

A POET'S JOURNEY
(WHY DO I WRITE POETRY?)

by

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Supervisor: Dr Rachel Finnegan

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I hereby declare that the material in this thesis is
entirely my own work.

Rory Johnston

M.A. Thesis – Rory Johnston

Dedicated to my wife Betty and our five children,

Deirdre, Turlough, Maeve, Dara and Bronach

M.A. Thesis – Rory Johnston

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POETRY

Introduction to Poems

The poems herein have all been written by me during the course of my MA (Research) in Creative Writing at Waterford Institute of Technology. Many are autobiographical, covering different periods of my life; Childhood / Earliest Memories, Early School Days, Later School Days / Teen Years, Family, Political, and Others (Narrative/Humorous/Etc.). I use the word political in a wide sense, to cover public affairs and the problems and inequalities that exist in a sad world.

RADIO NEWS 1941

In the early morning dark our family
Huddled around the crackly wireless.
As a five year old I sensed that
What the cold voice said was important.
Advances. Gains. Retreats. Losses.
I watched with ignorant interest
My father redraw the borders of Europe
On yesterday's newspaper maps.
Strange sounding places. The Sudetenland.
Scary new words. Torpedo. Gestapo.

CAIT RUADH

Because my father was an Excise man, we moved.
We moved to Limerick from Donegal
And Kitty Shiels came with us.
Rosy cheeked Kitty of the wild red hair
And the gentle Donegal voice.
She sang and laughed, her music filled our life.
Kitty worked hard, there was only way to work – hard.

Washday Monday was always busy.
Tub and washboard and Sunlight soap
In the lean-to glasshouse outside the kitchen door.
After the postman the milkman came.
And next the chatty breadman.

The grocery boy on his bike
Called for his daily order.
Then the jolly black faced coalman,
A sack on his back, one at a time,
Emptied his avalanche into the shed.

Throughout, Kitty worked at her washboard,
Intermittently carrying clothes to the line
To blow in the early Summer breeze.
“There’s good drying today mam”.
The sheets flapped like a great white swan
Under a blue sky with its own
Laundry of wispy white.
And the wild red hair trailed behind.

THEY SAY HE NEVER TALKS ABOUT THE TRENCHES

I remember the tall man with the gentle hands.
We met him often when I walked with my father
By the Shannon Fields.

My father said he was a drummer
In The Connaught Rangers.
He played the Lambeg drum.
My father described him to my mother. Old
Erect, poorly dressed, dignified, he had a limp.

I asked my father "what does dignified mean".
And trenches, "are they like the trenches on
Markey's farm. Why wouldn't the man talk
About them. Is it wrong to talk about trenches.
What's The Somme, why was he fighting there.
Is Connaught Rangers a football team.
And shrapnel, what's that".

APING

There were hot lazy Sundays then,
My father in his best plus fours
Shed his waistcoat, smoked
“Sweet Afton” and blew smoke rings
In the static humid air. Mother sat
In her straw hat and finery in the shade
In a long garden on two levels.

BURKE

Burke came to school with boils on the back of his neck,
January 1946.

In bare feet with oversize burlesque clothes ,
A scarecrow with shaven scabby head,
Weeping hollow eyes in a see through face.

Burke hadn't got tuppence for a jotter,
O gawd , O gawd, don't hit me sir.
The strap came down on red raw chilblained hands.

I want to see your father,
He's gone to England, sir,
Your mother, she's very sick, sir.
Have a jotter tomorrow or else.

Burke dragged his feet
And spoke the language of the nobodies,
He ate the discarded core of my apple,
Pips and all.
A fly landed on the sore on his lip.
I didn't think it odd
That our Bran was better fed.

Christian Doctrine class –
Lazarus and Dives.
Did dogs lick Burke's sores?
Who is Dives?
He didn't fare too well.

We are all equal in God's eyes.
No explanation given.

Pennies for pagan black babies in darkest Africa,
Not a farthing for Christian Burke from Church Lane.
Jesus loved me. Did he love Burke?

When Burke's mother died, I thought
That's what happens to the mothers of boys
With sores and scabs and no shoes.
I cried when a stray mongrel dog
Was hit by a bus.

Sixty years on,
Burke has never left me,
Still without a Christian name,
Always Burke, plain Burke, just Burke.

THROUGH THE MIST

Was it always into a golden sunset
That the gypsy caravans headed out
The Ennis Road, drawn by piebald ponies?
Stocky swarthy drivers walked beside
And held the reins, or sat on a shaft,
One foot dangling.

Tousled haired urchins peeped above
The half door of their rainbow home on wheels
And gazed at us with impish grins,
As we gazed back in awe, and
With not a little envy.

Tethered behind, a foal and donkey,
Followed by a cart driven by a barefoot boy
Of about my age.
He didn't have to go to school
Or wash behind his ears.

This was the nearest we came in real life
To the cowboys of the silver screen,
As we watched these nomads heading out
To tame the wild west of County Clare.

To us they travelled as far as the "Irish Pine"
When it sailed majestically down the Shannon
To Riga, Tallinn and Vladivostock.

THE COUNTRY BUS 1946

December fog hung
Cold outside the door,
Waiting passengers thawed
The numbness in their bones.

A fire roared in an open hearth
In the bus office
Beside Tiger O'Briens
In Sarsfield Street.

Two buses stood outside
Facing west.
One for Sixmilebridge,
One for Clarecastle, Ennis
And distant points beyond.

A few peaked capped men
Stood around,
Shuffling feet, rubbing hands,
Chatting, nodding and keeping
An eye on the big wall clock.

A black-shawled woman,
Canvas shopping bag and parcels,
Sat in the nook and lit
A jaw-warming *duideen*
With a red burning sod.
Through a gap in her teeth
She spat in the ash.
Sparks brought momentary life
To her all weather face.

Country bus people
Came and went
Like a slow carousel.

Adventure, distant journeys,
A magic world of travellers,
To a ten year-old city boy,
Outside the door, peeping in.

STORM

I am with my father on a Summer Sunday
In County Clare. I am ten years old.
We are happily lost in fields.
He clears brambles with his stick and
Sings "Glory O to the Bold Fenian Men"
In his soft low voice.
He laughs at my blackberry face,
I laugh when he steps on a cowpat.

Leaving the shade of the planters' trees,
The gaunt roofless skeleton of the
Big house looms. Timidly I follow.
I fear the ghosts within the ivy walls.
A raven perches on a broken battlement,
It's not a bird, they say.

There are voices, strange clothes, cellars,
Back stairs, scullery maids, liveried footmen,
Flickering candles and the smell of antiquity.
The hooves of headless horses spark the
Marble stairs.

Unrest in the town tonight. On with the dance.
Ballroom of crinoline ladies, graceful bows,
Drawing-room of cigar smoke and tinkling glasses.
The perfume of illicit passion lingers,
A uniform thrown across a chair, an earring
On the floor, embers in the grate,
Two glasses and a burnt out candle.

Windows rattled in the storm that raged that
Night, a shutter banged and echoed in the howling
Chimney, an attic trapdoor rose and fell, gusts
Cracked in trees. Dogs barked. Horses whinnied.

They came that fateful night with torches lit.
Shots. The sound of broken glass.
Flames, smoke, screams. The thunder of a roof
Caved in. The smell of burning horse flesh.

Confused day replaced reluctant night.
Smoke rose like incense from their sacrifice,
The shell stood gaunt against an eastern sky

To remain and remind. A shelter for cattle
From the East Clare winds.

ANGELA'S LIMERICK

Jacko's house on Arthur's Quay
Had no front door.
Jacko stuttered, pale and gaunt
The smell of piss rose from the floor.

The hungry mother of a starving brood
On the Dock Road when the ship was in
Earned what she could to buy some food
And righteously we condemned her *sin*.

Cloth capped men with no job or hope
Left in droves for the emigrant boat
Lived in dosshouses in Cricklewood
Got whatever work they could.

The rest of us we had it hard
No white bread and ration cards
Some felt sorry for their tough luck
But mostly we didn't give a fuck.

We watched it all from behind the lace
Their squalor was their own disgrace
We went to church and paid our way
Will that be enough on Judgement Day?

INNOCENCE BEDAMNED

In the beginning was the shout,
And the shout was very loud.
“Are you going to return to your sin
Like a dog to his vomit?”

After the shroud of the black confessional
Melting candles flickered,
Lighting our path to doom.
“Out of hell there is no redemption”.
Not for a priest-fearing child.

Brother Madden said Micko was damned.
He stole apples from Cowpar’s orchard
And didn’t make restitution.

We went to the Cosy on Friday
For fish and chips.
Manning bought sausages and ate them.
He said he didn’t give a damn.
“Woe to the scandal-giver”.
Riley said Manning had a hard neck
That could easily take a millstone,
And he was a good swimmer.

Jacko will have a stain
On his soul for ever because
He told a lie about a priest
And a curly haired altar boy
With short trousers.

Smiler Daly pulled up Mary Hogan’s skirt
To see her knickers.
That’s like adultery.
He’ll burn for all eternity

It’s all right for brothers and priests
They’re holy, they never sin,
They go straight to heaven.

FEAR

A slit in the curtains
Allows the street light in
To pick out the statue on the wardrobe,
A head with a crown of thorns,
An agonised face dripping with blood.
I am eight years old.
The ghosts from the dark corners
Of my room enter my head.
I am going to hell.

At school there is a crucified corpse
Nailed to a cross, and blood and wounds,
And a picture of an open bleeding heart.
I am evil, I am sinful, and frightened.
And filled with dark despair.
I hear the screams, the sobs,

And they become mine.
I die and I'm buried at Golgotha,
The place of the skull.

REVENGE (1953)

Recruited before he knew his mind,
Incarcerated in his misery,
The world his enemy, the school his prison.
No escape. Just fester.

Revenge for wrongs endured
Consumed by burning hate
Frustration lashed out
Against a cruel fate.

Spite and pleasure mixed.
The poor man planned attrition
His empty life was broken
For that we had to suffer.

It had something to do with a formula.
Each of twenty two scholars was asked,
Each failed miserably to answer.
Some stuttered, others blankly stared.

The Rev. brother drew a large penknife
From underneath his cassock. Silence.
What next? He stormed out the door
Down the stone steps into the garden.

We milled around the window
As he hacked a stout branch.
Instantly all became clear.
Some mutterings of bravado
Mostly unspoken fear.

Mackey who normally sat beside me was first.
Four of the best. Mackey was a quiet
Stubborn hardy hurler from County Clare.

O'Dea was next. He groaned. Turned pale.
Then Butler. In fear I waited my turn.
After two for Butler, O'Dea fainted.
The savagery ended *pro tem*.

ENGLISH TEACHER

High long pole windows, rough wood floors,
Knife initialled desks.
Six foot Mike Brady surveyed his charges,
Peering over his spectacles,
Almost with interest.

*"Odi profanum vulgus—
"We're doing English, Sir".
"How clever of you to notice, Power,
Did anyone else spot that?
No! Then you're the brightest boy in the class, Power.
Be sure to tell your mammy.*

*English. Right.
Many English words are derived from Latin roots.
So maybe you're not that bright after all, Master Power.*

*Our friend Mr. Shakespeare wrote many fine plays,
(Some not so fine).
He never told us all, liked to keep us guessing-
Was Hamlet mad?"*

A sweet bell jangled out of tune and harsh.
"The tintinabulation of the bells".
Observed the English teacher,
*"Always include the apt quotation.
Kelly, repeat what I just said".*
"Always include decapitation".
"Don't tempt me boy, don't tempt me".

*"Before this sweet sorrow" boomed the sonorous voice,
"An essay for Monday,-- Was Hamlet mad?"*

Sotto voce, "Is Mike Brady mad?"
*"I heard that, Power,-
Of course I'm mad,
To attempt to teach you lot of pygmies"*

THE STICK

Fifty years on, your black ebony stick,
Silver knobbed handle, the ferrule missing,
Its once shiny surface dulled with age,
Sits in the corner and smiles.

I hold it in my hand and feel your presence,
You're good company as always.

You laughed when I wanted
Hot water in the tap.
"When I was young
We broke the ice in the hogshead
In the backyard
To wash our morning face".

After a few pints in Foley's
On a Summer night
You ate a Spanish onion
Like an apple, and
Strong red cheddar cheese.

Once I saw you alight from the bus at Todds,
Preceded by the black shiny stick.
It was raining.

You only bussed when it rained,
Otherwise you walked
In the Ennis Road,
Always with the silver knobbed stick.
You smiled, saluted, had a chat, told a yarn,
Occasionally waved the ebony stick.

The "Leader"x said you were a true Christian,
A man of integrity, a good conversationalist.
I bet that raised a smile.

Leaving St. Laurence's cemetery
When we laid you to rest,
Too early, too soon, too sad,
A shovel hand grabbed mine,
Gogser Hogan, Limerick docker -
"He never riz above himself".
He grinned and was gone.
You whispered to me,

That's how it should be.

THE PIGMEN

Saturday noon.
A November wind blows
Up the Shannon.

A knot of pigmen stands
At Mulligans' corner,
Swarthy faces telling nothing.

Hands deep in grimy pockets
Counting silence. Shuffling feet
And nods. Talk is sparse.

Clouds black out the sun.
A navy sky threatens,
Then bursts on the city streets.

The bell rings. The ritual over,
The pigmen cross themselves,
Then cross to Sullivans' pub.

DIASPORA (Class of '52)

Kelly's mother wanted a priest,
His careless father died.
Kelly sold the horse,
Bought a tractor on the never never
And ploughed a furrow.

Stoker carried his father home
Or vice versa.
Beefy didn't want to be butcher,
Joined a Steamship boat
And crossed the world to Liverpool.

Tommo became a Teddy boy in London,
Blue suede shoes, duck's arse haircut,
Big Ben accent, "only orses work".
Anaemic Murphy went to Wales and died.

Barry became a bus conductor in Rugby,
Said he was moving to the philharmonic
After Christmas.
Catslick went too,
Realised his full potential in the first week,
Shacked up with a married woman.
We knew he would.
"One should never deprive the fair sex of
The better things in life".

A or ab, ex or e, cum, palam, coram, clam and de,
Tenus, sine, pro and prae,
Govern the ablative, so they say

Stood them all in good stead.

A FERVENT PRAYER

Dark as the shroud of a holy ghost,
A few flickering candles burning low,
Grease smell, pungent aroma of incense,
High altar of cold marble
Tabernacled under the dome of heaven.

Saintly women in veiled headscarves,
Anaemic, bowed heads, forty five degree necks,
Doing the stations, mouthing prayers,
Vying for sanctity, chewing the ear of God,
Moving slowly from one to fourteen.

A ragged beggar shuffles up the centre aisle
Carrying his cross. His unwashed smell
Parts the sea of women of sorrows
With their monopoly of sanctity, assured of
Front row seats in the kingdom of heaven.

Raging at Christ's cruel tormentors,
No pious words, *Pater, Ave, or Gloria,*
In the dark Franciscan church
The beggar utters a fervent prayer
And angrily waves a trembling crutch.

"Oh the bastards, the lousy bastards,
If only I was there".

REGIME ACHTUNG

Hands out of pockets
Don't slouch
Speak up boy
Don't look at your shoes
Straighten your tie
That look in your eye
Don't join the fools
I make the rules
You listen I speak
I will decide
The when and the where
No need to ask
Whether it's fair
Obey and dispel
All whimpering fears
These are after all
The very best years.

THE HILL

You say there's no path up that steep hill,
There will be when we reach the top.
You ask what we'll do when we get there,
We'll look back down and see the way we came,
Where we walked side by side holding hands,
And where the way was stony for a while,
And where we stopped to view the landscape,
Where we sheltered from the storm,
Where we watched the sun go down
And watched the stars come out at night.
Where we saw our children born
And start to climb their own steep hill.
You ask what we'll do when that's all done,
We'll sit and smile at the world.

SILENT SIGNALS

Ten month old Finn in his chariot,
Me, three score and ten, at the helm.
The weather is a mixed metaphor,
We're freewheeling in Bute Park, he
Under his all weather plastic shield,
Wrapped, snug.
We face into the bracing wind.
He can't see me.
Does he know I'm here?
Navigating the tarmac path
Through a sea of green
Beneath grandfatherly chestnut trees.
Do silent signals travel, Myles like
Through the metal frame,
From me to him and back again,
Across the years?
A Morse code of love.

71st BIRTHDAY

Many different tables, meals and menus,
Appetites for food for love for life,
Candlelight reflected in the red wine glass,
And in your knowing eyes I hear you laugh.

We're not so young now, but what is young?
We never lived more than one day at any time.
And in that time, music of love and fears,
Knowing and not knowing across the dream filled years.

Ups and downs, mistakes and some regrets,
Over all the sheet shows balance plus,
Would we have changed some, maybe yes,
A perfect life would bore the man above.

Does it matter now if you are twenty one,
Or thieving time has passed and fifty years have gone.

BUTTERFLIES

From the butterfly bush
The butterflies fly,
A ballet of wings
Against a blue sky.
They dip and they glide,
They float and they dart.
The peace is so quiet
You'd hear a bee fart.

WITHOUT

Would your absence walk with me by day,
Day without birdsong,
And lie with me at night,
Night without stars.

To lose you would be
To live in a place called grief
In a street called darkness
In a house called memory,
With no escape.
The only door self-pity,
And I wouldn't open that.

No. At that time we can say
We are grateful, because
We celebrated the light.

RESURRECTION

Chiselled granite slabs and marble crosses,
Names and dates.
My parents' grave, and their grandson
Who never saw life, yet died. My nephew.
Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord.

A funeral enters my privacy. Strangers
Through a mist wind their way
In a labyrinth of graves.
An undertaker with Purgatorial visage, learned
In the art of death.
A widow in clergyman black.
Did the cortege travel Kavanagh's
"Homeward" long way round?
Did strangers cross themselves, and
Like me, walk the three *coisceim*?

A shovel, a hole, earth, a grave.
Dead leaves, damp clay, wet grass..
The agony in the garden. And tears.
Tears.

Yew trees and cedars of Lebanon.
Gethsemane. Calvary. Mount of Olives.
Skull, skeleton, bones, dust.

An uninvited guest at their sorrow,
An unseen observer who has seen it all before.
It is where we finish, but it's not the end.

We strike our breasts, bow our heads
And mouth the words,
And think of our own mortality.

A corpse in a box, a wreath, a single red rose,
A spirit journeying through spacelessness to eternity.
A pilgrimage of the living among the dead.

The tomb is empty.
Requiescat in pace.

DESPAIR

I subscribed to the New Internationalist
For one year.

Agonised screams rose from the printed page.
The smell of rotting corpses oozed between the lines.
Pearly white teeth of laughing soldier boys
Smaller in stature than their rifles
Grinned their bloody innocence.

Starvation while the junta feasts
House arrest for dissenters
Medicines available at a price
Complete denial of women's rights.

Wars I had forgotten
Torture I never knew
Prisoners of conscience rotting
In cells in primeval jails,
And genocide.

Then floods and drought
Earthquakes mudslides
Disease and can I send
A donation?

I take the easy route,
I'm absolved, a transient pardon.
Soon the guilt returns.
The coiled spring of my anger
Strains.

There is a solution.
I cancel my subscription.

HEADLINES

When I woke he had left the train.
He sat across from me and read my
Newspaper, upside down.

“What do you think”, he asked.
I waited.
“The headlines”.
I scanned the open pages.

Rape, child abuse, a suicide bomb,
A corrupt politician, a homeless
Shoplifting addict aged fourteen.
Wars, starvation, exploitation.

His burning eyes persisted -
“The question I ask is”, he continued,
“What am I doing. Is it to late?”

If we don't act now there will always be
A Star child behind razor wire,
A napalm child burning down the road,
A swollen belly child, a matchstick legs child,
A bulging eyes child with sores with flies.
And Auschwitz, My Lai, Kosovo, Enniskillen”.

When I slept again a uniformed guard with
A swastika armband entered the carriage,
Checked my ticket and clicked his heels.
Martial music played over the intercom.

**CAMBODIA TRILOGY
(PHNOM PENH 1992)**

CHOEUNG EK

Black rags part hidden
In the ossified ground,
The clothes they lived and died in.
Funereal ceremonies.
A stump of yellow bone protruded-
A thigh shin arm rib,
Anonymous in life and in death
In fields that killed.

A glass case, the skull mound,
In the shape of their homeland,
Eight thousand pairs of sockets
Accuse.

TUOL SLENG

Children laugh in the happy high school yard.
Screams echo from blood stained walls
In the museum.

Ghosts in this charnel house
See their photos on the walls,
Floor to ceiling.

Crude and rusted instruments remain.
Irons, chains, racks
Testify.

The less than robust torturer,
At the first sign of humanity,
Joined the tortured.
Bludgeoned to death,
To save ammunition.

A leap from the highest window,
A blessed relief.

SISOWATH QUAY

Through the open door
Of Kong KEA restaurant,
A waft of warm night air.
A legless man on a skateboard,
One bony hand outstretched,
The other steered the ludicrous vehicle.

Quietly, without fuss,
Quickly ejected.

DARFUR

The village midwife waits and prays
That somehow they won't come.

Then silence in the desert night
Spreads fear that explodes in death.

Trucks roar, doors burst open,
Screaming, pleading, gunfire.
Laughing.

The men are dead, children weep,
Women bleed. There's nothing left.
They stare at the ashes.

This is but a beginning.
Swollen bellies, matchstick legs,
Parched throats. Death.
Death comes slowly, too slowly.

Again she prays. Maybe this time
Her prayers will be answered,
The soldiers will return, and kill them.
Quickly.

CHOICES

For breakfast I had apple juice,
Followed by some ripe fresh fruit –
An exotic hairy soft flesh kiwi.
Porridge with honey, boiled egg,
Fresh brown soda bread,
Hot rich smelling coffee.

I did have choices.
It could have been cereal,
Scrambled egg on toast and tea.

After breakfast I read the post.
A letter from *Concern*.
Their girl in Ethiopia had choices.
There's not enough food and
Medicine to go round.

Take your children over five
And bring them home to die.

Christ have mercy.

WASTELAND

Wraith like
The roots
Of the felled
Mangrove trees
In the rainforest
Of the Orinoco-Amazon
Coastal swamp,
Signal death.

Scarlet ibis
Heron and
Greater flamingo
Have no resting place.

In the dryland regions
The fish baskets hang
From roof poles,
Arid ornaments.

IRELAND 1923

Together they cracked the ice
In the hogshead in the yard
Blew smoke up the chimney
In the bedroom they shared
With three other brothers
Too young to be aware.

What made them take the paths
They took when all was shared,
From infancy to manhood?

That house would rise against itself,
Divide and fall. What sowed the seed
That ended in black silence?
Who whispered asides, gave stage
Directions, and plotted death
Until the curtain fell?

Together now they face the rising sun.

THE PENSION BOOK

Out of sight, around the first corner
He vomited their hospitality
Into their neighbour's field.

The Excise man called to deliver
The pension book, March 1933
In the wild cold of Donegal.

A wee gaunt woman at the half-door
Welcomed the gauger. Not everyone in that
Pauper poteen parish held such a welcome.

The old man slept, slumped in his chair in
Front of an empty grate, amid the smell of
Incontinence and yesterday's boiled cabbage.

The visitor drank black tea without sugar
From a cracked dirty cup with no handle,
The old lady drank from a battered tin mug.
When the boys come home from Scotland after
The potato picking, there'll be a few pounds,
And maybe a letter from America soon.

She shuffled to the sleeping man and tucked the
Dirty coat around him. "Sure let the poor divil
Sleep, Won't my X do as good".

A trembling hand marked her simple X.
The bilious gauger left, his stomach churning,
And wondered how long the old man was dead.

PICTURES

Through Nasa's Spitzer Space telescope
Can be seen a new giant Saturn ring,
Four hundred years after Galileo Galilei
Discovered the first one. It orbits eight
Million miles from the planet.
The film of dust from Saturn's Phoebe moon
Is a startling orange against a black
Background, Scientists are excited.
The newscaster informed us that it cannot
Be seen through an ordinary telescope
And amateur astronomers will have to settle
For television or glossy magazines for proof.

The next news item showed the dying eyes
On the despairing face of a six year old
HIV positive African child, lying on a mat,
Fodder for flies, too weak to swish them away,
Or maybe not bothered as he awaits the end.
He won't need a telescope later this week
On his way to heaven, he'll pass by the giant ring
And see the wonderful spectacle up close.

SULLIED WORDS

A young boy separated from his poor
Unlettered parents in the crowds
At the Easter festivities.
You took him into your loving care
With all the other poor boys.
You cherished them, fulfilling
Your Christian mission, teaching
A holy way of life with love and compassion.

In your black habits, foreboding of badness,
You took the most vulnerable, and like the
Nazis, who stamped numbers on the forearms,
You gave them numbers, stamped your evil
On innocence and denied their humanity.

They arrived with light brown paper parcels
And their simplicity. They left, if they did,
Heavy with guilt, battered and broken.

Like the Jews, they were disinfected, had
Shaven heads, and entered a madhouse of rules
And insane cruelty, run by jackboot bullies.

You raped and slaughtered holy innocents,
Stood firmly defiant in your brazen denial.
Nothing scaled your unholy wall of silence.

We suffered them to come to you, they
Suffered, how they suffered, and still do.

You tried to look innocent, we acted the
Innocent, the innocent cried and bled.

Slight sign of rebellion brought a midnight
Roll call on a sub zero night, in their shorts
In the schoolyard of hell. Show them.
Teach them. Break them. Fuck them.
All in the name of the risen Christ.

Stains on beds soiled by blood and urine
Are washed clean. The bloody crimes of
Heinous monsters cannot be absolved.

Out of the depths they cried. Their pleading
Fell on the deaf ears of holy men who
Prayed their chants to another god.

Knock and it shall be opened to you.
There was no door, only a wall of ashen
Gravestone grey, and silence.

We never heard the crescendo of nightly
Screams from the hell holes of terror,
Or the adagio of pain, torture and fear.

Ask and you shall receive. How they must
Have prayed, prayed for deliverance, for a
Saviour. Is there a God?

They cried into the void for mercy,
They begged the world to listen,
Someone to look kindly on them.
They were nobodies and nobody heard.

Now we feel their agony and our useless
Sorrow. Our seething cauldron of shame
Boils over. Their red raw scars still fester.
You, pious brothers sisters fathers mothers,
With your vocations to serve your God,
What do you feel? Remorse? No. Not while
You're in hiding. Your ghosts still haunt, and
The beast will slumber until we root him out.
There are naked truths beneath the rubble
That will serve honesty and justice.

You have sullied the word Christian,
You have sullied the word Mercy.

As we shout never, never again,
I whisper, I wonder.

Miserere Nobis.

THE RULES

They're targeting foreigners,
Immigrants, non-nationals,
That's political,
You can't put it in a poem.

You can't put truth in a poem?
You must be circumspect,
Use allegory, metaphor. Otherwise
It's political. Not acceptable.

Did Hitler and Pol Pot use allegory?
What's a metaphor for gas chamber?
It goes on. We express sympathy.
It's far away. What can I do?

I'm thinking of a metaphor for genocide,
For life with the worms in a shanty town slum,
And the men who send the suicide bombers.
Anyway it's too political to put in a poem.

**AFTER READING POEMS
FROM GUANTANAMO**

Incarceration, interrogation,
Torture, humiliation.

Thoughts are not imprisoned by bars,
Poems can not be killed,
Words won't surrender,
Lines won't lie down.

I open the unlocked door, breathe freedom
And let loose my poem.

BELLEEK

On my way to my pilgrimage
On St. Patrick's Island on Lough Derg
I passed through Beleek.
The village left no lasting impression,
Except for the woman on the street corner
From whom I asked directions.

Eagle-nosed, hat-pinned hat, hymnal
Tome tightly pressed beneath her arm,
Assured of a place in a Loyalist heaven,
She stepped from the pavement
Left foot forward.
Righteous and tight-lipped with the minimum
Of words and half a nod in a possible
Direction she steered me out of town.

Had nothing changed since childhood
When we wrote Proddy on the Blue School
Wall, felt no guilt or shame but
Righteousness, their Old Testament word.

ROADBLOCK

Nineteen seventy one,
Derry / Donegal border,
Two a.m., party over.

Armoured car ahead,
Impromptu roadblock ,
Open window.

“Turn off your lights, please sir.
Open the boot, please sir.”
This is happening.
The light from the boot
Shines on his boots,
Shiny, black and enormous.

I look up at him,
His face is shiny black,
He’s enormous.
His torch picks out
Beach ball, buckets
And spades.

“Thank you ,sir,
Good night sir,
Drive carefully”.

VISITORS

There's oceans of space
Enough food to go round
And they add variety and colour.

I was feeling magnanimous,
Warmly welcoming the newcomers.
They're here five days now,
How long will they stay?

I studied the strange
Size, colour, beaks,
I consulted my bird book.
As I suspected, Brent geese.
In twenty years I've never seen
Them here in Glenacuan.

Gulls squawk at them from the
Harbour wall. Is it a welcome or
A warning? Puffins fly above them
As they bob on gentle waves.
A pair of cormorants dive for food
In the bay. Visitors or not, family
Must be fed. A lone heron stands
Like Cortez, observing from
The Smugglers' Rock. Oystercatchers
Are wary at the water's edge. A pair
Of red legged choughs, high on the
Cliff keep a watchful eye.

ENNUI

In dead heat beside the Mediterranean
I sit, bored.
I read a poetry book.

I'm on my travels in Cork
On the Yangtze river.
The boisterous swimmers are gone.
A heron lands. A gecko sneaks
A look from between the rocks.
He has green eyes and an Irish accent.

From Sri Lanka to India in verse,
Down the Ganges. I bathe before
Returning to Bewleys.
Then down to Derrynane, where
A boat sank and books were lost.
But not words, not poetry.

Now a saffron monk a Muslim and
A Hindu bindied lady in technicolour,
Make music. I write the lyrics.
A Japanese girl in a kimono sings.

We talk of Brooklyn and Manhattan
And drink Barrys' tea
Before my spirit returns to Cork,
Where you're never bored boy.

JUNE DAY

Green June day. Hot.
Cattle swish flies and look
For the shade of trees.
Fields not scorched yet.
Water levels dropping.

In a dusty sleeping village
Little houses with peeling paint
And yawning open doors
Peep out with squinting eyes.
I stop and don't know why.

A wellingtoned woman with a stick
And no mobile phone
Drives her herd of one at a pace
At ease with the world down
The middle of the untarred street.

In the shop I pick a newspaper,
"That's yesterday's", the bainin
Cardiganed woman tells me.
"Today's might be in later".
And divil a mention of an e.t a.

I might have stayed and
Lived in that village
Read yesterday's paper
Greeted the dawn muse
And written poetry.

BREAKDOWN

The bus breaks down outside a grand hotel,
Curtains open, guests dining.
It has an expensive look, the napkins
Textile, probably linen.

In an alcove window a couple sit,
Dim lighting barely showing their faces,
Flickering candle brings her to life,
His maybe sour visage is not too clear.

He speaks, gesticulating slowly with his hands,
She toys with the stem of her red wine glass.
He is reasoning or pleading. She is not impressed.
She toys with the sparkling pendant that advertises
Her decollete. He is impatient and unsure.
She is self assured, an independent lady.
He speaks quickly now, with passion.
She smiles and toys with him.

As we transfer to the replacement bus
They have finished dinner. He rises and
Walks around the table, kisses her forehead
And wheels her wheelchair out of sight.

THE DEAD OF NIGHT

Sign the death certificate. Write the obituary.
In the black night, a passing car
Photographs a moment in time.
The flashbulb breaks on my bedroom wall.

The distant sound of the last bus
Up the hill, invades my peace.

Youths, with the bravado of lager,
Shout the odds.

Girls, safe awhile in numbers,
Play the field.

A drunk sings out of tune and harsh
Does he know it's not Christmas?

A lone dog in the night cries wolf
At a moon emerging from the clouds.

The ghosts of yesterday will bury their dead.

THE BUTTON

Above the roar of waves
I heard a seagull's cry.
An old salt said "a sailor
Calls from his watery grave".

On a night of savage storm
A cabin boy searched by
Candlelight for his jacket button
As his ship hit rocks and sank.

He went down with all hands
On the brigantine *Camilla*,
Lost in the graveyard of ships
At Rhinestark Bar, 1885.
He witnessed mighty heroics
Round the treacherous Horn
Saw exotic lands with magic names
And came to grief in Tramore Bay.

Now a fisherman ponders, was there
A wife or widowed mother who mourned
The owner of the lead button he found
Embedded in the rock at Glenacuan.

LLANDAFF CATHEDRAL

In Llandaff Cathedral graveyard I sit on a
carved tombstone on a hot August day.
“Underneath are deposited the remains
of Ann, wife of John David, d. Aug.1, 1829.”

There is something about spending time
amongst the dead. Even the ones you
never knew. A silent peace. There's
comfort in equality. And no demands.
Born one date, died another, father
sister, mother, brother.

I seek cool sanctuary in the grey of the
old stone church. Crypt quiet I sit. The
sun plays rainbows through the stained
glass. A faint odour of snuffed candles
and morning incense lingers.
I think of Ann, wife of John David.

A sparrow flies above the high altar.
They're two a penny in the gospel.
It flutters in the panic of enclosure, and
seeks in vain a branch on a marble column.
The air from an open window beckons.
It flies to freedom. Now it can be what it
wants. A lark, a burning hawk, an eagle.
A holy soul.

THE VERY IMPORTANT MATTERS THAT OCCUPY OTHER PEOPLE'S LIVES

Wales is a small country, but
Big enough to get lost in.
We enquire, a country pub,
With a midday log fire.

A coffe a beer and two
Ploughman's lunches.
Blodwyn brought the food,
Megan served the drinks.

Pleasant, polite, lilting
Welsh accents, they discussed
Their affairs, oblivious to
Our presence.

Big bosomed Blodwyn broke the
Bad news. Megan stood her ground.
She worked the last two Saturday
Nights and that was that.

The boss had told Blodwyn that
Dai boyo was going to the match
In London so the girls would
Both be on duty.

"Ah", said little Megan,
Smiling sweetly and raising
Herself to her full height of
Five feet and half an inch.

"Tell him he can fuck that
For a game of soldiers".

BE MY GUEST

Would you like to see the photos
Of my cousin's wedding in Inverness?
O.K. not now.
When you drop over tomorrow to hear
The tape I made of the forgotten tribe
In Northern Thailand.
Of course you'll come.
I'll show you the quickest way
To grow tomatoes.
It's really quite amazing.
No really, it's not to be missed.
We'll have a cup of coffee and
I'll invite the retired clergyman
Who moved in next door.
You'll love him. He's over eighty.
Can be a bit boring when he talks
About himself and his exploits.
But really a nice old chap.
Tell you what, I'll read some of my poetry.

PASSING

A slanting sun in a December sky,
A monstrance blessing the close of day.
Soon the quiet dark and cloudless night,
The goddess moon, a sea of a million stars.
Silence.
Time and eternity.
Space and spacelessness
And death has no dominion
Through the new dawn's door.

FAITH

I stand still,
Believing love.

A prayer whispers,
Hope happens,
Doubt evaporates.

Credo.
The hand is visible,
The presence palpable.

Why, on some days,
Am I almost an atheist?

THESIS

Chapter 1

Introduction

“You are old now
As years reckon, but in that slower
World of the poet you are just coming
To sad manhood”.
(Thomas 126).

Background

Poetry is a very personal form of expression and poetical theorists refer to the “internal landscape of the poet”. For me this includes the vast collection of memories that I have accumulated and often noted down, over the years, particularly from different phases of my childhood, and memories associated with my family, career and other phases of my life. While many of the poems presented in this dissertation have a strong memory base and are very personal, it is true that my work which only started to emerge seven years ago, has also been greatly influenced by external factors (both Irish and International) and of course the work of other writers, particularly that of modern American and Irish poets.

My interest in poetry has been with me for as long as I can remember, though my ambition to create my own poetry lay dormant for the first sixty five years of my life, waiting for the opportunity to emerge from the darkness of the recesses of my mind. While the creative urge was still gestating and my

interest in writing poetry was still blossoming, I made a tentative start. At that stage it was purely for myself, although I did secretly harbour the desire to become a real poet. At first I dabbled. Next I wrote something and thought, “that’s not bad”. Then I considered I had something to offer, something to contribute. Finally I elevated myself to the status of poet, without considering if there was a valid reason to do so. In fact that did not really matter. The pleasure and satisfaction, in spite of the frustration, made the labour of love worthwhile. As for being a poet, time will tell.

Research Question

The research question in this dissertation is: *Why do I write poetry?* In answering this question, I shall analyse all the influences that have led to my recent creative output, including my attempts, in earlier life, to write short stories and plays, my enduring interest in poetry in general, and more specifically, the factors that came to play in the last decade, motivating me to make this all absorbing change in my life.

Methodology

With regard to the methodology, I shall present the material for this study in thematic sections or chapters, according to the categories in which my collection of poems has been structured. These are, 1. *Childhood /Earliest*

Memories, 2. *Early School Days*, 3. *Later School Days / Teen Years*, 4. *Family*, 5. *Political*, and 6. *Others (Narrative / Humorous / Etc.)*. I use the word political here in a broad sense to cover public affairs and the problems and social inequalities that exist in a sad world. The discussion will take into account personal memory, literary tradition, poetical theory and practice as well as social, ethical and historical concerns.

In addition, it is important that the reader understands how my collection of poems has evolved, and for that reason, I shall illustrate with examples from each category, the various stages of development from the initial idea, to their present format. In some cases this involved a major rewrite, based either on my own instincts or on my reading during the M.A. course of such books as Richard Hugo's *Triggering Town*, Dana Gioia's *Can Poetry Matter?* and many more, or on my practise of reading and rereading my poems out loud, or on the input of colleagues at workshops on the Creative Writing Programme. These workshops were a very important part of the M.A. course.

Structure of Dissertation

Chapter 1 is a Literature Review where I discuss the work of the poets and theorists whom I have read, and the influence they have had on my own poetry, adding opinions or observations of my own which I consider relevant.

This Literature Review differs from the standard Literature Review in other types of M.A. dissertations produced in WIT in that I will be reviewing relevant literature, as required, but also will be showing how such writers influenced my style. In certain cases, I will reproduce small poems or sections of poems (both my own and those of others) to illustrate a point.

The main body of the text analyses the present collection of poems, according to the above categories. The Conclusion will examine new directions in creative work that I am currently engaged in, and ways of expanding my repertoire with fresh and original ideas, as well as plans for future workshops and poetry readings planned with other M.A. students.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reading poetry has been a lifelong interest. The study of theorists, critics and commentators developed when I embarked on the MA course. During the course I read major poets such as Yeats, Heaney, Kavanagh, Hughes, and R.S.Thomas, and others such as Montague, Longley, Meehan, O'Driscoll, Carol Ann Duffy, Roger McGough, as well as American poets such as Frost, Lowell, Rich, Whitman and the newer poets being published in *The Stinging Fly*, *The SHOp*, *Poetry Ireland* and other publications ("Good poems are the best teachers" ([Oliver10]).

I have often been asked why I started writing poetry in my late sixties, what the influences were, where the ideas came from. When I stared at the blank page wondering why I started to write poetry at an advanced age, a more fundamental question presented itself, something I had never considered before, viz. what is the purpose of poetry? I wrote my answers, several of them, and deleted each one. They were technical, flowery, mysterious, and serious, and many more things in turn. Another poet's answer would not necessarily be mine. I did however, read one answer with which I can identify and agree. In an interview with Derek Mahon (*The Gloss 2*), Sarah Owens, who describes Mahon as "an internationally recognised wordsmith and poet",

posed the question. Mahon replied, “It has no purpose . . . it is for fun. It is originally music, a form of entertainment and storytelling. Poets are just writing lyrics, entertaining themselves with a language and, if it works for them, then it will possibly work for other people too”. I feel this is true of my poetry, especially the narrative poetry about the 1940s and 1950s, where the poem is often a record of a social history that is all but forgotten.

Mahon is interesting in what he thinks is the place of poetry in modern Ireland. “Perhaps it relates to silence – there is so much noise, so much going on, so much nonsense. So if there is a room, a silent room where you can go and be out of the mainstream for a while . . . I see poetry like that. Maybe it has a purpose . . . and that’s to be an alternative to post-modern life”. (*The Gloss 2*). The Dublin poet John McNamee refers to “a little space in my head to call my own”. I have a little harbour, hardly a harbour, a cove, that I walk to each morning, sometimes again later in the day. I have been doing this for twenty years. For most of the year it is deserted. That is my silent room. I bring a pen and a notebook. I share the solitude with the sea birds and escape the world. I wrote a poem about the little harbour when the tourist season is over, the final two lines of which read, “And I reclaim the solitude / As I walk back up the hill”. Long after I established my own *modus operandi*, I came across that of poet and teacher Mary Oliver. She walks as an aid to writing poetry: “the motion somehow helps the poem to begin. I end up usually, standing still, writing something down in a small notebook I always have with me” (Oliver 119).

While Mahon's ideas on the purpose of poetry come nearest to my own, the views of some other poets differ greatly. In a review of the book *Why poetry Matters* in *The Irish Times*, May 17, 2008, the critic Harry Clifton quotes what some well-known poets considered their own poetry to be: Philip Larkin, "a hobby"; Elizabeth Bishop, "an embarrassment"; T.S.Eliot, "a mugs' game"; Czeslaw Milosz, "a tournament of hunchbacks"; Patrick Kavanagh, "I was never more than half a poet"; Rainer Maria Rilke, "Can art heal the sick? Can art take away the bitterness of dying?" Opinions, some frivolous, some serious, some enigmatic, but probably in all cases, true to the author. I prefer Derek Mahon. I can also agree with "that silly, absurd, maddening, futile, enormously rewarding activity: writing poems" (Hugo xii). There are probably as many definitions of poems and poetry as there are poets. The rewarding bit is certainly true. When a poem is written, re-read, altered by subtraction and addition, the right word or phrase found after many revisions, even though one knows it is far from perfect, there is the reward of knowing one has created something.

Since my first efforts I have been drawn into the mysterious web of poetry. It happened quickly and the attraction was strong. Most of my first efforts were weak. As I read more poetry and books about poetry, for example, *Can Poetry Matter* (Gioia), *The Triggering Town* (Hugo), *52 Ways of Looking at a Poem* (Padel), *Writing Poems* (Sansom) and many more, I was captivated.

There are few poets who have been first published late in life. One is the English poet Pamela Gillilan, whose first book of poetry was published in 1986, when she was in her late sixties. At that time she chose not to disclose her age. She thought a woman known to be in her late sixties at first publication might be patronised by reviewers, and passed over for public readings, tutoring opportunities or travel awards. By the time of her eightieth birthday she judged it safe to come out as an old person. "Eighty", she said, "had cachet". An American poet, Amy Clampitt, had her first poem published in *The New Yorker*, when she was fifty-eight, and her first collection at age sixty-three. One other who first published late in life (the first of his four collections in 1993 when he was aged seventy-two) was the Irish poet Fergus Allen, who now lives in England. He published sporadically through his adult life, but after retirement increased his output and published four collections, the last in 2006 when he was eighty-five years old. In that collection, *Gaslight and Coke*, he returns to the Ireland of his childhood, a thing I have done myself in my own poetry with some satisfaction. I recall the magic part of childhood, which now seems unreal, as well as a contrasting stark reality of dire poverty, which I saw, but thankfully did not experience (see my poem "Angela's Limerick"(p.16). My experience of a near tyrannical school system is recorded in the poem "Burke"(p.10).

My first few efforts at The Adult Education Creative Writing Class in Waterford in 2003 earned the accolade, "There's something stirring here, keep going".

No doubt I have written some doggerel and produced some presumptuous drivel since. But even the heavyweights could at times write badly, something that is heartening for a tyro. The Welsh poet R.S. Thomas, quoted earlier, is a poet I very much enjoy. A poem entitled "July 5, 1940" (the day he got married), admittedly written in his very early days, is, "with its long catalogue of words and its literary archaisms, quite bad". (Rogers 49-50). Within two years of my first paltry efforts I had a poem published in *The SHOP*, which, according to John Montague, "looks like being the best poetry magazine in these islands". The publishers selected the poem "Burke"(p.10) for submission as one of their four poems to The Forward Book of Poetry Competition 2007. Even though it was not successful, the nomination was a great boost. I have written some short stories and hope to continue to do so sometime in the future, but my preference is for poetry, and my success with "Burke"(p.10) in such a prestigious publication has confirmed me in the belief that poetry is my medium.

Having recently read the poem "Diving into the Wreck" by American poet Adrienne Rich, I decided that I needed to dive into my own wreck to discover the origins of the impulse to start to write poetry at age sixty-seven. On this voyage of discovery the sea is bottomless. Certainly there is flotsam and jetsam, but treasure also.

While "Diving into the Wreck" is multi-layered, in so far as Rich examines, among other things, her own sexuality and her venture into the then (mid-

twentieth-century) male-dominated preserve of poetry, my dive was solely to discover why poetry surfaced as an important element in my life in my late sixties. I was to discover that there was no thunderbolt from the muse, no Pauline conversion, but the fanning of a spark that apparently always existed, waiting to be blown into flame. I await the conflagration. Rich wrote, "I came to explore the wreck. / The words are purposes. / The words are maps." The memories my own exploration produces are stepping stones. In calling up earliest memories for influences I got an added bonus in that I discovered themes from my childhood, my school years and right through to adulthood. The recesses of my mind opened up and yielded an abundant crop.

Where did the spark come from? All I can say at this early stage of my research is, that when the muse knocked, I held the door open. Now it is an ongoing voyage of discovery that sheds light on many things. I have on occasions been surprised that re-reading my own work could throw up thoughts and meanings that were not obvious to me at the time of writing. I have little choice but to journey on and hone my poetic knife on the whetstone of a life lived and waiting to be recorded. As I proceed through memories of seventy years, many influences have come to light.

As a child in the 1940s and 1950s I was a reader. My first recollection of an interest in any form of art or literature was listening with my father to the plays of Seán O'Casey and J. M. Synge on radio. About that time also, aged about ten or eleven, I saw Shakespeare performed by Anew MacMaster's touring

company. MacMaster was, I believe, a brother-in-law of the famous Irish actor, Micheál MacLiammóir.

I have a recollection of gathering chestnuts in a wood with friends when I was ten years old, and, lost in Autumn colours, quoting to myself,

Bright yellow, red, and orange,
The leaves come down in hosts;
The trees are Indian princes,
But soon they'll turn to ghosts.

At that time I had no idea who had written the poem or what its title was. It was only while writing this thesis that I discovered that it is from "Robin Redbreast" by William Allingham. But I am sure that it was the colour, the imagery, and no doubt the rhyme and rhythm that appealed to me then. I still derive pleasure when a single sentence paints a picture. Sixty years ago I read William Bulfin's *Rambles in Erin*. One sentence which paints an idyllic rustic scene remains with me. "As I gained the crest of the hill the whiff of the fragrance of new mown hay greeted me". When I close my eyes I can still see the scene and smell the hay.

The sounds and music of words attracted me and still do. I have read poems by Yeats or Heaney and did not understand them on first reading, and sometimes not on third or fourth reading. But even if the poem was long and enlightenment was eluding me, I still enjoyed what I read to some degree. Part

of the attraction is the language, the music, the words, their meaning, or layers of meaning, and that extra dimension, what they suggest. "If you have the words there's always the chance you'll find the way"(O'Driscoll 72).

Heaney opined in a very strong statement, "The world is reduced by the reduced power of speech in someone like George Bush"(O'Driscoll196). The poet himself has a great ability to paint a picture with the minimum of words, describing a small holiday apartment he and his family occupied in Madrid as follows; "toys on the floor, tortillas in the pan, toreadors on the television". (O'Driscoll183). One can see and feel the domestic chaos and contentment.

Fascination with words and sounds has never left me. Some words sit comfortably together, and when they do, they make the right sound, and that is the music of language. About two years ago I heard an East European poet reading his poetry in his native tongue. The poet Kerry Hardie read the translations beautifully. What surprised me was the enjoyment I got from the poet's own words in his native tongue. That one could derive pleasure from listening to words one could not understand was new to me. The poet had a strong guttural voice and read with great feeling, rhythm and cadence. Poets reading in Irish, when I understand only half the words, can have a similar effect when the passion and *blas* are present.

Musical-sounding place names are used to great effect by some poets. Yeats did it, and more recently, Michael Longley: Mweelrea, Carrigskeewaun,

Cloonaghnamana, Owennadornaun, have a magical sound that somehow seems to invite the reader to visit.

At The Imram Irish Language Literature Festival in Dublin in September 2008, a concert was performed in which a number of poems by Kerry teacher and poet, the late Caoimhín Ó Cinnéide, had been set to music by Shaun Davey, who cannot speak the language. Interviewed on the *Arts Show* (RTÉ Radio1 on September 16, 2008) Davey said that he liked the sounds. Stresses and emphases were pointed out to him, and he arranged inflexions of tone and pitch accordingly. The finished product proved to be a great success.

Alliteration, assonance, hyperbole, onomatopoeia, and rhyme and rhythm enrich the language of poetry. Some lines are never forgotten. Lines which I have not read for fifty years are fresh in my memory and can still have a powerful effect on me. "Sonorous metal blowing martial sounds", from Milton's "Paradise Lost", still conjures up armies marching to war, battle-cries and mighty warriors. Matthew Sweeney, Donegal-born poet, told a lovely story on the *Arts Programme* on RTÉ radio, on June 24, 2008. The subject of the programme, which was broadcast from The National Gallery, was W.B. Yeats. Sweeney's father, a headmaster in a primary school in Donegal, introduced the fairy poems of Yeats to his ten-year-old pupils. His son Matthew, one of the pupils, commented, "Those poems have a lovely noise". A child with an ear for such poetic sound at such an early age was surely destined to become a poet.

Richard Hugo speaks of falling in love with the sounds of words. Referring to his teacher, the poet Theodore Roethke, he said, "He gave students a love of the sound of language . . . he performed therapy on the ear" (Hugo 28). I read and re-read my poems aloud, to ensure that nothing grates on the ear. There is music in poetry and music should be heard. My love of words, their sounds, music and rhythm, was greatly influenced by an English teacher, although I think I had from an early age an innate appreciation of the beauty of language. For me the acid test of a poem is its reading out loud. A poem can live or die in a reading. One of my poems, which I heard dying slowly while being read aloud, inspired the following:

DEATH BY RECITATION

My poem was delivered in a
S L O W
D R O N E
MONOTONE
Like a reading of a bus timetable
Or The Yellow Pages.

It wasn't a bad poem
Before it was anaesthetised,
Tortured and murdered
By slow strangulation.
(Not bludgeoned to death,
As the monotone reader
Deserved to be.)

While examining my interest in the music of language and my love of the poetic phrase, I discovered a habit which I have had for many years and which, until now, has passed unnoticed. When reading a novel I occasionally turn back a page to a poetic phrase or a grouping of words which appealed to me and obviously remained in my subconscious. This has been a constant practice long before writing poetry occurred to me. Recently while browsing a novel at an airport bookstall, I read on the first page, “like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world”, and “deep stone flues where the water dripped and sang”. The book, by Cormac McCarthy, was *The Road* and it won The Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, 2007. As well as being a great story it is a juxtaposition of haunting poetic language and bleak stark beautiful prose, and is one of the finest novels I have read in a very long time

Imagery, allegory, and metaphor are essential to poetry, although I did hold a view when I decided to write, that if poetry is to appeal to the masses, the hidden multi-layered meanings in some poetry might not be the way forward. After much reading and many workshops, I think I am cleansed of this view. Maybe poetry is not for the masses, at least not all poetry. Are we meant to communicate with earthlings? Yeats held the view in “The Fisherman”, that he was reluctant to write for an audience that did not appreciate his work. “I do not write for those people who attack everything I value . . . I write for a man I’ve never seen. . . I do not know if he is born yet”. (Yeats 572). “A man who does not exist / A man who is but a dream”. (Yeats 198).

Ruth Padel's *52 Ways of Looking at a Poem* helped in ridding me of my earlier views. Her overall guidelines on writing poetry are sound, "frisk every word to make sure. . . it's pulling its weight"(Padel 9).

In my last two years at school my English teacher, who had a passion for poetry, would quote liberally from poets, whether they were on the prescribed course or not. At times he would get carried away and enter a world of his own. On more than one occasion when he returned to earth, seeing faces of boredom or amusement around him, (he must have noticed that I showed interest and appreciation), he enquired, quoting Gray's "Elegy in a Country Churchyard", "Johnston, am I wasting my sweetness on the desert air?" He proffered the rather odd advice, "If you like a subject don't teach it". He was entertaining and had a sense of humour, but obviously didn't like an unappreciative audience. The poem "English Teacher"(p.20) is about Mike Brady.

Mike Brady also taught Latin, and, at least for some, made Horace, Virgil and Livy interesting, He relished the myths and legends about warriors, heroes, and gods and their exploits. There are parallels in the poetry of Yeats, Clarke, and other Irish poets. With so many translations from Eastern Europe, Scandinavia and elsewhere now available, it is interesting to note that these same fables and legends pervade the folklore of most of the world. Lines from Yeats's "The Stolen Child", Come away o human child /To the waters and the wild / with a faery hand in hand, are reminiscent of the Spanish poet

Lorca in his poem “Ballad of the Moon, Moon”, through the sky goes the moon / taking a boy by the hand. The mystery of the fairyland myth is strongly present in both. But while mythology and legends provide great scope for imagery, metaphor, and allegory, I have not myself attempted to use these sources yet.

I once met the literary man, poet, and playwright, Padraic Fallon. As a young Customs and Excise Officer I deputised for him in Wexford in 1957. I recall finding some lines written on the back of a brown envelope. They made reference to a tree-lined avenue, the big house and windows. As yet I have not come across a poem of his to which they might refer. I sat in the chair from which he surveyed the Wexford quay, the gulls, “a tumult, a squawking crown, windblown”, (Fallon 26) and the fishermen, “Men with meanings / Inside that wait like cold wicks of oil”, (Fallon 45). I recall being annoyed when certain official work, which should have been completed before my arrival, was left undone. Much later, after I became acquainted with Fallon’s work, I was more annoyed with myself than him. I wrote the lines: “And I a young scamp / whinged when his bread / and butter work / was left undone. / More’s the pity now / he didn’t do less, / and further bless / an ungrateful age, / with all that sparkles / in his wit and rage.”

In 1957, early in my working life in Rosslare, I met a young poet called Desmond O’Grady. He was on his way to Caldey Island to spend some time with the monks, and to write. He gave me a copy of a book of his poetry, *Chords and Orchestrations*, with the inscription, “On the eve of Caldey”. I

dipped into the book occasionally over the years. Eventually, after thirteen house moves in fifty years, the book was mislaid. The most recent of O'Grady's nineteen collections of poems, *On My Way*, includes an accolade from Seamus Heaney, "one of the senior figures in Irish literary life. . .has lived selflessly for his art". A most accurate observation, borne out by O'Grady himself: "When I take my joyous leap alone/ I curve the sky's rainbow" (O'Grady 77).

After that I made two brief forays into writing. The first was in my twenties when I lived in Co. Donegal. I wrote some short stories that gathered dust for some years until they were mislaid or thrown out. The second was in my thirties when I lived in Drogheda. I wrote two plays and sent one to the Abbey Theatre. It was rejected. It had "a weak plot" but was "strong in dialogue". After that I got on with my job and my family life. The muse remained dormant until I retired from the Civil Service, aged sixty-five. Do some of my poems tell me what has lain dormant in my subconscious mind since childhood, poems such as "Burke"(p.10)? Perhaps the stereotyped reporting and the rigid formality of revenue law and regulations stifled creativity.

Creativity itself is a bit of a mystery to me. The question "where does my creativity spring from?" is not the same as "why do I write poetry?", although they are inextricably linked. According to Richard Hugo we know almost nothing about creativity, where it comes from, what causes it (Hugo 35). Yet I continue to search for the answers to these questions. Reading, teachers,

parents, theatre, and music, all must have a bearing, even if there is probably an X factor, too. Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken"(Astley 55) evokes a thought. The road I took was the safe one. It gave me a satisfactory life, comfort, and contentment. Had I taken the other . . . ?

The enjoyment derived from reading poetry has encouraged me to write, although reading poetry at times can be a problem. I read somewhere that poetry is a public-address system. If this is so, the recondite style of some poets would command a rather small audience. I do not necessarily need transparency in poetry, but translucency is preferable to opacity. I concur with the view of Billy Collins when he says in an article in *The Irish Times* on July 24, 2007, "One of the pleasures of poetry is being a little bewildered at the end of the poem. But there's a lot of poetry that makes me bewildered right in the beginning. And that's too early for me". It can take me several readings of Yeats, Clarke, Fallon, and others to get the focal length of the lens correct. Maybe it is because I embraced the medium of poetry so late. Sometimes it is as if there are words or lines missing or I have skipped a page. Then I endeavour to get the rays of light which are deflected by the lens to converge at the correct angle to meet on the screen of my understanding and appreciation. It is usually a worthwhile exercise, sometimes immensely rewarding. The book *Don't Ask Me What I Mean* contains some interesting observations on poems and their meanings. Seamus Heaney opines therein,

“Perhaps the first function of a poem is to assuage the poet’s need for it to exist” (Brown & Patterson 101).

On occasions, I have had the idea for a poem in my head for days, and then the skeleton of the poem in a notebook or on the back of an envelope for a further period. Having doubts whether the poem is justified, whether there is a poem there at all, whether it will work, or whether I can pull it off, I leave it. It won’t go away, it festers, and eventually demands to be written. This appears to be in accordance with the dictum of the poet George Barker in the same book, “a poet does not invent poems, they discover him” (Brown & Patterson 11). In explaining his own poems, he says, “they are about what they are about”.

More from the same book: Kingsley Amis says of his own poems, “Who am I to say what they are like or what they mean? That’s the reader’s job”(Brown & Patterson 2), Andrew Motion concurs, “I believe poems should be self sufficient – accessible to readers of course, but not dependent on the after-care of the author”(Brown & Patterson 188), and R.S. Thomas: “If a poem does not register of itself, no amount of talking or writing about it is going to make it a success”(Brown & Patterson 285). The consensus among poets appears to be that poems get themselves written and thereafter stand on their own.

Other interesting observations from the same source: Rita Ann Higgins, “Humour does not have to sneak in, but it’s better if it does “(Brown &

Patterson 114), and Ted Hughes, "Accident appears to account for much of what we write"(Brown & Patterson 124).I agree that poems should stand on their own, without prologue or epilogue. I like humour in poetry, provided it "sneaks in", as for accident accounting for much of what we write, this is certainly true in my case, a bus breaking down, a visit to a cemetery, a television programme or a newspaper photograph, can be the seed that grows into a poem.

Over time there has been a change in my appreciation and understanding of poetry. I read somewhere that poetry should be experienced, not interpreted. I now prefer to let the poem flow, get the feel of it, enjoy the music of the words, the rhythm and the cadences, instead of analysing paraphrasing and reaching for a dictionary. Neil Astley, in the introduction to his anthology *Staying Alive*, complains that some intelligent people object when they find poetry too difficult because they fail to get the poet's meaning at one reading: "difficulty equals obscurity and we don't have time for this. But this is the strength and beauty of a well-wrought challenging poem: it makes you stop and think" (Astley 26). In his poem "Ars Poetica", Archibald Mac Leish says, "a poem should not mean / but be" (Astley 441). In other words a poet does not have to explain.

In his book *Can Poetry Matter?* Dana Gioia deals with a "curious collection of modern poets who were also businessmen" (Gioia118). They had full-time jobs outside writing. They led strictly divided lives, Gioia speculates, using "not

only scholarship and analysis, but also inference and intuition”(Gioia 119). It appears to be that their careers and family life and responsibilities occupied the greater part of their time and energy. “Their careers forced their reading and writing into odd hours (late evenings, weekends, brief vacations) and probably prevented them from reading and writing as much as they would have liked”(Gioia 119/120). Wallace Stevens and T.S Eliot both complained of this deprivation, and the strain of two careers put pressure on their marriages. These findings in some sense could refer to my situation.

From the late 1950s to the mid-1980s, the period in which I wrote a few short stories and two plays, I might have turned to poetry, had not family commitments (five children to be provided for and educated) and a full-time Civil Service career curtailed free time and energy for outside interests. The harsh tax regime during that period meant that a young Civil Servant had to struggle to make ends meet.

Studying for exams to gain promotion was a priority. Making time for the lonely occupation of writing was not. I did not even think of it. Now that the pressures are removed the lonely occupation has become a frustrating delight. In *Poetry Ireland Review*, Issue 93, Rita Kelly opines in her essay on Eavan Boland that “perhaps the very act of teaching is draining to the detriment of Boland’s poetry” (Kelly 32). If I had tried to write poetry during my working life, maybe I would not be writing now. The belt-tightening days of the 1960s and 1970s would have drained a working Civil Servant trying to provide for a family and climb the ladder.

I would like to have written in Irish. I was bilingual in my early teens.
Unfortunately lack of the use of Irish, both in speech and writing changed that.
I still read some Irish poetry, but would not have the vocabulary to write in
Irish. I wrote a poem in English called "Why". It is about a poem titled "Lieder",
written in Irish by Gabriel Rosenstock, It posed a question for me.

WHY

I read a poem
Written in Irish
By Gabriel Rosenstock.

Pleased that I understood
Most of the words and
The meaning, I think.
I wondered
Was there something hidden.

The poem resembles this poem
In one respect.
It is about a poem.

In it he asks why
The author of the poem wrote
That poem in the first place.

I write poems,
Do I have to know why?

Early on in my writing career ideas for poems caused problems. They were not scarce, but transient. If not written down immediately they were often lost, never to return. Now I carry a notebook everywhere. Ideas, words, phrases, must be written down as they occur to me. One night a poem was incubating in my mind as I lay in bed. Too lazy to turn on the light and make a brief note, I decided to leave it until morning. At day break it was gone, never to return. I wrote the poem "Idea" instead.

IDEA

The idea for a poem
Is a fish on the end of a line.
Unless you hook it, play it,
Land it on the bank,
Sometimes using gaff and net,
It gets away.

I had a bite on my line last night,
The fish got away.

Would a fisherman know
If the same fish ever returns.

Other poets have similar experiences. Richard Tillinghast, the American poet, now living in Ireland, wrote in his poem "Istanbul: Meditation on an Empire", "the poem I wrote last night in my dream / disappears before breakfast" (Tillinghast 47).

I have read that poems get themselves written. They can certainly take a direction not previously anticipated, a life of their own, with intrusions from outside and endings that were not envisaged when line one was penned.

The more diving in the wreck and the more exploration, the clearer the muddy waters have become. It has also supplied a rich reservoir of subjects and sometimes inspiration. Having acquired some of the tools of my trade I could not proceed to create if I did not have raw materials, namely, subjects, themes and imagination. So far there is no shortage of subjects or themes. My ordinary logical world flees when imagination takes hold and flows. Maybe that's poetry. How long it continues depends on the fickle muse. I read with interest in an article in the *Irish Times*, 29 November 2007, that Brendan Kennelly (the same age as myself and one of my favourite poets) wrote eighty poems on a recent three month sojourn at Boston University. What seemed surprising to me was that he did not go there with the intention of writing poetry. He had a couple of other literary projects in mind, but not poetry. If the muse knocks, respond.

Most of my poetry is in free verse, which I find less restricting. Even though economy of language is important, there is more freedom when one is not

confined by rules and conventions. Then however, as if to chide my indolence, Kevin Kiely quotes two colossi, Yeats, who exhorts “Irish poets learn your trade”, and in the same sentence, Eliot’s admonition, “no vers is libre for the man who wishes to do a good job” (Kiely 94). Both quotations are probably correct and fair comment for the era in which they were made. But poetry and poets move on. Formal structures which fulfil conditions and observe conventions may sometimes produce a colourful rhyming package with a bauble inside. Maybe on occasions rhyme and metre should be sacrificed for rhythm and momentum. Styles change, poetry continues to evolve, risks are taken, new ground is broken. Once poets were advised to simplify, today’s dictum is “show, don’t tell”. As in most spheres of life, without experiment there would little advancement. The subjects or style of many of today’s poems would not have been considered suitable a hundred years ago. I admire poets who work to certain rules, conventions and constraints. A recent book of poems by Ulster poet Ciarán Carson, *For All We Know*, contains two sets of thirty five poems, with exactly matching titles. Not alone that, the poet has worked under self-imposed constraints. All the poems are written in unrhyming couplets, seven or fourteen to a poem, twenty eight in one case, with fourteen syllables in each line. To write with such precision without losing impact, strength or meaning is to me a feat of near genius. If I undertook such a task I am sure I would lose meaning and the end product would be rather lame. Ted Hughes opined that there is a “notion that there is a stylistic ideal . .

to which all men might attain". Teachers of written English should, he suggests, "teach not how to write" but rather "how to say what they mean". (Hughes 13).

While I enjoy reading some of the poets of the early twentieth century and those of an earlier era, for their rhyme and rhythm and structure, I find some of the older poetry remote and sometimes flowery. As in everything, styles change over time, and many of the subjects covered in poetry today require a more modern and urgent language. Having said that, the book *Answering Back, Living Poets Reply to the Poetry of the Past*, edited by the English poet laureate, Carol Ann Duffy, shows a connection and similarity between poetry past and present. The editor invited some of the best contemporary poets to select a poem or poem in translation from a poet from the past, which they would like to answer. No conditions or constrictions were imposed. About fifty poets responded. Many chose poets like Donne with his themes of love and death, still today among the more popular themes. The editor noted "the sense of coherence and community between the living and the dead poets" (Duffy xii). Poetry can weave a thread that links the old and the new.

Chapter 3

CATAGORIES

The poems accompanying this dissertation are set out in the six categories listed on pages 63-64.

Childhood / Earliest Memories

Introduction

This period in each person's life is special. At least this is how I see it. Whether lived in idyllic contentment or miserable poverty, in memory it is difficult, if not impossible to escape it. My first clear memory is that of my father arriving home and telling my mother that the war had started. Of course I did not understand the significance, but I realised, even then, that it was serious, probably because a normally bright and happy house suddenly became sombre. Serious discussion ensued. The war, while it was far more serious, and even disastrous for most of the population of Europe, changed our lives for many years to come, not only during the six years of the war, but also in the aftermath. There were shortages of essential goods, there was unemployment, poverty and shortly afterwards mass emigration of an

unskilled workforce, mainly to Britain. We can only surmise how our lives would have developed and what course our future would have taken, if this catastrophe had not occurred.

Discussion

The first category contains poems from the early 1940s. The first poem, "Radio News 1941"(p. 6) is one of my earliest memories. I was not yet five years old. Communications seventy years ago were so much different from today. Morning radio news was a big event. There was no news on the hour every hour. There were four bulletins in 24 hours. In wartime these were very important sources of information. During each broadcast strict silence was observed so that no detail would be missed. The tension was palpable even to a child. At that time it was not known whether our country would be occupied by Germany, and whether we would live permanently under German rule if Hitler won the war. "Radio News 1941" has a special significance for me. The original poem had twenty-two lines and is reproduced hereunder.

RADIO NEWS 1941

Sixty years before Guantanamo,
The smouldering ash-covered sod,
Rekindled in time for the news at eight,
Nursed from dim glow to flame,

Brought light after the blackout night.

War weaves a hazy thread of connected
Unwelcome things. The plots, scary gas
Masks, ration books (no white bread),
Night patrols when even the dim glow
Of the light of Christ was quenched.

“O'Donnell Abu, for all of three minutes
Lasted an hour. We sat in flickering silence
Around the wireless. Winter morning.
Wartime. Dark. Serious faces.

At five years old I only knew
What the cold voice said was important.
Advances. Gains. Retreats. Losses.
Yesterday's newspaper maps on the table.

I watched with ignorant interest
My father redraw the borders of Europe.
Strange sounding places. The Sudetenland.
Scary new words. Torpedo. Gestapo.

While reasonably well received at the weekly workshop, attended by my former Supervisor and fellow students, it was considered that some unnecessary detail had only minor relevance and its deletion left a far more compact poem without losing any meaning or poetic value. The real poem was fully expressed in the abbreviated version. This has occurred with other poems also. Sometimes it might not be a workshop that brought change, but

my own instinct after reading and rereading out loud. If a word, a phrase, a line or a verse rankled, I stayed at it, often returning to a poem after several days and several amendments, until I was satisfied. The original version of "Aping" (p.9) was also longer. An additional verse read: "Invited neighbours dropped in / the children drank lemonade / the adults sipped tea, milk in first / one lump or two". This also, although it continued with the picture in verse one, was considered by the workshop superfluous. The mimicry of the Anglo-Irish gentry of my mother's childhood was all there in first verse. Further details were regarded as unnecessary. The final four lines were considered weak. "Cait Ruadh" (p.7) also had its final two lines excised during a workshop. The final lines read: "I was seven years old when Cait returned to her homeland in the hills of Donegal. / It was the end of my first love affair". The advice I received was that the final line was so obvious, the verse was superfluous, and added nothing to the poem. I still have some doubts about this. Another childhood memory prompted the poem "They Say He Never Talks About The Trenches" (p.8). On returning from a walk with my father, at age about four or five, I overheard my parents talk about me when they thought I wasn't listening. Regularly on our walks we met a poorly dressed but elegant man. He walked in an erect, almost stately manner with his arms by his sides and his fists loosely closed, his hands sticking out at a ninety-degree angle to his long arms. We discovered that he had been a drummer with the Connaught Rangers in the First World War. I referred to him as the

man with the gentle hands. The use of the word gentle seemed to intrigue my parents. At that tender age I was obviously observant and possessed some descriptive talent.

Conclusion

The events in this first category record, I hope, pen pictures of my earliest memories, a period of great upheaval in the world. There has been huge progress in communications in the interim. In the period in question not every household possessed a radio. Recording a small piece of social history in verse was an enjoyable exercise in nostalgia. Looking back I now realise that it was an exciting and important time, and the urge to record it in verse was very strong.

Early School Days

Introduction

My first three years at school were spent at the Model School in Limerick, where there was a mixture of middle class and working class children, as well as a small number of the underclass who have been, in the main, ignored, until recent times when such books as *Angela's Ashes* and *Suffer the Little Children*, were published. Things changed when I entered the Christian Brothers' School at eight years of age. The mixture of students was the same, the regime was different. The poorer children always suffered most. For me this period was a mixture of tough times at school and childhood happiness at home, as the poems in this section portray.

Discussion

School introduced me to the outside world and to some of the harsh realities, however small, of growing up. The first poem in this second category, "Burke"(p.10), has special significance for me, being the first poem I published. It appeared in *The SHOp* in Spring 2007. It was entered by the editors of that publication for the Forward Book of Poetry prize 2008. Even though not successful, it was great encouragement for me. The poem is from an era of poverty and unemployment, when many of the men were forced to

emigrate in search of work. That period is very well recorded in Frank McCourt's book *Angela's Ashes*, and in the book *Suffer the Little Children*, by Mary Raftery and Eoin O'Sullivan. This latter book is the inside story of Ireland's Industrial Schools. In 1999 Raftery wrote, produced and directed an internationally proclaimed three-part television documentary series, *States of Fear*. O'Sullivan was a consultant in the making of the series, which won several international awards. On the front cover of that book is a quotation by Frank McCourt in which he says that the book portrays "a hidden Ireland of such brutality, even savagery, you will wince from page to page". The poem "Burke"(p.10) is from this era. In *Suffer the Little Children* Terry's Story tells of Terry's first impressions on entering St. Joseph's Industrial School run by the Rosminian Order at Ferryhouse, Clonmel. The boys "looked hunched, bent over. I realised later that this was because they all had boils on their necks". (Raftery & O'Sullivan 110) The opening line of "Burke"(p.10) is 'Burke came to school with boils on the back of his neck". This was immediately a sign of hunger and malnourishment, and was common among the underclass, the nobodies, as they are referred to in the poem.

"Innocence Bedamned"(p.17) is another poem from this period. I never saw any evidence of sexual abuse at school, but there were rumours. This poem alludes to that, when Jacko "told a lie about a priest / and a curly haired altar boy / with short trousers".

“Angela’s Limerick”(p.16) is also from that time, and highlights the hypocrisy of the better off: “we watched it all from behind the lace / their squalor was their own disgrace / we went to church and paid our way / will that be enough on Judgement Day?”

“Fear”(p.18) shows how the fear of God was instilled into very impressionable young children. The bust of the Crown of Thorns was an unwanted present my parents received. It was not on display, but placed on top of a wardrobe at the back. However, as described, I could see it in semi-darkness from my bed. That and the Crucifixion statues in the school yard were enough to remind any God-fearing child that his sins had contributed greatly to our Saviour’s suffering.

The other side of that era was life outside school, happy times. “Through the Mist”(p.11) portrays the magic and mystery of the nomad gipsy life, as seen by a young boy. “Tousled haired urchins peeped above the / half-door of their rainbow home on wheels”. The multi-coloured caravans were shaped like the arc of a rainbow.

“The Country Bus”(p.13) again deals with what a young city boy saw as the mystery of travel. With curiosity and probably some envy, he watched the country people, with their bags and parcels, set out on their journeys, which to him were great adventures.

“Storm”(p.14) is a record of a happy time spent walking with my father on a Sunday afternoon in County Clare. It records a fact, a country walk and

coming across the ruins of the “big house”, and fiction, the fantasies my father’s stories brought into my life. Mixed with the fiction is a piece of history, recording the storming and sacking of the residence of one of the Anglo-Irish gentry, a not too uncommon occurrence during the surge of nationalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Conclusion

In this second group of poems the good and the bad times are recorded. In view of recent disclosures and reports of clerical sexual and physical abuse inflicted on innocent and vulnerable children, and the scandalous cover up by the Catholic Church I felt it was important for me to record my own experiences of that time. “Sullied Words”(p.43), which is in the Political category, would just as readily fit into this section. The poems presented themselves to be written. I felt that it was almost a duty to write them. There may be more to come. Maybe some of my poetry has more than a poetic value.

Later School Days / Teen Years

Introduction

The poems in this section are divided in a similar manner to those in category 2, between school and out of school. It was the nineteen fifties and things had only improved slightly since the previous decade. Rationing of food and other commodities was over but poverty and unemployment were still major problems. Europe was rebuilding itself and emigration was still rife.

Building a viable Irish economy in industry and agriculture had hardly commenced. There were signs of modest prosperity and hopes for the future.

Discussion

This was the period of my secondary schooling and immediately after. Things had not changed much, in that corporal punishment was still the norm even for pupils of eighteen years of age. The first poem in this section "Revenge"(p.19) records this in savage detail. The episode recorded in the poem is true, except for the names. The Christian Brother involved was in his fifties. He was a lone figure and probably a lonely one as well. He was unfit for the job he was in, and probably very unhappy. At that time very few left the religious life. This is another poem that was amended and reduced in length after discussion. It was originally forty-four lines, it is now thirty two. In the

original there are references to the man's devious tactics. In verse three the first three lines were, "The element of surprise / served him well, three in one day! / the reverend made our lives a hell ". Verse four read " The first surprise, physics class at 9.30 / instead of 2pm. We were wrong footed. / Second, all stand in a semicircle away from / desks, at the back of the room. / (No peeping at text books)". The first line in verse six,(which is now verse five), was "The big surprise was kept for last". The last eight lines were condensed into four. At a workshop discussion the excised lines were considered awkward, clumsy and unwieldy. Some of the line endings were wrong. On hearing the poem read out loud by a fellow student I readily agreed to the proposed amendments, and indeed wondered how I allowed the poem to go forward in its old form. I was learning.

"English Teacher"(p.20) is another school poem but of a totally different kind. The teacher was Mike Brady, a lay teacher, who obviously loved his subject. He had a sense of humour and always endeavoured to make a subject interesting.

"Regime Achtung"(p.26) is an attempt at a different style. It depicts the almost military regime which existed. Follow blindly and obey.

Most of my classmates emigrated immediately after school. The poem "Diaspora"(p.24), is due to be published in *The SHOp* later this year. It relates how much of what they learned at school, such as the Latin mnemonic, an aid to Latin grammar, was of little use to them in their new situation.

My father had a big influence on my writing, my thinking and on my attitude to life. The poem "The Stick"(p.21) is a eulogy to him. It paints an accurate picture of a man whose character is summarised in what the local newspaper, *The Limerick Leader*, 3rd. January 1959, wrote about him, "a true Christian, a man of integrity, a good conversationalist". The accolade from the Limerick docker, Gogser Hogan, would have been an epitaph that would have pleased him, "he never riz above himself".

Another poem from that era is "The Pighmen"(p.23), a Saturday morning ritual observed by local pig dealers going for a drink. The Angelus bell had to strike before they would enter the pub. Finally "A Fervent Prayer"(p.24) refers to an incident I witnessed in a Franciscan church, and compares genuine prayer with lip service.

Conclusion

These poems are a continuation of those in category 2, just from a later period. While much of what is in them is personal, both the good, "The Stick"(p.21) and "English Teacher"(p.20), and the bad, "Revenge"(p.16) and "Regime Achtung"(p.26), are recorded. The desire to record the injustices in verse was strong, as was the desire to balance the scales with poems about the good times.

Family

Introduction

This group of poems covers four generations of my family, from my parents to my grandchildren. They came about in different ways. One is a brief record of our married life, three are events that occurred involving family members, one resulted from reading a book, and one was written to order.

There is ample material in any family for themes for poems. In my case most are pleasant and easy to write about, once I avoid being mawkish or sentimental.

Discussion

“The Hill”(p.27) describes a young couple in their early twenties setting out in married life, up to the present day when they are in their mid-seventies. It maps their journey, the good times and the not so good, the rocky road and the smooth path. The poet’s overall verdict is that on balance it has been a success.

“71st Birthday”(p.29) is in a similar vein where “over all the sheet shows balance plus”.

“Resurrection”(p.32) records a visit I paid to my parents’ grave on an Autumn day, when my peace was interrupted by a funeral of a stranger. It follows my

train of thought among the tombstones, with references to some old Irish funeral customs.

The idea for the poem "Without"(p.31) came from a book I read, Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*. In the excerpts from reviews at the beginning of the book, *The Sunday Times* called the book a masterpiece, *The Guardian* hailed it as book of the year. It is a rare, powerful and moving book. Didion had been married for forty years when her husband died suddenly. I wondered how, after over fifty years of marriage, I would cope.

"Silent Signals"(p.28) is about a simple walk in Bute Park in Cardiff on a cold Winter's day, with my infant grandson. There is a reference in it to Myles na gCapalleen's molecular theory, from his book *The Dalkey Archive*, in which the local sergeant and his bicycle exchange molecules as a result the former spending too much sitting on the latter.

My granddaughter, aged six, asked me to write a poem for her. I sat in the garden with her near the butterfly bush and the idea came to me. On her next visit I presented her with her poem "Butterflies"(p.30). She was precocious, as six year olds often are. With an Irish mother and an English father, and having been brought up in Wales, she has an accent like that of a junior BBC newsreader. She stood in the middle of the kitchen, held the poem at arm's length and performed. Even though it is a very simple poem, more a nursery rhyme, I got my reward.

Conclusion

The poems in this section are mainly happy. I did not decide that it should be so, but the fact that it is, says something. Family and personal relations offer a wide range of themes for poems. I have no doubt that I will dip deeply into this area many more times. Everyday events, experienced or witnessed, form rich pickings. An unobservant poet is a contradiction in terms.

Political

As stated earlier I use the term 'political' in a broad sense, to cover political and social affairs, including war, cruelty, greed and policies that lead to injustice, and wreak havoc on the poor who have no voice. The ever widening gap between rich and poor is an abomination. In dealing with this subject I try to be objective and not didactic.

Discussion

"Despair"(p.33) tells its own story. The feeling of helplessness when faced each month with a printed record of the awful mess the world is in was ultimately too much for me. This poem was shortened by one verse as a result of a workshop discussion. The deleted verse five read, "We send our tourists / And continue trade, / Better to keep contact, / It's nothing to do with profit". It was considered to be out of tune with the rest of the poem.

"Headlines"(p.34) is part true and part fantasy and follows on from

"Despair"(p.33), and poses the question, has history taught us nothing?

"Cambodia Trilogy"(pp.35-37) is an account of a visit to Phnom Penh in 1992 with my son who works with the United Nations. In the morning we visited the Killing Fields, in the afternoon the torture prison and in the evening we dined out and still could not escape the horrors.

"Darfur"(p.38) is again the cruelty of war, "Choices"(p.39), the horror of starvation, and both highlight the indifference of an uncaring world, while "Wasteland"(p.40) shows the result of that indifference.

"Ireland 1923"(p.41) is a story that was replicated in many Irish homes during the Civil War. It is the story of my father's two older brothers who fought on opposite sides.

"The Pension Book"(p.42) is a story my father told me. It portrays the appalling dire poverty in rural Ireland in the 1930s. He was the official involved. Apparently after verification of the signature, the pension could be drawn for another period of time. The pensioner was dead, a fraud had been perpetrated, and the Pension Officer was complicit in the deception. The poverty was appalling, the officer was proud of his action, or inaction. Had the fraud been discovered he would have been dismissed.

"Pictures"(p.43) was written after I watched television news. An item of academic interest to astronomers was given precedence over one concerning dying sick malnourished children in Africa. The latter was an everyday occurrence.

"Sullied Words"(p.44) tells the story of the awful abuse of children and the indifference of a Christian society. The situation is similar to that which pertained in "Burke"(p.10) in the discussion at page 95 herein. There was the most horrific, inhuman, physical, sexual and mental abuse of innocent children, by Catholic priests, brothers and nuns. When the crimes came to

light, their denials, lies and cover-ups, endeavoured to save the reputation and wealth of the Church. Some senior clerics are still in denial.

“The Rules”(p.46) is my reaction to people who say that poems such as “Sullied Words” should not be written in such stark terms.

“After Reading Poems from Guantanamo”(p.47) is my reaction to reading the book *Poems from Guantanamo*. Some of the poems were originally written in toothpaste, others scratched onto foam drinking cups with pebbles, and then smuggled out by the inmates’ legal representatives. The last four lines from one poem “Two Fragments” reads, “Those who have no courage or honour consider themselves free, / But they are slaves. / I am flying on the wings of thought,/ And so, even in this cage, I know a greater freedom.” (Falkoff 36).

“Belleek”(p.48) is about entrenched tribal attitudes that are never far beneath the surface. The poem originally contained twenty-seven lines, it now has eighteen. After a workshop it was reduced to fourteen lines. After further scrutiny and on the advice of my new Supervisor, four lines which to me were relevant, were restored.

“Roadblock”(p.49) concerns crossing the border out of Northern Ireland, and shows my surprise when I witness the trappings of war on my own doorstep. “This is happening”.

Conclusion

Unlike the poems in the previous section these poems are not happy. Many of them sat as notes in a notebook or in the recesses of my mind, some for time. They would not go away. They demanded to be written. A poet must be honest to himself as well with to his readers.

Others (Narrative / Humorous / Etc.)

Introduction

This final category contains a mixture of poems on various themes. Most poets write some poems on impulse. Any event, real or imaginary, even a dream, can spark a poem. Seamus Heaney, after he recovered from a stroke in 2006, wrote a poem about his friends whose help was crucial in the immediate aftermath. He used the Gospel story of the sick man who could not gain entrance to a house where Christ was teaching, because of the crowds. The man's friends removed part of the roof and lowered him on a stretcher. Experiences, media reports or just random thoughts or musings, sometimes provide a theme or maybe only a first line, but the process has started.

"Visitors"(p.50) resulted from a visit to a small harbour near my home where I visit daily, and the first time I saw Brent geese there. There is a thinly veiled reference to the immigrants who have come to Ireland in considerable numbers in recent times.

I took a book of poetry, *The Blind Stitch*, with me on holidays to Turkey. I thoroughly enjoyed it. I fell asleep in the shade and the poem "Ennui"(p.51) developed. I am not sure whether I was asleep or awake, probably a bit of both.

“June Day”(p.52) is a mixture of two separate car journeys in the country. It was shortened and amended at workshop. Verses describing an old stone schoolhouse and the village graveyard were excised. It was considered that they added nothing meaningful to the poem.

“Breakdown”(p.53) is a record of an ordinary bus breakdown with my imagination filling in the detail, to occupy the time while waiting for a replacement bus.

“The Dead of Night”(p.54) is the closing of a day that is gone, never to return. I lay in bed listening to the sounds of the night before all went quiet and silence and darkness reigned.

“The Button”(p.55) relates to a lead button found embedded in a rock by a local fisherman. He dug it out with his penknife and showed it to me. He surmised that it was from the reefer jacket of a sailor from long ago.

A visit to a beautiful old cathedral in Wales produced the poem “Llandaff Cathedral”(p.56).

The next two poems in this section are light-hearted offerings, “The Very Important Things That Occupy Other People’s Lives”(p.57), relates to an amusing episode when my companion and I got lost in the Welsh countryside.

“Be My Guest”(p.58) is about persistent bores that we all come across from time to time. The idea came from a poem written by Dennis O’Driscoll called “No Thanks”, in which he declines invitations to attend coffee mornings, visits

to view newly fitted kitchens, and many more similar boring events. I agree with O'Driscoll that what I call family photograph bores deserve ridicule. They invite it and it is easy to write about them.

"Passing"(p.59) is a personal belief about the freedom death brings.

"Faith"(p.60) is another personal poem about my belief and doubt concerning the hereafter and the existence of an Almighty Being.

Conclusion

This last category, as the title suggests, is an amalgam of poems on various themes and topics. Some are personal, some humorous and some just incidents from everyday life which appealed for one reason or another. For me all have something worth saying.

Chapter4

Conclusion

In my childhood the upheaval in the world caused by the Second World War brought many changes. In my poetry I tried to capture aspects of that era with its poverty and injustice. The recent and ongoing disclosures and reports of physical and sexual abuse in the Roman Catholic Church brought back unpleasant childhood memories. I witnessed the former and lived through a time rife with rumour of the latter. Having written about this I tried to balance the scales with poems about the good times, of which there were many when the world moved at a more leisurely pace. The educational system in Ireland had its bad and good sides. The cruelty is recorded. Family poems bring back happy memories and remind me of how lucky I was at a time when many were not. Later I include the troubles of today's world and its injustices. Finally there are random poems which are part of most poets' repertoires.

I have outlined how poems were amended and rewritten and the reasons, including workshops and the influence of many books, such as, Hugo's *Triggering Town*, Gioia's *Can Poetry Matter?* Pinsky's *The Situation of Poetry*, and Padel's *52 Ways of Looking at a Poem*. The other influences were my father, my English teacher, reading, theatre and my love of the music of words.

I attended a part time (three hours per week) adult education course in creative writing in Waterford. After about eighteen months my work was assessed by the tutor, who is a poet and university graduate, and author of five books of poems. He encouraged me to apply for entry to the M.A. Creative Writing course at Waterford Institute of Technology. I was accepted after interview and submission of my curriculum vitae and a sample of my poetry. In my new situation as a mature student I was initiated into the disciplines of academia, since I did not have a primary degree. This was somewhat daunting but a challenge, especially since it was a research M.A. At the start it was a bit difficult but it became very interesting and absorbing. The workshops were important, the discussions and feedback, invaluable.

I replaced a forty-five year career in the Civil Service with my new occupation, writing poetry. It is practically a full time job, pleasant and frustrating. I spend time reading poetry, reading about poetry, and writing and discussing poetry. I think I must conclude that I write poetry because it is there, it is in me and I have discovered that I love doing it. I now write for myself, to express something which I feel I must express. If my work is published, that's good, if it's read, that's better.

For the future it is my intention, along with some poets from my class to start regular workshops. This has been initiated already. In due course we hope to hold poetry readings.

On a personal level, it is my intention, firstly to continue to write, and if the muse permits to increase output. How quickly one realises that inspiration is very necessary. A poem can not be forced. I will now have more time to attend poetry readings and festivals, of which there is an abundance nowadays. I will continue to read poetry and books about poetry. At present I get the periodicals, *The SHOp*, *The Stinging Fly*, and *Poetry Ireland Review*, and will continue to do so.

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