

David Wheatley, *Thirst*. Loughcrew, Co. Meath: Gallery Books, 1997. £12.95 (Hardback), £6.95 (Paperback).

Brendan Kennelly, *The Man Made of Rain*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1998. £7.95 (Paperback).

Mary O'Donnell, *Unlegendary Heroes*. Cliffs of Moher, Co. Clare: Salmon Press, 1998. £6.99 (Paperback).

It is disconcerting to find a poem about the onset of grey hair in a first collection, but David Wheatley has been around for quite some time now. His name is familiar from frequent appearance of his poems in periodicals (including *IUR*), winning prizes, being a writer in residence, editing and reviewing. He has served a long apprenticeship. Wheatley's *Thirst* is the only first collection among the three books under consideration here, but it is the most assured in its handling of form. For those of us who subscribe to the idea that there is no such thing as a free verse, it is gratifying to come across a poet prepared to try his hand at sestinas, sonnets, Marvellian octosyllabics, translations and versions from various sources, epigrams, a prose poem, a long poem, meditations in rhyming couplets, etc. At times, the strain involved in searching for such versatility becomes apparent. For instance, a good test of any sestina is to look at the six words chosen for the repeated line endings — how much ingenuity will they demand on the part of the poet? Four of Wheatley's words in "Bray Head" are "scene", "air", "shadow" and "sea" — all rather generalised and nondescript for a poem which is little more than a verbal postcard from the Wicklow coast. A much more successful, and more knowing, "postcard poem" is "Lithuania:

A long briny Baltic comber slaps against
 the dyke, comes apart in hundreds-and-thousands
 of froth all round you and soaks you through: *Effi* Briest weather.
 the coal-eyed old Jew stares into a pointed camcorder
 While a guanoed Lenin doffs his cap,
 propped rigid in cast-iron, epochal sleep.

Thirst has about it something of the air of a book of samples, inviting its readers to choose what we would like next; really, Wheatley should make up his own mind as to how to proceed from here. At the same time, there is a retrospective quality to his book, because reading Wheatley is like reading Derek Mahon — the Mahon of the 1970s and 1980s. He has chosen his model well; arguably, he could not have chosen better. Wheatley writes well; when he can bring the formal dexterity more fully in line with his own material, as he shows signs of doing in a number of the poems here, such as "Visiting Hours", "Alba" and his rendering of Baudelaire's "Spleen", he will be a considerable poet.

The Man Made of Rain is a thank-offering for survival, and a poem written out of compulsion. Brendan Kennelly is known as a poet of exuberance and excess, and has made his reputation latterly with *The Book of Judas* and *Cromwell*. *The Man Made of Rain* is very different. It is a long poem in 43 or 44 parts (the last is unnumbered), giving an account of Kennelly's experience of recovery from a quadruple heart bypass. His guide through the recovery — and we are to understand this recovery as being more than simply a physical and medical one — is a visionary companion, a man made of rain. In an introduction clearing the space for his poem, Kennelly insists on the presence of this figure, and argues for his acceptance into our range of language and experience.

As a poetic device — think of Dante's *Virgil*, Berryman's *Mr Bones*, *Islings* in Irish poetry — it serves well enough. For Kennelly, however, it is more than a poetic expedient; one gets the sense of his creating or recognising a necessary angel to bring him back in the direction of the articular life he had lived before the immense experience of the operation. As a result, this is a poetry of therapy and rehabilitation. When it is good, the reader feels a little like Coleridge's wedding guest being intercepted by the ancient mariner, and compelled to attend. And, Kennelly would have us understand, this is the sort of compulsion he himself experienced before the man made of rain.

'When you walk through my tongue
 you're in a land of no language,' he said.

He opens his mouth, I walk in,
 I wander through the tongue of rain.
 I don't expect to meet such innocence again,
 innocence that is, as I understood it then.

As with so much of Kennelly's work, the poetry is uneven. But his poetry never had, or even aspired to, the genteel and well-crafted evenness of the finished product. A reader soon learns to react to a poor section by saying "Never mind, there should be a better one along in a minute."

Mary O'Donnell's third collection, *Unlegendary Heroes*, is very much as before. Her poems find it hard to resist narrative, as if she believes the essence of the poetry lies in the recording of what once happened; here are some opening lines, from different poems:

The first time I saw sunflowers.
In the New Year, we drove away.
Sadie's brother was a priest in Hong Kong.

The awkwardly named "Unlegendary Heroes" is a collection of such beginnings modelled on a folklore survey of 1938. In this O'Donnell is mining material similar to that which has been used by her namesake Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill, but where Ní Dhomhnaill is attracted to the marvellous in the folk tales, what O'Donnell offers is the incidental dry record of lives caught in two or three lines. Her invention resides in that, where the original material seems to have recorded only men, she inscribes women into the landscape:

Marita McHugh, Foxhole,
whose sponge cakes won First Prize at Cloncaw Show.
Miss Harper, Corley,
female problems rarely ceased, pleasant in ill-health.
Patricia Curley, Corlett,
whose joints ached and swelled though she was young,
who bore three children.

The cumulative list of fifteen such entries works, in so far as it makes a point, but does it make a poem? Perhaps it amounts to "Fifteen Ways of Looking at a Landscape". Elsewhere there is another cluster of short poems: ten haikus, an ill-advised form for they nearly always end up as notes for poems rather than the real thing.

Given the achievement of Mary O'Donnell in her earlier collections, *Reading the Sunflowers in September* and *Spiderwoman's Third Avenue Rhapsody*, she appears to be only to be marking time in this book. The real strength of this collection is to be found in its final few poems, among them three about Emilia, Duchess of Leinster in the eighteenth century, one entitled "Bees and Saint Colman", and "The Bog-Witch's Daughter, One Summer". These are written with some power, without the self-consciousness which characterises too many of her other poems. More like these, please.

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