

INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL DONAGHY



Conor O'Callaghan

Michael Donaghy was born of Irish parents in the Bronx in 1954. He studied at Fordham University and the University of Chicago, and worked as poetry editor for *Chicago Review*. He has lived in London since 1985. To date, he has published two acclaimed collections with the Oxford University Press. *Shibboleth* appeared in 1988, winning the Whitbread Poetry Prize of that year and the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Award of 1989. *Errata* appeared in 1993, and was chosen for the Poetry Society's New Generation Poets promotion in 1994. The following interview with Conor O'Callaghan took place in Galway on 18 April 1997, during the Cúirt festival.

CO'C: *I'd like to begin by asking you to say something about your background.*

MD: My father was from Belfast, my mother was from Tralee, and they came over to the States in '49-'50, and I was born in 1954 in the Bronx. But somewhere between the ages of one and four we tried to move back again, so I lived briefly in Belfast and Tralee as a child. As a matter of fact, we lived right across the street from where Ciaran Carson lives now. Then we moved back and we lived in the South Bronx. I don't want to over-dramatize the South Bronx, but I'm here talking to you now because I kept my head down. Once, long before my family emigrated, that area was predominantly Irish. In fact the area that I grew up in was known in the heyday of the recording of Irish traditional music as the "Reel Factory" because there were a lot of tunes coming out of the area. But mostly where I grew up was a black and Puerto Rican neighbourhood, and we were part of a white minority in a black majority.

My parents played a little Irish music, and my mother sang. My father was also fond of recitations, so there was a lot of stuff like the dreaded Robert Service in the house. I heard a lot of that. But, although he left school at fifteen or so, he kept a lot of books around the house. He was an autodidact. There were a lot of anthologies of poetry. So I fell in love, as many young poets do, with the work of Dylan Thomas, among others. In those days the anthologies in the States, the older paperbacks edited by people like Oscar Williams, incorporated a lot of British and some Irish

poets. So you could buy Austin Clarke or Ted Hughes or Dylan Thomas in those anthologies.

CO'C: *You worked for a time as poetry editor for Chicago Review, and published an American collection. What is the poetry publishing culture like in America?*

MD: I didn't publish a full collection in America. It was a little volume called *Slivers* which was more in the way of a chapbook, and was in fact never properly distributed. I'm sure it's still wrapped in cling-film under my publisher's desk in Chicago, where I found myself accidentally editing the poetry part of the *Chicago Review*. I enjoyed doing it. I "discovered" a number of poets. It was exciting to be able to push work that excited me. Poetry in the States is just overwhelming. There are over 250 Creative Writing programmes, all of those people publishing slim volumes of verse that hardly anyone reads. It's strange to say this, it's the opposite of censorship but just as oppressive. If someone can be silenced by the armed guard at the door saying no one can speak or whisper, then someone can be silenced because everyone is screaming. It's all very Balkanized, very tribalized.

CO'C: *Signs and signatures are recurring concerns in early poems like "Smith", and in the more recent poem "L" you have a driving tester tell you "It's all a question of giving—proper—signals". Is there a furtive semiology at work in your poems?*

MD: I was doing a PhD at the University of Chicago, and had the honour of being asked to leave the room by Paul de Man. I found myself immersed in all this theory, and many of the concerns must have seeped into what I was writing. But looking back on my work, these concerns preceded my acquaintance with Derrida & co. I was always fond of literary hoaxes. The fake Welsh translations in *Shibboleth* are very old. When I was at university I attended a few meetings of the Jung Foundation—God knows why—and I remember dropping a reference to a North African Gnostic belief that physical beings are all 3D hieroglyphics in an infinite text being written by God. Of course I made it up. The thing is, I later read it in one of their papers reported as fact. I love that sort of thing, like the conspirators in Borges's story who forge entries in the encyclopaedia.

I began to think of it as the opposite to literature. I thought I'd do a degree in literature because I loved literature, then I realized that my colleagues hated literature. It's like saying that I decided to do vivisection because I loved animals. It's not the same thing, is it? They're not interest-

ed in literature, and they also despise actual living working writers. As writers we have no illusions about ourselves. We're ordinary men. We're not bards or special people. And yet when a writer is in a room with a critic, the critic develops an inferiority complex that he tends to over-compensate for. The critic thinks "I am a real scholar, this person is a paid entertainer". I certainly miss the intellectual energy of theory, I enjoy the mental energy one expends unravelling these obfuscations in the same way that I enjoy a good run. But it's not the same as being intellectually rigorous.

CO'C: *In one of your most celebrated poems, "Machines", you come to the conclusion that "The cyclist, not the cycle, steers". Would you say that you have a heightened sense of poetry's artifice?*

MD: I do. But that line, "The cyclist, not the cycle, steers", is only half the truth. It's strange. I came upon an interview with John Ashbery in *The New York Quarterly* not so long ago, referring to his early use of forms like the sestina. He liked the form of the sestina rather than more conventional forms like the sonnet. I don't know what he understands by the word "conventional"—what could be more conventional than a sestina? He enjoyed the way that it was sometimes like going downhill on a bicycle, and having the pedals move your feet—which is an interesting mechanical metaphor for something that I've noticed. When you're working with a resistant form, you negotiate with form, and negotiation allows for serendipity. So it's only half true to say "The cyclist, not the cycle, steers".

CO'C: *But it begins, or should begin, as a conscious act. You have no mystical pretensions as a poet?*

MD: Well you see now, if someone were to ask you a question like "Do you believe in God?" there's something almost rude about that question for an intellectual. It merely reduces it to a question of semantics. There's nothing mystical about the work. The Muse, what's the Muse? The Muse I believe is an expression for the unconscious. It's an acceptable term. It's an allegorical term, like Socrates always referring to the gods in a similar way I think. I don't use the term the Muse, but I understand its use, I understand what it means.

CO'C: *You have said that the strongest influences on your work have been pre-twentieth century. Who, and how does that work?*

MD: Donne, Herbert, the metaphysical poets. Shakespeare! I'm also very interested in the convention of the conversation poem as practised by Wordsworth and Coleridge. It can be epistolary, narrative and dramatic all at the same time. But why do poets only ever cite poets as influences? I've

learned as much from the syntax of Defoe or John Lyly as I have from verse.

CO'C: *Your work has also been linked with contemporary American formalists like Richard Wilbur and Anthony Hecht. How accurate is that?*

MD: That's very flattering. I hope it's accurate. I'm a great admirer of both Hecht and Wilbur. I think Wilbur's a great poet. He has such a good ear. I think he gets ignored. I'm a great admirer of Hecht's as well, but I think people would want to take a second look at Richard Wilbur. He often has the one point to make and he keeps on making it about things of this world, the quotidian. His is an anti-mystical, an anti-idealist stance. There's a poem of his called "The Mindreader" which is a very great poem.

CO'C: *You're not so strict on form as Hecht or Wilbur. A poem like "Alas, Alice" uses the possible rhyming structure in prose stanzas.*

MD: Well that's because the poem is only rhythm—so much so that it seemed unnecessary to lineate it as verse. I've sometimes approached it at the opposite angle: the title poem of *Errata* was originally written in prose and worked on until I discovered lines taking shape. Coming back to the thing about form and experimentalism, I find that people always talk about influences, but you know, negative influence is very powerful. I think Charles Olson is a very great influence on my work, in that I don't see the point. I find his poetry boring and I find his critical writing absurd. Experimentalism is a very romantic concept. Modernism has given us great poetry, exciting stuff, but I'm against the concept of the avant-garde. It ended years ago when conventional culture accepted it as another "style". There's a ruse that bourgeois art pleases and mollifies the bourgeoisie with received notions of beauty, whereas avant-garde art shocks and outrages. Which is ridiculous. The audience for avant-garde art is a middle-class audience that pays to be shocked or outraged or bored, in the same way that the phone cards on the booths of the kiosks in London read: "You've been a naughty boy. Ring Miss Wanda now". A poem consisting of semicolons is not going to bring down the superpowers, and yet, people like the $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ poets in America, who are in that tradition, really believed that they were changing things. Now there are well-funded academic conferences on oppositional poetry, and $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ poetry, yet while they're attending these or receiving fat cheques from the Saatchi gallery, the avant-garde still believes that it's opposed to late Capitalist culture.

CO'C: *On a topical point, Allen Ginsberg died recently. He was somebody who*

made a career out of opposition to mainstream poetry as embodied by Hecht and Wilbur. How do you value his work?

MD: It's possible now, in American schools, to take an exam on Allen Ginsberg and fail it. There's a market for being opposed to mainstream culture. I don't want to say anything about poor Ginsberg now that he's dead, but there was a time when he'd shock everybody at poetry readings by taking off his clothes and running around the stage. Towards the end of his life, he would sit there quietly in his tweed suit, while people would give lectures on his work. Early on he liked to give the impression that poems like "Howl" were written rapidly in a fever of Beat improv, when in fact they were carefully worked out in successive draughts. And I have no problem with any if this, my only problem is with the self-delusion involved when artists/writers/poets believe they are opposed to mainstream culture and they are just playing their part. That romantic idea, as it stands, began with advertising. "Throw that away, and buy this. That is the old style, this is the new style." That's consumerism. You can't be an oppositional poet unless you abandon the concept of the avant-garde.

CO'C: *But your work is not intensely formal in the way that Hecht's and Wilbur's is?*

MD: But I realize that I can move away from it too. I'll deliberately mess it up in the way that a drummer "drops a bomb"—throws in a little extra polyrhythm. Any musician knows this: you have to create a recognizable pattern, a groove, to provide a ground against which a figure can be perceived. I think what you're saying is that I don't write straight sonnets. In fact I have done—take "The Present" in *Shibboleth*. It's just typographicaly disguised. I do believe verse is an aural form. For me it's a musical form. So I don't ever count syllables because I don't believe we hear syllables, we hear beats. There's something absurd about syllabics in English. The haiku may be a great form in Japanese but in English you have to forgo the natural rhythms of the language for a Dalek-like monotony.

CO'C: *You work as a musician. How different are these two jobs, do they complement or inform each other? At what point does the creative impulse diverge between poetry and music?*

MD: They're of a piece, in one sense. I play Irish traditional music, and I feature on a cd with a Jazz band called Lammas with Don Paterson playing guitar and I've worked with a sampling composer, John Wall, using sample speech, building up music from spoken voices. It's experimental with a small e. I'm as interested in that kind of music as I am in traditional

music. I think it's the same impulse all round in fact. The same satisfaction you get from the reel can be held in the mind's hand all at once—it's almost tactile. You internalize the sixteen beats and that's the ground on which you play the tune, and I feel the same is true of the poem. At the unconscious level, it's like a watch, as in "your eyes are getting heavy", a hypnotist's watch, familiar from end-of-the-pier shows. This is why Plato threw poets out of the Republic, because the form reaches you below the conscious level. Prose is the language of doubt and circumspection, and verse is the hypnotist's watch. The struggle for poets is how to use the hypnotist's tools to wake up the reader.

CO'C: *Your place of birth, your ancestry and your current home would appear to give you access to three literary traditions. How distinct are those traditions and to which do you feel closest?*

MD: They're all very mixed up at this stage. Growing up in the Spanish-speaking neighbourhood of the South Bronx, my parents told me that I was not American but Irish. I remember they were very hurt when I would say to them, "But I am American." I always felt like an outsider and could never really get into American literary nationalism, which is very strong. People are constantly competing to be the "New American Voice". I was never concerned with being nationally anything, but with just writing the poem. I really don't see the point of all that. I think this particularly now that I'm living in Britain and when I look back on American literature, and particularly modernist poets like William Carlos Williams who were rabid Anglophobes, and hated everything about Britain, as did Pound after his success soured—he went off Britain completely. American literature has an enormous inferiority complex. William Carlos Williams hated Eliot: he always considered his emigration a great betrayal; he seemed to take it personally.

CO'C: *I think Frost said that Eliot abandoned America and never quite reached England.*

MD: I think Frost was wrong. History has shown us a thoroughly anglicized Eliot adopted by the English, and a sanitized and canonized Pound adopted by the Americans. I've been looking at this. The New Formalists really brought it to a head. Some of these people are friends of mine and I'm willing to take any help that they're prepared to give me, but I have to say that I don't want to be a part of any movement: it's all PR—it boxes you in, and I don't like that. I hate manifestoes, consciously saying: "I write a certain way, and this is the way I'm going to write". I think Larkin said it's fatal to decide what a good poem is, because you are honour-bound to

write that poem instead of the poem you're meant to write. If I had to choose one positive attribute of the jumble of styles critics are pleased to call "postmodern", it's the freedom and eclecticism that keeps writer and reader constantly alert.

CO'C: *To what extent have you ever considered yourself an Irish poet?*

MD: I was at Fordham University as an Undergraduate and did a course using Kinsella's translation of the Táin. My first year Eng. Lit. teacher there, Mary FitzGerald, introduced me to Heaney back in '74 and we all went to hear Robert Lowell read, so I got very into Heaney. I of course found Heaney a great poet, but I found Mahon even more liberating—that urbanity, the humour. It was so liberating to discover that you could do this, write beautiful, memorable language and yet still be funny and ironic. So I never pursued an Irish identity. I just sort of backed into it. I'm not interested in literary nationalism of any kind. What was it Pound said? Studying American poetry is like studying American chemistry, something like that. I may have been escaping American literary nationalism: the poetry that I was being force-fed at the time was poetry from people like that great virtuoso typist Charles Olson, with great theories like a line was as long as the length of a breath—how much did that man smoke? Even a man with one lung could do better than that! But he was full of those vatic pronouncements—he copied that from Pound, I suppose, along with everything else. "One perception must immediately follow and directly lead to a further perception"—that's not a direction for poetry. That's instructions for being awake!

CO'C: *You've gone on record as saying that Derek Mahon's collection of 1975, The Snow Party, brought you back to poetry when you thought you were going to give it up.*

MD: That sounds a bit odd when you consider that my first collection came out in 1988. But it brought me back, yes. It said "you can do this", this is what great poetry does to a poet. It gives you something else to do; when you're getting tired it gives you somewhere else to go. But looking back into it, I never consciously pursued Irishness in any way. I was only ever Irish through my family, and most of my friends were Irish as a result of playing in a traditional band. And I happened to be turned on by poets like Mahon and Muldoon. Muldoon shows you a direction of modernism that's very different to American and British modernism: it's Joyce's modernism.

CO'C: *You were chosen as one of the New Generation Poets. What was your*

involvement and what did you make of the whole promotion?

MD: Here's what happened. I didn't know anything about this and then I got a phone call from my publisher asking was I forty yet. And I said "No" and put the phone down. And then a week later, I got a phone call saying "Congratulations, you are A New Generation Poet", which has a horrible sound. Occasionally, I'll do a reading and someone will insist on saying "Tonight we have Michael Donaghy who is a New Generation Poet", and this grey-haired 43 year old gets up on stage. It sounds awful, and it was. I hate to sound ungrateful, and I'm sure it did me some good, but there was almost nothing to it. Carol Ann Duffy, to her credit, refused to participate in most of it. I complained again and again to journalists, although no one quoted me. No one said there was anything wrong. If they said they'd chosen 20 poets who were all white males, there would have been outrage, but to chose 20 poets who were all under 40 was considered a good thing. After that what happened was, they said "Keep October free—don't do any readings, you've going to have lots of readings." In the end, I did far fewer readings than I would have done, getting them off my own bat. But really, the only people who remember it are poets who weren't included.

co'c: *Can that kind of marketing impinge on the writing process?*

MD: No—I don't give a puff for being famous. I was talking to Kathleen Jamie about this at the time, about having people running up to you and saying, "Will you do this—you'll be on the *television*." It's very nice to have people buy your books, and that's what we all want, for people to read our work, but there's only so much you will do. The whole thing was an embarrassment. It sounds ungrateful saying all this, and sometimes it was nice to be in the same room as nineteen of my friends. I think it helped out some people whose work should be better known—I think it gave Don Paterson a push, and I think he certainly deserves it, he's a great poet. I think that Kathleen Jamie acknowledges that she needed the push, but I don't think that Simon Armitage or Glyn Maxwell needed any help.

co'c: *Much of your new work since Errata seems to concern your father. How has writing about your father affected your work, and has it made it more confessional?*

MD: They say the page is a curtain and you never know who's on the other side. It is interesting for me to write about my father and it is interesting for me to write about myself, but I don't feel any commitment towards reality or towards the details of our relationship. There's a tremendous

anxiety of, in Walter Jackson Bate's phrase, "the burden of the past on the English poet". There is the burden of one's contemporaries writing about one's fathers. I don't want to be on page 20 of the Faber Anthology of Father Poems. (I think there actually is going to be such an anthology.) All of this brings us into the realm of my personal life which I'm not interested in discussing. I haven't written that much about my father: I've written a poem called "Caliban's Books", one called "The Excuse" and another "Not Knowing the Words" and I think that's it. Oh, and there was a poem called "Letter" in the first book, which is a very young person's poem, a very naïve poem: there seems to be something very artless about it. But I'm afraid it's one of those poems I've decided to include in my tiny selection in the *Penguin Modern Poets Selection*, because that's the poem about which my relatives come up to me and say, "That's the only poem of yours I understand" and I haven't got the heart to leave it out.

CO'C: *A poem like "The Commission" in Errata suggests an interest in longer narrative forms. Is this a direction in which you would like your work to move?*

MD: Yes, it is. I've just broken a long stretch of not writing, and I feel excited about the possibilities of writing again. I've written a long, three-page thing that people will probably think is very confessional. Perhaps I've protected myself against that by making it a dramatic monologue. Obviously I'm very comfortable with the lyric form and the lyric impulse, but I'd like to move in more dramatic and narrative directions and use different rhetorical strategies. I enjoyed writing "The Commission", and there's an experiment in that poem, in that, as you may have guessed, it's based around Benvenuto Cellini. I had an idea in mind of making him the Metalsmith who fashioned the bird of gold enamelling and winds up singing for the Emperor in Yeats's poem, but the poem went off in its own direction—an exploration of rage—my rage and desire for revenge—compared with an artist's rage for order. There's also a formal experiment in that poem: I wanted to write a single dactylic line with visual breaks like free verse line endings—a continuous rhythm from beginning to end, without a break.

CO'C: *Has the success of Shibboleth, which won both the Whitbread Prize and the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize, put pressure on your subsequent works?*

MD: Yes, it has. *Errata* is a better book, but it didn't win anything. Although it did get me a cheque in the middle of the night when I was financially in dire straits. Someone delivered a letter from America in the middle of the night that had gone to my old address. I heard it come

through my letterbox just as I was walking down the stairs in a blind panic about money. I opened it up and it was a cheque for, well, a small fortune from the Ingram Merrill Foundation. It was almost the last thing that James Merrill did before he died, to send me a small fortune.

co'c: *God bless him!*

MD: God bless him! But I thought that *Errata* should have received more attention—it was a better book than *Shibboleth*. *Shibboleth* was perhaps a little over-praised, and *Errata* suffered because of that. It happens to every poet though, after you publish a book, you go through a period where you think none of your current ideas live up to your last achievement. A part of you thinks “I’ve done it, what should I do now?” It took five years to write *Errata*, but my work didn’t suffer, just the perception of my work, which is a very different thing. I remember on the way up to get the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Award in the Faber offices, I met D.J. Enright in the lift. After the Whitbread Prize, he was calling me “Dear Boy”. By the time I met him on the way up to get the Faber Award, he was asking me “So, when will you be going home to America?”