

*Michael Hartnett: A Memoir*

I think it was in the autumn of 1963 in U.C.D. at Earlsfort Terrace that I first met Michael Hartnett. I cannot recollect the precise circumstances of our first encounter but I am sure it involved the English Lit. Society and Eamon Grennan, the late Liam Hourican and others who were associated with the Society and the magazine *St Stephen's*.

Some of Michael's first poems had been published by John Jordan in the first issue of *Poetry Ireland* (stylishly and prestigiously renewed by Liam Miller's Dolmen Press). John had invited Michael up to Dublin from Newcastle West for the launch of the magazine in the Bailey. As Michael was to tell me later, this was a bit of a disaster for him. He knew scarcely anyone at the launch, had a few pints too many, and when a middle-aged gentleman sitting at the same pint-laden table as Michael asked him what he thought of a poem that began "I am here in a garage in Monaghan", Michael naively expressed an unfavourable judgement, remarking on the poem's crudity, in his opinion. An uproar ensued, the table was upturned and Michael got an earful of expletives directed at him. That was Michael's first meeting with Patrick Kavanagh.

But to continue. With characteristic generosity, John Jordan committed himself to paying Michael's college fees, and this is how Michael happened to find himself in U.C.D. Later on, he would receive financial support from another generous patron, James Liddy (editor and publisher of *Arena*). Without such assistance it is unlikely that Michael would have entered U.C.D. His background was working-class Newcastle West and in those days he would not have received a grant; moreover, Michael never showed any academic ambition. He arrived in U.C.D., indeed he arrived in Dublin, AS A POET.

Of all the poets in U.C.D. at the time, and there were Paul Durcan, Macdara Woods, Brian Lynch, Eamon Grennan, to

mention just a few, Michael was indisputably *the* poet. All of us at the time knew that. Right from the beginning, his poetry was accomplished, polished, made of gold, and he was minting it in abundance. Not even Lorca began his poetic career so spectacularly. Speaking for myself (and possibly for others) I was in awe of his genius with language. By comparison, the rest of us were apprentices of various degrees of promise. Michael was the real thing.

From the beginning, it was evident that Michael was a hopeless student. I wasn't much better myself. U.C.D. was a place to meet rather than a place to attend lectures or to do something as mundane as study for exams. Kavanagh was holding his raucous court in McDaid's and there, too, could be found the Monaghan poet's new discoverers, John Jordan and James Liddy. Penniless young poets were treated to drinks by these two generous patrons and some others, and the place had a kind of attractive (at least for us) bohemian atmosphere in a squalid sort of way. It was when McDaid's disgorged its inebriated clientele that Michael and myself got together to make our way home. As I was living in Sheriff Street and Michael was living in digs in a cul-de-sac off the North Strand, we made our way home together. It is the Michael of that time that I care to remember best though we remained friends until his atrociously premature death.

Our commonly shared working-class background was a strong bond between us. It enabled us to share intimacies and confidences that might otherwise have been difficult. It was patently clear to me that Michael was extremely intelligent, had a razor-sharp wit and was a wonderful storyteller. He observed the Dublin literary scene dispassionately and often cynically. He had no tolerance for literary "characters", no matter what their reputation was. He admired Yeats as a "business man" and thought that every young poet should pay attention to how Yeats had set about making his career. The irony of all this, unfortunately, is to be found in Michael's later life. But that's another story for another time.

Although Liam Miller can be said to have seriously launched Michael as a poet with *Anatomy of a Cliché* in 1968, it was the publication of his *Selected Poems* by New Writers' Press in 1970 that brought him into prominence. My arrangement with Michael for the issuing of this book was that I would buy him a

pint for every poem in the book. Weeks before his death, in a very strange telephone conversation he had with my wife Irene and myself, he joked about how many pints I still owed him.

For many years before he died, Michael and myself saw little of each other. We would meet from time to time, accidentally in the street, or in O'Neill's pub while he was working in the then International Telephone Exchange. We were going our separate ways. I delighted in his awards and the recognition he was receiving. But I was very concerned about what was happening to him both as a person and as a poet.

Poets are not like novelists who generally need long stretches of time to devote to their work (however bad it may be). The muse of poetry, however, is dangerously fickle. A poet can be "written out", and for good, at any time. What then? And if one has based one's social and personal identity on being a poet? The risk involved is a great deal more serious than is generally recognised (and directors of Creative Writing Schools should bear this in mind). Better, at least so far as sanity is concerned, to let one's poetry come out of living than live to write poetry. That's just my own opinion.

I think there are few who would disagree with my judgement that Michael was the most talented poet of his generation. He had what one can only call genius. The sort of genius that Lorca had: natural and at the same time highly cultivated. I am loathe to say it, but I sometimes think that the tragedy of Michael's life was that he wanted acceptance by Irish society at large as a poet in the way that his beloved Gaelic poets of the past had been accepted, as an important and integral member of their own society. Despite the awards it bestowed on him, Irish society of his time could not offer that. It is a lesson Thomas Kinsella learnt, who now pursues his solitary path and makes his offerings to us with a take-it-or-leave attitude.

It is not my intention to conclude on a pessimistic note. The body of poetry Michael has left us is something to be treasured. It is a thing of great beauty, to use an old-fashioned word. It is full of wise insights and miraculous graces of language. It embodies an Irishness we will be the poorer for ignoring: a sense of shared values, a disdain for crude materialism, a respect for tradition where that is wholesome, a delight in nature and an awareness of, and an openness to the bigger world we share with others.

*Postscript*

Having shown my wife Irene this memoir, she reminds me of a little event which took place all those years ago. I had met Eavan Boland in O'Dwyer's of Lesson Street. Michael was present on the occasion. After a time Irene left, as she admits, in a huff of jealousy. Michael left with her. Before entering St. Stephen's Green, Michael asked Irene if she had any money to buy another round of drink. Having searched her purse, Irene produced a three-penny piece, all that she had in her possession on the evening. Michael said it would do to make up the price of a pint, but he would have to compensate Irene for this. Both of them sat down on a bench outside the Green, and Michael tore open a cigarette pack and began to write on it in his beautiful calligraphy. In minutes he produced, appropriately, a haiku, three lines of compliment to Irene's generosity. It was just enough to make up the price of a pint for Michael, justifying his return to the pub without having to ingratiate himself. Irene deeply regrets the loss of that little poem. But that little story tells so much about Michael: his amazing courtesy and his wonderful skill at verse improvisation. Michael entitled the poem "A Trupenny Poem To Irene". Even now Irene bitterly regrets having lost it. She believes that in some strange way it encapsulates Michael's character. She also reminds me that Michael gave us our first cat, which she called Franklin in homage to another Irish poet by the name of Trevor Franklin Joyce. He was a wonderful cat, worthy of both poets.