

# R I C H A R D M U R P H Y

## *Interview*

Richard Murphy is one of Ireland's leading poets. Born in County Mayo in 1927, he has lived in Ceylon, Ireland and England, and now divides his time between Ireland and South Africa. His *Collected Poems* was published by Gallery Press in 2000, drawing on the collections *Sailing to an Island*, *The Battle of Aughrim*, *The God Who Eats Corn*, *High Island*, *The Price of Stone* and *The Mirror Wall*. A volume of memoirs will shortly appear from Granta Books. David Wheatley spoke to Richard Murphy in his home in Leixlip, Co. Kildare, on October 16, 1999.

*Your first volume of poetry, The Archaeology of Love, was published by Dolmen Press in Dublin in 1955. This was during a decade when the press was also publishing Thomas Kinsella and John Montague and, notoriously, not publishing Philip Larkin. Would you like to say a little about the climate for poetry and poetry publishing in Ireland at the time?*

Liam Miller liked to claim that *The Archaeology of Love* was the first volume he published after giving up his job as an assistant architect to devote himself to publishing poetry by Irish writers, so I was rather proud of that. I felt a little ashamed that my wife subsidised the publication to the tune of £50 by agreeing to purchase that amount of copies, but then I heard that Shelley's first publication had been paid for, so what harm. I did feel that it was an interim collection, and that I would later add to it. Therefore the edition was limited to 200 copies, at my request, and was never reprinted. It was never nicely designed, with a Greek motif.

*From what I hear of poetry publishing in the '50s it wouldn't just have been your juvenile status that kept the print-run down...*

No, but mind you the edition sold out on the day of publication. Liam Miller walked into Hodges Figgis, rubbing his hands, and said "We've sold out". Immediately the bookshop took their six copies out of the window and put them in a glass cabinet at the book, among the rare books, and put the price up from six and sixpence to eight and sixpence.

M U R P H Y

*Lots of poets end up being remaindered, but you went straight from the contemporary to the antiquarian section.*

Yes. Then in 1956 I moved to Lake Park and got interested in rebuilding the house and my child Emily was born and I became more of a farmer, a sheep farmer, than a poet. A grave error, to think you could become a better pastoral poet by actually keeping sheep.

*It didn't work out for you then?*

It didn't really, no. It did with Ted, Ted Hughes, later on with *Moortown*, in his poems about sheep farming. There was a stand-off between me and what literary life there was in Dublin, because of my marriage to a woman who had a private income and a car, and that caused unpleasant remarks to be made in McDaid's and Davy Byrne's. There was also my accent... I hadn't helped my *entrée* into Dublin literary life by winning the AE Memorial Award in 1951 when [Anthony] Cronin was expected to get it. I was only given it—I say this with hindsight now—to prevent it going to Cronin. The judges might have had their reasons for that, but Cronin had written much better poems at that stage than I had; I hadn't published anything, hardly at all, and I only heard about the AE Memorial Award by entering McDaid's in order to meet the poets. I was advised by Allen Figgis that that was the place to go, and there I did meet Paddy Kavanagh, Anthony Cronin and Valentin Iremonger, and I was introduced to John Ryan in the offices of *Envoy*... but in the course of the morning's drinking, I learned that there was a thing called the AE Memorial Award and that Anthony Cronin was going to win it.

*Did you find Kavanagh receptive to his younger contemporaries?*

Well I was astonished by Kavanagh, and we got on fairly well. At that time the only reason I had for setting foot there was that I was reviewing poetry in England for the *Spectator*, so he was rather nice to me. When the holy hour came I was embarrassed at not having read any of Kavanagh's poetry and said I'd like to get a copy of *The Great Hunger*, which he then said he could easily arrange.

*Was this before he came to disown The Great Hunger?*

He didn't disown it that day, and said he'd go round to Mrs Yeats that very afternoon and get a copy. I gave him ten shillings, which he said was enough, and we strolled around Stephen's Green, had a cup of tea and he said "I'll see you at six o'clock in McDaid's and I'll have the book for you" and of course I never saw him.

*One figure you wouldn't have met in McDaid's if Kavanagh was in evidence was his nemesis Austin Clarke. Did you have any dealings with him?*

I didn't meet him then but I did later on in, it would have been '59 or '60... I remember Liam Miller telling me before that that he was very keen to publish Austin Clarke, but he wasn't sure that Clarke would agree. This was the sort of hesitancy that I found strange. I said, "Liam, you want to publish Austin Clarke, I'm sure Austin Clarke would want to be published by you, why don't you go to him now and offer him a hundred pounds for his *Collected Poems*?" He said, "That's a good idea", but he never did it. I was hoping that this would lead to an involvement with the Dolmen Press, but Liam didn't want that and didn't follow that up at all, not then anyway.

*How did your connection with Faber and Faber and Charles Monteith come about?*

I got a scholarship to Oxford—otherwise I would never have gone near the place—in December 1944, and the following October a lot of much older men came back from the war. Charles had been a major in the Royal Enniskillen Fusiliers, and a Japanese mortar bomb had blown up in the street in Burma and he'd been seriously wounded, and he returned to Oxford and I got to meet him there. At parties in my undergraduate rooms, when there was a certain amount of beer flowing, he would start to recite Yeats, and I can still hear Yeats recited in Charles's voice. When he first came to Oxford Charles had a Belfast accent (he went to Inst, and his father had a drapery shop in Lisburn), but when he was in the army he took elocution lessons and came out with an Oxford accent; you couldn't possibly detect any origins. He took an interest in my wish to become a poet, particularly in my second year at Oxford in 1946 after I had been back to Ireland and decided I didn't want to go on writing critical essays on *Paradise Lost* when I couldn't write a poem that was a patch on Milton—it seemed to be an absurdity. I got into a state of crisis, with high enthusiasm and in the total conviction that what I must do was leave Oxford and build and live in a cottage beside a waterfall at the foot of a mountain, beside a lake, miles from any other house, and write poetic drama.

*Was this your play on the Diarmuid and Grainne legend?*

No, this was about the mayor of Galway, Lynch, who hanged his own son because he couldn't get any Irishman to do it, Irishmen believing in the Brehon laws... And Charles gave a party for my send-off. He was impressed by the Romantic gesture, I think. There was no falsehood in it, I was utterly serious. And C.S. Lewis wrote to my father

## M U R P H Y

and said he thought it was quite foolish and mad, but they ought to consider the possibility that in years to come I might have been right, or words to that effect.

*Would you still agree with your sentiments in The Price of Stone where you say "you slipped up, going down"?*

Yes. But I did go back. There's a sonnet that relates to my departure from Oxford, "Lecknavarna", which is one I like, because it has that expression in it of what I was trying to do with the sonnet, the analogy with the waterfall images in it... Let me read from my notes: "It takes a lot of rain spread over a mountain to create a waterfall. The prose notes are like rain in relation to the poem's waterfall. How utterly different water looks when it falls as rain from when it's gathered in a gully on a steep mountain cliff" ... but there's a longer note in this about the relation of the notes to the sonnet and the notes being like rain, the sonnet being the waterfall. But to get back to Oxford, Charles was a very good friend and he encouraged me afterwards in my writing, and when he got the job at Fabers it became a bit awkward. Eliot was still poetry editor and Charles had been there several years by the time I was ready to publish a book in London (and in those days you really needed to have a London or New York publisher, more than nowadays), and because of our friendship I didn't want it said that *Sailing to an Island* had been published because Murphy was a friend of Monteith. So with Charles's encouragement I sent the manuscript first to Macmillan, where a man called Maclean, who was a brother of Donald Maclean, the Russian spy, was the editor, and he accepted the collection but only offered me a five percent royalty. So now I had a good reason to reject his offer and give the collection to Faber, since Macmillan had already accepted it. That's how it worked out. But Charles didn't have the last word by any means at Faber. He said he'd like to do it but it entirely depended on Eliot. This was now coming up to Christmas of 1961 and Eliot went off to the West Indies for three months and it wasn't until April that he came back, and then I got a telegraph in Cleggan from Charles reading "Tom says yes love Charles".

*And did you have any personal dealings with Eliot?*

He invited me to tea. I felt that was not quite as good as being invited to lunch, since Hughes and Gunn had been invited to lunch.

*And was it a case, in his own words, of "How unpleasant to meet Mr Eliot"?*

He was a very charming elderly gentleman, the eagle in his nest in his

little office, and after he put a question like “What are you thinking of writing next?” he said, “I never like being asked that question” and changed the subject. Then he said “I have a very good friend in America called Robert Lowell who’s interested in sailing”. Nothing about poetry. So we talked about sailing. Ever since I’d come to a self-consciousness about writing I’d been aware that T.S. Eliot was the great judge of what is and isn’t poetry in the modern sense, and here he has judged me fit to be published by Faber and Faber, and the years and years of rejection slips were wiped out by this. And as we sat there I thought, how wonderfully courteous of this great man to be at least trying to treat me as an equal, and *he* said “I met Yeats once and what impressed me most about him was, he treated me as an equal.”

*That’s quite a succession, isn’t it [laughter]. Maurice Harmon’s study of your work is subtitled Poet of Two Traditions. It feels like a long time since writing from this country was routinely described as “Anglo-Irish”. Is the label one that continues to hold any meaning for you?*

I think it does, yes. About twenty to thirty years, thirty to forty years ago I couldn’t bear anyone calling me Anglo-Irish, because I was trying to impatriate myself in the west, among the people of Cleggan and Inishbofin, and disguising myself as a fisherman to the best of my ability. Living in a place like Cleggan you didn’t have much of a chance of being accepted as a writer—writers were treated with all sorts of suspicion, with people thinking “he’s going to write about us!” and until 1963 when tourists started reading *Sailing to an Island* my disguise was quite effective. It did also mean that I was continually being interviewed by journalists who wanted a holiday in the west, all expenses paid, and would come down and do an article about me, “the Cleggan fisherman poet”...

*Nevertheless, in your interview with John Haffenden you’ve spoken of reading “The Cleggan Disaster” and your pleasure at the reception it got from Pat Concannon, who had featured in the poem, so you must have felt you’d carried off this disguise or naturalised yourself as an islandman.*

After I read it to him he said “What you’ve said is true, and is well put together”. If that could be the final verdict I’d be happy.

*It’s a very different sort of imprimatur from T.S. Eliot’s, but it must have been very important to you to bridge that divide of Eliot on the one hand and a West of Ireland audience on the other.*

That’s what I was wanted to do, and I think it was quite an effort to do that, because there was a confusion to it: I remember once some

## M U R P H Y

man was drunk and thought I was charging too much for the fish on my boat and called me a “fucking Liverpool Irishman” who polished his boat to pretend he was one of us.

*Much of your work about the West of Ireland displays an ambivalent claim to its landscape. How strong a tension do you feel between the ascendancy world of “Droit de Seigneur” and that of “Pat Cloherty’s Version of The Maisie”?*

They’re two extremes. “Pat Cloherty’s Version of *The Maisie*” came out of my effort, over many years, to identify my voice with the voice of the people, and I’d attempted that in “The Cleggan Disaster”, but that’s still much more heavily literary, whereas “Pat Cloherty’s Version of *The Maisie*” was entirely composed of words I’d recorded, spoken by Pat Cloherty, I think it was in 1968, six months before he died. I transcribed the recordings into a notebook and analysed the words for their rhythm. His rhythm of speech was really governed by the movements of the boat on the sea.

*I think you presented a radio programme in the ’60s on W. S. Graham, a man who also wrote a lot about the sea. Did you feel a kinship with other poets who wrote about the sea?*

A lot of them used it as a metaphor, but I used it as a real thing. I thought I couldn’t do justice to the lives of those men without being out on the sea at night in an open boat. But going back to the Anglo-Irish thing, all the time I was living in Cleggan writing about the Cleggan disaster and subsequently the Battle of Aughrim, in the ’60s, I was turning my back on Anglo-Ireland and the demesne, and identifying with the Catholic people of the West.

*The Battle of Aughrim reads like the essential statement, for you, of these separate worlds coming into collision. Was it the tension you’ve just described that motivated you to see your Anglo-Irishness against this historical backdrop?*

Well I’m sure it was, but it came unconsciously. I came to it on the drive through Ireland from Dublin to Cleggan: I’d go through Aughrim and always knew it was the place where a bloody battle had been fought but didn’t know all that much about it. Then I began to take an interest in it. In 1962, after the acceptance of *Sailing to an Island*, I felt I wanted to explore my background more in relation to the background of the country and the past as a whole. *Sailing to an Island* you could see as me establishing my mental geography in Connemara, and becoming possessed by the place and possessing it in my poetry. Then, I

thought, I must look into the past and the origins of this place. Aughrim seemed a good focal point, because it was a kind of navel of Ireland and a watershed in history, and a far more important battle than the Boyne: if the Battle of the Boyne had been decisive it wouldn't have been necessary to fight the Battle of Aughrim a year later.

*It's actually the Battle of Aughrim which took place on the twelfth of July, not the Boyne. Not many Orangemen know that...*

When I told Charles Monteith that he was furious. He pooh-poohed it and said "You're completely wrong".

*... though technically the confusion is because of the change to the Gregorian calendar.*

Six thousand Irish people were killed at Aughrim, whereas about fifteen hundred lost their lives at the Boyne. The only reason the Boyne went down in history is because it's easier to pronounce and two kings were on the battlefield, and English history has always been about kings and queens. But Aughrim was a far greater disaster, as things turned out, except for the Protestant ascendancy. Also, all my feelings about contemporary life began to be related to that. This was good and bad, it was programming all my poetry in one direction. I never did it again, after five years of that.

*Was it important for you that the poem be not set exclusively in the past?*

I went to a meeting of the Military History Society in Renmore Barracks in Galway and I met Martin Joyce, who's a national teacher at Aughrim who had already started to build up a museum devoted to the battle. He lived simultaneously in two time zones, the day of the battle and the day that we were passing through the town, and I stayed with him for a week one year, hired a horse and rode around the top of the hill, because only on horseback could you see how the battle actually looked from the generals' point of view. My interest in it was far from being confined to the antiquarian so in fact I was always afraid the antiquarian side would bog me down, like the soldiers who had to wade across the morass to reach their goal; so I made the contemporary most important. I didn't have a scheme and no beginning, middle and end for years. I just wrote individual poems that I knew related somehow, somewhere to the theme, and putting them together was very difficult. Tony White was a great help. He devised the order "Now", "Before", "During" and "After", or we devised it together.

*One of the things the poem brings out for me is the haphazardness of battle.*

## M U R P H Y

*The appearance of St Ruth reminds me of the fleeting glimpse we catch of Napoleon in Stendhal's The Charterhouse of Parma, though in your poem no sooner does St Ruth appear than he gets his head blown off...*

Well, I was indebted to Stendhal and Tolstoy.

*Perhaps it's appropriate to its theme that the poem came together in the haphazard way you've described.*

It would never have come together but for the BBC and the person of Douglas Cleverdon giving me the commission. It wasn't the money, the money was very small, but Cleverdon, who had produced *Under MilkWood* and broadcast "The Cleggan Disaster". Otherwise I'd have given up. Nobody was writing long poems, and I often despaired of finishing it.

*Did you feel you were working in a very neglected genre, then, with the long poem?*

Yes, and I was also working on my own too, in Cleggan. You were going to ask me about Ted Hughes being there...

*Yes, what effect do you think he had on your work, if any?*

I think he was there for just under a year in that neighbourhood, across the bay. We used to meet at least once a week. I can't give a specific instance of how he influenced my work, but he was a great help.

*The phrase "a calamity of seals" at the beginning of "Seals at High Island" strikes a Hughesian note, I think.*

That was written long after, when I was seeing very little of him, but he might well have influenced it. He did some of his best work there, in *Wodwo*, and began *Crow*. I kept in touch with him intermittently and phoned him about a month or six weeks before he died, and had a long, long chat with him. He gave me no impression that he was going to die. He didn't know. It came on very suddenly. I think it was wonderful how he came forward with his best work towards the end. *Tales from Ovid* are supreme poems, and I admire it very, very much. It may not be good Ovid but as a metamorphosis into Hughes... Ovid wrote a *Metamorphoses* and Ted did a metamorphosis of Ovid into something intensely his own. Because it was Ovid and because it was outside him, more of his inner world, and the ferocious conflict and guilt over women came through. It didn't come through in any of his other work, for me. I prefer *Tales from Ovid* to *Birthday Letters*. Very powerful.

*I thought we might move on now to The Price of Stone. You've talked about the lengthy preparatory work that your work requires, and the voluminous notebook entries from which you quarried the sonnets of The Price of Stone. How much do you think gets lost or gained in the process?*

Well, that wasn't always how I worked. I began to keep a notebook to gather images or ideas for poems, in Paris in 1954. The notebooks had mathematic square pages, and they're small, so I thought this was a good thing: I can't write lines that are too long, and since mathematics is the basis of all music, and there is a musical element in all poetry, I have a grid on the page in front of me. Even if I don't keep to a strict metre, the idea of metre will be present in my writing, and that's always been the case. As a result my writing became very small and neat.

*Are these notebook entries like ladders that you climb and kick away, or do they have some autonomous existence?*

My idea for a very long time was simply to collect material for poems in them. But I'm a victim of this illusion, having fooled myself into thinking that writing a poem was the most important way I could spend my life. I think this came from rebellion in Oxford against the academic world, and also against my parents who'd gone off to Bermuda, my father getting more and more successful. It was in a sense an attempt to subvert by upstaging their high-mindedness that I became even more high-minded about being a poet. It was quite obvious I was turning my back on making a decent living. I remember my mother taking me down to the beach in the Bahamas, and as I stood between her and the sea she did her utmost to eradicate this idea that I was a poet... At the time the notebooks were devoted to producing poems rather than anything else. But gradually I did write pieces in them that were autobiographical and interesting in their own right rather than as notes. When I finished *The Battle of Aughrim* I realised I mustn't tie myself down like that ever again and then started, around 21 October 1967, the day I finished *The Battle of Aughrim*, setting off for England with the manuscript, and on the way I was going to call on Sean O'Riada, who was doing the music for the broadcast, music which he was biasing it entirely in favour of the Catholic, Jacobite side—we had to bring in Purcell to represent the Protestant side. Then I started writing without restraint at all memories of my past and what was going on in my present, and went over to Cornwall and back to the school I'd attended during the war there, in 1941, and my writing became autobiographical there and found a new purpose. By now the notebooks obviously had a new purpose, rather than just being for producing poems: you get to forty and realise, I'm not going to remember the most impor-

M U R P H Y

tant things that happened in my life unless I write them down. That's when the notebooks really took off. Narrative writing in *The Battle of Aughrim* was somewhat frustrated by the opposition to narrative verse in the climate: I got no encouragement from my contemporaries, neither Tom Kinsella nor Ted Hughes, to sit down and write a *Paradise Lost* Book VI version of the Battle of Aughrim.

*Yet Kinsella was about to launch into his Peppercanister sequence, which may not be straight narrative verse but still has inclinations in that direction.*

Well he thought with "The Cleggan Disaster" that most of it, he'd cut [laughs]. I'd made a terrific effort to write a poem of this length and he thinks it should all be cut apart from the lyric at the end and a few images here and there.

*Something more discontinuous or Poundian.*

Yes.

*Speaking of ordering longer poems, one of the features of The Price of Stone is its exploration of the whole theme or proportion, even down to the Græco-Latinate vocabulary, and words like "obelize", "fungosity", "anchoretic", and "rupestral". Did you see the sonnet form as a paradigm of the classical order you were trying to describe?*

I think I wanted each sonnet somehow to represent the architecture of the building described, as well as the culture and attitudes of the period. So the language had to work on the level of the etymology of words. Take a poem like "Beehive Cell", for instance, which has a lot of Græco-Latin words in it, like "eremetical", "pyramidal", "peregrine", "cerebellic", "souterrain", "purgatorial" and so on. I got rapped over the knuckles by Neil Corcoran for using words of Græco-Latin derivation in a Shakespearean sonnet—he said they were Shakespearean anyway. My answer to that is that a beehive cell is an object of Græco-Latin derivation, if ever anything was. The whole idea of a Christian hermit cell is Græco-Latin.

*But then Seamus Heaney told you off for using the image of a mole in The Battle of Aughrim, since there are no moles in Ireland, and also the nightjar, which he equated with Keatsian England...*

There were nightjars in my part of Ireland in my youth, though not in Heaney's.

*There's a tension between the classical vocabulary and the other strains.*

The mole is a voice speaking, talking about the rapparees from the English perspective, saying they're a menace and have to be wiped out.

*Another feature of The Price of Stone is its interrogation of formal complacency, in poems about political monuments like "Nelson's Pillar" and "Wellington Testimonial". The formal vocabulary isn't just a self-congratulatory gesture, it's much more complicated than that.*

I'm glad you think so. Certainly in "Nelson's Pillar", I was going into the relationship of England and Trafalgar and the flag, and the counter-rhetoric of the Republican movement in blowing it up. It all comes down in the end to the couplet "Dismasted and dismissed, without much choice,/ Having lost my touch, I'll raise my chiselled voice." It's the chiselled voice of the Anglo-Irish, the Oxford English that I speak and get derided for sometimes, get attacked for, and in *The Price of Stone* for the first time I tried to confront myself from all aspects and make a stand from each. In "Wellington Testimonial" it's taking a very strong stand: "My sole in this evergreen oak aisle/ Is to maintain a clean laconic style." It's the Spartan tradition of the English public school I went to: Wellington College was founded to commemorate the Duke a year or two after his death. The laconic style is one that I try to polish in this writing, and the Duke was celebrated for his laconic style too: this is a celebration of my "polished Anglo-Irish mark/ [...] made by Smirke, as a colossal spit", and the spit is a play on the obelisk, the Greek word for a spit on which you'd roast an ox. It's "Wellington Testimonial" on the one hand and "Wattle Tent" on the other, the oldest human habitation after the cave.

*And yet the cave and the monument can be accommodated in the same poetic form.*

With "Wattle Tent" there aren't any Græco-Latin words... no there's "Ascendancy". Well you see, the tinkers and the Anglo-Irish always had a relationship, not a very good one, but in the post-Treaty period where the demesne walls collapsed the tinkers would tent up against the ruins. This begins with a word in tinkers' cant, and I tried to keep the language as close as possible to what they use. I think the sonnet as a form is infinitely adaptable, so I can justify giving the viewpoint of the tinkers through it as much as that of the seventh-century monks on the grounds that the sonnet is a form which resembles the human body. I only came across this today in my notes: "Morally undermining suspicions are always whispering to your certainty that the sonnet form is too traditional, like a suit of clothes in which values have to be fitted, not forgetting your belief that the form of the sonnet corresponds to the form of the body and is no less adaptable, having a pair of eyes

and a pair of hands and a pair of feet..." That was the wish at least, but I've never encountered such absurd grounds for attack: that it was wrong to use words of Greek or Latin derivation such as "rupestral". "Rupestral" was quoted by Corcoran in that review: it means "growing out of a rock" and I used it of the hexagon in *The Price of Stone*, because I had built it with direct labour myself and it didn't need any foundations because it was planted on rock on top of a hill with a view of High Island, and I thought, when you get old you won't be able to go to High Island, and anyway you can't ninety-nine days out of a hundred—but I thought, if you build a gazebo or a hexagon you'll be able to see it, so the idea of the structure was that it must look as if it's growing out of the rock, so as not to breach planning regulations.

*You mentioned a gazebo there. The opening sonnet of The Price of Stone speaks of "the rich/ with light step ascending my gazebo stair". This phrase has always reminded me of Yeats's "In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Constance Markievicz". To what extent was Yeats an influence?*

He was a very strong influence on me. That was one of the poems I heard Charles read when I was nineteen, at Oxford, and I was alluding to it unconsciously in that opening sonnet, "Folly". The folly was an Anglo-Irish object built with defiance and irony and I identified with it in its decayed and vandalised state. I felt as I was writing these poems that my intention was to put as much meaning as possible into every word, and if there are two or preferably three possible meanings, they must all be relevant, not just as jokes. This concentration of meaning in a very few words confined to fourteen lines really compelled me in that direction, while the idea of writing prose notes very freely was to keep the flow going. But the sonnet "Folly" arose from a sense of encounter, since every morning before breakfast I used to jog up to the top of the hill and go round it clockwise. I found that the more notes I wrote about any particular building, the summit used to emerge sometimes after many pages written in prose, and gradually I found that the flow was beginning to condense and I'd reach a state of intense concentration, going on day and night, and sooner or later the opening line would emerge as a line, and once that occurred I knew that the rest would follow. Then my worry was the couplet at the end, which is usually the weakest point in a sonnet because you get the three quatrains, fine, and you think you have to sum it all up. I very soon learned that that was a mistake. In "Folly" I wrote four couplets and thought, "you've taken eight lines to say that, now say exactly the same thing in two".

*I've always thought the weakest couplets in Shakespeare's sonnets are the ones that begin 'So' or 'Thus', where all he's doing is summarising what he should already have said by then.*

What I try to do is say as much in the last two lines as I've said in any four lines before that. The hexagon sonnet and "Icerink", for instance: I was particularly pleased with the endings of those. I was so worried about the last two lines I'd often write them before I got to them, or try to.

*Ceylon had always been a presence in your work, but in The Mirror Wall you devoted an entire book to the frescoes or graffiti of Sigiriya. How important was your Sri Lankan experience to you?*

Going back to Sri Lanka fifty years after I left Ceylon really transformed me. I had been thinking of doing it for many years. Someone said to me, don't go back there, just write about it, it'll all have changed. After finishing *The Price of Stone* the idea was to do a colonial sequence, because I'd shut the colonial side of my life out completely by trying to impatriate myself in the West of Ireland. Then I realised that by moving to Dublin I was doing something that was difficult for me, moving back to the sort of life I was avoiding. I moved in the early '80s, and felt the next book should be all about the colonial experience and my childhood. On the way, in London, I stayed with my mother and she came with me. As a result of that I saw the island through her eyes as well as mine. I was able to see what it like to be a bride in 1922, aged 24, going out three months after her wedding to join her husband in Candy, in a big bungalow with lots of gardeners and servants. In a way it was a reconciliation with my mother, and in the end she was quite pleased with the success of *The Battle of Aughrim* and *Sailing to an Island*. She bought twenty copies of *High Island* and sent them to lots of her friends, but she cut out one page, which contained a poem she didn't think was nice, "The Glass Dump Road". She was a mother who was forever trying to cut pages out of books. She was very distressed that I had made reference in *The Battle of Aughrim* to the bulldozing of three raths by my first cousin. He had a grant from the Department of Agriculture and nobody warned him that you shouldn't do that, or that tradition had always preserved these in the past. It was Charles who suggested I change the word "cousin" to "kinsman", but my mother knew all about this and was quite cross... When the poem was broadcast I was staying with her sister-in-law, the mother of the man who had done the bulldozing, and by this time she knew the poem fairly well, and when she heard the line "Left a Cromwellian demesne" she jumped up, went over to the wireless and switched it off saying "I can't hear very well, I'll try to tune it", and started twiddling all the knobs.

*I can appreciate why your mother mightn't have liked "The Glass Dump Road", with its painful subject, but did you find it liberating to write about*

*the more sensual subject matter of The Mirror Wall?*

Yes, when I arrived there I felt a welling up in me of a love I didn't know existed in me from my early childhood. I had two weeks with my mother meeting the president and the mayor during this civil war situation, never feeling in the slightest danger myself, and then my mother left and my daughter arrived and we went to the beach and the game reserve and after that I was taken on a tour of the slums in Colombo, which are horrendous. Then I found the text of the Sigiriya poems, and this was very, very exciting, and I saturated myself in them. I got a Sanskrit dictionary. I'd take one poem after another, and was guided by Pound's "The Seafarer". If a word appeals to you, you look it up and you see a word next to it and somehow or other a relationship is established, and if there are five or more meanings to the word you try to fit them all in. In Sanskrit you might have five words each with a distinct meaning, but in Singhala you'd have one word applied to all the five meanings. The result of this is that, to this day, you don't really know what anyone is saying if they're talking Singhalese, because there's so much ambiguity.

*So did you have to make any difficult decisions in the translating?*

I was pretty relaxed on that: "bring in all the meanings", I thought.

*There's a famous howler in Pound's "Seafarer" where he translates "eorthan rices", "earthly kingdoms", as "earthly riches".*

The "rink" in my "Icerink" originally meant warrior. I was fascinated by the multiple meanings in these texts I was producing. There's a word in this one here... "Lolita" comes into this, and I discovered that the word "lola" means "tossing about" or "tossed about". Nabokov actually got it from Sanskrit. I said this to Susan Sontag and she said that's nonsense, Nabokov didn't know any Sanskrit. I'm sure he did.

*The Mirror Wall appeared in 1989. What have you been working on since then?*

On my notebooks. Writing notes about my life, not with a view to producing poems, simply with a view to recording as truly as possible what's happened. I've been working more recently, in the last two or three years, on putting some order on what I've written and filling in gaps I've left. I've just recently signed a contract with Granta for a volume of memoirs based on these notebooks.

*And what proportion of these, I believe, massive notebooks will the memoir represent?*

One word in ten. It's a very difficult undertaking. An awful lot is going to be left out. There's a lot of variety in the writing, in the styles of writing.

*And your Collected Poems?*

Yes, I'm very excited about that.

*Finally, since I started by asking about poetry publishing in the '50s, do you have any views on the state of poetry publishing now?*

Well a lot of poetry is now published in Ireland. But spending half the year abroad I'm a little out of touch. Now of course people are encouraged to write poetry: imagine that! I didn't dare call myself a poet or even suggest it back then. It was like a title to be conferred by your readers.