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## *Canon Fodder: Anthologies of Contemporary Irish Poetry*

by ADRIAN FRAZIER

WITHIN THE last 15 years there have been better than a dozen anthologies of contemporary Irish poetry, and within the last few years the major presses have weighed in: California, Faber, Penguin, Norton, Scribners, not to mention Kinsella's *Oxford Anthology of Irish Verse*. There is more going on here than publishers cashing in on a good thing: there is a canon being formed of living Irish poets, and a canon being reshaped of their precursors. Each of these anthologies, either straightforwardly or, more often, by example, is dictating what Irish poetry is, who the best Irish poets now are (in rank order), who their major precursors are, what set of poems best embodies *The Way We Live Now* and *How To Be in the World*, and, finally, who is an Irish poet and who, as yet, is not. Literary valuation—saying what's better than what—is neither fashionable nor well understood at present, but, with all questions begged, it goes on: each table of contents is a table of relative values. If you are not in the anthology, you are not an Irish poet; and if there is not much of you in it, you are not much. Would you be surprised if politics—literary, national, gender, all kinds—were ten miles off from these questions? You wouldn't.

### *What Is Irish Poetry?*

ALL OF THE most obvious, clear-cut definitions of Irish poetry will not work because they exclude writers commonly regarded as among the best Irish poets. For instance, if an Irish poet is a poet living and working in the Republic of Ireland, then at one time or another one must leave out Michael Longley, Ciaran Carson, Paul Muldoon, Derek Mahon, Eamon Grennan . . . one could go on and on, listing those who either have always lived in the North of Ireland or who now work in the USA or England. If an Irish poet is just one born in any one of the 32 counties of the island, then neither John Montague nor Padraic Fiacc nor Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill are Irish. If one starts to define Irishness in terms of ancestry, then one is very rapidly going to start playing the nasty *colon-versus-native*, Gael-versus-Gall game, and end with quasi-racist distinctions between quadroons and octaroons or sectarian distinctions among Catholics, agnostic former Catholics, Catholics turned Protestants in the 19th century, Church of Ireland Southern Protestants, Protestant Unionists, Protestant Republicans. So, plainly, Irish poetry is not simply verse written by people born in Ireland, or by those at one time living or working there, or by those with Irish parents or

grandparents. No, it is not poetry written by a kind of person; it is, if it is any one thing, a kind of poetry.

It could be that anthologies of nationally selected poets do not have a basis in literary values to justify putting them together, except for political purposes—to make a proleptic argument for or against unification; to propagate the civic values of Gaelic, religion, tolerance, family, love of place, respect for the past, etc. If one's purposes are instead literary, perhaps it makes more sense to group poets by criteria that are neither national nor social, like the following:

- a) genre: poetic sequences by Galway Kinnell, John Montague, Theodore Roethke, Thomas Kinsella, Adrienne Rich, and Seamus Heaney;
- b) subject: love poems by Montague, Wendy Cope, Michael Longley, Linda Gregg, Paul Durcan, Thom Gunn, and James Simmons;
- c) movement: the formalist tradition of Philip Larkin, Seamus Heaney, Howard Nemerov, Michael Longley, Louise Gluck, and Derek Mahon;
- d) tradition: the Beckett tradition in the lyric of Paul Celan, Montague, W. S. Merwin, Mahon, and Michael Burkhardt.

These groupings are based in some single certifiable aspect of the matter or manner of those poems collected; are there such common aspects of the poems in these recent anthologies of "Irish verse"?

Naturally, the editors tend to choose from the authors' works especially those poems which validate "Irishness." For instance, Irish poets (like American and English poets) frequently do some of their best work in versions of poems by European writers. Montague and Mahon have both done whole collections of the French poets Frenaud and Jacottet; Heaney, Tom Paulin, and Sean Dunne have turned to the Russian poet Ahkmatova; but all these anthologies include almost exclusively translations from the Irish, because the editors wish to insist on what Ireland uniquely has: the double-language traditions of Irish and English, which, according to Thomas Kinsella in his *New Oxford Book of Irish Verse*, are the definitive feature of the nation's poetry.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, even as communities of native speakers disappear and as contemporary writers turn their attention abroad, the inherently cultural and political agenda of the Irish anthology reinscribes the necessity for poets to be conversant with a putatively vital and professionally essential tradition of Gaelic literature.

Reviewers of these volumes generally take it on faith that there is some "Irishness" holding all the poems together and even serving as the source of their value. Conor Cruise O'Brien, who had once thought the only Irish poets were those writing in Irish, decided upon reviewing Kinsella's anthology and Muldoon's *Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry* that contemporary poets were bonded "by common predicaments, obsessions, and hang-ups, which appear to be peculiar to Ireland, and which also appear somehow to be conducive to good

1. Thomas Kinsella, ed., with translations by, *New Oxford Book of Irish Verse* (Oxford, New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1986), vii.

poetry.”<sup>2</sup> *Somehow, appear to be*: others do not get much clearer about Irishness than O’Brien. Peter Porter is clear but censorious: irritated that the poets from the North had monopolized Morrison & Motion’s *Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*, he complained that Heaney & Co. had a “fool’s license”: they were those who did what others could not—be sentimental about dead relatives, about “the land,” about the old religion, in a general surrender to self-indulgence.<sup>3</sup> That “connection with the soil” (has any besides Peter Fallon actually worked on a farm in, say, the last 20 years? The connection is largely mental) is just what made Norman Vance fond of “the Irish poets,”<sup>4</sup> while Sean Coughlin, reviewing Fallon and Mahon’s *Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry*, suggests that the causes for Irish distinctiveness were conflicts between the contemporary and the historical, in religion, language, and literature.<sup>5</sup>

Coughlin gets close to an illuminating paradox: Irish poets are bound together by the set of conflicts that divide them, which includes more than Churchill’s “integrity of their ancient quarrel” over the “Irish question” of political identity. There are, let us say, ten sets of two-term dialectics in play amid the poems collected as Irish. Indeed, which set of terms someone chooses to privilege may determine what poems are selected for an anthology and which poets come out on top. Here are the oppositions: 1. Gaelic/English, 2. national/international, 3. modernist/traditionalist, 4. wet eye/cold eye, 5. male/female, 6. place/history, 7. North/South, 8. Protestant/Catholic, 9. Ireland/Britain, 10. art/propaganda.

1. Gaelic/English: As mentioned, Kinsella’s *New Oxford Book* asserts this polarity as definitive, with dramatic results. The cross-fertilization between the two poetries that became common after compulsory Gaelic was instituted in Free State schools is projected into earlier centuries; Yeats’s key poems are not “Wild Swans at Coole,” “Sailing to Byzantium,” or “The Second Coming,” but “To Ireland in the Coming Times” and “Red Hanrahan’s Song About Ireland”; among the precursors, Austin Clarke gains by what Patrick Kavanagh loses, since Clarke deliberately tried to write English as if it were Gaelic; Michael Longley’s stock goes down; Michael Hartnett’s goes up, with the volume ending with his “Farewell to English.”

2. National/international and 3. traditionalist/modernist: Anthologies like Montague’s that wish to “draw from the air a live tradition” of international modernism in Ireland will be sure to include precursor figures like Brian Coffey, Samuel Beckett, Valentine Iremonger, and Anthony Cronin. In the canon of contemporary masters, an American critic like Hugh Kenner or Thomas Parkinson, sympathetic to the Eliot/Pound line of international modernism, devotes attention not to Heaney or Longley but to Kinsella and Montague because they have “learnt from the traditions of Ireland, Europe, and America” or, in Kinsella’s

2. Conor Cruise O’Brien, “Micks and Prods,” *The Observer* (8 June 1986), 25.

3. Peter Porter, *The Observer* (19 December 1982), 24.

4. Norman Vance, “Imagining Ireland,” *Queens Quarterly*, 94, 1 (Spring 1987), 105-15.

5. Sean Coughlin, rev. of *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry*, *New Selected Poems of Seamus Heaney*, and *Madoc*, *Times Educational Supplement* (4 January 1991), 23.

case, because he “uses meter rather than merely following it.”<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, English critics will do the opposite, ignoring the too American, too republican Kinsella and Montague, and favoring Heaney, Longley, Simmons, and Mahon, partly because they work(ed) within the traditional English line of Hardy, Larkin, and the Movement.

4. Wet eye/cold eye: Irish writing, of course, is famous at once for an unembarrassed surrender to sentimentality and for its gay, heartless, disenchanted wit. Canons can be created from each: the “wet eye” canon would feature Heaney; the “cold eye,” Mahon or Muldoon. From the works of Kinsella, one could select for both canons: when he regards writing in Irish, he is unguardedly sentimental; when he writes of his own life in his own way, he is fiercely disenchanted. Montague is the opposite: writing of his own life, he articulates each sob of heartsickness; when he writes of Ireland, he sees with the eye of an eagle.

5. If an anthology is featuring writing by women, as *Pillars of the House* does, it may present verse of grotesque sentimentality, indifferent to that grotesquerie, because the value claimed for the anthologized poems is not that Irish women “from 1690 to the present” felt exquisitely or wrote magically but that one ought to document that female poets in each decade existed, felt as others feel, gave song, wrote.<sup>7</sup> Many collections focus on “(6.) place/history,” helping Irish people to “live back in the land they live in” (Samuel Ferguson); this one aims to give contemporary Irish women a canon to live back in the bodies they live in.

7. The North/South opposition: This set of terms has recently been the site of the greatest polemical activity in the canon wars, so I will explore it at some length. Each anthology including Irish poets includes the border question, whether it’s a collection of British, Irish, or Northern Irish poets. The whole purpose of Morrison and Motion’s *Penguin Anthology of British Verse* was to inaugurate the Age of Heaney, but, after giving Morrison and Motion permission to publish poems from each of his books, Heaney withdrew in an “Open Letter,” saying he was not British.<sup>8</sup> Presumably, he came to see that to seek a place in a cultural canon could mean giving up the freedom to stand outside a political entity.

The same dynamic works with Northern poets included in anthologies of Irish poetry assembled by Dublin editors: Edna Longley explains these subtle but sharp Unionist fears in this way:

6. Thomas Parkinson, “Poetry is Alive and Well in Ireland,” *Georgia Review* (Fall 1982), 662-68.

7. A. A. Kelly, ed., *Pillars of the House: An Anthology of Verse by Irish Women From 1690 to the Present* (Dublin: Wolfhound, 1988). Patricia Craig observes that the cover illustration of a washerwoman “goes some way towards explaining the averageness of the contributions” (*TLS*, 2 September 1988, 957). Geraldine Meaney goes farther, arguing that the old concept of a national culture is now obsolete, and with it, notions of literary judgment, so that whether or not the poems are “great” (she paradoxically admits they aren’t great) is not an issue (“The Keystone of Art,” rev. of *Pillars of the House*, in *Irish Studies* [Fall 1988], 37). I think Meaney has a point in this respect: if an editor asserts that the post-colonial predicament is the defining feature of Irish literature, as Seamus Deane does in *The Field Day Anthology*, then women writers like McGuckian and Boland may not show to best effect, since they may feel that “Where Do You Stand on the National Question?” is not the most important matter in human life, this being a male, not a human or even Irish, obsession.

8. Seamus Heaney, *An Open Letter*, *Field Day* No. 2 (Derry: Field Day, 1983). Before the 1982 Morrison and Motion anthology, Heaney permitted Michael Schmidt to use 17 poems to conclude *Eleven British Poets* (London: Methuen, 1980).

Nationalism still sometimes claims Ulster Protestants as Irish, sometimes not, according to the rhetorical tack being pursued. Since Protestants divine in this inconsistency the unacceptable alternatives of assimilation and expulsion, they tread warily around 'Irish' unless preceded by 'Northern.' The more subtle manifestation of the 'siege mentality' is a sense of being excluded, rather than self-excluded, from political Irishness.<sup>9</sup>

Just as Heaney wants to decide under just what circumstances it suits him to be a "British" poet, Longley wants the freedom for Northern Protestants to say "No" to being Irish.<sup>10</sup>

No one apparently refused Frank Ormsby's offer to be represented in *Poets from the North of Ireland*. But would some have gotten cold feet if the title had been . . . *from Northern Ireland*, the name of the statelet, not the area? Or . . . *from Ulster*, the name of a province, having reference to the whole, original island, of which the Six Counties is a large fragment? Certainly, not many of the best writers *could* be represented under a title ending . . . *in Northern Ireland*: not Heaney, Montague, Mahon, or Muldoon. One could make a better anthology beginning with a title from a James Simmons poem: *The Flight of the Earls*.

The publicity given poets "from the North" led young writers in the Republic, in Montague's phrase, to "writ[e] back, especially in Irish."<sup>11</sup> In 1982 Gerald Dawe tried to "right the imbalance" of attention given to poets from the North by generous publication of Southern poets in *The Younger Irish Poets*;<sup>12</sup> Sebastian Barry then put together *Inherited Boundaries: Younger Poets of the Republic of Ireland* (1986), and Sean Dunne did an anthology of Munster writers. Many "all Ireland" collections recently assembled in the South actually try to prove, in both preface and selections, that the "Northern renaissance" never really happened (or, more mildly, what happened cannot be called a "Northern renaissance"), the Belfast "Group" did not amount to much, and, were it not for the adventitious publicity that results from the Troubles, the current crop of writers in the North would show up no better than those in the South.<sup>13</sup> Patricia Craig, writing in *The London Review of Books*, conceded that Kinsella may have

9. Edna Longley, "Opening Up: A New Pluralism," in Robert Bell, Robert Johnston, & Robin Wilson, *Troubled Times: Fortnight Magazine and the Troubles in Northern Ireland, 1970-71* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1991), 140-44.

10. This may seem to be asking a lot, but it is in conformity not only with the stated British position on political unification, but also with the actual cultural position of writers living in the North: Paul Muldoon, for example, when he was living in Belfast, could have received financial support from Aosdána (the Republic's form of state patronage), the Northern Ireland Arts Council, and the London-based Arts Council and Poetry Book Society.

11. John Montague, *Bitter Harvest: An Anthology of Contemporary Irish Verse* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1989), xvi.

12. Gerald Dawe, ed., *The Younger Irish Poets* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1982), x.

13. Elliott, Hughes, and Peskett, well represented in Ormsby's anthology of Northern writers, do not appear at all in Montague's or the Fallon-Mahon anthologies. Kinsella declared apodictically that the Northern Ireland renaissance was just an affair of publicity because "The past, in Northern Ireland, is not," Northern Ireland being a temporary political entity with no cultural or psychological reality (*New Oxford Book*, xxx). Fallon and Mahon agree with Kinsella's critique of the inflationary effect of the Belfast background, adding that too much is made of the "Group," but they do go on to admit that there have been two generations of outstanding poets from the North (*Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry*, xx). It would seem odd to say that these writers did not exist, or were not writing in a place called Northern Ireland, simply because one did not like the way the border was drawn in the Treaty of 1921. That is what causes Edna Longley to crack that those who deny that "Ulster's literary output has improved" are "mostly diehards from a Dublin-centered universe" ("Opening Up: A New Pluralism," *Troubled Times*, 143-44).

been correct in saying that Northern writers think of themselves as writing for the whole of the country, but still, she asked, was he not going too far in leaving out of *The New Oxford Book* Hewitt, Muldoon, Simmons, Paulin, Carson, Longley, McGuckian—just to prove there was no concentration of talent in the North?<sup>14</sup> At the same time, Paul Muldoon's *Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry* (1986) was read by Denis Donoghue as a kind of cultural *putsch* to "take possession of the country on behalf of his Northern friends."<sup>15</sup> What began with a call from London for the "new War Poets" in Belfast has now become the "Poetry Wars" between North and South. Not to worry: there was little enough war in the debonair poetry of the North, and no blood is shed in the current cross-border sniping of anthologists. But the North/South dialectic can in one rhetorical context rapidly take the shape of high-stakes political negotiation, or a faction feud among county clans.

8. Protestant/Catholic: Sometimes religion can be the subtext of North/South and Irish/British distinctions, but it is also true that religious difference can be foregrounded, with a variety of political subtexts. On the one hand, Edna Longley, who is very antirepublican, can with Gerald Dawe assemble *Across the Roaring Hill*, studies in the Protestant imagination in Ireland, in order to lay proud claim to a unified, separate tradition in the country. Furthermore, speaking of *The Field Day Anthology*, she calls for a different anthology that would manifest what Irish writers "don't have in common," because religion, not nationality (as Seamus Deane supposes), is the key feature of Irish society.<sup>16</sup> Such an anthology would underwrite, for her, a political solution in the North of power devolved from Westminster, then shared by groups with different religions, different values, different customs. On the other hand, Tom Paulin, in his poems and in that same *Field Day Anthology*, constructs a new canon of vigorously independent, politically strenuous Protestant republicanism, from the United Irishmen forward. That canon constitutes the grounds for a different political solution, combining the democratic and libertarian traditions of Protestants with the revolutionary line of Irish nationalists. Both Longley and Paulin make use of the religious category to propose canons for a pluralistic society, but Longley's maintains Northern Ireland as a "corridor" between Ireland and England, and Paulin's draws the Protestants of the Six Counties toward a united, nonsectarian republic.

When it is not explicit (as in Longley and Paulin), religion can also be the subtext in rearrangements of the *precursors to the major contemporary Irish poets*. The crucial ancestral figures are those in the generation immediately after Yeats, Yeats himself being written out of consideration in anthologies of recent verse. Irish poets require "intercessors" to come between themselves and the stultifying, incomparable example of WBY, guardian angels who survived his influence. But Protestant and Catholic poets pray to different angels: in the

14. Patricia Craig, "Green Martyrs," *London Review of Books* (25 July 1986), 17-18.

15. Denis Donoghue, "The Luck of the Irish," *New York Review of Books* (26 February 1987), 25-26.

16. "Opening Up: A New Pluralism," *Troubled Times*, 140-44.

South, to Clarke and Kavanagh; in the North, to MacNeice and Kavanagh. Clarke meant his "Irish mode" to be an explicitly Catholic and "casuistic" mode, so he has little appeal to Northern Protestants; MacNeice, when he writes of Ireland at all, is liberatingly outspoken in his disgust with a place where "the minority is always guilty" and "schoolchildren fumble their sums / In a half-dead language,"<sup>17</sup> yet he is obviously not a roaring, bigoted, "Not an inch!" Protestant, so that he can free a Northerner from the pious grip of either clan, as well as from the stranglehold of Yeats.

9. Ireland/Britain: Seamus Deane, the general editor of *The Field Day Anthology*, contends that all cultural life is at bottom political, that Irish politics are always national, and therefore that Irish writing can best be understood with reference to the colonial crisis. So he would read the other two-term oppositions always in light of the struggle for escape from the mystifications of a post-colonial condition. However, the editor of the Contemporary Irish Poetry section of the anthology, Declan Kiberd, does not really make this thesis stick. He does not, that is, dramatically revise the canon in order to give value to those ways of feeling, groups of writers, or notions of the Good that stress political engagement. Paul Durcan, for instance, comes off rather poorly, though he addresses political events ("Ireland 1972," "The Divorce Referendum, Ireland, 1986") more straightforwardly than most other writers. The reason given by Kiberd is that Durcan's poems are "loose," "chatty," "mere drafts."<sup>18</sup> Kiberd may perhaps have a formalist criterion of tight, burnished, iconic stanzas which overrides the Field Day criterion of political engagement, but he paradoxically concludes his introduction to the selection by worrying about "the political reticence" of "the leading poets of the period," who came to fame during the Troubles but "have had remarkably little" to say about them.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps, he muses, that is just "a measure of the privatization of *all* poetry"—but if all poetry is private, must Irish writing still be understood with reference to the post-colonial condition?

10. Art/propaganda: There is a critical dogma in England, the USA, and Ireland that poems touching on politics must do so "obliquely," not directly; that they must "personalize" politics, not "politicize" poetics; and that they must be "evenhanded," not "one-sided"; otherwise, they will be "propaganda, not art." When a major poet violates this dogma, he will be condemned and the poem will not be anthologized, as in the case of Kinsella's "Butcher's Dozen."<sup>20</sup> Parts of Montague's *The Rough Field*, such as "The Sound of a Wound," are too direct, uncomplicated, and deeply felt to have proven acceptable to some critics, at least

17. MacNeice, "xvi, Autumn Journal," a passage that appears in Montague, *The Book of Irish Verse*, Ormsby, *Poets of the North of Ireland*, Muldoon, *Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry*, and Bradley, *Contemporary Irish Poetry*. It is crucial to the Northern canon.

18. Kiberd, *Field Day Anthology*, V. 3, 1398. There is, of course, absolutely nothing improper about Kiberd as editor choosing those poems his aesthetic sense tells him are the best, regardless of politics or fashion; that is what he is supposed to do.

19. *Field Day Anthology*, V. 3, 1316.

20. In "Kinsella's Craft," James Simmons found "the sort of hate Kinsella is whipping up" in "Butcher's Dozen" "unforgivable in a man of his education," *Fortnightly*, 39 (11 May 1972); rpt. in *Troubled Times*, 82-83.



until a decent interval passed during which the poem's politics could be "aestheticized" by distance.<sup>21</sup> Declan Kiberd may still, in terms of taste, practice this critical dogma, even as, in terms of ideology, he wishes for another kind of poetry. Until this contradiction is resolved, these various two-term oppositions, all of which are in part "political," will continue to operate, but usually inexplicitly, indirectly, obliquely.

### *Who Is Number 1? 2? 3? . . . ?*

LAST YEAR in Dublin, Desmond Fennell put out a brilliantly nasty piece of Dublin spite, worthy of WBY's nemesis F. Hugh O'Donnell, plainly titled, *Whatever You Say, Say Nothing: Why Seamus Heaney is No. 1*.<sup>22</sup> This broadside gives every plausible explanation for Heaney's having won fame as a poet, except that he writes better poems than other people. Heaney is acclaimed, Fennell says, because he only writes short lyrics; he has nothing much to say about anything, nothing at all about "general matters"; he made his own self a matter of general interest; he won over London critics first, then set his cap at the American ones (who are said still to defer to Oxbridge!); he worked to qualify under American critic Helen Vendler's terms as a good poet, making poems that were only about themselves, with plenty of allusions and no resolutions, so that, like the works of Joyce, they should keep the professors busy for years.

Fennell has a canny sense of how the poetry game is played, and Heaney plays it better than anyone—that's a fact. But Fennell seems to think that a game is all it is, with a fix in from the start, so that "the plain people of Ireland" are all done out of what a poet is supposed to give them: a structured world view and quotable platitudes to live by, saying something about "general matters." What those matters are, he doesn't really say, but they do not include marriage, family, childhood, memorials to the dead, or dilemmas between duty to the tribe and personal freedom, because Fennell acknowledges that those subjects form the occasions for many of Heaney's poems. Frequently, in these and other poems, Heaney has blamed himself for not being able to say anything to stop the killing or save a friend who's died, for not actually doing anything in the world except to write about his feelings about not actually doing anything, for moving out of the North, for being lucky, for eating oysters—the man's as guilt-driven as anyone—so he's given the begrudger's evidence. Fennell can now swing round and say, "Seamus, you're right . . . you are an undeserving, evasive, politic, worthless, ambitious charlatan. Your other man is much better" . . . though Fennell never suggests who ought to be more famous than Seamus.<sup>23</sup>

21. In a review of a new edition of *The Rough Field*, John Bayley can now speak of the sequence as "astonishingly successful," "as soundly crafted as the rose-wood fiddle"; in it Montague is said to merge his being with those of another party in a "common Irishness, in a way that the fanatic cannot and will not do" ("Irishness," *NYRB* [25 June 1992], 14). When first published, *The Rough Field* was dispraised by Denis Donoghue for being too fanatical, partisan, and direct in its presentation of violence, "trying to get the horror of it hot" (*Sewanee Review* [Winter 1976], 200). Time confers aesthetic poise on poems and readers alike.

22. Desmond Fennell, *Whatever You Say, Say Nothing* (Dublin: ELO Publications, 1991).

23. Who is "your other man"? Fennell names no names, except Shakespeare.

The extraordinary thing is that in recent anthologies edited in Ireland Seamus Heaney is *not* indisputably Number 1. The rank order of Irish poets clearly differs in the USA, England, and Ireland. Irish-American sentimentality may not be irrelevant to American judgments, or British guilt and British fear to English ones, but there are more obvious, less contemptible reasons for the differences of judgment. In England, those poets published by Oxford, Faber, Carcanet, and Salamander will take precedence to those published in Ireland by Gallery and Dedalus; in the USA, poets working in universities and publishing with Farrar Straus, Knopf, or Wake Forest are the ones best known, thus most highly rated. At any rate, one would get two different rankings, something like the following:

AMERICAN PANTHEON	ENGLISH PANTHEON
Heaney	Heaney
Muldoon	Mahon
Montague	Muldoon
Kinsella	Longley
Mahon	Paulin
Eamon Grennan <sup>24</sup>	McGuckian
Eavan Boland	Simmons

What is the ranking in Ireland? With the recent flood of anthologies, there is plenty of evidence of both tumult in the ordering and tact in its finer adjustments. Here is the ranking of poets.

John Montague, *Book of Irish Verse* (1974) (BIV)

Thomas Kinsella, *New Oxford Book of Irish Verse* (1986) (NOB)

Paul Muldoon, *Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry* (1986) (FBC)

Anthony Bradley, *Contemporary Irish Poetry: New and Revised Edition* (1988) (CIP)

John Montague, *Bitter Harvest* (1989) (BH)

Peter Fallon and Derek Mahon, *Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry* (1990) (PBC)

Declan Kiberd, "Contemporary Irish Poetry," *The Field Day Anthology*, V. 3 (1991) (FD)

The rank order for each anthology could be determined by either the number of pages or the number of poems for each writer; and the results would differ in slight but important ways. In the tables below, I have combined for each poet the two numbers, in order to average out these differences.

BIV	NOB	FBC	CIP
Clarke 17	Clarke 17	MacNeice 96	Montague 44
Kavanagh 16	Devlin 14	Kavanagh 81	Clarke 44
Kinsella 13	Murphy 12	Heaney 69	Kinsella 40
Devlin 12	MacNeice 10	Paulin 62	Heaney 34
Montague 10	Kinsella 10	Montague 59	Kavanagh 28
Heaney 9	Montague 9	Longley 54	Mahon 23
Murphy 8	Heaney 8	Mahon 50	Longley 23
Beckett 7	Mahon 7	McGuckian 41	Muldoon 22
Mahon 6	Hartnett 7	Kinsella 35	Hartnett 20
Hartnett 6	Deane 4	Durcan 25	Carson 16

24. Grennan has gained wide notice by the appearance of many of his poems in *The New Yorker*, the most coveted shop window of American poetry; in addition, North Point has published *What Light There Is & Other Poems* and *As If It Matters* has been published by Graywolf. Boland has recently been added to the list of Norton poets with her volume *Beyond History: Poems 1980-1990*. Her frequent magazine appearances, both as poet and essayist, have given her an expanding reputation in America.

BH	PBC	FD
Durcan 18	Kinsella 50	Heaney 28
Mahon 17	Heaney 45	Kinsella 23
Montague 16	Montague 38	Montague 22
Heaney 15	Mahon 32	Mahon 19
Muldoon 12	Muldoon 31	Muldoon 19
Murphy 12	Hartnett 30	Padraic Fallon 18
Longley 11	Durcan 29	Paulin 14
NíDhomhnaill 11	Murphy 26	Murphy 13
McCarthy 11	Longley 26	Kennelly 11
Kinsella 10	Simmons 25	Hartnett 10

There is rich evidence here of evaluation, of canons taking shape, and being reshaped, evidence from which we can all draw our own conclusions . . . most of them false.<sup>25</sup> While I think it is true that in Ireland Heaney shares the palm with Montague, Mahon, Kinsella, Muldoon, or now Durcan (most often, in the South, with Kinsella), the rank order implied by the number of pages assigned each writer is affected by a range of other, non-evaluative factors: a) the permission fees charged by large publishers; b) the privileges of seniority; c) the differing dates of publication for each collection and of their historical scope; d) the characteristics of a poet's *oeuvre*, whether consisting mainly of short lyrics, longer sequences, narratives, epistolary meditations;<sup>26</sup> e) the opportunity to publicize what's less well-known. The last factor is important, I think, in many of these anthologies, which attempt to "right the balance" not only between North and South, but between Heaney and others. In addition, Heaney himself may cooperate in this effort. Far from that Turk who will bear no brother near the throne, Heaney's more like the Irish-American who, winning a mayoral election, would give jobs to brother, cousin, and neighbor.

The question of who's "Number 1" is, of course, absurd, unanswerable, mischievous. Any answer is necessarily a pseudo-statement, unempirical, unverifiable.<sup>27</sup> What poet or poem is most valuable depends on what a publisher, editor, poet, or reader wants to use him/her/it for. If you wish to repossess yourself of the dispossessed Irish writers, then Thomas Kinsella, translator of *An Duanaire*, is your man; if you want to explore the globe from North Carolina in one fine-tuned Irish mind, get a hold of Derek Mahon; if you have the nerve to push back the envelope of the sayable in human relationships, try John Montague; if you want a bulletin of Belfast events the other media cannot conceive as events (matters of feeling, altered states), give yourself up to Muldoon or Carson.

25. The notable and almost complete absence of women from the majority of these lists is symptomatic of a problem that has recently come to a head in the controversy surrounding the under-representation of women in *The Field Day Anthology*. Although clearly related to my present analysis, it is a subject that requires a separate essay.

26. Heaney "anthologizes well" because he has written a host of great short lyrics; Montague does not because one of his greatest skills is in handling book-length sequences; Muldoon is more and more turning his hand to long, rapid narratives or book-length conceptual worlds, impossible to excerpt; and some of Mahon's best poems are rather lengthy verse letters, though he also has the lyric gift.

27. For a full discussion of literary value, whether it is "essential" or "instrumental," see Barbara Herrnstein Smith's article, "Contingencies of Value," in *Canons* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1984), 5 ff.

Students in my classes, generally unhindered by knowledge, show surprising and changing preferences: one year they weep over “A Flowering Absence” and adore Montague; the next year they may go for the Dylanesque swing of a poem by Durcan or that high-speed psychedelic Belfast trip, Muldoon’s “The More a Man Has, the More a Man Wants.”

### *What Lies in the Golden Treasury?*

WE HAVE spoken of the “canon” in terms of a set of embodied criteria of “Irishness,” and as a sort of secular sainthood, those few elected and revered spirits. But a still more common meaning of the canon is that small set of works experts agree everyone should know. This is the treasury of the nation’s values, the cradle of its future mores. What poems by contemporary Irish writers now belong to this canon as essential equipment for living?

Surprisingly, very few. While there is consensus in these anthologies that Kinsella, Montague, Heaney, Mahon, and Muldoon (in order of birth) are among the country’s best poets, there is very little agreement on which poems by each are the best. In Kinsella’s case, I can find no agreement. That may be because Kinsella, whose work is described as “formidable,” “grim,” “obscure,” “cold,” is honored, even feared, but, as Tom Parkinson suggests, neither envied nor imitated.<sup>28</sup> Poems that regularly appear in one anthology after another are often “epistemic” poems, ones that created new ways of speaking, or opened up new territories, and therefore led to many other poems by many other writers: Kavanagh’s “Inniskeen Road: July Evening,” for instance, which illustrated the right kind of sensitive humility and sensitive courage in dealing with parish subject matter. Montague’s “A Lost Tradition” is another example: one line—“The whole landscape a manuscript”—fathered a subgenre of poems by Heaney and a play by Brian Friel.<sup>29</sup> And Muldoon’s “Gathering Mushrooms” is a landmark for younger Irish writers, showing how to use the vatic rituals of Heaney’s *North* and Montague’s family matters, while going irreverently far ahead into new psychopolitical territories. But these poems do not appear in every anthology, and when they appear, they may have been included for reasons of literary history, not because they are, for readers, essential equipment for living.

In that essential canon upon which all agree, there is just one poem: Derek Mahon’s “A Disused Shed in County Wexford.” Everyone consents in thinking this is “The Way We Live Now,” this is “How to Be.” The poem will take upon itself whatever wrongs one wishes to bring to it—the European holocaust, the fate of Irish Protestants, the cultural nullity of de Valera’s Ireland. And, modelling an attitude of poignancy and astringency, it will give you back what you need, a full, complex understanding of history, of the weak, the voiceless, the sentient. Here,

28. Parkinson, 666; Fallon & Mahon, xix; Seamus Deane, *A Short History of Irish Literature* (London: Hutchinson; Notre Dame, Indiana: Univ. of Notre Dame, 1986), 236-37.

29. Declan Kiberd makes this point in *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, V. 3, 1313. The Friel play is *Translations*.

then, for once, something: perfect civility. Best of all, you can lay it side by side with a poem by Yeats, and it won't collapse. Indeed, a "Big House" poem like "Coole Park and Ballylee," compared with "A Disused Shed . . ." seems gravid, humorless, pompous, nearsighted.

### *A Narrative of Some Intricacy*

IN AN ESSAY on "The Modernist Canon," Hugh Kenner remarks that "a canon is not a list but a narrative of some intricacy, depending on places and times and opportunities."<sup>30</sup> That seems just to me: more than a church hierarchy of poet-priests, or a list of poems, the canon is a story told to explain the present, both shaping the unwritten chapters to follow and being revised according to the needs of strong writers. The "canons" I hypothetically suggested earlier—of writers of love poems, formal verse, verse sequences, etc.—in some ways don't make sense because they don't involve the immediate kinship relations one needs to make a good story, relations of fathers to sons, twins and rivals, sisters neglected. One of the extraordinary features of Irish writing is that so many of the poets know one another, give readings together, dedicate poems to one another, and develop one another's themes: there is a familial intimacy to their interrelationships. The canon is the intergenerational story someone chooses to tell about that family. Obviously, there is not just one story. One can begin with Kavanagh's long walk to Dublin from Monaghan, and that will make all the difference later on. Or one might open one's tale with Austin Clarke feeling the enmity of WBY at Coole Park. Or with the correspondence of Montague and Kinsella about getting together the *Dolmen Miscellany of Irish Writing*. Hobsbaum talking to students in Belfast about craftsmanship begins yet another kind of tale while I can still remember the excitement that ran round the room in 1968 at Pomona College when W. R. Rodgers introduced 29-year-old Seamus Heaney as the "best Irish poet since Yeats."

Not every story will have the same hero, the same set of conflicts, or the same New Ephebe, singing at the end the selection's main theme in a new note. And they should not, because the tellers shape them to different needs, with always new facts coming into the picture, and new senses of what makes a picture please. In biblical usage, the canon is a set of writings which will not change; in our profane practice, it constantly changes according to emergencies of need, new incarnations of value.

30. Von Hallbergs, *Canons*, 373.