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An Interview with Joan McBreen

by RAND BRANDES

JOAN MCBREEN lives in Tuam, County Galway. Her first collection, *The Wind Beyond the Wall*, was published in 1990 by Storyline Press (USA) and was reprinted in 1991. Her poems have been published in Ireland and Canada.

RB Contemporary male Irish poets such as Heaney, Montague, or Murphy often refer to the giants of modern Irish literature—Yeats, Joyce, Kavanagh, among others—as primary influences on their work. The male lineage is striking. Who are your influences and those of other women poets of your generation?

JM The influences are as various as the practitioners, as I understand it. I cannot speak for other Irish women poets [because] I was not writing or publishing my own poetry until 1987. Therefore I personally had no opportunity to meet and discuss contemporary poetry or any other poetry with those women whose names are considered important today, i.e., Eavan Boland, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Medbh McGuckian, Paula Meehan, Sara Berkeley and others.

I never took part in a workshop, rarely attended a reading. Yet, and this is very important to state, I had been an obsessive reader of poetry of all kinds from early childhood, possessed as large a library of poetry as I could afford, and shared this obsession with my husband when I married.

RB You were born and grew up in County Sligo. How did the presence of Yeats affect you?

JM To have even the merest flicker of a poetic sense meant that the life and the work of W. B. Yeats was impossible to ignore. In my family poetry was considered as natural and as necessary to our lives as the air we breathed. My earliest memories are of both my mother and my father reading aloud and singing in some cases the lyrics from *The Wind Among the Reeds* and from volumes of Tennyson, Shelley, Shakespeare, and Byron. The place names in the poetry of W. B. Yeats were also a daily reality in my life. I believe I felt nothing extraordinarily magnificent then about lines like “the wind has bundled up the clouds, high over Knocknarea” except that the sounds the words made were musical and beautiful, the image one I knew well. I saw Knocknarea after all each day on my way to school.

When I wrote my own first poems, it did not occur to me to be afraid to use some of these very selfsame place names in my own work. Sligo was my place as it had been Yeats’s place, and I would write out of and about it. I would have it as a context for many of the poems in my first collection, *The Wind Beyond the*

Wall, and I found in doing this the security and the framework I needed.

RB I may be pushing it, but are there not at least a few names that could be cited as significant influences on women writers in Ireland?

JM Yes, you really are pushing this one, but no matter. Eavan Boland, Eilean Ní Chuilleanain, Eithne Strong, and Máire Mhac an tSaoi and others have all been publishing and writing powerful poetry over the past thirty years or more, and their names do crop up, in particular Boland's. She has had an enormous impact on women writers in general in Ireland. Hers is a voice that is heard loud and clear. . . . The Irish poetry of the period 1600-1900 in *An Duanaire: Poems of the Dispossessed*, published by the Dolmen Press in 1981, contains much of the poetry learnt at school by contemporary Irish poets and much of the folk poetry which we still hear in song and ballad form. The influences are powerful even though we do not discuss this very much, if at all. For example, songs like "Cill Chais" ("Kilcash") and "Roisin Dubh" ("Little Black Rose") are still sung and are greatly loved. I feel the rhythms in my poetry and in the poetry of my contemporaries, male and female. There is no difference. So if there are reference points or influences I strongly feel they are in this tradition. It is the dramatic or storytelling voice that is most frequently heard: there is a strong emotional involvement with place. . . . Of course, Yeats, Kavanagh, Heaney, Mahon, and Kennelly have also been very influential.

RB In addition to the oral tradition and the significance of place, what are other central components of poetry written by women in Ireland today?

JM The central component of poetry written by women in Ireland is more and more, and very powerfully, simply their own experience. This is very, very good. Women are more and more turning from the "poem in the air around them," to quote Eavan Boland, and are writing about their own lives. That there are few points of reference in what went before them in the canon of Irish poetry means that there are few female poetic role models—this has its own advantages—disadvantages.

RB What do you consider to be the advantages and disadvantages of not having female poetic role models?

JM Advantages of few female poetic role models—yes. Poets have freedom to find their own voices, to find role models in voices from other cultures; I think in particular of Eastern Europe—the suffering of women, of human beings there, resembles the suffering of Ireland as a colony. Gender and colonialism is a fascinating subject to me. Disadvantages: maybe a little lost at times—maybe it takes a little longer to find courage—yes! Courage is very important and does not come easily to women writing in Ireland. That and the determination to continue. Fear of failure, fear of rejection, fear of the unknown—all date back to the Famine. Guilt, repression, lack of education in the past are all factors. Ireland was and still is a very patriarchal society. The roles of women were clearly defined by the Catholic Church and by the state. This is changing thankfully, but very slowly. Now is a good time to be a poet.

RB As a new emerging poet do you feel any significant differences between yourself and your work and those of the poets you mentioned such as Boland?

Do you feel more isolated than those poets?

JM I consider myself part of something very exciting that is presently evolving in the poetry of Ireland, and I feel proud to be alive and writing and publishing my poetry at this time. My work/world view must be somewhat different to the work/world view of those who have been “there” or established before me. I have a network of support among the entire literary community or community of living poets. In this sense there is no “isolation.” The “isolation” I experience is the one experienced by the living artist anywhere in the world, living out his or her artistic or creative life. . . . I do not feel I am writing my poetry on the margin—some people do, and with some justification, I understand. I feel the loneliness of being somewhat “different” in a small community like Tuam, County Galway, in particular. But my work is very important—this idea sustains me, that and my friends.

To “emerge” as I did as a poet, later rather than earlier, is perhaps interesting for others. For me it was not a sudden or a dramatic thing to happen. Throughout my teens I had written some poetry, but published relatively little. I married in my early twenties and subsequently had six children. I had a full-time teaching job throughout various location moves in Ireland. I constantly read poetry. When the question is put to me “and why were you not writing during those years?” the answer is quite simply that over and above the fact that I never or seldom had time alone, I also had the conviction that for me as a woman, a wife, a mother, a teacher it was not going to be possible to pursue my life as the poet I suspected I might be, in the way I would want it to be—that is, totally. Therefore you might say I deliberately waited until for me it would be the right time.

RB How do contemporary women poets connect with the women’s movement in Ireland? Are many women poets writing directly out of a feminist perspective?

JM Contemporary women poets connect in a variety of ways with feminism in Ireland. Radical, aggressive feminism does not attract many poets who otherwise consider themselves feminist in ideology. Many take no active part—simply get on with their lives and their work and publish their poetry where they can. They do not necessarily gravitate towards particularly feminist presses (like, for instance, Attic Press) for book publication in Ireland. This press publishes little poetry anyway.

Salmon Publishing in Galway deserves a mention. Under the editorship of Jessie Lendernine this press has published many poets writing out of a feminist perspective. I think there in particular of Mary Dorsey, Anne Le Marquand Hartigan, Mary O’Donnell, and Rita Ann Higgins.

Contemporary poets in general have difficulty being published in Ireland. There are literally hundreds of people writing poetry—only the excellent will manage to get on the few available publishers’ lists (and then how does one qualify “excellence”!) There is a lot of angry “poetry” being written, by women in particular. But this has its own value. Remember many, many women are finding voice for the first time regarding issues that concern them in their relationships and in their lives in general.

RB Do women poets writing today in Ireland have more access to publishing than was previously available? Which publishers are most helpful?

JM Poets, not just women poets, have easier access to publishing than, say, fiction writers. All publishers of poetry, i.e., the magazines, *Poetry Ireland*, *Cyphers*, *The Salmon*, *The Honest Ulsterman*, and *Fortnight*, encourage and welcome contributions from both men and women and are impartial, editorially, in my experience. In other words the good poem whether it is written by a man or by a woman will get published. I have personally never felt discriminated against because of my gender. It simply did not figure. If my poem was not considered suitable for publication, I got it back; if it was accepted, I received a professional letter to that effect and that was that. But—there has been a “thing” in the air that in some cases women’s writing does not receive the same treatment from publishers as their male counterparts. Many women complain of prejudice, of not receiving reviews of their work, of being marginalized. Because this has not been my personal experience does not mean that some, if not all, of these assumptions have validity. I think here of *The Field Day Anthology*’s arrogant and almost total (bar 5) exclusion of fine poetry written in the last three or more decades by women.

RB Are women poets reclaiming male-oriented, mainstream myths/histories? Are contemporary women poets writing about Cromwell like Kennelly, or Aughrim like Murphy, or the siege like Montague? Are they (re)writing well-known myths such as Cuchulainn, Fionn, Fergus, Sweeney?

JM Contemporary women writing and publishing their poetry are not writing about Cromwell and the others. To my knowledge there are no Irish female figures from history appearing. It is an intriguing thought. I have written about figures from the Bible like Martha and will continue to do so. They fascinate me personally. I use them as a metaphor for things I want to say. . . . Eavan Boland writing in “A Kind of Scar: The Woman Poet in a National Tradition” writes “Once the idea of a nation influences the perception of a woman then that woman is suddenly and inevitably simplified.” She is right. However, she goes on to argue that it is easy and intellectually seductive for a woman artist to walk away from the idea of a nation, but that she did not feel free to do so. I agree with her. Like her, I think of myself as an Irish poet even though the national poetic tradition rarely regarded a woman poet in the past as such. Women you see are now more and more the makers of their poems, not merely the subject of them. This is Boland’s central argument. . . . In my opinion many women poets in Ireland at this time are breaking silence, are becoming more and more confident that to write out of and about their own lives/experience is not only good but is very valuable.

RB Do workshops and readings play a role in women “breaking the silence”?

JM I see workshops as very important for young poets and for people like myself who come later rather than earlier to writing/publishing their poetry. Women in particular seem to need the support of a group. Rapidly one of two things happens: (a) they find a poetry “kindergarten” and settle down to a routine

heavily laced with self-congratulations, somewhat a comfort but ultimately useless in terms of the development of good poetry or even writing of same, or (b) they find an established community of writers with an open attitude toward newcomers, supportive and interested, therefore constructive. At its worst the workshop situation can be thoroughly destructive, full of petty jealousies, envy, and misplaced ambitions.

I joined the Galway Writers Workshop in the winter of 1987 and attended weekly for almost two years. On the positive side, it introduced me to a world I knew little about and to people I would otherwise possibly never have met. On the negative side, it could have destroyed me and my conviction that I might be a poet. I did not allow this to happen, but the struggle to survive was immense. Looking back at that time I now realize my native independent spirit and my long association throughout my life as a reader of poetry stood to me. I was unknown to myself then, unshakable and determined. I had poems to write and I was going to get on with it.

As for readings—these were unknown in Ireland when I was growing up in Sligo and indeed until the 1970s were a rarity. I remember hearing Patrick Kavanagh read on the radio and heard people recite Yeats aloud at our local *feiseanna* in Sligo. Now readings and poetry festivals abound in Ireland. There is one for every town and city, everybody has a party, the poets have a platform. It is a return to our old bardic tradition—great! The media love the poets. Many are household names—one, our beloved Brendan Kennelly, poet and Professor of Modern English at Trinity College Dublin, even advertises Japanese cars to the great delight of his many fans!

RB What changes or concerns do you see shaping the future of poetry written in Ireland by women?

JM I am uneasy about the future and uneasy about the shape and the content poetry written by women in this country will take. I am suspicious of too much feminist poetry getting into print as I am suspicious of irrational or rational anger about public and private obsessions or even issues themselves being printed as poetry simply because the ideology happens to be currently interesting or controversial. I worry about the ill-thought-out poem, the poorly crafted poem being published just because a woman wrote it. I am uneasy about the support systems, i.e., the self-congratulatory workshop situation which feeds on its own obsessions. However, there are certainly many talented poets being published. Long may it continue.

RB I know this is a loaded question, but based on what you have said it seems as if a woman poet's "identity" is perhaps more precarious than her male counterpart's. Are women poets in Ireland Irish, women, or poets first?

JM I simply cannot answer this question. It is like asking me to reply to the question: "Is a man in Ireland Irish, a man, or a poet first"? If a woman poet writing like her male counterpart in Ireland as anywhere else on the face of this earth is anything first, she or he is surely human. We write out of our humanity. Our gender, be it male or female, is only significant when the femininity or masculinity combines in all of us and is expressed as a truth or a revelation about the human condition in a fresh and original way, is given life in the poetry we strive to express.