

- Mícheál Ó hAirtnéide, *Do Nuala: Foighne Chrainn*. Baile Átha Cliath: *Coiscéim*, 1984, £1.00.
- Seán Ó Lúing, *Déithe Teaghlaigh*. Baile Átha Cliath: *Coiscéim*, 1984, £1.50.
- Gabriel Rosenstock, *Nihil Obstat*. Baile Átha Cliath: *Coiscéim*, 1984. £2.00.
- Rita E. Kelly, *An Bealach Éadóigh*. Baile Átha Cliath: *Coiscéim*, 1984, £1.50.
- Aodh Ó Domhnaill, *Feic*. Baile Átha Cliath: *Coiscéim*, 1984, £1.50.
- Ciarán Ó Coigligh, *Noda*. Baile Átha Cliath: *Coiscéim*, 1984, £1.50.
- S.E. Ó Cearbhaill, *Cros gan Teampall*. Baile Átha Cliath: *Coiscéim*, 1984, £2.00.
- Liam Prút, *An Dá Scór*. Baile Átha Cliath: *Coiscéim*, 1984, £2.00.
- Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, *Féar Suaithinseach*. Maigh Nuad: *An Sagart*, 1984. No price indicated.

Poets writing in Irish still find it difficult to avoid giving the impression that collectively they wish to be considered as sufficient unto themselves. By the very fact of writing in a minority language they place themselves in a sort of cultural reservation, at best self-contained, at worst self-regarding, moving in a closed circuit. If fences have been built, it is hardly surprising in the face of the overshadowing sense of threat. Even the natural description 'Irish poetry' is denied to their work, that label having been hijacked by various honest Ulstermen and other practitioners of what used to be called Anglo-Irish literature. It is left to some awkward circumlocution such as 'poetry in Irish' to identify their work. The terminology is important, for the word 'Irish' has a significantly different meaning in each phrase. 'Irish poetry' indicates the writing of a nation, linked inextricably to the community which engenders it; 'poetry in Irish' suggests an orphan literature, all code and no context. The poets in Irish are not altogether blameless in this situation. One of the books under review comes blurbed and larded with a comment from a respected elder poet who might have known

better: *'Talann cumasach, neamh-ghnách; Gaeilge shaibhir, thagarthach, chomhaimsireach.'* This attitude of 'Never mind the poetry, feel the Irish' is frequent, and does a general disservice in diverting attention from the main matter. The demand that poetry should function primarily to purify the language of the tribe can be too literal and too limiting: another fence around the reservation. Poetry, to be sure, is essentially linguistic, but the language must be at the service of the poetry, not *vice versa*.

Those of us who look at writing in Irish from the English-language side of the fence must own up to an occasional unworthy feeling of exasperation at what we are tempted to see as a perverse decision to write in a dying language. And for the contemporary generation of poets, unlike that of Ó Direáin, it has been a matter of choice: the English alternative is, or was at some stage in their lives, available to them. The choice, seen at its most exhibitionistic in Hartnett's farewell to English some ten years ago, is an act of artistic affirmation denied to monolingual poets. It is up to us to recognize it as such, and to recognize also that the sooner writers in both languages come to be seen as contributing to a common heritage of Irish writing, the better for all. In the meantime, this review attempts to consider poetry in Irish with without undue reservations: even if it cannot hope to establish a right of way through the fence, there is no harm in nodding companionably across it.

The books under review here constitute a mixed bag. Two of the poets, Rosenstock and Ní Dhomhnaill, belong with a readily identifiable group of poets, now in their thirties, which emerged in U.C.C. around 1970. Much has been made of the fact that this group belongs to the first generation of writers to come from a non-Gaeltacht environment — although each of them has established and maintained some links with Corca Dhuibhne. This Cork group (it includes also Michael Davitt, Liam Ó Muirthile, Finín Ó Tuama and the ballad-maker, Con Ó Drisceoil) has succeeded in imprinting an image of itself, mainly through *Innti*, an occasional publication edited by Davitt over the past decade and a half. It is also remarkable that each of the poets has, at one time or another, fronted programmes for RTE radio or television. The slightly raised media profile has helped, in a wholly unexceptionable way, to bring their work before a less

restricted public. The remarkable aspect of the formative U.C.C. period was the ready interchange between undergraduate writers of which, as always, there were plenty on campus. While those writing in Irish looked to Davitt and, eventually, *Innti* which was founded during this time, those writing in English gravitated towards *Motus*, a little magazine edited by one Roddy Campbell, an engagingly eccentric Scotsman who was one of the more stimulating students in Cork at the time. These two sets took an active interest in each other's writing, participated in joint poetry readings, and, as in Pound's phrase of Whitman, there was commerce between them. Seen in retrospect, this willingness to engage in the commerce of a more widely-based artistic activity, albeit in a sheltered campus environment, bespeaks a degree of self-assurance which was the foundation for the achievement since then.

There were other ways they could have proceeded, as Michael Hartnett has demonstrated. In 1975, with an established reputation as a poet in English, he announced that from then on he would write in Irish. Curiously, he decided that this new departure had as its corollary that he should cease to write in English, an assumption unsupported by logic, necessity or precedent. There are many examples of poets who have written in two languages, from Charles d'Orléans through Milton and Crashaw to Iain Crichton Smith. It would at least be consoling to report that Hartnett's courageous and potentially enriching venture, while a loss to English, had been a gain to Irish. Such is not the case. His first poems in Irish, collected in *Adharca Broic*, did display a rough vigour, but since then *An Phurgóid* and this latest slim volume have offered little. *Do Nuala: Foighne Chrainn* ('For Nuala: The Patience of Trees') has the unfinished air of work-in-progress, but progress to where is not clear. The title poem evokes a powerful symbol of latent violence but without applying it to any discernible purpose. '... agus ligéas' ('... and I let it') and 'Comhairle' ('Advice') are poems about the problems of writing a poem, while others retreat to the imagery of childhood ('Iarmharáin', 'Survivors') or to the purple seaweed and granite rocks of the Gaeltacht ('Gné na Gaeltachta', 'Gaeltacht Type'). This last (with the enigmatic suffix 'I.M.C.M.' — '*in memoriam* Caitlín Maude' perhaps, but if so why not say so?) shows a landscape observed from the

outside but not felt in the blood or along the pulses of the heart. Only in 'As Láthair' ('Absent') and 'Aimsitheoir' ('Finder') does one sense that Hartnett is writing with full power. Meanwhile, Hartnett's farewell to English appears to be dragging into one of those stagily long leavetakings; his poems have (rightly) been reissued in various refurbished collections, and he has recently provided versions of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's poems for a Raven Arts collection. He is in the position now of being able to choose to write henceforth in both languages; he should try it.

Seán Ó Lúing's collection, *Déithe Teaghlaigh* ('Household Gods'), is made up mostly of Lowellesque imitations of Latin or French originals. As with all poetry in translation, a great part of the reader's enjoyment comes from comparison with one's knowledge of the original, or with other versions of the same piece. Ó Lúing, who belongs to an older generation of poets – that of Ó Direáin and Ó Ríordáin – has provided us with wholly attractive renderings of pieces by Mallarmé, Verlaine and Baudelaire, who seem to pass over well into Irish in his hands. For a flavour of his work, however, here is Catullus' 'Odi et Amo':

*Tá fuath agus grá
 Ag réabadh tríom.
 Fáth m'anacra
 fiafraigh d'tom.
 Ní fhéadaim freagradh.
 Ach mothaím an pian
 is an t-olcas dian
 ag loscadh m'anma.*

The concision of the original is lost, but is compensated for by the poise and balance which takes its measure from the opposed 'odi et amo' of the opening. Ó Lúing also includes some original poems, including one of anecdotal delight which describes an encounter between Kruger Kavanagh, the publican *gloriosus* of Dún Chaoin, and Patrick Kavanagh – an imaginary conversation to beat all.

Ó Lúing's is an individual voice, and so is Gabriel Rosenstock's. *Nihil Obstat* confirms him as a writer of great energy and

eclecticism, and he is probably the wittiest of Irish poets in either language. On this last ground if no other he deserves to be cherished. 'Teachtaireacht' is a rhythmic paradigm of comings ('to you', 'through you', 'in you', 'with you') mischievously tailed with an acknowledgement to the Christian Brothers' Irish grammar book. Although Rosenstock looks frequently to oriental culture and to German literature for his models, the poet whom he most calls to mind is Robert Desnos, who also wrote particularly well for children, loved language, and had a precise lyrical vision.

Rita E. Kelly has written both in English and in Irish in the past. Some years ago she collaborated with Eoghan Ó Tuairisc on a dual-language poem 'Ar Lorg an Lae', of which he did the Irish version and she the English, although each fed off the other imaginatively and neither version took the status of original or translation. '*An Bealach Éadóigh*' ('The Unlikely Route') shows the elusive nature of her writing. Her poems strike the reader at any rate as being often toneless and without closure. This may be because her work concentrates on moments of stasis; the characteristic moment is the hiatus between small crises, the breath held and the tense present. Its appeal is momentary and baffling, and I can best convey my dissatisfaction and interest with this collection by saying that I already look forward to her next.

Rita E. Kelly writes mostly in free verse, but generally seems to find forms adequate for her thought. The current prevalence of free verse in poetry in Irish is all too often taken as an invitation to meander, all image and no aim. Ciarán Ó Coigligh's '*Noda*' ('Hints' or 'Ellipses') and Aodh Ó Domhnaill's '*Feic*' ('Show') are both written in this idiom of modernist naif — spare jottings in short lines with no apparent impulse.

S.E. Ó Cearbhaill's *Cros gan Teampall* ('A Cross without a Church') is a collection of occasional verse, but the occasions remain small. A visit to Peru, Raidió na Gaeltachta, man landing on the moon, the Pope landing in Ireland — all these and many others are included in what begins to take on the character of a verse diary.

Liam Prút's *An Dá Scór* ('Two Score') also contains a lot of pieces prompted by personal occasions: a visit to Scotland, relationships with his father, and so on. He is far more success-

ful in giving both structure and significance to incidental observation, and he writes with a pleasantly wry humour. As with several of the poets under review, he could benefit greatly from the services of an attentive editor. Among the sixty or more poems included here there is a good book of poetry struggling to get out.

By leaving Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's *Féar Suaithinseach* ('Extraordinary Grass') until now I have, Cana-fashion, departed from the usual reviewing order and kept the best until last. Her poems leave one with a clear feeling that by the final line of each one has advanced some imaginative distance since the opening. It is much as one could hope for from any poet. Her work relies heavily on the speaking voice for its nuances, whether setting down a conversational confrontation or engaging the reader directly in dialogue. What she has to say is rarely less than memorable, an insistent thrusting at experience which she discusses in terms of folk-based images. In structuring her world on folk-motifs, Ní Dhomhnaill aligns herself with the Orkney poet George Mackay Brown, and with Anne Sexton in *Transformations*. Both these use a communally shared framework of folk-symbols which enables them to work variations on the significance; when Sexton transforms the story of Cinderella it is essential to her purpose that the reader be familiar with the original fairy-tale. Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry is far less parasitic on the folk characteristics which it uses, marshalling them instead as a repertory of powerful presences moving through life. A central group of poems features the 'bean an leasa' — fairy woman, vampire, obsession, guest and meddlesome neighbour. Just how malleable a figure this is in Ní Dhomhnaill's hands can be seen in 'An Crann', where the 'bean an leasa' retains her authenticity even when depicted in the potentially ludicrous act of attacking a tree in a suburban garden with a Black & Decker chainsaw.

I referred above to the closed circuit of poets in Irish. For example, Rosenstock has one poem about reading Davitt's poetry, another about reading Ó Muirthile's; Prút has a poem replying to a comment by Davitt, another addressed to S.E. Ó Cearbhaill, Ó hAirtnéide's collection is prominently dedicated to Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Rita E. Kelly dedicates a poem to her publisher . . . It's a small world, they make it so, hudd-

ling close to each other. But who can blame them? After the generation of Ó Direáin and Ó Ríordáin, born in the first quarter of this century, there is a curious lacuna. What happened to the generation of poets born between the late twenties and the early forties? They are not there, the contemporaries of Montague, Kinsella, Heaney, Longley, *et al.* A few lone voices, infrequent books, but nothing sustained. One can point only to Seán Ó Tuama who, significantly enough, was a Professor of Irish at U.C.C. during that formative period there around 1970. But for the most part, a void. It is, on a small scale, a repeat of the great silence of the nineteenth century. With this loss of elders, it is not surprising that the today's poets should look to each other. It is an achievement that they are writing poetry at all; that some of the poetry is unusually good is more than we deserve.

— Peter Denman