

*The Lost Link:
Richard Murphy's Early Poetry*

In 1977 an edition of the *Irish University Review* was devoted to the work of Richard Murphy, containing essays by many of the major figures of the day in Irish poetry in acknowledgement of his eminence in the field. What was being acknowledged was the distinction of three volumes of poetry (following his debut with *Archaeology of Love* in 1955): *Sailing to an Island* (1963), *The Battle of Aughrim* (1968), and *High Island* (1974). *High Island*, on the basis of the two preceding books, was greeted as eagerly as any volume of its time. In 2001 it is necessary to remind readers that in 1970 only Larkin and Hughes enjoyed such prominence in English poetry in Britain and Ireland.

In this reminder essay, I want to recall briefly why Murphy's early work was—and of course remains—of such historical importance. The root of the matter is that it was his poetic language that connected Yeats to the major school of Irish poetry in the last third of the twentieth century. Murphy's next volume, the accomplished *The Price of Stone* in 1985, showed no diminution in his powers; yet, in common with all his later poetry, it can be seen as indebted in the same way that all of his contemporaries were to his extraordinary writing in that decade 1963-74. It was a good idea too to make *The Price of Stone* the concluding section of the *Collected Poems* (2000), placing it after Murphy's later work, because it remains a remarkable symbolic biography of the poet's locations and inspirations, acting as a poetic commentary on Murphy's great decade. Yeats, it is universally recognised, was the inspired inventor of an Irish poetic vernacular; but to enthusiastic readers of Irish poetry in the late 1960s (my student generation), Murphy's was the voice that carried that vernacular forward, and it is often that voice, elegant and varied, that we hear in the accomplishment of the great stylists of the later school, such as Heaney and Longley. The history of twentieth-century Irish poetic language in English cannot be written without him. He has counterparts outside the Irish tradition, especially among the Scots; for example George Mackay Brown has a similar open-air eloquence. But, attractive as Brown is, his achievement is much narrower than Murphy's, especially because Murphy was so widely influential.

The influence of those three major books has not been traced much, but it is easy to show how pervasive it was, often in surprising places: for example “Pat Cloherty’s Version of *The Maisie*” in *High Island*, quite apart from being a stunningly successful instance of the “found” poem, must have affected Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill in poems like “Deora Duibhshléibhe”, Muldoon’s “Dora Dooley” in *The Astrakhan Cloak* (1992). As well as developing a series of languages, Murphy carved out a mythology for the lyric poem in the west of Ireland, the impact of which can be felt in unlikely contexts (in Eavan Boland for example, as well as Ní Dhomhnaill).

But the extraordinary thing is the versatility of the language Murphy develops. Uniquely, he is recalled in the following generation by writers as diverse as Heaney, Muldoon, Ní Dhomhnaill and Hartnett. If there really is a “Dual Tradition” as proposed by Thomas Kinsella, Irish and English, then Murphy was its exponent in the third quarter of the twentieth century. There is of course an irony here: “Anglo-Irish” is the term often used to characterise Murphy’s social and historical placing; he tells us his ancestors fought on both sides in the Battle of Aughrim in 1691. It has been said that this is a matter of more interest to the poet himself than to his readers; but it links to a fact about him of great poetic significance. He is an “Anglo-Irish” writer in linguistic terms. There is a wonderful controlled heteroglossia in his poetry: first what Ted Hughes called “the simplicity, force and directness” of his classical style, applied to unmistakably Irish subjects:

If books resembled roads, he’d quickly read:
But they’re small farms to him, fenced by the page,
Ploughed into lines, with letters drilled like oats.
(“The Reading Lesson”)

Next there is the enriched, neoclassical style of “Song for a Corncrake” the “Crepuscular, archaic politician”. Best of all is the matchless Irish-English vernacular of Pat Cloherty:

Kerrigan’s wife was brought from Cross
home to Inishbofin
and she’s buried there.

To be master of three such styles is achievement enough; but Murphy continually plays tunes that resemble and emulate successors and predecessors. There is a Dickinson-like fairytale mystery in his “Lullaby for *Shura*”

Before you’d given death a name
Like Bear or Crocodile, death came

To take your mother out one night.

Seamus Heaney's "Widgeon" was dedicated to Paul Muldoon and is often said—rightly—to be in Muldoon's idiom; but that common idiom is also reminiscent of Murphy's beautiful "Stormpetrel":

A sailor hooks you
And carves his girl's name on your beak.

Again, Heaney's driving poems are remarked on; but the modern reader unacquainted with Murphy might guess that the opening of "Little Hunger" was one of them: "I drove to Little Hunger promontory."

Why then is this influence and centrality not given full due nowadays? There is an element of what linguists call "Ancestor-hopping": the tendency to overlook the immediately preceding generation. More significant perhaps is ancestor-choosing. Northern writers choose MacNeice; southern writers fiddle with Clarke. Everyone wants to be linked to Kavanagh and Yeats. History has worked against Murphy's work: all the quotations in my last paragraph come from his finest book at the culmination of his great decade, *High Island* which appeared in 1974, the year before Heaney's *North*. The centre of Irish gravity moved away from Murphy's southern and western Ireland, socially and stylistically varied though his version of those was. And what poetry in the South of Ireland did next—I think unconsciously to define itself against the authoritative public writing that was coming from Ulster—was to withdraw more definitely into the Irish tradition, with Hartnett's "Farewell to English" (also significantly 1975) and the *Innti* generation of writers in Irish led by Ní Dhomhnaill. Murphy's cosmopolitan and postcolonial stance was sidelined.

With that sidelining, it wasn't just his gifted linguistic virtuosity that was lost: in the books of his great decade Murphy did something different with the *address* of the Irish lyric—and for that matter the English lyric. Although the two *Island* books are highly autobiographical, concerned with Murphy's move to his ancestral Mayo, the poems' subjects typically are objectified. They move beyond the compass of the writer's mind. They are narratives of self, at once autobiographical and non-confessional. The poems tell us of experience, not of thought, and the liberating effect of this can be seen, again, in the writing of Ní Dhomhnaill and Muldoon. Only Murphy's restoration to centre stage can make sense of the development in Irish writing in English between the 1950s and the 1970s. The tradition, dual or more than twofold, can't be understood without him. More important still, the poems from 1963 to 1974 must be restored to their proper eminence as an exercise of critical judgement in its own right.