

John F. Deane and Dedalus Press

An Interview with PETER DENMAN

John F. Deane, founder of *Poetry Ireland*, is also the founder and editor of Dedalus Press, which has established itself since 1985 as one of the country's most active poetry publishers. It operates from an address in Templeogue, close to a locality associated with Austin Clarke but now transformed by the spread of new housing. Not the least of Deane's achievement with Dedalus has been to maintain a presence for poetry in a progressively more difficult environment. The following interview was recorded on 6th March 1992, as Deane was simultaneously preparing for publication of the new titles mentioned in our conversation, and also for another initiative in which he is involved, the opening of the Heinrich Böll House, a residence for writers on Achill Island.

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PD: Could you give me a profile of Dedalus Press as it is at the moment - Spring 1992?

JD: On the 7th April we're seven years old, and we'll be bringing out an anthology called Dedalus Irish Poets — twenty-four of our Irish poets. Looking through it, it's very hard to specify any particular directions. When a new poet that I like surfaces, I add that poet to what I think the Dedalus Press might be. The 'daddies' in the anthology are Denis Devlin and Brian Coffey, and also Charles Donnelly. I like their European dimension, the awareness of things outside their own little farmyard, and the fact that they were moving in that direction long before any of us were beginning to realise that things were happening out there. The poets that I enjoy and feel committed to have an active awareness of that dimension outside the Kavanagh tradition — which I say without denigrating Kavanagh, because I like him too. Most of the poets that we have are experimental in form. That basically is what we aim at.

PD: So the present state of the Press can be judged by Dedalus Irish Poets?

JD; I hope so.

PD: If you look back to the early days, would you say that it's present form is in line with the plans or projections you made at that time?

JD: It actually doesn't appear so. Perhaps the plans were not clear and distinct in 1985. One thing I very much wanted to do, even at that stage, was to bring in the concept of Irish poets translating other poets, and vice versa, so that Irish poetry would become available abroad, which is another thing I've been working at. In those days I was running a small magazine called Tracks with Jack Harte, and we published stories and poems in translation, and we were greeted with guffaws, at the general idea of publishing foreign rather than our own poets. I did discover that foreign poetry in translation does not sell very well, although people express interest in it. We have done a lot of translating and that will continue.

PD: Would you say that Dedalus Press grew out of Tracks? Tracks lasted alongside the Press for some time — I remember an issue on Thomas Kinsella.

JD: Yes, and on Six American Poets, which was the last. I decided that Tracks was becoming a Dedalus Press book, and Jack Harte was no longer involved in it, so I didn't see a point in keeping it separate.

PD: Going back to the origins again, before Dedalus you had a hand-press, St Bueno's. Did that lead into Dedalus Press?

JD: It was separate. I have a strong instinct to make things. I like things to develop and emerge under my hands. I produced John Jordan's booklet on that press, and I remember having all 150 pages spread over the floor drying, when I was called to the 'phone, and the baby Catherine dragged herself right across them, smudging 35 or 40 of them. But St Bueno's was sheer pleasure. Some of the poets I got to know then stayed on.

PD: What was the first Dedalus title?

JD: There were two: Con Ellis's Age of Exploration and Robert Greacen's A Bright Mask.

PD: Robert Greacen is still with you.

JD: And will be reading at the launch on April 7th.

PD: How many titles have you published now?

JD: I think it's about 35.

PD: And what books are in prospect at the moment?

JD: Well, there's Jack Harte's fiction. We're doing the first fiction book from Dedalus. Again, it's a form which I enjoy enormously, but which publishers will tell you is a killer — the novella. It's in the tradition of Borges and Böll.

PD: You see this as a first of a number of excursions into fiction?

JD: I hope so.

PD: One thing that has distinguished Dedalus Press is the republication of those writers you mentioned earlier: Devlin, Coffey, Jordan. Are there any other writers of whom you'd hope to do retrospective or collected editions?

JD: Nobody springs to mind at the moment. There are so many collections coming out at this stage, and you have to make your plans about eighteen months in advance, so that at the moment there is nothing in line.

PD: The Coffey book is very handsome. You spoke of the appeal of the European quality in the poets you now publish who emerged during the 1930s. In this are you not picking up the torch lit by Michael Smith and New Writers' Press?

JD: Yes. I've always had a great admiration for New Writers' Press. In the current atmosphere I feel I have a better marketing technique. Also, things have become a little easier with the new technology. And with Password doing our distribution in England and Europe, distribution is easier. I am honoured to follow Michael Smith's footsteps. I've taken up his interest in those writers, and his interest in translation as well. We've had a great success with publishing his translations from the Spanish of Quevedo. Very pleasing.

PD: It's a feature of your list that there are practically no women writers on it.

JD: Yes. There are two reasons for that — although first, of course, I should point out that we do have Leland Bardwell, whose new and selected poems we published — Dostoyevsky's Grave. We have also published the Hungarian Agnes Nemes Nagy, and a collection by Ethna McKiernan; Susan Connolly, too. The first reason is an accident of time, in that I had a woman's collection as one of our very first titles and I wanted to publish it. But in those days every individual title that I did had to be individually grant-aided by the Arts Council. I submitted two collections — one by a woman, one

by man and both were rejected by the Arts Council. Both were published by somebody else subsequently — in fact the Arts Council has since grant-aided that book from another publisher. Now, that's a fact of life; it was an extremely difficult way to work. There is no policy to exclude women from Dedalus by any means. The second reason is that Salmon Publishing has specialised in women poets during the period Dedalus has been building up its list. No other woman poet, other than Leland and the woman I've just referred to, has actually submitted a collection to me. There are two women on the lists for 1993. I know that a perception has arisen that I don't publish women, but it's an unfortunate accident, not a policy.

PD: You've spoken of the Arts Council — what rôle does it play in supporting Dedalus's current programme?

JD: Again, I must emphasise that the Arts Council, right from the beginning, has been extremely supportive. I did find it difficult when I had to deal with them collection by collection because it stymied my hand. I wasn't actually the publisher, in effect. But the encouragement for the translation area was enormous. Gradually they began to realise that I was serious. Now, the operation is well funded by the Arts Council, and there is no interference of any kind, in the sense that I have a free hand. There is a fine working relationship of mutual trust. Without the Arts Council, Dedalus Press would not exist — it's as simple as that.

PD: What about joint publication, and Thomas Kinsella's Peppercanister series. Is that your only such arrangement?

JD: Yes, that is unique. Tom has published Peppercanister, and it was distributed by Dolmen. Tom retains the identity of the Peppercanister, a separate identity which I think is very important to him. When Dolmen folded, Tom actually considered stopping Peppercanister, so I just offered him the alternative. I will carry on as far as possible what the Dolmen Press had done. He has control of the production. I suggest costs and so on, and do the distribution. Everything else is Tom's. I have no editorial input. Dedalus Press did have some co-publications with Anvil Press in the past: for people like Tom McCarthy, who were not being distributed properly here, and Dennis O'Driscoll. I see no great point otherwise in

going into joint publication — with English publishers, anyway, because we have the same distributor. I can distribute just as well.

PD: How do you manage distribution in Ireland?

JD: I do that by shank's mare. I do all of that myself at the moment. I'm open to offers from distributors to help out, although at this stage I've developed a pretty good relationship with bookshops. There are so many poetry books on the shelves that publishing new poetry is a difficult task. Bookshops will only take half-a-dozen, or three, and they run out fairly quickly. It takes a lot of invoicing, a lot of coming and going, to sell a book.

PD: What part does reviewing play?

JD: I used to believe it was very important, and had running battles with The Irish Times, Sunday Independent, trying to get them to do reviews. I now find that a review makes very little difference to the actual sales. I think that at this stage there is a poetry clientèle, and once they know a book is there, they'll buy it. We waited for a long time, with no reviews, but found ways of getting to the public. Something that annoys me greatly is hype rather than reviewing. Hype has been the greatest enemy to real poetry over the past five or six years. The quiet voice gets lost. That is irksome. I've had calls from various bookshops, saying that they can't sell so-and-so because everyone is buying X because of the hype.

PD: You're not going to put a name on X. . . ?

JD: No.

Two poems by JOHN F. DEANE

Far Country

He told us Pushkin, Tolstoy, Gogol;
we were Tatar and Cossack, I was Taras Bulba

leading moustachioed hordes over drain and árdán,
my short pants wide as the Black Sea,

Bonnacurry the Ukraine
and Stoney River the Dnieper.

I watched him pacing the stone flags of the kitchen floor,