

Headlands and Hamlets

Conor O'Callaghan, *Seatown*. Gallery Press, £6.95

If there was a Martello tower for every promontory, harbour-mouth, peninsula or spit of land an Irish poet had stood on, pondering the whys and wherefores of staying or going, Ireland's would be the best defended coastline since the Napoleonic Wars. There is always room for one more, however, and it runs out, at the end of this book, in the form of an extended lyric called "Slip".

There is no time
to dwell on metaphors
for an aimless life.

There is just long enough
to saunter down
in shirt-sleeves,

to whistle strands
of an unplaced air,
then call it a day.

Before the haze swells.
Before the tide
Comes round again.

Its whereabouts, if I read the built-in topography of the poem and indeed the whole sequence correctly, is somewhere to the east of Dundalk, hitherto not a region noted for magnetising poetic talent—though Patrick Kavanagh might not agree. Indeed, it is Kavanagh with his "But nothing whatever is by love debarred. / The common and banal her heat can know", who lays down the blueprint Conor O'Callaghan is following here, where the challenge is to quarry some kind of transcendence, any kind of transcendence, from the obstinately quotidian, stared at unflinchingly. There the resemblance ends,

however, for there is nothing of Kavanagh's redemptive vision in O'Callaghan, a citizen of post-modern Ireland whose tone is resolutely anti-ecstatic, who is nearer in spirit to the Hard Men of Huddersfield, Hull and Dundee than the mystic light of Iniskeen. Mind you, "East", a poem dismissive of the legendary afflatus that lends so much coloration to Irish poetry, is one even Kavanagh might have gone along with.

I know it's not playing Gaelic, it's simply not good enough,
to dismiss as someone else's all that elemental Atlantic guff.
And to suggest everything's foreign beyond the proverbial pale
would amount to a classic case of hitting the head on the nail.

But give me a dreary eastern town that isn't vaguely romantic,
where moon and stars are lost in the lights of the greyhound track
and cheering comes to nothing and a flurry of misplaced bets
blanketing the stands at dawn is about as spiritual as it gets.

Whatever about affinity or otherwise with Kavanagh, the intonation of that poem is instantly recognisable as Louis MacNeice's "Bagpipe Music", and it is MacNeice rather than Kavanagh who stands, stylistically at least, behind many of the more characteristic effects in this collection. The long wobbly lines, with their loose rhyme and their tendency to itemise and inventorise in, for instance, the two "Seatown" poems, might easily have belonged in another paean to an eastern seaboard town, MacNeice's "Carrickfergus".

Last straw for the panel beaters only just closed down
and the dole office next to the barracks and the gold
of beer spilled on the pavements of Saturday afternoon.

Home from home for the likes of us and foreign boats
and groups with oilskins and unheard-of currencies
in search of common ground and teenage prostitutes.

Poor man's Latin Quarter of stevedores and an early house
and three huge silos swamped by the small hours
and the buzz of joyriders quite close on the bypass.

("Seatown")

The influence of MacNeice notwithstanding, these "Seatown" poems or a poem like "East" are among the very best in a finely written sequence, keeping faith with a grey reality that nevertheless has a heart at its core. Elsewhere, that fidelity edges away into reflex melancholia, a morbid Larkinesque wallowing in defeat for its own sake. At

such times, *Seatown* ceases to be the locus for a difficult act of self-definition, and becomes instead a circle Dante accidentally left out of his *Inferno*, the Hell of the Perpetually Cheesed Off, chained to ansafones, personal computers and television screens, railing at nerdy neighbours and fouled pavements, being mizzled on by Irish rain, enduring the Christ-awful boredom of Sunday drinking with a dead week in prospect.

It is the realm of men
and boys joined in boredom,
the way of life that sees
one day on a par
with the next and school breaks
dragged out too long.

(“Pitch & Putt”)

The pressing of technique into the service of a misery half in love with itself is one of those things O’Callaghan has to watch. Escape, through time-travel, doesn’t necessarily bring us into more idyllic realms either. These are lines from “The Gate Lodge” which I take to be a throwback to earlier, freer times, seen retrospectively.

One afternoon, for something to do as much as anything,
we fucked on the mattress on the boards upstairs,

and fell asleep, and woke there stuck to each other
and to someone else’s cast-off flannel sheets.

That “for something to do as much as anything” is what gets to me there. So it was as boring and banal back then as it is now? Or are we dealing here with an attitude so programmatically anti-ecstatic that it amounts to an affectation in itself? Much better, in the realm of love-dalliance, is the excellent “Green Baize Couplets” which manages to transcend, by a lightness of tone, the depressive agenda too many of the others follow as a matter of course.

After her kiss on the green, my unexpected cannon,
we go to the mid-session interval with honours pretty much even.

Just as you join us, she has given me a shot to nothing,
and I am just about to reply by pinning her to the cushion.

In any chosen life, such as this one of marriage and family in Dundalk, a defensiveness can express itself by ironic sketchings of possible alternatives. Why go to Ravenna, for instance, when all you will see is

the same wilderness of light industry, bypasses and marshy ground as exists around Dundalk? Well, his poetic mentor MacNeice went, and this is what he found:

The flat lands now
Are ruled by a sugar refinery and a church,
Sant' Apollinaire in Classe. What do I remember of Ravenna?
A bad smell mixed with glory, and the cold
Eyes that belie the tessellated gold.

O'Callaghan on the other hand, who seems never to have been there, wants his compensatory Ravenna to include only the sugar refinery and the bad smell. The tessellated gold, which meant so much to that other Irish poetic visitor to Ravenna, William Yeats, that he wrote the Byzantium poems out of the experience, is expunged from the younger poet's more reductive vision.

I'll go in the late season and probably discover
that it's not much different from Portrush or Tramore.

The streets will be littered with chips, the facades
buried under the names of amusement arcades.

Saturdays will screech with gulls and bumper cars
and teenagers from the marshes cruising the wine bars.

So that's Ravenna. Yeats saw only the gold, MacNeice the gold and the sugar refinery, O'Callaghan only the sugar refinery. Let finer minds than mine address themselves to the Irish—European evolution behind that, if they haven't already. In the meantime, the message is the usual post-modern one that everywhere equals everywhere else, and it's all nothing anyway, or a "familiar gulf across which nothing shines".

The chosen life, of course, implies commitment. Limited it may be, but at least a decision has been made. Which, I take it, is not the case with "Anon.", the figure behind the excellent poem of that name, whose life, however glamorous or half-autobiographical, is an elaborate map of evasion, ending up, like Larkin's Mister Bleaney, in a solitary room somewhere.

But no interest when she cries,
and no ambitions for the past.
No two ways, no ties,
no cheques, no questions asked.

Nor resolutions either way
to go or leave things the same,
throw all again or stay.
What am I? What's my name?

So here we are again, with the poet on his headland, weighing the pros and cons of the chosen life. One knows in advance, I suppose, that Hamlet-like, he will ask himself the perennial Irish question to-go-or-not-to-go, and then return to the hamlet. Is that maturity or another attempt at having it both ways, at straddling the fault-line between domestic bliss and poetic intensity? This carefully balanced collection, which I warmly recommend to all potential readers, offers no answer to those questions. Every Irish poet, perhaps, should be given one chance to stand out there on the shifting shoals of indecision—as long as he or she doesn't make a career out of it.