

and a bibliography; there are eight plates and several photoreproductions. Only the Gaelic words, phrases and titles reveal at times an unfamiliarity with this side of Behan's art; otherwise the editing is impeccable. The price of the book regrettably puts it outside the range of the general reader or Behan fan, but it should be sought out in libraries.

The *Letters*, companionable though all too few, complete Behan's *oeuvre* in a significant way. *Oeuvre*? You could sing that if you had an air to it.

CHRISTOPHER MURRAY

Paul Murray, *The Absent Fountain*. Dublin: Dedalus, 1992. 75 pages. £7.95. £4.95 (paper).

Dermot O'Brien, *Beads*. London: Excalibur, 1991. 89 pages. ST£3.95 (paper).

Seamus Hogan, *Interweavings*. Paris: Granville, 1988 (second impression 1989). 39 pages. 40 Ffrs; ST£3.50 (paper).

John Ennis, *In a Green Shade*. Dublin: Dedalus, 1992. 125 pages. £8.95. £5.95 (paper).

Paul Murray writes in "Know Thyself":

There is a world within you  
no one has ever seen,  
a voice no one has ever heard,  
not even you.

Confidence in that source, that ground within, is at the heart of his poetry. He is that rare creature, an Irish mystic. He is attuned to promptings and perceptions within the self and within the universe: "you are your own seer/your own interpreter". The words apply to the poet and to the reader; they serve as a statement of integrity, belief and purpose. As surely as Heaney affirms the validity and richness of a personal background — rural, skilled and with an explorable past — Murray, within a much different context, affirms the virtues and mysteries of spiritual sources. He will tremble into awareness, bring together life and death, the world of being and a world beyond earthly reality: "the naked simple awareness/.../of all that is not myself." He seeks awareness in the "weekday/goings-on". Stillness, solitude, attentiveness, speculation on meaning, these are the states he realises in a language that is ordinary. The rhythm is quiet, the lines fall softly down the page, unhurried, spare, arresting. They would hold and reflect the "grace" of one "raptureless/moment". It is a place of

traveller. You get a sense throughout the book of her moving across the world, watching, arrested alike by stillness and movement, travelling right down through Africa to Pretoria. A hanging, a snake, sisal and bluegum—often poems of a single idea, sparse yet enough.

Despite all her travelling, or perhaps in part because of it, Paterson seems firmly rooted in her life and in her generation, sandwiched between children and the old, both of whom she is letting go. She remembers childhood and recognises what old age will probably be like, and links them with an ease borne of being comfortable where she is,

(She) peered, dim-sighted,  
 across the car park  
 like the last uncollected  
 child left standing  
 at the school gate  
 with the shadows  
 growing long

#### Retirement Home

Towards the end of the book, she seems to return in full voice, the book lifts and she re-establishes her right to tell us what we need to know. She resumes the delicate unveiling of numbing truths, leaving us to fill in the emotions—"they left her brothers/dead on the floor" ("Home")—and that is easily done. Her deft pencil sketches reveal her glimpsing ordinary moments (two old ladies crossing the road by the library) and from them excitedly, almost sub-consciously, weaving whole stories. Miss Delauney's lonely bedsit; Moriarty, publican, a life in twenty lines; the lovely controlled lyricism of Yeats meeting Maud Gonne on O'Connell Street. Although the journey through *Lucifer With Angels* has been a little uneven, Paterson finishes as she began: simply, lyrically, at ease.

John Ennis's book deserves a more grand description than a 'collection' of poems. It is more than a series of pieces, it is a body of work, dense, cerebral, scholarly. If you are going to read Ennis on the bus, bring a dictionary. I had to pick my way through, re-reading, catching echoes, trying to digest. Studded with quotes and intimate one-way conversations with the great figures of literature and art, it is a book of themes: the intellectual concerns of poetry, muse, and inspiration, set in the sweeping arenas of history, mythology, and ancient lore.

Although loosely rooted in place, the poems feel universal, timeless. After some reading, however, I could not help faintly suspecting some kind of



plot, a conspiracy that kept me always on the edge of understanding. Reading in 'After Emily' the lines:

I will pour out my mouth again, speak the cry of birds  
Lost in a wilderness

I felt that was a very accurate description of his words. There was a mounting struggle for a sense of what he's talking about, not because it's obtuse or abstract, but because meaning seems to drown in a soporific wash of words. This is difficult to illustrate. Apposite quotes cannot be used fairly, you must experience the sheer volume of his work, the weight of it. Reading John Ennis is an ongoing occupation, the poems start to pile up, exude a sense of plenty, yet sooner or later they beg the question: plenty of what?

On the back of the book it says the poems "explore the sonnet form in exciting ways". Rather than exploration, I sensed the commandeering of a structured vessel into which it sometimes did not seem to matter what he poured. Again, it's tempting to quote individual lines, but it's fairer and more revealing to experience these poems as a continual flow, until you begin to realise that disturbing the flow is an increasing number of jarring words, senseless phrases, and hesitations for the sake of emphasising points that were cloudy and unfathomable to start with.

The mythological poems feel much more assured than the early sonnets. In 'Aengus On Aran', he delves into the history of what seems like the oldest island on earth. He equates poetry with courage, giving us in the process the beautiful rhythmic simplicity of lines like:

Sea foam drifts like snow in winter on Aran at high tide.

He seems at his best dealing with the raw facts of history: "Stone. Bronze. Iron." On the cliffs of Aran, he brings the poet to the height from which "no retreat is possible". This is one of many references to falling and height which give us a few intimate glimpses of his own mind: "Eternity, when the falling ends." ('Father Hopkins In Old Age'). Behind the ambitious themes and the famous characters, to whom he seems to turn for solace and intellectual stimulation, we catch sight of this very private, gentle, courageous man who is plainly convinced of the necessary path through the fire, the fall from a great height, the pain of creation. "To see myself, to set the darkness echoing" he quotes from Heaney at the start of the second section. He is certainly obsessed with death, burial rites, mourning and lamentation: one whole section is aptly titled 'The Near Obsequies.'

However, it's not until he moves away from the sonnet form that I feel his true voice is freed. The poems that mourn his cousin James are charmed by this freedom. The memories of his childhood, mother, grandfather, are delicate and fine. When he returns in the final section to sonnets, they are graceful, slower, more assured. The voice has become one of a tiny frail bird whose "fright is palpable" and whose presence is an oddly vulnerable incarnation of this erudite man. Perhaps, as the very first quote intimates, the paradoxical descent of Ennis into his "deeper Helicon" is an attempt, like Eliot's, to shore up fragments against the ruins.



Michael Smith on four new poetry collections

# Seeing the world through metaphor

John Thomas '95

IN this newspaper not too long ago, I confessed that I was more than a little baffled by Medbh McGuckian's poetry. Reading this revised edition of *On Ballycastle Beach* has made me wonder why I was so baffled then, so obtuse. I think I was probably trying to make "major" themes and statements match McGuckian's high reputation here and abroad.

The language of McGuckian's poetry is pervasively metaphorical. It is as if the poet sees and experiences the world through metaphors. Despite countless startling effects, there is no sense of statements being strained by craft or contrivance into metaphorical configurations. And that is a gift, a talent. One has only to think of the work of Emily Dickinson or, closer in time and space, Michael Hartnett.

*One has lips so virginal,  
they seem to be edged  
With snow, the discoloured  
whiteness waiting  
Within ourselves.  
Her teeth are pressed like  
seeds  
Against one another, all her  
bones are armour.  
And anything one says  
reaches the scroll  
Of her body slowly, her  
madonna  
Parting, her milk-fed hands.  
("Scenes from a Brothel")*

If there is one reservation I have about McGuckian's poetry, it is the facility with which she mediates everything into "poeticity". There are ugly things in the world that need rendering in all their ugliness.

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IT is not only that all the poems in *Down in the Deeper Helicon* are written in some kind of sonnet form that gives an old-fashioned atmosphere to John Ennis's new book. The continuing viability of the sonnet as a poetic form has been amply demonstrated by many modern poets including W. H. Auden and Geoffrey Hill, to name just two.

More influential is the poetry's thematic preoccupation with poets and poetry, with inspiration and the muses and with the poet as literary artefact as conventionally understood. Not that the poetry doesn't embrace the ordinary. John Major and Boris Yeltsin ap-

**On Ballycastle Beach**  
by Medbh McGuckian  
Gallery, £5.95

**Down in the Deeper Helicon**  
by John Ennis  
Dedalus, £5.95

**Turane: The Hidden Village**  
by Patrick Deeley  
Dedalus, £5.95

**Snowfire**  
by Noel Monahan  
Salmon, £5.99



Medbh McGuckian

pear in a poem, as do the usual concerns of families and friends.

Notwithstanding Ennis's formal and thematic conservatism, there is still a good deal to admire in *Down in the Deeper Helicon*. The poems move with a lovely rhythmic ease and elegance of phrasing. I liked especially "Bécquer Forgives", which plays against the famous Spanish original ("Volverán las oscuras golondrinas"):

*The deft swallow in you now  
will soon return,  
The dark and graceful swallow  
of my dream.  
I'll watch you build your  
nest and learn  
Of tenderness again, your  
wing close to his as you  
both climb  
Blue skies for insects and  
stop a second in the air.  
("Bécquer Forgives")*

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ALTHOUGH he has taught for years in a primary school in Ballyfermot in Dublin, Patrick Deeley, staying true to his Galway background, is an unabashedly rural poet. The poetry of *Turane: The*

*Hidden Village* is genuine parish-pump poetry.

*Magdalena, my eldest,  
wants her arse kicked  
for leaving this parlour  
the way a pig eats.  
("Ellie and the Years")*

My intention in saying this is not to disparage. In the final analysis, Robert Frost may well be described as a poet of the parish pump, however large the parish and the pump. Deeley's work is always vigorous and lively and many readers in Ireland will doubtless derive great pleasure from reading it. Personally, I think he needs to challenge himself more. Otherwise his poetry runs a serious risk of becoming tedious.

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NOEL MONAHAN'S poetry in *Snowfire* is quirky in observation and spare in its use of language. Many of the poems, indeed almost all of them, read superficially like translations from the Chinese in their insistent focus on the object as the main vehicle of communication:

*Silken threads of rain  
Shock the river  
Into glossy stitches of  
laughter.  
("A Change of Mood")*

The "objectivity" of Chinese poetry, however, is a great deal more complex than it often seems to the Western eye. As anyone who has read A. C. Graham's pioneering introduction to his *Poems of the Late Tang* knows, the objects that appear in Chinese poetry are usually densely coded and call on a vast store of allusions to achieve their full articulation.

But enough of that. In *Snowfire*, Monahan has achieved some very attractive miniaturist effects:

*At the end of twigs  
Were wild animals' feet  
In a leafless winter world  
That turned the animal  
kingdom  
On its back:  
Each bough, a leg  
Pawing the dark, the stars  
Their footprints in the  
night.  
("Bud Clusters")*

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