

## EDITORIAL

I was honoured, and somewhat apprehensive, when asked to be editor of **Poetry Ireland Review**. Since John Jordan got it off on a proper footing in the 1970s, successive editors have seen to it that **Poetry Ireland Review** has valuably mixed work by established and assured poets with that by new and emergent voices. After so many years of publication, there is some risk of the magazine's being taken for granted; one way of guarding against this has been to invite editors to take over the magazine for a period of four issues, thus ensuring continual change. Looking back over the list of my predecessors, I am indeed pleased to take my deferential place in that line. The editorship is a position of trust. A great many people submit to **Poetry Ireland Review**, far more than the magazine can hope — or even wish — to publish. Nevertheless, especially for those on the threshold of writing, the very act of getting some poems into an envelope and addressing them to an editor is a decisive step, a move from the private to the public arena. All deserve full consideration, and the courtesy of a not unduly delayed decision. So that as editor I am aware of a two-fold responsibility — to Poetry Ireland and its magazine and readers, and to contributors, actual and aspirant.

As I am writing this first editorial in the octave of the new year, perhaps I should frame some resolutions or stated intentions and — to give them force — nail them to the opening pages. So:

- I plan to get my four issues out during the calendar year.
- I hope to have reviews of as many books of Irish poetry as possible, as I believe that one of the functions of **Poetry Ireland Review** should be to respond to current publications. In this, of course, I shall be dependent on the efficiency of publishers in sending on volumes for review and on the conscientiousness of reviewers.
- As publishing is an integral part of how poetry is produced and perceived, I shall be talking to Ireland's leading poetry houses; the series starts with Gallery

Press and Peter Fallon who are celebrating twenty one years together.

- In each issue I shall give some extended space to an emergent poet, allowing her or him rather more than the two or three pieces which usually constitute the allotted ration. I start, as planned, with the winner of the 1991 Patrick Kavanagh award — who turned out to be Sheila O'Hagan, chosen from over a hundred entries. Her name is already familiar to readers of poetry magazines in Ireland, and indeed she featured in the last issue of **Poetry Ireland Review**.

— That staple item on the **Poetry Ireland Review** menu — Dennis O'Driscoll's pickings among recent pronouncements on poetry — will be preserved, although with his agreement I have changed the title under which it appears. The series on "The Poet as . . ." will, I hope resume in the future, but not in this issue as there is a backlog of reviews to be accommodated.

And . . . is that all? Well, no, there are some other resolutions, but those I'm keeping to myself, as a private agenda.

**The Great Book of Ireland**, Theo Dorgan and Gene Lambert's project combining poetry in manuscript, calligraphy and original art illustration, is set to get still greater. There remain several pages to be filled, as it was taken for exhibition in the Royal Hospital, Kilmainham, last year before the full complement of contributors had been given the treatment. Even in its incomplete state it garnered a Bank of Ireland Arts Award.

That other great book of Ireland, **The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing**, existed before it came into being, as throughout its understandably protracted preparation we heard in lectures, interviews and hearsay of its slouch towards Bedlam to be born — for a certain amount of Bedlam and ballyhoo has attended its appearance. **Poetry Ireland Review** has not been sent a copy for review, which is quite understandable given the cost. But this points to the fundamental problem with **The Field Day**. Its purpose as an anthology should be to

make available what hitherto was inaccessible or neglected. Available? At £166.50? At Waterstone's in Dublin and Cork the volumes are displayed behind locked glass doors; to inspect them, you summon an assistant to lift them out with reverence. In Hodges Figgis the set is kept out of reach and almost out of sight across the counter, beside the cash register. At the Dublin Writers' Museum bookshop a set sits splendidly on a darkly polished table as if on a Protestant altar; here, although within reach, it is most forbidding of touch. Everywhere the volumes huddle snugly into their slipcase, enveloped by a cellophane protective. The **Field Day Anthology's** initial achievement has been instant iconostasis, screening that which it purports to offer.

And what does the **Field Day** offer? Have you noticed how many reviewers have been thrown back on to an almost stupefied recitation of numbers? Three million words, 4,500 pages, three or four languages, twenty contributing editors, two assistant editors — or is it one? (the slipcase information is at variance with the title pages on this) — five or ten years in the compiling, fifteen centuries covered, three volumes, and — dear, dear, yes — IR£166.50.

How are our modern poets treated? The organisation of the anthology into sections, sometimes thematic, sometimes author-based, sometimes generic, has resulted in some anomalies. For instance, contemporary poets writing in Irish (lumped into the section "Irish Writing 1900 - 1988") are segregated from the "Contemporary Irish Poets", who bring up the rear of the assembly. Can you name the poets who appear in both sections? I'll give the answer later, but meanwhile some observations on the selections. First of the "Contemporary Irish Poets" is Patrick MacDonogh, a neglected writer who is given a deserved good outing. But alas, the printing of his beautiful lyric "Be Still As You Are Beautiful" perpetuates the disfiguring misprint that occurred in his collection **One Landscape Still and Other Poems**; the end of the first stanza should read "Impenetrably grave", not "Is penetrably grave". In the Kinsella selection, there are two misprints in the three short "Moralities"; more curiously, his

major poem "Downstream" is presented as if it were the title-poem of his 1962 collection, but the text printed is the radically revised and shortened "Downstream II" in **Nightwalker and Other Poems** (1968) — although with "widened" instead of "scattered" in the seventh line. And Dennis O'Driscoll, who in the course of his elegant essay "At Work: Poet as Civil Servant" (see last issue of **PIR**) entered a weary protest at having once been described in some 1987 publicity material as a "tax inspector", finds himself again so designated by **Field Day**.

The answer to the question above is: Pearse Hutchinson and Michael Hartnett. The two sets of biographical notes on Hutchinson might refer to different poets, and seem to contradict each other in part — like Whitman, he is large and contains multitudes. The name of Hartnett's collection **Do Nuala; Foighne Crainn** is garbled in the contents and index; the English version of the title poem is given in the "Contemporary Irish Poets" section, but without any cross reference. And a selection of contemporary Irish poetry which omits Gabriel Rosenstock and Biddy Jenkinson is somewhat skewed. I also missed Richard Rowley, the Belfast poet of the 1920s.

But the important fact remains that **Field Day** is there and it is a magisterial achievement for Seamus Deane and his collaborators. While it will continue to provide grist to the mill of cavilling readers, such cavilling reaction is part of the debate on the writing that incarnates our culture. The strength of the **Field Day** rests not so much in its selections but in the introductory editorial essays prefixed to each section, which are for the most part stimulating and superb. Now if those essays were to be extracted (anthologised?), the resulting manageable volume would make an affordable and valuable book. For the rest . . . well, in any anthology so much has to be left out, would it matter if everything were?

It strikes me that that last comment is at once cavalier and unchivalrous, and comes ill from an editor. I mentioned at the outset my apprehension at being asked to become editor

of **Poetry Ireland Review**, caused mainly by foreknowledge of the amount of material I would have to read — I had heard rumours although nobody gave me precise figures. So I kept a tally. Of poems alone, during the two or three months that fed into this particular issue, I received nearly 600 from over 100 contributors. In addition to those, there was a body of poems which my predecessor, Máire Mhac an tSaoi, had accepted but had been unable to find space for during her tenure. These I also read, having first taken the decision in principle that all such poems would be considered afresh by me alongside current submissions for this **Poetry Ireland Review 34**. So, this issue is a distillation of some 800 poems from 170 submissions. I hope that the poems continue to flow in; there is still in some of that simplicity which reacts with pleasurable wonder and anticipation to the sheer bulk of each parcel of submissions forwarded to me from the Poetry Ireland office. Whatever the space at my disposal I know, alas, that I cannot emulate the editorial generosity of response of Máire Mhac an tSaoi, and can offer instead only the 'scrupulous meanness' advocated by Joyce in another context.

A pamphlet that arrived, **Poetry Listing 4**, is an alphabetical checklist of recent poetry publications. It gives anthologies, collections and pamphlets under authors, and magazines by title. There are several hundred entries, covering the whole range of current British poetry and a selection from Ireland, the U.S., Canada and elsewhere. It is compiled by David Hart, who offers his own brief comments on each of the items listed. The comments tend to be kindly and approving — deservedly so, of course, in the case of **Poetry Ireland Review**, which he describes as "a strong, lively quarterly of poems, reviews & discussion, 100-plus pages; . . . it regularly prints the best of Irish & poets from elsewhere as well as new poets; the reviews are extensive & of high quality". He was looking in particular at issues 29 to 31. **Poetry Listing 4** is available from Wood Wind Publications, 42 All Saints Road, Kings Heath, Birmingham B14 7LK, and costs £3.00.

Paula Meehan is this year's writer-in-residence at Trinity College, following in the lines of Eavan Boland, Derek Mahon, Tom Mac Intyre, and Paul Durcan. This is one of several instances of the symbiosis between the university and the literary world, operating to the benefit of both. As an academic myself, and convinced that commerce between the teaching of literature and the practice of writing, while not necessary, is usually beneficial to both sides, I have been saddened at the occasional swipes in passing that uncomprehending writers take at academics. I had hoped it was becoming a thing of the past, with the readings, residences, and serious attention to contemporary writing now more frequent in the universities. Of course, Desmond Fennell in his **Whatever You Say, Say Nothing: Why Seamus Heaney Is No. 1** uses academics as a stick with which to beat — or flail at — Heaney's poetry, although in the same pamphlet he is not averse to quoting academic opinion when it suits. But I was dismayed to see Seán Dunne, in **Poetry Ireland Review** of all places, equating "academic" with "narrow" a couple of issues ago. Gerald Dawe, a poet, and a critic, and a lecturer in TCD — and one of those quoted by Fennell — will offer a riposte in the next issue.

Every year of reading and readings brings its pleasures. At the end of 1991 George Szirtes came over from England on a brief first visit as part of "Budapest" festival organised by the Hungarian Embassy. Although he has published nine collections — the latest, **Bridge Passages** from Oxford University Press, picking up some glowing reviews — he was someone whose work I knew only from occasional pieces seen here and there. Having now heard and read him with due attention, I'm an enthusiast. It seems possible that he will be back in Ireland next May for the Listowel Writers' Week; catch up on his work there or anywhere you get the opportunity. Meanwhile, there will be an interview with him and a couple of poems in the next issue . . . to the preparation of which I now betake myself.

Peter Denman