

HUGH MCFADDEN

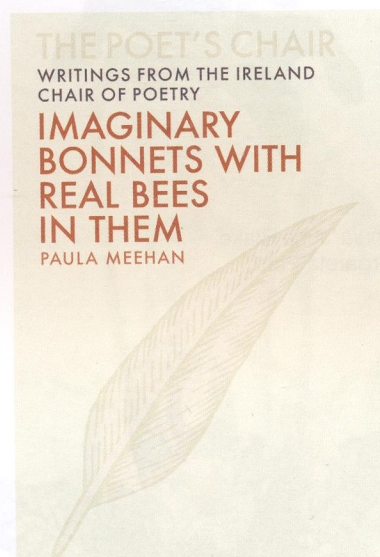
Bonnets, bees, bears and water

Imaginary Bonnets with Real Bees in Them. Paula Meehan. UCD Press; 86pp; €20 hb; 23cm; 978-1-906359-91-1.

THIS VOLUME of three public lectures, originally delivered in three university colleges, Trinity, Queen's and UCD, is the third in UCD Press's 'The Poet's Chair' series of lectures by the Ireland Professors of Poetry. The Ireland Chair of Poetry was established in 1988 after Seamus Heaney was awarded the Nobel Prize and is supported by these three universities and Ireland's two Arts Councils. The lectures of two previous Ireland Professors of Poetry, Michael Longley and Harry Clifton, were published last year. The themes of Paula Meehan's lectures might be summarised pithily as 'bees, bonnets, bears and water', or as 'magic, mythology and poetry'. They are also autobiographical memories of community, family and the journey of individuation to an understanding of selfhood.

I first met Meehan in the James Joyce Tower, Sandycove, Co. Dublin, in June 1984, when her debut collection of poetry, *Return and No Blame*, was published by Beaver Row Press. On that occasion my own first collection, *Cities of Mirrors*, was one of four published by Beaver Row: the others were *The Fly and the Bedbug* by Leland Bardwell and *Master of None* by John Borrowman. The latter two poets are no longer with us: Borrowman died in Copenhagen aged 46 in 1998, while Bardwell lived to be over 90. Meehan has written six volumes of original verse, with another collection due this year.

She prefaces this volume with a quotation from the Greek poet C.P. Cavafy's poem 'When They Come Alive': 'Try to preserve them, poet, / your visions of love / however few may stay for you. / Cast them, half hidden, into your



verse. Try to hold on to them, poet, / when they come alive in your mind / at night or in the brightness of noon.' And, indeed, she has held on to her visions and preserved them in her writing, and there are more than a few recalled here.

Allusions to classical mythology are woven into the fabric of these essays, with many references to the pantheon of ancient Greek gods and goddesses. She might just as easily have quoted from another Cavafy verse, 'Ithika', which encapsulates the idea that the journey itself is the way to insight and understanding, that the journeying is revelatory in itself.

There is much that is autobiographical in these lectures, revealing the nature of the development both of the poet herself and of her art. The first gives us the title of the book, and it was delivered at Queen's University, Belfast, on 28 November 2014. The theme is the poetic imagination, examined through the conceit of having real bees in the bonnet of her imagination, defiantly taking the accusation levelled at her by a teacher in

a school in Dublin that she had 'a bee in her bonnet' and adopting it as a motto or personal trope, turning it around courtesy of a line in a Marianne Moore poem entitled 'Poetry' which examines the qualities necessary to make real poetry out of verse, when poets become

'literalists of the imagination'—above insolence and triviality and can present for inspection 'imaginary gardens with real toads in them'.

She tells us that she first came to contemporary poetry through the lyrics of singers like Sandy Denny, Joni Mitchell, John Mayall, John Lennon, Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen and Van Morrison, before being introduced to the poetry of Rimbaud by a Dublin friend, John Borrowman, poet and one-time singer with the band The Atrix. Rimbaud led on to the counter-culture writers and then to others who were more acceptable in academe, from Theodore Roethke to Louis MacNeice and from Carol Ann Duffy to Eavan Boland, whose verse she quotes to illustrate the essay.

Bees buzz consistently in this essay's bonnet. Paula tells us that the oldest known bee is a 100-million-year-old specimen found in Myanmar (Burma), preserved in amber. She refers to the seventh-century Brehon Law on the ownership of bees, *Bechbretha*:

'When I read the Bechbretha, I feel I am connecting directly to the aboriginal mind of the ancestors. The ancestors who understood both human community and what I will call, and relish calling, "bee mind". How many generations of observing and understanding human nature, and bee nature, did it take for the following to enter consciousness, be assimilated and then expressed: "The

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man from whom bees escape and who ventures testimony that the swarm enters the land of his neighbour at swarming times: they divide in half between them the produce of that swarm, [i.e.] all produce for three years; but the source of their procreation [i.e. the bees themselves] belongs to the holding in which [the swarm] settles”.

The ancient wisdom regarding bees is used as an entry point for a meditation on the environment today and the threats to our ecosystem.

These essays combine comment on public issues with personal memories and family history, especially in the second lecture, ‘The Solace of Artemis’. The title is taken from one of Meehan’s own poems, which was inspired by research conducted in TCD, Penn State University and Oxford University and published in the journal *Current Biology*, which showed that every single polar bear alive today has mitochondrial DNA from a single ancient Irish brown bear as a result of a union during the last Ice Age, although the Irish brown bear has been extinct in Ireland for about 9,000 years.

Meehan comments: ‘This research, when I came across it, set the hare running or the bear dancing. In the face of anxiety about our future, and that of the many creatures with whom we share this amazing creation, their research offered the comfort of the longer view, the prospect that though we live in cataclysmic times, something will survive.’ But then she adds: ‘Can we live, though, with the idea that it might not be us?’

The lecture is an elaboration of the poem and examines the pre-classical goddess Artemis, whose totem is the bear. It concerns itself with bears, with



Paula Meehan.

memory, the public and historic memory, personal family history and her teachers, including the classics don W.B. Stanford at Trinity, the poet Gary Snyder at Washington State University and the Irish poet James J. McAuley at Eastern Washington University. Another influence from her time in the US was the poetry of Galway Kinnell. She mentions that Snyder’s first workshop as Distinguished Visiting Poet at Washington University may not even have mentioned the word poetry, and was all about breathing and breath control. In the midst of the memories of poetry classes in America, she also ruminates on her family of origin, which includes a link through her grandparents to James Joyce’s Monto, where they were born. It’s both a big world and a small world.

The third lecture, ‘Planet Water’, takes water as its motif, meditating on the language of water, water and the unconscious, taking it as a trope or emblem of the journey to selfhood. The essay begins with a memory of a visit last

autumn to Elizabeth Bishop’s childhood home on the banks of the Great Village River in Nova Scotia, quotes lines from Bishop’s poem ‘Sestina’ and recalls an encounter with the poet Sue Goyette. That involved a trip to have her tea leaves ‘read’ by a psychic, who instead cast a Tarot card, the Querent, and told her fortune through a mirror by scrying, or clairvoyance, which she notes often uses the medium of water. This leads back again to Gary Snyder’s poem ‘What You Should Know to be a Poet’, which she says has long since become for her a deep well that is constantly refreshed.

Her sailor’s voyage home to Howth leads into another meditation on dreams and to Seamus Heaney’s verse ‘Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces’, name-checking the Liffey and the Vikings ‘swanning it up to the ford’. And finally a fond memory of walking as a young girl with her father down Gardiner Street to the river, where he raises her on his shoulders and she sees the lights on the flowing water. Back home ‘beside Anna Livia ... a way a lone a last a loved a long the river run ...’.