

Green Wound

Paul Muldoon, *Moy Sand and Gravel*. Faber & Faber, £14.99

The first time I encountered Paul Muldoon's poetry was hearing him read on the flip side of a Faber & Faber cassette featuring Ted Hughes. A companion cassette contained the unlikely pairing of Seamus Heaney and Tom Paulin. That was in 1983 and even then I felt that Muldoon more properly belonged on the Heaney tape, not that I would pair the irascible Paulin with Hughes. This is not to say that Muldoon is anyone's B side, more that he is in many respects a "dub" version of Heaney and knowingly so. The contents list of his latest collection *Moy Sand and Gravel*, which won the Pulitzer Prize this year, contains several obvious nods to Heaney's work and lyrical terrain: "Hard Drive", "Unapproved Road", "Guns and Butter", "The Otter", "The Outhouse", "The Eel". There is also here an elegy for Ted Hughes, "Herm" in which the poet's putative paganism defers to the heroism of Bishop Edward Daly on Bloody Sunday in Derry. All roads it seems lead back to Heaney territory.

In *Madoc*, Muldoon prefaced his spoof on Southey's romance of founding a commune in America with a loose sonnet, "The Briefcase" dedicated to Heaney. The case morphs into an eel which Muldoon fears might escape back across the Atlantic in a replay of the journey described in Heaney's "A Lough Neagh Sequence", thus destroying Muldoon's poem. It seems that modesty prevented Muldoon including himself in *The Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry* which he edited in 1986. He did include, however, Heaney's poem "Widgeon" dedicated to himself. Here Muldoon is likened to a man who blew "his own small widgeon notes" through the voice box of the dead bird, an ambivalent tribute to the younger poet's talent.

The very ambivalence of the relationship between these two Northern Irish, nationalist, Faber-published poets, professors in

Ivy League American universities, is in part created by Muldoon as a fertile arena in which his love of verbal play can frolic and at the same time acknowledge and comment on Heaney's large presence. For example, the eel that Muldoon invokes here is a version of a Montale poem which nevertheless deploys a vocabulary reminiscent of Heaney's, albeit to rather different purposes:

...the rivers
through which she climbs, bed-hugger, who keeps going against
the flow, from branch to branch, then
from capillary to snagged capillary
farther and farther in, deeper and deeper into the heart
of the rock...

Whereas Montale/Muldoon's eel becomes the glowing female life principle "the arrow shaft of Love on earth", Heaney's reinforces the boy's fear of dawning sexuality that colours so many of his early poems up to the cathartic release of "Station Island" where Joyce's ghost encourages him to become "elver-gleams in the dark of the whole sea", fusing sexual and artistic maturity. Muldoon's eel is a political animal, as she returns to the unmistakably British "green and pleasant spawning ground", but is a "green soul" seeking life where "desolation" has taken hold. In this pun he conjures with the sort of subversion that Heaney learnt from Joyce, using the English literary tradition and language against itself.

The title *Moy Sand and Gravel* comes from the name of a business in Muldoon's home town, Moy, which has featured in his work since *New Weather* came out in 1973, a year after Heaney's *Wintering Out* where the Moyola is heard "harping on its gravel beds". In the title poem of the new collection Muldoon juxtaposes a pagan and a Christian image, but whereas Heaney's paganism tends towards the animistic Muldoon's is hedonistic. He emerges from the "Olympic cinema" where he has watched screen idols in a lingering kiss to face the two towers of the gravel plant which have been washing and rewashing soil from the Blackwater "as if washing might make it clean". On the facing page, a sestina "The Misfits" plays out a father-son conflict against the backdrop of the film, which starred Marilyn Monroe and Clark Gable, the father refusing to allow the boy take a lift to the cinema from a spoilt priest named the Monk. Throughout, the word "blue", one of the recurring rhymes, takes on several shades

of meaning as it works its way from the “gray-blue sky” to the blues.

There has always been a puerile blue streak in Muldoon’s poems which happily is absent from this volume. Instead, the intimacy he evokes is that of the *paterfamilias* preoccupied with the domestic world of his new family, especially his two children, dedicatees of the collection. As he contemplates his new-born son, Asher, he calls into play the Jewish ancestors he has acquired through his wife in the virtuosic envoi “At the Sign of the Black Horse, September 1999”. This long poem exemplifies all of Muldoon’s narrative strengths in a post-modernist structure reliant on paronomastic word associations. Setting baby Asher’s Biltrite pram as a still point against which he watches a flood precipitated by Hurricane Floyd, the poet draws together images from his daily life with the story of his wife’s Jewish antecedents from the Warsaw ghetto and the death camps to the Roaring ’20s in America while Irish navvies “keen and kvetch” in the background, reinforcing that old convergence of the two dispossessed communities in the New World. While this torrent of history flashes past, he muses on the tension between the “pram in the hall” and the pen in the hand. The rhapsodical poem itself however banishes any doubt that the two might be antithetical as Muldoon appropriates a whole new tradition and its vocabulary to extend his range of reference giving him “Irish schmucks” and a rhyme between the American road sign “No Detour” and the Yeatsian “lonely túr”.

This long poem also synthesises many themes and images from preceding lyrics. Irish navvies turn up in “The Loaf” where the poet explores a hole cut in the wall for a “dimmer switch” with each of his senses until the texture of the plaster evokes the taste of bread baked by the builders. As the five three-line stanzas move from touch to taste the poet is brought into ever more intimate contact with these labourers of two centuries past, their poverty and hunger contrasting with the modern comforts he enjoys, a period house now being wired for fancy lighting effects. With typical wit Muldoon uses this hi-tech device, the “dimmer switch” to switch himself back to the not-so dim and distant past. Yet he diverts any risk of the maudlin by punctuating each verse with a nursery rhyme chorus culminating in the line “with a link and a link and a linky-lick” which nevertheless emphasises the connection he has to these former Irish immigrants to America.

By contrast in "The Ancestor" he comments on his acquisition of anonymous heirlooms to furnish his house which become "at once more/ presentable and// more present than our own". The urge to escape his own history has preoccupied Muldoon from his earliest work where memories of life in the troubled North of Ireland were blurred by childhood games of Cowboys and Indians. Later he escaped into sex and drugs creating a surreal poetry that expresses a tension between the need to remember and the desire to alter the memory. So in "Homesickness", facing "The Ancestor", he recalls his actual antecedents in the moment when his father's last illness was diagnosed. The memory is flanked by the image of sandstone lion yearning for a smoke and a "black-winged angel" in a "business suit", and as in "The Loaf" a chorus breaks the sombre mood with a litany of place names reminiscent of Beckett's Ballyba, "Ballyknick and Ballymacnab... Clonmore and Clintyclay... Lislasy and Lissaraw" as if the parody can mask the emotion. This is belied however by the rhyme that links each chorus to its preceding verse "last ray... Clintyclay", "from the ash... Derrymacash". Try as he might, Muldoon cannot completely wash out his Irish genes as he concedes in identifying traits he has inherited from his parents: "Feckless as he was feckless, as likely as her to be in a foofaraw,/ I have it in me to absolutely rant and rail..."

When it comes to Irish politics he applies satire in two poems here using cartoonish characters Biscuit and Bap who in "Guns and Butter" are contemptuous of the poet's irreverence as he uses the butter intended to grease Biscuit's guns to moisten his own "bit of a crust". In "A Brief Discourse on Decommissioning", Bap announces that "you can't make bricks without the straw/ that breaks the camel's back" a mixed metaphor and compound proverb that operates on several levels, initially suggesting the illiteracy of on-the-ground activists, but also insisting on the truth that the bricks of Northern Ireland's future cannot be made without breaking the paramilitary movements, much as an omelette requires broken eggs. Looked at from yet another angle decommissioning became the final straw in Republican patience with the peace process, leading to the present impasse.

For Muldoon his children are another step away from that burdensome history, although his son is freighted with an equally terrible past. So in "Cradle Song for Asher", Muldoon the father feels that he has been cut adrift at the child's birth as the

boy's Hebrew name conjures the image of Moses, the Jews of Venice, and endless peregrination. This leads into the encyclopaedic meditation of the collection's closing poem where the poet is

...awestruck to see in
Asher's glabrous
face a slew of interlopers
not from Maghery, as I might have expected, or Maghera,
or Magherafelt...

The new world for Muldoon is rich with the inheritance of many old worlds whose history and vocabulary he can appropriate. Perhaps what he most feared when he wrote "The Briefcase" was that he might never escape the shadows of home and Heaney. On the evidence of *Moy Sand and Gravel* there is no fear of that.