

Peter Fallon and The Gallery Press

An interview with PETER DENMAN

In the first of a series profiling some of Ireland's poetry publishers, I talked to Peter Fallon, founder and editor of The Gallery Press which has just completed two decades of publishing. The Gallery Press operates from an early nineteenth century cottage in north Meath, a few hundred yards away from the Fallon home. The six rooms of the stonebuilt cottage serve as stockrooms, editorial office, and meeting rooms. It was in the last named that I taped this interview on 5 December 1991, a week after Gallery had launched its most recent titles: *Negotiations with the Chill Wind*, John Hughes; *The Clare Island Survey*, Seán Lysaght; *Marconi's Cottage*, Medbh McGuckian; *Ways of Falling*, Peter Sirr; *Faith Healer*, Brian Friel; and a book of stories by Tom Mac Intyre, *The Word for Yes*. Although Gallery also publishes prose and plays, my questions (which were asked and answered spontaneously in the course of conversation) concentrated on poetry.

P.D.: Can you outline how The Gallery Press came into being?

P.F.: It wasn't started with a mission or manifesto; it did evolve out of an energy I felt, and out of an absence. In the late 1960s there were magazines and readings, the energy of youth. I was doing readings with some friends who were starting to write, and out of all this came a small magazine, *Capella*. I became increasingly interested in publishing and the first books appeared between issues of the magazine, almost supplements. At the time the publishers were Dolmen Press and New Writers' Press which started at about the same time as us, with values that were clearly defined at the outset. Although Dolmen commanded a position of excellence and elegance, there was something lofty and removed about it.

P.D.: So when did Gallery actually start?

P.F.: In February 1970. The first book was by two authors — the only Gallery book by two. They were Justin McCarthy and Des O'Mahony. Both stopped writing for a while, but have now started again.

P.D.: How many titles have there been?

P.F.: Approximately 250 — I don't know the exact number — and about 100 or 120 are now in print.

P.D.: Are there any which stand out as particularly memorable?

P.F.: I remember the importance, in the early 1970s, of Brendan Kennelly offering his books to us. I was at Trinity when the Gallery Press started, and two of the people teaching me were people I began to publish — Brendan, and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin. It was a great boost, part of Brendan's generosity that he would then and has since continued to work with small presses. Then we published Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's first book, and I have no doubt that *Acts and Monuments* is still a magnificent collection. The poems in it are superior; I half knew it then, know it better now.

P.D.: Is there any consistent money-spinner on your lists?

P.F.: No. New books have a certain sale immediately on publication, some continue to sell well on the back list. Each year we publish about a dozen new titles, and we try when possible to reprint four or five.

P.D.: What role do the Arts Councils play?

P.F.: We receive a grant from the Arts Council every year, based on our past record and on our programme. It provides about 63% of what we need in order to publish as we would like to. On certain titles we get additional help from the

Northern Ireland Arts Council. We see Gallery as an Irish — all the island — enterprise. A publisher like Gallery has to rely on the following: sales of books, grants, sales of subsidiary rights (co-editions, etc) and, usually, on its personnel working for less than they would in another vocation. So, yes, the Arts Councils' help is essential, life's blood. They have no input into editorial decisions. These are mine; Gallery Press begins and ends with my choice. Manuscripts come every day. Most of them are absolutely awful — from people with some urge to express themselves, I suppose, but without any sense of writing or composing or thinking. Others are competent and earnest. But not, in some way, *necessary*. And then there are the unusual. I read everything at least twice. Many people submit when they shouldn't really be thinking about a book — trying to run before they walk. It's a regret that I can't enter into correspondence on submissions — there's just too much material coming in.

P.D.: It seems to me that Gallery has not published many new voices, first collections, recently.

P.F.: I think we've published a number of people like John Hughes, Anthony Glavin . . . who else? . . . If we haven't published a lot of new poets, we have published a lot of new poems.

P.D.: Your last eight titles, in 1991, had no first collections. There were some names new to Gallery Press, who had started their careers elsewhere: Seán Lysaght, Medbh McGuckian, Paula Meehan.

P.F.: Yes, I'm happy to publish them. In the case of Medbh McGuckian and others whose work has previously been published in England, I'm delighted that we can publish their work here. Some of them are more established than others. We like being an Irish publishing company for Irish authors. I think we will get to a situation where people will graduate,

for want of a better word, to The Gallery Press from other houses. There is an extraordinary amount of poetry publishing just now, and it's mixed and uneven in all kinds of ways. Someone like Paula Meehan, who you say is not a new poet but she's new to Gallery — well, in a way *The Man Who Was Marked by Winter* is her first substantial book, and is being recognised as such. There is a great danger of career building — a poem in this magazine here, a reading there, runner-up in some prize or other, and suddenly this person is a poet and submits to a press. And there are many options, and these options are a good thing, but they must be exercised all the more responsibly. I don't expect brave new voices to come sailing down the river every two months. I believe it's a wonderful bonus if a poet does appear, but of all the first collections that have come out in the past eighteen months or whatever, if not from Gallery then from other houses, I wonder how many of them are really good, and should the poet have waited until there was a better book.

P.D.: Gallery Press as you've just described it seems now to have assumed the lofty position of Dolmen Press twenty years ago.

P.F.: I don't think Dolmen Press twenty years ago was as interested in new writing as Gallery is now. I don't think Dolmen Press did much to stop the flow of poets to English houses. A lot of writers who were available to Dolmen didn't publish with them. I wonder sometimes about Liam Miller's advisers: he had the chance to publish Seamus Heaney's first collection; I believe Larkin submitted from Belfast, and for the first nine years of Dolmen, Kavanagh was looking for a publisher . . . Still, Liam Miller was very kind to me and I believe he 'approved' of my efforts, but I don't think he was an editor in the way that I might be. He was a . . .

P.D.: A print man?

P.F.: A print man, a marvellous designer and book-maker, but I don't think we can compare the two presses so readily. Are you saying that The Gallery Press has become established? Well, yes it has. There is a track record, a list that is not rivalled by any other house here. But I wouldn't like anyone to think we're not interested in first collections. In fact publishing them gives a particular pleasure. But because there are so many publishers now, I think it's often a case of the machinery being on so the 'product' has to come out. I don't believe in that — publishing for the sake of it. We don't publish by numbers. If, in our view, the good first book is not there, then we won't publish. One thing that pleases me enormously is that it appears that people approach Gallery before anyone else. In fact I find it more and more difficult to think of poets published by the other presses who haven't come to Gallery first.

P.D.: Tell me a little about the design and production of Gallery books.

P.F.: We don't do the printing. Often people who don't know confuse publishing and printing. We don't believe in 'desktop' or 'in house origination'. Other people can do that better. We work very closely with typesetters in Dublin, Redsetter, and we've arrived at a design for the books. We prepare camera-ready copy which we then ship out for printing where we can. And we're constantly disappointed by printers — that is one of the real difficulties in this country.

P.D.: Your books are printed in Ireland?

P.F.: Yes.

P.D.: And Gallery Press is staffed . . . ?

P.F.: By myself, and my wife Jean, and Patricia Nicol who works with us part-time.

P.D.: And you have a representative on the road. He's not exclusively for Gallery?

P.F.: No, he works for various people. His name is Fergus Corcoran — he's carried our list for years and years. Password handle our books in England.

P.D.: You find that here in Loughcrew you have a good base? You moved here from Dublin about three years ago.

P.F.: The Gallery Press moved, although I've always lived here in some way. We couldn't afford this kind of space in Dublin, for one thing. I think you can work from wherever you want to be, I don't believe in the necessity of Dublin. I never subscribed to the notion of everything working from the city. I do go to Dublin regularly. But you need to get away from it, to have some other life, and I don't think I'd be able to have that in Dublin.

P.D.: You said to me earlier today that The Gallery Press wouldn't have survived this long if you'd lived in Dublin.

P.F.: I don't think it would. I mean . . . all that bitching. One of the things that upsets me sometimes is that so many of the decisions you try to make, that you hope are being made seriously and professionally, are taken personally. I don't really understand it, but I have to recognise it. That's hard to live with, but it's inevitable these days when there is, it seems to me, a worrying confusion between poet and poetry. And we're interested in poetry.