

# Longley's Connemara passion

■ Acclaimed poet's work inspired by landscape and culture of the west

BY BILL HEANEY

IT was a hitch-hiking holiday around Connemara, South Mayo and the Aran Islands with his wife Edna and fellow poet Derek Mahon that turned out to be a prelude to hundreds of visits to the West of Ireland for Michael Longley.

In this first volume of *The Poet's Chair*, Longley - whose poetry has transcended political and cultural boundaries throughout his career - reflects on what has influenced his craft.

And Connemara, Westport, Leenane, Louisburgh and Inishmore feature large amongst the many places he has visited and written about.

Belfast-born Longley opens with an 'autobiography in poetry' where he recounts the poets and places that have influenced him as both a reader and writer of poetry. Longley says life in Belfast was demanding and painful in the 'Sixties because one of his friends was having a breakdown.

He writes: "We were drawn perhaps to the idea of the place, Connemara."

Longley quotes Tim Robinson, the Roundstone-based writer and map maker: "Connemara - the name drifts across the mind like cloud shadows on a mountainside, or expands and fades like circles on a lake after a trout has risen."

Longley writes that the Cleggan-base poet Richard Murphy "first attracted the attention of us Western wannabes with his majestic narratives 'Sailing to an Island' and 'The Cleggan Disaster'.

"Over the years I have been inspired by his consummate nature poems - 'Storm Petrel', 'Corncrake', 'Sea Holly' and 'Seals at High Island'.

That other Belfast poet, Louis MacNeice, whose family have clerical connections with Clifden and Omev Island, is quoted too by Longley.

MacNeice wrote: "The very name Connemara seemed too rich for any ordinary place. It appeared to be a country of windswept open spaces and mountains blazing with whins and seas that were never quiet."

Longley recalls in this odyssey around the West: "In Galway we boarded the steamer for Inishmore - a very rough crossing - there were no stabilizers on the boat - below decks Mahon and I fought off sea sickness with medicinal brandies.

"In Kilronan we hired a jaunty car that took us to our guest house."



Inishbofin from Rosadillisk near Cleggan. Scenes like these inspired Longley, Heaney and Mahon.

PICTURE: BILL HEANEY.



knees over the stone flags into the church ...

"It is striking that my first collection (of poems) and the first collections of Derek Mahon and Seamus Heaney all contain poems about the Aran Islands."

In this excellent book of prose and poems, Longley goes on to discuss his close relationships with Mahon and Heaney, who has written about Inishbofin, Maam Cross and Recess.

This is a very personal discussion about how the West of Ireland has had a deep impact on his poetry, his life, and his 'spiritual education'.

Longley's love of nature and the environment shines through and the extracts from his poems portray his deep understanding of the West.

One Wide Expanse gives readers a rare insight into the creative process of one of Ireland's leading contemporary poets who was Ireland Professor of Poetry from 2007 to 2010.

Michael Longley was educated in Belfast and went on to study Classics at Trinity College, Dublin.

His most recent collection *The Stairwell* (2014) won this year's Griffin Poetry Award.

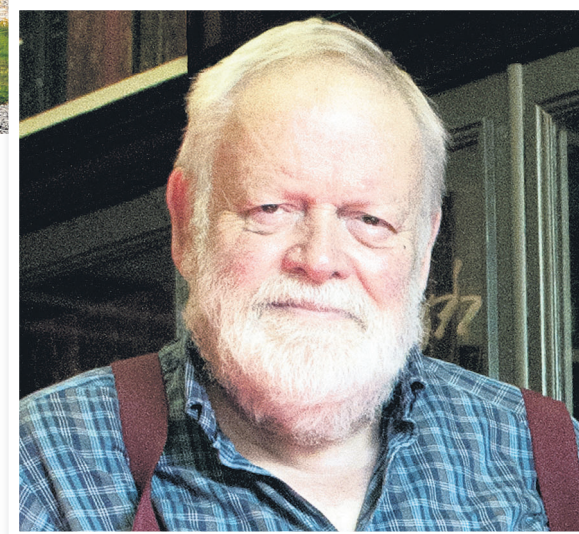
He is married to Edna Longley, a critic of modern poetry, and they have three children.

The Ireland Chair of Poetry has, since 1998, been a key element in the promotion, discussion and encouragement of poetry - both its practitioners and readers - across the island of Ireland.

John Montague, Nuala Ní

Dhomhnaill, Paul Durcan, Michael Longley, Harry Clifton have all held the role of Ireland Professor of Poetry for three years each, with Paula Meehan, the current Professor until 2016.

■ *One Wide Expanse* by Michael Longley is the first volume in *The Poet's Chair* series from UCD Press which will publish the public lectures of each of the three most recent Ireland Professors of Poetry.



Poet Michael Longley - inspired by Connemara, Mayo and the Aran Islands.

DON'T FORGET YOUR SHOVEL

CALL 090 964 2131

KellerTravel 55 YEARS  
VALUE • SERVICE • EXPERIENCE

Keller Travel Main Street, Ballinalsoe

E:info@kellertravel.ie | www.kellertravel.ie | www.campotel.com

worldchoice  
Government Licence & Bonded: TA0148