Responsibility to the craft

Fred Johnston

RECENTLY I was privileged to read at the second Seán Dunne Literary Weekend in Waterford, the poet's home town. Readings and workshops and prizegivings extended over a couple of days in a commemorative gathering that was as modest as it was dedicated and genuine in its intent. Seán died suddenly in 1995, and his loss, as poets at the festival affirmed, is inestimable. The weekend gathering, originated by friends of Seán, is also in a way a small token of thanks to a poet and editor who inspired and directed other writers and was himself a friend to many of them. I knew Seán a little and had met him on several occasions. He was a rare, dedicated poet in a contentious poetic time; he struggled to rediscover the spiritual in poetry, and remained outside the common argument that poetry too often can become. I'd suggest that Seán's life was itself a poem, verses and passages of which he has left in print for us to reflect upon and through which to measure as best we can our own efforts. The commemorative weekend in his name should be supported by all Irish poets and those to whom poetry is important. In Seán Dunne's death we lost, too young, a writer who had faith.

A poet who knew him well is John Ennis.

Selected Poems. John Ennis. *Dedalus. 224 pp £7.95 pb 1-873790-92-9 (£10.95 hb -93-7).*

John Ennis is one of those poets whose work illuminates Irish poetry. Born in County Westmeath in 1944, he studied at UCC, UCD and Maynooth and is now Head of Humanities at Waterford Regional Technical College. *Night on Hibernia*, his first collection, won the Patrick Kavanagh Award. There is something distinctly European about the mode into which Ennis' work has settled; here is the use of language as metaphor for a wider world, for a more varied and involved world than is usually addressed by his contemporaries; John Jordan links him to Kavanagh and Clarke and Devlin, in a blurb on the jacket. But Ennis is someting more than the sum of this bright poetic triangulation.

In the foreword we are reminded of Seamus Heaney's remarks in *Poetry Ireland Review* back in 1987, to the effect that Ennis deserved more critical attention than he had then received with four books on the shelves; an addition to this, from a citation from the Irish American Cultural Institute Award which Ennis received two years ago, mentions the poet's satirical capability, his 'Swiftean or Clarkean ferocity', describes him as a modernist poet and notes the influences of Hart Crane—whom the second poem of this selection resurrects—and Pound.

It might be argued that Ennis' poetic voice is both humble and unique; he is not part of the more regularly-publicised Irish poetry industry. Perhaps therein lies the reason he has not received greater critical attention? My view is that he is one of our finest and most original poets and anyone grabbing a copy of Dedalus' hefty 'selected' will be rewarded. I do not believe that any honest critical assessment of Irish contemporary poetry would be complete without mention of John Ennis. He is, further, one of the few Irish poets to whose work the term 'exciting' might be applied.

The Dedalus selection awakens with *Night on Hibernia* (1976), gallops up and over *Dolmen Hill* (1977), stops for a breather at *A Drink of Spring* (1979), skips through *The Burren Days* (1985), dives into *Arboretum* (1990), rests a while in *In a Green Shade* (1991), before exploring *Down in the Deeper Helicon* (1994) and surfacing finally with *Telling the Bees* (1995) and strolling among long sequences, such as 'Letter to Connla' and 'This Other Umbria'. If one hasn't acquired by this time a reasonable feel for the early and later Ennis, one never will. Memorable poems are all over the place: the aware Irishness and the caustic, bleak mythic imagery of 'Work on Wren's Day':

> Boredom and resentment
> Smouldered blackly in me.
> Spring, like Christmas,
> Stretched light years away.
> A wren studied us from a branch,
> Ate at a distance
> worms we unearthed . . .

Then there is the moving elegance (how little of it we see these days!) of the final lines of his later 'Vedic':

> And may these failing birds find
> resurrection in our wills
> Retrace their wings to cignethood
> on lakes between the hills.

The simplicity and musical magic of the final prolonged rhyme is wonderful. Then there is the distinct and almost mystical transmutation of ordinary things in 'Ultimata,' from 'Telling the Bees':

> Silent house
> Hear this, my pre-dawn
> Ambrosial madness. Dust in a jar.
> The kitchen of this poem will be spacious,
> The garden and the extended apiary . . .

Ennis' work moves over a wide and, in personal and historical terms, often familiar topography; a long poem is put into the mouth of a ninth-century lay monk, there are sonnets, a description of eighteenth-century Dublin with contemporary overtones, and an ingenious reinvention of the Diarmuid and Grainne tale. My one gripe has nothing to do with the work in this book; it was published in 1996 and I'm only getting it now. In any case, I have no hesitation in suggesting to anyone interested in Irish poetry to acquire this book and cherish it. It contains the work of a brave and imaginative poet who knows his craft and who could teach the rest of us a thing or two about poetry and language.

The Erratic Behaviour of Tides. Katherine Duffy. *Dedalus. 54 pp £5.95 pb 1-901233-12-X (£9.95 hb -13-8).*

Katherine Duffy has a fair knowledge of what should happen to language in poetry, too. She's a young poet, (born 1962 in Dundalk) and this is her first collection. Her poems, we are told, have won prizes in the National Women's Poetry competition and the Roscommon Abbey Writers' competition; a reminder, perhaps, that when it comes to poetry competitions Ireland has them by the square mile. And she has been shortlisted for Hennessy Awards and taken more than a few Oireachtas prizes for fiction in Irish. Understandably for a young poet, much of the work here concerns memories of childhood and the strength of the imagination. Duffy is, at times, a refreshingly lyrical poet and for once I'm inclined to agree at least in part with the jacket blurb that suggests that Duffy will produce even better work. 'Accomplished' is an example of what she can do with a mix of ironically gentle lyricism and tongue-in-cheek seriousness:

> You glow gold, you, and the world
> emerging, unscathed
> by the irony of Brasso;
> your rubbing forcing self-effacing
> Wednesday to smile in its
> shining rectangle.
> In the little house behind
> is the clamour of your tasks.
> Now the first,
> at least, is accomplished.
> With rags and special substances
> you have conjured morning.

The phrase 'the clamour of your tasks' glides down neatly to reflect 'you have conjured morning' and the poem, consequently, is a marvellous small crafted accomplishment. Similarly, a more verbally raucous poem, such as 'Planet DIY', verging here and there dangerously close to the border between poetry and prose, redeems itself with wonderfully vivid images, such as describing " . . . where couples / finger lampshades longingly, and cast / fierce glances on furniture . . ." Having recently moved house, I rather understood the mood. Not a bad collection at all, with the promise of better things to come.

Sunfire. Michael O'Dea. *Dedalus. 63 pp £5.95 pb 1-901233-04-9 (£9.95 hb -06-5).*

A first collection also for Roscommon poet Michael O'Dea, who came third in the Patrick Kavanagh Award in 1994. Just as some other poetry publishers seem to take connection to the academic world as proof of poetic legitimacy, so, it would appear, Dedalus look for prizewinners or runners-up. This habit has its pitfalls; though it must be said that O'Dea has published in journals and literary pages to earn his stripes. In any case, he has the makings of a good poet and so far is uneven. 'From Galway' is fine in spots but otherwise loaded with a dreadful insider provincialism; one must know where and what Kelehan's happens to be for example (it's a pub opposite the University Hospital) and this tone makes the poem studenty and trite, spoiling beautiful images such as "Here is the colour of Galway, / that falls from the clouds that mop the spires, / that rises again in the Burren hills across the bay." Galway is arguably the

gave me a bird's eye view, which was quite kind and I wasn't allowed to do anything cre- that was always breaking down.

A poet of vision who deserves more than obscurity

Selected Poems
by John Ennis
Dedalus, £7.99

JOHN ENNIS has been one of the most sophisticated and innovative voices in recent Irish poetry and, curiously, one of the least well known. Indeed Seamus Heaney has described him as one of the most neglected voices of his generation.

His virtue and his vice has been to excel in a wide variety of form and theme so that his individual style is not immediately recognisable and, unfortunately, the public does not always allow a subtle talent like his the luxury of the close reading it deserves. In an editorial in the 1989 edition of Poetry Ireland Review, which he edited, Ennis quotes Vivian Smith's admonition "the true poet's vision is the search to find a language and a voice," to explain the restless and ceaseless experimentation which is the hallmark of his work.

His long poem, "The Burren Days," a modern version of the Diarmaid and Gráinne love story, was recognised as a ground-breaking innovation for its time. To confound his critics further, though, Ennis immediately switched to the formal English sonnet style in collections like "In a Green Shade" and "Down in the Deeper Helicon."

> Seamus Heaney describes Ennis as a neglected voice of his time

In doing so he became the first poet to fuse the dual Gaelic and English traditions of Ireland in a single poetic style.

No less a critic than John Jordan recognised the broad sweep of Ennis's talent when he commented on his ability to combine the "local vision of Kavanagh" in collections like "Night in Hibernia" and the cool asceticism of Clarke in sequences like "Orpheus" and "A Drink of Spring."

A product himself of the enlightened educational reforms of the '60s his poetry mirrors the revisionist historiography of recent decades in its relentless questioning of the accepted faiths and values of an older Ireland. Like the modernist American poet Hart Crane, a profound influence, he was the first poet to respond to the increasing industrialisation and urbanisation of Irish society.

In "Fair City," for example, he laments the rape of old Dublin and evokes the "savage indignation" of Swift in sequences that forecasted the canker of urban blight that has the heart of modern cities.

As lecturer in Waterford RTC and now Director of Humanities there, he witnessed the hordes of young people entering the college and exiting as technological fodder to service the insatiable appetite of our so called 'Celtic Tiger.' Later collections like "Down in the Deeper Helicon" explore the consequence of "young Ireland's" traumatic modernisation and entry into the EC and re-visit the achievement of such great luminaries as Michaelangelo, Van Gogh, to explore their relevance to his "new" society.

More and more though Ennis's superb mastery of his craft allied to his adherence to the Yeatsian dictum "of the poet's life lived as constant experiment" has allowed him to embark on an inner personal journey in stark contrast to the public poetry of much of his earlier work. "Telling the Bees," with its wonderfully apt metaphor of the hive as analogy of man's progress, is a powerful meditation on the progress of a life and again a new departure in his seemingly endless repertoire. These selected poems, a precise of his eight collections to date, must rank as an invaluable reference to any serious reader of modern Irish poetry.

It is a milestone and a prelude, I think, to the wonderful treasures still to come.

- Eugene O'Connell

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