

of the woman of Beare, a *caillach* poem in Irish from the tenth century. A *caillach* is an old woman or crone, sometimes a seer.

out my youth first / And glad I did, even though "My days drinking spirits / And wine with kings are gone." Old age has at

the volume, including the fact that Ní Chuilleanáin is approaching old age herself, though with far more vigor and joy than the

graciosa.

—University of Michigan

The Poet's Chair: Writings from the Ireland Chair of Poetry

BY ALAN GILLIS

THE IRISH CHAIR OF POETRY TRUST was set up in 1998 with the main purpose of creating and supporting the role of Ireland's Professor of Poetry. This position holds the honorary status of a national laureateship, but is broadly geared towards the more egalitarian purpose of producing public lectures by leading poets. Each incumbent takes on the role for three years, and spends a year apiece attached to Queen's University Belfast, Trinity College Dublin, and University College Dublin. The centerpiece of each tenure is a public talk given at each of the three hosting institutions.

(Photo right: Michael Longley)

Michael Longley

ONE WIDE EXPANSE

DUBLIN: UNIVERSITY COLLEGE DUBLIN PRESS, 2015. €20.

Harry Clifton

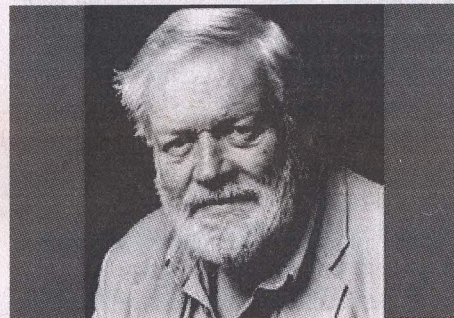
IRELAND AND ITS ELSEWHERE

DUBLIN: UNIVERSITY COLLEGE DUBLIN PRESS, 2015. €20.

While it's a shame that, say, Cork, Limerick, or Galway are not involved to stretch the role beyond Ireland's east coast, the project has otherwise been a purely good thing. So far, John Montague, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Paul Durcan, Michael Longley, Harry Clifton and Paula Meehan have taken the reins. This represents a happily broadish spectrum, not least in the way they have responded to the task of giving their talks. I remember Montague's inaugural lecture in Belfast being delivered

Montague, Ní Dhomhnaill and Durcan) in 2008. More recently, UCD Press has committed to publishing the three lectures of each poet as soon as possible after their stint is completed. And with the publication of Longley's and Clifton's lectures, it must immediately be stated that they have done a remarkable job (Meehan's lectures were subsequently published in the same rich format after the commission of this review).

What beautiful books! These slim and elegant hardbacks are objects to be treasured, sitting like deluxe poetry books in the hand. If the truism that form and content cannot be separated is at the heart of poetry, UCD Press have extended that apprehension to these lectures about poetry. Compared to the mediums through which one now reads most lit criticism, this is like the difference



between holding a well-produced vinyl LP in its artful sleeve, relative to glancing at the name of a song on a phone screen. Wonderfully, the books themselves manifest the suppleness and care of the thoughts inside, physically impressing on the reader that this is not something merely to consume then throw away. These books feel like a raising of the bar, for which the publishers deserve utmost kudos and praise.

Longley's lectures (delivered 2008-2010) are directly concerned with his own

In poetry criticism, just as in any discourse about art, it is nowadays rare to encounter someone willing and able to convey the joy, excitement, pleasure, value and fulfilment they get from their chosen art. This is what Longley does. He quotes lines he loves, long enough for his reader to get a sense of them. His lectures are filled with poems, and his own words are at the service of these. Even on the page, it's clear his chief desire is for you to hear them anew.

By contrast, one is often unsure whether Clifton is citing a poem with approval or disapproval. His approach is more geared towards a critical appraisal of the relationship between historical reality and the lyric. His style is geared towards letting readers appraise poems for themselves once he has dropped them into an exacting awareness of the historical stakes within which the poems, and our appreciation of them, exist.

As it happens, both approaches turn out to be thrilling. Longley's celebration of poetry is infectious, drawing the reader into its "jovial hullabaloo" (Wallace Stevens's phrase, which gives the title to Longley's first lecture) in which "the meaning cannot be detached from the melody." The opposite of disposable language, or what he calls "verbal polystyrene," his sense of poetry is myriad-minded. Towards the end he writes: "I have tried to 'sing about everything'." He revels in the grounded and earthy; he reveres subtlety and grace. A muse poet to the core, he prefers to keep the mechanics of technique (of which he is such a master) at a distance. For him, "being a poet is different from being a writer," and poems are held as gifts. Yet his lecture on the Classics gives as good and insightful an

charged sense of value, most to the fore in the last lecture on the West. This is essential "ecocritical" reading, in which Longley spells out the context for his pastoral verse: "The whole island is under threat: contaminated lakes, fish-kills, ruthless overgrazing, "bungalow blight", chemical overkill, building on flood plains, oil spills." Perhaps more strikingly, he gives a truly radical sense of where he perceives himself to be, when he takes up residence on his beloved Mayo coast: at the hub of a vast and intricate global culture in which the great migrations of the birds above, and those taking place beneath the waves, can be apprehended. We are being "parochial" when we ignore such enormities and limit ourselves to our human world, he argues: "Carrigskeewaun is not really a 'remote corner': it is a focal point, a nerve centre."

This kind of radical reorientation of where we are, this shifting of our parameters, shaking up the way we should be looking at things, is Clifton's forte in his very different lectures. His is a bold and unapologetically diagnostic approach, dependent upon perceiving the world through vast, and rather absolute, concepts. Perhaps his key argument is to equate Irish poetry as essentially lyrical but lacking intelligence. He claims: "Irish poetry, to this day, identifies with its lyric self," and argues that there is nothing that decays quicker" than "lyricism ... with the intellectual spine removed." In this reboot of Matthew Arnold's argument about "Celticism," where lovely Celtic sentiment must be married to hard Saxon rationality, Dante's Europe replaces Arnold's England as the place where Irish poetry might find its intellectual backbone and become whole.

In the subsequent lecture, America is

in a low-key and informal manner, rich in anecdote, and improvised asides about his own work and experiences. Some years later, Durcan's approach was strikingly different, as he read off the page a hugely detailed and impassioned paean to Anthony Cronin, not mentioning himself once.

Not all poets are happy in prose, but by obliging each poet to articulate something about their work and craft, while negotiating the balance between "public talk" and "university lecture" (or as Harry Clifton puts it, between the "Alexandrian world of scholarship and the rag and bone shop of the heart where poems are made"), a varied and fascinating archive of lectures has now emerged. The continuity of the talks, combined with the diversity found within them, ensures that the printed form of the lectures is fast becoming a rewarding and insightful, perhaps even crucial, body of literature for anybody interested in Irish poetry today.

The Lilliput Press published the first nine of these lectures (three apiece from

work and sensibility. The first offers "an autobiography in poetry," expressing what he loves about poetry, and discussing poets that have meant most to him. The second examines his love of the Classics and the importance of Greek and Latin poetry to his own work, while the third explores the presence of the West of Ireland in his verse, in his life, and in his general worldview.

Clifton's lectures (delivered 2011-2013) offer a strikingly different approach, avoiding direct discussion of his own verse and taking a more "cold-eyed" and analytic tone, albeit towards themes that clearly provide crucial contexts for his own verse and career. The first discusses the "New Poetry" generation rising in Britain in the late eighties and early nineties, and focuses on the spread of geographically and culturally devolved poetic authority, the breaking down of ivory towers, the taking on of urban subject-matter, working-class perspectives and diction. The second discusses Irish poetry in relation to Europe, the third in relation to the U.S.

On Irish poets in America, he cites a Thomas Moore poem declaiming Thomas Jefferson, declaring a wish to live anywhere than in America: "where bastard freedom waves / Her fustian flag in mockery over slaves." Clifton then asks, deadpan: "Would an Irish poet, with a career to make in the United States, address an American president like that today?" Of course, the question is different now, in the current age of Trump, than when Clifton asked it, in the glow of Obama. But his mockery of Irish poetry's cap-in-hand American captivation still spikes. Especially when he claims: "Strictly speaking there is no need for the poet to go to America at all, for he already exists in a post-real, if not posthumous state of the soul he has moved over into, where

everything, though perfectly in focus, is oddly affectless, stripped of value."

This omniscience of the ahistorical post-modern is keenly posed in his lecture on Europe also. Clifton argues: "there can be few in contemporary Irish poetry, north or south, who have not been forced to question the privilege underpinning the space of making—the liberal space—made available to us." He sees the Irish poet as working in a "subsidised dreamspace ... dismissed by Marxist critic Lukács as 'power-protected inwardness'." Ineluctably collusive with postmodernity's dark empire, Clifton sees the poet as a "self-hating liberal, guilty bystander" forever cast on a fruitless "search for something to refuse."

entirely defined through postmodern theory's notions of reality displaced into a free-floating, dehistoricized, commodified phantasmagoria. Clifton writes of "the replacement of time in the historical sense with some kind of shimmering flux in an eternal American present." He summons Czeslaw Milosz's notion of "the Feast of Insubstantiability." He defines "American space" as "a strange mixture of fulfilments, erotic and financial, with intangible, metaphysical unreality."

He has been a more reticent critic than his immediate peers Heaney, Mahon and Boland, making this book even more invaluable. He recounts admitting to Boland, in their youth: "I have never been much good in intellectual debate." But he is most certainly sharp-witted and analytically adroit, able to summarize the world of his career in sentences that flash by yet are themselves set-pieces well worth re-reading and dwelling upon. For example, he refers in passing to "the poetic trade in general and what it involves: careerism, fashion, fame, obscurity, integrity, contamination, factionalism, camaraderie, intrigue, transitoriness, failure."

There are telling autobiographical details in the book, bursting with charm. He recounts a trip to Inishmore by the young Derek Mahon and himself: "huddled in an attic bedroom in our inflammable sleeping bags, chain-smoking." But there is also a

There is a need for Clifton's arguments to be tested against the contradictory and complex evidence of detail. The positive alternative to this endless flattening out of post-capitalist non-history is offered in the lectures, when Clifton speaks affirmatively of "re-establishing a vertical hierarchy of meaning and value again from a spiritual landscape"; and then again when he speaks up for "the physical, the local, the permanent, for the vertical hierarchy of values and the continuity of the self from one day to the next." One is tempted to say regarding vertical hierarchies, that, well, they're likely to have a downside as well as an upside. Like the work of earlier poets such as Denis Devlin and Brian Coffey, the radical

immediacy of Clifton's rhetoric may well stem from a highly conservative worldview. Yet undeniably, this is stirring stuff. Both these books honor the sumptuous packaging they have received. Far from decadent fancies, these gorgeously produced books are full of wisdom, wit and fire, exploring above all else how Irish verse is not a limited pursuit, but is a living part of our culture cutting to the heart of how we might think, how we might live, what we might do. Both books should be read by anyone with an interest not just in Irish poetry, but in Irish culture and its changing place in the world today.

No doubt, if one was to poke at his central concepts a little, they might become problematic. Like all essentialisms, they steamroller any sense of the particular. Yet Clifton's ideas are nonetheless powerful. And more to the point, he rhetorically wields them with felicitous provocation and undeniable bite, making these lectures on Europe and America two of the most perspicacious intercessions into how we think about Irish poetry in recent memory.

There's a rather delicious, impish goading behind much of Clifton's rhetoric.

—University of Edinburgh