

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



pilgrimage. In a secular and sceptical age he speaks quietly, but with persuasive power and integrity, of love, a Christian virtue, of God's presence. "Love's vengeance is mercy". Living is a "wound". To be exposed is a virtue, an openness to insight. One must "be prepared/ to be surprised". He is happy as a thrush to realise that God needs us: "if you or I should cease to be,/ He would die of sadness." Quite striking and traditional Christian insights and paradoxes are conveyed directly, with startling, minimal simplicity. At a time when poets search about for ways in which to comment on political violence, in "Ulster Relics" Murray turns his face directly at Ulster and condemns in fine satirical vein: we parade the relics of old hatred and have become like relics "tainted and stained", yet still "righteous/ for display". But predominantly this poetry is refreshingly positive. Murray is "drenched through/ with the joy of being alive."

The Christian mysticism at the heart of his poetry is missing in the religious poetry of Dermot O'Brien. There are two haiku-like poems to each page but they do not have the lucid and arresting imagery of true haiku and the illustrations are not well done. *Interweavings*, also a first book, is more accomplished. The poet has come to terms with words and learned to discover the shape of a poem. "Sandymount" and "Verse of the Sea", for example, have a fine control of image and line. To be published by an obscure press is probably the wrong way to begin a poetic career, but I expect to see more of Hogan's promising work.

On the other hand John Ennis is a familiar voice. He has a variety of subjects, two or three distinctive styles, and a good technical control. He ranges from historical figures, like Brian Boru, Roderic to Molly Malone and Patrick Pearse. He writes of family members. He describes with particular affection the landscape of south Leinster. He evokes a variety of feelings — elegies for his mother and father, tributes to family and friends, celebrations of individual achievements, sensuous responses to the natural world, and in particular to his garden. When he brings together memories and recognitions of individual lives with the expression of loss for their deaths, the poetry becomes finely human and moving. It could be said that the creation, and the recreation, of individual lives, past and present, king or commoner, is what he likes to do most of all and what he does best. His psychological monologues reveal individuals with dramatic strength. His chosen figures are often strong and resolute. They wrestle with emotions, they are created within the thrust and flow of events, opposing forces, kingdoms in conflict, past deeds and future choices. They are above all human in their drives, regrets, and hopes. The rhythms are accordingly often vibrant, the lines interrupted to reflect

the inner emotions. Thus Brian Boru before his tent at Clontarf, recalling past deeds:

I force the pace for this last battle to hold,  
An idea like rockrose. I've cut down *mo*e clerics  
Than these Norse — harassed their fathers as a boy among the  
oaks, —  
Conniving monks I ran through on their oil-soaked  
Stairs...

or Roderic whose series of declarative, one-line statements measure his state:

My people spit me out like esker grit.  
I am neither hot nor cold in the west.  
Sit on, warm and loquacious with despair.  
A man deserves contempt if he's not wise at fifty!

The ghost of Austin Clarke lurks among these historical recreations in which the style is down-to-earth — realistic, toughened, unsentimental. When Ennis recreates eighteenth-century Dublin it is through the eye of Molly Malone, the language of a fish-monger who sees life from the side of the street, his own kind of Crazy Jane, with no symbolic frills. "Love me, hug me, name me, and cherish me." Not for Ennis the kind of objectivity and stasis of William Carlos Williams whose red wheelbarrow he queries in an amusing poem. "In all my years", he says, "walking round hardware stores", he has yet to embrace it.

Well, was it all red? What of the wheel? Handles?  
And what mix of paint then, — a mere cheap oxide?  
A glossy finish? Matt coat? An unlikely satin?  
Was it out for show like an old bygone pump in a haggard?

He needs to know, to get the details right. The poem is a manifesto. From such questions Ennis's poetry grows.

MAURICE HARMON

Robert Welch, *Muskerry*. Dublin: Dedalus Press, 1991. 51 pages. £7.95, £4.95 (paper).

Peter Denman, *The Poet's Manual*. Maynooth, Co Kildare: Sotto Voce Press, 1991. 46 pages. IR£4.50 (paper).

Seán Lysaght, *The Clare Island Survey*. Oldcastle, Co Meath: Gallery Press, 1991. 45 pages. IR£8.95, IR£5.95 (paper).



## Word-filled voids

Fred Johnston

POETS NEED their heroes. Irish poets seem to have created a pantheon of exiled and persecuted Russian poets around whom they've woven the texts and contexts of many of their poems; no attempt, seemingly, has been made to create a similar or equal Olympus of Irish poets, some of whom suffered at the very least exile and censure. Much as we might admire Clarke, Kavanagh, Hewitt et al., they never quite seem worth quoting from as introductions to our poems; never carry the same kind of, let's admit it, intellectual exoticism. What might be interpreted as a mild dose of literary snobbery might also and less charitably be read as a dismissal of Irish poetry as the poor relation—intellectually—of world poetry. Even Yeats is rarely quoted. And there is no identification possible between the experience of Irish poets and that of Russian poets, so let's stop trying to insinuate any.

**The Desert Route: selected poems 1973-1988.** Harry Clifton. Gallery Books. 60 pp £5.95 pb 1-85235-092-X; hardback £9.95 - 083-8 (UK: Bloodaxe Books).

**The Sheltered Nest.** Sean Dunne. Gallery Books. 56 pp £5.95 pb 1-85235-084-9; hardback £9.95 - 085-7.

Harry Clifton, in his 'Death of Thomas Merton', and Sean Dunne in his 'Marginal Man' have chosen a particularly unique sort of hero around whom to shape a poem. A convert to Catholicism, Thomas Merton became a contemplative mystic religious who opposed the Vietnam war, even writing poems of protest which were sung by, among others, Joan Baez. A love of the poetry of Hopkins, Merton's writings had a more than subtle influence on American intellectual opinion. He died while on a trip to Bangkok in 1968, apparently electrocuted while taking a bath.

That two poets should come upon Merton at more or less the same time is not surprising: he is a figure who combines spirituality with physical and intellectual involvement, who is at the same time priest and protester, and also poet. Harry Clifton takes us on a series of voyages before arriving at Merton; these are personal trips, neatly done, not terribly exciting but well-mannered, like stories told over tea. Derek Mahon writes a laudatory introduction. A fan of Mahon's work, I was drawn to Clifton's easy style and occasional deftly-worked rhyming. But at times he is too much Mahon to be Clifton. 'Death of Thomas Merton' tracks the mystic's life to the point where

... an electric shock

Into anticlimax. But it leaves you dead,  
With a powerline shortcircuited  
through your head ...

ends everything. Clifton has Merton flown home in an Air Force plane, which is correct; Dunne flies him out in an army plane, which is not. Dunne's style is easier, less dogmatic, and there is no sense that he is a disciple of a larger poetic mind. There is

something less cerebral, more utterly human, in Dunne's Merton, who "agonised over a nurse you loved" and whose picture the poet keeps "in my crowded room".

Where Clifton has set out into a wider sea, Dunne has contented himself with more familiar dimensions; titles such as 'Refugees at Cobh', 'Grandfather's Glasses', 'Altinashen', 'Doneraile Court' map out Dunne's poetic geographies. There is the by now obligatory dedication to a Russian poet, in this case in the form of lines quoted from Akhmatova and Mandelstam; in fairness, Dunne has local heroes too, and these he also mentions. Up comes Wittgenstein, however, doing his thing in Connemara. But there is something fragile and very appealing in Dunne's work, a persistent naïvety in the best sense, which produces some very good poetry. I dearly wish I'd written 'Old Fields', with its remarkably, deceptively simple

Old beehives in the sun, huts

Bulge in corners where sheep stand ...

Elements of loss and anguish abound; Dunne is genuinely concerned about how various important identities, such as those present in language and place, can be altered or misplaced. People go away, die, and Dunne's tragic heroes are big, mystical, looming figures such as Merton, Eric Gill or the Shaker singer with "her hands plunged into basins of cool flour" ('Eldress Bertha and the Apples').

**An Introduction to Irish Poetry.** ed. Sean Dunne. Bookmark, Ossian Publications, PO Box 84, Cork. 67 pp £3.95 pb. The book with a cassette tape: £7.95.

On a slightly different tack, Sean Dunne has selected a series of poems ranging from Yeats to Durcan and others for a cassette-booklet combination which works quite well as an introduction to Irish poetry. Bosco Hogan, Patrick Laffan and Dunne himself are among the readers. The introduction is brief but interesting, casting unfamiliar light on the ironical relationships between the vision of poets such as Pearse and the stark modern reality of the new Ireland. Thomas McCarthy's 'Party Shrine' gets placed in the booklet after the index at the back, which is a pity. Worth buying, though I think I might have dispensed with the anonymous 'The Night Before Larry was Stretched'.

**Easter Snow.** Gerard Fanning. Dedalus. 59 pp £4.95 pb 1-873790-15-5; hb £7.95 - 16-3.

As heroes go, master-spy Kim Philby would seem rather unlikely; in any case, Gerard Fanning thinks we should know about him. With the intellectual snobbishness of many university-educated poets, Fanning feeds us information with aplomb, as if we had it already. Two poems, 'Philby's Apostles on Merrion Strand' and 'Philby in Ireland' (really?) refer directly to him, then veer off from the titles into coded blather dealing with unrelated things such as seismometers and something called 'the

world's Chippendale'. Symbols get contorted and the signals break up. Fanning's title on the former poem appears to indicate that Philby owned a group of people called the Apostles. One hopes that Fanning knows better: the Apostles Society at Cambridge was a leftist, introverted group of intellectuals in the thirties, which bred Philby and some other famous spies. But are readers supposed to know this? Similarly in 'The View from Errisbeg', one is supposed to know who Robert Lloyd Praeger and 'My long lost Franklin' were. Praeger was a Belfastman and a naturalist; Sir John Franklin (1786-1847) was an explorer, among other things, whose ships *Errebus* and *Terror* were last sighted in 1845 north-west of Baffin Bay, on their way to discover a North-West Passage. In this poem and in 'The Conquest of Djouce', Fanning uses lines from the folk-song 'The Ballad of Lord Franklin'. His poetry comes more easily when he tries less ardently. Unfortunately some publishers confuse a plethora of arcane facts with erudition. The blurbs on the back of this collection should be ignored, even where one succeeds in interpreting them.

**In a Green Shade.** John Ennis. Dedalus. 125 pp £5.95 pb 0-873790-00-7 (hb £8.95 - 01-5).

There is a publishing penchant for poems that have won prizes. I do not think prizes, in themselves, signify anything. Two poems included in John Ennis' new collection, 'Decisions' and 'Fair City' took the Listowel Poetry Award in 1985 and 1986 respectively. But Ennis' work is bigger than either poem, and one should learn to ignore the one- and two-liner blurbs on the jackets of poetry collections.

The main discourse of *In a Green Shade* is the unfolding of history of one shape or other, history as personal and as general thematic, something shaped into humanity-sized proportion by individual experience. Ennis' wordy style—perhaps I should say 'word-filled'—demands patience and more than one reading. Micheal O'Siadhail comes to mind: all those words that rush to set as much down as possible. Sometimes history is a family thing, with no decoding necessary, as in 'My Brother':

One blue scented summer Sunday  
we'd been kicking football,  
Boys together over in Wexford.  
You and I, we stood as tall  
As a car's radiator, both in each other's  
florid estimation  
Stars at the gate ...

Tipping the edges of prose, the poetry is redeemed by its rhythm. Other times, a quasi-biblical note directs us very far back, as in 'Passover Night':

I wanted You [sic] still in the  
bluey cold pallor of that death  
Jerusalem's paved streets flame-  
wavered with me to the bone ...

In 'After the 6.30 am News', Ennis rushes us along to Tiananmen Square, where "The young are still dying"; he, however, and the reader, remain outside it all, listening "to The Lark Ascending" by Vaughan Williams. Ennis transmutes the action and the time and lets the essence of it all pour out at



Clontarf, or over Dublin when it was "a black pool with Roderic floundering in / his tub". Difficult enough to grasp at first, Ennis' tone and method are seductive. His style is distinct, intricate and calls for the reader's attention with an uninhibitedly chorus-like range of tones. There is nothing cosy about Ennis.

**The Absent Fountain.** Paul Murray. *Dedalus*. 73 pp ££4.95 pb 0-948268-98-0 (hb £7.95-99-9).

Paul Murray is a mystical, as opposed to a religious, poet. Not that the two propositions are ever mutually exclusive, but whereas purely religious poetry can, of its nature, be narrow-sighted and one-tracked, mystical verse allows itself more spiritual muscle-flexing and unashamed exploration of the world. Murray's earlier publications, such as *Rites and Meditations* (Dolmen 1982) and *T. S. Eliot and Mysticism* (Macmillan 1991) set the tone. There is a lovely, elegant simplicity to Murray's poems, a direct qualitative beauty that marks him out from the verbal roar of so much new Irish poetry. Significantly, there are no declamatory jacket-blurbs; the poetry stands on its own. And it is very fine.

The title poem, 'The Absent Fountain', is epigraphed with a quote from Saint-Exupéry (what a relief to find a poet who does not have to quote from the Russians!) and the poem itself is bare, stripped, a study in exactness:

My soul  
was dry, and dry  
as dust  
lay the roots  
of my awareness.

How close Murray moves his poems towards prayer is arguable. Murray's excursion into very worldly engagement, such as in 'Ulster Relics', contains elements of different discourse; down from the mystical to the provincial and petty, his tone is angry, determined: "What can our drums explain, / what can they excuse / if, in the end, we kneel to tribal / gods but are unworthy / of our own children. . ." Not surprisingly, Murray's heroes are John Scotus, Saint-Exupéry, Simone Weil, St Ciaran. In very short poems such as 'The Question' his style is un-Irish, simple and unfamiliar but bright:

Midnight.  
All is silent.

Yet still the question  
of the void  
amazes the stars.

This is a wonderful book, a must for anyone who believes that poetry and spirituality should enjoy a definite symbiosis. Murray is a quiet clear voice sounding against the great muddled roar of contemporary Irish poetry. Congratulations, by the way, to *Dedalus* for the thoughtful and very attractive design of the book.

**Straight Lines.** William Neill. *Blackstaff Press*. 108 pp Stg£5.95 pb 0-85640-475-6.

A quick perusal of such excellent Scottish literary magazines as *Gairfish*, *Cencrastus*, *Chapman* to name but three, will reveal two interesting things: Lallans Scots is alive and well and used as an essentially political

medium in which to write poetry; the great magician of Lallans, Hugh MacDiarmid (Christopher Murray Grieve) is assessed and reassessed with a constancy that Yeats does not enjoy; the magazine *Cencrastus*, incidentally, takes its title from a poem of MacDiarmid's, 'To Circumjack Cencrastus'. It was in this publication, half a dozen years ago, that I first came across William Neill's poetry, four poems in Lallans with a glossary for the Sassenach. One poem carried Boswell's remark on first meeting Johnson: "I'm Scottish but I cannot help it."

In a sense this remark can be taken to sum up the argument against which much Scottish poetry has waged war: what precisely it is to be Scots, to be heir to three dialects (English, Lallans and Gaelic), to have had a cultural and literary renaissance similar to our own under Yeats, but which didn't blossom into political action. To be, as it were, cursed with a mix of history and romanticism. Consequently it is difficult to find a Scottish poet whose work does not at some point take on a political hue. Ironically, finding a political poet in Ireland (outside Kinsella) has become a difficult task. No surprise that Neill has worked at times with Sorley McLean.

*Straight Lines* is a marvellous introduction to Neill's work, a big sturdy book of ninety poems and some notes. The poems range from the quietly pastoral to the Blake-like note of prophetic defiance in a poem such as 'Element':

but still the subtle essence that first  
played  
across the waters gleams before the eye,  
when soul seeks what the City  
thinks a lie.

In 'Lockerbie' Neill takes the horror of what happened there and gives it a universality: ". . . The well-wisher / burns in the fire of opinionated malice; / the humble roof is crushed / beneath the weight of the mind's mad tyranny."

In other poems Neill acknowledges a debt to folklore, old tradition, and the Irish themselves ('Glasgow Irish'). This is a marvellous, wide-ranging collection of poems which goes a little further to establish Neill as a major Scottish poet. Younger Irish poets might take in the sentiments in Neill's 'Literature Panel'; critics too. My one gripe is that Neill's Lallans poetry is absent here. Perhaps Blackstaff will take a deep breath and risk a collection some time?

**The Cloverdale Anthology of Irish Poetry 1992.** ed. Patrick Cotter. *Cloverdale Corporation, Bristol, IN 46507* and *Three Spires Press, Killeen, Blackrock, Cork*. 61 pp £3.95 pb (Ireland) 1-873548-06-0; (US) 1-55605-206-5.

Patrick Cotter's Three Spires Press in Cork

has combined with the Cloverdale Corporation in Indiana to produce this anthology of work by five Irish poets whose work has at least appeared in some specialised poetry magazines in this country. With admirable optimism, Cotter suggests in his introduction that they may be on the verge of their first major collections; certainly they've attended their share of workshops and lifted a deal of prizes and things. If only this were enough. Aine Miller has a decidedly sure and sharp hand; Edward Power is unafraid of new or unfamiliar language; Michael O'Sullivan has a direct, strident command of his trade; Conor O'Callaghan, I would guess, will be the first to find a publisher chiefly on account of the polished yet accessible tone of his themes; John Grenham has an encouraging ordinariness to his short poems which deserves further expansion. I think Cotter's venture is a very worthy one. I wish Three Spires well; we need a new decent poetry publisher and this anthology should find its way into the hands of our major publishers in the near time. Sadly, just because a poet happens to publish his work constantly and in many good magazines doesn't mean that an Irish publisher will take an interest in him.

**Peninsula.** Desmond Egan. *Kewenaw Press*. 71 pp £7.50 \$20 pb 19 x 26 cm 1-870491-55-6.

Desmond Egan's *Peninsula* is a modest coffee-table book in blazing colour with two photographs of Egan, one on the back along with praising comments from Studs Terkel, Hugh Kenner, Brian Arkins and one Giuseppe Serpillo ('This new, great voice of contemporary Irish poetry'). The photos, by Liam Lyons, are good and some of the epigrammatic poems not at all bad; the evocations of Dingle are sharp and occasionally daring. But one has to get through Egan to reach the poetry, and sometimes the effort is off-putting. No doubt it will find buyers, probably somewhere in the USA.

**The Father's Part.** Gabriel Fitzmaurice. *Story Line Press, Three Oaks Farm, Brownsville OR 97327-9718* (Irish distrib. *Anna Litvia*). 45 pp \$9.95 / £5.25 pb 0-934257-65-5.

The Story Line Press has recently taken an interest in the work of contemporary Irish writers. Gabriel Fitzmaurice's *The Father's Part* is a collection of poems moulded around the theme of fatherhood. Lightweight for the most part, they spill over into a quasi-religious mode, and the best poems are those in which Fitzmaurice has allowed himself to be a natural poet ('John', 'Seeing the Fish'). Fitzmaurice recently released a cassette of his work on the Cló Iar-Chonachta label in which a wider canvas of his poetic talents is displayed. □

## Euro-celtic community

Anne O'Connor

AMONGST the collections being currently reviewed are some very important and beautiful contributions to the study of Celtic culture, consciousness and archaeology. Of the two by Lloyd and Jennifer Laing,

**Celtic Britain and Ireland: the myth of the dark ages.** Lloyd and Jennifer Laing. *Irish Academic Press*. 263 pp £25 0-7165-2415-5.

is a formidable work of somewhat con-



beggar in *Jackdaw Jaundice* can answer the lack of charity shown by a nun with the retort: "typical jackdaw jaundice/clip-clopidy-clop/ and a black sail away"

In a perverse way, the mother in *His Mother Won't Die* is funny, if only because the ideals she holds dear are so outdated. In *If You Want To Get Closer To God*, Higgins pokes fun at the more extreme and hopefully, old-fashioned tendencies in Irish Catholicism. An unmarried young girl is castigated for not having settled down yet even when men of the calibre *Kill Cassidy* are still available. Kill, this girl is informed, would: "...knock a son/out of you no problem."

Higgins takes up this religious theme again in *The Power Of Prayer* where a domestic accident causes a distraught mother to realise that a fall-off in the rate of praying is bringing misfortune upon her house. As a consequence her children end up praying for such things as the conversion of Russia, the much-maligned Dr. Noel Browne and: "...above all/the grace of a happy death."

Ireland in the fifties must have been a funny old place indeed. Either way, Higgins is most adept when railing against the establishment and its often warped values. Therefore, the vote-catching politician in *Butter Balls* who increases the value of butter vouchers by 1p is labelled a: "side tracker/dirty talker".

In my own personal favorite *Between Them*, Higgins turns the attentions of her not inconsiderable wit to society's age-old preoccupation with physical beauty and correctness. The chief players in this poem are bereft of such traits as: "Broken veins/ stretch marks/or swollen ankles"

The title poem of the collection relates the tragic tale of a girl who was "mad at the world" and who ends up in an asylum undergoing shock therapy. Philomena is typical of the dispossessed victims so prominent in the work of Rita Ann Higgins. Indeed, in the best possible way, Higgins herself might be described as being "mad at the world" as she repeatedly attacks, admonishes,

and rebukes much of what is wrong with contemporary Ireland. Higgin's is a vibrant, energetic and startling voice.

-David Hannigan

## In A Green Shade by John Ennis. Dedalus Press, Dublin IR5.95 pbk IR8.95 hbk.

John Ennis was born in Westmeath in 1944 and has lived in Waterford since the late seventies. On his arrival in Waterford, where he works in the Regional Technical College, he organised a long series of public readings which attracted audiences of varying size and interest. Paul Durcan read there, as did Neil Jordan, Michael Hartnett and Desmond Hogan. Many local writers were also encouraged.

In this way, John Ennis, like Michael McLaverty, is one of those rare people whose interest in literature becomes a kind of node from which younger writers emerge and, in time, go their own way. In the same period, his first books were appearing from Gallery Press. They seemed to possess a music like no other in Ireland. Championed by John Jordan and others, John Ennis wrote poems that echoed the word-texture of Hart Crane but honoured local themes which Kavanagh marked out as the proper stuff of poetry. His Westmeath landscape became as recognisable as Mucker.

And he was no small-time poet, content with the occasional production of tit's eggs. He thought big and made poems that were long, loaded and symphonic. His themes could range from a drink of spring water to the tragedy of Orpheus. He writes a poetry of fathers and sons, of farms and music and death, of generous-minded sympathy and savage indignation. One is as likely to find an echo of Mahler or the Aengid in his work as a reference to Gaelic football or the death of a student after whom a college hall is named.

Seán Dunne, The Steeple, 1990