporator, of demineralised whey and scorched particle tests, of antimony tri-chloride and low actinic glass ware ('For moisture will render the reagent useless'), of the Rose Gottlieb Test, the Negler reaction and 'the exigencies of the Carr-Price method.' Meanwhile, the salmon die, the takes are choked with slurry, 'the ether of life is diminished'. There are moments during the poem when the oppositions it uses seem to be becoming too stark, its exploitation of contrasts too deliberate and wilful - but in the end it is this very relentlessness which makes the poem a success, the fact that Ennis does not choose to soften or compromise from executing his long, single-minded, unified work. 'A tour de force, a genuine long poem continuing from a single impulse,' says the blurb: it's true.

Winter In Meath, John F. Deane's new book of poems, is dedicated to his wife, whose death in 1980 is the personal grief which can be felt throughout this collection. The opening poems are penitential in tone, and include a sequence of poems about John Scotus Eriugena, the 9th century monk whose book *De Divisione Naturae* 'taught that God reveals himself in nature in a continually developing theophany.' Many of the poems are set in the holy places of Ireland, from the monastery on the bare Atlantic rock of the Great Skellig, the climb up Croagh Patrick, or Monasterboice where 'Buite climbed from here to heaven/on a ladder held by angels', to the geographical bleakness and personal desolation of 'Winter in Meath' itself. A sequence called 'Encounter' describes the emptiness of a 'landscape without figures', and leads the reader to suspect that these poems are more successful when they evoke loss emblematically rather than through direct treatments. 'My words never enclosed her'; true after death too perhaps. In the last poem, 'Francis of Assisi', a tentative affirmation is hinted at:

our poems, too, are gestures of a faith
that words of an undying love
may not be without some substance.

This collection is certainly a long way from being without substance.

Lieut. Col. Lundy was the Military Governor during the siege of Derry in 1689. He departed the city and to the besieged population he became a symbol of betrayal. Those considered to follow in his footsteps are known as Lundys.' Gerald Dawe, raised in the Protestant community of Belfast, now lives and works in Galway: a Lundy to some. His poems about modern Ireland have a wary, watchful quality, a constant sense of slight uncertainty, slight unease - 'In-between is where we are,/ backs to the sea.' In 'Postcard From Galway' he writes of the

buried spate
of bloody accident and design

that makes a mockery of this free state
and our tinkering with time.

Dawe's poems are decent and limited; in the present they describe, very little happens, and the Ireland they evoke is dominated by 'our mutual incomprehension', by bolted doors and

Three Irish Poets to Watch

(in page one)

... way, he argues persuasively, is the one mapped by Kavanagh, whom he designates as "the first fully Irish poet in the English language — an Irish poet whose relationship to Irish nationality and the English language was not problematical." Kavanagh therefore had no anxiety about cultural tradition. "He realized that the presence of an Irish present — no matter how sordid, flawed or dubious — relieved the writer of dependence on an Irish past or future." This is well said, and the essay abounds in well-phrased *aperçus* not only about Kavanagh but about Yeats ("between Yeats and Kavanagh there is not so much a profound break, as the lack of any real connection"); about Thomas Moore ("It was not necessary for Moore to be great — it is enough that he merely existed"); and Mangan ("Mangan perceived, at some level, that the entire nation was being translated into English."). And about many other matters, such as the "fully conscious innocence" of much new Irish poetry — as opposed, one assumes, to the new poetry from Northern Ireland, which is more knowing, swathed in irony, limed in the literary, occluded and allusive.

All this is good stuff, as is O'Loughlin's discussion of certain aspects of Kavanagh's poetic note — its relation to the submerged voices of folk-song and to the Gaelic poems of northeast Ulster. So, is this then the beginnings of a new "Irish discourse," resistant to British and American idioms, self-born and authentic? Well, not altogether. O'Loughlin is still as subject as Corkery was to an old postcolonial anxiety, and for all his exact delineation and celebration of Kavanagh's imaginative UDI, those English critics and American professors whose discourse he is intent upon deconstructing remain every bit as much imprinted upon his Southern Irish mind as they do upon the more problematical minds (Ulster? British? Northern Irish?) of those beyond the pale of the new Irishness which he discerns and would espouse. But in a poem like "Latin as a Foreign Language," O'Loughlin manages to free the surge of discourses and histories in order to arrive in the rite literate domain of the achieved poem, that place where what his publisher calls "the urge of the marginal to become central" is fulfilled. There is something redemptively innocent about this poem's effort to be in the know.

John Ennis, however, could have been adduced by O'Loughlin as one of those new Irish poets who operate with a "fully conscious innocence." *The Burren Days* is the fourth book by this too-neglected, oddly gifted, undiscouraged poet, and if one needed proof of the continuing efficacy of Kavanagh's work, one could begin right here. What a thrill to open a book which starts off like this:

Ray Daly's Super Yamaha ate up the miles and gleamed
Toward the white portals of the Bord Baine complex

This is narrative, aware not only of its own relation to the legend of Diarmuid and Gráinne, but even more immediately aware of its stylistic debt to *The Great Hunger*. The fact that the substance of *The Burren Days* is sexual joy rather than sexual repression only serves to emphasize Kavanagh's continuing availability as an influence. Lines like the following are both fully themselves and eerily ventriloquistic:

The evening wore the sharp cold blue of early April

They'd rushed at love too strongly in the rising sun.
Withdrew from the climax till it became torture.

Lines like these begin in allusion and proceed into parody:

Applause. Applause. Ray Daly was not missed.
The minister's gut roared as the clapping died.

And finally, lines like these are the bonus which the Kavanagh spirit bequeaths to the Ennis voice — direct, sudden, generous, unmediated perceptions:

Daly and Joyce exchanged smiles like sister moons.
Each swung out of the other's solitariness.

And Ray Daly loved the tremble running
Through the Chemical Plant at full stretch . . .

Ray Daly is a young laboratory technician, Gráinne Flynn is his student girlfriend, and Mr. Joyce is the manager of the Bord Baine laboratory. These are the principal characters in *The Burren Days*, an account structured in five parts to match the five working days of Ray Daly's week, culminating on the Friday with a visit from the Minister of Agriculture, who arrives to perform "the Ceremony of the Tape" and to open a new extension to the plant. But:

At that precise second

Ray Daly, laboratory technician and sometime lover,
Brought to life his Yamaha 850,
Set out at his ease on the eternal road to Gráinne
And the great silences of Maam.

So the poem ends, with a conclusion that is entirely satisfactory, since the thing is not only an account of Ray Daly's working life but an evocation of his dream life as well; the writing is realistic insofar as it abounds in images of the new Euro-Ireland, but it is erotic also, full of hankerings after the old

cesses are matched (too schematically and too unrelentingly) with daydreams of breakaway weekends in the Burren or Connemara. If at times it all feels very gawky and openfaced, this is the penalty of John Ennis' salutary readiness to dive into the usual life, put his faith in the god of details and try to close "the gap between Irish identity as it is experienced and Irish identity as it is formulated and perceived outside Ireland." (After Kavanagh.)

SOMETHING WHICH KAVANAGH MIGHT have said I found being said recently by Milan Kundera (in *The Threepenny Review*, Number 24). I am reminded of it because what holds true for the Czechoslovakian applies equally to the case of Paul Durcan whose eighth volume, *The Berlin Wall Café*, deepens his claim to be one of the most original and undaunted imaginations at work in our favor anywhere today.

Poetry, Kundera declared,

means not just a literary genre; rather it's above all a conception of the world, an attitude towards the world . . . The lyric poet always identifies himself with his feelings. The anti-lyrical attitude consists of the conviction that an infinite distance exists between what one thinks about oneself and what one really is, an infinite distance between feelings and existence, between what things want to be, or believe they are, and what they are.

It is precisely this tension between the lyrical and the anti-lyrical, between intensity and irony, between innocence and fear, that we experience in Paul Durcan's work. Michael O'Loughlin sees Durcan deriving his strength from the Catholic mystical strain in Kavanagh's later work, and this is undoubtedly true. There shimmers at the heart of these poems a something which we might call "The Morning Offering Vision," the belief that nothing is trivial and everything is holy and wholly important when offered up and taken in the spirit of love. The poetry resides in this "attitude to the world." Yet this vision or attitude is constantly threatened by the anti-lyricism of a realist's laughter; the cold blast of self-mockery blows menacingly close to the marshlight of tenderness.

A Poetry Society Choice

FRANK ORMSBY

A Northern Spring

Secker & Warburg; Gallery Press, 1986,

St.£4.50; Ir.£6.90 (c)

0 19 211870 6

Reviewed by RONALD MARKEN

WHEN IT APPEARED IN 1977, Frank Ormsby's first book of poetry attracted a critical response. A slim volume of meticulously-crafted lyrics and a Poetry Book Society Choice, *A Store of Candles*, ignited more mild irritation that wild surmise. Ormsby's published advisors urged him to be more daring, to challenge convention, to stop making "Ulster Well-Made Poems" (than which nothing is more irksome to certain reviewers). According to Robert Hogan's *Dictionary of Irish Literature* his poems' "lack of poetic skill is somewhat disguised by their adequacy as rhetoric" — faint praise indeed for poems that deserved instead to be quietly celebrated for their finesse, wit, and powerful reticence.

Now, nine years later, Ormsby has released his second volume, *A Northern Spring* — altogether quite a different candle store. The poet's formal constraints have been considerably loosened; line-length, stanza structure, and meter relax into styles more flexible, suited to the various and changing voices deployed in this volume:

They flew me back to Utah with shock in my eyes,
that rimmed and frozen look the marines call
the two-thousand-yard-stare.

The bridges are all targets now, the pools
belch like hot springs and dead faces
balloon to the surface.

The dark flies against, the faces bloom in the sun.

("Grenade-Fishing in the Orme")

Ormsby no longer relies on his own voice to carry the burden, as he did in his earlier volume. Most of the voices in this book are those of American GIs who spent time in Northern Ireland before going off to fight and die in Europe. Ormsby's more expansive style seems to have been created by the American way of speech and poetry:

If dead men laughed, I would have laughed the day
the committee for white heroes honoured me,
and honoured too the mangled testicles

It has been the fate of Durcan's imagination to inhabit this world of hiatus, to tremble on the fulcrum between comedy and self-pity, to be doomed to compensate for need or loss with a hyperactive inventiveness. The longer he writes, the more he closes the gap between a style and a destiny, the more purely he transforms the intimate into the universal.

Durcan, of course, is an older and far better-known poet than O'Loughlin or Ennis. Yet O'Loughlin's point about the separate development of poetry in the Irish Republic (*pace* the welcome fact that the book is published by Blackstaff Press, the poetry handlers of the North) is well borne out when we consider not only the insiderishness and originality of Durcan's work, but also the fact that while his poems are enormously popular and highly regarded in Ireland, they have had less notice than they deserve in Britain and the U.S. In fact, it's time some American publisher did a volume of this poet, who, with Paul Muldoon and a number of women, are among the ones who are "changing the game" (to use Lowell's downbeat phrase) in Ireland.

To keep to Kundera terms, we might call *The Berlin Wall Café* a book of laughter and remembering, a book which demonstrates the bearable heaviness of being. There are plenty of the old merry routines here about the crudity of the Irish male and the bully-boys of the Irish hierarchy. There are the hit-and-miss fantasias we have come to look forward to, the great zany odysseys of an Irish everyman in a dream Russia or an actual Acapulco. But behind his chanter music, there is the great drone of a central theme. A marriage breaks, distances intervene, the heart breaks and must heal itself and its distances again, must contain in itself a Jesopath of memories and desires. To say that Durcan's poetry is equal to the task is only to begin to give the book its due praise. What was once necessary writing has become necessary reading.

SEAMUS HEANEY's latest book is *Station Island*.

Most of the voices in this book are those of American GIs who spent time in Northern Ireland before going off to fight and die in Europe.

Influenced, Ormsby says, by *The Spoon River Anthology*, the poems range through black humor, nightmare, elegy, and meditation, each one raising against senseless slaughter a protest, but by polemic, but by the integrity of its humanity.

Ormsby devotes about three-quarters of the volume — the center — to the American Second World Warriors. The opening and closing sections, however, bring the issues of strife and violence from northern Europe home to Northern Ireland:

These are my last pictures: in a trench
with Chuck and Harvey, by the phasnet-pen
behind the gate-ledge. The dark one with the gun
is Dan McConnell. Keep them. When I return
they'll fill an album. We could call it *Spring*,
or *Spring in Ireland, 1944, My Northern Spring*.

("Postscripts")

A Store of Candles was criticized for being small in scope, too claustrophobically "local." Ormsby's strength, however, has always been careful management of the miniature, the tight shot. In *A Northern Spring*, that forte allows his closely focused poems to embrace the world, rendering thirty-odd foreign and familiar voices in one year in one place — and rarely without characteristic tinctures of Ormsby irony and affection:

Once, in the Giant's Ring, I closed my eyes
and thought of Ireland,
the air-wide, skin-tight, multiple meaning of here.
When I opened them I was little the wiser,
in that, perhaps, one
with the first settlers in the Lagan Valley
and the Vietnamese boat-people of Portadown.

("Home")

A Northern Spring has been selected as the Poetry Book Society Choice for spring 1986.

experience, its erotic entanglements.

It would take a much lengthier essay than this to analyse these two books in the detail they require. What I wish to report is that they mark a distinct phase in this difficult, frustrating and richly endowed poet's career. An Irish imagination of such obsessive rigour entering in full maturity into possession of the Christian heritage is something that must compel attention. It has not happened before (only Devlin in this century supplies any kind of real comparison). And we must gratefully welcome the moments of poetry in these volumes, as celebratory and haunting in their intimations of redemption as those in "Nightwalker" and "Phoenix Park", so long ago.

John Ennis has written a frankly pagan poem, a marvellously original re-interpretation of the legend of Diarmuid and Gráinne. Diarmuid is a laboratory technician in a milk processing plant, in love with a pillion-passenger Gráinne in an Ireland of recognisable contemporaneity. The language of science, of sexual delight and a kind of slack everydayness (which reminds of Kavanagh) combine to create a wholly delightful poetic strangeness. This will give you an idea of the thing:

*The eyes of Mr Joyce tracked down Ray Daly.
Farm soil blew grey and sleety in the north wind
The green grass bleached. A black frost clung.
The April air was white and dry with foreboding
The sapling trees bent like old lanterns in the breeze.
Daffodils danced insanely. Their yellow cups shook,
And a few attempts at forsythia bloomed in gold.
Across one shrub a juggernaut had reversed.
Within the snowy portals of Bord Baine land
Presumptive teenagers from RTCs, pimply
Adolescents on grant from the National Science Council,
Technicians with Diplomas on a part-time basis
Performed lactose, casein, anti-biotic analyses,
Novices on the grateful periphery of Science.*

But in this bizarre world of papal visits and strange new chemical processes, Gráinne is her old self, a girl out of the old songs, the pagan, Geelic world still intact, whatever else isn't in this

poem of frank sexual celebration:

*The birch leaf fell from her cardigan
like an accusation.
Her father purpled. The Papal Visit was
her undoing.
And Gráinne remembered the blackbird singing
On the rhodendron beyond Tipperary.*

– Terence Brown