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**On ‘the Edge of a Crumbling Continent’: Poetry in  
Northern Ireland and the Second World War**

**Amy Beth Smith**

**Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
to the Department of English Studies**

**Durham University**

**2014**

## **Abstract**

This thesis proposes that nineteen forties Northern Ireland was not a cultural desert, as has often been assumed. It draws on an extensive range of neglected archival and published sources to argue that a diverse and vibrant community of poets, united by shared political and aesthetic interests, formed in Belfast during the Second World War. As the conflict encroached on individual imaginations and on Northern Ireland, these poets became concerned with establishing an enduring body of imaginative literature which was appropriate to their region. To date, this thesis provides the most comprehensive assessment of poetry written in Northern Ireland during this decade and is, therefore, a significant contribution to assessments of post-partition culture.

The thesis follows a chronological trajectory, beginning by tracing the roots of this poetic community to the legacy of the preceding generation of poets. Then, John Hewitt and W.R. Rodgers's regional and political commitments of the immediate pre-war period are examined. Their shared interest in regional poetics was in creative tension with Louis MacNeice's cosmopolitan aesthetic. Patrick Maybin's pacifist protest poetry reveals the group's anti-establishment bias. A survey of the publishing opportunities available to these poets is followed by an evaluation of Robert Greacen's anthologies, which were designed to promote a local literary revival. Analysis of poetry by May Morton and Freda Laughton demonstrates the key roles played by women in this milieu. Finally, Roy McFadden's attempt to connect pacifist, neo-romantic, and regional ideas is discussed, leading to a consideration of his post-war poetry and the links between these writers and the Ulster Renaissance of the nineteen sixties. Close analysis of the work of these poets uncovers a varied and energetic literary milieu which formed the foundations of the subsequent flowering of poetry in Northern Ireland.

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## Abbreviations

<i>FL</i>	Roy McFadden, <i>Flowers for a Lady</i> (London: Routledge, 1945)
<i>GCP</i>	Robert Greacen, <i>Collected Poems, 1944-1994</i> (Belfast: Lagan Press, 1995)
<i>HCP</i>	John Hewitt, <i>The Collected Poems of John Hewitt</i> , ed. by Frank Ormsby (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1991)
<i>JHC</i>	University of Ulster: John Hewitt Collection
<i>MFC</i>	Queen's University Belfast: Roy McFadden Collection
<i>MFCP</i>	Roy McFadden, <i>Collected Poems, 1943-1995</i> (Belfast: Lagan Press, 1996)
<i>MNCP</i>	Louis MacNeice, <i>Collected Poems</i> , ed. by Peter McDonald (London: Faber, 2007)
<i>PRONI</i>	Public Records Office of Northern Ireland
<i>RCP</i>	W.R. Rodgers, <i>Collected Poems</i> (London: OUP, 1971)
<i>RGP</i>	Linen Hall Library: Robert Greacen Papers
<i>SP</i>	Roy McFadden, <i>Swords and Ploughshares</i> (London: Routledge, 1943)
<i>SS</i>	May Morton, <i>Sung to the Spinning Wheel</i> (Belfast: Quota Press, 1952)
<i>TH</i>	Freda Laughton, <i>A Transitory House</i> (London: Cape, 1945)
<i>YMW</i>	W.B. Yeats, <i>The Major Works</i> , ed. by Edward Larrissy (Oxford: OUP, 1997)

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# Introduction

## I. Outline of thesis

This thesis examines poetry written in or about Northern Ireland under the shadow of the Second World War, seeking to understand the concerns, styles, and group dynamics of poets who lived and wrote ‘on the edge of a crumbling continent’.<sup>1</sup> Historically bookended by the surge in creative activity during the Irish Literary Revival and the so-called Ulster Renaissance, the nineteen forties appear to be years of relative silence during which writers ceased publishing or emigrated to escape the oppressive atmosphere of unionism and the provinciality of Belfast’s cultural life.<sup>2</sup> As Michael Parker comments, ‘[o]utside the province it is frequently assumed that Northern Ireland’s literary history suddenly sprang into being from nowhere at some point in the 1960s’.<sup>3</sup> To date, no comprehensive assessment of Northern Ireland’s nineteen forties poetry has appeared, although there has been substantial re-evaluation of other genres and of literature in independent Ireland.<sup>4</sup> Only Louis MacNeice, John Hewitt, and, to a lesser extent, W.R. Rodgers have drawn the sustained attention of critics and anthologists, whilst their Belfast-based contemporaries have often been forgotten.

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<sup>1</sup> Roy McFadden, *Collected Poems 1943-1995* (Belfast: Lagan Press, 1996), p. 309. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>2</sup> The debate prompted by the term ‘Ulster Renaissance’ is outlined in the introduction to Heather Clark, *The Ulster Renaissance: Poetry in Belfast 1962-1972* (Oxford: OUP, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Michael Parker, ‘Roy McFadden’, *Guardian*, 28 September 1999, <<http://www.theguardian.com/news/1999/sep/28/guardianobituaries>> [accessed 7 July 2014].

<sup>4</sup> For new viewpoints on drama, fiction and autobiography in Northern Ireland, see footnote 7. For mid-century Ireland, see especially Brian Fallon, *An Age of Innocence: Irish Culture 1930-1960* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1998); Joe Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune: Capital and Culture in Modern Ireland* (Dublin: Field Day, 2007); and Lucy Collins, ed., ‘Irish Poetry Cultures, 1930-60’, Special Issue of the *Irish University Review*, 42.1 (May 2012). Guy Woodward of Trinity College Dublin completed a doctoral thesis in 2012 entitled ‘Culture, Northern Ireland and the Second World War’. This thesis is currently unavailable to the author as it is in preparation for publication.

This thesis addresses the neglect of nineteen forties Northern Irish poetry by exploring a range of poems, publications, and archival materials which have significant aesthetic or historical value. It contributes to literary history by describing Northern Ireland's wartime poetic culture in detail, in addition to providing analysis of the poetry and the writers' complex textual and social interactions. Such an approach lays the foundations for further work on Northern Ireland's mid-century literature, whilst also establishing a more accurate picture of the context from which Hewitt's later poetry and the writers of the Ulster Renaissance emerged. From Rodgers's explosive poetic voice to May Morton's folk-inspired lyrics, this thesis uncovers a number of writers who wished to reinvigorate local literature and, in doing so, to leave a poetic legacy which would be inherited by the next generation. The establishment of a group identity and the creation of a poetic mode particular to the region are ideas which recur throughout the poetry and are central to this thesis. This increase in literary activity coincided with the Second World War and was in part stimulated by the conditions of that conflict. As Rodgers wrote, poets increasingly felt that '[a]ll things, even our thoughts' shapes, subscribe / To these importunate times'.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the poets' work was often written in response to the ethical questions, new conditions, and sometimes terrifying realities of the war years.

Although I focus on the nineteen forties, no decade can be abstracted from history. Therefore, the time period covered overflows the war years, extending from the poets' first mature work in the mid-nineteen thirties until the waning of poetic energies in the early nineteen fifties. Eight poets who were domiciled in, or closely connected to, Northern Ireland during this time have been selected for close analysis:

John Hewitt; W.R. Rodgers; Patrick Maybin; Robert Greacen; May Morton; Freda

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<sup>5</sup> W.R. Rodgers, *Collected Poems* (Oxford: OUP, 1971), p. 41. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

Laughton; and Roy McFadden. At the beginning of the war, these poets' cultural, social and working lives centered on Belfast. Consequently, I concentrate on the literary networks and poetic activity in the city and its environs. The eighth poet, who 'has always sent the canonical compass bearings haywire', is Louis MacNeice.<sup>6</sup> Unlike the other writers discussed here, MacNeice's imagination and career were not fully anchored in Belfast or Northern Ireland. However, as explored in Chapter Three, his work existed in creative tension with the regional impulses within Northern Irish poetry and is thus indispensable here.

The work of these poets cannot be considered in isolation from the wider cultures of Britain, Ireland, and Northern Ireland. Edna Longley's realization that 'it can be difficult to draw clear boundaries between the pan-Irish, British and Northern Irish 1930s' could equally be applied to the nineteen forties.<sup>7</sup> The poets' imaginations were in continual dialogue with debates and experiments elsewhere, to which they contributed and from which they learned. Neither can poetry be divorced from drama, fiction, music, visual art, or broadcasting. However, the limited space available here means that the work of many fascinating novelists, essayists, dramatists, and painters cannot be considered in depth.<sup>8</sup> Critics and cultural historians have already researched the region's periodical culture and the BBC

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<sup>6</sup> Peter McDonald, *Louis MacNeice: The Poet in his Contexts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> Edna Longley, *The Living Stream: Literature and Revisionism in Ireland* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1994), p. 117.

<sup>8</sup> Some work has already been completed on drama and fiction. For drama, see Sam Hanna Bell, *The Theatre in Ulster* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1972). New editions of plays include Rutherford Mayne, *Selected Plays of Rutherford Mayne*, ed. by Wolfgang Zach (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2000), and John Hewitt, *Two Plays: The McCrackens; The Angry Dove*, ed. by Damian Smyth (Belfast: Lagan Press, 1999). For fiction, see J.W. Foster, *Forces and Themes in Ulster Fiction* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1974); Sophia Hillan King, *The Silken Twine: A Study of the Works of Michael McLaverty* (Swords: Poolbeg, 1992); Sophia Hillan King, "'A Salute from the Banderol': Sam Hanna Bell's Contribution to Ulster's Cultural Life", *Writing Ulster*, 6 (1999), 1-11; Seán McMahon, *Sam Hanna Bell: A Biography* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1999). New editions of fiction include Michael McLaverty, *Call My Brother Back* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2003); Michael McLaverty, *Lost Fields* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2004); Sam Hanna Bell, *Erin's Orange Lily; and Summer Loanen and Other Stories* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1996).

Northern Ireland Home Service (BBC NIHS) and so these are only referred to where relevant.<sup>9</sup> Those poets who produced only a handful of poems or who were not closely associated with the group in Belfast are not discussed in detail. Therefore, the little-known John Gallen and the considerably more prolific Patrick Kavanagh are peripheral to this thesis.

The difficulty of drawing borders in time and space highlights the issues relating to terminology when writing about poetry in Northern Ireland. Although at times the poets discussed here used this descriptor, they generally referred to their region as Ulster. However, this historic nine county province was divided by partition in 1920: thereafter, the six north-easterly counties form Northern Ireland, whilst Counties Donegal, Monaghan, and Cavan became part of the newly established Irish Free State. The poets usually wrote of an even smaller area which comprised Antrim, Down, and Armagh, with Hewitt, McFadden, and Morton occasionally looking further afield to Donegal. All of the poets thought of the border as a dividing line between belligerence and neutrality, an awareness which reinforces the distinction they occasionally make between the historic province and the newly-formed statelet. I therefore employ the term Northern Ireland as the most accurate descriptor of the poets' immediate imaginative territory, but not as a means of isolating their work from contemporary Irish or British literary culture.

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<sup>9</sup> For periodicals, see Tom Clyde, 'Uladh, Lagan and Rann: the "Little Magazine" Comes to Ulster', in *Returning to Ourselves: Second Volume of Papers from the John Hewitt International Summer School*, ed. by Eve Patten (Belfast: Lagan Press, 1995), pp. 145-53; Tom Clyde, *Irish Literary Magazines: An Outline History and Descriptive Bibliography* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2003); Frank Shovlin, *The Irish Literary Periodical, 1923-1958* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003); Malcolm Ballin, *Irish Periodical Culture, 1937-1972: Genre in Ireland, Wales, and Scotland* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). For BBC NI, see Rex Cathcart, *The Most Contrary Region: The BBC in Northern Ireland 1924-1984* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1984); and Gillian McIntosh, *The Force of Culture: Unionist Identities in Twentieth-Century Ireland* (Cork: Cork UP, 1999).

## II. Critical assessments of nineteen forties Northern Ireland

Few critics of Irish literature have explored poetry in mid-century Northern Ireland in detail. Many provide only a brief, incomplete summary in order to bridge the gap between the early and late twentieth century, or to contextualize the Ulster Renaissance of the nineteen sixties. Thus, Dillon Johnston mentions ‘the emergence of several important poets in Ulster’ during the nineteen forties, John Goodby refers to a ‘Regionalist movement’, and Neil Corcoran argues that critics have exaggerated ‘the extent to which literature was not a significant feature of the province’s cultural life’ prior to the nineteen sixties.<sup>10</sup> Whilst such accounts tantalizingly hint at the nature of mid-century poetry, their paucity nevertheless suggests that this section of Northern Ireland’s literary history is relatively uninteresting in comparison to the remarkable flourishing of poetry in Belfast two decades later.

There is, however, a small and growing body of scholarship which seeks to assess this field. The first study in this area was Terence Brown’s *Northern Voices: Poets from Ulster* (1974). This book is a significant addition to literary history, consolidating the canonical repatriation of MacNeice and providing perceptive readings of many poets. However, although Brown devotes four chapters to Hewitt, MacNeice, Rodgers, Greacen, and McFadden, he nevertheless refers to ‘the barren soils of Belfast and its surrounding counties in the dry, uncreative years of the 1940s and 1950s’.<sup>11</sup> In his 1991 essay, “‘A Stirring in the Dry Bones’: John Hewitt’s Regionalism’, Tom Clyde posited that the conditions of the Second World War prompted a literary revival in Belfast and placed greater emphasis than Brown on the existence of a network of literati. Hewitt and the development of regionalism are at

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<sup>10</sup> Dillon Johnston, *Irish Poetry After Joyce* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1997), p. 8; John Goodby, *Irish Poetry Since 1950: From Stillness into History* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000), p. 16; Neil Corcoran, *After Yeats and Joyce: Reading Modern Irish Literature* (Oxford: OUP, 1997), pp. 131-2.

<sup>11</sup> Terence Brown, *Northern Voices: Poets from Ulster* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975), p. 86.

the centre of Clyde's exposition of this cultural 'boom period', during which Belfast benefitted from the cosmopolitan atmosphere created by the presence of British and American troops. The article's brevity inevitably narrows the focus, and so Greacen, Maybin, Morton, and Laughton remain unmentioned. Furthermore, Clyde's narrative rests on the assumption that prior to the war Northern Ireland was 'a neglected backwater, untroubled by foreign visitors and foreign ideas'.<sup>12</sup> Such a generalization about Northern Ireland's pre-war culture fails to acknowledge, for example, the considerable impact of visits by Chinese socialist Shelley Wang and New Zealander James Bertram to Belfast during the late nineteen thirties.

In *The Living Stream: Literature and Revisionism in Ireland* (1994), Edna Longley views literature in Northern Ireland through a panoramic lens, discussing a range of writers whose work deviates from the 'predatory ideologies, fixed agendas and fixed expectations' which she believes dominate Irish politics. Objecting to the cursory treatment of the 'crucial bridge of the mid-century' in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (1991), Longley explores the political and social dynamics of writing in Belfast from the beginning of the twentieth century onwards, with particular emphasis on the nineteen thirties and forties. Her insightful analyses of Hewitt, MacNeice, John Boyd, Sam Hanna Bell, and others capture the vibrancy, productivity, and internationalism of Belfast's mid-century literature. Longley emphasizes the significance of those liberal writers who stood up for art and socialism in reaction against the entrenched sectarianism and fixed ideas of the city's unionist 'savage quarters'. Yet, Longley risks overstressing the radicalism of these writers in order to demonstrate the existence of a literary tradition in Northern

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<sup>12</sup> Tom Clyde, "'A Stirring in the Dry Bones': John Hewitt's Regionalism", in *The Poet's Place: Ulster Literature and Society*, ed. by Gerald Dawe and John Wilson Foster (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, 1991), pp. 249-58 (pp. 250-1).

Ireland which is characterized by dissent from unionism and which counterpoints what she views as Field Day's nationalist ethos.<sup>13</sup> In addition, Longley does not consider to what extent these writers mythologized their own pasts in contemporary and retrospective autobiographical accounts of the period.

Building on Longley and Clyde's work in *The Force of Culture: Unionist Identities in Twentieth-Century Ireland* (1999), Gillian McIntosh draws on a wealth of archival resources to support her argument that Hewitt, Rodgers, MacNeice, Bell, and Hugh Shearman presented 'alternative visions' to the official Unionist ideology of the nineteen forties and fifties. McIntosh argues that these visions were often, but not always, in opposition to the unionist government's projection of an image of a demographically homogenous and loyal protestant state. McIntosh's historical assessment of mid-century culture leaves much scope for a detailed examination of the poetry itself, whilst her insistence that Hewitt 'forged a place as the representative voice of the period' and was the 'linchpin' of literary society is questionable.<sup>14</sup>

The majority of these critics emphasize Hewitt's importance, sometimes presenting him as a heroic figure striving against sectarianism, philistinism, and insularity in conditions of extreme intellectual and artistic isolation. Clyde, for example, hails him as a valiant figure: 'the groundwork done by Hewitt in the 1940's means that no Ulster poet since that time has found his or her self so confused, isolated and burdened by cultural cringe as Hewitt and his predecessors did'.<sup>15</sup> The marginalization of McFadden, Greacen, Laughton, Morton, and Maybin serves to reinforce Hewitt's predominance as the only significant poet who lived in Belfast

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<sup>13</sup> Longley, *The Living Stream*, p. 9, p. 44, p. 127, p. 23.

<sup>14</sup> McIntosh, p. 3, pp. 181-2.

<sup>15</sup> Clyde, "'A Stirring in the Dry Bones'", p. 258.



through the middle decades of the twentieth century. Patrick Walsh rejects a Hewitt-centered literary history, arguing that such narratives depend on ‘the generally obscure literary culture from which [Hewitt] emerged’. He argues that this is often mistakenly perceived as ‘torpid, provincial and philistine, having produced no major, and even few minor, locally-based writers until the emergence of Seamus Heaney and his generation at the end of the sixties’.<sup>16</sup> The present thesis does not dispute the radicalism of some of Hewitt’s ideas, or that he was one of the foremost poets in Belfast during the period. However, by balancing a wide-ranging perspective with detailed analysis of each poet and their place in the literary scene, I demonstrate that Hewitt was part of a diverse, loosely-formed group of poets who responded to their context in comparable but not necessarily coterminous ways.

The contribution this thesis makes to literary history and its focus on cultural networks is indebted to Richard Kirkland’s groundwork on the period, summarized in an invaluable article, ‘The Poetics of Partition: Poetry and Northern Ireland in the 1940s’ (2012). Shifting the focus away from Hewitt, MacNeice, and Rodgers, Kirkland identifies a Belfast-based revival which began during the Second World War and was promoted primarily by Greacen, McFadden, and John Gallen. According to Kirkland, Hewitt, Morton, and Rodgers were associated with this movement in a ‘slightly more semi-detached way’. Kirkland traces a complex web of relational and literary interconnections, homing in on Greacen’s energetic crusade for a revival based in Belfast and his obsession with modernizing Irish literature. ‘The movement, then,’ Kirkland writes, ‘set its face to the future, rejected the past,

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<sup>16</sup> Patrick Walsh, “‘Too-much-alone’: John Hewitt, Regionalism, Socialism and Partition’, *Irish University Review*, 29.2 (Autumn-Winter 1999), 341-57 (p. 341).

and frequently expressed a desire to break with what was understood as a tradition of artistic mediocrity in the North'.<sup>17</sup>

Two of the themes which run through Kirkland's essay have already been identified above and are elaborated on and interrogated throughout this thesis. Firstly, Kirkland considers whether the poets formed a 'movement' or a 'second literary revival'.<sup>18</sup> I expand on his comments about the nature, key concerns, and coherence of this putative revival, also taking into account the questions Heather Clark sets out in the introduction to *The Ulster Renaissance: Poetry in Belfast 1962-1972* (2006). Quoting Blake Morrison, Clark asks:

Did the writers know each other? Is there any evidence of mutual admiration, mutual influence, or collaboration? Did the writers come from the same social background? Did they have similar political beliefs? Did they intend to write for the same kind of audience? Was there a common belief about the direction which contemporary literature should take?<sup>19</sup>

To these questions, I add several other lines of inquiry. Did the poets publish in the same places or collaborate in publishing ventures? Did they have similar literary influences? Did they meet and discuss literature as a group on a frequent basis? What was the nature of any disagreements? I elucidate Kirkland's allusions to such fractures in the fragile group identity, which could be divisive or constructive and variously damaged or facilitated the refinement of regional poetics. By expanding the constrained timeframe Kirkland employs and placing a greater emphasis on textual analysis, I create a more complete survey of this embryonic coterie.

Secondly, Kirkland notes that the wartime poets 'invest[ed] in the idea of a more distinctively local mode' or, as Hewitt put it, a 'native mode' which was

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<sup>17</sup> Richard Kirkland, 'The Poetics of Partition: Poetry and Northern Ireland in the 1940s', in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry*, ed. by Fran Brearton and Alan Gillis (Oxford: OUP, 2012), pp. 210-24, (p. 211, p. 214).

<sup>18</sup> Kirkland, 'The Poetics of Partition', p. 211, p. 221.

<sup>19</sup> Clark, *The Ulster Renaissance*, p. 7.

neither English nor Irish.<sup>20</sup> With the caveat that MacNeice's relationship to this topic is complex, the writers sought to employ the fundamental aspects of poetry – rhythm, rhyme, diction, imagery, and so on – in order to shape a poetic mode which was appropriate to their region, whether they perceived it to be historic Ulster or post-partition Northern Ireland. They saw themselves as engaged in the creation of a vibrant, vital literary culture which would nourish the life of the wider population and was defined in opposition to the repressive aspects of unionism. Although each poet's oeuvre is unique, I propose that three modes of writing became dominant: regional, regionalist, and neo-romantic poetry. Whilst the first two have received much critical attention, the third has been somewhat overlooked, particularly in assessments of Northern Ireland's literature.

The first term refers to a reaction against the dominance of metropolitan centres in much poetry of the Second World War. This resulted in a trend towards decentralization and the composition of poetry rooted in the local place. Many poets became increasingly interested in local accents, landscapes, issues, and histories. Regionalism in Northern Ireland was a more specific distillation of these ideas and is primarily associated with Hewitt. His theories developed in response to partition, wartime travel restrictions, and the writings of Lewis Mumford and Patrick Geddes, all of which caused writers to look to their own locality for inspiration and an engaged readership.<sup>21</sup>

In *The Culture of Cities* (1938), Mumford considered two inter-related and pressing problems: the decline and failures of urban life, and the rise of fascism. He

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<sup>20</sup> Kirkland, 'The Poetics of Partition', p. 214; John Hewitt, *The Collected Poems of John Hewitt*, ed. by Frank Ormsby (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1991), p. 21. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>21</sup> John Hewitt, *A North Light: Twenty-Five Years in a Municipal Art Gallery*, ed. by Frank Ferguson and Kathryn White (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2013), p. 144.

proposed that it was necessary to oppose ‘the stale cult of death that the fascists have erected’, arguing that instead ‘we must erect a cult of life’. To do so, man should ‘march out to newly plowed fields, to create fresh patterns of political action, to alter for human purposes the perverse mechanisms of our economic regime, to conceive and to germinate fresh forms of human culture’. This statement places the visionary at the centre of the progression towards an ideal future in which people would live in interlinked regions, areas defined by natural geographic boundaries instead of political borders. Mumford described the town planner’s role as ‘mak[ing] the region ready to sustain the richest types of human culture and the fullest span of human life’.<sup>22</sup> His emphasis on the necessity of imagining an alternative, non-urban order in which culture could flourish pointed towards a viable public function for the poet, an idea which attracted regional writers who felt alienated from their social context. For Hewitt, Mumford’s study suggested that the artist could fulfill a vital role in imaginatively establishing the region’s unique cultural identity.

The essayist Howard Sergeant defined regionalism as the:

[...] movement towards a future in which a balanced life in every community has become the source of local self-respect and human affinity. It arises out of a natural affection for or an attachment, conscious or unconscious, to a particular environment, and finds expression through a language, outlook and manner of life, of the people concerned, adapted to the intellectual and emotional experiences of the individual.<sup>23</sup>

Regionalist writers strove to imagine such an ideal world, which retained a place for the individual within the community and for the local place within a global perspective. Partly because of the failure to define the region’s borders, regionalism was never a viable alternative to unionism and nationalism, or a solution to Northern Ireland’s socio-political problems. Recognizing this retrospectively, Hewitt

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<sup>22</sup> Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1940), p. 11, p. 336.

<sup>23</sup> Howard Sergeant, ‘Ulster Regionalism’, *Rann*, 20 (June 1953), 3-5 (p. 3).

described regionalism as one of many ‘Socialist Utopias’ of the war years.<sup>24</sup> Yet, its importance for poetry of the nineteen forties cannot be understated.

Many other Northern Irish poets also found these ideas appealing. However, as discussed in this thesis, most deviated in some way from Hewittesque regionalism and are therefore more accurately described as regional writers. In different ways, Rodgers, Greacen, and McFadden brought regional and regionalist ideas into dialogue with neo-romanticism, a wartime mode of writing which stressed introspection in place of the ‘public’ attitudes of nineteen thirties English poets. During the early nineteen forties, Greacen and McFadden were affiliated with the New Apocalypse, a literary movement indebted to the broader fashion for neo-romanticism.

The second axis on which this thesis is plotted is that of Second World War poetry. Literature of the 1914 conflict has often occluded that of the later World War. Critical studies and anthologies often privilege poets whose work demonstrates, in Samuel Hynes’ terms, an ‘aesthetic of direct experience’ of the battlefield.<sup>25</sup> However, revisionist studies of twentieth-century war literature have generated more inclusive perspectives on war poetry. Marina MacKay links this development with ‘[w]ar’s homecoming’ during the nineteen forties. The new conditions and technologies of the Second World War erased many of the barriers between the Home Front and the battlefield, combatant and civilian, men and women. Writing about late modernism, MacKay argues that ‘[a]s a conflict in which the civilian experience was paramount, its literature urges a reshaping of what counts as the literature of war in order to include authors who were not combatants and texts that

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<sup>24</sup> Hewitt, *A North Light*, p. 144.

<sup>25</sup> Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London: Pimlico, 1992), p. 159.

are not “about” war in any straightforwardly mimetic way’.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, scholars now study the multifarious responses of civilians, women, pacifists, and combatants to the unprecedented conditions of total war. The developing careers of nineteen thirties poets, the formation of the New Apocalypse, and the efforts of popular versifiers have been examined alongside the ‘war poets’ Sidney Keyes, Keith Douglas, and Alun Lewis.<sup>27</sup> MacKay, Simon Featherstone, and Hugh Haughton have challenged the centripetal force exerted by London, introducing regional and international writers in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of World War II* (2009), *War Poetry: An Introductory Reader* (1995), and *Second World War Poems* (2004).

Northern Ireland is one of the many unexplored ‘components of the scene’ of Second World War poetry.<sup>28</sup> As Greacen explained, the statelet was on the geographical periphery of the conflict and therefore experienced the contradictions inherent in having ‘one foot in the War and one out of it’.<sup>29</sup> With the exception of army doctor Patrick Maybin, the poets discussed in this thesis did not write with the benefit of direct experience of the battlefield. Instead, they shared what Elizabeth Bowen refers to as the ‘climate’ of war.<sup>30</sup> The conflict impinged on the imaginations of the poets, who were subject to the blitz, rationing, the blackout, travel restrictions,

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<sup>26</sup> Marina MacKay, *Modernism and World War II* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), p. 6.

<sup>27</sup> Gill Plain provides a detailed overview of these developments in literary criticism in the introduction to *Literature of the 1940s: War, Postwar and ‘Peace’* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2013). For more inclusive studies of war poetry, see, for example, Robert Hewison, *Under Siege: Literary Life in London, 1939-1945* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977); Catherine Reilly, *English Poetry of the Second World War: A Bibliography* (London: Mansell, 1986); Adam Piette, *Imagination at War: British Fiction and Poetry, 1939-1945* (London: Papermac, 1995); Adam Piette and Mark Rawlinson, eds, *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century British and American War Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2012).

<sup>28</sup> Donald Bain, ‘War Poet’, in *Second World War Poems*, ed. by Hugh Haughton (London: Faber, 2004), p. 26.

<sup>29</sup> Robert Greacen, ‘Trends in Recent Irish Poetry’, *The Poetry Review*, Queen’s University Belfast: Roy McFadden Collection MP5, p. 372.

<sup>30</sup> Gill Plain, ‘Women Writers and the War’, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of World War II*, ed. by Marina MacKay (Cambridge: CUP, 2009), pp. 165-78 (p. 165).

and other conditions peculiar to the war. However, some of these limitations also functioned as catalysts for the development of local literature. Consequently, the war is a constant presence in the poetry of the eight poets discussed here, whether they tried to find peace in the pastoral mode or to confront the horrors of the Belfast blitz.

### **III: Poetry in mid-century Northern Ireland**

Due to the incompleteness of accounts of Northern Ireland's mid-century literature, it is necessary to sketch the scene before embarking upon detailed analysis of the poetry of the war years. With the exception of Morton, the poets discussed in this thesis were born between 1907 and 1922 and therefore grew up either during the First World War or its aftermath. The relief felt in Britain following the cessation of hostilities in November 1918 was tempered in Ireland by what Matthew Campbell describes as 'a weariness borne not only of involvement in a world war, but also of revolution and its aftermath, the irresolution of partition'.<sup>31</sup> The war had polarized nationalists and unionists, confirming the former's anxiety that Home Rule would not be implemented, and the latter's belief that their sacrifice for Britain would consolidate the union. The Easter Rising of 1916 and the slaughter of many members of the 36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster) Division several months later at the Somme remained painfully fresh in people's memories. After partition in 1920, communal violence swept through Northern Ireland, whilst the Unionist Party retained its position as the dominant political power. The nineteen thirties saw Northern Ireland's economy suffer during the depression. By the end of the decade it had become the poorest part of the United Kingdom, with an unemployment level often above twenty-five per

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<sup>31</sup> Matthew Campbell, 'Irish Writing of Insurrection and Civil War, 1916-39', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century British and American War Literature*, ed. by Piette and Rawlinson, pp. 64-74 (p. 64).

cent due to the decline of the shipbuilding and linen industries. The tensions and frustrations of restive industrial workers, who were discontented with the government's provision for the unemployed, exploded in the Outdoor Relief Riots of 1932.<sup>32</sup>

Reflecting on his experience of the nineteen thirties from the vantage point of 1951, Greacen mythologized the period as an era of stagnation and isolation:

Since the generation of Joseph Campbell and AE, until the late Thirties, there was an almost complete blank in poetic utterance and in drama. No middle generation of quality had arisen to whom the younger writers could look for guidance, not to speak of inspiration. [...] Commercialism, with its rough edges unsmoothed by the graces that money can buy, lack of true values and isolationism due to an absorption in domestic quarrels that originated several centuries ago, make life extremely difficult for the sensitive young Ulsterman. His early impulse is to break free, cut himself off completely from such a smothering atmosphere. Later, he learns to modify his attitude and even to find certain good and positive traits in his environment.<sup>33</sup>

Northern Ireland's cultural life was not as bleak at this time as Greacen remembers.

Although figures such as George Russell and St. John Ervine had left Belfast to pursue their careers elsewhere, Thomas Carnduff, Richard Rowley, Rutherford Mayne, Forrest Reid, and others remained and continued to publish. Even so, Greacen and his contemporaries felt alienated within their own society and frequently reiterated the cliché that Belfast and Northern Ireland were inhospitable to the imagination. Hewitt complained that 'the fact is bluntly that until an Ulster writer is dead the community is scarcely aware that he was even alive', whilst elsewhere he deplored the 'state of popular aesthetics in Belfast'.<sup>34</sup>

The first chapter of this thesis takes this context as a starting point. Beginning by situating Hewitt's poetry in relation to his immediate literary predecessors, I then

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<sup>32</sup> Thomas Hennessy, *A History of Northern Ireland, 1920-1996* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1997), p. 4, p. 11, p. 56, p. 59.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Greacen, 'The Poetry of W.R. Rodgers', *Rann*, 14 (December 1951), 14-8 (p. 14).

<sup>34</sup> John Hewitt, 'Toast of H.M. Government of Northern Ireland', Public Records Office of Northern Ireland D/3838/2/2, p. 1; John Hewitt, 'The Ulster Academy of Arts Exhibition (Oct. 24-Dec.1). With a few remarks on local art criticism', *The New Northman*, 2.3 (Autumn 1934), 8.



discuss his progression towards ‘socialist internationalism’.<sup>35</sup> Hewitt’s friendship with Chinese socialist, activist and poet Shelley Wang, whom he met in 1938, provides a focal point for consideration of his left-wing activities and attitude to the declaration of war. Whilst their relationship was brief (Wang died soon after his return to China in 1939), it exerted a profound impact on Hewitt’s poetry. His poems and elegies for his friend develop the image of an ideal poet, whilst addressing the issue of whether art and civilization could survive the coming storm. This international context is an important aspect in the development of Hewitt’s regionalism, which was closely linked with his socialist tenets and a global perspective on place.

Rodgers was equally interested in both local and international issues, which inform his first volume of poetry, *Awake! and Other Poems* (1941). The impact of this publication on Belfast’s writers was electrifying and they immediately welcomed the ‘all-round sheer excellence of Rodgers’s work – apart from a rather tiresome revelling in alliteration’.<sup>36</sup> His sudden popularity in Britain, Ireland, and the United States proved to local writers that it was possible to achieve significant literary success whilst living in and writing about Northern Ireland. Chapter Two examines two aspects of Rodgers’s maverick poetic voice which, like the verse of his Northern Irish contemporaries, was influenced by regionalist ideas and English poetry of the nineteen thirties. Firstly, I analyse his impact on local literature and the creation of a regional poetic mode which he believed could unite the characteristics of Northern Ireland’s diverging communities. The second section of the chapter explores the relationship between his poetry and the intense anxieties of the

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<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Tom Walker, ‘Louis MacNeice and the Irish Poetry of his Time’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Oxford, 2010), p. 55.

<sup>36</sup> Robert Greacen, ‘A Survey of Ulster Writing’, *The Northman*, 15.2 (Winter 1942-3), 10-4 (p. 13).

immediate pre-war period during which *Awake!* was composed. I propose that Rodgers's startling images and diction were designed to prompt his readers to understand the need for social reform. Drawing on ideas about the poet's social role then current in English poetry, Rodgers joined other wartime writers in looking forward to the post-war construction of an ideal, levelled world.

When war was declared in September 1939, it appeared to some commentators that poets failed to respond to the challenge as quickly as their predecessors had done in 1914. The question 'where are the war poets?' quickly became a cliché in a time which seemed to be characterized by endings and silence.

Writing about this period in *Poems from Ulster* (1942), Greacen announced that:

One of the most significant facts for the potential poets of the Forties was the disintegration of the group that had attracted so much attention during the previous decade. Some of them had gone to the U.S.A.; *New Verse* was discontinued; *New Writing* became less frequent and less dynamic, and a sea of silence swamped the vociferous *litterati* [*sic*] who had told us so often of their devotion to the extreme Left.<sup>37</sup>

In both parts of Ireland, the death of W.B. Yeats in 1939 consolidated the sense that an era had ended. Hewitt commented that 'it seemed to many as if the bottom had dropped out of Irish poetry'.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Rodgers remembered that the Irish Literary Revival came to an end 'with the outbreak of the Second World War'.<sup>39</sup> After war was declared in September the visiting lecturers and performers who had nourished the region's cultural life were unable to visit Northern Ireland without travel

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<sup>37</sup> Robert Greacen, 'Introduction', in *Poems from Ulster*, ed. by Robert Greacen (Belfast: Erskine Mayne, 1942), pp. 3-5 (p. 3).

<sup>38</sup> John Hewitt, Review of *The Plot Succeeds: A Poetic Pantomime* by Austin Clarke, 'This Insubstantial Pageant' by Ewart Milne, 'Reservations' by Valentin Iremonger, University of Ulster: John Hewitt Collection Box 22.

<sup>39</sup> W.R. Rodgers, *Irish Literary Portraits* (London: BBC, 1972), p. xvi.

permits.<sup>40</sup> Local writers consequently feared a decline in the statelet's intellectual life.

Like many of their contemporaries in Britain, writers in Northern Ireland did not immediately respond publicly to the beginning of the war. Despite the widespread experience of historical déjà-vu, the poets were faced with a vastly different situation to that which had confronted their predecessors in 1914. Perhaps with fewer illusions than their parents' generation, they met the challenge ambivalently and unenthusiastically. MacNeice in particular felt torn between a 'choice of evils': either the individual could evade the war, or choose to support violence in the hope of a better future.<sup>41</sup> Hitler's aggressive strategies and the menace of fascism nullified many pacifists' ethical reservations, along with most accusations of an imperialist war, whilst the Nazi-Soviet Pact of August 1939 threw the left-wing into confusion. Once fighting began in earnest, a variety of fronts was opened up over a huge geographical expanse. Vernon Scannell points out that at this time no single space could function as synecdoche for imaginative representations of combat, as does Flanders Fields in much poetry of the First World War.<sup>42</sup> Partition and Ireland's declaration of neutrality further complicated the picture.

Yet, by the end of 1939 the *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer Philip Tomlinson acknowledged that 'already those who are concerned to keep poetry alive are adding their comment on where the world stands'.<sup>43</sup> As in Britain and Ireland, literary life continued in Northern Ireland and the heads of Belfast's 'cultural hydra'

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<sup>40</sup> Brian Barton, *Northern Ireland in the Second World War* (Belfast: Ulster Historical Foundation, 1995), p. 6.

<sup>41</sup> Louis MacNeice, *The Strings are False: An Unfinished Autobiography* (London: Faber, 1965), p. 21.

<sup>42</sup> Vernon Scannell, *Not Without Glory: Poets of the Second World War* (London: Woburn, 1976), p. 20.

<sup>43</sup> Philip Tomlinson, 'To the Poets of 1940', *TLS*, 30 December 1939, p. 755.

proliferated.<sup>44</sup> Poets, essayists, novelists, artists, and others met for informal social gatherings and more structured debates in a number of settings throughout the war. Although each location or society had its own character and was patronised by varying combinations of people, most were celebrated for being anti-sectarian, open to progressive politics, and supportive of the arts. (As discussed further in Chapter Five, the politically inclusive nature of this almost exclusively Protestant milieu is questionable.) In general, the meetings were concentrated within a small geographical area easily traversable by foot or tram, leading to the formation of a close-knit community.

The upper floor of Campbell's Café, opposite Belfast's City Hall, has become legendary in accounts of nineteen forties Northern Ireland as an 'island of tolerance in our bitterly divided community'.<sup>45</sup> There, the older generation was represented by Richard Rowley, Denis Ireland, and William Conor, who presided over coffee and engaged with the younger 'literary aspirants' in eager discussions about poetry, politics, and the war.<sup>46</sup> Murals by the cartoonist and painter Rowel Friers decorated the walls.<sup>47</sup> Although critic Sarah Ferris states that the conversations in Campbell's were 'desultory', they are recalled by the attendees with warmth and enthusiasm.<sup>48</sup> Journalist James Kelly remembers that the 'conversation was lively, sometimes ribald, covering the theatre, the arts, politics and newspapers'.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Patrick Maybin, Letter to John Hewitt, 11 July 1944, PRONI D/3838/3/10, p. 1.

<sup>45</sup> Robert Greacen, *The Sash my Father Wore: An Autobiography* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1997), p. 130.

<sup>46</sup> John Boyd, *The Middle of my Journey* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1990), pp. 22-3.

<sup>47</sup> Rowel Friers, *Drawn From Life: An Autobiography* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1994), p. 135.

<sup>48</sup> Sarah Ferris, *Poet John Hewitt, 1907-1987 and Criticism of Northern Irish Protestant Writing* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002), p. 20.

<sup>49</sup> James Kelly, *Bonfires on the Hillside: An Eyewitness Account of Political Upheaval in Northern Ireland* (Belfast: Fountain, 1995), p. 149.

David McLean's Progressive Bookshop in Union Street furnished intellectuals with a meeting space and a ready supply of left-wing and anarchist books, whilst the meetings of the Poets, Essayists, and Novelists society (PEN) in the Union Hotel near the City Hall provided opportunities for debate. Although Hewitt and Morton were committed to PEN – both served as secretary and attended various international conferences – others were ambivalent. McFadden, who referred to the group as 'Phoneys, Eccentrics and Neurotics', remembered that 'we did not discover among the members any great degree of commitment to writing as a troublesome art, and the meetings were usually tepid'.<sup>50</sup> Despite his own frustrations with PEN, Greacen later described it as 'mercifully non-sectarian in a society with no great reputation for tolerance'.<sup>51</sup> The working-class 'shipyard poet' Thomas Carnduff founded the Young Ulster Society in 1936 with the stated aim of 'encourag[ing] a greater knowledge of Ulster art, literature, and drama'.<sup>52</sup> With 140 members, it functioned as a forum for discussion and lectures.<sup>53</sup> Several less significant societies formed, grew, and dispersed during the nineteen forties and early fifties. The Poetry Society, the Theosophical Society, the Literary Dinner Club, and the Belfast Literary Society are mentioned by Roberta Hewitt in her diary, whilst Maybin refers unenthusiastically to the Film Society and the Ulster Union Club in his correspondence with Hewitt.<sup>54</sup> More official committees included the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA), which was founded in 1943 and with which Hewitt was closely involved. Significantly, during the nineteen forties

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<sup>50</sup> Roy McFadden, "'No Dusty Pioneer': A Personal Recollection of John Hewitt", in *The Poet's Place*, ed. by Dawe and Foster, pp. 169-80 (p. 173).

<sup>51</sup> Robert Greacen, *Rooted in Ulster* (Belfast: Lagan Press, 2000), p. 107.

<sup>52</sup> Quoted by John Gray, 'Introduction', in *Thomas Carnduff: Life and Writings*, ed. by John Gray (Belfast: Lagan Press, 1994), pp. 11-56 (p. 42).

<sup>53</sup> Ferris, *Poet John Hewitt*, p. 73.

<sup>54</sup> Roberta Hewitt, Diary Entries, 26 November 1947, 3 June 48, and 30 September 1950, Diary Volume 1, PRONI D/3838/4/6, p. 22, p. 102, p. 503; Roberta Hewitt, Diary Entry, 23 October 1951, Diary Volume 2, PRONI D/3838/4/6, p. 652; Patrick Maybin, Letter to John Hewitt, 11 July 1944, PRONI D/3838/3/10, p. 1.

CEMA did not fund literary activities. Hewitt was also a member of the BBC Northern Ireland Regional Advisory Panel.<sup>55</sup>

The Hewitts' flat at 18 Mountcharles was a more informal social venue, as were the university digs of Sam Hanna Bell and Bob Davidson.<sup>56</sup> British and American writers often found their way to Mountcharles from their temporary accommodation in local military camps. Rayner Heppenstall, John Manifold, Emmanuel Litvinoff, and Hamish Henderson were among the visitors who enlivened the conversation at the Hewitts' and opened a window on the wider world. E.M. Forster, Philip Larkin, and John Betjeman visited in later years.<sup>57</sup> Friers later described these social evenings as a 'tossed salad of poets, writers, artists, critics and raconteurs' engaging in conversations which 'plodded from impressionists to regional poets'.<sup>58</sup> After McFadden's move from the city in 1941, a small number of writers met in the Lisburn area, approximately ten miles outside Belfast. These included McFadden, John Boyd, the Yeats scholar Oliver Edwards and his wife, Barbara Hunter, an occasional poet, linguist, and co-editor of the magazine *Rann*. Boyd holidayed with his friends in Murlough Bay before and during the war, whilst after 1945 he frequented the Elbow Room, a Belfast pub patronized by BBC employees and contributors such as McFadden, the artists Friers and Colin Middleton, and the politician and writer Denis Ireland. Rodgers and MacNeice made their way there when in Belfast and found accommodation with the artists George and Mercy MacCann.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Hewitt, *A North Light*, p. 156, p. 120.

<sup>56</sup> Greacen, *The Sash*, p. 128.

<sup>57</sup> McFadden, "No Dusty Pioneer", p. 172.

<sup>58</sup> Friers, p. 136.

<sup>59</sup> Boyd, *My Journey*, p. 16, p. 18, p. 97, p. 100; McMahon, p. 128.

The third chapter of this thesis situates MacNeice in relation to this cultural moment. Although he has now been assimilated into the canon of Irish literature, his relationship with his contemporaries in Northern Ireland remains a subject of debate: is he the rootless ‘airy internationalist’ of Hewitt’s regionalist manifesto, ‘The Bitter Gourd’ (1945)?<sup>60</sup> This chapter draws on published and archival material in order to assess Hewitt, Greacen, and McFadden’s attitude to MacNeice in more detail. Their ambivalent reception of his work indicates that it existed in creative tension with ideas of rootedness, prompting Belfast’s poets to refine their viewpoints on place, identity, the poet’s role, and a regional poetic mode.

At the beginning of the war, MacNeice shared the sense of déjà-vu experienced by poets throughout Britain and Northern Ireland. Reflecting on the parallels between the First World War and the imminent possibility of another conflict in 1938, he wrote ‘it has happened before, / Just like this before’.<sup>61</sup> In Chapter Four, I address literary echoes of the 1914 conflict in the nineteen thirties poetry of Maybin and Hewitt, particularly in relation to the publication of pacifist propaganda in *The New Northman*, the student magazine of Queen’s University Belfast. However, by 1939 Maybin had become convinced that as the war could not be stopped, he had a duty to act to mitigate some of its negative effects. After he joined the Royal Army Medical Corps and was posted to North Africa, Maybin began to write more intensively of his memories of Northern Ireland and continued an energetic correspondence with Hewitt on a range of literary subjects. In these

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<sup>60</sup> John Hewitt, ‘The Bitter Gourd: Some Problems of the Ulster Writer’, in *Ancestral Voices: The Selected Prose of John Hewitt*, ed. by Tom Clyde (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1987), pp. 108-21 (p. 115).

<sup>61</sup> Louis MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, ed. by Peter McDonald (London: Faber, 2007), p. 109. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

poems, Maybin's regional poetic mode is formed under the pressure of modern warfare.

Greacen and John Gallen objected to this politicization of *The New Northman*. In the winter of 1940, they assumed editorship of the magazine and tried to transform it into an apolitical literary periodical for the dissemination and encouragement of the arts. This was just one of many 'enthusiastic self-help' projects designed to rectify the dearth of publishing opportunities for aspiring local writers.<sup>62</sup> Four issues of the broadsheet *Ulster Voices* (later *Irish Voices*) were published by Greacen and McFadden in 1943, whilst Boyd and others produced four issues of the periodical *Lagan* between 1943 and 1946. The poetry magazine *Rann* succeeded *Lagan* in 1948 and was edited by McFadden and Barbara Hunter until 1953. Several small publishing houses were founded during this period, including the Inver Press and the Mourne Press. Most poets contributed to programmes on the BBC Northern Ireland Home Service, whilst also sending poems to Irish periodicals such as *The Irish Times*, *The Dublin Magazine*, and *Poetry Ireland*. Sean O'Faoláin of *The Bell* was extremely supportive of writing from Northern Ireland, editing three Ulster issues and promoting Rodgers and Hewitt.<sup>63</sup>

Taking Greacen's publishing ventures as a case-study, Chapter Five looks more closely at the evidence that this activity constituted a coherent revival. In addition to co-editing *The New Northman* between 1940 and 1942, Greacen produced six anthologies from 1941 to 1949. In these, he sought to counter the dominance of the Irish mode within the island's contemporary poetry by promoting literature which was heavily indebted to the New Apocalypse. He wished to generate

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<sup>62</sup> Roy McFadden, Draft Review of *The Odd Man Out* by F.L. Green, MFC M28, p. 1.

<sup>63</sup> The 'Ulster Issues' of *The Bell* are 2.4 (July 1941), 4.4 (July 1942), and 4.5 (August 1942).



new modes of writing appropriate to the ‘ruptured masonry of cities like Belfast’, whose blitzed streets were a testament to the city’s modernity and were strikingly different from neutral Dublin’s decaying Georgian grandeur.<sup>64</sup> Initially, Greacen’s claims for a vibrant, confident coterie were undermined by the faultline between the New Apocalypse and regional poetry. However, his later anthologies were more successful as they made space for a wider range of poets, including Hewitt and Rodgers.

A prominent feature of Greacen’s anthologies, and of Northern Ireland’s literary milieu in general, is a lack of women poets. The next chapter identifies two women – Morton and Laughton – who were important figures within Northern Ireland’s literary network, but who wrote in radically different idioms. Morton drew on folk-songs in order to describe the local landscape and culture, whilst Laughton developed an intensely introverted, symbolic and visual aesthetic practice. As with the other poets discussed, their nineteen forties verse is indelibly marked by the dislocations and anxieties of the war. This is manifested in the image of the house – still intact or destroyed by bombing – which is at the centre of Laughton’s symbolic framework and is also a significant image for Morton.

In 1954, Morton wrote to McFadden, explaining that ‘since I first met you I felt that there was – in spite of the generation’s disparity – an affinity of soul between us and an understanding beyond words’.<sup>65</sup> Although this declaration most likely refers to their shared regional interests, there is some evidence to suggest that Morton was sympathetic to McFadden’s pacifist stance, which is the subject of the final chapter. McFadden was a member of the Peace Pledge Union and throughout

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<sup>64</sup> Greacen, ‘Introduction’, in *Poems from Ulster*, p. 5.

<sup>65</sup> May Morton, Letter to Roy McFadden, 19 January 1954, MFC L11, p. 1.

his life remained a vociferous campaigner against violence, believing that despite his protests he was caught up in a cycle of war. The roots of McFadden's pacifism lay in his association with the New Apocalypse movement, which he tried to reconcile with Hewitt's regionalism. McFadden continued to write poetry about the nineteen forties until his death in 1999, revisiting the Second World War as a means of commenting obliquely on the so-called Troubles. The Coda suggests some of the ways in which McFadden and his contemporaries remembered or imagined the war from the perspective of late twentieth-century Northern Ireland.

In the summer of 1969, poets in Northern Ireland might have agreed with Maybin that 'it seems just now that we're standing on an avalanche which is rapidly gaining speed and volume'.<sup>66</sup> This idea pervades literature in Northern Ireland during the Second World War as the realities of total war confronted a generation of writers who had grown up in the shadow of conflict, but who were largely innocent of its lived experience. Unsure about the extent to which this violence would affect their region and their art, the poets discussed in this thesis worked intensively to formulate ideas about the nature of their own poetic productions. With this fundamental anxiety in mind, I now turn to Hewitt's poetry of the immediate pre-war period.

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<sup>66</sup> Patrick Maybin, Letter to John Hewitt, 3 September 1942, PRONI D/3838/3/10, p. 2.

## Chapter One

# John Hewitt: Socialism and Regionalism on the Edge of War

### Introduction

Born in Belfast in 1907, Hewitt matriculated at Queen's University in 1924 to study English. In 1930 he was appointed as an art assistant at the Belfast Museum and Art Gallery, marrying Roberta Black in 1934. In the years that followed, Hewitt had ample opportunity to explore Northern Ireland's cultural history and to become involved with Belfast's various literary and left-wing groups. By 1937, he felt that art and literature in Northern Ireland were on the cusp of renewal. Despite the admission that '[w]e have been sterile too long', Hewitt's trained ear heard, and was inspired by, the 'melody in the place'.<sup>1</sup> This chapter begins by sketching the foundations and ancestors of the poetic rebirth Hewitt anticipated by exploring his poems of the nineteen twenties and early thirties. These were written at a time when the northern branch of the Irish Literary Revival represented a cultural and literary alternative to unionist tenets and forms of artistic expression. It was this mode of writing, rather than the jingoist verse of a writer such as F.S. Boas, which attracted the young Hewitt.

However, left-wing activity in Belfast during the interwar period provides a more significant cultural framework within which to locate Hewitt's generation of poets: this is the central focus of this chapter. Hewitt was deeply involved in this milieu and it quickly led him to discover the politics, visual art and poetry of China

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<sup>1</sup> John Hewitt, 'Editorial', *Irish Jewry* (January 1937), in Cuttings Notebook, PRONI D/3838/2/4/A, p. 45.

in the years immediately preceding the Second World War. Although, as has often been noted, Hewitt believed that the artist ‘must be a *rooted* man’, he had a markedly international perspective. Even while sinking his roots into the soil of Counties Down, Antrim, and Armagh, the poet travelled in both reality and imagination to mainland Europe, the U.S.S.R., and further afield.<sup>2</sup> Writing about *Collected Poems* (1968), Peter McDonald explains that the volume contains:

[...] the poetry of sojourn, of exploration, of ideological engagement, and that of departure, exile, disengagement and disillusion. This parabola is scarcely in line with the better-known formulations of Hewitt’s Regionalism: if the book’s travels are those of ‘a *rooted* man’, then he is rooted in something other than place alone.<sup>3</sup>

Although he never visited the Far East, in 1938 Hewitt hosted Chinese poet and activist Shelley Wang on behalf of the Belfast branch of the China Campaign Committee (CCC). Despite the brevity of their friendship, they quickly found that they shared a passion for poetry, socialism, and the landscape of the Mourne Mountains. By considering this significant literary friendship, it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of how Hewitt’s political concerns coincided with his wartime aesthetic practice and commitment to regionalism.

## I. Interwar literary culture

In 1961, McFadden lamented that his generation ‘had no literary parentage. Uncles, perhaps, such as Carleton, Allingham, AE’.<sup>4</sup> When Hewitt began to write poetry in the mid-nineteen twenties, he shared McFadden’s belief that there was paucity of contemporary literature in Northern Ireland. At this time the energies of the northern branch of the Irish Literary Revival were waning as its writers struggled to adapt to

<sup>2</sup> Hewitt, ‘The Bitter Gourd’, p. 115.

<sup>3</sup> Peter McDonald, *Mistaken Identities: Poetry and Northern Ireland* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 72.

<sup>4</sup> Roy McFadden, ‘Reflections on Megarrity’, in *Spiral Bound Notebook*, MFC MP3, p. 16.

the new political circumstances of post-partition Ireland. Kirkland summarizes the situation as follows:

Before partition, Northern nationalist culture can be identified as an increasingly self-confident force mobilizing itself around a considerable number of interlinked organizations, journals and coteries, such as the Gaelic League, the Ulster Literary Theatre, the Irish Folksong Society, the Henry Joy McCracken Literary Society, and the group of intimates (including [Cathal] O’Byrne) gathered around Francis Joseph Bigger’s house in Ard Righ in North Belfast. Such organizations were partly based on Revival movements operating elsewhere in Ireland but were also, in their concerns and structure, often unique to the North. Following partition and the “loss” of the North, these movements either collapsed or radically reshaped themselves. From being a confident and fundamentally optimistic discourse, the language of Northern cultural nationalism after 1921 becomes insular, melancholic, and preoccupied with memory and loss.<sup>5</sup>

Kirkland’s research on Francis Bigger’s coterie and the poet Cathal O’Byrne has revealed that many northern nationalist writers wished to retain a distinctive Ulster identity within the wider scope of Irish literature. Eugene McNulty’s study of the Ulster Literary Theatre (ULT) is in agreement with this, yet also proposes that the theatre’s playwrights believed that their region’s unique characteristics could contribute much to the whole island: they aimed to “northernise” Ireland and “Irishise” the North’.<sup>6</sup> The tensions produced by competing regional and national affiliations remained unresolved and were inherited by the next generation, who sought to create a distinctively local poetic voice which remained part of – and had the potential to transform – the culture of Ireland. Unlike the northern Revivalists, whose political connections were nationalist in nature, most Belfast poets who grew to maturity in the wake of partition bore the strain of a dual allegiance. Predominantly biased towards unionism, they felt that their poetry was an integral facet of both British and Irish culture.

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Kirkland, ‘Dialogues of Despair: Nationalist Cultural Discourse and the Revival in the North of Ireland, 1900-20’, *Irish University Review*, 33.1 (Spring-Summer 2003), 64-78 (pp. 67-8).

<sup>6</sup> Eugene McNulty, *The Ulster Literary Theatre and the Northern Revival* (Cork: Cork UP, 2008), p. 114.

The legacy of the northern Revival, and also of those poets who distanced themselves from Bigger's coterie, had a significant impact on the development of Hewitt's literary consciousness during the nineteen twenties and thirties, if only because the existence of living writers in Northern Ireland provided a precedent for remaining in and writing about one's own region. According to Frank Ormsby, Hewitt's eyes were opened to contemporary literature when he heard Richard Hayward broadcasting his poems on BBC radio in 1925. This led the aspiring poet to read Richard Rowley (the pseudonym of businessman Richard Valentine Williams), whose books were held alongside Joseph Campbell's in the North Belfast Branch Library. Acquaintance with the work of northern revivalists Moira O'Neill, Elizabeth Shane, Alice Milligan, and AE quickly followed.<sup>7</sup> In a different vein, the first book of local poetry Hewitt purchased was by the 'shipyard poet' and member of the Protestant Orange Order, Thomas Carnduff, who held strong left-wing views.<sup>8</sup> Hewitt had many other opportunities to come into contact with this diverse and dispersed body of writers. He was already aware that Milligan had preceded him as a pupil at the prestigious Methodist College in Belfast. In his final year at this school Hewitt was taught briefly by a modelling master, whom he described as 'one of the small band of enthusiasts which represented the North's contribution to the Gaelic movement of the turn of the century'.<sup>9</sup> At Campbell's Café he met Rowley and several other older artists whose anecdotes would have augmented the knowledge of Irish literature Hewitt was already gaining through extensive reading. Moreover, although Greacen complained that 'the Ulster Literary Theatre trailed off sometime in the late twenties' leaving a substantial void, it did in fact continue in a less

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<sup>7</sup> Frank Ormsby, 'Introduction', in *The Collected Poems of John Hewitt*, ed. by Ormsby, pp. xli-lxxiv (p. xliiv).

<sup>8</sup> John Hewitt, 'Ulster Art and Writing in my Lifetime', JHC Box 12, p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Hewitt, *North Light*, p. 18.

energetic way until amalgamation with the Ulster Group Theatre in 1940, and it is possible that Hewitt was aware of its activities.<sup>10</sup>

During these decades, Hewitt experimented with a multitude of forms, styles, and poetic models as he oriented himself within the literary cultures of Ireland and Britain and sought to define his individual poetic mode. Among other things, his notebooks from these years contain socialist verse, dialect poetry, and work derivative of the Metaphysical poets and of the Revival. Hewitt later explained that at this time he and his university friends experienced ‘a vague sense of romantic Irish Nationalism, with Oisín and Connolly, Maeve and Maud Gonne bright in the sky’.<sup>11</sup> Cathleen ní Houlihan is the bright star in an unpublished poem entitled ‘Erin’s Sorrow Ended: A Hope’ (1926). The speaker of this Petrarchan sonnet – notably a form then associated more closely with English rather than Irish poetry – promises Cathleen that ‘[t]hy bleeding will cease and thy hurts be bound’ as ‘[t]hy sister of the North with misty eyes, / Comes slowly toward you with raptur’d face’.<sup>12</sup> Although the poem predicts that re-unification will end Ireland’s woes, it is not entirely clear if this conclusion would result in the island’s independence or return to British rule. Even at this early stage in his development, and in a similar way to the northern Revivalists, Hewitt emphasizes the region’s distinctiveness and suggests that it has much to offer Ireland. Far from being the urban, industrial, Protestant area familiar from stereotyped representations of Belfast, in this poem the north is feminized, emotional, and mystical. The archaic diction used by Hewitt here and throughout his early verse recalls an ancient time and is deliberately ‘poetic’.

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<sup>10</sup> Robert Greacen, ‘When Peace Breaks in Ulster, Being an Essay on the Resurgence in Ulster Caused by World War Two’, *The Bell*, 5.5 (February 1943), 397-99 (p. 397); Bell, *The Theatre in Ulster*, p. 60.

<sup>11</sup> Ormsby, p. xlv.

<sup>12</sup> John Hewitt, Notebook 2, JHC Box 1, p. 5. Where the manuscript version differs from the version printed in later editions of Hewitt’s poetry, I quote from the manuscript and retain Hewitt’s idiosyncratic spelling.

In 'Mona', another unpublished poem from the same notebook, Hewitt reflects on his disillusionment with Irish and Manx culture and his growing commitment to socialism. The crux of this shift in emphasis is a realization that Revivalist poetry did not speak of or to his own experience of life: the speaker discovers that the smell of peat at his 'own home door' and the accents 'heard in our harbours' are vastly different from those described in the poetic models he had been experimenting with hitherto.<sup>13</sup> As with Yeats in 'September 1913', Hewitt sees a modern world ruled by money, possession, and technology: 'dreary men in dirty shops sold relics there for gold' and there are 'motors thump-thumping without end'. At the poem's conclusion, he instead commits to serve his 'own land', an ambiguous and undefined location. Hewitt enacts this decision in several poems found in this notebook, such as in the dialect verse 'The Antrim Man'.

Hewitt's most articulate rejection of some aspects of the Revivalist mode is found in 'To a Modern Irish Poet' (1927). This was written contemporaneously with urban poems addressing local unemployment and social inequality, such as 'The Song of the Shipyard Men' and 'The Ex-Serviceman'. With the exception of a few archaic words, it is clear that in this polemical poem Hewitt was moving towards a more contemporary idiom, dropping initial capital letters and comfortably employing a flexible iambic pentameter. Hewitt described this as a conversational rhythm and it was to become a hallmark of his later poetry.<sup>14</sup>

You drowsed my senses by your misty kings,  
dream-drunken ladies languid as the noon,  
until I deemed no other songbird sings,  
save nightingale in twilight to the moon.

You came with your strange, wistful, trembling verse,  
beguiled me for a while in quaint deceit;

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<sup>13</sup> John Hewitt, Notebook 2, JHC Box 1, p. 44.

<sup>14</sup> John Brown, *In the Chair: Interviews with Northern Irish Poets* (Co. Clare: Salmon, 2002), p. 24.



and I forgot th'oppressor's blow and curse,  
the muffled tread of workless in the street.

A silver trumpet, or a golden throng,  
these are the harmonies loved of thy muse.  
'Tis better done to beat from bitter wrong  
a flaming slogan's challenge, fit for use!<sup>15</sup>

Ormsby explains that in this poem 'there is a reaction against the sumptuous self-indulgence of his literary-romantic verse'.<sup>16</sup> The poem clearly demonstrates a movement away from the emphasis on mythology, effeminacy, and passivity which mars Hewitt's early neo-Revivalist efforts, and which he aligns here with the threatening 'drowsy numbness' of Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale'.<sup>17</sup> Instead, the speaker advocates a progressive and forward-looking aesthetic which strives to engage with local realities and people. The final lines imply that, for the young Hewitt, poetry can make something happen and part of the poet's function is to seek redress for social ills.

The crux of Hewitt's dissatisfaction with Revivalist poetics in 'To a Modern Irish Poet' is the suppression of the 'senses'. This is perhaps the first intimation in Hewitt's oeuvre that sense perceptions, or the precise observation of and immersion in the landscape, were to become central to his version of regionalism. In 'The Touch of Things' (1933), for instance, the 'drows[y] senses' are reawakened and facilitate a complex interaction of mind, body, and place: 'If life's to mean full fist and riper wisdom / these things must turn to blood, to blood and muscle' (*HCP*, p. 20). Hewitt's sensitivity to place and his Planter heritage (that is, his descent from English and Scottish colonists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) was also a significant factor in his increasing alienation from Revivalism. Frank Shovlin notes that, later in his career, Hewitt was 'unwilling to be identified with Gaelic culture,

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<sup>15</sup> Ormsby, p. 443.

<sup>16</sup> Ormsby, p. xliii.

<sup>17</sup> John Keats, *The Major Works*, ed. by Elizabeth Cook (Oxford: OUP, 2001), p. 285.

and follows instead an uneasy if familiar intersection of blood and soil in an effort to stabilize his credentials'.<sup>18</sup> However, it would be an over-simplification to propose that Hewitt rejected Revivalism completely. Following Yeats's death, Hewitt lauded the poet who from 'those richly decorated qualities [...] was later at such pains to divest himself in his proud and lonely attempt to achieve verbal simplicity and emotional strength'.<sup>19</sup> Much like Yeats's landmark poem 'A Coat', which Hewitt echoes in 'Yeats in Retrospect' (1939), the younger poet replaces 'embroideries' with linguistic precision and clarity.<sup>20</sup>

Hewitt hinted at his attitude to the Revival in a 1937 essay on AE, who had earlier provided the young poet with an opportunity for publication in *Irish Homestead*. Hewitt objects to the 'jewelled magnificence of his verses, combined with their theosophical affirmation and obviously musical rhythms' which may 'cause his capacity as a poet seriously to be underestimated'. Instead, Hewitt prefers 'a handful of quiet lyrics of breathless intensity and delicate pattern'.<sup>21</sup> His predilection for the unostentatious yet well-crafted poem is apparent. In the nineteen forties and fifties, AE became central to Northern Irish writers' conception of their local tradition. In order to ground contemporary poetry in the region, many writers traced their roots to this Lurgan-born poet, also citing Milligan, O'Neill, and Rowley as progenitors.<sup>22</sup> In 1945 John Boyd also looked back to the Revival when he

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<sup>18</sup> Shovlin, *The Irish Literary Periodical*, p. 164.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Robert Marsh, 'John Hewitt and Theories of Culture: Cultural Nationalism, Cultural Regionalism and Identity in the North of Ireland' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Queen's University Belfast, 1996), p. 192.

<sup>20</sup> John Hewitt, Notebook 7, JHC Box 1, p. 38; W.B. Yeats, *The Major Works*, ed. by Edward Larrissy (Oxford: OUP, 1997), p. 59. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>21</sup> John Hewitt, 'George William Russell ("AE") 1867-1935', *City of Belfast Museum and Art Gallery Quarterly Notes*, 53 (June 1937), 8-10 (p. 9).

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, J.N. Browne, 'Poetry in Ulster', in *The Arts in Ulster: A Symposium*, ed. by Sam Hanna Bell, John Hewitt, and Nesca Robb (London: Harrap, 1951), pp. 131-50; Daphne Fullwood and Oliver Edwards, 'Ulster Poetry Since 1900', *Rann*, 20 (June 1953), 19-34; W.R. Rodgers,

claimed the ULT's short-lived periodical *Uladh* as a forerunner for the regionalist magazine *Lagan*.<sup>23</sup> Although Greacen and McFadden consistently distanced themselves from neo-Revivalist poetry, and Greacen stated that the ghosts of Yeats, Synge, and Lady Gregory were 'unsubstantial' for the younger generation, these predecessors are in fact a significant presence within their work.<sup>24</sup> In particular, as discussed in Chapter Seven, McFadden had a lifelong fascination with Yeats's Cuchulain plays.

What Hewitt later referred to as AE's 'tolerance and charity', and his work for the co-operative movement, nourished the young poet's interest in politics. The memory of an artist who was also 'as nearly an articulate conscience as Ireland ever possessed' was one of many factors which encouraged him to recreate the 'cry of the oppressed [*sic*] and downtrodden'.<sup>25</sup> Yet, the most significant influence in this respect was Hewitt's father, who introduced him to socialism and whose tolerance and liberalism are celebrated in several poems. It was Robert Hewitt who took his son, aged six, to hear James Connolly speak and with whom Hewitt saw the Christian socialist Alexander Irvine in 1926.<sup>26</sup> Hewitt's position as, to borrow his own words, a 'utopian socialist', was consolidated by other experiences and reading.<sup>27</sup> Among many other influences, the writings of William Morris, attendance at talks by socialists, and discussions at the International Labour Party Conference of 1933 were

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'Ulster's Inheritance from Gael and Puritan', *TLS*, 5 August 1955, p. 452; John Hewitt, 'The Course of Writing in Ulster', in *Ancestral Voices*, ed. by Clyde, pp. 64-76.

<sup>23</sup> John Boyd, 'Comment', *Lagan*, 3 (1945), 11. Shovlin discusses the relationship between *Uladh* and *Lagan* in *The Irish Literary Periodical*, pp. 161-2.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Greacen, 'Report from Dublin', in *Irish Harvest: A Collection of Stories, Essays and Poems*, ed. by Robert Greacen (Dublin: New Frontiers Press, 1946) pp. 9-14 (p. 13).

<sup>25</sup> John Hewitt 'The Centenary of A.E.: George William Russell 1867-1935', JHC Box 7, p. 1; John Hewitt, Notebook 2, JHC Box 1, p. 4.

<sup>26</sup> *HCP*, p. 443; Ferris, *Poet John Hewitt*, p. 148.

<sup>27</sup> John Hewitt, Letter to John Montague, Spring 1964, JHC Box 9, p. 5.

important for the young Hewitt.<sup>28</sup> As Walsh posits, whilst Hewitt's practical activities were directed by the Northern Ireland Labour Party (NILP), his intellectual standpoint was determined by Marxism.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, art was intertwined with politics from the beginning of Hewitt's career; recounting his uncle's inability to find paid work as an artist, Hewitt stated that this failure 'played no inconsiderable part in making and keeping me a man of the Left'.<sup>30</sup>

After the First World War, Northern Ireland was hit hard by the global economic recession and the politicians struggled to manage the situation. The Revolutionary Workers' Group was founded in 1931 as a more radical alternative to the NILP, which was itself a protest party speaking against the unionist government.<sup>31</sup> As Longley has argued, by the end of the nineteen twenties this context contributed to the development of 'a left-wing literary consciousness' in Belfast.<sup>32</sup> Hewitt engaged readily with this milieu and published poems in periodicals such as *The Irishman*, the Irish Labour Party journal, and *Workers' Voice*, the Communist Party newspaper. Moreover, for a short time he acted as literary editor of the political journal the *Irish Democrat*.<sup>33</sup> His poems of this time respond to strikes ('Paper Banners'), the legacy of James Connolly ('To the Memory of James Connolly'), the tensions arising from middle-class support of socialism ('Mister Faintheart Middleclass'), and the poverty of unemployed war veterans ('A Father Explains'). In some poems, Hewitt adopts the working-class voice of discontent, rendering it much less successfully than does Thomas Carnduff: 'But

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<sup>28</sup> Ormsby, pp. xlii-xliii; Hewitt, *A North Light*, p. 59.

<sup>29</sup> Walsh, "'Too-much-alone'", p. 353. Terence Brown describes Hewitt as 'a socialist of Marxist coloration' in *The Literature of Ireland: Culture and Criticism* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010), p. 173.

<sup>30</sup> Hewitt, *A North Light*, p. 4.

<sup>31</sup> Emmet O'Connor, *A Labour History of Ireland, 1824-1960* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1992), p. 183.

<sup>32</sup> Longley, *The Living Stream*, p. 117.

<sup>33</sup> Hewitt, *A North Light*, p. 68.

come the day when work gits slack, / [...] / Us till the streets just trudges back, / An' lines up for the dole' (*HCP*, p.441). Although he was never tempted to speak in the voice of the unemployed, Rodgers would reiterate such articulations of social inequality and poverty in the late nineteen thirties.

As McDonald observes, by '1935 the change in poetry signalled by the success of Auden and the other poets in *New Signatures* and *New Country* was irreversible. In critical terms, the orthodoxy had shifted decisively to the left'.<sup>34</sup> The reverberations of this change were felt in Northern Ireland. Boyd, Bell, Hewitt, and, for a short time at the end of the nineteen thirties, McFadden and Greacen termed themselves socialists. Yet, the political progress of local Labour candidates was disappointing as their electoral advances were hampered by the dominance of the partition issue and unionism's unrelenting opposition.<sup>35</sup> Believing that 'the parties of the Left in Ireland [...] were hopelessly split and ineffectual', leftist writers sought alternative modes of political expression and activity.<sup>36</sup> Although Hewitt supported the NILP, he and his contemporaries promoted left-wing politics from grass-roots level by becoming involved in the Belfast branches of national organizations such as the China Campaign Committee (CCC), the Workers' Educational Association (WEA), the Belfast Peace League, and the Left Book Club (LBC). This reading club was initiated in conjunction with David McLean's Progressive Bookshop on Union Street, which itself became an important meeting point for Belfast's literati from the time it opened in 1928.<sup>37</sup> Greacen remembers discovering the bookshop in 1939 and his amazement when he found that its owner was an anarchist. He had known that

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<sup>34</sup> McDonald, *Louis MacNeice*, p. 11.

<sup>35</sup> O'Connor, p. 174.

<sup>36</sup> Boyd, *My Journey*, p. 7.

<sup>37</sup> Longley, *The Living Stream*, p. 117.

‘Communists, Trotskyists, various brands of Labourite and even some Social Creditors walked the streets of Belfast, but an anarchist!’<sup>38</sup>

In an unpublished poem entitled ‘Sonnet for the Progressive Bookshop, 17 Union Street’ (1929), Hewitt praises the shop for its provision of an artistic and intellectual meeting space:

This is the Mermaid Tavern of Belfast.  
The young men come to argue, talk, and show  
brave lyrics to their friends. They seek to know  
how long the dark conspiring will last  
that holds men chain’d to wheels imbedded fast  
in old Tradition’s bog: they speak of blow  
and counter blow ... of God ... his beard of snow  
and how his cold dominion is past.<sup>39</sup>

Although this poem’s political concerns set it apart from Hewitt’s neo-Revivalist verse, the use of the sonnet form, the unnatural archaisms, and its romantic vision of youth indicate that it is of the same period. In this idealistic homage, Hewitt aligns the bookshop with the tavern where Jonson, Donne, and others met, whilst also celebrating Marlowe’s atheism and the revolutionary literary achievements of the Renaissance period. Although the comparison is grandiose and may reflect youthful hubris, it sincerely expresses the desire to be part of a coherent literary group which values poetry and is not afraid to object to the establishment.

In his autobiography, Hewitt states that ‘no generation was ever so well informed on international politics as ours of the Thirties’ and ‘the consolidating, the focussing instrument was, of course, the Left Book Club’. He remembers that the LBC branch in Belfast had 550 members registered at the Progressive Book Shop, but that ‘none of us realised that what seemed personal choice was simply the mass

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<sup>38</sup> Robert Greacen, ‘Browsing and Book-Tasting in Belfast’, *Books Ireland*, 19 (December 1977), 244-5 (p. 245).

<sup>39</sup> John Hewitt, Notebook 9, JHC Box 1, p. 23.

moving of a generation'.<sup>40</sup> Months before the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, publisher Victor Gollancz had founded the LBC in order to 'revitalise and educate the British left'. This association aimed to 'help in the struggle *for* world peace and a better social and economic order, and *against* fascism'.<sup>41</sup> Hewitt, his wife, Bell, and Boyd were among the many members who collected one low-cost publication and a copy of *The Left News* per month from their local distributor. Greacen, younger than these writers, joined slightly later. At its peak in 1939, the LBC had a network of 57,000 members concentrated in the United Kingdom with some groups scattered throughout the world.<sup>42</sup> Paul Laity observes that part of the LBC's attraction was the 'radical chic' it acquired by dealing 'in big political questions and ideas, not tiresome debates about detail and administration'.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, its broad remit facilitated the inclusion of readers from across the left-wing spectrum. The plethora of titles sent to the members included *The Theory and Practice of Socialism* by John Strachey (November 1936), *The Road to Wigan Pier* by George Orwell (March 1937), and *The Labour Party in Perspective* by C.R. Atlee (August 1937).<sup>44</sup>

As Hewitt's comments about the LBC indicate, the Belfast branch played a significant role in informing its members about international current affairs. In its local context, the club provided an opportunity for intellectuals to oppose unionism and many believed they were at the forefront of political and social reform. Members of the club reportedly 'appeared on RUC [Royal Ulster Constabulary] lists'.<sup>45</sup> In his

<sup>40</sup> Hewitt, *A North Light*, p. 66. Edna Longley records 350 members in *The Living Stream*, p. 119.

<sup>41</sup> Paul Laity, 'Introduction', in *Left Book Club Anthology*, ed. by Paul Laity (London: Gollancz, 2001) pp. ix-xxxi, (p. ix).

<sup>42</sup> Ruth Dudley Edwards, *Victor Gollancz: A Biography* (London: Gollancz, 1987), p. 257.

<sup>43</sup> Laity, p. xxi.

<sup>44</sup> For a full list of books, see John Lewis, *The Left Book Club: An Historical Record* (London: Gollancz, 1970), pp. 137-56.

<sup>45</sup> Longley, *The Living Stream*, p. 119.

memoir Boyd summarizes his experience of this time, humorously deflating his youthful enthusiasm:

We younger people regarded ourselves as Marxists, and few of us ever confessed to finding some of the monthly choices of the Left Book Club indigestible. We had tough stomachs and stout hearts, we were the vanguard of intellectual life in the city – at least in our own estimation and we were willing to live for our political faith. To die for it, of course, was quite another matter.<sup>46</sup>

Living for their political faith involved organizing discussions, social events, lectures, pamphleteering, and film showings which focused on key issues of the day, particularly the Spanish Civil War and the Sino-Japanese War. The latter had a profound impact on Hewitt's poetry and will be discussed in the next section of this chapter.

All of this activity took place in an environment which, as the articles and memoirs written by the poets continually reiterate, was perceived to be philistine and hostile to the imagination and literature. As Hewitt wrote, 'for a long time it has been customary to consider Ulster as a rather Philistine area, materialist and severely practical in its values'. He and his literary friends sought to change this, welcoming any intimation that this situation might be altered by literary and political activity. In the same article, Hewitt tentatively suggests that '[w]hilst it would be absurd to suggest that this position has become entirely reversed [...] it is evident that, at the moment, serious students of cultural affairs in this island must revise their prejudices'.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Boyd, *My Journey*, p. 22.

<sup>47</sup> John Hewitt, 'Poetry and Ulster: A Survey', *Poetry Ireland*, 8 (January 1950), 3-10 (p. 4).



## II: Discovering a ‘strange new China’

In October 1937 *The Left News* informed LBC members of the escalation of the Sino-Japanese War and the consolidation of Chinese communist and nationalist resistance in the form of a United Front.<sup>48</sup> The CCC was launched in the same issue, with the aim of ‘arous[ing] public sympathy and practical support of the British people for the people of China in her present struggle against Japanese aggression’.<sup>49</sup> That month’s book was Edgar Snow’s *Red Star Over China* (1937), which presents the communist Eighth Army’s Long March north as a feat of heroism and determination. Readers were further encouraged to campaign on behalf of China in an article written by Shelley Wang, who is given a lengthy introduction:

Professor of the National Chi-nan University, Shanghai; Organiser of the Peasant Movement in the Revolution of 1925-27, and Acting Director of the Peasant Department of the Central Executive Committee of the Kuomintang. He was Minister of the People’s Revolutionary Government of Fukien, 1933. Chief Editor of the Cathay Publishing Company for Left Books.<sup>50</sup>

Wang was also a poet and the contact for the Association of Chinese National Salvation and worked with Gollancz on the CCC, staying with him in Brimpton while he completed writing a book.<sup>51</sup> Wang’s propagandizing article presents Japanese aggression as an unprovoked act of brutality which prompted all of China to unite in their struggle against fascism. This ‘has become a war *of* all classes’, Wang writes, ‘and *for* all classes’. On a global level, Wang insists that the war against Japan is ‘for world justice and peace’.<sup>52</sup>

The Belfast branch followed the lead of the LBC’s directors and, from the autumn of 1937 onwards, drew its members’ attention to the Sino-Japanese War as a

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<sup>48</sup> Richard Goodman, Review of *Red Star Over China* by Edgar Snow, *The Left News*, 18 (October 1937), 522-4 (p. 522).

<sup>49</sup> Anon., ‘How You Can Help China’, *The Left News*, 18 (October 1937), 519.

<sup>50</sup> Anon., Note Introducing Shelley Wang, *The Left News*, 18 (October 1937), 524.

<sup>51</sup> Edwards, *Victor Gollancz*, p. 273.

<sup>52</sup> Shelley Wang, ‘A Long-Drawn War in the Far East’, *The Left News*, 18 (October 1937), 524-31 (p. 529).

clash between progressive communism and barbaric fascism which possessed the potential to impact on Europe. In September McLean was already warning members that if 'Japan beats China, she may invade Singapore, Indo-China, Java and Sumatra, Australia or the Soviet Union. If the Chinese beat off the invader, no aggressive action can follow'.<sup>53</sup> Skimming over divisions between different left-wing groups and regimes, McLean stated that fascist aggressors were jointly opposed by Spain, China, the Soviet Union, and the French Front Populaire, all of which required the support of the United Kingdom. In a letter to Maybin in May 1940, Hewitt expressed a similar view, stating that 'we can still have hope for men while there is a free China'.<sup>54</sup> It is not clear whether Hewitt believed that China could forestall Japanese movement west, or if the survival of a communist China gave him hope that socialism might prevail in Europe. In a poem written in the same year, Hewitt wondered whether '[l]ife's last chance is fixt' (*sic*) on China'.<sup>55</sup> In order to raise awareness and funds in support of the left, in September 1938 the Belfast LBC encouraged members to attend film showings on Spain and China organized by the Northern Ireland Council for the Preservation of Peace. In January 1939, a similar appeal prompted members to attend *War in China*, screened by the Socialist Party.<sup>56</sup> It is likely that around this time Hewitt read James Bertram's journalistic work *North China Front* (1939). A copy of this is held in the Hewitt collection at the University of Ulster, and Bertram stayed with the Hewitts in 1939 when he visited Belfast to lecture on the Eighth Army's long march.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> D. McLean, Letter to LBC Belfast branch members, 3 September 1937, PRONI D/3353/1, p. 1.

<sup>54</sup> John Hewitt, Letter to Patrick Maybin, 23 May 1940, PRONI D/3838/3/12, p. 3.

<sup>55</sup> John Hewitt, Notebook 24, JHC Box 2, p. 61.

<sup>56</sup> Sam Hanna Bell, Letter to LBC Belfast branch members, 17 January 1939, PRONI D/3353/1, p. 1.

<sup>57</sup> James Bertram, Letter to John and Roberta Hewitt, 24 March 1939, PRONI D/3838/7/12/1, p.1; Hewitt, *A North Light*, p. 52.

Following the publication of his article in *The Left News*, Wang embarked on a lecture tour of the United Kingdom, visiting fifteen towns and cities to inform people about post-revolutionary China and its struggle against Japan.<sup>58</sup> When Wang visited Belfast to give a talk for the CCC in the Ulster Hall on the twelfth of January 1938, the Hewitts provided him with accommodation for ten days. They had already met Wang in 1933 at the Independent Labour Party Summer School in Welwyn Garden City but, as Hewitt recalls in his autobiography, it was not until their second meeting that Wang ‘became a friend of my heart’.<sup>59</sup> According to Hewitt, Wang ‘did not assert but exemplified stillness, tolerance and single-mindedness’, he was a ‘great man, a man wiser and richer in experience than I should ever be’, poor but uncomplaining and passionate about discussing China’s history, culture, and problems. Wang’s character, marked by ‘essential humanity’, is manifested in the very act of writing: with ‘untroubled courtesy and patience he would demonstrate the holding of the writing brush and the brisk stroking of the characters’.<sup>60</sup> Roberta Hewitt explained that ‘[w]e both felt we had met one of the few “great men”’.<sup>61</sup> Wang left Belfast for England and then travelled to a conference in Geneva in 1938. By the end of the year he had returned to China, where he died behind enemy lines during cultural-guerrilla warfare against Japan.<sup>62</sup> One source states that his death was a result of ‘overwork and hard travel’ rather than of enemy action.<sup>63</sup>

By the time he met Wang, Hewitt had already gained some level of familiarity with Chinese visual art and poetry in translation. In the late nineteen

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<sup>58</sup> Lewis, p. 54.

<sup>59</sup> Hewitt, *A North Light*, p. 104.

<sup>60</sup> Hewitt, *A North Light*, pp. 102-3.

<sup>61</sup> Roberta Hewitt, Note to Diary Entry, 22 December 1948, Diary Volume 1, p. 207.

<sup>62</sup> Hewitt, *A North Light*, p. 104.

<sup>63</sup> Hawthorne Cheng, *China After Seven Years of War* (New York: Macmillan, 1945), p. 127, <[https://archive.org/stream/chinaafterseveny007959mbp/chinaafterseveny007959mbp\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/chinaafterseveny007959mbp/chinaafterseveny007959mbp_djvu.txt)> [accessed 10 April 2014].

twenties, his interest in this field was sparked by reading Arthur Waley's *A Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems* (1918).<sup>64</sup> Hewitt describes this as:

[...] an influential book. Exactly how much my own verse owes to it would be hard to define. Certainly the quiet, undramatic tone, the even texture, the significant abstraction from experience of natural phenomena, the awareness of landscape, and man-in-landscape, these were qualities which I admired and which I must half-consciously have attempted to reproduce.<sup>65</sup>

Waley introduces his anthology by suggesting that Chinese poetry has much to offer the western world: 'we must recognize that for thousands of years the Chinese maintained a level of rationality and tolerance that the West might well envy'.<sup>66</sup> He stresses Chinese poets' 'neat and tranquil figure[s]' and excellence in 'reflection rather than in speculation'.<sup>67</sup> Such comments sowed the seeds of Hewitt's mature poetry, which often emphasizes these values. As early as 1931, Hewitt was experimenting with what he later termed the 'Chinese manner'.<sup>68</sup>

Hewitt's reflections on China also had a more explicitly political edge. Coterminous with his reading of Waley's translations, Hewitt composed poems entitled 'To China on the Fall of Shanghai' (1927) and 'Sonnet: to Japan on her Chinese Policy' (1928). The former celebrates China's 'strange new birth' and laments the speaker's inability to 'rise and aid thy struggle', whilst the latter warns Japan to '[g]et ye gone or [China] will rise and strike'.<sup>69</sup> In 1936 Hewitt visited the Exhibition of Chinese Art at Burlington House in London. The resulting unpublished poem, 'Note to the Chinese Exhibition', anticipates the emergence of a 'strange new China' at a time when Japan was advancing in Manchuria, the Chinese Communist

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<sup>64</sup> Ormsby, p. xliv.

<sup>65</sup> Hewitt, *A North Light*, p. 101.

<sup>66</sup> Arthur Waley, trans., *A Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems* (London: Constable, 1918), p. 4.

<sup>67</sup> Waley, p. 5, p. 4.

<sup>68</sup> John Hewitt, Notebook 11, JHC Box 1, p. 131.

<sup>69</sup> John Hewitt, Notebook 2, JHC Box 1, p. 206; John Hewitt, Notebook 4, JHC Box 1, p. 117.

Party was regrouping after the Long March, and the opposing Chinese Nationalist

Party was struggling to maintain control:<sup>70</sup>

Never for me the agate or the jade,  
the elegance of lacquer, or the full  
brush flourish over silk.  
[...]  
Never the flyback eyes,  
the wet red sores, the famine in the land,  
the flooded fields reflecting the dull skies;  
the collie reeling from his master's blows,  
the severed hand,  
the rebel student headless in the snow:  
the bandit lord  
with armourd train and hoard  
of plunderd gold  
the crying children sold  
for rice with niggard fist reluctant dold.

Never for me the agate or the jade  
til the new China or her thick rich earth  
sings with her jostling millions satisfied  
shod, fed, and shelterd like a monarch's bride.

Then let the wise hand shape the cunning verse,  
finger the slip and paint beneath the glaze,  
or mark on silk a poem someone made  
of brotherhood and justice come to birth.<sup>71</sup>

Anticipating a central problem in Northern Irish poetry of the Second World War and the late twentieth century, here Hewitt considers the relationship between art and violence. He vividly imagines the horrors of conflict in a manner which would be unfamiliar to readers of his later published poetry. This poem implies that the creation and admiration of beauty can only follow the conclusion of oppression, tyranny, and violence and the reinstatement of equality and justice. The resultant art, which Hewitt describes in the poem's final line, will be socialist verse which celebrates the birth of a new society.

Hewitt's retrospective account of the Burlington House visit, written twenty years later and after his move to Coventry, is quite dissimilar. He depoliticizes his

<sup>70</sup> Richard T. Phillips, *China Since 1911* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 117-24.

<sup>71</sup> Both Notebook 7 and Notebook 20 in JHC Box 1 contain a version of this poem. I have quoted from the longer MS in Notebook 20, JHC Box 1, pp. 70-1.

response to the exhibition and instead presents it as an exemplary episode in the development of an ideal Planter persona which provides an alternative to the philistinism, provincialism, and commercialism of mainstream unionism. In other words, it is incorporated into Hewitt's narration of his 'personal myth, my imaginative pattern of truth' which forms the basis of his late poetic voice.<sup>72</sup>

The account stresses the contrast between his assessment of Chinese art and that of Sir Crawford McCullagh, unionist politician and Lord Mayor of Belfast. Speaking about the exhibition at a conference of museum employees, Sir Crawford distanced himself from the fashion of *Chinoiserie* which was sweeping through the United Kingdom:

Sturdily in his role as the plain, ordinary man, he continued 'As we were comin' down the steps I turned to the wife and said "There's nothin' in there I'd give houseroom to". And she replied "No Crawford, there's nothin'". The delegates laughed uproariously and unrestrainedly applauded the honest man.

For Hewitt, the exhibition was:

[...] as it must have been for thousands, a deep and compelling experience. T'ang and Sung became for me periods of human achievement of equal significance with the great ages of European art. The still inevitability of the pot shapes, the humour and gentleness of the ceramic creatures, the pleasure of the glaze-colour in drip and run and texture, the compact life-full postures of the sleeve-dancers, the planes, edges and surfaces of the carved jade, the gestures of the charged brush, the stain and blot on the grain of silk, the absorbance of rice-paper awoke responses in me which till then I did not know existed.<sup>73</sup>

Hewitt celebrates openness and sensitivity to other cultures alongside the necessity of calm reflection. His description of the Chinese artworks echoes his praise of AE's 'quiet lyrics of breathless intensity and delicate pattern' mentioned above, as well as his reaction to Waley's translations. Hewitt is consistently attracted by what is understated and unostentatious, yet is skillfully and precisely crafted. These traits nourished his own developing aesthetic, becoming fused with his attitude towards

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<sup>72</sup> Hewitt, *A North Light*, p. 4.

<sup>73</sup> Hewitt, *A North Light*, p. 97, p. 99.

left-wing politics, and were central to Hewitt's friendship with, and poems about, Wang.

### III: Shelley Wang

Between 1938 and 1941 Hewitt 're-English[ed]' and composed a number of poems by and about Wang. Several of these remain unpublished, whilst others were not collected until *No Rebel Word* (1948), *The Chinese Fluteplayer* (1974), and *Mosaic* (1981). These poems reflect Hewitt's admiration for his friend's poetic technique, revealing Wang to be a seminal influence on the development of Hewitt's poetry. They also depict Wang as an ideal figure, who combines radical political commitment with quiet integrity and sensitivity to nature and art. As I demonstrate below, Wang was a key role model for Hewitt in his shaping of an identity and poetic mode appropriate to the region, but which was free from the negative traits he associated with unionist culture. Many of the characteristics of Hewitt's mature, and now iconic and highly influential, persona were nourished by his admiration for his Chinese mentor.

In his letters, Wang repeatedly refers to collaboration with Hewitt. A few days after his departure from Belfast in January 1938, he deliberately employed Ulster-Scots slang when writing to request a copy of Hewitt's 'translation of my "wee" poem about the Mournes' and later he wonders whether 'you like the poem for you and Ruby. If so, please re-English it'.<sup>74</sup> He also asks for Hewitt's aid in translating some poems for publication. In *A North Light*, Hewitt recalls that Wang 'sent me several poems and ballads in the form of literal translations and asked me to

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<sup>74</sup> Shelley Wang, Letter to John Hewitt, 20 January 1938, PRONI D/3838/7/11/2, p. 1; Shelley Wang, Letter to John Hewitt, 24 August 1938, PRONI D/3838/7/11/8, p. 1.

put metre on them. Then, from Chungking, I received a booklet of verses, page for page Chinese and English, in the latter my tidying of his English'.<sup>75</sup> An indication about the friends' collaborative practice is found in Hewitt's review of John Irvine's *Willow Leaves: Lyrics in the Manner of the Early Chinese Poets* (1941). In this article, Hewitt describes two modes which the layman can adopt in translating Chinese poetry: 'the first is to have a smattering of the language and to lean heavily on Waley; the second is to have a Chinese friend at your elbow to break the tangled ideographs into recognisable images for you to arrange in an English order'.<sup>76</sup> The latter seems preferable to Hewitt.

Although most of the poems referred to in the Hewitt-Wang correspondence and found in Hewitt's notebooks dating from 1938 to March 1940 avoid overtly political language, 'Canton' angrily responds to Japanese air-raids. The poem, written by Wang and probably adapted by Hewitt, graphically describes the corporeal impact of aerial bombing, advocating peace by highlighting the human cost of warfare:

Sudden the sky is dark with metal birds  
[...]  
in a split minute; bodies scattered careless –  
a child with gaping chest, his eyes appealing;  
a legless woman dying with a sigh.

The metal birds swing off triumphantly.  
The city is left silent. Terror lingers  
in the sad crying of the evening wind.

[...]

Let men be shamed of [*sic*] this be still permitted.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Hewitt, *A North Light*, p. 104. Hewitt received a copy of Wang's *Exile and Wars* (1939), which is now held at the McClay Library of Queen's University Belfast. As this volume is entirely in Chinese, the volume to which Hewitt is referring is *Poems* (1939), held at the library of the University of Ulster, Coleraine.

<sup>76</sup> John Hewitt, Review of *Willow Leaves: Lyrics in the Manner of the Early Chinese Poets* by John Irvine, *The Bell*, 3.5 (February 1942), 401.

<sup>77</sup> John Hewitt, Notebook 23, JHC Box 2, p. 78.



The suddenness of this futuristic attack is emphasized by the description of airplanes as ‘metal birds’; the innocent, unarmed, and possibly pre-industrial population struggle to comprehend the reason or meaning of such an event. As will be discussed in Chapter Two, civilian casualties during air raids in the Spanish Civil War and the Sino-Japanese War highlighted the vulnerability of both soldiers and non-combatants, implicating entire populations in modern warfare and thus raising significant moral questions. The poem’s polemical and direct tone is characteristic of many publications of the period.

‘Canton’ relates to a letter dated June 1939, in which Wang informs Hewitt about the conflict and confirms the message of Japanese aggression promulgated in LBC publications. Wang’s language and descriptions of air-raids are very similar to the diction and tone of ‘Canton’. He presents the Japanese as deceptive ‘aggressors’ who oppose the Chinese leaders’ desire to ‘fight in order to attain true peace’. Words such as ‘brutalities’ and ‘barbarism’ pepper Wang’s discourse, but he insists that Japanese actions have not destroyed the ‘morale’ of the Chinese population. The Chinese, Wang writes, are united with the ‘peace-loving peoples in other parts of the world’ and their struggle is for ‘the maintenance of humanity and world peace’.<sup>78</sup> The letter also urges Hewitt to stir up public opinion in support of the Chinese. As with contemporary reports from Spain, such information about the Sino-Japanese War augmented the feeling that the United Kingdom was standing on the edge of another global conflict. Hewitt’s friendship with Wang authenticated the deluge of atrocity stories which emerged from China during the late nineteen thirties.

In other poems Wang deviated from this topic, whilst Hewitt never again presented the effects of war so starkly. One of their collaborative efforts is entitled,

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<sup>78</sup> Shelley Wang, Letter to John Hewitt, 12 June 1939, PRONI D/3838/7/12/4, pp. 1-2.

rather clumsily, ‘From the Chinese of Wang Li Hsi (Shelley Wang) a poem composed this morning on a visit to the Mourne Mountains, and translated in the evening’. It was later published in the *New Statesman and Nation*, *The New Northman*, the *Belfast Telegraph*, and Hewitt’s *The Chinese Fluteplayer*. The manuscript version contains examples of the archaisms familiar from Hewitt’s earlier poems:

The Mourne Mountains like a team of bears  
tumbling into the sea  
the embroidered fields like a monk’s patcht cloke  
spreading their skirts to every door  
the peasants leisurely allowing the chickens  
and dogs to wander at will  
the bare trees standing silent  
entangle the stranger’s dream.<sup>79</sup>

Alongside several poems which Hewitt reworked in English, this lyric’s quiet, reflective tone and focus on the natural world coincide with the qualities he had so admired in Waley’s translations and in his preferred lyrics by AE. Moreover, the poem conveys the precision, lightness, spontaneity, and vibrancy which had arrested Hewitt at the Burlington House exhibition. The concluding emphasis on the entanglement of the observing mind and the local, rural scene would also have attracted Hewitt. As Brown recognizes, by the nineteen forties Hewitt’s poetry articulates ‘a dialectic between a landscape scrupulously itemised in its objective particulars and a mental life at work in the material world’. According to Brown, Hewitt’s dramatization of the ‘mind in the act of perception’ represents the way in which the local landscape became part of the poet’s psyche, an active presence which acts as a ‘synthesising agent’ and unifies perception, intellect, and emotions.<sup>80</sup> If read in the light of these comments, ‘From the Chinese’ reveals how the mind animates and transforms the landscape in metaphors which are drawn from the poet’s

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<sup>79</sup> John Hewitt, Notebook 23, JHC Box 2, p. 39.

<sup>80</sup> Terence Brown, ‘John Hewitt: An Ulster of the Mind’, in *The Poet’s Place*, ed. by Dawe and Foster, pp. 299-311 (pp. 301-2).

Chinese heritage. Although the first person is avoided, in this painterly poem the speaker's mind is continually present as he subtly directs the reader's eyes from the distant mountains to the particularities of life in the foreground, and then to the mind of the visitor. The individual is thus given a place within the landscape.

'From the Chinese' had a profound impact on Hewitt and his close friend Maybin, who told Hewitt that 'I often think of [Wang] and his team of bears'.<sup>81</sup> Wang's influence is evident in the first of several poems in which Hewitt laments his friend's absence. 'The Storm: a poem in the Chinese manner' was written soon after Wang's return to China in 1938 and emulates his impressionist technique in order to convey the speaker's experience of loss and desolation:

My gate is swinging by one hinge  
twigs are scatterd on the pavement  
the withered chrysanthemums have daubd  
themselves with mud  
the lake has a feathery edge  
the old grasses make a dry sound  
and I think of my friend Wang Li Hsi  
on a ship, going home.<sup>82</sup>

In the introduction to Waley's anthology, Hewitt would have read that friendship and loss were themes of extreme importance for Chinese poets.<sup>83</sup> One such poem in the anthology begins:

Autumn wind rises: white clouds fly.  
Grass and trees wither: geese go south.  
Orchids all in bloom: chrysanthemums smell sweet.  
I think of my lovely lady: I never can forget.<sup>84</sup>

The similarities of tone, imagery and subject suggest that alongside Wang's poems, Hewitt took Waley's anthology pieces as models of 'the Chinese manner' with which he wished to experiment. This is despite Wang's assertion that Waley's translations might be 'very good English poems in their own way' but are poor

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<sup>81</sup> Patrick Maybin, Letter to John Hewitt, 27 December 1940, PRONI D/3838/3/10, p. 4.

<sup>82</sup> John Hewitt, Notebook 23, JHC Box 2, p.5.

<sup>83</sup> Waley, p. 5.

<sup>84</sup> Waley, p. 48.

approximations of the metre and word-play of the original Chinese texts.<sup>85</sup> From these examples, Hewitt would have learnt the technique of listing organic images before articulating the poem's emotional significance. MacNeice refers to this Chinese technique as 'parataxis', explaining that it has the benefit of allowing the poet to 'avoid the disintegrating and sometimes falsifying effects of simile'.<sup>86</sup> Thus, the list corresponds directly with the speaker's feelings without the need for explicit comparison. Using an elegiac trope which is developed in his later elegies to Wang, Hewitt associates his friend's absence with organic decay. The chrysanthemum, a flower which originated in the Far East, is an appropriate symbol for the bereavement felt by the speaker.

This sense of personal loss shadows global disaster in 'September Before War':

On this day of crisis  
when men march  
& the avalanche waits for the shout  
I try to make better english  
of Wang's literal translation of verses  
about the evening moon & the East Lake  
by a Ming poet  
painted on a small bowl<sup>87</sup>

When revising the poem in late 1939 or early 1940, Hewitt altered the title to 'August 1939', added a final end-stopped line, 'in the museum', and amended the spelling.<sup>88</sup> The original date suggests that the poem was composed on the first or second of September, after Germany's invasion of Poland but prior to Britain's declaration of war. Changing the month to August removes any ambiguity: the poem refers to the speaker's fears and preoccupations in the uncertain weeks immediately preceding the conflict. The additional line situates the bowl in the museum, most

<sup>85</sup> Hewitt, *A North Light*, p. 101.

<sup>86</sup> Louis MacNeice, *Modern Poetry: A Personal Essay* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), pp. 91-2.

<sup>87</sup> John Hewitt, Notebook 18, JHC Box 1, p. 14.

<sup>88</sup> John Hewitt, Notebook 24, JHC Box 2, p. 51; *HCP*, p. 145. See Ormsby, p. 596 for a full composition history of the poem.

likely the Belfast Museum and Art Gallery where Hewitt was employed, thus bringing the peripheral region and its developing culture into focus whilst also offering an ideal model of cross-cultural relations conducted through the medium of art.

The varied line lengths and irregular rhythm, both unusual for Hewitt, reveal the pressures on art, the imagination, and the individual in wartime: what McDonald terms the ‘forced smoothness’ of Hewitt’s favoured iambic pentameter has given way under the weight of contemporary circumstances.<sup>89</sup> MacNeice was also concerned about this issue. He wrote that ‘war spares neither the poetry of Xanadu nor the poetry of pylons. [...] War does not prove that one is better or worse than the other; it attempts to disprove both. But poetry must not be disproved’.<sup>90</sup> For MacNeice, the creative and visionary potential of poetry stood in opposition to the destructive aspects of war and fascism.

To pay attention to art in a time of momentous political events is not, for Hewitt or MacNeice, an irresponsible act or a retreat into the ivory tower. Instead, the speaker of ‘September Before War’ is preserving for posterity an object which represents beauty and friendship, both of which he believed had considerable social import. In a letter to Maybin, Hewitt spoke of the need to “‘fight” against Nazism for the defence of such cultural & humane values as survive in our rapidly changing culture’.<sup>91</sup> Yet, the bowl is vulnerable and the curator is at risk of failure, as his work may be compromised and forestalled by knowledge of what is happening elsewhere in Europe. Although the poem painted on the bowl dates from centuries before the war, it appropriately voices the curator’s position. Entitled ‘a translation of a Chinese

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<sup>89</sup> McDonald, *Mistaken Identities*, pp. 24-5.

<sup>90</sup> Louis MacNeice, *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats* (London: Faber, 1967), p. 18.

<sup>91</sup> John Hewitt, Letter to Patrick Maybin, 23 May 1940, PRONI D/3838/3/12, p. 3.

poem on a bowl from the literal english [*sic*] of Shelley Wang', the short lyric is found in Hewitt's notebook dating from 1938 to March 1939. In this poem, the speaker 'walkt along the winding East Lake' through a beautiful, peaceful landscape and 'tied my boat to a tree / as the shadow of night coverd all'.<sup>92</sup> When read in conjunction with 'September Before War', these words express the danger that the oncoming darkness poses to a rural idyll and to the individual who seeks shelter from the night. As demonstrated in Chapters Two and Six, the juxtaposition of the pastoral space and darkness is a trope found throughout Northern Irish poetry of the Second World War.

Hewitt's elegies for Wang coincide with his anxieties about the role of the poet in wartime. In several poems, he interprets Wang's death in the Sino-Japanese War as the defeat of individuality, artistic skill, tolerance, and rationality in a time of violence. Perhaps Hewitt's inclusion of Wang amongst a list of dead combatants in 'Wang Li Hsi Once More' was partly prompted by a belief in the importance of the artist's role of championing such values in times of war.<sup>93</sup> The first elegy that Hewitt composed was initially entitled 'Reverie and Recollection' and was drafted in 1940.<sup>94</sup> As in his long regionalist poems *Conacre* and 'Freehold', Hewitt approaches his subject circuitously: 'Here in the quiet evening of my home / anchord beneath a rocking flow of stars / with wife aweary after gardening / [...] / myself a navvy squelching in the clay'. Unlike 'September Before War', the regular iambic pentameter communicates a quiet, reflective mood which bears the imprint of Wordsworth. The alliterative words '[h]ere' and 'home' which bookend the first line encapsulate Hewitt's sense of the importance of rootedness in a specific locality, as

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<sup>92</sup> John Hewitt, Notebook 23, JHC Box 2, p. 4.

<sup>93</sup> John Hewitt, Notebook 30, JHC Box 2, pp. 76-7.

<sup>94</sup> John Hewitt, Notebook 24, JHC Box 2, pp. 129-38.

does the speaker's closeness to the earth itself. From this stable point within the cosmos, he can observe the wider world, which misleadingly appears to be at peace. The speaker recognizes that his attachment to the particularities of his tranquil home and garden is an attempt to gain relief from the pain of war and loss. As the memory of Wang's death in a war zone intrudes into his mind, he attempts to 'shut my mind's eye to the sight of him'.

However, the troubling memories of Wang cannot be forgotten and they resurface in the poem's final section, which was later rewritten as a stand-alone piece for inclusion in *No Rebel Word* under the title 'The Little Death'. The first verse-paragraph of this section lauds Wang's character:

I cannot cheat my thought. I remember too well  
 his bland smooth face by that hearth, his cigarettes  
 his explanation of the characters  
 the firm fist with the brush held vertical  
 his glinting glasses laminated thick  
 his way of speaking of his early days  
 his wise grandfather, ways of making tea  
 Confucius soya beans and Mao Tse Tung  
 his hope for China reference to his wife  
 his recognition that my wife and I  
 have learned to be both integral and free  
 his interest in my clumsy western thought[.]

By situating this description of Wang within an extended framing narrative which explores the speaker's developing character and intellectual concerns, Hewitt indicates that his friend's personality, politics, and aesthetics have played a central role in shaping the poet's own sense of self. Fundamental to Wang's character and, by extension, to Hewitt's formulation of an ideal poetic persona are the qualities of rationality, tolerance, political radicalism, and sensitivity to the local place.

The technique of carefully detailing an individual's personality and appearance is one which Hewitt employs repeatedly throughout his oeuvre. He adopts a similar approach when describing his father in 'The Lonely Heart' section

of 'Freehold' (1946), his grandmother in 'The Faded Leaf: A Chapter of Family History' (1969), and various relatives in *Kites in Spring* (1980). Writing about Hewitt's poems of memorial, Brown suggests that the poet's technique of vividly recalling the dead in a characteristic pose can be termed 'epiphanic recall'. For Hewitt, Brown explains, the act of remembering is one of the ways 'in which we define who and what we are, a mode whereby the individual connects him- or herself to family, to community in its social and historical dimensions and to the nation'.<sup>95</sup> That Wang, a Chinese national, becomes part of Hewitt's imagined community and his definition of his own identity suggests that Brown's list of frameworks should be broadened to include international reference points.

In many ways, Hewitt's descriptions of Wang echo his portrayals of Robert Hewitt, the poet's father and primary role model who, as Walsh posits, is presented 'as emblematic of the historical integrity of Protestant radicalism'.<sup>96</sup> In 'Reverie and Recollection', Hewitt describes both men as being 'wise'. A fuller depiction of Robert Hewitt is found in 'Freehold', begun during the Second World War and published in 1946, before being revised in 1986. In 'all his ways a just and kindly man', his father 'unequivocally stood / for quality of life and brotherhood, / without defiance, in all charity / towards those who in themselves were not yet free' (*HCP*, p. 374). As with Wang, Robert Hewitt's combination of radicalism with a gentle and rational character was a fundamental influence on Hewitt.

However, the apparent disjunction between Hewitt's political beliefs and his poetic voice has caused some confusion amongst critics. In his memoir, Boyd misses the mark by concluding that Hewitt had a basically conventional personality: 'I

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<sup>95</sup> Brown, *The Literature of Ireland*, p. 172, p. 175.

<sup>96</sup> Walsh, p. 344.



thought it was strange that a radical thinker, full of Marx and Engels, Morris and Shaw, should be content within the confines of conventional forms and language'.<sup>97</sup> In a similar vein, Sam Burnside wrote that 'for anyone familiar only with his poetry, the claims to a social sympathy might well appear to have a suspect foundation' as Hewitt's 'socialist leanings' manifest themselves mainly in his prose writing. Burnside believes that 'it is to his credit that he avoided using his poetry for propaganda purposes'.<sup>98</sup> Yet, there are other ways for poets to articulate radical politics whilst avoiding the language of 'that steaming fish tank of supercharged egos' Hewitt so disdained when he visited John Middleton Murry's Adelphi Centre.<sup>99</sup> I propose that Hewitt's eschewal of the forthright socialism of his juvenile verse and his adoption of an unostentatious, measured, and sturdy poetic voice was prompted, at least in part, by his desire to embody the values he admired in the committed socialists Robert Hewitt and Shelley Wang. It was also an attempt to embody the nature of the region in poetry.

If it was Hewitt's father who 'set the leaping flame / of social justice in my wayward heart', it was Wang who fuelled it (*HCP*, p. 13). Appropriately, in 'Reverie and Recollection' Hewitt employs the image of a seedling in order to describe Wang's mentorship:

My spirit grew beneath his influence  
as seedling sprouts in cinematograph  
waving uncertain arm and alternating  
with cold and moisture suddenly abrupt  
jostling the big round grains of earth aside  
and shooting towards the warmth that wakened it.

The conflation of poetic maturation with organic growth echoes images of gardening which occur elsewhere in the poem and are associated with the positive values of

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<sup>97</sup> Boyd, *My Journey*, p. 198.

<sup>98</sup> Sam Burnside, 'Preparing Lonely Defences', *Fortnight*, 275 (July-August 1989), iii-iv (p. iii).

<sup>99</sup> Hewitt, *A North Light*, p. 112.

harmony, happiness, creativity, rootedness, and companionship. To come into direct contact with the soil is to temporarily traverse the barriers which separate the city-dweller from his rural ancestors and the majority of the region's population in *Conacre* and 'Freehold'. In 'Reverie and Recollection', the natural world is also a symbol of the speaker's psyche: ideas 'took root' in 'the trampled thicket of my mind / bearing bright blossom or hard bitter fruit'. Such natural imagery is an important trope in the elegiac genre within which Hewitt is writing; as Peter Sacks notes, in elegies 'immortality [is] suggested by nature's self-regenerative power'.<sup>100</sup> In Hewitt's poem the traditional use of flowers as signifiers of new life and consolation is transformed as the speaker himself becomes the plant which has grown up under Wang's influence, and which will preserve the Chinese poet's legacy for the future.

Hewitt then turns to the place of the individual artist in a time of war:

Now he is dead in the middle of that war  
 life's values make agents the evil powers  
 powers of denial, dull repressive force.

[...]

For all his greatness life could offer him  
 only a little death in a vast campaign  
 a manuscript unpublisht, and a book  
 of badly printed verse on wartime paper.

Yet I do not think he would have understood  
 that sick word failure. There are other words.

As will be discussed in Chapter Two, in the late nineteen thirties and during the war many poets were fearful that the war machine would extinguish individuality and impinge on the freedom of the imagination. By memorializing Wang in poetry, Hewitt seeks to create a space for him and the poetic imagination which is threatened by violence and national agendas. Recording the particularities of apparently

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<sup>100</sup> Peter Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1987), p. 27.

inconsequential people and places is a way of ‘setting style agenst [*sic*] despair’, a quality Hewitt attributes to Wang in ‘Reverie and Recollection’. For Hewitt, poetry has the potential to withstand the encroachment of total war and to provide the community with a constructive vision for the future. Elsewhere, he wrote that ‘it is not wars that we remember / but the chiselled face, the brooch, the silver bugle, / the temple and the sonnet: these are Man’ (*HCP*, p. 19). The nature of this vision is the subject of the final section of this chapter.

#### IV. Towards regionalism

Hewitt’s wartime vision of poetry as an art which could provide respite from conflict and offer a constructive response to destruction and chaos could easily be described as tending towards escapism. After staying with Hewitt in his cottage at Cushendall, about forty-five miles north of Belfast, McFadden certainly believed that this was the case. He later recalled his frustration with ‘looking for Ulster identity around Tiveragh’ while ‘the war [was] raging around us’.<sup>101</sup> Although *No Rebel Word* (1948) was written between 1939 and 1944, it rarely mentions the war but instead dwells on the landscape, flora, and fauna of Northern Ireland. For example, in ‘Poem in May’ the speaker, whose mind is ‘tired’ and ‘callous with slack rhetoric / and close to terror at the sick world’s plight’, leaves the city for ‘this clean kingdom vehement with life’ (*HCP*, p. 25). In ‘November Wood’ ‘[i]nfrequent thistle and ground ivy here / still signal life amid a world’s despair’ (*HCP*, p. 29). The volume concludes with a future-oriented post-war dream in ‘The Ruins Answer’, in which Hewitt explains his chosen poetic mode. Moving away from the constraints of

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<sup>101</sup> Brown, *In the Chair*, p. 22.

wartime life to ‘unregimented’ existence and aiming to ‘build a world’, the poem celebrates the ‘random blowing seed’ in place of the limitations of ‘lettered stone’, an image which is reminiscent of the finality of death symbolized by tombstones and war memorials. At the heart of Hewitt’s vision for the future is a space for the individual who is organically linked with his native place and community: the speaker rejects the ‘submission of our personal / peevish erratic will / to some tall-pyloned steady discipline, / charged by a class or one man’s brilliant mind’.<sup>102</sup>

That Hewitt articulates his frustration at the biased governance of society alongside an assertion that it is necessary to turn to the natural world indicates the debt his theory of regionalism owed to his commitment to socialism. As Martin Mooney argues, for Hewitt the two ideologies were interdependent and complementary in their reaction against the centralization of power.<sup>103</sup> Importantly, for Hewitt regionalism could mitigate the potential loss of individuality in a socialist utopia. As he stated in 1947, it was an antidote to ‘increasing standardisation in material things’ and the ‘hurricanes of propaganda’.<sup>104</sup> Yet, Hewitt never fully defined the practicalities of this, just as he avoided expanding on his idea that regionalism offered a means of equitably governing small units within a larger federation. Primarily, regionalism was an aesthetic theory which gave direction to Hewitt’s poetic explorations of the landscape and his excavation of a local literary tradition. Wang’s poetry demonstrated to him that it was possible for a committed and actively campaigning socialist to write poetry which was sensitive to place and the natural world. Furthermore, Wang’s internationalism and his dedication to his

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<sup>102</sup> John Hewitt, *No Rebel Word* (London: Frederick Muller, 1948), p. 53.

<sup>103</sup> Martin Mooney, “‘A Native Mode’: Language and Regionalism in the Poetry of John Hewitt”, *The Irish Review*, 3 (1988), 67-74 (p. 7).

<sup>104</sup> John Hewitt, ‘Regionalism: The Last Chance’, in *Ancestral Voices*, ed. by Clyde, pp. 122-5 (p. 122).

own country contributed to Hewitt's conviction that regionalism should not become provincial, but that attachment to one's locality should be balanced by an awareness of the wider world.

The failure and flaws of Hewitt's regionalist vision have been much debated by critics, as have his definition of the region, the poet's relationship to the landscape, and his search for literary ancestors. However, research into this subject has hitherto paid little attention to the significance of interpersonal relations between contemporary poets. Hewitt's well-known assertion of his isolation ('[I was] the only person to call myself a regionalist and had no disciples') may have confused the issue, although he and others have contradicted this statement on several occasions.<sup>105</sup> The canonical occlusion of nineteen forties poets has further consolidated the idea that Hewitt worked largely in isolation from a literary milieu. In contrast, the Hewitt-Wang poems demonstrate that friendships with like-minded poets were formative to Hewitt's poetic style and ideas.

The connection between friendship and regionalism is explored in the five sections of 'Freehold', which narrates a search for a stable place, community, and identity in a time of war. '[S]ick of war', the speaker escapes in the first section to the rural Glens of Antrim and in the third to apple-growing county of Armagh (*HCP*, p. 379). Not only is this the county where his ancestors are interred – in 'Once Alien Here' these 'buried men / in Ulster clay' legitimize the planter's claim to place – but it is also the home of the painter John Luke and the poet W.R. Rodgers. It is at the house of this 'poet-parson' that the speaker finally 'found / my seeming-aimless feet on solid ground': belonging to an artistic community is here a prerequisite of belonging to place (*HCP*, p. 381).

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<sup>105</sup> Quoted in Ferris, *Poet John Hewitt*, p. 14.

The poem's fifth section, entitled 'Roll Call' and deleted from the final published version of 'Freehold' in 1986, identifies friendship as an essential component of Hewitt's regionalist vision. He later described this fragment as a record of 'those Ulstermen I considered representative of the best values of my Region'.<sup>106</sup> The poets listed are Rodgers, McFadden, Maybin, and Morton. Rodgers's fusion of 'Gaelic' and 'Puritan' language in his poems about Armagh, McFadden's interest in regionalism, Maybin's poetic memories of the Northern Irish landscape, and Morton's rooted folk poems justify their inclusion. Greacen's cosmopolitan neo-romanticism, MacNeice's ambivalent deracination, and Laughton's lack of publications at the time of composition were perhaps the causes of their elision from this poem. In an unpublished draft from the summer of 1939, Hewitt absorbs Wang into this imagined coterie, referring to his lyrics alongside the achievements of the painter John Luke.<sup>107</sup> For Hewitt, who had felt isolated during the nineteen twenties and thirties, the feeling of being 'no more alone', as he wrote in a poem addressed to McFadden, was essential to his growing commitment to vibrant local literature.<sup>108</sup>

Although Hewitt's wartime poetry may, at first reading, appear to be open to charges of escapism, it was carefully crafted in response to the war as a way of asserting faith in the ability of art, and an artistic coterie, to withstand violence and to preserve beauty, individuality, memory, and friendship for the future. In addition to dwelling on man's relationship to place, Hewitt emphasized the importance of human relationships in the face of mechanized modes of warfare and the regimentation of all sections of society in conditions of total war. In Wang in

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<sup>106</sup> Quoted in Ormsby, p. 657.

<sup>107</sup> John Hewitt, Notebook 24, JHC Box 2, p. 35.

<sup>108</sup> John Hewitt, Notebook 30, JHC Box 2, p. 43.

particular, Hewitt found an exemplary figure and friend who united tolerance, rationality, radical politics, sensitivity to the landscape, and an aesthetic sensibility. Their friendship consolidated Hewitt's conviction that regionalism should be balanced with an international outlook. Hewitt's close friend Rodgers was similarly keenly aware of the importance of the region and the global crisis in which Northern Ireland was involved. However, his poetic mode is radically different from Hewitt's quiet, measured lyrics. The motivations which lie behind Rodgers's creation of a maverick idiom are the subject of the next chapter.

## Chapter Two

### W.R. Rodgers's Poetic Voice, Pilots and Politics

#### Introduction

In 1987, *Poetry Ireland Review* featured an article entitled 'Who is Ireland's Most Neglected Poet?' Of the twenty-two writers quoted, four nominated W.R. Rodgers.

In his response to the question, Greacen recalled that during the nineteen forties:

A critic of the time, G.W. Stonier, reviewing *Awake!* in the *New Statesman* [...] tipped Rodgers to 'go as far as Auden – and beyond'. This prophesy was not fulfilled. Excessive praise for his first book probably harmed Rodgers. It's time for a new generation to discover him.<sup>1</sup>

Born in Belfast in 1909, Rodgers studied English Literature at Queen's University, before training at the city's Presbyterian Theological College and accepting a ministerial post in Loughgall in 1934. He began to write poetry in the late nineteen thirties after Hewitt lent him volumes by Auden, MacNeice, Spender, and Day Lewis, and he soon won a Radio Eireann poetry competition.<sup>2</sup> Rodgers exploded onto the scene of contemporary poetry in magazines such as *Horizon* and *The Bell*, and was celebrated for what Greacen called the 'all-round sheer excellence' of his work.<sup>3</sup> His exuberant rhythms, idiosyncratic use of alliteration and internal rhyme, and unusual juxtapositions of images attracted the attention of publishers Secker and Warburg, who produced his first volume of poetry, *Awake! and Other Poems*, in 1941. Prompted by MacNeice, who visited Northern Ireland in 1945 in search of new writers for the BBC, Rodgers resigned his ministerial position in 1946 and accepted employment in London as a scriptwriter for the BBC Third Programme.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted by John Montague, 'Who is Ireland's Most Neglected Poet?: A Survey', *Poetry Ireland Review*, 20 (Autumn 1987), 48-53 (p. 50).

<sup>2</sup> Michael Longley, 'Introduction', in W.R. Rodgers, *Poems*, ed. by Michael Longley (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1993), pp. 11-22 (p. 14); Roberta Hewitt, Diary Entry, 22 April 1948, Diary Volume 1, p. 92.

<sup>3</sup> Greacen, 'A Survey of Ulster Writing', p. 13.



Rodgers's second and final volume of poetry, *Europa and the Bull and Other Poems*, was published in 1952.<sup>4</sup>

This chapter will focus on *Awake!*, a collection of poems composed between 1938 and 1940 which were, as Hewitt recognized, 'given their mood by the European war'.<sup>5</sup> In 1942, the poems were published in the USA with the more explicit title *Awake! and Other Wartime Poems*. Rodgers's British publishers similarly capitalized on the boom in the sale of 'war poetry', quoting a *New Statesman and Nation* critic in their advertisements: 'When next I am asked what war-poets we have, I shall answer, Rodgers'.<sup>6</sup> This advertisement proposed to answer a question which was being asked repeatedly by the public and media alike: 'where are the war poets?'.<sup>7</sup> Yet, despite the publisher's confident assertion, *Awake!* does not conform to the models of war poetry which the public anticipated. As discussed further in Chapter Four, such demands assumed that the conflict would generate verse written under the pressures of the battlefield, and which echoed Rupert Brooke's heroic mode, Wilfred Owen's compassionate realism, or Siegfried Sassoon's impassioned protests.

Although the wartime atmosphere is tangible throughout *Awake!*, and many of the poems take war as their subject, Rodgers was a non-combatant. At the time of composition, he lived in Loughgall, a village in County Armagh remote from the more visible changes taking place in Belfast and in areas surrounding military bases. Hewitt was later to describe a visit to Rodgers's manse as a journey from 'Europe into peace' (*HCP*, p. 379). Consequently, one of Rodgers's central concerns is the

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<sup>4</sup> See Darcy O'Brien, *W.R. Rodgers (1909-1969)* (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1970) for a comprehensive biography of Rodgers's life.

<sup>5</sup> Longley, 'Introduction', in *Poems*, p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> Anon., Secker and Warburg Advertisement, *TLS*, 6 December 1941, p. 615.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Cyril Connolly, 'Comment', *Horizon*, 2.8 (August 1940), 5-7 (p. 5).

war's encroachment on a region on the margins of the conflict. The experience of waiting on the edge of doom pervades poems in which individuals stand helplessly 'chained to the telephone-end while the world cracks', or gain information about the war from the radio or billboards (*RCP*, p. 32). Another pressing issue is the possibility of social reform presented by the political and social upheavals of the nineteen thirties and forties.

This chapter will begin by positioning Rodgers in relation to his contemporaries in Northern Ireland, examining both the creation and reception of his startlingly distinctive poetic voice and placing particular emphasis on his interest in regional poetics. The second half of the chapter will analyse the connection between Rodgers's poetic voice and his commitment to social reform as manifested in his poems about airmen. I propose that critics' dismissals of Rodgers's political beliefs, which have been described as merely derivative of nineteen thirties English poetry, obscures the extent to which leftist ideas impacted on the fabric of his verse.

## **I: Rodgers in Northern Ireland**

Despite McDonald's assertion that the 'fluffy patisserie of much of Rodgers's poetry was insufficiently substantial for many regionalist appetites', during the war years he was hailed as an important member of the literary scene in Northern Ireland.<sup>8</sup> In 1999, McFadden recalled that the 'dominant poets here in 1946 would have been Hewitt and Rodgers'.<sup>9</sup> Rodgers's achievement of international success whilst resident in remote Loughgall encouraged local writers, although Hewitt had to suppress his jealousy when he became aware of the enthusiastic reviews which

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<sup>8</sup> McDonald, *Mistaken Identities*, p. 29.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Brown, *In the Chair*, p. 24.

greeted his friend's first volume.<sup>10</sup> Rodgers proved that it was no longer necessary to travel to Dublin or London to achieve literary acclaim. Discussing the development of regionalism in Northern Ireland, Clyde posits that Rodgers's accomplishments consolidated local poets' sense of belonging to an active literary culture:

The impact of Rodgers' first collection *Awake! and Other Poems* in particular, was phenomenal; this contributed to the increase in pride and confidence in the ranks at home. It also focused, for the first time, the attention of the British literary establishment on the province, an interest which manifested itself in, for instance, a survey of literary activity in Northern Ireland which appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement*. [...] [The article] treated 'Ulster' as a discrete region [...] and treated the emerging northern writers seriously.<sup>11</sup>

Throughout his career, Rodgers continued to promote Northern Irish writing at home and in Britain. His 1955 article in the *Times Literary Supplement* was a significant endorsement of regional literature and gave a much-needed boost in confidence and publicity to writers such as Hewitt and McFadden. Closer to home, after the war Rodgers served as a member of the Arts Council Poetry Panel and supported the idea of a subsidized literary journal to replace the periodicals *Lagan* and *Rann*, which ceased publication in 1946 and 1953 respectively.<sup>12</sup>

Before his departure for England in 1946, Rodgers was an important figure at the Belfast literati's many social gatherings.<sup>13</sup> At university, he had been part of a '[m]ildly left-wing and sexually emancipated' group which was involved in the dramatic society and the production of the university magazine. The medical student Marie Harden Waddell, his future wife and niece of the playwright Rutherford Mayne and the renowned translator Helen Waddell, was a member of this group.<sup>14</sup> Rodgers's university career overlapped with Hewitt's and both read English

<sup>10</sup> McFadden, "No Dusty Pioneer", p. 177.

<sup>11</sup> Clyde, "A Stirring in the Dry Bones", p. 251.

<sup>12</sup> Rodgers, 'Ulster's Inheritance', p. 452; W. R. Rodgers, Letter to John Hewitt, 27 July 1955, PRONI D/3838/3/17A, p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Unless otherwise noted, the information in this paragraph is based on Anon., 'Biographical Note', in W.R. Rodgers, *The Return Room* (Belfast: Blackstaff, 2010), pp. 12-7.

<sup>14</sup> Longley, 'Introduction', *Poems*, p. 14.

Literature. It is likely that it was this connection which led Rodgers to frequent the Hewitts' Mountcharles flat during the war, where he met McFadden, Boyd, McLaverty, and many other writers and artists.<sup>15</sup> Although he offered his Belfast friends hospitality in return at the manse in Loughgall, Rodgers forbade them from attending his church services: in his daily life, if not in his poetry, Rodgers maintained a strict separation between his public and private worlds. Within the safety of the manse, their discussions were wide ranging, including 'socialist theory, anti-fascist politics, Freudian psychology and the future of Spanish Republican refugees'. It was the artists Mercy and George McCann, also living in County Armagh, who introduced Rodgers to MacNeice. Despite his close connections with the Belfast literary scene, Rodgers does not appear to have attended PEN meetings or to have frequented Campbell's Café, perhaps due to his responsibilities in Loughgall. In 1941 and 1942, he broadened his social network, twice staying in Dublin for several weeks with Geoffrey Taylor, poetry editor of *The Bell*.

The important role Rodgers played in Northern Ireland's nascent literary milieu is demonstrated by the frequency with which his name is included in contemporary assessments of local literature. In *The Arts in Ulster*, for example, Bell lists Rodgers as part of a new wave of northern writers which swept through local literature since 1939.<sup>16</sup> Celebrating Northern Irish writing in the 1942 'Ulster Issue' of *The Bell*, O'Faolain mentions Rodgers as a member of an embryonic regional group.<sup>17</sup> In the same year Rowley approached Rodgers, requesting some poems for publication by the Mourne Press, a non-profit company dedicated to promoting the

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<sup>15</sup> Roberta Hewitt, Summary of Events, Diary Volume 1, p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> Sam Hanna Bell, 'A Banderol', in *The Arts in Ulster*, ed. by Bell, Hewitt, and Robb, pp. 13-21 (p. 19).

<sup>17</sup> Sean O'Faolain, 'Editorial', *The Bell*, 4.4 (July 1942), 229-31 (p. 230).

local literary group.<sup>18</sup> No such volume appeared, but Rodgers does feature in *Lagan* and in two anthologies edited by Greacen, *Northern Harvest: Anthology of Ulster Writing* (1944) and *Contemporary Irish Poetry* (1949), which are discussed in detail in Chapter Five. That Rodgers does not appear in the anthologies *Poems from Ulster* (1941) or *Irish Harvest* (1946) indicates that he was distant from the group of young student poets Greacen was primarily interested in publishing. Nor was Greacen among the Belfast-based writers who visited Loughgall. An autobiographical short story by McFadden records that during the war he and Hubbard (Hewitt) visited Ritchie (Rodgers), but his close friend Rea (Greacen) was not invited.<sup>19</sup> The probable reason for this is that Greacen's affiliations with the New Apocalypse did not appeal to either Rodgers or Hewitt, whilst McFadden's interest in regionalism and his more distant connection to the Apocalypics facilitated the development of a friendship with the older poets.

Despite Rodgers's close connections with these poets, he developed an idiosyncratic and striking poetic voice. In 'Freehold', Hewitt includes his friend in the 'Roll Call' of local writers: the 'hurtling force of his bold images / that crash his words together till they break / with harsh new light that strikes us wide awake; / I owe his thought much thanks but not his style' (*HCP*, pp. 487-8). For Hewitt, the energy and vibrancy of Rodgers's poetry was at once invigorating and alienating. His interest in the local landscape and dialects nourished Hewitt's developing ideas about regionalism. Elsewhere, Hewitt insisted that Rodgers's poetry is deeply rooted in Northern Ireland and that many poems 'have [a] close association with the Armagh and Mourne landscape'.<sup>20</sup> However, of the thirty-two poems in *Awake!*,

<sup>18</sup> Richard Rowley, Letter to W.R. Rodgers, 10 April 1942, PRONI D/2833/C/2/5/5, p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> Roy McFadden, 'Leave of Absence', MFC MP28.

<sup>20</sup> John Hewitt, 'The Arts in Northern Ireland', JHC Box 11, p. 8.

only three are specifically about Ireland or Counties Armagh and Down, whilst other pieces describe rural scenes which are not necessarily particular to this area.

Greacen's 1948 review of Rodgers provides a useful corrective to Hewitt's over-emphasis on rootedness. He acknowledges that although Rodgers's poetry 'has not that *immediate* regional flavour which one senses right away in the case of Hewitt', their work shares 'a clearly intellectual attitude to experience, a ready sympathy with natural phenomena, a willingness to grapple with what I have already termed the predicament of man'.<sup>21</sup>

Whilst Rodgers's poems about his locality have some similarities with Hewitt's wartime work, his mode of expression is exceedingly different and he does not adopt an empirical approach to descriptions of place. Whereas the understated diction in Hewitt's poetry enables the reader to focus primarily on the landscape and its history, in Rodgers's verse the visualization of such scenes is sometimes overpowered by word-play and the sheer speed at which each poem rushes to its conclusion. For these reasons, the frequent Audenesque rejoinders to the reader to 'look' and 'see' are occasionally defunct (*RCP*, p. 31).

A further difference is that Rodgers's imaginative territory encompassed the whole island rather than a limited portion of the north-east. This is the case in 'Words', which evokes the west coast of Ireland as the poet's imaginative territory:

Always the arriving winds of words  
Pour like Atlantic gales over these ears,  
These reefs, these foils and fenders, these shrinking  
And sea-scalded edges of the brain-land.

(*RCP*, p. 2)

These lines display none of the unease which marks Hewitt's poems about areas outside his own region. Yet, like Hewitt, Rodgers was fascinated by the

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<sup>21</sup> Robert Greacen, 'A Note on Two Ulster Poets', *Poetry Ireland*, 2 (July 1948), 12-5 (pp. 14-5).

psychoanalytic theories of Carl Jung, whose use of the sea as a symbol of the unconscious mind is alluded to in 'Words'.<sup>22</sup> If the Atlantic Ocean represents the creative unconscious then, by extension, Ireland symbolizes the conscious mind which re-organizes ideas into poetry. Rodgers presents this boundary zone as a place where opposites meet and conflict, generating the 'fructifying friction' which was an important source of imaginative energy throughout his work (*RCP*, p. 69). By situating this creative storm on the west of Ireland, Rodgers evokes a long tradition in Irish literature and indicates that his poetry will be open to Gaelic influences. Brown describes the west as the 'main locus of Irish cultural aspiration', a place which encapsulates a 'vision of the [...] primal source of the nation's being'.<sup>23</sup> According to Edna Longley, for Protestants the sparsely populated west 'could represent, besides primordial unity, a clean slate where old conflicts might be resolved and new definitions founded'.<sup>24</sup> Rodgers wished to unite 'Ulster' poetry with the Irish tradition and so looked to an area which could represent a new beginning. For this reason, he tried to incorporate the voices and identities of the island's divergent communities into his poetry.

For Rodgers, the differences between unionist and nationalist groups were reflected in the texture of the spoken word. In 'Ulster's Inheritance from Gael and Puritan' (1955), he elaborates on his understanding of the conflict and compatibility of different modes of speech associated with these groups. The Puritan tradition, Rodgers argues, 'has always been sparing of rhetoric' and has a 'rooted distrust of the easy money of emotion and the ready fund and run of words'. Such ease of

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<sup>22</sup> Carl Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, trans. by R.F.C. Hull (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 177.

<sup>23</sup> Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922-2002* (London: Harper Perennial, 2004), p. 81, p. 84.

<sup>24</sup> Edna Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Study* (London: Faber, 1988), p. 29.

expression instead characterizes the ‘ebullient southerner’. In Ulster, Rodgers states, the collision between the ‘spiky consonants’ of the former and the softer, yet more exuberant, language of the latter is productive and provides rich material for the poet who seeks to combine the two traditions in one mode (*RCP*, p. 147):

[...] the sombre Puritan palette of Calvin and Cromwell has, with the passing of three centuries, been brightened by the wit and graces of the Gael. Each has added to, has shared in and shaded into the other, so that to-day the colours run. Grimness and gaiety, predestination and abandon have found a common speech. [...] This collision and “double-take” of speech is a constantly exciting thing. It gives the Ulsterman a heightened wit, a sharpened vision, and an ambiguous mind. It lends itself to pun, epigram and verbal somersaults.<sup>25</sup>

McIntosh argues that the imaginative and critical work of Rodgers and his contemporaries often ‘combined traditional unionist and protestant stereotyping with an alternative version – and vision – of Northern Irish identity and the Northern Ireland state’.<sup>26</sup> Whilst Rodgers’s imagined linguistic fusion countered prevalent assertions of the incompatibility of unionist and nationalist cultures, his vision is based on conventional stereotypes which often favour his own Puritan heritage. Rodgers’s descriptions of what he identified as Gaelic speech do little more than suggest that it is characterized by exuberance and verbal play. Moreover, as Foster points out, that Rodgers shares his ‘[l]inguistic verve and dash’ with poets such as George Barker and Dylan Thomas indicates these verbal tricks were not specific to Irish speech.<sup>27</sup> Despite the inadequacies of such limited descriptors of local communities, similar terms were widely used by Northern Ireland’s wartime literati. In 1944, for example, Greacen described the ‘reserve’ and ‘lack of display’ of the

<sup>25</sup> Rodgers, ‘Ulster’s Inheritance’, p. 452.

<sup>26</sup> McIntosh, p. 206.

<sup>27</sup> J.W. Foster, ‘The Dissidence of Dissent: John Hewitt and W.R. Rodgers’, in *Across a Roaring Hill: The Protestant Imagination in Modern Ireland*, ed. by Gerald Dawe and Edna Longley (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1985), pp. 139-60 (p. 150).



unionist community, which contrasts with the ‘colourful and, above all, voluble make-up of [...] our fellow-Irishmen’.<sup>28</sup>

In Rodgers’s most often quoted and anthologized poem, ‘Ireland’, he attempts to link ‘spiky consonants’ with ‘Irish’ vitality. In this poem’s opening lines, plosives are mingled with softer sounds, whilst sudden caesurae introduce abrupt pauses which conflict with the underlying driving rhythm. The almost overwhelming use of alliteration, internal rhyme, consonance, and puns are all integral to Rodgers’s scheme to bring colour to ‘sombre’ Puritan English:

O these lakes and all gills that live in them,  
 These acres and all legs that walk on them,  
 These tall winds and all wings that cling to them,  
 Are part and parcel of me, bit and bundle,  
 Thumb and thimble. Them I am, but none more  
 Than the mountains of Mourne that turn and trundle  
 Roundly like slow coils of oil along the shore  
 Of Down and on inland.

(RCP, p. 42-3)

The opening lines tumble towards the speaker’s exclamation ‘[t]hem I am’. The caesurae before and after this strikingly plain, monosyllabic statement emphasize the unreserved assertion that this place is the foundation of the speaker’s identity. The scene is strikingly similar to that of many of Hewitt’s poems about remembered country walks, indicating that Rodgers is deliberately evoking his friend’s work in order to engage with his regionalist ideas about place and identity. Rodgers’s first person speaker recalls a walk with an unidentified companion through the Mourne Mountains, thinking about the pleasurable feel of the turf which ‘squealed and squelched cold between our bared toes’. Like the couple who are pictured gardening at the beginning of Hewitt’s ‘Reverie and Recollection’, the companions in ‘Ireland’ gain knowledge of the region through their senses. The contrast with much of

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<sup>28</sup> Robert Greacen, ‘The Editor Says...’, in *Northern Harvest: Anthology of Ulster Writing*, ed. by Robert Greacen (Belfast: Derrick MacCord, 1944), n.p.

MacNeice's poetry is striking: the '[w]indows between you and the world' which haunt many of MacNeice's isolated speakers have been removed (*MNCP*, p. 255). In the Mourne Mountains, the individual is free from the conditions of modernity which hinder engagement with physical reality and can prevent belonging to a particular place. That Rodgers describes this place as Ireland, rather than Ulster or Northern Ireland, affirms his perception that the northern counties are part of a single cultural and geographical unit.

The poem's final lines explore the interaction of memory, the imagination, and the act of creation. 'What is imagination but Memory?' Rodgers asked in 1951.<sup>29</sup> In 'Ireland', the recollection of the Mourne Mountains remains '[s]ilently' in the mind:

But touch it and it leaps, leaps like a bead  
Of mercury that breaks and scatters  
Suddenly in a thousand shining strings  
And running spools and ever-dwindling rings  
Round the mind's bowl, till at last all drop,  
Lumped and leaden again, to one full stop.

The unrestrained, unstoppable movement of the mercury bead appropriately represents the energy of Rodgers's poetic idiom. Like the bead, the words rise and fall, overrunning line endings until they slow and stop in the final line. Such movement reflects the ebullience of the remembered landscape, in which even the inanimate rocks are given life. The 'grey granite [is] goosefleshed', the fuschias are 'blazing parachutes', and birds peck '[r]apidly at scattered grain'. The repetition of the verb 'scatter' in the final lines reinforces this connection between place, memory and linguistic power. The barrage of alliteration, internal rhyme, and puns challenges the reader to engage actively with the poem. The use of the plural first person

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<sup>29</sup> W.R. Rodgers, 'Balloons and Maggots', *Rann*, 14 (December 1951), 8-13 (p. 11).

pronoun in the poem's central section also reaches out to encompass the reader, who is invited to share in this profound interaction of man, mind, and landscape.

Critics have found this poem's idiosyncratic reinvention of Hewitt's regionalist theories to be ultimately unsatisfactory. McDonald concludes that Rodgers's 'irritating' verbal play does not give him the poetic authority to stake his claim so boldly, commenting that there 'is something outlandish about this putting-on of a composite identity'.<sup>30</sup> Tom Walker extends McDonald's logic, interpreting the conclusion of 'Ireland' as follows:

This descent from the speaker's initial claim to be made up of 'these acres and all legs that walk on them' to this description of memory could, of course, be read as an implicit comment on the impossibility of maintaining the Bardic stance of the opening. For instance, that the memories of these places cannot be wholly and eternally possessed, but only briefly reanimated, might undermine the ideas of a poet being able, in any simple sense, to be all of them, as the opening claims. But little in the poem suggests such complexity of thought. Rather the poem evidences an inability to develop, in intellectual or poetic terms, the implications of that initial shift from a poetic position that claims licence over all of Ireland, to an inclusion of an unusual territory, the Mournes, within that notion of Ireland.<sup>31</sup>

Although this assessment of 'Ireland' is perceptive, particularly with regard to Rodgers's unquestioning alignment of poet and nation, it is overly harsh. It is possible that the poem's final lines indicate that Rodgers did have some of the very reservations Walker identifies. The image of the bead remaining within the mind points to a fundamental and lasting connection between the poet and the landscape. Yet, the bead's final stillness and the downbeat tone reveal a sense of loss and disappointment that such moments of ecstatic and complete self-realization are fleeting.

Moreover, 'Ireland' is haunted by undefined and troubling presences which threaten the vibrancy and freedom of the natural world. Rodgers employs the language of war when he describes the 'blazing parachutes of fuschia', a flower

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<sup>30</sup> McDonald, *Mistaken Identities*, p. 30.

<sup>31</sup> Walker, 'Louis MacNeice', pp. 61-2.

which recalls MacNeice's ominous image of 'fuschias red as blood' in 'The Coming of War' (1940) (*MNCP*, p. 684). The mountain ridges are described ambivalently as a 'chain of jiggling figures on the skyline', beneath which flows the 'Bloody River'. This is probably a reference to the Bloody Bridge River, which local folklore associates with a massacre during a 1641 rebellion against English settlers. Later in the poem, the 'ferret-Fear' is mentioned as a predator of the rabbits, symbols which are closely linked with the imagination throughout Rodgers's oeuvre. These hints at historical and contemporary violence, in addition to the poem's location at the centre of a volume primarily concerned with the Second World War, indicate concerns about the encroachment of conflict into the pastoral space which is being claimed as fundamental to the poet's selfhood and culture. For the poet writing in the late nineteen thirties, memory might soon be all that remains of this landscape.

Fear is a more tangible presence in 'An Irish Lake'. The speaker lies immersed in the local landscape, observing it through the mediation of his writing hand: 'I / Lying at the rhododendron's foot / Look through five fingers' grille at the lake'. His identification with place is more provisional than in 'Ireland' as the image of the fingers suggests that the body separates man from nature, entrapping him within his own mind. In the poem's opening section, man's superfluity is reinforced by nature's independent pursuit of its own ends. Yet, at the poem's conclusion the natural and human worlds unexpectedly coincide as both are disrupted by the coming of war:

The up-standing birds stretch urgently away  
 Into the sky as suddenly grown grey.  
 Night rounds on Europe now. And I must go.  
 Before its hostile faces peer and pour  
 Over the mind's rim enveloping me,  
 And my so-frightened thoughts dart here and there  
 Like trout among their grim stony gazes.

(*RCP*, p. 29)

In a similar manner to MacNeice's 'The Coming of War', the shadow of violence disrupts the pastoral retreat and prevents the individual from finding a sense of peace. The psychological disturbance caused by the war ironically allows the observer to identify himself with nature (in the form of trout) only when world events call for his departure. Rodgers recognizes both the desirability and provisionality of concepts of rootedness in place when considered in relation to political events.

## II: Rodgers's critical reception

As elucidated above, Rodgers was a key member of Northern Ireland's wartime literary scene. Although he expressed his thoughts in a radically individual manner, he shared the concerns of his contemporaries, particularly with regard to the poet's relationship to his place and the war. The initial reaction of readers in Belfast, Dublin and London was extremely positive. Hewitt listed Rodgers as second only to MacNeice in reputation, whilst in *The Arts in Ulster* Nelson Browne identified 'passion in the resonance and impetuosity of his language and a startling verisimilitude in his images'.<sup>32</sup> From Dublin, Austin Clarke praised Rodgers's 'rare gift of imagery, skimming over his 'plethoric faults' to emphasize the 'exhilarat[ing]' experience of reading his poetry.<sup>33</sup> In *The Irish Times* Edward Sheehy hailed Rodgers as 'the most important of our younger poets', whilst the *TLS* reviewer noted 'vigour and distinction' in the poetry of Rodgers and Hewitt.<sup>34</sup> Even

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<sup>32</sup> Hewitt, 'The Arts in Northern Ireland', p. 8; Browne, p. 144.

<sup>33</sup> Austin Clarke, 'The Poetry of Ulster', *The Irish Times*, 4 October 1941, p. 5.

<sup>34</sup> Edward Sheehy, 'Living at this Hour', Review of *Contemporary Irish Poetry* ed. by Robert Greacen and Valentin Iremonger, *The Irish Times*, 21 May 1949, p. 6; Hugh L'Anson Fausset, 'Ulster Voices: Tradition of Vitality Renewed', Review of *Northern Harvest: Anthology of Ulster Writing* ed. by Robert Greacen, *TLS*, 15 April 1944, p. 189.

the few dissenting voices admitted the power and accomplishment of Rodgers's verse. Desmond MacCarthy asked in *The Irish Times*, '[i]mpressed? – Yes, immensely. Delighted? – I'm not quite so sure'.<sup>35</sup> McFadden's comments on Rodgers's tendency to use 'words like hand-grenades' were similarly ambivalent.<sup>36</sup>

These reviewers laid down the foundations of later assessments of Rodgers's work, which focus on clever word-play and the energetic power of his rhythms and imagery. Their emphasis fell on his continual experimentation with alliteration, assonance, internal rhyme, puns, portmanteau words, and unusual imagery rather than on the ideas he wished to express. As critical fashions changed towards the end of the nineteen forties, so Rodgers's reputation declined due to increasing dislike for what Padraic Fiacc referred to as 'the Christmas-tree effect of a too brilliant rhetoric'.<sup>37</sup> Perhaps the most caustic review was by Kingsley Amis, who complained that 'the ear is overwhelmed; [...] brass instruments are sonorous enough, but it is unwise to make them all play fortissimo all the time'.<sup>38</sup>

Two decades later, James Simmons accused Rodgers of evading pressing issues by indulging in linguistic play. Targeting a late poem in which Rodgers refers to 'that brave man Paisley' (*RCP*, p. 141), Simmons writes 'I mean it's quite ingenious and jolly (isn't old Bertie a wizard with language!); but if he is avoiding having to feel deeply or think hard, then isn't he doing a vicious disservice to the

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<sup>35</sup> Desmond MacCarthy, Review of *Poems from Ireland* ed. by Donagh MacDonagh, *The Irish Times*, 22 December 1944, p. 3.

<sup>36</sup> Roy McFadden, Review of *Europa and the Bull* by W.R. Rodgers, *Rann*, 16 (Summer 1952), 20-1 (p. 20).

<sup>37</sup> Padraic Fiacc, Review of *Contemporary Irish Poetry* ed. by Robert Greacen and Valentin Iremonger, *Poetry Ireland*, 7 (October 1949), 24-5 (p. 25).

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Tom Clyde, 'W.R. Rodgers: 1909-1969', *Honest Ulsterman*, 92 (December 1991), 3-8 (p. 4).

medium?’<sup>39</sup> The context of the Troubles, and concomitant questions surrounding poets’ responsibility to society in a time of violence, clearly inform the tone of this review. These opinions highlight the apparent insufficiency or superficiality of Rodgers’s poetic voice, what Brown has referred to as ‘verbal irresponsibility’. Brown concluded that Rodgers’s ‘tendency to expect his poem’s brilliant surfaces to disguise a paucity of matter, a lack of centre’ is his key weakness.<sup>40</sup> Yet, as the introduction to Brown’s 1971 study *Louis MacNeice: Sceptical Vision* argues, initially MacNeice’s reputation suffered from similar accusations of superficiality.<sup>41</sup>

The critical tide began to turn after the death of Rodgers in 1969, when Michael Longley assessed his work in *Causeway: The Arts in Ulster* (1971), the same year that the *Collected Poems* was published. Although Longley recognized Rodgers’s defects (‘one sometimes feels that Rodgers is forcing the pace’), he referred to the poet as ‘one of the most unembarrassed and exuberant talents in the language’.<sup>42</sup> Two decades later, Longley edited and enthusiastically introduced a new selection of *Poems* (1993), celebrating the ‘tumble of words’, ‘rich, idiosyncratic vocabulary’, and ‘alliterative music’ of Rodgers’s best work.<sup>43</sup> Longley’s edition represents a desire to recover those elements which Simmons had found morally dubious during the early nineteen seventies, but which could provide release from political imperatives and a return to the joys of language in the more hopeful years of the nineteen nineties. Although literary criticism on Rodgers’s poetry remains sparse, in general it engages with Longley’s act of reclamation and is influenced by Brown’s landmark study, *Northern Voices* (1975). Brown’s emphasis

<sup>39</sup> James Simmons, ‘A Tarnished Reputation’, Review of *Collected Poems* by W.R. Rodgers, *Honest Ulsterman*, 32 (January-February 1972), 38-44 (p. 39).

<sup>40</sup> Brown, *Northern Voices*, p. 114, p. 125

<sup>41</sup> Terence Brown, *Louis MacNeice: Sceptical Vision* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975), p. 1.

<sup>42</sup> Michel Longley, ‘Poetry’, in *Causeway: The Arts in Ulster*, ed. by Michael Longley (Belfast: The Arts Council of Northern Ireland, 1971), pp. 95-109 (p. 99).

<sup>43</sup> Longley, ‘Introduction’, in *Poems*, p. 15.

on the repressive nature of Rodgers's Presbyterian background and the poet's consequent passion for explosive, dynamic language has been echoed by several critics, including Clyde and Longley.<sup>44</sup> Foster's view is more complex, as he suggests that in some respects 'Rodgers's liberties and unmoorings could be interpreted as his reaction against a Calvinist rearing', whilst in others his poetic voice is evidence of 'a transposed evangelic fervour'.<sup>45</sup>

A related strain of criticism views Rodgers's poetry as a 'pentecostal' irruption of the imagination or the unconscious which is barely controlled by the poet's conscious mind.<sup>46</sup> This reading is supported by the opening poems of *Awake!* 'Express' imagines the poet as a passenger on the 'through-train of words' who 'look[s] out and wonder[s] / To what happy or calamitous terminus' he is bound (*RCP*, p. 1). He presents himself as a passive traveller rather than a driver of the journey. Alluding to the commissioning of Isaiah, whose lips are touched with burning coal, the speaker of 'Words' anticipates that 'some day' the words will 'come forth, / Arrowed and narrowed into my tongue's tip, / And speak for me – their most astonished host' (*RCP*, p. 2). Barry Sloan argues that here 'the poet perceives his own role as a cross between a mediator who somehow harnesses [the words] into form and a bewildered medium possessed by a power that is using him'.<sup>47</sup> The terms 'mediator' and 'medium' attribute little agency to the conscious mind, and so the genesis of Rodgers's work appears to be in the uncontrolled sea of the unconscious.

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<sup>44</sup> Brown, *Northern Voices*, p. 115; Clyde, 'W.R. Rodgers', p. 6. See also Longley, 'Introduction', in *Poems*, p. 11.

<sup>45</sup> Foster, 'The Dissidence of Dissent', p. 156, p. 155.

<sup>46</sup> Barry Sloan, *Writers and Protestantism in the North of Ireland: Heirs to Adarnation?* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2000), p. 126; Longley, 'Introduction', in *Poems*, p. 15; O'Brien, p. 29; Brown, *Northern Voices*, p. 119.

<sup>47</sup> Sloan, p. 126.



Although the deluge of images and word-play is often disorienting for the reader, to describe Rodgers's oeuvre and his mode of writing as pentecostal partly falsifies the poet's role in the act of composition. In 1949, Rodgers asserted that 'I sometimes think it would take a Caesarean to deliver me of my sluggishly-born verse'.<sup>48</sup> In a later interview, he explains that 'four lines [of a new composition] might run to half a dozen pages, absolutely crammed with words, every possible variation until I chip the line that I want out of the stones'.<sup>49</sup> It could be argued that this is true only of Rodgers's later poetry, which undeniably had a much longer gestation period than his early work (the poems included in *Awake!* were written within two years, whilst it took another decade to write *Europa*). However, archival evidence demonstrates the painstaking care Rodgers took whilst writing the first volume. From his earliest poems, he adopted a compositional practice which involved considering a plethora of possibilities for each word or phrase.<sup>50</sup> Such evidence supports McDonald's nuanced account of Rodgers's poetic voice, which he argues is animated by the 'division between a distrust and a linguistic rapture'.<sup>51</sup> In this view, joy in language and the interplay of sound is tempered by the understanding that words are 'blinds', not the 'windows of feeling' (*RCP*, p. 49). Rodgers employs this image to convey his understanding that poetry can provide only partial and provisional access to emotion, the psyche, and the imagination. The poet does not merely accept words which are 'given' by the imagination or the unconscious mind, but instead must strive to make language a more accurate means of communication.

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<sup>48</sup> W.R. Rodgers, Letter to John Hewitt, 22 March 1949, PRONI D/2833/3/17A, p. 1.

<sup>49</sup> W.R. Rodgers, Interview for the British Council, 4 Sept 1964, PRONI D/2833/B/1/N/3/1, p. 209.

<sup>50</sup> W.R. Rodgers, Draft Poems, PRONI D/2833/B.

<sup>51</sup> McDonald, *Mistaken Identities*, pp. 32-3.

The assumption that Rodgers's words arrived in a pentecostal irruption of inspiration has distracted his readership's attention from his wish that ideal poetic language, the 'windows of feeling', will assist in '[r]evealing and relieving living needs' (*RCP*, p. 49). As demonstrated above, critics have largely neglected this aspect of Rodgers's poetry, tacitly agreeing with Simmons that 'certain simple-minded revolutionary attitudes [...] sit uneasily on Rodgers's shoulders, but were very much in the air' during the late nineteen thirties and early nineteen forties.<sup>52</sup> Whilst Rodgers left no explicit evidence of his political views, I propose that the left-wing ideology which animated the majority of Northern Ireland's wartime literati had a profound impact on *Awake!* Although Rodgers was not affiliated to a particular party and, as far as biographical and archival evidence suggests, was not a Hewittesque committee-man, his poetry is informed by the social problems facing Great Britain and Ireland in the late nineteen thirties and the war years. Indeed, he may have agreed with MacNeice's statement of 1942: 'distrust all parties but consider capitalism must go'.<sup>53</sup>

The next section of this chapter will focus on a related aspect of Rodgers's poetic mode, taking his poems about airmen as a focal point. I argue that these poems raise the issue of the relationship between the imagination, the war, and social conscience, expressing the necessity of shaping a poetic voice which is indebted to all three. This argument qualifies Brown's analysis of Rodgers's poetry, which asserts the irreconcilability of romanticism with a left-wing ideology:

The only relief Rodgers offers from this storm, from these repeated waves of verbal energy, is stern moral abstraction (the morality is conventional left-wing). So the demands of sermon and homily establish the tone of some sections of his early verse. Intensity of emotional and physical experience, or the urgent demands of moral and

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<sup>52</sup> Simmons, p. 40.

<sup>53</sup> Quoted in Brown, *Literature of Ireland*, p. 163.

social duty are the poles at which Rodgers's early poetry exists, without any exploration of a possible central territory.<sup>54</sup>

I posit that although Rodgers did not always succeed, he strove to bring these apparent opposites together and, through poetry, to make something happen.

### III: The Airman

Before discussing the particularities of Rodgers's engagement with the symbol of the airman, it is necessary to contextualize his fascination with this figure within a literary and historical framework. Doing so is instructive as Rodgers responded to and engaged with existing literature of the air, which burgeoned coterminously with developments in aviation technology during the interwar years. By the nineteen thirties, as Valentine Cunningham notes, '[a]irmindedness and being *airminded*' were 'characteristic concepts'.<sup>55</sup> Aerial technology and airmen feature in the work of a wide range of writers, from H.G. Wells's *The War in the Air* (1908, reissued in 1941) to Auden's *The Orators* (1932), from AE's 'Battle Ardour' (c. 1915) to Henry Green's *Party Going* (1939). Greacen, MacNeice, and Morton also refer to airmen in their work. In these texts, and many others, the airman variously symbolizes rationality, heroism, freedom, action, transcendence, the imagination, and triumph over nature. He represents man's ability to use the technological developments of modernity to surpass physical limitations and experience what Elizabeth Bowen

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<sup>54</sup> Brown, *Northern Voices*, p. 118.

<sup>55</sup> Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford: OUP, 1988), p. 167. On the airman and aerialism, see Laurence Goldstein, *The Flying Machine and Modern Literature* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986); Mark Rawlinson, *British Writing of the Second World War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000); Patrick Deer, *Culture in Camouflage: War, Empire and Modern British Literature* (Oxford: OUP, 2009); and Peter Adey, *Aerial Life: Spaces, Mobilities, Affects* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

refers to as ‘an exalting idea of speed’.<sup>56</sup> Less positively, in the futuristic narrative of *The War in the Air*, airmen bring a new era of global destruction and anarchy.

A key example by a writer Rodgers greatly admired and alludes to frequently in his poetry is Yeats’s ‘An Irish Airman Foresees his Death’, an elegy for Major Robert Gregory who was killed in action in Italy in 1918.<sup>57</sup> Writing in the first person, Yeats imagines the moment at which the airman realizes that he is facing death:

Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,  
Nor public men, nor cheering crowds,  
A lonely impulse of delight  
Drove to this tumult in the clouds;  
I balanced all, brought all to mind,  
The years to come seemed waste of breath,  
A waste of breath the years behind  
In balance with this life, this death.

(YMW, p. 64)

Here, the airman is omniscient, able to balance all things just as the poet uses chiasmus to balance the poem. Despite the pilot’s aerial perspective, he does not look down. This contrasts starkly with the sights seen from a ‘vague height’ in Wilfred Owen’s ‘The Show’, in which the speaker compassionately observes the mud, despair, inaction, and blindness of the trenches below.<sup>58</sup> In contrast to the confusion and stasis of land warfare, during the interwar period aerial combat was believed to retain a sense of purity, honour, and mobility. As E.J. Leed argues, it also kept ‘open the realm of purpose and meaning with which many entered the war’.<sup>59</sup> This idea is explicit in Cecil Lewis’s First World War memoir, *Sagittarius Rising* (1936), which aligns the morality of the war in the air with medieval chivalric codes.

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<sup>56</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, *To The North* (London: Vintage, 1999), p. 135.

<sup>57</sup> Brown, *The Literature of Ireland*, p. 80.

<sup>58</sup> Wilfred Owen, *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen*, ed. by C. Day Lewis (London: Chatto and Windus, 1966), pp. 50-1.

<sup>59</sup> Quoted in Brown, *The Literature of Ireland*, p. 81.

In 'An Irish Airman', the erasure of the battlefield is matched by the disappearance of the airplane: the airman becomes a bird, able to fly without technological assistance and with no reference to the war itself. Liberated from his historical context, the airman discovers sublime artistic fulfillment at the moment of annihilation.

Whilst the experience of trench warfare prompted many poets of the First World War to re-evaluate or reject heroism, heroes became a preoccupation for a new generation of writers who rose to prominence during the nineteen thirties. It is 'one of the most important facts about the 1930s', writes Cunningham, 'that this widely observed, world-scale collapse of the idea of heroism, this breakdown of the idea of the greatness of the life of action, this loss of "the sense of glory", did not last very long'.<sup>60</sup> In particular, Auden and Isherwood associated heroism with elevation and the panoramic perspective in texts such as *The Ascent of F6* (1936), a play selected for discussion by the Queen's University 'Verse and Drama Reading Society' in 1940.<sup>61</sup> For writers of this decade, the airman and the associated figure of the mountaineer often represented the possibility of mobility, omniscience, and transcendence of human suffering. Such heroes were liberated from what Patrick Deer terms the 'fractured points of view' which had shaped the perceptions of trench-bound soldiers.<sup>62</sup> The broken bodies of much First World War poetry contrast starkly with the airman's apparent invulnerability or, as in Yeats's 'Irish Airman', his disembodiment and transportation into the sublime at the moment of death.

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<sup>60</sup> Cunningham, p. 156. See also Linda Shires, *British Poetry of the Second World War* (London: Macmillan, 1985), p. 6.

<sup>61</sup> Robert Greacen, 'A New Group: The Verse and Drama Reading Society', *The New Northman*, 8.1 (Spring 1940), 65.

<sup>62</sup> Deer, p. 34.

However, if the post-1918 disillusionment with heroism did not last very long, the resurgence of interest in heroes was not unalloyed. Cunningham demonstrates that concurrent with the approach of a second world war, writers increasingly stressed anxieties surrounding the airman's arrogance, power, and omniscience. The rational airmen in Rex Warner's *The Aerodrome* (1941), for example, lack all compassion and emotion, embarking on a fascist reign over the aerodrome and its neighbouring village. In 'Lapis Lazuli' (1937), Yeats revised his idealistic vision of aerialism and sounded a warning note about the coming war: 'if nothing drastic is done / Aeroplane and Zeppelin will come out, / Pitch like King Billy bomb-balls in / Until the town lie beaten flat' (*YMW*, p. 153).

The widely reported use of aerial bombing by the Japanese in China and the Nationalist forces in Spain consolidated such links between airpower and totalitarianism. Moreover, these events shifted the focus of the public from the chivalric fighter pilot to the brutal aerial bomber who indiscriminately killed both combatants and civilians. In his journalistic account of the Spanish Civil War, *Salud! An Irishman in Spain* (1937), Peadar O'Donnell, an acquaintance of Hewitt and editor of *The Bell* from 1946 onwards, described civilian deaths during air raids and 'merciless machine-gun fire from aeroplanes' (my italics).<sup>63</sup> As discussed in Chapter One, Chinese activist Shelley Wang's lecture in Belfast and correspondence with Hewitt dwelt on the plight of civilians who, living far behind the front line, were targeted by Japanese bombers. Several years earlier, Hewitt had foreseen the catastrophic effects of aerial bombing. Launching the Belfast Peace League in *The Northman* in 1934, Hewitt imagined a BBC broadcaster reporting on the rapid decimation of Britain and Europe in a series of air raids and chemical attacks:

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<sup>63</sup> Peadar O'Donnell, *Salud! An Irishman in Spain* (London: Methuen, 1937), p. 204, p. 195.

Do you realise it? – War's in the air; and will be from the air. There will be no diplomatic courtesies about 200 m.p.h. airplanes. No formal declarations and demands. Just a lever release, so – and a town blown to the winds as the lungs of a thousand civilians retch into bloody phlegm.<sup>64</sup>

Such predictions are found throughout pacifist journals and literature of the late nineteen thirties.<sup>65</sup> Pacifist C.E.M. Joad, for example, prophesied that in another war a 'thousand aeroplanes would bomb London to pieces in a few hours and plague and famine would complete the work done by bacteria and explosives'.<sup>66</sup> At a time when such events seemed imminent, it was problematic to represent airmen as heroes. Although popular writers such as W.E. Johns, author of the Biggles series, continued to write about heroic British pilots, amongst poets there was a general shift towards criticism, rather than idolization, of airmen. In 'one night', Rodgers writes, 'all the marble heroes / Came down from their high decks and marched away' (*RCP*, p.14).

These events and anxieties inform Rodgers's poems which focus on the symbol of the airman, 'The Far-Off Hills', 'The Raider', and 'The Airman'. 'The Far-Off Hills' was Rodgers's earliest published poem, appearing in *The Listener* in 1938.<sup>67</sup> It is therefore deeply involved in the fears of the year of the Munich Crisis, rather than being a representation of the Blitz itself. In the poem's opening stanza, Rodgers evokes the ideas of heroism, imagination, transcendence and individualism which, as discussed above, were often associated with the figure of the airman:

It is a pity that distance puts  
Ten-league boots on brutality,  
That the glib spittle of steel claps down  
Miles below, in a spidery splash,  
On the pin-point town,  
Gumming grimacing faces to the pavement,  
While the alert executor, lark-light,  
Tiny climber in titanic chasm,

<sup>64</sup> John Hewitt, 'The Peace League', *The New Northman*, 11.3 (Autumn 1934), 20-3 (p. 20).

<sup>65</sup> Plain, *Literature of the 1940s*, p. 124; Martin Ceadel, 'Popular Fiction and the Next War, 1918-1939', in *Class, Culture and Social Change: A New View of the 1930s*, ed. by Frank Gloversmith (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1980), pp. 161-84.

<sup>66</sup> Quoted by Martin Ceadel, *Pacifism in Britain, 1914-1945: The Defining of a Faith* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 138.

<sup>67</sup> Anon., Biographical Note, in *The Return Room*, p. 14.

Rinses the pin-prick pity in the burst  
And cloudy roundabout of pride.

(*RCP*, pp. 10-11)

Defying human limitations, the airman transcends the suffering he has caused below and experiences a sublime ascent, seemingly without technological assistance. He is a mountaineer, a '[t]iny climber', who uses his own skill and strength to dominate nature. Whereas the speaker of Owen's 'The Show' cannot see beyond the suffering of the battlefield, Rodgers's airman observes only the magnitude of the natural world he has pitched himself against.

The colloquial opening phrase introduces the 'p' and 't' sounds which are repeated incessantly throughout the first stanza. These jagged aural textures undercut the lyrical alliteration of 'lark-light' as 'pity' is echoed and re-echoed in words such as 'brutality', 'spittle of steel', 'pin-point', and 'pin-prick pity'. This consonance forces the uneasy juxtaposition of 'pity' and 'brutality', highlighting the disjunction between the airman's compassionless perspective and Owen's emphasis on the 'pity of war'.<sup>68</sup> The poem's central theme is the airman's inability to experience emotion, a situation exacerbated by the nature of modern technological warfare which allows missiles to be released at a considerable distance from the victims. It is this imaginative or empathetic effort which the technologies and preparations for war often seek to erase. Predicated on the elimination of emotion, aerial violence, as Peter Adey explains, 'works to produce similarly non-living subjects through the attunement of aggression towards the environments that supply the conditions for termination, or degradation of, a population's survival'.<sup>69</sup> In part, Rodgers's airman is enabled to kill because distance transforms the living, vibrant town into a 'pin-point' and each person into a 'bell-push'. Recognizing the effects of advancements

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<sup>68</sup> Owen, p. 31.

<sup>69</sup> Adey, p. 144.



in war technology, Cyril Connolly approached the issue more positively, concluding that ‘increased mechanization largely does away with the need of hate’ and that this ‘absence of aggressiveness [...] is the healthiest of all symptoms for the peace’.<sup>70</sup>

This interesting yet idealistic counter-argument appears to have carried little weight at the time; it is the absence of compassion rather than the eradication of anger which animated Rodgers and other writers interested in this topic (compare, for example, Roy Fuller’s ‘Winter in England’).

As in many of his poems, in ‘The Far-Off Hills’ Rodgers’s technique is to seek out a variety of means to articulate a central idea, reinventing and reinforcing the poem’s meaning as he adds new possibilities for interpretation whilst employing dense, energetic language in order to engage the reader’s full attention. As in each stanza in this poem, the second verse is a single sentence which tumbles from the initial thought to the full-stop. At its centre are several parallel clauses which reiterate the effect of distance on the airman’s psychological state. Echoing the opening stanza, the speaker states that ‘[i]t is a pity’:

That no round returning view  
Rocks the airman’s aim askew,  
Implicates his blood and bone,  
Makes another’s wound his own,  
Explodes the cool and grounded map  
Of his airy purpose into angry domes  
Of his own doom, resists and rusts the hand  
That tears along the dotted lines of life.

Whereas the speaker of Owen’s ‘The Show’ knows that ‘the fresh-severed head’ he sees from above is ‘my head’, Rodgers’s airman cannot relate to the corporeal effects of his actions.<sup>71</sup> Instead, the image of the map succinctly indicates how distance reduces human vitality and particularity to lines and symbols which can be regarded without emotion. The fear of technology’s dehumanizing effect is found throughout

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<sup>70</sup> Connolly, p. 5.

<sup>71</sup> Owen, p. 50.

literature of the nineteen thirties. In MacNeice's 'Under the Mountain', for example, the aerial view transforms a house from a 'maelstrom of loves and hates' into a 'silent gadget' (*MNCP*, p. 268). Objecting to this phenomenon, Rodgers wholeheartedly celebrates the emotional and linguistic maelstrom. His immersion in the 'living riot' and rejection of the 'smooth smear' of language is, in part, a demonstration of his faith in the significance of the emotions, experiences, and complications of human life and language (*RCP*, p. 11). As discussed above, many critics have suggested that this may have been a reaction against the restraints which are often attributed to Presbyterianism. However, I suggest that in Rodgers's wartime poetry, it is also a rejection of the war machine's disengaged response to humanity.

Extant drafts of 'The Far-Off Hills' demonstrate that Rodgers modelled the airman on Tamburlaine, the protagonist of two plays by Christopher Marlowe. When composing the fifth stanza, Rodgers considered utilizing the words 'ambitious man' and 'Tamburlaine', before finally selecting 'our hero'.<sup>72</sup> Therefore, underlying his exploitation of the nineteen thirties' fashion for literature of the air is the Renaissance fascination with the potential of humanity and the way in which political power could result in tyranny. Whilst Tamburlaine's merits, ambition, and courage allow him to rise to power, his sovereignty depends to a great extent on brutality and pitilessness. These characteristics define Rodgers's modern airman, who, like Tamburlaine, could be described as a 'god of war'. Marlowe's occasional use of aerial imagery cements the connection Rodgers makes between the two figures. Encouraging Tamburlaine to make war on Persia, Cosroe tells him to 'whet thy winged sword, / And lift thy lofty arm into the clouds' whilst, in Part II,

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<sup>72</sup> W.R. Rodgers, Draft of 'The Far-Off Hills', PRONI D/2833/B/1/N/5/1.

Tamburlaine's son refers to his father's 'conquering wings'.<sup>73</sup> These lines associate flight with military domination and the extension of the empire rather than with any sense of transcendence or artistic inspiration. Tamburlaine's treatment of his enemies and conquered peoples casts an ominous shadow over Rodgers's vision of the imminent war in the air.

Rodgers's airmen poems are not limited to this analysis of the effect of mechanization on modern warfare. Having identified the airman's pitilessness and inability to empathize with his victims, Rodgers reflects on the implications of this for poets and readers alike. Throughout 'The Far-Off Hills', 'The Raider', and 'The Airman', he hints at similarities between the airman and the artist, particularly when the pilots confuse destruction with creation. Employing alliteration and internal rhyme to draw attention to this in 'The Raider', Rodgers writes that the airman sees below him the 'bloom and boom / Of bomb' (*RCP*, p. 27). Extending the metaphor of organic growth in 'The Airman', Rodgers imagines planes flying at the same height as God, who looks:

Up from his absorbing Book  
To – absentmindedly – admire  
The rhododendron banks of fire  
Flowering from roots that upward point  
Their pleading hands, all out-of-joint[.]

(*RCP*, p. 79)

For the aerial observer, fire and flowers, roots and victims merge indistinguishably in a spectacle which aestheticizes and naturalizes suffering and death. Rodgers has presciently identified a theme which would become central to descriptions of the London Blitz: the strange beauty found in devastation. Orwell was 'struck by the size and beauty of the flames' which ravaged London, whilst MacNeice saw a 'very

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<sup>73</sup> Christopher Marlowe, *Tamburlaine the Great – Part 1 and Part 2*, in *Doctor Faustus and Other Plays*, ed. by David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen (Oxford: OUP, 1995), p. 55, p. 21, p. 110.

beautiful' fire.<sup>74</sup> Considering such accounts alongside Rodgers's airman poems throws into relief the moral questions they raise. In representing destruction in this way, writers risk becoming complicit in the very act of dehumanization which enabled the opposing forces to carry out the attack.

The poems also suggest Rodgers's reservations about linguistic rapture identified by McDonald and discussed above. In 'The Raider', the 'lone airman' is 'wrapped in his own roars'. '[W]rapped' evokes the homophone 'rapt', implying the airman's ecstatic indulgence in his own power. A secondary definition of 'rapt' ('[t]ransported spiritually, by religious feeling or inspiration') might hint at a Yeatsian conflation of flight with artistic inspiration.<sup>75</sup> In 'The Far-Off Hills', this idea is reinforced by an allusion to Shelley's skylark ('lark-light'), a symbol of the romantic imagination. The implication is that complete immersion in the imagination or in words themselves may be a distraction from humanitarian imperatives which the poet, Rodgers believed, had an ethical duty to articulate.

Concerns about the poet's responsibility overlap with Rodgers's commitment to social reform. If, as Mark Rawlinson argues, the airman often functions as 'a model of both the ideal self and the ideal state', then Rodgers inverts this paradigm, employing the airman as a symbol of the corrupt self and the corrupt state.<sup>76</sup> *Awake!* implies that the limitations of the airman's panoramic perspective, specifically his blindness to suffering, are shared by the people who constitute the state. Throughout the volume, Rodgers employs plural first person and second person pronouns in order to insist on the involvement of the reader, speaker, and wider society in the

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<sup>74</sup> Quoted in Piette, p. 44; Quoted in Bernard Bergonzi, *Wartime and its Aftermath: English Literature and its Background 1939-1960* (Oxford: OUP, 1993), p. 16.

<sup>75</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, <www.oed.com> [accessed 1 May 2014].

<sup>76</sup> Rawlinson, p. 48.

struggle between brutality and pity. In the fourth stanza, he develops the idea that society is in some way implicated in the suffering of others. 'It is a pity', the speaker repeats, 'that distance':

Stilts us like gods, gives us vest-pocket views  
Of Himalayan chaos and chameleon hues,  
Fixes calm frames around the edgeless riot  
– Until earth's scene grows shallow, and we stand  
Only ankle-deep in its agony.

The final line alludes to Percy Shelley's 'Mask of Anarchy', in which Hope walks 'ankle-deep in blood' from a massacre.<sup>77</sup> Rather than articulating immersion in suffering, Rodgers's line 'ankle-deep in its agony' indicates that 'we' have as yet merely dipped our toes in this horrific reality. Rodgers echoes Shelley's indictment of upper-class blindness to the suffering they cause, applying it to a social situation in which inequality remained a significant problem. The next stanza reinforces the connection between the airman and society, presenting the pilot as a distillation of cultural trends rather than as a heroic leader: 'we [...] / Balloon our hero to vicarious height, / Hoop him with ceremony, hub him with awe'.

Social responsibilities are central to many poems in *Awake!*, in which Rodgers repeatedly launches left-wing invectives against the upper- and middle-classes. In 'Sing, Brothers, Sing!', Rodgers applies the theme of distance to the Home Front's understanding of events happening in the war-zone. The radio reports erase 'heat and noise / From all its images' as the announcer adopts 'insulated tones' which mask the true horror of the 'scrimmages', a word by which the news reporter reduces the war to a tussle on the rugby field (*RCP*, p. 12). Whereas the radio announcement of the declaration of war in MacNeice's 'The Coming of War' has a profoundly disturbing effect on the listeners, in Rodgers's poem the remoteness of

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<sup>77</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York: Norton, 1977), p.304; I am indebted to Professor Michael O'Neill for this suggestion.

conflict serves to reassure the population of their own safety. The word ‘insulated’ aligns the radio announcer with the airman of ‘The Far-Off Hills’, who is ‘[i]nsulate[d] from remonstrance’. It also echoes MacNeice’s use of the word in the opening lines of *Autumn Journal*. In sleepy Hampshire, which is unknowingly on the edge of war, ‘close-clipped yew / Insulates the lives of retired generals and admirals’ (*MNCP*, p. 101). Rodgers’s attempt to awaken his readers to this reality is more urgent than MacNeice’s journalistic record of the individual’s private experience of public events. Even so, in ‘Sing, Brothers, Sing!’ and *Autumn Journal I*, both poets indicate that the population has drifted unthinkingly into war, unaware of what is occurring in the world around them.

Images of societal passivity pervade *Awake!*: society is ‘immobilized / In precedent’ and trapped behind the ‘lock-gates of class, caste and custom’ (*RCP*, p. 17, p. 14). Diplomats are ‘obdurate’ with ‘stony eyelids’ and ‘icicles of memory’ (*RCP*, p. 8). This world’s heroes are ‘marble’ and its social stratum is maintained by an ‘anchor’, whilst any ‘oiled, reasoned, and orderly advance’ serves only to ensure that society ‘retain[s] its ease’, rather than facilitating progress to a culture founded on equality and justice (*RCP*, p. 8, p. 17). In ‘White Christmas’ (a poem whose theme is probably indebted to MacNeice’s ‘An Eclogue for Christmas’ and ‘Christmas Shopping’), Rodgers ironically alludes to the Biblical narrative of Jesus’ miracles: ‘the member for the constituency / Feeds the five thousand, and has plenty back’. According to Rodgers it is not just those in positions of power who have failed. Families engaged in seasonal festivities listen to a radio broadcast which upholds the ‘tinned milk of human kindness’ (an allusion to *Macbeth* Act 1, Scene 5) whilst a beggar walks past outside ‘without a bark or a bite’ (*RCP*, p. 39).

In poems such as ‘End of a World’, ‘Action Station’ and ‘Awake!’, Rodgers imagines apocalyptic scenes which sweep away the old order and usher in a new, more egalitarian, society. In the volume’s title-poem, war is figured as a revolutionary force which can bring positive changes: ‘So War came,’ Rodgers writes, the ‘late and urgent agent of change, not / Of Chance. So will it always come to wake / The deep sleepers’ (*RCP*, p. 51). Many left-wing intellectuals shared this hope that the upheavals of total war would prompt radical changes to the economic, social, and political structures of the pre-war period. Piette explains that many anticipated a time when late capitalism would ‘collapse under the pressure of its own war-machine’ and ‘a new society [would] arise out of the ashes of the Second World War’.<sup>78</sup> MacNeice’s poem of the London Blitz, ‘Brother Fire’, is perhaps the most famous example of this trend in wartime British thought. Closer to home, in *Lagan*, Belfast-born writer and journalist George Buchanan imagined a period of post-blitz reconstruction, picturing an ideal, beautiful, and technologically advanced city: there ‘may be parks and fountains; new ivory-coloured halls; heliotropic and delicate architecture; a song of health in the tremendous windows; quick nerves of transport’.<sup>79</sup> Buchanan’s vision of a new Belfast integrates modernity, social wellbeing, and the local writers’ desire to replace a philistine culture with one which embraces all forms of art.

#### IV. ‘[I]magination and pity’

In the first poem printed in *Awake!*, entitled ‘Express’, the speaker articulates a desire to retain his ‘pities and indignations’ (*RCP*, p. 1). The very qualities that he

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<sup>78</sup> Piette, p. 40.

<sup>79</sup> George Buchanan, ‘Pages from a Notebook’, *Lagan*, 2 (1944), 62-5 (p. 64).

values as being essential to his character – compassion and righteous outrage – are those which Rodgers reveals to be lacking in the airman and society. The conclusion to ‘The Far-Off Hills’ revisits the final line of ‘Express’, suggesting that a flawed society could be transformed if it were to embrace a combination of ‘imagination and pity’:

But tomorrow, perhaps, walking in the city,  
Soothed by apt paths and habitual paces,  
Sliding oiled eyes over the far-off hills  
And foreign ills, or sitting in rooms,  
Fitting, with cold tongs of reason and wit,  
The hot hates and sticky loyalties  
Of our day into jig-saw discussion  
– O then will the abrupt bolt and naked shock  
Shrink the glittering sheet of our laughter  
Into tinfoil drops, and reinstate us  
In our imagination and pity.

‘[O]iled eyes’ refers to the ‘oiled, reasoned, and orderly advances’, which actually serve to maintain the status quo in the corrupt, pre-revolutionary society described in ‘End of a World’ (*RCP*, p. 17). As products of modern society, the city-dwellers are unable to perceive the ‘far-off hills’. Instead, in Rodgers’s opinion, they depend too much on intellect instead of emotion and the imagination.

To interpret the significance of the phrase the ‘far-off hills’, it is necessary to turn to the prose commentary Rodgers wrote for a collection of photographs published in *Ireland in Colour* (1957):

It is in the grey west, for example that people, looking out to sea, have sometimes glimpsed, humped on the horizon, the fabulous island of Hy Brasil, the lost Atlantis, green and golden, and glittering with snow-white houses and immortal fruit: if only says tradition, a fisherman were to put a burning lump of turf or coal on that island, it would remain for ever his, instead of sinking again below the waves. For the far-off hills of the imagination are green but cold; only the fire and warmth of the human spirit can redeem and preserve them.<sup>80</sup>

It is this idealized west of Ireland, this locus of the imagination described as a meeting point of the conscious and unconscious minds in ‘Words’, to which Rodgers

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<sup>80</sup> W.R. Rodgers, *Ireland in Colour: A Collection of Forty Colour Photographs* (London: Batsford, 1957), pp. 19-20.



refers in ‘The Far-Off Hills’. For Rodgers this ideal island and the imagination need to be enhanced by being brought into contact with the vibrancy and chaos of humanity. The solution he seeks to social ills is therefore more complex than a restoration of empathy to the modern, detached mind. Instead, it is a union of the unconscious mind with the creative power of the imagination and man’s emotional life. In order to prompt his readers to realize this vision in their own lives, Rodgers created an idiosyncratic poetic voice which demands active engagement from his audience. He deploys obscure images, convoluted syntax, barrages of alliteration and harsh consonants, unusual portmanteau words, and many more linguistic techniques in order to accomplish this end. In addition, his subject-matter is impure, in MacNeice’s sense of the word, encompassing politics and criticism of social values.<sup>81</sup> In this respect, Walt Whitman’s reflection on the act of reading is appropriate to Rodgers’s technique: ‘the process of reading is not a half-sleep, but in the highest sense, an exercise, a gymnast’s struggle’.<sup>82</sup>

As I draw this chapter to a conclusion, I will explicate this argument with some examples from Rodgers’s first volume. Central to ‘Stormy Day’ is the desire to awaken the readers’ imaginations to the beauty of the landscape. Although the verbal play can become irritating, it provides an apt illustration of Rodgers’s poetic voice. The poem begins with the now familiar injunction, ‘O look’. Without delay, the speaker appeals to the reader’s imagination, inviting them to conjure a visual image from his words. The second sentence echoes the first:

[...] O it is a lovely time when  
 Out of the sunk and rigid sumps of thought  
 Our hearts rise and race with new sounds and sights  
 And signs, tingling delightedly at the sting  
 And crunch of springless carts on gritty roads,

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<sup>81</sup> MacNeice, *Modern Poetry*, n.p.

<sup>82</sup> Quoted in Peter Howarth, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernist Poetry* (Cambridge: CUP, 2012), p. 175.

The caught kite dangling in the skinny wires,  
 The swipe of a swallow across the eyes,  
 Striped awnings stretched on lawns. New things surprise  
 And stop us everywhere.

(*RCP*, p. 31)

Although he adopts a radically different poetic mode than that favoured by Hewitt, here Rodgers's interest in the individual's apprehension of the scene is similar to his friend's emphasis on the interaction of the perceiving mind and nature. As in 'Ireland', the speaker's emotional responses and his detailed descriptions emphasize proximity to phenomena which are depicted in a startling and fresh manner that aims to mimic the energizing effect of novelty on the mind. Rodgers mingles soft and harsh sounds, sandwiching groups of sibilant sounds between plosives. '[S]ounds and sights / And signs', for example, collide with the consonants in 'tingling delightedly'. Even so, the impact is softened by assonance ('sights', 'signs', 'tingling'), whilst internal rhyme unifies conflicting sounds. The words 'tingling', 'sting', and 'springless' chime as the sentence plunges across line endings with seemingly boundless vitality until it is brought to a sudden halt at the full stop. As the final line quoted indicates, to pause in the absorption of new experiences is just as important as being carried away by a sudden release of emotion, words, and ideas.

The political significance of Rodgers's technique is more overt in the volume's title poem, which predicts an apocalypse that will destroy a corrupt society dependent on 'privilege'. The poem's final lines crescendo to a frenzied warning which undermines the speaker's appeal for calm:

O awake! awake!  
 And let us like the trapped intrepid man  
 Who on prairie hears the holocaust roar  
 And sees his horizons running to meet him  
 In mutinous flames, while the still grasses fill  
 With rills of refugees, let us calmly  
 Stand now to windward, and here at our feet  
 Stooping, light fires of foresight that will clean  
 And clear the careless ground before us

Of all the dry and tinder increment  
 Of privilege. So will that other Fate  
 Arriving find no hold within our state,  
 And we on our ringed ground its roar will wait  
 Freely. Awake! before it is too late.

(RCP, p. 52)

The linguistic tropes are similar to those employed in 'Stormy Day'. The alternation of 'spiky consonants' and softer sounds is repeated, whilst nearly every line overflows into the next, the words jostling against one another and straining against the constrictions of the iambic pentameter. The reader must work to understand the opaque image of the lone man on the prairie and the undeveloped hint at the Biblical flood imagery ('rills of refugees') which is employed more overtly in 'End of a World'. The convoluted syntax also requires active untangling. The poem balances its apocalyptic predictions with the vision of 'that other Fate', in which society awakens and welcomes redemptive transformation. The agent of this change is the wind which, as in 'Words', is associated with the imagination and the unconscious mind. Rodgers's point is clear: the imagination can, and must, redeem society. The reformist gale from Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind' blows through Rodgers's poetry.

Of course, in shaping such dense language and adopting a didactic tone, Rodgers risked alienating, rather than compelling, his readers. That he continued to write on the same themes throughout the war indicates that he did not witness the transformations he had hoped for. In 1944, 'Nativity' was published in *The Bell*. It revisits the image of the airman and the theme of 'White Christmas':

And hark! the Herod-angels sing tonight!  
 Over the Magi's tents  
 Their heartless song drones on through grumbling glooms  
 And weeping continents.

High on his farthing floor the airman moons  
 Above the mourning town  
 Of Bethlehem; it is his fiddling root  
 And he the flower and crown.

(RCP, p. 124)

Oblivious to the events below, the angels and the airman hover, indifferently rapt in their own songs and concerns. Once again, Rodgers articulates a need to oppose endemic social problems. In *Awake!*, he had created a startlingly fresh and idiosyncratic poetic voice which united political concerns with an interest in a regional poetic mode. At times, the result is somewhat strained. Nevertheless, *Awake!* inspired Rodgers's Northern Irish contemporaries and contributed to the interlinked debates about regional poetics and left-wing politics. In contrast MacNeice's reception in Northern Ireland was somewhat less unquestioningly enthusiastic and more complex. However, as the next chapter demonstrates, his impact on wartime poetry in Belfast was equally profound.

## Chapter Three

### ‘[S]omewhat alien to Ulster’?: Reading and Publishing

#### Louis MacNeice in Northern Ireland<sup>1</sup>

The poetry of Louis MacNeice is outstanding for its technical accomplishment and satirical power. Certainly no study of Ulster poetry would be complete without reference to his work.

Howard Sergeant<sup>2</sup>

#### Introduction

Discussing mid-century periodical culture in Northern Ireland, Shovlin claims that neither MacNeice nor Rodgers was closely involved with the nascent literary coterie:

Louis MacNeice was the best known of the Northern poets, playing a prominent part in the so-called ‘Auden generation’ and reaching a wider audience through his involvement with the BBC. W.R. Rodgers had also begun to emerge as a significant new voice but both these writers, based as they were outside the country, had little or nothing to do with any sense of fresh regional coterie.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, Rodgers did not leave for London until after the war, when this significant development in local culture was already well underway. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, he interacted closely with Northern Irish writers on both a personal and a literary level, maintaining contact with them after his departure through visits, letters, and his BBC work. MacNeice’s relationship with Northern Ireland has always been more contentious, with many critics initially classifying him as a minor member of the Auden generation who had little to do with Ireland.

As Brearton, Brown, and Clark have explained, over the last forty years a re-evaluation of MacNeice’s work has led to his acceptance into the overlapping canons

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<sup>1</sup> Ruddick Millar, ‘Names that Will Rank High in Ulster literature’, *Belfast Telegraph*, 21 September 1944, MFC CN3, p. 27.

<sup>2</sup> Sergeant, ‘Ulster Regionalism’, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Shovlin, *The Irish Literary Periodical*, p. 157.

of Northern Irish and Irish poetry.<sup>4</sup> Among his most enthusiastic supporters has been a younger generation of poets, including Derek Mahon and Paul Muldoon, who accepted him as a literary forefather, bringing his reputation to rest in Ireland. The process of canonical repatriation has been based mainly on MacNeice's multifaceted approach to Yeats, his influence on the younger generation, and his poems about the west of Ireland. Thus, his current status is assured primarily by his ancestors, his descendents, and ambivalent poems of place, rather than by any connection to his Northern Irish contemporaries. The assumption is often that, as McDonald observes, the poet who revisited both parts of Ireland in his poetry generally maintained 'physical separation from the country'.<sup>5</sup>

Consequently, little attention has been paid to MacNeice's connection with the daily realities of mid-century literary endeavour in Northern Ireland. Exploring this avenue of research in his 2010 doctoral thesis, Walker argues that MacNeice's very real connections with Belfast and Dublin's mid-century literary cultures have been obscured: he writes that 'such is the strength of the conception of MacNeice as a homeless outsider posthumously assimilated into Irish culture by contemporary Northern Irish poetry that literary history risks being distorted to make MacNeice's career better fit within such a narrative'.<sup>6</sup> Walker convincingly demonstrates that MacNeice actually spent much time with writers in Belfast and Dublin, as well as experimenting critically with various models of Irish poetry in the 1939 sequence 'The Coming of War'.

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<sup>4</sup> See Fran Brearton, *The Great War in Irish Poetry: W.B. Yeats to Michael Longley* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), pp. 118-9; Brown, *The Literature of Ireland*, p. 131; Heather Clark, 'Revising MacNeice', *Cambridge Quarterly*, 31.1 (2002), 77-92.

<sup>5</sup> McDonald, *Louis MacNeice*, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> Walker, 'Louis MacNeice', p. 7.

Yet, McDonald warns that critics should not assume that MacNeice's poetic modes and values can be aligned with those of his Northern Irish contemporaries. In 1987 McDonald responded to Longley's 1986 essay, 'Progressive Bookmen: Politics and Northern Protestant Writers since the 1930s' (republished in *The Living Stream*). He argues that including MacNeice in an assessment of mid-century Northern Irish poetry is to risk making him 'seem a fellow labourer in the same cause as Hewitt and the others'. He then asserts that MacNeice posed a challenge to the fundamental principle of regionalism – rootedness in place – and therefore received many 'cool reviews' from Hewitt, McFadden, and others. Quoting Hewitt's 1945 essay, 'The Bitter Gourd', McDonald proposes that for those in Northern Ireland, MacNeice was a rootless 'airy internationalist, thistledown, a twig in a stream'. Hence, McDonald concludes that '[h]owever close MacNeice might have been to [Hewitt, McFadden, and Boyd] in terms of specific social and cultural ideas, his insistence on displacement made him for them an aspect of the cultural and political problems rather than a part of their possible solution'. McDonald goes on to cite McFadden's hostile 1949 review of MacNeice's *Collected Poems*, which criticizes the poet for not demonstrating 'allegiance to place'.<sup>7</sup> Following McDonald's lead, Walker emphasizes that MacNeice and Hewitt approached issues relating to regional identity and place from different angles.

McDonald and Walker's arguments are valuable and make an important distinction between MacNeice and his Northern Irish contemporaries. However, this chapter draws on neglected archival material in order to argue that MacNeice's impact on Hewitt, McFadden, and Greacen was more complex than previously suggested. Although Mahon's claim that 'I think it extremely unlikely that

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<sup>7</sup> Peter McDonald, 'Ireland's MacNeice: A Caveat', *The Irish Review*, 2 (1987), 64-9.

[MacNeice] was on close terms with any Irish poet except his fellow-Ulsterman W.R. Rodgers' still stands in relation to the poets discussed in this thesis, they did read his work voraciously and consider it in detail.<sup>8</sup> Below I explore the dynamics of the reception and publication of MacNeice in Northern Ireland, placing Hewitt's essay and McFadden's review in context. I argue that MacNeice's problematic deracination enabled these writers to develop their ideas about regional poetic modes and the poet's role in society.

### I. Hewitt: MacNeice as a cultural critic

In 1945, Hewitt's regionalist manifesto, 'The Bitter Gourd', was published in *Lagan*. As McDonald observes, the terms of the essay exclude MacNeice. Indeed, MacNeice may have been in Hewitt's mind when he contrasted his conception of an ideal poet with its opposite:

He must be a *rooted* man, must carry the native tang of his idiom like the native dust on his sleeve; otherwise he is an airy internationalist, thistledown, a twig in a stream. [...] An artist, certainly in literature, must have a native place, pinpointed on a map, even if it is only to run away from. [...] To return for only a moment to this question of 'rootedness'. I do not mean that a writer ought to live and die in the house of his fathers. What I do mean is that he ought to feel that he belongs to a recognisable focus in place and time.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast, MacNeice's poetry questions the very possibility of achieving a rooted condition in the modern world. In 'An Eclogue for Christmas', he writes that '[t]here is no pinpoint in any of the ordnance maps / To save you when your towns and town-bred thoughts collapse' (*MNCP*, p. 3). MacNeice's schooling and adult employment in England, his time spent in the United States, and his ambivalence towards Ireland

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<sup>8</sup> Derek Mahon, 'MacNeice in Ireland and England', in *Journalism: Selected Prose, 1970-1995* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1996), pp. 21-9 (p. 22).

<sup>9</sup> Hewitt, 'The Bitter Gourd', pp. 115-6.



and Northern Ireland (*'Odi atque amo'*) meant that he did not conform to Hewitt's definition of the *'rooted man'* (*MNCP*, p. 140).

Hewitt's description of the ideal poetic idiom further marginalized

MacNeice:

The careful rejection of the rhetorical and flamboyant, the stubborn concreteness of imagery, the conscientious cleaving to the objects of sense which, not at all paradoxically, provides the best basis and launching ground for the lonely ascents of practical mysticism.<sup>10</sup>

In contrast, in *Modern Poetry* (1938) MacNeice explained that a *'controlled flamboyance of diction has always moved me'*.<sup>11</sup> Hewitt's conception of an *'Ulster'* voice does not encompass the dazzling surfaces of MacNeice's early poetry nor, indeed, of Rodgers's first volume. Whereas Hewitt consistently regards reality as a stable foundation for the self which can then be represented relatively unproblematically in poetic language, MacNeice's linguistic vivacity is a response to a world characterized by Heraclitean flux in which there can be no permanence of place or identity.

However, *'The Bitter Gourd'* sets out an unrealized ideal and demonstrates only one aspect of Hewitt's attitude to MacNeice. In order to examine this in more detail, it is necessary to return to the summer of 1939. In July, MacNeice travelled to Belfast to take part in an unscripted discussion with the Irish poet F.R. Higgins at the BBC studio.<sup>12</sup> The consideration of modern poetry requested by the BBC quickly became narrowly focussed on Irish verse and the relative merits of *'racial'* or *'international'* rhythms. MacNeice adopted the role of devil's advocate, drawing heavily on his own study *Modern Poetry* in his objections to Higgins's definition of poetry as the articulation of *'race-consciousness'*. MacNeice defended *'impure'*

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<sup>10</sup> Hewitt, *'The Bitter Gourd'*, p. 111.

<sup>11</sup> MacNeice, *Modern Poetry*, p. 43.

<sup>12</sup> Jon Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice* (London: Faber, 1995), p. 256.

poetry (which is ‘conditioned by the poet’s life and the world around him’) and suggested that ‘socialist doctrine and enthusiasm may not be technically a religion, but they cut in the same way across race distinctions and are an equally valuable substitute for race feeling’.<sup>13</sup> He consistently tried to expand the scope of the debate, referring to English, American, and French writers and discussing Auden’s ‘Spain’.

The day after the broadcast, the twelfth of July 1939, Hewitt wrote to introduce himself to MacNeice, including a copy of his poem ‘Ireland’ on a separate sheet:

I wish heartily to congratulate you on your advocacy of socialist internationalism in last night’s discussion with Higgins. Your defence of contemporary poets was an invaluable piece of work especially in a cultural sahara such as this; while your quiet criticism of our native bigotry and bogus Irishry was excellently stated. As an enthusiast for your work and an Ulster rhymers myself it was particularly gratifying to me to hear such opinions broadcast and to hear Auden’s ‘Spain’ praised.

I regret that you didn’t repeat the lines on Craigavon from ‘Iceland’ but I don’t suppose this was possible. I may also add that I was sorry that you didn’t know my poem ‘Ireland’ (*Listener* 1932; reprinted in ‘*Poems of Tomorrow*’) which, I think, takes up much the same line with regard to national isolation.<sup>14</sup>

This letter, with its precise reference to Hewitt’s poem, could be read as an attempt at self-promotion by an ambitious young poet; in itself, this reveals MacNeice’s status within the literary establishment and Hewitt’s esteem for him. However, to dismiss the letter as such would be to marginalize the way in which Hewitt uses MacNeice’s example in order to better define his own sense of what it means to be a writer in Northern Ireland. Moreover, the letter is part of Hewitt’s attempt to counteract his feeling of aesthetic isolation by establishing a community of local writers. For these reasons, he stresses the similarities between himself and MacNeice, marginalizing their plethoric differences in order to create a sense of commonality. In 1943, Hewitt wrote to McFadden in exactly the same terms:

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<sup>13</sup> MacNeice, *Modern Poetry*, n.p.; Louis MacNeice and F.R. Higgins, ‘Tendencies in Modern Poetry’, *Listener*, 22.550 (27 July 1939), 185-6.

<sup>14</sup> Walker, p. 55.

I have often felt that we ought to know each other better. Serious workers in any craft have the responsibility of solidarity. Especially in this Sahara of the arts. [...] I'd be very pleased if you came to see me perhaps to discover a wider ground of agreement than you at present think possible.<sup>15</sup>

Again, Hewitt seeks to create a sense of companionship by concentrating on similarities and the poets' objections to the nature of the unionist establishment.

A central theme of the MacNeice letter is Hewitt's developing interest in the relationship between the poet and his community. Aligning himself with MacNeice, Hewitt presents them both as standard-bearers for liberalism in a region dominated by 'native bigotry', a phrase which encapsulates Hewitt's anger at what he believed was the unionist elite's sectarianism, introversion, hostility to the arts, and blindness to social inequality. In this context, one aspect of the poet's social function is to act as a cultural commentator, a role familiar from much nineteenth-century English poetry. MacNeice had advocated this in *Modern Poetry*, proposing that the 'writer to-day should be not so much the mouthpiece of a community (for then he will only tell it what it knows already) as its conscience, its critical faculty, its generous instinct'.<sup>16</sup> Although Hewitt remained committed to the idea that the poet spoke for and from within the community, he was impressed by MacNeice's critical stance with regard to Northern Ireland.

Alluding to a poem from Auden and MacNeice's travel book *Letters from Iceland* (1937), Hewitt indicates his agreement with their caustic attack on Northern Ireland's Prime Minister. In 'Auden and MacNeice: Their Last Will and Testament', MacNeice presents his father and Lord Craigavon as opposites:

I leave my father half my pride of blood  
 And also my admiration who has fixed  
 His pulpit out of the reach of party slogans  
 And all the sordid challenges and the mixed

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in McFadden, "No Dusty Pioneer", p. 171.

<sup>16</sup> MacNeice, *Modern Poetry*, n.p.

Motives of those who bring their drums and dragons  
 To silence moderation and free speech  
 Bawling from armoured cars and carnival wagons[.]

[...]

Item, to Lord Craigavon that old bull  
 With a horse's face we leave an Orange drum  
 For after-dinner airs, when he feels full[.]

(*MNCP*, p. 732, p. 734)

Hewitt often avoided such blunt statements in his wartime poetry, at this stage in his career preferring to imagine an alternative form of society in poems which implicitly criticized the unionist status quo. Perhaps Hewitt, resident in Belfast and employed by the City Council, felt impelled to tread more carefully in public, avoiding the forthright tone MacNeice adopted in 'Belfast', 'Valediction', and *Autumn Journal* XVI. Furthermore, Hewitt's pastoral mode, drawn in part from Wordsworth and Edward Thomas, was not adapted to the careful balance of light-hearted but incisive wit and vehement condemnation achieved by MacNeice. Despite Hewitt's quieter approach, he was equally in support of free speech. He linked this topic specifically with the hostility to the arts he experienced in Northern Ireland rather than the broader societal trends MacNeice inveighed against: in Belfast, Hewitt wrote in 1935, poetry is 'smothered by the drums' of violence and sectarianism, or merely ignored by an indifferent unionist elite (*HCP*, p. 16).

In his letter, Hewitt surprisingly includes MacNeice in the term 'Ulster rhymer', hinting that they share a poetic identity and a literary tradition which should be nourished by the life of the region. The phrase is at once a modest reference to Hewitt's own poetic endeavours and also a statement of identity which looks back to the work of the Rhyming Weavers, poets and pre-industrial craftsmen who lived in the north of Ireland during the nineteenth century. Although in 1939 Hewitt's research into this topic was at an early stage, he had already begun to view this

period as an ideal era when poets were fully integrated with the community and he frequently contrasted it to the state of post-partition Northern Ireland. In his own BBC broadcast ten years later, Hewitt argued that there is a ‘two way responsibility’ of ‘artist to people’ and ‘people to artist’. The artist must represent the people, whilst in turn they ‘realise his importance and accept him’. Continuing on this theme, Hewitt referred to a time when ‘every Ulster townland had its own poet [...] and people repeated his verses as naturally as they breathed’.<sup>17</sup> For Hewitt, this identity was in creative tension with the demands of ‘socialist internationalism’, which compels the rooted poet to look beyond the borders of his own region. This was a fundamental tenet of regional and regionalist writing, as Nesca Robb insisted in her unpublished autobiography: ‘Ulster was the centre of my world: it was by no means the circumference’.<sup>18</sup>

Another target for Hewitt’s epistolary disapproval is ‘bogus Irishry’. In the radio debate, Higgins had argued that ‘pure poetry comes from Ireland’. Irish poets, he continued, have faith in ‘a belief emanating from life, from nature, from revealed religion, and from the nation’.<sup>19</sup> Rejecting Higgins’s nationalist poetic, Hewitt cites the poem ‘Ireland’ as evidence that his stance on ‘national isolation’ is similar to that of MacNeice. Walker argues that in reality Hewitt’s dependence on racial identity in ‘Ireland’ is closer to Higgins’s conception of Irish poetry and the role of the poet. In this poem Hewitt aligns himself with ‘[w]e Irish’ and the ‘Keltic wave’, failing to question the inherent contradictions and shortcomings of this language.<sup>20</sup> However, in disagreeing with the nature, if not some of the fundamental assumptions, of

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<sup>17</sup> John Hewitt, ‘Ulster Commentary’, Broadcast 7 November 1949 on BBC NIHS, JHC Box 12, p. 4, p. 10.

<sup>18</sup> Nesca Robb, ‘The Lark in the Clear Air’, Volume IV, PRONI D/3847/9, p. 355.

<sup>19</sup> MacNeice and Higgins, p. 185.

<sup>20</sup> Walker, ‘Louis MacNeice’, p. 60.

Higgins's theories, Hewitt divorces his vision of Ulster poetry from what he came to refer to as the 'Irish mode'. Whilst for Thomas MacDonagh this term signified specific experiments with assonance and stress, it had a slightly different import for Hewitt, Greacen, and McFadden.<sup>21</sup> For the latter two in particular, the Irish mode embodied the negative qualities of provincialism, introversion, and emphasis on the past which they wished to eliminate from their poetry. Hewitt found that the verbal patterns of Austin Clarke, Robert Farren, and others who wrote in this manner were alien to his own poetic accent: 'for most of the Ulster poets', Hewitt wrote in 1950, 'Irish has never been the folk-tongue, that assonance falls strangely upon our ears'.<sup>22</sup>

In 'Ireland', Hewitt develops a poetic voice which eschews the introversion he associated with the Irish mode:

So we are bitter, and are drying out  
in terrible harshness in this lonely place,  
and what we think is love for usual rock  
or old affection for our customary ledge,  
is but forgotten longing for the sea  
that cries far out and calls us to partake  
in his great tidal movements round the earth.

(HCP, p. 58)

Hewitt exercises great control over these lines, modifying the iambic pentameter with occasional anapaestic feet in order to introduce variety without disrupting the quiet flow of the verse. This example demonstrates that MacNeice's idiom had little impact on Hewitt's poetry. The vivacious wit of a poem such as the 'Last Will and Testament', in which the poets' high spirits strain against the *terza rima* stanza form, was far from Hewitt's conception of a regionalist poetic voice. Instead, Hewitt makes the same assumptions as Rodgers about the speech of the unionist community, and which are discussed in the previous chapter of this thesis. 'Ireland'

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<sup>21</sup> For a full description of the 'Irish mode' see Thomas MacDonagh, *Literature in Ireland* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1916).

<sup>22</sup> Hewitt, 'Poetry in Ireland', p. 7.

approximates the direct, concrete, clear, and restrained qualities both poets discovered in the speech of their region. Like Higgins, Hewitt and Rodgers believed that the poet had a responsibility to speak for his own people and to encapsulate something of their diction in verse.

Just as Hewitt agreed with aspects of Rodgers's work, but rejected his experiments with 'Gaelic' exuberance, so too did he concur with some of MacNeice's ideas and disagree with others. Hewitt's letter to MacNeice skims over differences in their approach to the poet's embeddedness in the nation or the region, as well as avoiding questions regarding the position of Northern Ireland and its literature in relation to Ireland. Instead, he highlights similarities in their attitudes to the artist's function as a social critic working in opposition to the unionist establishment.

There is no record of any reply from MacNeice and a relationship failed to flourish. However, after his tour around Ireland with Ernst Stahl in the summer of 1939, MacNeice returned to Belfast and quickly formed a close friendship with painter George MacCann. After their first meeting in Erskine Mayne's bookshop in Belfast in the autumn of that year, MacNeice became a frequent visitor at MacCann's house in Vinecash in County Armagh.<sup>23</sup> Like Hewitt's Mountcharles' flat in Belfast, MacCann's was a haven for writers and artists. Hewitt and Bell made the trip there from Belfast on at least one occasion in 1944, whilst Laughton wrote a poem about the garden.<sup>24</sup> It was there that MacNeice met Rodgers, who was living in nearby Loughgall. He then oscillated between Dublin and Belfast until leaving for

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<sup>23</sup> Roy McFadden, 'Corrigibly Plural', Review of *Louis MacNeice* by Jon Stallworthy, *Fortnight*, 337 (March 1995), 41-2 (p. 41); Stallworthy, p. 262

<sup>24</sup> A letter from John Luke to Hewitt dated 9 March 1944 refers to an evening at the McCann's house, at which Hewitt and Bell were present, PRONI D/3838/3/8; Freda Laughton, *A Transitory House* (London: Cape, 1945), p. 58. Further references to this edition will be given after quotations in the text.

the United States in January 1940. After his return to the United Kingdom a year later, MacNeice made several brief visits to Northern Ireland and Ireland (to see his son in Belfast and then County Cavan; to his father's funeral in 1942; on honeymoon in 1942), before returning for a longer stay in April 1945. With the exception of a few weeks spent in England that spring, MacNeice remained until September, spending time with his literary friends and recruiting scriptwriters for the BBC. These visits were productive, leading to the composition of 'The Coming of War', the post-war Achill sequence, and the radio play, *The Dark Tower*.<sup>25</sup>

Due to his links with Northern Ireland, MacNeice was consistently included in summaries of the statelet's contemporary poetry and reviews of his work appeared in the regionalist periodical *Lagan*. The majority of reviewers measured MacNeice against regionalist ideas, often expressing disappointment that the poetry of such a successful writer was not more clearly stamped with the hallmark of his birthplace.<sup>26</sup> But when MacNeice grappled with ideas of rootedness in his 1945 west of Ireland sequence, he was unable to establish an identity underpinned by his ancestors' place of origin. Perhaps picking up on the centrality of the word 'belong' in Hewitt's essay 'The Bitter Gourd' (a writer 'ought to feel that he belongs to a recognisable focus in place and time'), MacNeice admitted the attractiveness of this idea in 'Under the Mountain'.<sup>27</sup>

And when you get down  
The house is a maelstrom of loves and hates where you –  
Having got down – belong.

(*MNCP*, p. 268)

To 'get down' is to immerse oneself in a landscape which '[s]izzles' with vitality, energy, and the plurality of living things. This word appears as a positive quality in

<sup>25</sup> MacNeice's travels during these years are recorded in Stallworthy, pp. 262-335.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Fullwood and Edwards, p. 31; Browne, p. 142; Millar, p. 27.

<sup>27</sup> Hewitt, 'The Bitter Gourd', pp. 115-6.



several wartime poems, namely 'London Rain' ('let the water sizzle'), 'Brother Fire' ('sizzling air'), and 'Carrick Revisited' ('here is a sizzling grid') (*MNCP*, p. 174, p. 217, p. 261). In both sound and meaning, 'sizzle' echoes the use of 'dazzle' in the pre-war poems 'Mayfly' ('Let us [...] dance above the dazzling wave') and 'Leaving Barra' ('While you are alive beyond question / Like the dazzle on the sea') (*MNCP*, p. 31, p. 89). These two words convey what Edna Longley refers to as MacNeice's 'multifaceted sensuous joy in the present' which, in some ways, is similar to Hewitt's appreciation of the landscape 'vehement with life' and the air 'teeming' with vitality (*HCP*, p. 25, p. 37).<sup>28</sup>

Throughout MacNeice's west of Ireland sequence, hyphens function as markers of uncertainty and qualification: in 'Under the Mountain' they bookmark the awkward phrase '[h]aving got down' and thus underline the provisionality of belonging. As the speaker of 'Carrick Revisited' realizes, to 'land on the Particular' is to 'lose / All other possible bird's eye views' (*MNCP*, p. 262). By learning that one 'belongs' in a specific time and place, the individual may better appreciate the vitality and variousness of existence, but he compromises his freedom of thought and his ability to view a range of perspectives. Hewitt recognizes this danger in 'Ireland', but comes to a different resolution. His poem articulates the possibility of uniting rootedness with a wider perspective gained from contact with the 'tidal movements round the earth' (*HCP*, p. 58). Attachment to place and time, Hewitt implies, can be balanced by engagement with the rest of the world. In his letter, Hewitt interpreted MacNeice's stance as being substantially the same. In the BBC debate MacNeice had said that 'I think it possible that sooner or later national traditions will be taken up into some wider traditions of this [European] kind, corresponding to the

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<sup>28</sup> Longley, *Louis MacNeice*, p. 12.

superseding of narrower national feelings by creeds or philosophies which cut across national frontiers'.<sup>29</sup> However, MacNeice's theory that national identity will be replaced by more inclusive ideologies, such as socialism or religion, is subtly yet substantially different from Hewitt's vision of the existence of a nation or a region within a wider international culture.

In 'Under the Mountain' the word 'maelstrom' alludes to a more sinister context for this reflection on place. In *The Strings are False* (1940), MacNeice had employed this word to signify war:

I had a special – a personal – reason for wanting to return to America, but apart from that I thought I could think things out there, get myself clear before I went back to the maelstrom. Clarification – it may be too much to demand of most people but a writer must demand it of himself.<sup>30</sup>

'Under the Mountain' is, therefore, not simply a poem about place but also about involvement in the war. In order to think clearly about both, MacNeice suggests that the writer must balance the close-up perspective with the panoramic view. When drafting an article entitled 'Poetry in Northern Ireland' in 1949, Hewitt identified this as a positive aspect of MacNeice's sensibility. Hailing MacNeice as the 'most eminent [living] poet of Ulster birth' who commands 'masterly skill' and poetic 'virtuosity', Hewitt admits that 'it may be that his very unattachment both to Ireland and to England gives him his sharpness of observation for landscape and behaviour on both sides of the Irish Sea'.<sup>31</sup> By 1959, Hewitt had absorbed this idea into his own pattern of thought. Stating the benefits of his move to Coventry, Hewitt told an interviewer that it 'is a good thing for an Irishman to leave home because he can see

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<sup>29</sup> MacNeice and Higgins, p. 186.

<sup>30</sup> MacNeice, *The Strings are False*, p. 21.

<sup>31</sup> John Hewitt, 'Poetry in Northern Ireland', JHC Box 11, p. 2.

the things in perspective which normally obscure, if not distort his vision. One can only be aware of one's roots when they are at a distance, not round one's neck'.<sup>32</sup>

As in his 1939 letter, in 'Poetry in Northern Ireland' Hewitt situates MacNeice in relation to both his English and his Northern Irish contemporaries, readily including him in an assessment of regional poetry. Hewitt lists MacNeice as the foremost living poet from Northern Ireland in an article which aims to explain the development of a 'distinctive regional consciousness' (a broader category than regionalist) and the 'cultural affairs' of a society which is becoming 'distinct and individual'.<sup>33</sup> Several years later, in 1952, Hewitt again attempted to balance different aspects of MacNeice's poetry in a lecture to the Workers' Educational Association, which was also to include a discussion of Rodgers. Hewitt's lecture notes identify points of connection and disjunction between MacNeice and both English and Irish literature. He planned to explain to his students that MacNeice 'stands a little apart' from Auden, Spender, and Lewis, elaborating on this statement with the observation that 'socially', 'technically', 'and by his qualified acceptance of their collective "myth", he stands somewhere near them'.<sup>34</sup> Hewitt's analysis is considerably more nuanced than many other summaries of MacNeice's oeuvre which emanated from Northern Ireland during the nineteen forties. In 1944, for instance, McFadden linked MacNeice unquestioningly with Auden and Spender and thus circumscribed the poet's achievements.<sup>35</sup>

In his lecture notes, Hewitt selected 'An Eclogue for Christmas' as evidence that MacNeice 'shared the same cultural climate' as Auden. The 'Eclogue' is indeed

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<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Ormsby, p. 588.

<sup>33</sup> Hewitt, 'Poetry in Northern Ireland', p. 1.

<sup>34</sup> John Hewitt, 'To W.E.A. Belfast 30.IV.52: MacNeice and Rodgers', JHC Box 7, p. 3.

<sup>35</sup> McFadden, 'A Trend in Poetry', p. 48.

an apt example to support Hewitt's argument that, in many ways, MacNeice was more closely affiliated with his contemporaries in England than those in Northern Ireland. As the first text the reader encounters in *Poems* (1935) and *Collected Poems* (1949), the 'Eclogue' functions as a gateway into MacNeice's work, and the reader's initial impression is of a writer whose oeuvre is shaped primarily by an English context and literary tradition. For McDonald, this is embodied in the poetry's 'admission of "unpoetic" imagery and subject-matter, its sense of urgency and stress on the present'.<sup>36</sup> The sense of impending doom, which pervades much nineteen thirties English poetry, is articulated in the poem's opening line: A greets B with the downbeat phrase, 'I meet you in an evil time' (*MNCP*, p. 3). The promise of hope, new life, and celebration evoked in the poem's title is immediately undermined, as the 'evil bells' of Christmas ring the inexorable progression of time in a world conditioned by inter-war anxieties. Standing on the frontier between the urban and rural worlds, A and B reiterate the themes of Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which MacNeice later described as 'the decay of Western civilization – the disappearance of religion, the depreciation of sex'.<sup>37</sup> Hewitt further identifies Audenesque diction in the violent image of 'sniggering machine-guns in the hands of the young men' (*MNCP*, p. 6). 'Eclogue' speaks of rootlessness, urban life, and the fragility of identity at a time when several Northern Irish poets recognized the same danger and consequently sought stability and selfhood in the natural world. Yet, it is in the 'bare and high / Places of England' that the poem's second speaker tentatively hopes to recover his connection to nature.

The echoes of Yeats, and particularly of 'The Second Coming', are perhaps less obvious and Hewitt's notes give no indication that he planned to mention any

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<sup>36</sup> McDonald, *Louis MacNeice*, p. 35.

<sup>37</sup> MacNeice, *Modern Poetry*, p. 166.

connection between the 'Eclogue' and Irish poetry. Instead, the notes cite 'Carrickfergus' and 'Valediction' as evidence of MacNeice's origins in Belfast and his strained attitude to Northern Ireland. The latter follows on the heels of the 'Eclogue' in *Poems* and the notes indicate that Hewitt read it as a 'refusal to be taken in': he interprets 'Valediction' as a diatribe against the myths and ideologies of Dublin and Belfast.<sup>38</sup> Hewitt has come full circle, returning to his 1939 assessment that MacNeice's significance for the poetry of Northern Ireland lay primarily in his role as a cultural critic.

## II. Reading MacNeice and Hewitt in *Lagan*

MacNeice's 'Godfather' appeared in the fourth and final issue of *Lagan* in 1946, alongside the script of Rodgers's radio programme 'Armagh: The City Set on a Hill' (produced by MacNeice) and Hewitt's 'Freehold'. Boyd, Bell, Hewitt, and McFadden were all involved in the editing and production of *Lagan*, whilst Boyd was already employed by the BBC and Bell was recruited by MacNeice in 1945.<sup>39</sup> Boyd later speculated that '*Lagan* may have helped Sam to get his job too, for Louis MacNeice had a hand in that, and Louis had contributed to *Lagan*'.<sup>40</sup>

The periodical's selection policy was more inclusive than the vision for regionalist poetry outlined by Hewitt in 'The Bitter Gourd'. Introducing the final issue of *Lagan*, Boyd reiterated its fundamental intentions, which were to 'encourage writers living in or associated with this province' (a summary which is broad enough to include MacNeice) and thus to 'begin a literary tradition springing out of the life

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<sup>38</sup> Hewitt, 'W.E.A.', p. 4.

<sup>39</sup> McMahan, pp. 43-4.

<sup>40</sup> Boyd, *My Journey*, p. 56.

and speech of this province'. Boyd then felt compelled to admit that 'this aim has not yet been achieved' as it was 'questionable whether the main contributors to LAGAN felt sufficient kinship in methods and aims to regard themselves, in any sense, as a literary movement'.<sup>41</sup> The contrasts between 'Godfather' and 'Freehold' are evidence of Boyd's sense that a coherent group had failed to form. Radically different in their approaches to time, place, and identity, the publication of both poems in the same issue nevertheless testifies to the diversity of poetry in Northern Ireland during the war years.

When Hewitt began to write 'Freehold' in 1939 he thought of it as a sequel to *Conacre* which would incorporate his ideas on regionalism, socialism, place, time, poetry, and family history into a personal mythology with a wider import. As a regionalist manifesto, the poem progresses from a state of uncertainty in a landscape which is 'known' but still somehow alien, to a condition of rootedness and an imagined projection of an ideal society (*HCP*, p. 369). All this takes place in the context of the war, which undermined certainties and revealed the need to reassess national ideologies and the nature of individual states' engagement with the wider world. In this sense, the poem raises and suggests an answer to the issue Boyd posed in his introduction: 'LAGAN has survived the war: and the problem now is to survive the peace'.<sup>42</sup> Hewitt offers his readers a regionalist blueprint for the survival of literature and the establishment of an ideal society in the post-war period.

The doubt expressed at the outset of the quest is stated in terms which are remarkably similar to the conclusion of MacNeice's 'The Strand'. Returning to the

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<sup>41</sup> John Boyd, 'Comment', *Lagan*, 4 (1946), 9-11.

<sup>42</sup> Boyd, 'Comment', *Lagan*, 4, p. 9.

Glens of Antrim on holiday, Hewitt's speaker wonders whether the landscape bears the imprint of his previous visit:

But what seemed always underpinned by doubt  
 was that, when beating showers had flattened out  
 our footsteps from the mud, and when the land  
 wore no more track of us than tide-washed sand,  
 one shred should linger, hint or breath or touch,  
 above the roads and rocks beloved by each[.]

(*HCP*, p. 370)

In 'The Strand', part of MacNeice's 1945 west of Ireland sequence, the speaker visits a beach where his father had walked before:

It was sixteen years ago he walked this shore  
  
 And the mirror caught his shape which catches mine  
 But then as now the floor-mop of the foam  
 Blotted the bright reflection – and no sign  
  
 Remains of face or feet when visitors have gone home.

(*MNCP*, p. 264)

It is unlikely that there was any direct connection between the two poems. McDonald dates 'The Strand' to 1945 and it was published in *Holes in the Sky* in 1948, whilst Ormsby dates the first section of 'Freehold' to 1942, and it was not published in *Lagan* until 1946 (*MNCP*, p. 826, *HCP*, p. 640). Even so, it is notable that both poets turn to the imagery of the tide, a force associated with flux, to symbolize the transience of the individual's imprint on indifferent nature. For Hewitt, this is an indication that he does not belong to the region, as the landscape itself has not yet reciprocated by accommodating him. Roots cannot be arbitrarily imposed on place, but instead must become organically interwoven with it and have a stronger basis than sporadic holiday visits. 'The Strand' is informed by a more profound sense of isolation, as all physical traces of the family's place of origin have been erased. Personal grief at loss is mingled with an awareness of the impossibility of wholly belonging in a particular place.

‘Freehold’ progresses from such doubts to a sense of certainty as the speaker gradually sinks his roots into the local soil, a process which counteracts the psychological and physical dislocations caused by the war. The conflict itself is figured as a storm which sweeps across the landscape. Edna Longley’s comments on Edward Thomas’s poetry, whose work Hewitt read avidly, are relevant here: ‘Wind, rain, and other waters often symbolize Thomas’s sense that human beings do not control their environment, cannot read it, cannot control themselves’.<sup>43</sup> Arriving at the ruins of Orra Lodge, Hewitt’s walkers take shelter from the storm in a building which is at once a symbol of war-torn Europe, the speaker’s distressed mind, and the degraded culture he wishes to regenerate. There, he experiences a revelation of the self:

I was no more  
a timid creature tangled in a world at war,  
but a free man set out of time and place  
for whom event was braked to walking pace  
that mind could measure, handle and assess[.]

(HCP, p. 372)

In the midst of turmoil, this haven of stability offers the speaker the opportunity to consider his identity and relationship to the community, as well as to ‘measure’ his thoughts in verse. In order to achieve this objective consideration of contemporary events, and so to become fixed in time and place, paradoxically the speaker has to be removed from (‘set out of’) his particular historical and spatial context. As mentioned above, Hewitt was alive to the potential attractions of MacNeicean ‘unattachment’.<sup>44</sup> Yet, this experience of transcendence occurs securely within the region, whereas MacNeice’s ‘The Strand’ is situated in a liminal space.

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<sup>43</sup> Edna Longley, ‘War Pastorals’, in *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, ed. by Tim Kendall (Oxford: OUP, 2009), pp. 461-82 (p. 467).

<sup>44</sup> Hewitt, ‘Poetry in Northern Ireland’, p. 2.



As discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, in the next section of 'Freehold' the speaker 'step[s] clean out of Europe into peace' and visits Rodgers and the painter John Luke, artists with kindred minds (*HCP*, p. 379). MacNeice found such a transition to be an attractive, but ultimately impossible, prospect. In 'Cushendun', part three of the 1938 sequence 'The Coming of War', the boundaries of the pastoral retreat are violated by the radio announcer who 'talk[s] of War' (*MNCP*, p. 682). In contrast, Hewitt's speaker is secure in the peaceful countryside of Armagh, where he discovers personal and ancestral connections to the region. This gives him licence to announce:

Now and for ever through the changed-rocked years,  
I know my corner in the universe;  
my corner, this small region limited  
in space by sea, in the time by my own dead,  
who are its compost, by each roving sense  
henceforward mobilised in its defence,  
against the sickness that has struck mankind,  
mass-measured, mass-infected, mass-resigned.

(*HCP*, p. 382)

Hewitt's war is against the conditions of modernity which poets such as MacNeice had identified during the nineteen thirties. As an alternative to a 'mass' identity, he imagines the integration of individuals into a community circumscribed by natural geographical boundaries, although notably he avoids specifying the location of the land borders. As in 'Ireland', Hewitt again highlights the importance of tempering a potentially provincial regionalism with international influences: 'let there be no wall / to shut the warm winds out that bring us word / how over Europe liberty has fared' (*HCP*, p. 385). This compromise is less convincing than that reached in 'Ireland'. Whereas in the earlier poem Hewitt hopes for the establishment of a society which is immersed in international influences (the sea), in 'Freehold' the region is only distantly connected to Europe. It plays no significant part in the war and is abstracted from the continent, remaining a peaceful region waiting passively for news.

In the context of *Lagan*, the juxtaposition of 'Freehold' and 'Godfather' calls into question the certainties of Hewitt's manifesto and its concluding sense of purpose. In a series of cryptic vignettes 'Godfather' reformulates the sorrow, transience, and placelessness of 'The Strand'. Its final lines echo the lament which concludes the earlier poem, in which the speaker recognizes that nothing is left 'when visitors have gone home'.

Elusive  
 This godfather who mostly forgets one's birthday,  
 Perusing  
 Old schoolbooks when he should be reading the papers  
 Or, when he does  
 Glance at a daily, snooping between the headlines.

Revolving  
 Doors whisk him away as you enter a café,  
 Clipping  
 Hoofs of black horses drown his steps in the High Street;  
 He signs  
 Huge cheques without thinking, never is overdrawn.

The air-raids  
 Found him lying alone on his back and blowing  
 Carefree  
 Smoke-rings – a pipe-dream over the burning city;  
 At the crack  
 Of dawn he would lounge away, his hands in his pockets.

Adept  
 At all surprises, disguises, to conjure a Christmas  
 Packet  
 Into a stocking unnoticed or make without fussing  
 His first call ever and leave  
 Pale stone tablets like visiting cards in the churchyard.

(*MNCP*, pp. 269-70)

As the stark opening line explains, the identity of the poem's central figure is unknown. McDonald theorizes that he may be 'God the Father, death, or both', but this issue remains unresolved.<sup>45</sup> Somewhat like the god who looks up 'from his absorbing Book / To – absentmindedly – admire' the burning city in Rodgers's 'The Airman', the godfather is detached from, and indifferent to, his context (*RCP*, p. 79). The speaker is equally elusive. Turning away from the autobiographical mode of the

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<sup>45</sup> McDonald, *Louis MacNeice*, p. 141.

west of Ireland poems, which precede 'Godfather' in *Holes in the Sky* (1948), MacNeice adopts a speaking voice which hovers between the bird's-eye view and the particular. Somehow omniscient, the speaker describes the godfather from a distance and with knowledge of idle moments when he is alone. Thus, the poem offers questions about identity where 'Freehold' provides resolution, concluding with the inevitable finality of death whilst Hewitt projects his poem into an ideal future.

In further contrast to 'Freehold', 'Godfather' returns to the urban, modern settings familiar from MacNeice's earlier volumes *Poems* and *The Earth Compels*. The '[r]evolving / doors', for example, recall the 'revolving door' which grinds to a halt in 'The Brandy Glass' as snow falls on the petrified restaurant (*MNCP*, p. 92). 'Godfather' also looks forward, anticipating late poems such as 'Charon', in which humour and the mundane aspects of city life are incorporated into a nightmarish parable of mortality. In all of these poems, there is no sense of the history or tradition which suffuses Hewitt's landscapes, or of purposeful movement, progression, and relationships. Instead, the indefinable figures of MacNeice's poem exist in a continuous present tense which ceases only with death.

### **III. Greacen and McFadden: modernity, the city, and war**

When Greacen and McFadden (born in 1920 and 1921 respectively) first encountered contemporary poetry during the late nineteen thirties, MacNeice was already a prolific writer and had become known as a member of the Auden generation. In 1995, McFadden recalled that 'MacNeice's work was always, in those far-off forgotten days, admired by my contemporaries'. His *Selected Poems* (1940)

was the first book of modern poetry McFadden purchased.<sup>46</sup> Greacen also revered MacNeice. In his memoir he records that during the late nineteen thirties he was ‘beginning to be overwhelmed, almost obsessed, by the idea of contemporaneity. What of the new heroes in my poetic firmament, Eliot, Auden, Spender, MacNeice? Pylons, not daisies!’<sup>47</sup> McFadden and Greacen believed that MacNeice had an ‘Irish connection’, but was more closely linked with an English coterie.<sup>48</sup> Why, then, did these two young writers, both committed to fostering a local poetic renaissance during the war, read MacNeice so avidly?

The answer lies in the difference between MacNeice’s poetry and the predominant pastoralism of the regional, regionalist, and Irish modes. In *Conacre* Hewitt admitted that the urban landscape was ‘the world my heel and nostril know, / but not the world my pulses take for true’ (*HCP*, p. 4), whilst in the BBC debate Higgins described Irish poetry as ‘fundamentally rooted in rural civilisation’. Elaborating on this theme, he connected ‘the slow movement of nature’s everlasting law and process’ and ‘rural traditions’ with ‘the old racial heart-beat’.<sup>49</sup> This was a pulse which excluded poets from Northern Ireland, particularly those who had grown up in the industrial city of Belfast. Reacting against such statements and influenced by the New Apocalypse, McFadden and Greacen sought to promote a Belfast-based poetry renaissance which would confront the future, modernity, the city, and the war. McFadden articulated this drive towards urban poetry in *The Bell* in 1943: ‘I would like to see a sincere interpretation of life in the drab city of Belfast, with its dogma and its patient hates; for our industrialism differs in many ways from English

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<sup>46</sup> McFadden, Review of Stallworthy, p. 1.

<sup>47</sup> Greacen, *The Sash*, p. 124.

<sup>48</sup> Greacen, ‘A Survey of Ulster Writing’, p. 13.

<sup>49</sup> MacNeice and Higgins, p. 186.

industrialism and offers something new to the imaginative writer'.<sup>50</sup> Whereas Hewitt employed slightly archaic diction in his evocations of past societies and ancestral links with the region, the word 'new' clangs like a bell throughout these younger poets' publications and editing projects.

In both the BBC debate and *Modern Poetry*, MacNeice defended urban life and modernity as poetic subjects. In the latter, he insisted:

I consider no subject-matter taken from life to be alien to poetry (Wordsworth, generous to a fault to the life of the rustic, disallowed the life of the townee). I am still astonished to meet people who hold that machines or physiology or slums or politics must not be introduced into poetry.<sup>51</sup>

Such generalized statements were important for McFadden and Greacen, as were MacNeice's poems about London and Birmingham. However, this new ground had already been broken by other poets. The real significance of MacNeice's work for these two students lay in his poems about Belfast. Even whilst critiquing and seemingly rejecting Northern Ireland in 'Valediction', 'Belfast', and *Autumn Journal* XVI, MacNeice brought Belfast's shipyards, factories, materialism, and Orange bands – 'unpoetic' details of contemporary urban life in a provincial city – within the ambit of poetry. McFadden would later refer to such poems as expressing "'love-hate" for our dirty old town'.<sup>52</sup>

As with the majority of McFadden and Greacen's ideas regarding a local poetry renaissance, the execution was less successful than the vision. Several of their poems reformulate MacNeice's visually striking panorama of Belfast Lough in 'Belfast':

Down there at the end of the melancholy lough  
Against the lurid sky over the stained water

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<sup>50</sup> Roy McFadden and Geoffrey Taylor, 'Poetry in Ireland: A Discussion', *The Bell*, 6.4 (July 1943), 338-46 (p. 345).

<sup>51</sup> MacNeice, *Modern Poetry*, p. 140.

<sup>52</sup> McFadden, Review of Stallworthy, p. 2

Where hammers clang murderously on the girders  
Like crucifixes the gantries stand.

(*MNCP*, p. 25)

In 'Ulster' Greacen describes the same scene and translates MacNeice's statement

'[o]di atque amo' (*MNCP*, p. 140):

Standing under the wing of gantries,  
The phallic sentinels of Belfast lough,  
He ponders beneath pride's vacant sneer,  
Hating and loving futile majesty.<sup>53</sup>

The cinematic visual sweep of 'Belfast' is deftly matched by the inverted syntax of this stanza, resulting in a build-up of anticipation through the first three lines which culminates in the imposing image of line four. The alignment of oppressive religion and industrialism in MacNeice's description of the gantries is transposed by Greacen into much less visually arresting language, which neglects concrete phenomena in favour of a vague description of the individual's emotional response to his surroundings. Furthermore, the harsh plosives of 'Belfast' are much more effective than the softer sounds and natural imagery of 'Ulster'.

Although MacNeice's example provided Greacen with the freedom and some of the language to describe his city, the New Apocalypse furnished the gratuitous sexual metaphors and the greater emphasis on the individual's psychological state. For Greacen the city and its population are décor with little intrinsic interest or value, serving merely to highlight the isolation of the sensitive, dissenting individual who is oppressed by his context: the private world supersedes public concerns. MacNeice had advocated walking a fine line between external and internal realities in *Modern Poetry*, arguing that the poet's 'object is not merely to record a fact, but to record a fact *plus and therefore modified by* his own emotional reaction to it'.<sup>54</sup> There is no

<sup>53</sup> Robert Greacen, *Collected Poems 1944-1994* (Belfast: Lagan Press, 1995), p. 36. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>54</sup> MacNeice, *Modern Poetry*, p. 197.

lyric 'I' in 'Belfast' and the poem is focussed on external phenomena, but it remains conditioned by the speaker's critical voice. Greacen's intense focus on the individual is more limiting and allows for a less nuanced consideration of the city and its culture. He belabours what is implicit in 'Belfast', but cannot match the technical expertise with which MacNeice expresses a complex blend of attachment to, and alienation from, the city.

McFadden's 'Dublin to Belfast' (1943) is a more reflective poem. Journeying across the border from neutrality to war by train (reversing the trajectory of MacNeice's pre-war 'Train to Dublin'), the traveller approaches Belfast:

Feeling the light falter and fall away  
As time and place slip on him like a glove,  
Where gantries creak blue bones, and querulous gulls  
Move in the streets at night like crying girls.<sup>55</sup>

Like Greacen, McFadden was more interested in the individual than the city itself, which provides a backdrop to the poem rather than a focal point. In contrast to Dublin, Belfast is a place of darkness and suffering in which the individual is embedded in a particular location in time and place. MacNeice would later employ the same words in 'Carrick Revisited' to describe concepts which are 'bridgeheads into reality / But also its concealment'. In addition to determining identity, time and place reveal or obscure a variety of truths dependent on the individual's 'topographical frame' (*MNCP*, pp. 261-2). McFadden's poem has a similar ambivalence: a geographically and historically inscribed identity envelops or entraps the traveller on his return to Northern Ireland. Even at this early stage in his career, and before his period of experimentation with regionalist poetics, McFadden articulates unease regarding the fundamental values which underpin Hewitt's verse.

That McFadden does so by alluding to MacNeice indicates the importance of the

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<sup>55</sup> Roy McFadden, *Flowers for a Lady* (London: Routledge, 1945), p. 24. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

older poet's work to his understanding of the individual's relationship to Northern Ireland.

For both Greacen and McFadden the war was a key aspect of Belfast's modernity. The expansion of manufacturing industries, the arrival of troops from the United States, and the experience of technologically advanced modes of warfare set Belfast apart from more remote rural areas and from Dublin. In the fifth poem of 'The Coming of War', MacNeice set a precedent for linking Northern Ireland with war and independent Ireland with escape. Following the radio announcer's 'talk of War' in the third poem of the sequence, this untitled section articulates the impulse to flee from Belfast (*MNCP*, p. 682):

Running away from the War,  
Running away from the red  
Pillar-box and the stamps  
Bearing George's head.

Running away from the War,  
Running away from the Black  
North – the winch and the windlass,  
The drum and the Union Jack.

Through the fat fields and the orchards  
And the fan-shafts of sun,  
Through Dungannon and Augher,  
Clogher and Fivemiletown.

Making the car roar  
Over the hill's crest,  
Hoping to hide my head  
In the clouds of the West.

(*MNCP*, p. 683)

As Walker notes, the use of repetition and a ballad-like form 'driv[e] the poem beyond the signs of Britishness in Ulster that are a reminder of the imminent war'. Industrialism, Orangeism, and the war represent an oppressive culture, which the speaker tries to escape by travelling towards the west of Ireland and, as Walker



perceives, moving from a militaristic to a 'wavering, dreamy rhythm'.<sup>56</sup> As the poem progresses, the broken and enjambed statements give way to more lyrical, yet still brief, phrases, whilst the fluctuating and natural 'clouds of the West' replace the stasis associated with industrialism and staunch unionism. As William McKinnon suggests, for MacNeice journeys involving cars symbolize the individual's control over his own life: in this poem, the journey is a rejection of the limitations society imposes on the individual's free will.<sup>57</sup> However, within 'The Coming of War' the idealized west of Ireland is unreachable because the conflict intrudes into every aspect of life and all parts of Ireland: 'death is on the waters and no one / Can drive the war away' (*MNCP*, 685).

McFadden and Greacen reiterated these contrasts between Northern Ireland and Ireland, war and escape, entrapment and freedom in a variety of ways. The issues surrounding neutrality are examined separately in Chapter Seven; here I focus on the poets' depictions of urban Dublin. This capital city was at once part of the cultural heritage of these three poets and, in a post-partition context, alien to them. MacNeice's 'Dublin' is the most significant poem in this respect. Initially published in *Horizon* in February 1940, 'Dublin' was later printed as the first poem in 'The Coming of War'. Greacen and Valentin Iremonger chose it as the first of the eight MacNeice poems which feature in their 1949 anthology, *Contemporary Irish Poetry*. It begins with a list of phenomena yoked together by the repeated conjunction 'and'. The city's decaying grandeur exists alongside squalor and poverty, whilst statues commemorating nationalist figures have the same prominence as a memorial to the British Admiral, Lord Nelson:

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<sup>56</sup> Tom Walker, 'MacNeice Among his Irish Contemporaries', in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry*, ed. by Fran Brearton and Alan Gillis (Oxford: OUP, 2012), pp. 196-209 (pp. 201-2).

<sup>57</sup> William T. McKinnon, *Apollo's Blended Dream: A Study of the Poetry of Louis MacNeice* (London: OUP, 1971), p. 68.

Grey brick upon brick,  
 Declamatory bronze  
 On sombre pedestals –  
 O'Connell, Grattan, Moore –  
 And the brewery tugs and the swans  
 On the balustraded stream  
 And the bare bones of a fanlight  
 Over a hungry door  
 And the air soft on the cheek  
 And porter running from the taps  
 With a head of yellow cream  
 And Nelson on his pillar  
 Watching his world collapse.

This was never my town,  
 I was not born nor bred  
 Nor schooled here and she will not  
 Have me alive or dead  
 But yet she holds my mind  
 With her seedy elegance,  
 With her gentle veils of rain  
 And all her ghosts that walk  
 And all that hide behind  
 Her Georgian façades[.]

(*MNCP*, p. 680)

As McDonald and Richard Danson Brown note, MacNeice's choice of metre is similar to that of Yeats's 'Easter 1916'.<sup>58</sup> It also recalls Oliver St. John Gogarty's satiric 'Ringsend', which is probably the source of MacNeice's image of the fanlight: 'I will live in Ringsend / With a red-headed whore, / And the fan-light gone in / Where it lights the hall door'. If Gogarty's 'old-fangled songs' are out of place in the modern Dublin slum, so too are MacNeice's words at a tangent to a city in which he does not belong.<sup>59</sup> Yet, Dublin remains attractive to him. MacNeice alters the rhyme scheme and insistent iambic metre of Gogarty's quick-paced poem, creating skeletal lines which retain a certain elegance and poise appropriate to the city's preservation of some of its Georgian beauty.

<sup>58</sup> McDonald, *MacNeice*, p. 100; Richard Danson Brown, 'Neutrality and Commitment: MacNeice, Yeats, Ireland and the Second World War', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 28.3 (Spring 2005), 109-29 (p. 118).

<sup>59</sup> Oliver St. John Gogarty, 'Ringsend', in *Irish Literature: A Reader*, ed. by Maureen O'Rourke Murphy and James MacKillop (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1987), p. 199.

Greacen quotes Gogarty's lines in his introduction to *Irish Harvest* (1946) in order to illustrate his depiction of Dublin as a city of 'beautiful façades' and 'encrusted grit'.<sup>60</sup> As in MacNeice's poem, Greacen's introduction depends on a combination of attraction to and alienation from Dublin. His poem, 'Memories of Dublin' (1940), is similar: '[t]he façades of the eighteenth century – / Burke and Goldsmith frozen for posterity, / [...] / Broad, glowing pavements, damp / With stout spittle, and soft Dublin rain' (*GCP*, p. 35). Although Greacen omits MacNeice's repeated conjunctions in favour of asyndeton, the technique of listing is reminiscent of 'Dublin', as are the contents of the catalogue itself. In Greacen's 'Georgian Twilight' the MacNeicean 'exquisite' façades and the 'ragged fanlight' appear again as emblems of the decline and frustrations of the post-partition period (*GCP*, p. 68).

For MacNeice, part of Dublin's appeal is its peculiar history. Neither an Irish nor an English town, it therefore seems set apart from the impending war.

Addressing the city, the speaker of 'Dublin' concludes:

You give me time for thought  
And by a juggler's trick  
You poise the toppling hour –  
O greyness run to flower,  
Grey stone, grey water,  
And brick upon grey brick.

The poem itself poises Dublin, with its decaying grandeur and complex history, within a circular form. The final line repeats the first, directing the reader's attention towards the concrete reality of Yeats's 'grey / Eighteenth-century houses' (*YMW*, p. 85). McFadden and Greacen often borrowed this technique of repetition to reinforce a particular idea. In 'St Stephen's Green, Dublin', for example, McFadden begins by pinpointing the difference between Dublin and Belfast: '[t]he north lies backward in a fold of time' (*FL*, p. 13). This line is reiterated at the beginning of the final verse

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<sup>60</sup> Greacen, 'Report from Dublin', in *Irish Harvest*, p. 9.

paragraph, which repeats McFadden's conviction that the 'grey city' is free from the war which afflicts Belfast. In a manner comparable to MacNeice's 'Dublin', McFadden portrays the city as steeped in its own history, but set apart from the continuing advancement of time. As will be explored further in Chapter Seven, later in the war McFadden and MacNeice would come to regard this blend of introversion, stasis, and isolation as a marker of Ireland's neutrality.

Greacen and McFadden did not admit their interest in MacNeice's poetry until long after the war. Instead, during the nineteen forties they distanced themselves from any connection with him. This was primarily because, following the lead of New Apocalypse writers, they defined their wartime aesthetic in contradistinction to poetry of the nineteen thirties. Introducing his first anthology, *Poems from Ulster* (1941), Greacen outlined his vision for a new wave of wartime poets who were to write a very different kind of verse to that which had been published a few years previously:

There has been a marked turning away from the frequently tinsel-like objectivity of the Thirties, and a new sincerity, simplicity and ardour have replaced the work of the effete hangers-on of the Auden-Spender-MacNeice-Lewis movement, of which only the quadruple alliance remains.<sup>61</sup>

Greacen's explanation highlights the progression from objective to subjective poetry which he, and members of the New Apocalypse, argued was characteristic of the transition from the nineteen thirties to the forties and from peace to war. Despite this, it is notable that Greacen does not in fact dismiss the 'quadruple alliance' but subtly maintains a place for them within his vision of wartime poetry.

McFadden's criticisms of MacNeice during the nineteen forties reveal the complexities of his interest in both the New Apocalypse and regionalism. In agreement with Greacen's classification of MacNeice as a poet of the 'Auden

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<sup>61</sup> Greacen, 'Introduction', in *Poems from Ulster*, p. 4.

generation', McFadden dismissed him in 1943 as 'merely one of an ever-growing catalogue of names irretrievably lost to this country'. In the same article, McFadden contrasted the 'poetry of the 'Thirties' unfavourably with the writings of the New Apocalypse:

[...] the poetry of the 'Thirties' had prepared the ground for a new harvest; the poetry of analysis and experiment now led to a poetry of positive value and prophecy. The living breath of a faith now animated the jaded limbs of the Muse whose dress, so unlike the artificial silk stockings of her MacNeicean heyday, became conventual, with an inherent discipline. The old materialism was dead, and a new, vital religion – a religion in the deepest, widest and toughest sense of the word – was breathed into the soul of poetry.<sup>62</sup>

McFadden is alluding most obviously to the 'Muse with stockings and suspenders in *Autumn Journal* XV, but also to the woman standing in 'silk stockings taunting the winter wind' in 'Eclogue', and the woman with 'dyed hair and a ladder in her stockings' in *Autumn Journal* I (*MNCP*, p. 135, p. 4, p. 102). The aura of a decaying civilization associated with these women, McFadden suggests, has given way to a new optimistic faith in the individual and in the post-war construction of an ideal world. As Herbert Read put it in the introduction to an anthology entitled *Lyra* (co-edited by Greacen in 1942), the younger poets 'have realised that even in the midst of war this reconstructive effort must be made, and their poetry is therefore projected away from the immediate struggle into the new world which has to be created out of the ruins of our civilisation'.<sup>63</sup> For McFadden, one of the poet's functions is to imagine the new society which will arise out of the ashes of decadent modernity. MacNeice's nineteen thirties poetry of social critique, McFadden argues, is insufficient to achieve this aim.

McFadden returned to the term 'positive values' in his review of MacNeice's *Collected Poems* (1949), published in the regionalist periodical *Rann*. As with

<sup>62</sup> McFadden and Taylor, p. 344, p. 342.

<sup>63</sup> Herbert Read, 'Introduction', in *Lyra: An Anthology of New Lyric*, ed. by Alex Comfort and Robert Greacen (Billericay: Grey Walls Press, 1942), pp. 9-11 (p. 11).

Hewitt's 1939 letter, this review reveals more about the critic's own viewpoint than about MacNeice's poetry itself. McFadden begins by deriding MacNeice for a lack of development, 'with certain qualifications'.<sup>64</sup> These are that 'MacNeice has become thoughtful where formerly he was merely flippant; and he appears to regret his lack of a pattern of positive values where formerly he was content with what the passing moment yielded'. Presumably, McFadden is referring to the progression from a poem such as 'Snow' (in which MacNeice celebrates the 'drunkenness of things being various') or the journalistic style of *Autumn Journal*, to a later piece such as 'Western Landscape' (in which the speaker exclaims 'O relevance of cloud and rock – / If such could be our permanence!') (*MNCP*, p. 24, p. 265). If McFadden misses the significance the 'passing moment' had for MacNeice – Mahon describes his poetry as '*profoundly* superficial' – and the ways in which his poetry developed over the course of ten years, it may be because he uses his review as an opportunity to promote the necessity of 'positive values'.<sup>65</sup> For McFadden the words belief and faith are apparently synonymous with this phrase.

All three phrases are closely linked to the ideas of the New Apocalypse. Yet Greacen and McFadden appear to have absorbed this language from the writings of the generation they ostensibly wish to debunk. In *Modern Poetry* MacNeice had explained:

I have already maintained that major poetry usually implies a belief. Therefore the fact that beliefs are increasing among poets should conduce to a wider, more fertile and possibly a major poetry. But, *for the poet*, any belief, and creed [...] should be compromised with his own individual observation.<sup>66</sup>

A year later, in the 1939 BBC debate, MacNeice sparred with Higgins about the nature of belief. Higgins had protested that Irish poets shared a faith linked with the

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<sup>64</sup> McFadden, Review of MacNeice, p. 10.

<sup>65</sup> Mahon, 'MacNeice in Ireland and England', p. 22.

<sup>66</sup> MacNeice, *Modern Poetry*, p. 201.

‘rhythm of their race’, whilst MacNeice had suggested that various English poets demonstrated ‘a belief in Christianity, belief in the importance of the body, belief in revolution, and belief in free will’.<sup>67</sup> In 1941 Spender employed similar language, stating that the ‘faith that enables a true poet to write poetry is the faith that the universal conditions of life prevail behind all existing appearances’.<sup>68</sup>

Exactly what McFadden found insufficient about such statements is difficult to ascertain. Similarly, he never clearly defined his own understanding of positive values or belief, although there are some hints in the 1949 review. In this article, McFadden complains that MacNeice relies on ‘immediate impression and expression; the poet’s response is the underlying mood of the moment – the general mood; it is hardly at all conditioned by a set of positive values; the poet rarely risks setting himself against his own time’. Positive values are, therefore, permanent and often in opposition to the political or literary status quo. McFadden’s strongly held anti-establishment anarchist and pacifist views may lie behind these comments. He goes on to suggest that attachment to place could counteract MacNeice’s apparent failures:

The only uneasy ghost in Mr. MacNeice’s mind is his place of origin. From time to time the poet reverts to Ireland, nostalgically, impatiently, contemptuously – only to set his face firmly again towards the English scene. This retreat from childhood and country is a pity, for in the absence of any spiritual roots Mr. MacNeice might have strengthened his work by allegiance to place.<sup>69</sup>

This is a reductive reading of MacNeice’s poetry which, as demonstrated above, adopts a multifaceted approach to issues of belonging that problematizes Hewitt’s poetics of place, whilst expressing the inability to detach oneself completely from one’s geographical origins. Clark states that this passage from McFadden’s review is a ‘sweeping dismissal of MacNeice’s work’ which indicates that ‘though regionalists

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<sup>67</sup> MacNeice and Higgins, p. 185.

<sup>68</sup> Quoted in McDonald, *Louis MacNeice*, p. 122.

<sup>69</sup> McFadden, Review of MacNeice, p. 10, p. 11.

were trying to combat parochial attitudes towards literature and culture, they could sound as provincial in their opinions as those they criticized'.<sup>70</sup>

However, if McFadden's review is placed in context of his later disagreements with Hewitt, it is possible to discern the underlying irritations which direct his comments about MacNeice. Although McFadden moved close to a regionalist stance during the mid-nineteen forties, he never identified himself as a regionalist and his poetry displays none of the certainties which inform Hewitt's nineteen forties verse and prose pieces. Towards the end of the decade, and certainly by the date of this review, McFadden had begun to distance himself from Hewitt. In 1950, Roberta Hewitt complained in her diary that McFadden had attacked regionalism and, by implication, her husband in a BBC NIHS broadcast.<sup>71</sup> At times in the 1949 review, there are hints that McFadden had begun to object to Hewitt's ideology:

Allegiance to something beyond one's immediate time is a valuable asset in poetry. Mr. MacNeice may yet apply for membership of Mr. Hewitt's school of regionalism, and, studying the superstitions and sagas of the forefathers, discover Louis MacNeice. Come back, Paddy Reilly.<sup>72</sup>

The tangible sarcasm and scepticism of these sentences calls into question McFadden's previous comments on the detrimental effect of rootlessness.

The following year, McFadden overtly criticized regionalism in *Rann*, writing that Hewitt 'is naturally eager to prod us into an awareness of our roots. That is the trouble. Our roots travel widely and ignore boundaries and cultural and geographical units'.<sup>73</sup> It is impossible to tell whether a poem such as MacNeice's 'Carrick Revisited' directly impacted on McFadden's change of mind. However, in

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<sup>70</sup> Clark, *The Ulster Renaissance*, p. 118.

<sup>71</sup> Roberta Hewitt, Diary Entry, 17 May 1950, Diary Volume 1, p. 427.

<sup>72</sup> McFadden, Review of MacNeice, p. 11.

<sup>73</sup> Roy McFadden, Review of *Poetry Ireland*, 8 (1950), *Rann*, 8 (Spring 1950), p. 11.



that poem MacNeice's acknowledgment that his west of Ireland ancestry, Carrickfergus childhood, and English adulthood complicated any possibility of achieving a coherent identity as understood by regionalists may have reminded McFadden that an individual's roots are neither simple nor confined to a particular place.

#### **IV. Publishing MacNeice in *Contemporary Irish Poetry***

In the same year as McFadden's review was published in *Rann*, Greacen and Iremonger included MacNeice as one of the most prominent poets in their anthology, *Contemporary Irish Poetry*. MacNeice and Day Lewis were allocated eight poems each, whilst Donagh MacDonagh and Rodgers had seven. None of the remaining thirty poets were represented so handsomely. In their selection of MacNeice's poems, the editors favoured those written during the war years; five were composed between 1940 and 1943, whilst 'Dublin' was written just prior to the declaration of war in 1939. Greacen's choice is consistent with his preference for those poems by MacNeice which emphasize modernity, the city, and the war. 'The Springboard', 'Brother Fire', and 'Dublin' all have urban settings, whilst 'Nuts in May' is a blitz poem.

This latter poem in particular is in tension with regional and regionalist contributions to the anthology, most of which present rural Northern Ireland as a place of peace and freedom. In Boyd's 'Murlough Bay, 1942', the majority of the population of rural County Down remain untouched by the war. Only the speaker, who is from Belfast and cannot forget his memories of the 'teeming times', does not

feel at rest in the beautiful landscape.<sup>74</sup> Hewitt is more assertive in the section of 'Freehold' he contributed to the anthology ('[I] stepped clean out of Europe into peace' [*HCP*, p. 379]). In 'The Little Lough' (1941), he is less sure about the survival of the natural world, but remains convinced that memories of nature and friendship can counteract the encroachment of despair and death on the individual's mind:

Though many things I love should disappear  
in the black night ahead of us, I know  
I shall remember, silent, crouching there,  
your pale face gazing where the rushes grow,  
seeking between the tall stems for the last  
black chick the grebe is cruising round to find,  
my pointing finger showing it not lost  
but sheltered only from the ruffling wind.

(*HCP*, p. 38)

There is no real sense of threat in these calm, musical lines, which assert that nature offers shelter for even the most vulnerable of animals. The iambic pentameter and tight rhyme scheme remain unruffled by the winds of war.

In contrast, in MacNeice's 'Nuts in May' (1943) the pastoral idyll offers no retreat:

In the sun-peppered meadow the shepherds are old,  
Their flutes are broken and their tales are told,  
And their ears are deaf when the guns unfold  
The new philosophy over the wold.

[...]

Yes, angels are frigid and shepherds are dumb,  
There is no holy water when the enemy come,  
The trees are askew and the skies are a-hum  
And you have to keep mum and go to it and die for your life and keep mum.

(*MNCP*, pp. 225-6)

As MacNeice discovered in 'Novelettes' and 'Bagpipe Music', nursery rhyme and ballad rhythms could convey sinister content in a deceptively light-hearted manner.

The insistent rhythm of 'Nuts in May' drives the poem forward in desperation as the

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<sup>74</sup> John Boyd, 'Murlough Bay, 1942', in *Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. by Robert Greacen and Valentin Iremonger (London: Faber, 1949), pp. 17-8.

tattered rags of classical pastoral – with its connotations of stability and retreat – are destroyed by the futuristic technologies of total war. MacNeice revisits the traditional oppositions of the pastoral mode (rural and urban life, peace and war, birth and death) as he searches for a means of articulating the previously unimaginable events of war. The nativity scene alluded to in ‘An Eclogue for Christmas’ reappears in the final stanza quoted above, but Christian theology also offers little possibility of escape or assistance.

Although MacNeice was less closely associated with Northern Ireland’s wartime literary scene than were Hewitt, McFadden, and Greacen, his poetry had a profound impact on the development of their ideas. MacNeice stretched the boundaries of Hewitt’s regionalist vision, whilst also providing Greacen and McFadden with a precedent for writing about their city. MacNeice’s importance is reflected in his inclusion in many nineteen forties articles on poetry in Northern Ireland. In 1950, Greacen wrote an article about MacNeice for the ‘Ulster Issue’ of *Poetry Ireland*. He argues that MacNeice ‘cannot be considered an uprooted man, save in the sense that we are all uprooted in a world of debased values’. Continuing, Greacen states that MacNeice’s heritage is revealed in poems about Northern Ireland and his ‘Ulster’ directness.<sup>75</sup> Two decades before critics and poets would attempt to repatriate MacNeice, Greacen unreservedly claims him as one of the pre-eminent poets of Northern Ireland.

One of the poems Greacen cites as evidence of MacNeice’s ‘Ulster’ quality is ‘Carrickfergus’. Written in 1937, this autobiographical poem addresses MacNeice’s memories of his childhood home. For Greacen, it reveals that although MacNeice travelled widely in imagination and reality, he shared his place of origin with those

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<sup>75</sup> Robert Greacen, ‘The Ulster Quality in Louis MacNeice’, *Poetry Ireland*, 8 (1950), 15-8 (p. 15).

poets who had remained in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, in ‘Carrickfergus’, MacNeice articulates his sense that the First World War cast a long shadow over interwar culture, an awareness which was shared by most of the poets studied in this thesis. Returning to this town at the end of the Second World War, MacNeice wrote ‘Carrick Revisited’: ‘Back to Carrick, the castle as plumb assured / As thirty years ago – Which war was which?’ (*MNCP*, p. 261). For MacNeice and his contemporaries, the First World War seemed to overlap with the 1939 conflict, leading to a pervasive sense of déjà-vu. In the next chapter, I examine in greater depth how the earlier war impacted on nineteen forties poetry in Northern Ireland, focussing on the work of army doctor Patrick Maybin.

## Chapter Four

### Patrick Maybin: Remembering the First World War

#### Introduction

A recurrent feature in MacNeice's *Autumn Journal* is the inescapable feeling that, as the United Kingdom stands on the brink of war, history is repeating itself. In the poem's opening section, references to the First World War are interwoven with the depiction of the social and geographical landscape of the south of England. The calm drowsiness of the scene, in which the 'trucks of the Southern Railway dawdle ... shunt / Into poppy sidings for the night', is troubled by echoes of the earlier war (*MNCP*, p, 101). '[S]hunt' can refer to firearms, whilst 'poppy' connotes not only the oblivion of sleep, but also wounds sustained during trench warfare and symbols of remembrance of the war dead. Yet, at this point in the poem, such echoes do not shatter the sultry, peaceful mood of late August, 1938. It is in section V that tensions escalate:

But posters flapping on the railings tell the fluttered  
     World that Hitler speaks, that Hitler speaks  
 And we cannot take it in and we go to our daily  
     Jobs to the dull refrain of the caption 'War'  
 Buzzing around us as from hidden insects  
     And we think 'This must be wrong, it has happened before,  
 Just like this before, we must be dreaming;  
     It was long ago these flies  
 Buzzed like this, so why are they still bombarding  
     The ears if not the eyes?'

(*MNCP*, p. 109)

These lines allude to an earlier MacNeice poem, 'Ode', in which the 'buzzing' 'bomber and fly' augur another war (*MNCP*, p. 36). The collective experience of déjà-vu is mirrored by the speaker's reiteration of phrases as he attempts to process events which seem beyond comprehension.

As Cunningham demonstrates, such obsessive recollections of the First World War pervade nineteen thirties English poetry.<sup>1</sup> In an attempt to understand the fearfully anticipated disaster, writers turned to their memories of the only comparable event in recent history. Even so, when the Second World War began it was very different from the earlier conflict. 1939 was separated from 1914 by the First World War's legacy of disillusionment, the dearth of military action prior to the spring of 1940, the greater scope and mobility of the conflict, new technologies, and the increased vulnerability of the Home Front. Furthermore, the definite ideological stances some poets adopted during the First World War and the nineteen thirties seemed unavailable to those writers who were living through the beginning of this new conflict. Confusion and uncertainty dominated MacNeice's thoughts in the first months of the war: there was nothing but a 'tangle of black film / Squirming like bait upon the floor of my mind' (*MNCP*, p. 240). A manifesto printed in *Horizon* in 1941 confirms that other writers shared this experience. The article states that writers were 'hesitant' because they 'did not see the issues as clearly as they had seen the Spanish Civil War, for example, or the last European war'.<sup>2</sup>

As the nerve-wracking yet prosaic months of the Phoney War dragged on into 1940, in England literary critics and reviewers contrasted the apparently disappointing state of contemporary poetry with the situation in 1914, asking 'where are the war poets?'<sup>3</sup> Their expectations were conditioned by the earlier war's poetic legacy, which was perceived to have two main strands, summarized by Spender as 'poetry of *the idea for which we are fighting*' and poetry of '*war experience*'.<sup>4</sup> For

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<sup>1</sup> Cunningham, p. 55.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Calder-Marshall and others, 'Why Not War Writers?: A Manifesto', *Horizon*, 4.22 (October 1941), 236-9 (p. 236).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Charles Brodribb, 'Poets in War', *TLS*, 8 August 1942, p. 391.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Spender, Letter, *Horizon*, 11.8 (August 1940), n.p.

the writers of the Second World War, the former mode was epitomized by Rupert Brooke, whilst the latter was represented by Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Charles Sorley, and Isaac Rosenberg. In 1943, combatant and poet Keith Douglas contrasted poetry written early in the war with that composed under the pressure of the stark realities of the battlefield:

The retreat from Mons, the aggregate of new horrors, the muddling generalship, the obsolescence of the new gentleman in war demanded and obtained a new type of writing to comment on them. [...] Rupert Brooke, who might have seemed our ready-made herald and bard, appeared superannuated in a moment and wandered away fittingly, from a literary point of view, to die in a region of dead heroes. Instead, arose Owen, to the sound of wheels crunching the bones of a man scarcely dead; Sassoon's tank lumbered into the music hall in the middle of a patriotic song, Sorley and Isaac Rosenberg were hypnotized among all the dangers by men and larks singing.<sup>5</sup>

For Douglas, the essential difference between the heroic and realistic modes of writing is the experience of death and suffering. Although many critics have since complicated this picture of the dual heritage of First World War poetry, these ideas had significant currency during the nineteen forties.<sup>6</sup> Citing the famous dictum from Owen's unpublished preface to his poems, McFadden later recalled that poets of the 1939 war 'didn't have a Rupert Brooke. Instead, we looked for pity in the poetry, and poetry in the pity'.<sup>7</sup>

The majority of poetry written in Northern Ireland during the Second World War does not conform to either the heroic or realistic precedents. With the exception of Maybin, the poets under consideration in this thesis lacked the primary criteria for being writers of war poetry: combatant status. As Queen's University academic Oliver Edwards wrote in 'To Alun Lewis', he and other civilians were left 'imaging

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<sup>5</sup> Keith Douglas, *The Letters*, ed. by Desmond Graham (Oxford: OUP, 2000), p. 350.

<sup>6</sup> Hynes has questioned the idea that the heroic mode of the early war years was later succeeded by protest poetry (Hynes, p. 283). See also Plain, *Literature of the 1940s*, p. 88; Andrew Rutherford, *The Literature of War: Five Studies in Heroic Virtue* (London: Macmillan, 1978), p. 65; Jane Potter, "'The Essentially Modern Attitude Towards War': English Poetry of the Great War", in *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century British and American War Literature*, ed. by Piette and Rawlinson, pp. 20-30. Critics have also examined poetry by women written during the First World War. See in particular Sharon Ouditt, *Women Writers of the First World War: An Annotated Bibliography* (London: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> McFadden, 'Megarrity', p. 6.

[sic] Dunkirk' through the words of others.<sup>8</sup> Ambivalent about the idea of heroism and with little direct experience of violence, the poets were largely concerned with the impact of war on their pastoral landscape, ideas regarding post-war reconstruction of an ideal state, art's ability to survive conflict, and the formation of a literary coterie.

Despite this, in the third and penultimate issue of *Lagan*, the editors managed to acquire enough material to create a sub-section entitled 'From the Forces', a phrase borrowed from Keidrych Rhys's popular anthologies, *Poems from the Forces* (1941) and *More Poems from the Forces* (1943). Maybin, a regular contributor to *Lagan*, appeared in this sub-section, alongside two very minor poets, actor Jack McQuoid and Alan Prior. Beginning with Maybin's pre-war pacifist poetry, this chapter will explore how he became *Lagan*'s main war poet and the ways in which his poetry was shaped by memories of the First World War. Maybin shared his interest in pacifism and regional poetics with other writers connected to Northern Ireland's loosely-formed literary milieu. The left-wing literati regarded both pacifism and regional writing as alternatives to the tenets and cultural productions of the unionist establishment. Pacifist and regional ideas were, therefore, a means of uniting a diverse literary community which valued dissent from the status quo. As I demonstrate below, Maybin's correspondence with Hewitt on these topics confirms the importance of literary discussion and friendship to the surge in poetry during the war years.

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<sup>8</sup> Oliver Edwards, 'To Alun Lewis', *Lagan*, 3 (1945), 63.



## I: Pre-war pacifism

Patrick Maybin was born in 1917 and graduated with a degree in Medicine from Queen's University in 1938. Before his enlistment in 1940, Maybin attended the various literary, social, and political gatherings which were the basis for Belfast's wartime poetry revival. He became a Captain in the Royal Army Medical Corps and, after spending time in military bases in Northern Ireland, Oxfordshire, and Scotland, served in the Blood Transfusion Unit in North Africa, Italy, and Yugoslavia.<sup>9</sup> The most extensive record of his life can be found in a series of letters exchanged with Hewitt between 1939 and 1971, ending five years before Maybin's death. These documents continued discussions which they had begun in person in the mid-nineteen thirties and attest to their shared interests in left-wing politics, literature, and nature. Although he did not publish a volume of poetry, Maybin contributed frequently to *The New Northman* and *Lagan*. He also featured in periodicals such as *Poetry Ireland* and *The Bell*, and in the anthologies *Now in Ulster* (1944), *New Irish Poets* (1948), and *Contemporary Irish Poetry* (1949). Hewitt summarized Maybin's poetic oeuvre as being '[s]lender in output, sharp and individual in quality'.<sup>10</sup> His poems display a facility for language and show potential which remained unfulfilled when Maybin stopped writing – or, at least, publishing – during the late nineteen forties.

Maybin's early poems and essays found an outlet in *The New Northman*, the student magazine of Queen's University, which was sympathetic to pacifism during the nineteen thirties. Although the majority of the magazine's readers and

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<sup>9</sup> N.C. Wright, 'Obituary: Robert Patrick Maybin', *Journal of the Royal College of General Practitioners*, 26 (1976), pp. 451-2,  
<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2157931/pdf/jroyalcgprac00282-0061d.pdf>  
 [accessed on 22 May 2014]; Hewitt, *A North Light*, p. 110.

<sup>10</sup> Hewitt, 'Poetry and Ulster', p. 10.

contributors would have been part of the university's 2,500 student body, there is evidence that *The New Northman* also reached members of the public through local booksellers.<sup>11</sup> Morton contributed a poem to the issue of summer 1941; in the same year the writer St John Ervine complained in print about changes to the magazine's tone; Hewitt and Maybin maintained connections with it after graduation; and articles in *The New Northman* were occasionally referred to by the local press.<sup>12</sup> Thus, when Hewitt and Maybin contributed anti-war articles in the autumn of 1934, they were writing not just for university students, but also for a local educated elite.

Coinciding with the twentieth anniversary of the beginning of the First World War, the autumn of 1934 saw the intensification of pacifist and anti-war protest throughout the United Kingdom. The Christian pacifist and Dean of Canterbury, Dick Sheppard, called for subscribers to the peace pledge, which was to form the basis of the Peace Pledge Union in 1936 (PPU). At its peak in 1940, the PPU had 136,000 members throughout the United Kingdom.<sup>13</sup> Also in the autumn of 1934, a Peace Ballot was instigated in support of the League of Nations' Disarmament Conference. In Northern Ireland, over 70,000 people voted in the ballot, with a large majority in favour of non-militarist action.<sup>14</sup> Maybin's 1934 *Northman* article, 'Some Notes on Fascism', engages with this context, warning against the spread of blackshirts in Britain and instead championing 'liberty of action, within reasonable

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<sup>11</sup> Kirkland, 'Poetics of Partition', p. 216; Robert Greacen, *Even Without Irene: An Autobiography* (Belfast: Lagan Press, 1995), p. 141.

<sup>12</sup> See May Morton, 'Bride Plant', *The New Northman*, 9.2 (Summer 1941), 32; St John Ervine, 'What's Wrong with the 'New Northman'?', *The New Northman*, 9.1 (Spring 1941), 5-7; Anon., 'Art Soars in the North, Declines in the South', *Northern Whig*, 4 November 1941, MFC CN2, p. 14.

<sup>13</sup> Caedel, *Pacifism in Britain*, p. 192, p. 263.

<sup>14</sup> See Martin Caedel, 'The First British Referendum: The Peace Ballot, 1934-5', *The English Historical Review*, 95.377 (October 1980), 810-39 (p. 833).

bounds, and freedom of speech'.<sup>15</sup> Maybin sees 'militarist imperialism' and war as the end result of a fascist mentality, and cautions his readers to avoid both.

Hewitt's longer and more dramatic article in the same issue, already referred to in Chapter Two, announces the launch of the Belfast Peace League by appealing to humanitarian, rather than political, sympathies. (This organization foundered two years later during the Spanish Civil War.<sup>16</sup>) Hewitt evokes his readers' cultural memories of the First World War by alluding to the effects of chemical attack and picturing a 'son rotting on twisting wire'.<sup>17</sup> The indictment of profiteers and those blind to wartime suffering recalls Sassoon's furious criticisms of non-combatants less than two decades earlier. Also of concern in this article are the wounded soldiers who return from war, 'tapping the sidewalk home'. In several early poems, dating from 1927 and 1928, Hewitt draws attention to the difficulties faced by returning servicemen, whom he depicts living on the streets in 'rags and stamping slush-cold feet' or surviving on meagre government handouts (*HCP*, p. 448). In the unpublished poem 'On a Soldier, Blinded 1914-18' (dated 26 October 1940), Greacen similarly depicts a war veteran who 'shuffles along life's corridor', wounded and deserted by a society which has unthinkingly entered another war.<sup>18</sup> Comparable sentiments were expressed in the next winter's issue of *The New Northman*, in which an anonymous 'Pacifist in Queen's' asked if 'the sacrifice made by brothers, fathers, and even mothers and sisters (ten millions and many more of them) during 1914-18 [was] merely a futile, anaemic gesture?'.<sup>19</sup> To declare a new war on Germany would, in this

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<sup>15</sup> Patrick Maybin, 'Some Notes on Fascism', *The New Northman*, 2.3 (Autumn 1934), 16.

<sup>16</sup> Rob Mitchell, 'Peace Groups Since the 1930s', *Dawn*, 38-9 (April 1978), 32-41 (p. 32), <<http://www.innatenonviolence.org/pamphlets/nonviolence.pdf>> [accessed on 22 May 2014].

<sup>17</sup> Hewitt, 'The Peace League', p. 20.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Greacen, 'On a Soldier, Blinded 1914-18', MFC 6.

<sup>19</sup> W.J. Johnstone-Herron, 'A Pacifist at Queen's', *The New Northman*, 4.1 (Winter 1935-6), 19.

view, desecrate the memory of those who had fought in what was known as the war to end all wars.

Many of the poems printed in *The New Northman* conform to the attitudes expressed in these articles. In the winter of 1936, a poem entitled ‘Verse for November 11<sup>th</sup> 1936’ appeared, attributed to ‘PM’. As Maybin undoubtedly wrote under these initials in other issues of the magazine it is plausible, although not definite, that he was the poem’s author.<sup>20</sup> ‘November 11<sup>th</sup>’ reveals much about the way in which the First World War was officially remembered in nineteen thirties Northern Ireland, and how these acts of commemoration were interpreted by the vocal anti-war minority:

Along the streets all this November day  
the poppy-sellers go. Which one can say  
  
why they sell poppies? Flanders fields – they grow  
between the crosses – crosses row on row.  
  
Honour and Duty, the Union Jack, the King.  
With unintelligible words we bring  
  
excuses, and on Sunday proudly raised  
our voices to their memory, and praised  
  
men who died nobly; now today we chose  
a poppy from a cardboard box for those  
  
who came back, changed in body and in mind –  
strange-seeming, lamed, or paralysed, or blind.  
  
And this dull Autumn day we proudly wear  
the symbol of our shame, our paper flower.  
  
Two hundred million pounds they spend this year  
on ‘planes and shells and poison gas – so near  
  
is Hell let loose. Melodiously we sing  
of those who suffered horribly, and died to bring  
  
an end to war; a tarnished silver coin  
jingles for those who gloriously live on.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> In 1948, Maybin contributed a poem entitled ‘The Fallen Tree’ to Devin A. Garrity’s anthology, *New Irish Poets: Representative Selections from the Work of 27 Contemporaries* (New York: Devin-Adair, 1948). This poem appears in *The New Northman*, 6.1 (Spring 1938), 24 and is attributed to PM.

<sup>21</sup> PM, ‘Verse for November 11<sup>th</sup> 1936’, *The New Northman*, 4.4 (Winter 1936-7), 3.

Responding to his own question regarding the purpose of poppies, the speaker disjointedly reiterates the heroic and national ideals articulated in John McCrae's famous poem, 'In Flanders Fields'. The second couplet paraphrases McCrae's opening lines: 'In Flanders fields the poppies blow / Between the crosses, row on row, / That mark our place'.<sup>22</sup> The orderly, honoured graves of the war dead sit uneasily within the disordered syntax of PM's poem. Focussing on the maimed bodies which McCrae erases from memory, 'November 11<sup>th</sup>' draws attention to the war's devastating physical and psychological effects on its survivors.

Another allusion, to Ivor Gurney's 'To His Love', reinforces this point. The phrase 'died nobly' in 'November 11<sup>th</sup>' echoes Gurney's elegy for a soldier who 'died / nobly'.<sup>23</sup> As the speaker pauses, it is as if he is searching for adequate language in which to describe the manner of his friend's death. The word which he decides upon is suitably reassuring, as it encapsulates ideas of heroism and purpose which transform the soldier's excruciating death into a meaningful sacrifice. It is only in the poem's final lines that the reader discovers that the speaker is desperately trying to cover the 'red wet / Thing', the soldier's mutilated body, with flowers: traditional elegiac imagery and modes of memorial are employed in order to hide a traumatizing truth. Again, the line break indicates a pause in which the speaker searches for, and fails to find, the right word. In 'November 11<sup>th</sup>', PM articulates a need to face such memories in order to counteract the sanitized depictions of war which underpin social acts of remembrance.

The intention behind 'November 11<sup>th</sup>' is therefore twofold. Firstly, the poet recognizes the high human cost of war and consequently rejects McCrae's

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<sup>22</sup> Jon Silken, ed., *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry* (London: Penguin, 1979), p. 85.

<sup>23</sup> Ivor Gurney, *Collected Poems*, ed. by P.J. Kavanagh (Oxford: OUP, 1982), p. 41.

incitement to continue the battle for national supremacy. ‘Honour, Duty, the Union Jack, the King’ become empty ideals when set alongside such suffering. Secondly, the poet reveals the insufficiency and hypocrisy of wearing a ‘paper flower’ for one day while ex-soldiers continue to suffer from their injuries and the government rearms in preparation for another war. In a letter to *The Bell*, McFadden explained the mood of his generation, whose ‘adolescence occurred in a period when an artificial poppy made by cripples was the symbol of broken promises and the remnants of an idealism gone sour’.<sup>24</sup> Writing out of this context, PM adopted a public, declarative voice comparable to the mode Rodgers uses in *Awake!* Employing plural first person pronouns, the speaker implicates the reader in the moral questions he raises and tries to prompt a response.

Furthermore, the context of publication – a Belfast-based magazine – immediately situates ‘November 11<sup>th</sup>’ within a complex web of issues which are largely absent from English war memory. As Jim Haughey explains, from the nineteen twenties onwards, memories of the First World War in Northern Ireland were divided along socio-political lines as different sectors of the population were gripped by ‘unionist triumphalism and nationalist amnesia’.<sup>25</sup> Whilst nationalists preferred to forget the considerable contribution made by Irish soldiers in the British army, unionists proclaimed Protestants’ enlistment record in order to consolidate their ties to the British Empire. The criticisms of ‘November 11<sup>th</sup>’ are directed at the latter community by a dissenter from this society. For Hewitt, Maybin, Greacen and McFadden, pacifism functioned in much the same way as socialism, becoming a marker of their self-identification as different from the unionist establishment. Foster argues that:

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<sup>24</sup> McFadden and Taylor, p. 341.

<sup>25</sup> Haughey, p. 225.

Pre-war socialism was a way in which Northern Irish writers could overcome, however precariously, their prior and largely involuntary primary identities as either Protestant or Catholic, unionist or nationalist and take part, first and foremost, in an unpartitioned and recognizable intellectual and artistic community (or, at worst, coterie); as a bonus, it was a way too of defining oneself as an artist and dangerous.<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, pacifism and pacifist organizations provided an alternative framework of beliefs and a network of support which underpinned dissent from both the nationalist and unionist status quo.

Another poem attributed to PM was published in *The New Northman* in 1938.

‘The Son at the Front’ warns its readers about the coming war by looking back through literature and history. As in ‘November 11<sup>th</sup>’, PM responds negatively to McCrae’s ‘In Flanders Fields’ and the heroic strand of First World War poetry discussed above. Rejecting the image of the peaceful graves and the poppies’ promise of regeneration and hope, PM emphasizes the brutality of the battlefield and the horror of a soldier’s dead body:

She reads below the lamp, her aged face  
Yellow as parchment, lined in countless folds  
That speak for dignity, unconscious grace.  
While he sits dreaming by the fire, and holds  
The tongs within his hands, with which he took  
A glowing turf-coal from the fire, to light  
His favourite pipe.  
They’d lose their tranquil look,  
Did they but know that, lonely in the night  
Of Flanders fields, their only son now lies,  
His laughing face downtrodden, soaked in blood,  
Forgotten, nameless, under foreign skies,  
A shapeless corpse putrescent in the mud.<sup>27</sup>

The phrase ‘foreign skies’ brings Rupert Brooke’s wartime sonnets to mind. Yet PM refuses to portray the comforting image of the dead soldier lying in ‘some corner of a foreign field’, just as he rejects the reassuring conclusiveness of the sonnet form.<sup>28</sup>

Instead, ‘The Son’ stops short of the expected couplet and there is no apotheosis or panoramic perspective comparable to that which concludes Brooke’s ‘The Dead’ and

<sup>26</sup> John Wilson Foster, *Between Shadows: Modern Irish Writing and Culture* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009), p. 213.

<sup>27</sup> PM, ‘The Son at the Front’, *The New Northman*, 6.1 (Spring 1938), 31.

<sup>28</sup> Silken, p. 81.

‘The Soldier’. The poem plunges from the ‘foreign skies’ into the mud and remains mired there, far from the safety and comfort of the domestic space. By abstracting these two particular scenes from the larger narrative of the war, the poet strips the soldier’s death of any significance within national history.

If Maybin wrote this poem whilst a medical student, a probable hypothesis, it is appropriate that he does not shy away from the physical reality of the dead body. Instead, the speaker achieves a level of intimacy with the body which is absent from poems such as Rodgers’s ‘The Far-Off Hills’ (‘gummed grimacing faces to the pavement’ [*RCP*, p.10]), Hewitt’s ‘The Volunteer’ (‘we learned he had been killed in France’ [*HCP*, p. 267]), or Greacen’s ‘Accidental Death’ (‘his was merely – accidental death’ [*GCP*, p. 21]). In these three examples, the poets adopt a rhetorical strategy which Rawlinson terms ‘redescription’. Rawlinson defines this as a process by which ‘violence against persons is represented in language which is not “morally resonant”, for instance “disarming” for “injuring”’.<sup>29</sup> This rhetorical strategy renders bodies invisible, thus masking the true impact of violence and making war more palatable to civilians who have not witnessed the scenes of carnage. The poems by McCrae and Brooke already mentioned are excellent examples of this. In contrast, the political impact of ‘The Son’ is achieved by placing the corpse centre-stage. The poem appeals to readers’ literary and experiential memories of the previous war in an attempt to warn them of the pain which would follow entry into another conflict.

‘The Son’ clearly demonstrates the poet’s debt to the protest strand of First World War poetry and, in particular, to the theme of non-combatants’ myopia. A central facet of the myth of the war, as Hynes summarizes it, is that women and the older generation lacked combat experience and were therefore able to urge young

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<sup>29</sup> Rawlinson, p. 28.



men to a war which was not glorious or noble, but grotesque and terrible.<sup>30</sup> A poem which angrily expresses these ideas – Sassoon’s ‘Glory of Women’ – lies behind ‘The Son’. Sassoon draws a contrast between the domestic setting and the battlefield, the comfortable mother and the dead son, softening the blow only slightly by displacing his ire onto a German family: ‘O German mother dreaming by the fire, / While you are knitting socks to send your son / His face is trodden deeper in the mud’.<sup>31</sup> The ‘face downtrodden’ ‘in the mud’ in ‘The Son’ echoes Sassoon’s brutally demystifying lines. PM’s rhyme of ‘blood’ and ‘mud’ further alludes to Owen’s ‘Apologia pro Poemate Meo’, in which the speaker insists that the reader share the soldiers’ ‘sorrowful dark of hell’.<sup>32</sup>

Ironically, for a poet contributing to a university magazine in peacetime, the only way to tell the ‘truth’ about war was to rely on accounts written by those who had actually lived through it. However, writing to Hewitt several years later, Maybin explains that in his view an artist does not necessarily have to ‘live the material things he writes about’. Maybin insists that instead the artist must ‘*experience* them; and the true artist often knows more about an event than the man who actually went through it’.<sup>33</sup> In these comments, Maybin revises the concept of experience which is central to the mid-century understanding of war poetry, viewing the artist’s imagination, rather than his biography, as the most significant element of his work.

The prominence given to anti-war viewpoints within the pages of *The New Northman* confirms Kirkland’s hypothesis that prior to the Second World War it was

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<sup>30</sup> Hynes, p. 439.

<sup>31</sup> Siegfried Sassoon, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber, 1947), p. 79.

<sup>32</sup> Owen, p. 40.

<sup>33</sup> Patrick Maybin, Letter to John Hewitt, 2 January 1942, PRONI D/3838/3/10, p. 4.

an independent and ‘reasonably lively, politically engaged journal’.<sup>34</sup> It provided Hewitt, Maybin, and others with a platform for dissent from the status quo and an arena in which to explore their political beliefs and communicate them to a wider audience. Hewitt employed the publishing opportunities offered by the magazine to fulfill his nineteen thirties’ understanding of the poet’s role. In ‘The Return’ (1935), Hewitt perceived his public function as being to ‘lift a banner / of mercy and justice’ and to ‘rouse and warn’ those who did not understand that war was imminent (*HCP*, p. 14).

## II: ‘Pacifist’s regress’<sup>35</sup>

When war was declared, Maybin was faced with a dilemma: should he enlist in the forces, or remain at home in Belfast? The absence of conscription in Northern Ireland gave its population a greater level of choice than that experienced in other areas of the United Kingdom. Many young men welcomed the opportunity to remain civilians, taking advantage of the wartime boom in manufacturing industries or simply avoiding the discomforts and risks of the battlefield. In a letter to his fiancé, Thomas Carnduff satirically referred to the population’s antipathy towards enlistment: ‘an outstanding event occurred here yesterday. A young Belfast man joined the army. [...] Nobody could understand what had happened to cause such a tragedy’.<sup>36</sup> Few of Northern Ireland’s literati joined the armed forces or its auxiliary units. As women, Morton and Laughton were not expected to enlist. Rodgers and the pacifists McFadden and Greacen showed no inclination to join up, whilst MacNeice was initially rejected by the navy because of poor eyesight. He quickly found

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<sup>34</sup> Kirkland, ‘Poetics of Partition’, p. 216.

<sup>35</sup> Patrick Maybin, Letter to John Hewitt, 7 September 1943, PRONI D/3838/3/10, p. 5.

<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Gray, p. 46.

employment at the BBC, through which he contributed to the war effort.<sup>37</sup> Hewitt and Maybin's response to the question of enlistment was equally complex.

As early as 1935, Hewitt was reflecting on these issues in the context of riots in Belfast, the imminent Spanish Civil War, and the possibility of a larger European conflict. 'The Return' considers three options which are available to the artist in a time of war. Firstly, there is political agitation and protest. A second possibility is retreat to an isolated pastoral idyll, in this case, Rathlin Island, off the north coast of Northern Ireland. Devoid of the anxieties of the city, on Rathlin Island man can live in harmony with his environment and grasp 'the hem of Peace' (*HCP*, p. 16). However, it is also the scene of 'old battles' – an understated reference to several massacres of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – and only provides a temporary retreat (*HCP*, p. 17). Thirdly, the individual had the option of enlisting in the army:

I remembered one who went to die in France,  
hating the war and wishing only to paint,  
but dreading more the pointed finger and gibe,  
and what his son might think when he had grown.  
Remembered, too, that deft hand with the brush,  
glad to slop filth and human excrement,  
rather than crack his fleas in a frontline trench,  
or have his sensitive wits scraped bare with suspense.

(*HCP*, p. 17)

The irony of these lines lies in the disjunction between the volunteer's desire to emulate heroic, masculine models in order to avoid social censure and the brutal, prosaic reality of military service. Hewitt presents war in opposition to art, as the painter is debased by his duties and deemed too 'sensitive' for direct engagement with the enemy. Maybin agreed, writing to Hewitt that the 'war just now seems to me to be a destruction delaying action – a colossal "scorched earth" campaign sterile

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<sup>37</sup> Stallworthy, p. 287.

to all the arts'.<sup>38</sup> Although 'The Return' is inconclusive, in this section the speaker clearly feels that the artist's skills could have been better employed elsewhere.

In his autobiography, Hewitt explains that on the declaration of war he visited the recruitment office, only to find that he was in a reserved occupation and that enlistment would mean a significant loss of pay. A later half-hearted attempt to join up was also unsuccessful.<sup>39</sup> Writing to Maybin in 1940, Hewitt expressed his understanding that he was privileged to be able to immerse himself 'in "aesthetic" things' rather than in war.<sup>40</sup> Hewitt and his contemporaries in Northern Ireland were keenly aware of the impact of conscription on individual lives and welcomed their freedom. In 'Conscripts' (c. 1941), Maybin predicts death for the young soldiers he meets in various military training camps. For many, the rapidly approaching death 'has not a meaning' and even 'life has ceased long before the flesh decays'.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, MacNeice's 'The Conscript' presents the young soldier as a 'Choiceless' 'automaton' heading towards 'an ordained disaster' (*MNCP*, p. 224). MacNeice mingles the diction of the war machine and predestination as he considers the desperate fate of the individual who has unwillingly become caught up in the war.

Defining a role for himself at home, Hewitt insists to Maybin that he is happy to 'fight', intending to 'assist actual belligerents, organise, [illegible word], agitate [illegible word] – do whatever may be askt [*sic*] and could possibly be performed'.<sup>42</sup> Hewitt was still worrying about this in 1944, when Maybin assured him that 'I've always been glad you never succeeded in joining up: I know you won't resent it when I say there isn't a place in the forces where you could do work a tenth as useful

<sup>38</sup> Patrick Maybin, Letter to John Hewitt, 3 August 1941, PRONI D/3838/3/10, p. 6.

<sup>39</sup> Hewitt, *A North Light*, p. 127.

<sup>40</sup> John Hewitt, Letter to Patrick Maybin, 23 May 1940, PRONI D/3838/3/12, p. 3.

<sup>41</sup> Patrick Maybin, 'Conscripts', *Lagan*, 2 (1944), 52; John Hewitt, Letter to Patrick Maybin, 15 December 1941, PRONI D/3838/3/12, p. 7.

<sup>42</sup> John Hewitt, Letter to Patrick Maybin, 23 May 1940, PRONI D/3838/3/12, p. 3.

as you do now'.<sup>43</sup> Hewitt had become involved in Civil Defence and – once Russia entered the war on the side of the Allies – he lectured on Marxism and art to troops stationed in Northern Ireland. Later in life Hewitt regretted missing 'the greatest imaginative experience of my generation'.<sup>44</sup> This comment reveals the deep-seated connection in British and Irish poetry between the experience of war and the imagination, and the privileging of wartime poetry by combatants above that by civilians. Even Maybin looked to war for 'an extension of experience of some sort' as compensation for years of service in the army.<sup>45</sup>

In 1944, Maybin told Hewitt that, for him, the decision to enlist was 'simple and obvious'.<sup>46</sup> However, his letters of 1939 reveal a more conflicted attitude to the war. Maybin's pacifism, left-wing tendencies, profound anti-fascism, individualism, and desire to provide medical assistance were mutually contradictory and led to equivocation about the best route to take. In a letter of 1939 Maybin admits feeling overwhelmed by the 'summation of misery and pain and suffering in Spain and Austria and China and Czechoslovakia and Jewish Germany'. 'Yet', he continues:

[...] if you ask me what the Czechs are to do to protect themselves from brutal massacre, I don't know. As for my individual problem, at the moment I would undertake any medical work I was capable of (and high explosives would provide plenty of it) provided I was not asked to put on a uniform, and given the right to decide when it was necessary for me to butcher "the enemy". This I know is a feeble compromise; for I feel that the pacifists are right. Force begets force, and progress can only come if it comes at all, through knowledge.<sup>47</sup>

As a protester against war, Maybin could not condone Czechoslovakian armed resistance to Germany, but neither could he accept the suffering of those repressed by Fascist regimes in Spain, China, and central Europe. His medical vocation would allow him to mitigate the damage caused by war, but would constitute support for

<sup>43</sup> Patrick Maybin, Letter to John Hewitt, 14 November 1944, PRONI D/3838/3/10, p. 1.

<sup>44</sup> Hewitt, *A North Light*, p. 128, p. 131, p. 127.

<sup>45</sup> Patrick Maybin, Letter to John Hewitt, 6 June 1942, PRONI D/3838/3/10, p. 2.

<sup>46</sup> Patrick Maybin, Letter to John Hewitt, 14 November 1944, PRONI D/3838/3/10, p. 1.

<sup>47</sup> Patrick Maybin, Letter to John Hewitt, 24 September 1939, PRONI D/3838/3/10, pp. 2-3.

the British army and therefore contradict his anti-war stance. Eventually, he decided that he could not remain idly on the sidelines and, like MacNeice, accepted the lesser evil of assisting the war effort. By 1943 Maybin admitted that 'I now carry a revolver'.<sup>48</sup>

Maybin's decision to enlist as a medical officer coincided with his abandonment of polemical verse in favour of landscape poetry and personal meditations. Both as a doctor and as a poet he strove to maintain his own individuality, rather than being completely absorbed into the war machine. Writing to Hewitt, he explained that propaganda 'can never be true art in the properly limited sense of the word' as this 'seeks to reconcile the individual with the group'. In contrast, 'true' art is the 'compensation at once for the failure of reconciliation and for the partial sacrifice of individuality that society demands'.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, he abandoned the propagandizing poetry written during the nineteen thirties and began to compose more private poetry. Piette identifies this trend across wartime British culture, as artists struggled to create a space for 'private stories' whilst under pressure from the war's 'big propaganda machines, its fabricated communal feelings and military regimentation'.<sup>50</sup>

### **III: From the forces**

Following these developments in his thinking, Maybin began to write poetry of personal experience which was rooted in his home landscape and, in those poems composed abroad, depended heavily on memory. In doing so, he engaged more

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<sup>48</sup> Patrick Maybin, Letter to John Hewitt, 7 September 1943, PRONI D/3838/3/10, p. 5.

<sup>49</sup> Patrick Maybin, Letter to John Hewitt, 24 September 1941, PRONI D/3838/3/10, pp. 3-4.

<sup>50</sup> Piette, p. 5, p. 2.

closely with regional ideas about poetic subjects and language. Maybin's poetry thus exemplifies the ideal Hewitt set out in 'The Bitter Gourd'. Although he travelled far from home, choosing not to 'live and die in the house of his fathers', Maybin felt that he 'belong[ed] to a recognisable focus in place and time'.<sup>51</sup>

'Ballykinlar, May 1940', written at a coastal military training camp close to the Mourne Mountains, demonstrates this shift in focus. Standing on a beach, the speaker is in a liminal space, caught between the hills and the sea, the chaos of the wider world and the certainties of home. Looking for a solution to the oppressive conflict, he calls on Cuchulain, a hero of Yeats's plays and symbol of the 1916 Easter Rising, to 'descend from the mountains' and wield 'his battle-axe for freedom':

And yet, the Red Branch withered at the last  
now only a shadow in the mind of man  
the victors and the victims – they are all lost  
and the shed blood forgotten. Surely it were better  
in these bitter days to walk by the sea's quiet margin  
or humbly where the dry grass murmurs. Not out of the hills  
must come the conquering host, but from the deep  
recesses of the heart, before the darkness falls.<sup>52</sup>

The rejection of the violent figure of Cuchulain also constitutes a refusal to write in a heroic mode. Such accounts of great deeds and brave sacrifices, the speaker concludes, do not live for long within human memory, eventually becoming meaningless and ineffectual during the crises of the present moment. This dismissal of military prowess is complemented by the insistence that human emotion must be safeguarded in the face of the dehumanizing horrors of war. In 'Before the Offensive, 1940', George Buchanan also emphasized this point: 'let the heart not be

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<sup>51</sup> Hewitt, 'The Bitter Gourd', p. 116.

<sup>52</sup> Patrick Maybin, 'Ballykinlar, May 1940', in *Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. by Greacen and Iremonger, pp. 130-1.

crushed by the terrible shields – / More deadly than danger’.<sup>53</sup> Here, war’s impact on the mind, the individual, and emotions is considered to be more damaging than potential physical injuries. Maybin joins his contemporaries in trying to retain a place for these threatened values in the face of possible destruction.

Maybin’s ‘A Land Without Trees’ articulates a more pessimistic view with respect to the war. Written in January 1943 at a military camp in England or Scotland, this poem depicts a barren landscape where:

Men cutting peat deep in the lonely moor  
have found the roots and stumps of a dead forest:  
bleached in the sun of the living summer  
these bones suffer rain and wind

where once all day was the continued sound  
and shade and shelter of a great pine wood  
but now only a gull crys [*sic*]  
on the salt wind flung landward.<sup>54</sup>

As in ‘Ballykinlar’, the passage of time erases memories of past events. No record remains of the forest’s existence as a living, vital entity, or of its destruction. The presence of ‘roots and stumps’ hints at manmade deforestation or a fire, but also evokes haunting images of a mass grave, the only remnants of a tragedy or massacre which has been erased from living memory. Furthermore, the dead forest may be reminiscent of the ravaged landscapes of some First World War poetry. Brearton explains that ‘trees became parallels for the mutilated human condition’ for those writers who looked out over no-man’s land, gazing out on a space full of ‘shattered branches, burnt-out tree-stumps, bits of men stuck in trees, and vice versa’.<sup>55</sup>

Although Maybin’s speaker attempts to rehabilitate the dead by imagining their past, he cannot restore a pre-lapsarian idyll. This poem displays none of the certainties of

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<sup>53</sup> George Buchanan, ‘Before the Offensive, 1940’, in Proof Copy of *Pioneers and Survivors: Poems from Northern Ireland, 1940-1960*, ed. by Roy McFadden, in Green Folder, MFC MProof 3, p. 15.

<sup>54</sup> Patrick Maybin, Letter to John Hewitt, 18 February 1943, PRONI D/3838/3/10, p. 9.

<sup>55</sup> Brearton, *The Great War*, p. 193.



Hewitt's 'Freehold', in which a stable identity and poetic role are assured by the immunity of the pastoral retreat to war.

Unlike Shelley Wang's letters to Hewitt, which dwell on the horrific violence of the Sino-Japanese War, the majority of Maybin's wartime poems, letters, and prose eschew direct reference to the results of combat and are instead pastoral and literary in focus. Strikingly, Maybin's essay 'North African Retrospect', which appeared in *Lagan* in 1944, focuses on the landscape and the social problems faced by the indigenous people. Although this article contributes to the balance of local and global concerns found in *Lagan*, it is notable that references to the war itself are limited to factual statements about arrival at a military camp or watching a training exercise.<sup>56</sup> As Deer suggests with regard to Second World War literature, it is possible that Maybin's reluctance to write about his role as a witness of combat was due to the sheer scale of this uncontrollable, technologically advanced, geographically dispersed conflict.<sup>57</sup> Another option is that, having accepted that the defeat of fascism was more important than pacifism, Maybin no longer felt able to comment about politics in his poetry. Alternatively, he may have sought relief from war and its effects on the mind by remembering home in both his letters and imaginative writing.

'Thoughts from Abroad', written in Italy in 1944 with the final stanza added later, provides evidence for the latter hypothesis.<sup>58</sup> Again, the speaker is symbolically situated on the coast:

In October at midnight in the olive groves  
the air was warm, and the shadows lay black across  
the dry earth in the moonlight, and the waves  
broke in a whisper along the white sand.

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<sup>56</sup> Patrick Maybin, 'North African Retrospect', *Lagan*, 2 (1944), 87-90.

<sup>57</sup> Deer, p. 225.

<sup>58</sup> Patrick Maybin, Letter to John Hewitt, 10 September 1944, PRONI D/3838/3/10, p. 1.

In those days was the sea quite [*sic*] at Murlough  
 in the grey evening, or did rough wind lift the spray  
 into the larch wood, and fling the long cry  
 of the curlew far over bogland and ploughland?

The vines are stripped, and the oranges piled in the market,  
 gold in the winter sun. Snow covers the hills  
 taking the breath with beauty at morning and sunset.  
 Have the brown leaves fallen in the beechwood yet  
 at Mullaghmore, above the salmon falls?

Happiness runs through the fingers like water,  
 and was always some former time and in another country.  
 But now I know it was last in Glen Aray,  
 wild roses on the hedge, and new-cut hay by the river,  
 and smoke rising quietly to the evening sky.<sup>59</sup>

The scene oscillates between Italy and Northern Ireland, moving from descriptions of the immediate landscape to a setting constructed from memory. The speaker's questions about home and his repeated addresses to a reader living there are full of pathos, suggesting a long absence which cannot be compensated for by Italy's luxuriant fertility. As in Keats's 'Ode to Autumn', the autumnal context competes with the symbolism of the gathered harvest, pointing both towards fruitfulness and to a period of endings, loss, and decline. This disharmony is further conveyed by the mournful half-rhymes (for example, 'groves'/'waves', 'spray'/'cry'). Hewitt similarly employed this method of conveying incompleteness in his wartime poetry. For example, in 'The Little Lough', written and sent to Maybin in 1941, Hewitt reflects on the fragility of the 'many things I love'.<sup>60</sup> The half-rhymes ('rocks'/'stacks', 'ground'/'land', 'last'/'lost') sit uneasily alongside full rhymes ('spray'/'day', 'know'/'grow'), undermining the desired certainty of form and thought (*HCP*, pp. 37-8).

Maybin recognized that his poetry did not conform to the public's expectations of verse written during war. He sent this quiet elegy for a pre-war landscape and way of life to a group who were compiling an anthology of Eighth

<sup>59</sup> Patrick Maybin, 'Thoughts From Abroad', in *New Irish Poets*, ed. by Garrity, p. 147.

<sup>60</sup> John Hewitt, Letter to Patrick Maybin, 7 October 1941, PRONI D/3838/3/12, p. 1.

Army poetry. Writing to Hewitt, Maybin explained that ‘I heard nothing more of either – I take it something of a Kiplingesque character was required, and they didn’t get enough to make it worth while’.<sup>61</sup> Despite Maybin’s comments, there is precedent for wartime pastorals in the poetry of the First World War. Both Edmund Blunden and Edward Thomas evoke rural England in their poetry, presenting it as a restorative green space far removed from conflict. As Bergonzi notes, for Blunden and Thomas the pastoral mode is a ‘sanative norm’ against which they measure their experiences of trench warfare.<sup>62</sup>

Hewitt considers adopting Thomas as a poetic role model in ‘Minor Poet’s Dilemma, 1940’. Writing in ‘the hush of terror’s interval’, he looks to ‘Edward Thomas, who, when earth was breaking, / brooding on vole and hawthorn, deathward went’ (*HCP*, p. 151). Thomas is presented as a nature poet who became involved in a situation alien to his own disposition. His apparent indifference to the war raises the question of the value of pastoral meditations in a time of violence, but the poem comes to no definite conclusion. However, like Thomas, both Hewitt and Maybin contrasted rural idylls with wartime conditions. Spiritually and culturally anchored in a tranquil landscape, their poetry recalls Thomas’s commitment to his native place, whilst also looking forward to the creation of an idealized post-war society based on regional affiliation. Bergonzi’s description of Georgian poetry could well be applied to all three writers: the Georgians displayed a ‘patient accuracy of observation before the facts of nature, unpretentiousness, a plain and decent affection for the everyday, and unemphatic sensitivity of language’.<sup>63</sup> Hewitt’s poetic idiom combined such qualities, which he associated with the English pastoral tradition, with the reticence

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<sup>61</sup> Patrick Maybin, Letter to John Hewitt, 11 October 1944, PRONI D/3838/3/10, p. 1.

<sup>62</sup> Bernard Bergonzi, *Heroes’ Twilight: A Study of the Literature of the Great War* (London: Macmillan, 1980), p. 113.

<sup>63</sup> Bergonzi, *Heroes’ Twilight*, p. 85.

and sturdiness he identified in Protestant speech. Although Maybin does not mention such ideas in his letters, it is notable that his wartime poetic mode is as measured and understated as that of his close friend.

Maybin's 'A Lark in February' exemplifies these qualities. Composed in a military training camp in either Omagh or Ballykinlar, this poem was first printed in *The New Northman* under the title 'February 1941'. A different version was included in the 'From the Forces' section of *Lagan* in 1945. The images of the lark and the coming spring are central to the speaker's articulation of hope for the future:

Awakened again to awareness by some trivial thing,  
of the widening crack in the wall, the crackle of fuse  
before final explosion, high in the morning air  
above the rifle-ranges I heard a lark singing.

Snow lies along the hedges where the white hawthorn  
will burgeon, ice by the stone walls where the whin  
will burden the summer air with richness, but high  
above the cold earth the lark announces spring.

Not barrage nor emplacement can bar his wing  
athwart the air, eager sky-seeker, wind rider;  
the beat of feet cannot trample in the clay  
seed-life he sings of, as the sun tilts near,

promising warmness of long days in June,  
the grasshoppers beside the dusty road,  
wind moving over the lengthening corn,  
the cuckoo calling in the shadowed wood.<sup>64</sup>

The final stanza of *The New Northman* version (which Maybin later described as 'very bad') is more akin to the neo-romantic imagery favoured by Greacen, editor of the magazine at that time:<sup>65</sup>

This is a sign for us then that the bitter night  
harsh winter of heart's coldness, darkness of mind  
must pass: behind hill-crest smoulders the dawn  
that will flame forth, fling for its warmness and light.<sup>66</sup>

Although the sentiments expressed are similar, the final version is more assured ('promising' is more optimistic than 'must pass') and depends on a detailed

<sup>64</sup> Patrick Maybin, 'A Lark in February', *Lagan*, 3 (1945), 87.

<sup>65</sup> Patrick Maybin, Letter to John Hewitt, n.d., PRONI D/3838/3/11, p. 3.

<sup>66</sup> Patrick Maybin, 'February 1941', *The New Northman*, 9.1 (Spring 1941), 7.

depiction of the landscape rather than an abstract image of dawn. Worried that the war will obliterate ‘anything not directly relevant’ to its progress, Maybin insists on retaining a space for both the individual and the natural world outside of the homogenizing, destructive power of the war machine.<sup>67</sup>

Many literary allusions converge in the poem’s central image, the lark. From Shakespeare’s Sonnet 29, in which the human spirit soars like a lark above the earth, to Shelley’s skylark, and then to poetry of the First World War and beyond, the bird is associated with the lyric impulse, imagination, and transcendence. Paul Fussell explains that in First World War poetry, the lark symbolizes the soldier’s survival of another night.<sup>68</sup> It therefore connotes hope and relief from the intense anxieties experienced during darkness, hours which were ideal for attack. Isaac Rosenberg’s ‘Returning, we Hear the Larks’ is perhaps the best known example of a First World War poem in which this trope appears. Walking back to camp, ‘anguished’ and exhausted, the soldiers hear birdsong:

But hark! joy – joy – strange joy.  
Lo! heights of night ringing with unseen larks.  
Music showering our upturned list’ning faces.<sup>69</sup>

As Hynes explains, Rosenberg evokes ‘the Romantic image of the creative imagination in Nature’ in order to juxtapose it against ‘the denying reality of war’.<sup>70</sup> Above the battlefield, the lark is completely removed from the suffering and pain of war. Echoing these precedents, Maybin’s lark heralds the coming of spring, hope, and restoration. Just as the lark and its song are indomitable, so the end of war and the return of peace are inevitable.

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<sup>67</sup> Patrick Maybin, Letter to John Hewitt, 3 August 1941, PRONI D/3838/3/10, p. 6.

<sup>68</sup> Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), p. 242.

<sup>69</sup> Isaac Rosenberg, *The Collected Poems of Isaac Rosenberg*, ed. by George Bottomley and Denys Harding (New York: Schocken Books, 1949), p. 80.

<sup>70</sup> Hynes, p. 193.

‘A Lark in February’ exemplifies Maybin’s Wordsworthian concept of the ‘aesthetic experience’, which he explained to Hewitt in a letter of November 1942:

[The aesthetic experience] is something sudden and brief and clear as crystal; suddenly all the perceptions are razor-keen, and the whole personality, all inner conflicts suspended, turns itself in delight to one thing. I feel that this can only be because there comes to the heart and mind a realization of the unity and purpose of all life, a consciousness that the individual is a part of something infinitely more complete and perfect.<sup>71</sup>

Whereas propaganda seeks to reconcile the individual with the group and war threatens to extinguish him, the imagination reconciles the individual to the natural world. It is notable that the lyric ‘I’ appears only once in both ‘Thoughts from Abroad’ and ‘A Lark in February’. In both poems, the individual is integrated with the natural world, becoming known to the reader primarily through his memories and perceptions of place. In the latter poem, the consistent use of internal rhyme and alliteration, which echo the harmony of the birdsong, unifies man and nature. This reading of the poem is complicated by the minimal use of end-rhymes, which is perhaps indicative of the impossibility of freezing an ideal moment. As MacNeice understood, ‘[t]he sunlight on the garden / Hardens and grows cold, / We cannot cage the minute / Within its nets of gold’ (*MNCP*, p. 57). In order to articulate life’s vitality and variety, the poet must remain open to flux and progression rather than insisting on stasis.

Although much of Maybin’s poetry depends on memories of the First World War, it also looks forward to a restoration of peace. Engaging with ideas about regional poetry, Maybin celebrates Northern Ireland’s landscape as a pastoral retreat largely removed from the war. It is for this reason that Hewitt includes him in his list of ideal regional writers in ‘Freehold’: each of Maybin’s poems, Hewitt writes, is ‘cool as a brook, as winter sunshine brief’ (*HCP*, p. 488). The next chapter, on

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<sup>71</sup> Patrick Maybin, Letter to John Hewitt, 15 November 1942, PRONI D/3838/3/10, p. 7.

Greacen's poetry and editorial projects, will consider the work of a young writer whose ideas were also oriented to the future. Yet, unlike Maybin, Greacen began his literary career by insisting on a break with the past. Even so, his editorial work was extremely significant in providing Maybin and other local writers with a much-needed forum for publication.

## Chapter Five

### Robert Greacen: Anthologizing the Renaissance

A new political world, a new economic world, a new practical world, is being forced on us: we cannot drag after us into this new world the literary conventions of the old.

Herbert Read<sup>1</sup>

#### Introduction

Born in 1920 in Londonderry, Greacen moved to Belfast as a child and as a teenager became friends with a group of left-wing students (which presumably included Boyd and Bell).<sup>2</sup> In 1939, he met McFadden at a meeting of the Belfast branch of the PPU. By 1940, they were key members of a cluster of aspiring poets at Queen's University, a group which included John Gallen and Leslie Gillespie.<sup>3</sup> Hewitt had graduated several years before in 1930, Rodgers in 1931, and Maybin in 1938, leaving the way open for a new generation of student poets.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the difference in ages, Greacen and McFadden shared Hewitt and Maybin's sense that the First World War was a determining event in their lives. McFadden later emphasized their birth in the aftermath of the 1914-18 conflict, at a time of inter-war communal violence in Northern Ireland: '[w]e, whose cradles had been rocked by the rifle and the bomb, knew that these monstrosities could never force order out of chaos'.<sup>5</sup> Greacen and McFadden's often vocal and forthright poetic responses to the seemingly pervasive nature of violence dovetailed with the anti-war sentiments of Maybin's early writings, if not his nuanced approach to the

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<sup>1</sup> Read, 'Introduction', p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Greacen, *The Sash*, p. 61; Patrick Gillan, 'Robert Greacen', *Guardian*, 15 May 2008, <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/may/15/culture.obituaries>> [accessed on 3 June 2014].

<sup>3</sup> Greacen, *The Sash*, p. 123, p. 125.

<sup>4</sup> Ormsby, p. xxxii; Longley, 'Introduction', in *Poems*, p. 12; Wright, p. 451.

<sup>5</sup> Roy McFadden, Untitled MS, in Blue Notebook IX, MFC MP35, p. 3.



issues of pacifism and enlistment. Unlike Maybin, they were attracted to the neo-romantic poetics of the New Apocalypse and were determined to make their mark in Belfast, opposing what they perceived to be the philistine, conservative culture of mainstream unionism.

However, when these enthusiastic, young writers sought forums for the publication of their work, they were faced with a problem: there were few opportunities to publish contemporary poetry locally. This chapter will begin by describing the available avenues of publication, before examining the anthologies produced by Greacen. His editorial projects were part of an attempt to foster a wartime literary coterie and readership based primarily in Belfast. Central to this discussion are two interlinked questions. Did the anthologies promote or stimulate, as Greacen claimed, a ‘new awakening in Ulster writing’?<sup>6</sup> If so, how did they shape and represent this developing milieu?

### **I. Publishing in Northern Ireland during the mid-twentieth century**

Commenting on the Lisburn-based Lisnagarvey Press, artist Rowel Friers identified the fundamental problem faced by publishers of contemporary literature in mid-century Northern Ireland: ‘you could not call it a business because it made no money – it consumed it’.<sup>7</sup> The root of this financial problem was that readership for such work – both locally and in Ireland and the United Kingdom – was limited. Although the war years saw an increase in the demand for books in England and Ireland, there

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<sup>6</sup> Greacen, ‘The Editor Says...’, in *Northern Harvest*, n.p.

<sup>7</sup> Friers, p. 138.

is evidence to suggest that in Northern Ireland reading actually declined.<sup>8</sup>

Consequently, those outlets which depended solely on contemporary literature were short-lived, whilst successful publishing houses relied on the financial stability offered by the sale of more commercially viable products, usually books of a religious or educational nature.

Nicholas Allen and Terence Brown divide the island's mid-century book publishers into four groups: publishing houses, newspapers, retailers, and private hand presses.<sup>9</sup> Building on this taxonomy, this section of the thesis extends Allen and Brown's research using additional information gained from archival and other sources. In the first category is the Quota Press, a small publishing house founded by Dora Kennedy in 1927 in Donegall Street, Belfast.<sup>10</sup> By the time it closed in 1954, it had printed over one hundred titles, including May Morton's *Dawn and Afterglow* (1936) and *Sung to the Spinning Wheel* (1952), and *Lost Sanctuary and Other Poems* by John Irvine (1954). The Dundalgan Press, founded in Dundalk in the nineteenth century, was a family owned business which produced educational, religious, and literary works in English and Irish, including Richard Rowley's *The Ballads of Mourne* (1940), *The Corrib Country* by Richard Hayward (1943), and *The Collected Poems of Elizabeth Shane* (1945).<sup>11</sup> In the second category, the *Belfast Telegraph* printed occasional books, such as *Bombs on Belfast: 1941 Photographs* (1941) and *Northern Ireland: The Land of Delightful Scenery* (1942). Some poetry and book reviews featured within the pages of the newspaper itself.

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<sup>8</sup> Frank Shovlin, 'From Tucson to Television: Irish Reading, 1939-69', in *The Irish Book in English 1891-2000*, ed. by Clare Hutton and Patrick Walsh (Oxford: OUP, 2011), pp. 128-51 (p. 134).

<sup>9</sup> Nicholas Allen and Terence Brown, 'Publishing after Partition, 1922-39', in *The Irish Book in English*, ed. by Hutton and Walsh, pp. 70-88 (p. 72).

<sup>10</sup> Northern Ireland Publications Resources, *Local Publishing*, <[http://www.nibooks.org/uploaded\\_files/file/banners.pdf](http://www.nibooks.org/uploaded_files/file/banners.pdf)> [accessed on 3 June 2014].

<sup>11</sup> Gabriel Doherty and Gillian M. Doherty, '"Some Measure of Vocation": Publishing in Ireland, 1939-69', in *The Irish Book in English*, ed. by Hutton and Walsh, pp. 108-28 (p. 111).

The third group, local booksellers, was more prolific in the dissemination of literary works. Established retailers such as William Erskine Mayne and W. and G. Baird, as well as a company founded by Derrick MacCord in 1944, printed volumes of poetry alongside religious or political works.<sup>12</sup> For example, Erskine Mayne produced several books by J.F. MacNeice, in addition to Joseph Campbell's *The Garden of the Bees, and Other Poems* (1905) and Greacen's *Poems from Ulster* (1941). Although it is probable that Greacen bore the cost of this pamphlet, Erskine Mayne was persuaded to publish it through a family connection.<sup>13</sup> It is notable that, with the exception of *Poems from Ulster*, the books produced by local publishing houses and retailers are authored by established poets writing pastoral, neo-Revivalist or regional verse.

Finally, various small, non-profit companies published solely literary works, often printed on hand presses or commissioned from larger firms. In 1942, Rowley founded the Mourne Press, which published Bell's *Summer Loanen and Other Stories* (1943) and McLaverty's *The White Mare, and Other Stories* (1943), before closing due to minimal commercial success.<sup>14</sup> The Inver Press, based in Larne, published two volumes by John Lyle Donaghy, *The Flute Over the Valley: Antrim Song* (1931) and *The Blackbird: Songs of Innisfail* (1933). In Lisburn, McFadden and Barbara Hunter's post-war Lisnagarvey Press (affiliated with the periodical *Rann*) produced volumes such as Morton's *Masque in Maytime* (1948), Hunter's *Who'll Carry the Bag* (1950), and McFadden's *Elegy for the Dead of the Princess Victoria* (1953). Evidence suggests that such books were sold by both booksellers and individuals. In 1949, Edith McFadden recorded the sale of thirty-nine copies of

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<sup>12</sup> Lynn Doyle welcomes the founding of Derrick MacCord Publishers in 'The North Awakes', *The Irish Times*, 19 August 1944, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Greacen, 'Browsing and Book-Tasting', p. 245.

<sup>14</sup> Marsh, p. 381.

the pamphlet *Masque in Maytime* and sent the money directly to Morton (it is unclear whether Morton kept the proceeds or returned a portion to the press). Edith McFadden records that most copies of the pamphlet were sold at Erskine Mayne's bookshop, with private sales, Davy McLean's Progressive Bookshop, and Mullan's bookshop following.<sup>15</sup> That volumes of poetry produced by publishers in all four categories are now rare indicates that only limited print runs were undertaken. It is likely that these were distributed primarily amongst Belfast's literati.<sup>16</sup>

Periodicals provided an additional outlet for poetry. Between 1926 and 1950, the Queen's University magazine, *The Northman* (called *The New Northman* between 1932 and 1941) published poetry, prose, and articles by students and those connected with the university. Departing from the mainly comic, political or occasional poetry printed in *The Northman*, under Boyd's editorship *Lagan* printed regional work in four issues which spanned 1943 to 1946. One of its stated aims was 'to encourage [local writers] by publishing their work and by making it better known in their own region'.<sup>17</sup> *Rann*, which focussed solely on poetry and was edited by McFadden and Hunter, shared this agenda and ran to twenty issues between 1948 and 1953. Also in the post-war period, BBC employees Boyd and Bell promoted literary programmes on the Northern Ireland Home Service, with the aim of 'trying to liberate what we considered was the narrow parochialism of the region'.<sup>18</sup> Perceiving themselves as the standard-bearers for liberalism in Northern Ireland, many local writers of the period shared this ambition. By broadcasting literary

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<sup>15</sup> May Morton, Letter to Edith McFadden, 29 November 1949, MFC L11, p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> The Roy McFadden Collection in the Special Collections of the McClay Library at Queen's University Belfast contains copies of many of these privately printed works and periodicals.

<sup>17</sup> Boyd, 'Comment', *Lagan*, 4, p. 9.

<sup>18</sup> Boyd, *My Journey*, p. 47.

discussion programmes, poetry ‘anthologies’, poetry readings, and short talks, the NIHS provided local writers with small financial returns and much-needed publicity.

Despite this activity, in *The Arts in Ulster* J.N. Browne would summarize the publishing scene for younger, relatively unknown writers in largely negative terms:

[...] in Ulster, as in many other places, the poets of the younger generation have been sadly handicapped by the absence of the means to bring their work before the public, and as a natural result they have been deprived of public encouragement. Apart from *Lagan* [...] the only chances of publication available to poets of promise in recent years were afforded by certain newspapers, notably *The Irish Times*, or by periodicals such as *The Dublin Magazine* or *The Bell*.<sup>19</sup>

Given the limited audience commanded by local publishers, ambitious poets turned to periodicals and companies outside of Northern Ireland in order to promote their work. Bruce Williamson, a minor Northern Irish poet and doctoral student at Trinity College Dublin, became the literary editor of *The Irish Times*, which often printed poems by McFadden, Greacen, and Laughton.<sup>20</sup> O’Faoláin of *The Bell* was notably sympathetic to northern writers, frequently publishing their work and producing three ‘Ulster issues’.<sup>21</sup> In addition, *Horizon*, *The Partisan Review*, *The Listener*, *The Adelphi*, *The Cornhill Magazine*, *The Irish Statesman*, *Poetry Ireland*, and *Poetry Scotland* printed the work of Northern Irish poets.

A list of publishers for individual volumes indicates the centripetal force exerted by London. MacNeice published with Victor Gollancz, Faber, and Oxford University Press. Hewitt’s first volume, *No Rebel Word*, was eventually published in 1948 by Frederick Muller. Rodgers’s publishers were Secker and Warburg, whilst Laughton’s were Jonathan Cape (who acted for James Stephens and W.B. Yeats). Greacen’s first volume, *One Recent Evening* (1944), was published by the Favil Press and Routledge acted for McFadden. Both Greacen and McFadden were also

<sup>19</sup> Browne, p. 149.

<sup>20</sup> Kelly Matthews, *The Bell Magazine and Representations of Irish Identity* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2012), p. 95.

<sup>21</sup> See *The Bell*, 2.4 (July 1941), 4.4 (July 1942), and 4.5 (August 1942).

patronized by small-scale publishers associated with the New Apocalypse, including the Grey Walls Press, the Falcon Press, and the Hand and Flower Press. In addition, Greacen and McFadden were loosely connected with the Dublin-based hand-printers the Runa Press and the Gayfield Press. MacNeice's *The Last Ditch* (1940) was published in a limited edition by the Cuala Press in Dublin.

Wartime conditions adversely affected all of these publishers as the demand for books increased in England but resources were greatly curtailed. The shortage of raw materials and staff, distribution difficulties, the additional cost of war risks insurance, and the bombing of warehouses detrimentally affected the publishing industry. Younger writers faced greater difficulties than normal in finding publishers, as companies often favoured the lower production costs incurred by new editions or reprints above the additional expenses of new titles.<sup>22</sup> At a time before CEMA provided financial support for writers, all the poets discussed in this thesis balanced literary activities with paid employment in the professional sector. In his memoir, Boyd recalls the impossibility of being able to make 'a living by his art': he remembers that 'to do that in Belfast was a feat in itself'.<sup>23</sup> For the poets under consideration, financial constraints were not the only problem. A corollary of the difficulty in finding a publisher was that the poets' belief in the social function of art was compromised. Without a readership, they were unable to communicate their ideas about social problems and their visions for an ideal post-war society.

Responding to this situation, Greacen began his editing career when he and Gallen took over *The New Northman* in late 1940. Aided by McFadden and Gillespie, they tried to reshape it into an 'indigenous literary magazine' which bore

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<sup>22</sup>Valerie Holman, *Print for Victory: Book Publishing in Britain 1939-1945* (London: British Library, 2008), p. 1, p. 15, p. 242.

<sup>23</sup>Boyd, *My Journey*, p. 23.

the stamp of the then fashionable New Apocalypse.<sup>24</sup> As Kirkland notes, their radically new editorial policy was unsuccessful:

The struggle for quality submissions was unceasing, and at one point, only six students held subscriptions to the magazine out of a student body of 2,500. It was clear that any poetic revival in Belfast during this time would have to emerge without the nourishment of the city's major educational institution.<sup>25</sup>

By the winter of 1942, Greacen and Gallen had been deposed and the magazine, renamed *The Northman*, returned more or less to its original format. The attempt to transform it had not developed out of the concerns and interests of the majority of the student body, whilst the editors' preference for neo-romantic poetry would most likely have alienated even Belfast's literary-minded population. Writing from England, Belfast-born writer St John Ervine complained that *The New Northman* had been turned into one of the many 'unnecessary undergraduate magazines with which Great Britain is still cursed' and was now edited by 'persons who were begotten and born in underground urinals'.<sup>26</sup> Not displeased with the reaction he had provoked, Greacen printed these comments in *The New Northman* and soon turned his attention from the magazine to anthologies. He then played a leading role in editing several collections which showcased a wide variety of writing from Northern Ireland in an attempt to promote what he perceived to be a renaissance in local literature.

Most critical discussions of anthologies as a genre have focussed on the retrospective collection and its role in the formation (or re-formation) of canons.<sup>27</sup> However, the twentieth century saw the rise of what Laura Riding and Robert Graves term '[s]mall co-operative anthologies' which are often edited by one or more of the

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<sup>24</sup> Robert Greacen, 'Editorial', *The New Northman*, 8.3 (Winter 1940-1), 45-6 (p. 45).

<sup>25</sup> Kirkland, 'Poetics of Partition', p. 216.

<sup>26</sup> Ervine, p. 7.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Laura Riding and Robert Graves, *A Pamphlet Against Anthologies* (London: Cape, 1928); Anne Ferry, *Tradition and the Individual Poem* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2001); Stefanie Lethbridge and others, eds, *Anthologies of British Poetry* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000).

poets included in the selection.<sup>28</sup> Following Malcolm Ballin's analysis of twentieth century periodicals, I propose that the co-operative anthologist's editorial role constitutes a 'different kind of authorship' which is undertaken 'in combination with the proprietor and publisher and is sometimes influenced by financial supporters'.<sup>29</sup> Each choice made by the editor – relating to the selection and arrangement of contributions, the cover design, the publisher, the mode of distribution, and the writing of the introduction – is a significant element in communicating the anthology's overall impression or message. In many cases, the editor announces a change in the literary landscape and seeks to place a new movement or generation of living poets at the heart of contemporary writing. Examples include *Some Imagist Poets: An Anthology* (1915), the *Georgian Poetry* series (1912-22), *New Signatures* (1932), and *The New Apocalypse* (1940). Anthologies became particularly popular during the Second World War as paper shortages resulted in the passing of a law on the 25<sup>th</sup> May 1940, which made it illegal to start a new periodical.<sup>30</sup> Hence, the subtitle of *Lagan*, 'An Anthology of Ulster Writing', camouflaged its true identity as a magazine.

However, most wartime co-operative anthologies did not simply adopt the term in order to conceal the contents of a periodical. Co-operative anthologies of the mid-twentieth century constitute a separate and fascinating genre which combines the canonizing impulse of retrospective collections with the present- or future-oriented discourse of little magazines. Editors employed the term 'anthology' in order to imbue their collections with the authority associated with the genre. At the same time, they used the introduction and paratextual design as a means to reinforce

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<sup>28</sup> Riding and Graves, p. 191

<sup>29</sup> Ballin, p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> Hewison, p. 80.



the anthology's modernity. Consequently, co-operative anthologies can be considered to invert the pattern Gerry Smyth identifies in their retrospective counterparts. Smyth argues that retrospective anthologies map 'out the topography of seemingly already-existing literary terrains', often masking the fact that they are 'an intervention into how things *are*'.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, co-operative anthologies tend to inflate the importance of their contents in relation to the extant literary terrain, whilst insisting on their intervention in society at a particular literary, political, or historical moment. The editors and contributors frequently assess the failures of the dominant trend in contemporary writing and then proclaim their role in leading the way to a reinvigorated, modern literature.

During the mid-century, anthologies played a significant role in promoting the work of writers in Northern Ireland. Hewitt explained that:

Anthologies have their uses. They can often provide, in a rough and ready way, a guide to the poets working at a given time, for they are apt to include worthy poets who never achieved individual volumes or whose little books were swamped in the flood of publication. Many a time the inclusion of a name in an anthology has sent me searching for a poet of whose existence I had been unaware.<sup>32</sup>

Hewitt presents an ideal scenario in which the anthology prompts the motivated reader to follow up a poet of particular interest. Poets who have written relatively few poems are at a lesser disadvantage in an anthology. For example, five poems by Maybin are printed in Devin Garrity's *New Irish Poets* (1948), whilst the much more prolific Austin Clark and Padraic Fallon are represented by the same number. Furthermore, this mode of publication can provide a means of circulating work which might otherwise remain in the more ephemeral form of manuscripts.

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<sup>31</sup> Gerry Smyth, *Decolonisation and Criticism: The Construction of Irish Literature* (London: Pluto Press, 1998), p. 163.

<sup>32</sup> Hewitt, 'Poetry and Ulster', p. 3.

More significantly, anthologies can create a sense of community among their contributors and readership, as demonstrated by a vignette in Brian Moore's semi-autobiographical novel, *The Emperor of Ice-Cream* (1966). Gavin, an ARP volunteer working in Belfast during the blitz, nervously asks a new friend 'Do you know Wallace Stevens' stuff?' Freddie replies 'Isn't there something by him in the Faber book?'<sup>33</sup> Throughout the novel Gavin's literary tastes, which include MacNeice and Stevens, symbolize his deviance from both the unionist and nationalist communities in Belfast. However, the discovery that the socialist actor Freddie has also read *The Faber Book of Modern Verse* (1936) leads to Gavin's entry into a more liberal, social, and creative cultural sphere. In this novel the anthology not only shapes 'the taste of a generation', as Anne Ridler remarked in relation to the *Faber Book*, but it also facilitates the end of Gavin's intellectual isolation.<sup>34</sup>

Finally, Northern Irish poets saw anthologies as a means of delineating a group identity. Steven Matthews explains that throughout both parts of Ireland, writers turned to anthologies as a way to 'better define the nature of their own writing, and the stand it takes within the various possible histories and contexts pressing upon it'.<sup>35</sup> Yet, Greacen's anthologies reveal much about the poets' disagreements regarding the nature of their work and the identity of a potential literary group. This is primarily manifested in the differences between Greacen's dedication to neo-romantic, urban poetry and Hewitt's regionalist aesthetic.

## **II. *Poems from Ulster* (1942): beginning to shape an 'Ulster' voice**

<sup>33</sup> Brian Moore, *The Emperor of Ice-Cream* (London: Deutsch, 1966), p. 29.

<sup>34</sup> Anne Ridler, 'Introduction', in *The Faber Book of Modern Verse*, ed. by Michael Roberts (London: Faber, 1951), pp. 35-44 (p. 35).

<sup>35</sup> Steven Matthews, 'The Poet as Anthologist', in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry*, ed. by Brearton and Gillis, pp. 534-47 (p. 534).

Greacen's first anthology was a twenty-two page pamphlet entitled *Poems From Ulster*, published in 1941 (although it is dated 1942) at the price of one shilling. Its aim was to publicize a revival in local poetry. The collection is, as Geoffrey Taylor commented in *The Bell*, 'pleasantly produced'.<sup>36</sup> Despite wartime shortages the pamphlet is printed on good quality paper and each poem is allotted a separate page, often leaving large white spaces underneath the text. In contrast, Greacen's later anthologies, *Northern Harvest* (1944) and *Irish Harvest* (1946), were printed on inferior paper and the latter had minimal blank spaces. The front cover of *Poems* is printed in striking red and black, with a woodcut by Greacen's school friend Leslie Owen Baxter, who also illustrated Greacen's *The Bird: A Poem* (1941) and McFadden's *A Poem: Russian Summer* (1941).<sup>37</sup>

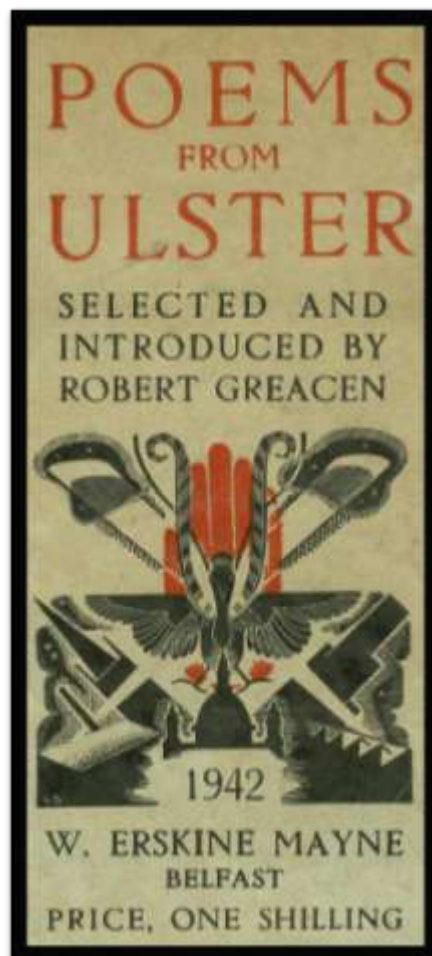


Figure 1: Cover illustration of Robert Greacen, ed., *Poems from Ulster* (Belfast: Erskine Mayne, 1942). Illustration by Leslie Owen Baxter.

<sup>36</sup> Geoffrey Taylor, Review of *Poems from Ulster* ed. by Robert Greacen, *The Bell*, 3.5 (February 1942), 403-5.

<sup>37</sup> Greacen, *The Sash*, p. 58.

The woodcut depicts a black bird superimposed over the red hand of Ulster, surmounting a silhouette of Belfast's City Hall. A church steeple and factory chimneys, which represent Belfast's religious and industrial culture, list away from the centre of the image. The wartime context of publication is inescapable, as two searchlights transect the night sky and the date is clearly printed at the base of the image.

The image evokes several related ideas which were central to Greacen's conception of a local literary revival. Firstly, it stresses Greacen's sense of the importance of the war-torn, modern city and thus excludes those poets who wrote in the regional and Irish modes, which were predominantly rural in subject. Hewitt, Maybin, Rodgers, and Morton, whose poetic territory was the natural landscape of Northern Ireland, were therefore eliminated from Greacen's vision at this point. Secondly, as Kirkland notes, the iconography symbolizes that the postulated poetry renaissance is 'both rooted in Northern Ireland while seeking to be transcendent of it'.<sup>38</sup> This is because the woodcut draws on the ideas of the New Apocalypse group, an English movement which Greacen believed could invigorate literature in Northern Ireland.

The black bird is, I suggest, an allusion to the New Apocalypse. It is a symbol often associated with D.H. Lawrence who, as James Keery notes, was an inspirational figure for this movement.<sup>39</sup> Greacen explicitly refers to Lawrence in the introduction to *Poems*, whilst after the war McFadden was certainly aware of the connection between the novelist and the phoenix, writing that Lawrence 'preached &

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<sup>38</sup> Kirkland, 'Poetics of Partition', p. 217.

<sup>39</sup> James Keery, 'The Burning Baby and the Bathwater: 9: "Muddying Inclusivity"', *PN Review*, 30.4 (March-April 2004), 40-2.

practised disobedience [...] [and] has the symbol of a phoenix on his grave'.<sup>40</sup> The bird is also an important symbol in McFadden's poem 'Ulster – May 1941', in which the speaker rejects any attempt to 'invent the phoenix', but still longs for the resurrection of a derelict province from the ashes of the blitz.<sup>41</sup>

In 1947, Greacen postulated that the New Apocalypse arose out of a general reaction against the Auden generation's emphasis on political commitment and interest in 'society at large' instead of 'the individual and *his* problems within the social framework'.<sup>42</sup> Greacen posited that this led to a 'romantic impulse [which] remained disorganised, sporadic, occasional'.<sup>43</sup> This broad trend within contemporary literature is referred to as neo-romanticism or new romanticism and included poets such as Rodgers and Dylan Thomas. The English writers Henry Treece and J.F. Hendry then distilled neo-romantic ideas into a specific manifesto when they formed the New Apocalypse group. As Hewison explains, they rejected the 'outwardly directed and "classical" viewpoint of pre-war poetry of the Auden School' in favour of a 'romantic and inwardly-directed extreme'.<sup>44</sup> As mentioned in Chapter Three, despite their vocal denunciations of the preceding generation, Greacen and the Apocalyptic writers were in fact influenced by Auden and his nineteen thirties peers.<sup>45</sup>

Freudian analysis and surrealism were central to the manifestos of the New Apocalypse, which argued that myth and the imagination could liberate the

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<sup>40</sup> McFadden, Untitled MS, p. 6; Greacen, 'Introduction', in *Poems from Ulster*, p. 5.

<sup>41</sup> Roy McFadden, 'Ulster – May 1941', in Alex Comfort, Roy McFadden, and Ian Serrailier, *Three New Poets* (Billericay: Grey Walls Press, 1942), p. 16.

<sup>42</sup> Robert Greacen, 'The Way we Write Now', *Irish Writing*, 2 (June 1947), 86-94 (p. 87).

<sup>43</sup> Greacen, 'The Way we Write Now', p. 88. Keery has debated the genesis of the New Apocalypse in 'The Burning Baby and the Bathwater' series, printed in *PN Review* from 29.4 (March-April 2003) to 33.1 (September-October 2006).

<sup>44</sup> Hewison, p. 100.

<sup>45</sup> Brown, *Northern Voices*, p. 129; A.T. Tolley, *The Poetry of the Forties* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1985), p. 101.

individual from an increasingly mechanistic and totalitarian existence. Greacen outlined his understanding of this ideology as follows:

Their philosophy is summarised in the idea that man has himself become implicated in the machine he once tended, with the result that he has now found himself submerged, sterile. He must free his personality and make himself a complete man, responsible, vocal and harmonious in his whole being. Thus they hoped to bring about a fresh awareness of the possibilities of a romantic attitude in liberating the mind and the emotions, in making possible spontaneity and wonder, the essence of true poetry.<sup>46</sup>

Such ideas are found throughout poetry of the Second World War and are not unique to the New Apocalypse. For example, Maybin believed that the individual is more than ‘a cog in any machine which may try to organise that society’.<sup>47</sup> Rodgers wished to liberate emotions in his poetry, counteracting the process of dehumanization which was occurring due to the rise of military technologies. It is the extreme reaction of the New Apocalypse, and the influence of surrealism, which marks it out from such general concerns.

Although the three-page manifesto which introduces *Poems from Ulster* does not explicitly mention the New Apocalypse, many of its fundamental ideas are obviously derived from this movement. Greacen begins by sketching an unpropitious picture of wartime literature, writing that young poets felt that ‘the nature and tempo of these crass inhumanities for which so many deceptive euphemisms exist, would admit of little opportunity for authors not yet established’. He criticizes the ‘old men’ for leaving the younger generation a ‘legacy of lies, shams, deceptions, compromise and half-truths’ which led to a ‘cataclysm their elders could no longer postpone’. Not only is the older generation to blame for the war, but also for the prevalence of poetry which relies on ‘tinsel-like objectivity’ and neglects ‘sincerity, simplicity and ardour’. Greacen predicts the demise of the ‘effete hangers-on of the Auden-Spender-MacNeice-Lewis’ movement as the younger generation take centre-stage,

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<sup>46</sup> Greacen, ‘The Way we Write Now’, p. 88.

<sup>47</sup> Patrick Maybin, Letter to John Hewitt, 4 August 1939, PRONI D/3838/3/10, p. 2.

promoting a 'message of love' which valorizes the individual. These new writers understand that 'the integration of individual personality must be achieved before the setting-up of a political, social or moral philosophy for others'.<sup>48</sup>

*Poems* received mixed reviews. *The Northern Whig* rather surprisingly announced that one 'of the most popular small presents sent over the festive season was a slim volume of Ulster verse' containing 'slender' poetry which is none the less 'significant'.<sup>49</sup> The *Belfast Newsletter* reviewer referred to the poets, rather sarcastically, as a 'gallant company' whose poetry is 'clever' but 'more than a trifle bleak and hard'. The lyric poem, the reviewer complains, has 'metamorphose[d] itself into the dirge'.<sup>50</sup> Hewitt was less than complimentary when he wrote to Maybin, complaining about Greacen's 'bad' anthology.<sup>51</sup> In the more public forum of *The Irish Times*, Austin Clarke warned Greacen not to confuse 'circumstances with ability', that is, not to assume that all poetry written under the intense pressures of war is good. He noted the overly strong influence of contemporary English poetry and the lack of identifiably local content: '[m]ost of the contributors [...] have not justified the title of the collection except in a geographical sense'.<sup>52</sup> The assumption underlying Clarke's comments is that poetry written in Ireland or Northern Ireland should conform to expectations about a native mode of writing, rather than being influenced primarily by an English literary movement. In the introduction to *An Anthology of Irish Verse: The Poetry of Ireland from Mythological Times to the Present* (1948), Padraic Colum insisted that the 'note of racial distinctiveness' was

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<sup>48</sup> Greacen, 'Introduction', in *Poems from Ulster*, p. 5.

<sup>49</sup> Anon., 'Queen's and the Arts: A New Literary Movement', *Northern Whig*, 5 January 1941, MFC CN2, p. 16.

<sup>50</sup> Anon., 'New Poetry', *Belfast Newsletter*, 28 January 1941, MFC CN2, p. 16.

<sup>51</sup> John Hewitt, Letter to Patrick Maybin, 15 December 1941, PRONI D/3838/3/12, p. 1.

<sup>52</sup> Austin Clarke, 'Some Recent Poetry', *The Irish Times*, 17 January 1942, p. 5.

the most significant quality which distinguished Irish poetry from other contemporary verse.<sup>53</sup> Greacen's anthology reacted against such ideas.

In contradiction to Clarke's comments, in a geographical sense the contributors do not justify the anthology's title. Only five of the eight poets – Greacen, McFadden, Gallen, Gillespie, and Maurice James Craig – are from Northern Ireland. The volume is bookended by Harold Brooks, Alex Comfort, and Nicholas Moore, English poets who were associated with the New Apocalypse and had featured in *The New Northman* under Greacen and Gallen's editorship. Another fundamental problem, which undermines the anthology's aim of promoting a coherent local poetry renaissance, is that not all of the volume's contents demonstrate the principles outlined in Greacen's introduction. As T.S. Eliot observed, young poets involved in co-operative anthologies 'frequently bind themselves together by formulating a set of principles or rules, to which usually nobody adheres'.<sup>54</sup> For example, although his poems are set in an urban landscape, the themes of the individual, faith in mankind, and a resurgence of personal emotion do not impinge on the two pages allotted to Maurice James Craig. His 'Ballad to a Traditional Refrain' and 'Song' are focussed on political issues relevant to Ireland, whilst the former is satirical and witty:

We swore by King William there'd never be seen  
An All-Irish Parliament at College Green,  
So at Stormont we're nailing the flag to the mast:  
*May the Lord in His mercy be kind to Belfast!*<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Padraic Colum, 'Introduction', in *An Anthology of Irish Verse: The Poetry of Ireland from Mythological Times to the Present*, ed. by Padraic Colum (New York: Liveright, 1948), pp. 3-20 (p. 4).

<sup>54</sup> T.S. Eliot, 'What is Minor Poetry', in *On Poetry and Poets* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1957), pp. 39-52 (pp. 40-1).

<sup>55</sup> Maurice James Craig, 'Ballad to a Traditional Refrain', in *Poems from Ulster*, ed. by Greacen, p. 10.



There is a clear contrast between Craig's poems and the final lines of Moore's contribution, which announces that '[p]olitics we eschew'.<sup>56</sup>

Even so, many of the contributions do share a neo-romantic style and concerns, as is evidenced by Greacen's 'One Recent Evening'. This poem was written around the time of the Belfast Blitz, which occurred on the nights of the 7/8<sup>th</sup> and 15/16<sup>th</sup> of April and the 4/5<sup>th</sup> and 5/6<sup>th</sup> May 1941. The manuscript is dated the 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1941, although McFadden later stated that it was composed the morning after a bombing. McFadden recalled that this was an occasion when he and Greacen were arrested as their activities on behalf of the PPU had bizarrely brought them under suspicion of having connections with the IRA. After questioning, they were released and, according to McFadden, under surveillance for several months.<sup>57</sup> Whether or not McFadden's dates are correct, the poem was composed in an atmosphere conditioned by the blitz and the students' involvement with pacifist campaigns. This contributes to Greacen's depiction of the individual's alienation from the war effort:

One recent evening, when time and space were standing still,  
He crossed the road flanked by air-raid rubble,  
And came to a bridge where water stood below.  
The sky was flushed with red and very spacious.

The soldiers paced – one of them with bayonet fixed –  
Around the firm, broad-breasted, sand-bag fort.  
(His brother had defiled the earth.)  
The sound of trumpets slashed the dim horizon lines.

And then he felt the War's impact for individuals –  
How it sent one to signal across seas from an oil-tanker,  
Another with wound and suitcase from a line of lean houses...  
Tongues of air or sea, of land or fear, divide and conquer us.

Walking beside the river, he forgot the shells that poise  
In the city of his alternate love and hate:  
He forgot the obscenities of roof and window,  
The mad catharsis of the thoroughfares.

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<sup>56</sup> Nicholas Moore, 'The Indian and the Shark', in *Poems from Ulster*, ed. by Greacen, p. 22.

<sup>57</sup> McFadden, Untitled MS, p. 4.

Men must not weep, he thought, or show a too-great love  
 For those who sleep under debris or beside ditches...  
 "It is feared the death-roll will be heavy."  
*Collective anguish has no eyes to wipe.*

And he, being then an observer, dazed by lack of sleep,  
 Was conscious only of his unwilling senses,  
 Of his refusal to accept man's malice or stupidity...  
 While the soldiers paced – one of them with bayonet fixed.<sup>58</sup>

The opening stanza evokes the state of a city caught up in the middle of war. The picture is one of a hiatus in time, a pause between recent destruction and the coming apocalypse, in which there is little to do but wait. Whilst the description of the sky suggests passion, emotion, and liberation, it also ominously hints that the future holds further devastation. The lyrical sibilance of this line gives way to the accented, harsh plosives of the next stanza, in which the solid reality of the war defences bring the poem back down to earth.

At the heart of this poem is a consideration of the issues facing the individual in a time of war. Much like the speaker of McFadden's contribution to the anthology, entitled 'Poem', the central figure is stripped of purpose and agency. However, whereas McFadden's speaker is unable to act as he is overwhelmed by the scale of the conflict, in the third stanza of 'One Recent Evening' Greacen presents the personified War itself as the power which determines the fate of individuals. Two possibilities are offered: the role of the observer or of the soldier. Yet, Greacen presents the divisions between the men as less than clear-cut. Until the final stanza, when the word 'observer' definitively differentiates the non-combatant from the soldier, the repetition of the pronoun 'he' confuses the identities of the two men. Moreover, whilst it is possible to read the description of the soldier marching 'with bayonet fixed' as a symbol of military aggression intruding onto the Home Front, it is also indicative of his individuality within the wartime collective. In the fifth

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<sup>58</sup> Greacen, 'One Recent Evening', in *Poems from Ulster*, p. 17.

stanza, the observer attempts to persuade himself to adopt the mentality of the war machine, eschewing emotion in a manner comparable to Rodgers's airman. The later alteration of the poem to read '[o]fficial anguish has no eyes to wipe' dilutes the point Greacen makes in the 1941 version, as it shifts the focus away from society's collusion in the necessary indifference of the war machine to a critique of the government's reaction (*GCP*, p. 19).

The poem concludes with the reiteration of ideas Greacen expressed in the introduction to *Poems*. There, he hopes that writers will retain 'faith in man's essential good' and continue to 'sing against an accompaniment of whistling bombs'.<sup>59</sup> In 'One Recent Evening' the juxtaposition of the observer's 'refusal to accept man's malice or stupidity' with the detail of the 'bayonet fixed' indicates that such faith is extremely difficult to maintain. Other poems included in the anthology assert the primacy of the individual, emotion, and freedom from the war machine in terms of sexual relationships. These impulses were fundamental to the New Apocalypse, particularly those poems which Herbert Read termed 'reconstructive'. Such verse, Read posited, imagined an alternative or post-war world rather than representing the war itself. Despite the positive, future-oriented quality of several of the lyrics included in *Poems*, Greacen's confident claims of a literary revival are belied by the slimness of the volume. Rather than launching a fully-fledged literary revival heavily influenced by the New Apocalypse, *Poems* signalled simply a new beginning and an alternative direction in Northern Irish poetry.

In 1942, Greacen and Alex Comfort edited a neo-romantic anthology entitled *Lyra: An Anthology of New Lyric*, which contained work by Gallen, Greacen, and McFadden. The English writer Emanuel Litvinoff also features: he was stationed in

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<sup>59</sup> Greacen, 'Introduction', in *Poems from Ulster*, p. 5.

Northern Ireland for some time during the war. Most of the contributors had little connection with the region, however, and names such as Henry Treece and Wrey Gardiner are familiar from New Apocalypse publications. After *Lyra* Greacen began to edit anthologies which had a more inclusive approach. His next project was the joint editorship, with McFadden, of three 'broadsheets' entitled *Ulster Voices* and one copy of *Irish Voices* which appeared in 1943. Seeking to broaden the number and type of poets represented, the aspiring editors approached Hewitt. He agreed, but grumbled to Maybin that the 'Greacen-McFadden gang have corralled me for their broadsheet racket. *Ulster Voices*. The first no. gave clear evidence of tonsillitis'.<sup>60</sup>

The following year Greacen edited the more ambitious anthology *Northern Harvest: Anthology of Ulster Writing*, which showcased both neo-romantic and regional poetry. In presenting these modes in the same volume, Greacen tried to highlight their similarities, whilst retaining a sense of the diversity of contemporary poetry in Northern Ireland. Like regionalism, neo-romanticism and the New Apocalypse were part of a widespread reaction against the metropolitan character of much modernist and nineteen thirties literature.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, in the introduction to *The White Horseman: Prose and Verse of the New Apocalypse* (1941), G.S. Fraser explained that most writers included 'have a certain sympathy with ideas like those expressed by Mumford in *The Culture of Cities*: that culture should be less congested and centralized [...] and that human units of control, generally, should be smaller and more adapted to natural regions'.<sup>62</sup> Even if Hewitt disliked the poetry of the New Apocalypse, he concurred with this facet of its theoretical basis.

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<sup>60</sup> John Hewitt, Letter to Patrick Maybin, 9 June 1943, PRONI D/3838/3/12, p. 3.

<sup>61</sup> Tolley, p. 123; Hewison, p. 111.

<sup>62</sup> G.S. Fraser, 'Apocalypse in Poetry', in *The White Horseman*, ed. by J.F. Hendry and Henry Treece (London: Routledge, 1941), pp. 3-31 (pp. 8-9).

### III. *Northern Harvest* (1944): a more inclusive approach

Despite the differences between *Poems from Ulster* and *Northern Harvest*, both anthologies ebulliently announce a new movement in contemporary literature. The latter benefits from the increased energy and success of local writing in the years between 1941 and 1944. Consequently, it is a much more successful collection. This new confidence is reflected in the tone of Greacen's preface, which is less iconoclastic and aggressive than that of *Poems*:

Due to the new awakening in Ulster writing, which has taken place since the War started, and thanks to the widespread interest which that renaissance has aroused, I have felt for some time that a critical selection was called for.<sup>63</sup>

These comments were more accurate in 1944 than 1941, when only *The New Northman*, Rodgers's *Awake!*, and an Ulster issue of *The Bell* testified to the existence of a revival. 1942 saw the establishment of Rowley's Mourne Press, which published titles by McLaverty and Bell in 1943. McFadden's *Swords and Ploughshares* and the *Ulster Voices* series were published in 1943, followed in 1944 by Greacen's *One Recent Evening*, the first issue of *Lagan*, O'Faoláin's anthology *The North*, and the Campbell brothers' collection *Now in Ulster*. Hewitt's *Conacre* and *Compass: Two Poems* were privately printed in 1943 in 1944 respectively.

The mood among most writers and artists at this time was positive with respect to the progress being made in the arts. As early as 1941, the *Northern Whig* reviewer found evidence that 'the North is experiencing a literary renaissance', whilst in 1944 Lynn Doyle wrote to *The Irish Times*, stating that '[h]ope and enthusiasm for the Arts are being awakened and stimulated in Northern Ireland'.<sup>64</sup> Boyd was more circumspect in the introduction to the first issue of *Lagan*: 'it must be remembered that the work in this anthology represents at best the beginnings of a

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<sup>63</sup> Greacen, 'The Editor Says...', in *Northern Harvest*, n.p.

<sup>64</sup> Anon., 'Art Soars in the North', p. 14; Doyle, p. 2.

movement'.<sup>65</sup> In 1945, Hewitt was similarly cautious. Alluding to Greacen's use of the word 'renaissance', he wrote that it was necessary to scrutinize any evidence for a revival, in addition to examining:

[...] the more fundamental complex of problems: whether the circumstances exist which would permit this 'revival', whether a definitely Ulster style, idiom, approach is to be looked for and what should be the broad recognisable outlines of this. Let me begin at once by declaring against the word 'renaissance'. Whatever we are talking about is no rebirth.<sup>66</sup>

Whereas in *Poems* Greacen distinguished the new wave of poets from their predecessors, here Hewitt assumed that a revival requires contemporary writers to work within a distinctive tradition and mode of expression. These two ideas are central to most mid-century Northern Irish writers' conceptions of regional or regionalist literature, although, as demonstrated by Greacen's anthologies, they are manifested in a variety of different ways.

Central to Greacen's editing policy in *Northern Harvest* is the desire to present Northern Irish writers as a diverse group working within a local tradition, albeit one with a much briefer history than that espoused by Hewitt. Dispensing with the narrow selection criteria employed in *Poems*, in *Northern Harvest* Greacen aims instead for 'representativeness'. The result is an anthology containing a broad range of writers whose work is divided into sections headed Fiction, Poetry, and Belles Lettres. Each section begins with writers already established throughout Ireland and the United Kingdom – such as St John Ervine, Forrest Reid, Helen Waddell, and Robert Lynd – and is concluded by the youngest generation. In poetry, the names of Rodgers and Hewitt were well known in literary circles, whilst Colin Middleton, John Irvine, Maurice James Craig, Bruce Williamson, McFadden, and Greacen would have been familiar to readers of *The New Northman*, *Lagan*, and *The Bell*.

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<sup>65</sup> John Boyd, 'Introduction', *Lagan*, 1 (1944), 5-7 (p. 7).

<sup>66</sup> Hewitt, 'The Bitter Gourd', p. 108.

Abandoning the dissenting tone he adopted in the introduction to *Poems*, Greacen states that the chronological arrangement of contributions means that ‘the lines of descent and divergence may be more clearly noted; for no writer, not even the youngest or most original, is wholly cut off from the men who are his literary progenitors’.<sup>67</sup> By expanding the range of contributors, and not including any English writers, Greacen was able to strengthen his case for the existence of a renaissance.

The anthology’s title encapsulates Greacen’s attempt to balance his interest in the New Apocalypse with the increasing vitality of regional writing. The title alludes to *Wartime Harvest: An Anthology of Prose and Verse from the Literary Magazine “Kingdom Come”*, a 1943 anthology edited by Stefan Schimanski and Henry Treece. This anthology and the magazine *Kingdom Come* were closely associated with the New Apocalypse and championed individualism and the survival of literature in a time of war. The influence of Apocalypticism is manifested in *Northern Harvest* in the poems by the youngest generation, which includes Greacen, McFadden, Craig, and Williamson. However, McFadden’s ‘Lines by Slieve Donard’ and ‘Evening in Donegal’, both discussed further in Chapter Seven, demonstrate his progression towards a combination of regionalism and neo-romanticism. In addition, the agrarian connotations of the phrase *Northern Harvest* encompass the regional or pastoral modes employed by the majority of contributors. For example, Hewitt’s contributions explore the local countryside: both composed in 1942, ‘East Antrim Winter’ and ‘The Brothers’ celebrate nature as an ‘[u]nregimented’ foil to wartime culture (*HCP*, p. 29, p. 32). Given the success of *Awake!*, it is surprising that in the poetry section Rodgers is represented only by ‘Ireland’, his most confident assertion

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<sup>67</sup> Greacen, ‘The Editor Says...’, in *Northern Harvest*, n.p.

of rootedness in his locality. Similarly, the prose pieces, which include Bell's 'Two Blades of Grass' and Rodgers's 'The Funeral', are firmly situated in Northern Ireland. These seek, imaginatively or anthropologically, to uncover and explain the region's complex culture.

It is notable that the anthology's representation of the region does not follow the apolitical stance Greacen adopted during his editorship of *The New Northman*, in which he had 'confess[ed] a personal aversion to politics as a human activity'.<sup>68</sup> In the preface to *Northern Harvest* Greacen addresses issues of sectarianism:

It must be pointed out that these essays, stories and poems are presented in no exclusive or arbitrary manner, that every viewpoint from Unionist to Nationalist, whether explicit or implicit, has been given its chance to speak out. [...] Whatever may be the solution to our political and social problems – which War conditions have, if anything, intensified – let us pay them the tribute of honesty and frankness.<sup>69</sup>

This statement indicates the growing tendency to associate the arts in Northern Ireland with a liberal, inclusive, and non-sectarian stance at odds with mainstream unionism. It demonstrates a progression away from the ideas which informed *Poems*, the cover of which bore the red hand of Ulster, a symbol associated predominantly with unionism in the post-partition period. The most striking difference between the anthologies in this respect is that the contributors to *Northern Harvest* are not exclusively drawn from the unionist community. Furthermore, the prose pieces by McLaverty, Rowley, Sheaman, and Thomas Fegan present Catholicism from a range of perspectives, whilst Denis Ireland reflects on the subversive legacy of northern Republicanism. Yet, despite Greacen's bold prefatory claims, this diversity is not represented in the poetry section, which includes only unionist writers. Hewitt's 'The Brothers' conforms to Greacen's assertion that all viewpoints should be represented honestly, but it serves to reinforce social boundaries between urban and rural

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<sup>68</sup> Greacen, 'Editorial', p. 45.

<sup>69</sup> Greacen, 'The Editor Says...', in *Northern Harvest*, n.p.



dwellers, a dichotomy which implies political and religious divisions too. The poem's central issue is the speaker's incomprehension of rural life and his desire to speak with two boys he observes when walking in the countryside: 'When the day / seems all propitious we shall stop to talk, / and they shall answer in their separate ways / [...] / what their world is like' (*HCP*, p. 32). No communication occurs, no boundaries are crossed, and the boys remain in a separate world.

Unlike Hewitt's contributions to the anthology, two of Greacen's three poems explore urban landscapes and cultures. The first of these, entitled 'The Glorious Twelfth', sits uneasily alongside the anti-sectarian sentiments expressed in the preface. The speaker voices the reaction of unionists who lament the wartime banning of the annual Orange Order celebrations on the twelfth of July:

Four years ago since we last heard the drums' thunder,  
 Since the Orange banners looped in gay procession  
 And bands of flute and fife, of brass and silver  
 Played hell to the Pope and immortality to William –  
 To William, Prince of Orange, defender and avenger,  
 To William, the stiff Dutch Protestant who saved us  
 From villainous James, the tyrant Stuart King.<sup>70</sup>

The speaker rehearses the foundational folklore of the Orange order, before moving on to imagine the bloodshed occurring on the battlefields of the Second World War. The superficially benign militarism of the community celebration fades as the poem's perspective expands to a panoramic vision of wartime devastation. At the conclusion, the speaker's triumphalist attitude to the Battle of the Boyne becomes entwined with a prophecy of victory in the Second World War:

You will remember that the Twelfth was always dry,  
 While now in Sicily the bloods of Continents are joined,  
 While now the Russian plains are stacked with corpses,  
 Rotting in the Red sun, feeding plagues to common rats...  
 But after carnage, there will be music; after death will be hope,  
 After the horror of the day will come the evening dream,  
 After hatred's harvest joy will march, shrouded, to Finaghy.

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<sup>70</sup> Greacen, 'The Glorious Twelfth', in *Northern Harvest*, pp. 98-9.

It is difficult to determine Greacen's standpoint in relation to this. One possibility is that, as stated in the preface, he is honestly expressing a particular viewpoint. A second option, which does not necessarily exclude the first, is that Greacen has adopted a persona in order to critique the beliefs which underlie the unionist speaker's narrative. This proposition is supported by the connection between the '[f]ire in our throats' on the twelfth of July and the 'fire [that has] run swift rivers into Europe'. The flames of uncompromising adherence to a political ideology have now spread destruction throughout Europe. In addition, it is evident that in this poem Greacen is insistent that the unpoetic details of urban life and the Orange order are incorporated into poetry. Here and elsewhere he asserts that poets should adopt a holistic attitude to Northern Ireland's culture, focussing not just on rural areas.

*Northern Harvest* achieved greater success than *Poems* and was relatively well received by the local press. The *Belfast Telegraph*, for example, interpreted the anthology as a signal that 'Ulster is beginning to stand on its own feet in literature', although 'not many [of the contributors] can stand up to being read several times'.<sup>71</sup> The reaction outside of Northern Ireland was lukewarm: the *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer thought that the 'fiction section contains the cream' whilst the 'poetry is less distinctive'.<sup>72</sup> Despite the reviewer's lack of enthusiasm, Greacen had succeeded where others had failed by drawing a local publication to the attention of a major national periodical. Furthermore, he had managed to incorporate two different, and often divergent, clusters of local writers in one volume.

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<sup>71</sup> Anon., 'Ulster Writers Show they can Stand on their Own Feet', *Belfast Telegraph*, 31 December 1943, MFC CN2, p. 27.

<sup>72</sup> Anon., 'Ulster Voices: Tradition of Vitality Renewed', Review of *Northern Harvest: Anthology of Ulster Writing* ed. by Robert Greacen, *TLS*, 15 April 1944, p. 189.

#### IV. *Irish Harvest* (1946): rejecting the Irish mode

Always ambitious, Greacen moved to Dublin in 1943 and, along with poet and diplomat Valentin Iremonger, set up the New Frontiers Press. This company published the anthologies *On the Barricades* (1944) and *Irish Harvest: A Collection of Stories, Essays and Poems* (1946), along with plays by Jack Loudan and Teresa Deevy. The move provided Greacen with the opportunity to situate Northern Irish writing within a new context and to present his anthologies as an intervention in the field of Irish, as well as British, literature. Greacen expanded his vision of promoting up-and-coming writers to encompass the whole island of Ireland, now aiming to provide ‘proof of a new vitality in *Irish* writing’ (my emphasis).<sup>73</sup>

Greacen’s repetition of the word ‘new’ indicates a break with the past and a focus on the future. Whilst this was in imitation of contemporary anthologies of English poetry, such as *New Signatures* and *The New Apocalypse*, it was also in opposition to what Greacen perceived to be the backwards-looking mentality of Irish literature and, by extension, independent Ireland. His most repeatedly invoked target is the ‘Cathleen ni Houlihan tradition or “the mist that does be upon the bog”’.<sup>74</sup> These tropes synecdochically represent the legacy of the Irish Literary Revival, whose central ideas and images were treated reductively by some writers during the inter-war period. Brown summarizes the hallmarks of this strand of Irish writing:

[...] for many years less imaginative, more piously patriotic writers [than Yeats and Synge] had produced countless poems in which peasants and farmers had appeared not to reveal human possibility but to exhibit the unspoiled simplicity of the essential Irish, who had for many violent centuries endured the ravages of climate and oppression. [...] They celebrated a version of Irish pastoral, where rural life was a condition of virtue inasmuch as it remained an expression of an ancient civilization uncontaminated by commercialism and progress. In doing so they helped to confirm

<sup>73</sup> Robert Greacen, Valentin Iremonger, and Bruce Williamson, *On the Barricades* (Dublin: New Frontiers Press, 1944), n.p.

<sup>74</sup> Greacen, ‘A Note on Two Ulster Poets’, p. 13.

Irish society in a belief that rural life constituted an essential element of an unchanging Irish identity.<sup>75</sup>

For Greacen, the past, 'Irishness', introversion, the Irish language, and obsession with rural life were the central characteristics of a deteriorating Irish mode. As demonstrated above, he had already established his own framework of values and poetics which were in direct opposition to this mentality. His vision of urban, future-oriented poetry written under the shadow of war, and influenced by British literature was, in part, a protest against the ideology of Irish Ireland.

*Irish Harvest* manifests Greacen's vision of a revitalized and modern Irish literature. Undertaken without the assistance of Iremonger, this anthology was funded by Maurice Fridberg, a Dubliner with experience in bookselling in London.<sup>76</sup> The anthology's plain cover and modern typeface immediately announce its self-conscious modernity. Its simplicity resembles the austere cover design of early issues of *The Bell* and anticipates the dust-jacket of Garrity's similarly forward-looking anthology, *New Irish Poets*.

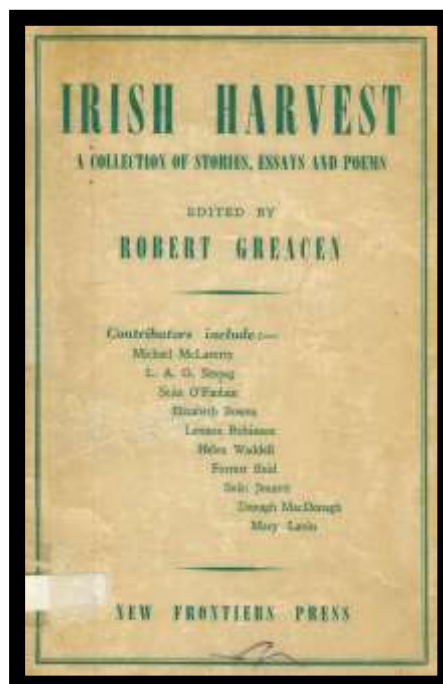


Figure 2: Cover of Robert Greacen, ed., *Irish Harvest: A Collection of Stories, Essays and Poems* (Dublin: New Frontiers Press, 1946)

<sup>75</sup> Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History*, p. 72.

<sup>76</sup> Greacen, *The Sash*, p. 136.

The cover design contrasts sharply with the Celtic patterns and fonts which adorn anthologies such as Elizabeth Sharp's *Lyra Celtica: Anthology of Representative Celtic Poetry* (1896, 1924, and 1932) and Padraic Colum's *An Anthology of Irish Verse: The Poetry of Ireland from Mythological Times to the Present* (1948). Even so, Greacen's choice of a green font emphasizes his continued commitment to Ireland, although his vision for a modern culture is radically different from the state's dominant ideology.

One of the most notable aspects of *Irish Harvest* is the prominence of Northern Irish writers in a Dublin-based publication. With the exception of *The Bell's Irish Poems of To-Day* (1944), other mid-century anthologies of Irish literature published during the nineteen forties do not include many Northern Irish writers. Whereas a third of writers in *Irish Harvest*, and five out of nine poets, are from Northern Ireland, the proportion is no higher than one fifth in Donagh MacDonagh's *Poems from Ireland* (1944), John Irvine's *The Flowering Branch* (1945), Padraic Colum's *An Anthology of Irish Verse* (1948), and Devin Garrity's *New Irish Poets* (1948).<sup>77</sup> For Greacen, the literature of Northern Ireland could act as a suitable foil to writing in the Irish mode as the industrialized, war-torn city of Belfast provided scope for poetry which confronts modernity. Furthermore, as Greacen argued elsewhere, Northern Ireland was politically part of the United Kingdom, yet geographically situated in the island of Ireland, and could therefore 'act as the bridgehead between Ireland and Britain', uniting 'the best out of the English, the Gaelic and the Anglo-Irish cultures'.<sup>78</sup> The ideal literature Greacen imagined would be impacted by global events and cultures, not shielded by

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<sup>77</sup> It is impossible to give a definite figure: many contributors published so little that their biographies are not recorded in any histories or databases of Irish writing or culture.

<sup>78</sup> Robert Greacen, 'Drama Up North', *The Bell*, 13.5 (February 1947), 53-7 (p. 53).

neutrality or constrained by censorship. This viewpoint is similar to that articulated in *The Bell* during the early nineteen forties: ‘the strength of the North is that she does live and act in the Now’, O’Faoláin proclaimed in the Ulster issue of July 1942.<sup>79</sup> However, whereas *The Bell* championed documentary realism as a means of rooting literature in the present rather than the past, Greacen’s preference was for neo-romanticism.

The anthology’s title suggests that this new collection is a sequel or companion volume to *Northern Harvest*. Indeed, *Irish Harvest* does develop some of the ideas which were central to the editing of the earlier anthology, particularly the fundamental aim of showcasing the work of contemporary writers. Both anthologies include a spectrum of fiction, essays, and poetry by living writers of all generations ranging from Greacen and McFadden, to the slightly older Hewitt, O’Faoláin, and Geoffrey Taylor, to veterans Helen Waddell and Forrest Reid. Unlike *Northern Harvest*, the contributions to the 1946 anthology are not organized chronologically or generically, but are placed in no immediately apparent order. This facilitates the representation of a literary milieu which is lively and productive, and within which there is significant dialogue between generations and, perhaps more importantly, across the border. ‘[L]iterature has no “Border”’, Greacen insists in the introduction.<sup>80</sup>

One reviewer was not convinced by the way in which *Irish Harvest* supported this assertion: ‘[m]ust an anthology of Irish literature edited by an Irishman, who himself insists that there is no “Border” in the arts, contain a foreword

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<sup>79</sup> Sean O’Faoláin, ‘An Ulster Issue’, *The Bell*, 4.4 (July 1942), 229-31 (p. 231).

<sup>80</sup> Greacen, ‘Report from Dublin’, in *Irish Harvest*, p. 13.

composed by him from the standpoint of a foreign visitor?’<sup>81</sup> The introductory essay narrates Greacen’s mixed sense of relief and guilt in escaping wartime Belfast for a comparatively more comfortable life in Dublin, a city in which he is an outsider: ‘[o]ne arrived from the Northern drizzle, with its black-out and khaki and drab rationing, to find a brilliantly-lit, well-groomed atmosphere that appeared sinfully “normal” in a stricken world’.<sup>82</sup> Ignoring any contradictions in his own proposition, Greacen stridently argues that Northern Ireland is already an integral part of the island of Ireland’s literary culture. O’Faoláin’s approach to the issue of partition was considerably more nuanced. He hoped that *The Bell* would foster ‘intercommunication’ between two diverging literary traditions and thus forestall an increasingly apparent cultural partition.<sup>83</sup>

Further comparison with contemporary anthologies reveals that Greacen omits any poets writing explicitly in the Irish mode or whose work draws on Gaelic influences. Thus Austin Clarke, Robert Farren, and Padraic Fallon do not appear, although neither do Gallen, Gillespie, or Craig, the student poets who played an important role in the literary life of Queen’s University. Such elisions may well have been due to a range of reasons outside of Greacen’s control. However, I propose that Greacen preferred to include work which, to a greater or lesser extent, opposed the values of Irish Ireland and articulated the need to look to the future rather than the past. This underlying impulse is in tension with the amount of space available to an anthologist who ambitiously wished to include both prose and poetry from Northern Ireland and Ireland. In order to cover such a wide range of writing, Greacen had to

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<sup>81</sup> A.J. Leventhal, ‘Grain for Export’, Review of *Irish Harvest: A Collection of Stories, Essays and Poems* ed. by Robert Greacen, *The Irish Times*, 22 June 1946, p. 4.

<sup>82</sup> Greacen, ‘Report from Dublin’, in *Irish Harvest*, p. 9.

<sup>83</sup> Sean O’Faoláin, ‘Ulster’, *The Bell*, 2.4 (July 1941), 4-11 (p. 8).

limit his selection so that it became less representative of the milieu he was promoting.

One benefit of abandoning a programmatic organization of contributions is that individual pieces are juxtaposed in order to create dialogue between different opinions. For example, McFadden's poem 'The Orator' immediately follows O'Faoláin's short story 'The Man Who Invented Sin': both address, and question, the value of learning the Irish language. McFadden presents the language movement as flawed and a mere shadow of Yeats's heroic vision of Ireland:

If Yeats were still alive maybe  
Ireland would cut a dash again.  
But men can starve on poetry  
And bullets break the poet's pen.<sup>84</sup>

McFadden targets an ivory tower mentality, asserting that political and historical events intrude on the life of the artist and therefore cannot, and should not, be ignored. The language holiday in O'Faoláin's story, involving a journey from the city to rural Ireland, is also a retreat from the realities of modern Ireland. Several of the anthology's contributions engage with the historical realities McFadden insists must be confronted. In their short stories, McLaverty, O'Faoláin, and Lennox Robinson employ the naturalistic mode characteristic of fiction promoted by *The Bell* and *Lagan* as a means of exploring the realities of life in post-independence Ireland. These stories identify social, cultural, and economic problems, implicitly pointing out the failures of the nationalist vision of an independent state.

Another interesting juxtaposition of prose and poetry is found in the transition between R.M. Fox's essay, 'The New Ireland', and Greacen's poem, 'The Undiscovered Island'. Fox divorces the government's plan for industrial development and rural electrification from any connection to the country's Gaelic

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<sup>84</sup> Roy McFadden, 'The Orator', in *Irish Harvest*, ed. by Greacen, pp. 136-7 (p. 137).



heritage. The ‘era of Shannon power’, writes Fox, ‘succeeded that of the Celtic Twilight. Ireland can no longer rely on the softening effect of the poetic shadows’ to hide the conditions in which many of her inhabitants live.<sup>85</sup> His conception of an economically independent, post-Emergency state relies on the development of a modern mindset and technology appropriate to improvements in the welfare of the population. In contrast, ‘The Undiscovered Island’, which immediately precedes Fox’s article, dwells on the hollowness of a comfortable middle-class existence based on trade, industrialism, and economic development. Unable to find any hope or spiritual home in dreams of ‘the miraculous west’, the southern ‘wheatlands’, or the ‘arid north’, the speakers dismiss thoughts of the future and relapse into empty, meaningless, and disillusioned existences. In this thinly-veiled description of Ireland, Greacen’s speakers have no real alternative to office life. In a dialogue between three voices, the unnamed man loses hope in an imaginary Hy Brasil:

Life is real, earnest; like accounts, like bank balances,  
Like the goods in the warehouse, like real estate,  
Like indigestion and B.O. and the spear of rheumatism.  
[...]  
I no longer dream of the island...  
I no longer dream of its sights and sounds...<sup>86</sup>

The banalities of everyday life build up through the use of anaphora and overwhelm the body, which becomes trapped by pain and discomfort. The poem’s conclusion suggests that those who oppose the religious and political status quo, who are ‘*ready to accept the necessary isolation*’, shall eventually see the island. When read alongside Fox’s article, Greacen’s poem articulates a need to humanize any plans for modernization, although he insists that this should not lead to the continued dominance of the church.

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<sup>85</sup> R.M. Fox, ‘The New Ireland, in *Irish Harvest*, ed. by Greacen, pp. 72-81 (p. 73).

<sup>86</sup> Robert Greacen, ‘The Undiscovered Island’, in *Irish Harvest*, ed. by Greacen, pp. 70-2 (p. 71).

### **V. *Contemporary Irish Poetry* (1949): an act of consolidation**

In 1949, Greacen and Iremonger's final anthology appeared. *Contemporary Irish Poetry* was one of three anthologies which Faber designed to present regional literature to the public: the other two were *Modern Welsh Poetry* (1944) and *Modern Scottish Poetry: An Anthology of the Scottish Renaissance, 1920-1945* (1946).<sup>87</sup>

According to Hewitt, the anthology was the 'most handsome representation' of Northern Irish poets produced in the mid-twentieth century.<sup>88</sup> However, Matthews has recently criticized the collection, stating that the brief preface 'does nothing to locate or characterize the work of this recent generation' of poets. The alphabetical arrangement and the 'paucity of work offered' indicates, Matthews argues, that 'there is little attempt to build a coherent sense of what the emerging generation of Irish poets might amount to, how they might situate themselves once the Yeatsian presence has disappeared'.<sup>89</sup> Although Matthews's comments are fair if the volume is viewed in isolation, a relatively coherent editorial objective emerges when it is considered as a consolidation of Greacen's earlier projects.

Originally, Greacen and Iremonger intended to include a much more detailed preface. However, Faber editor T.S. Eliot vetoed their "'fightin'" words' and asked for alterations to their selection of poems.<sup>90</sup> Therefore, the preface which is printed in the volume summarizes only the key ideas. The editors state that they wish to provide an 'over-all picture of the contemporary Irish scene' since the death of Yeats and to demonstrate continuity between generations of living poets. This poetry, they argue, is indelibly marked by the events and experiences of the war years which, as

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<sup>87</sup> Anon., Advertisement, *TLS*, 16 April 1949, p. 249.

<sup>88</sup> Hewitt, *A North Light*, p. 154.

<sup>89</sup> Matthews, 'The Poet as Anthologist', p. 538.

<sup>90</sup> Robert Greacen, *Brief Encounters: Literary Life in Dublin and Belfast in the 1940s* (Dublin: Cathair, 1991), p. 27.

demonstrated by Greacen's earlier anthologies, is an indication of his vision of a modern, forward-looking, urban aesthetic. Finally, the editors indicate that 'young and less-known' writers have been favoured'.<sup>91</sup> An objective found in the original preface also determined Greacen and Iremonger's editorial decisions. Aligning neutrality with the Irish mode, the original preface argues that:

Few people really believed that Ireland would succeed in preserving her neutrality: consequently, as the problems to be solved in Ireland were similar to those in any other country, it was obvious that it was no use burying one's head under the wool-blanket of the Celtic twilight. Ivory Round Towers, even if complete with the green-whiskered wolfhounds of Banba, Deirdre of the Sorrows, the harp that once [*sic*] and the dying fall of the mellifluous and kingly Gaelic, would hardly provide cover against the assault of a tommy-gunned, jack-booted airborne division.<sup>92</sup>

As in *Irish Harvest*, the editors see the Second World War as a symbol of the modern experience many Irish writers were avoiding. Post-Yeatsian poetry, Greacen and Iremonger argue, needs to respond to and represent this radically altered world.

There is considerable tension between the editors' views of the ideal direction of contemporary Irish poetry and the imperative to include a representative selection of texts. As in *Irish Harvest*, a large proportion of the poets are from Northern Ireland. It is unlikely that, as Padraic Fiacca wrote in his review of *Contemporary Irish Poetry*, 'the Northern group is just there to show no hard feelings'.<sup>93</sup> The hard feelings were probably on Fiacca's side, as he was not one of the thirty-four poets included. Each of the twelve Northern Irish poets is represented by a significant number of poems. This would be expected in the case of MacNeice, Rodgers, Hewitt, Greacen, and McFadden, all of whom were well-known or friends with the editors. However, there are a few surprises. Harrison and Craig have more poems than the considerably more prolific Clarke. Out of the eighteen poets

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<sup>91</sup> Robert Greacen and Valentin Iremonger, 'Preface', in *Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. by Greacen and Iremonger, p. 9.

<sup>92</sup> Greacen, *Brief Encounters*, p. 27.

<sup>93</sup> Fiacca, p. 24.

represented by three poems or fewer, there are only four writers from Northern Ireland. Considerably less space is given to those poets whose work engaged with the Irish mode or specifically Irish themes. Despite their success in comparison with young Northern Irish poets, Clarke, Fallon, and Farren are represented by just four, two, and three poems respectively. As Matthews points out, Kavanagh's absence is striking.<sup>94</sup> However, according to Greacen, this was not due to an editorial decision. Instead, Kavanagh demanded such a high price that Faber withdrew their request for material.<sup>95</sup>

As in Greacen's earlier anthologies, there is a disjunction between his vision of modern, urban, neo-romantic poetry and the practice of the majority of (Northern) Ireland's writers. As one reviewer commented, the imagery found in *Contemporary Irish Poetry* 'is mostly natural and rural: in a contemporary English anthology, corresponding to this, there would be more that was industrial and urban'.<sup>96</sup> The reviewer might have added that a contemporary English anthology would have contained more poems on the subject of war, written from the viewpoint of a combatant or a witness of the Blitz. MacNeice's 'Brother Fire' and 'Nuts in May' are the only Blitz poems, and the only piece written from a military base is Maybin's 'Ballykinlar, May 1940'.

Greacen's 'Poem to K.D' (addressed to novelist Kay Dick) considers the war from the perspective of a visitor in neutral Dublin. At first the speaker relishes his

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<sup>94</sup> Matthews, 'The Poet as Anthologist', p. 538.

<sup>95</sup> Greacen, *Irene*, p. 154.

<sup>96</sup> Laurence Whistler, Review of *Contemporary Irish Poetry* ed. by Robert Greacen and Valentin Iremonger, *TLS*, 26 August 1949, p. 554.

freedom, seeming to agree with MacNeice that wartime Dublin ‘give[s] me time for thought’.<sup>97</sup>

I greet you from a neutral country in a neutral hour  
 When the blood pace slows and nothing stirs  
 But the leaves in the parks, so gently;  
 So gently that not even the newspaper headlines  
 Can fluster the plumes of swans, gliding, gliding,  
 As on a lake of fire, fringed by pink water.  
 The pulse of life is faint, as in a trance,  
 As we await the backwash of hate’s last outrage.

[...]

But everywhere we see the uncharted darkness melt,  
 We see the sun pour on the sap-drained faces,  
 The oil of joy press motion in the wheels of love,  
 The masks fall off, the undying day return!<sup>98</sup>

Less vehement and acerbic than MacNeice’s ‘Neutrality’, this poem nevertheless critiques Ireland’s neutral stance. The still and peaceful streets, whose architecture reminds the reader of Dublin’s eighteenth-century hey-day, are characterized by a deadening stasis. The swans, symbols borrowed from the Irish Literary Revival, are unaware of the danger surrounding them and their potentially imminent deaths. A sudden change occurs in the final lines, in which the speaker predicts a time of liberation and a resurgence of emotion similar to that found at the conclusion of Rodgers’s ‘The Far-Off Hills’. The poem articulates a vaguely defined faith in humanity, which Greacen shared with McFadden and the New Apocalypse. From the ‘I’ of the opening lines, the poem moves towards the integration of the individual in a collective experience. The lone prophet becomes the voice of the community which has undergone an awakening.

<sup>97</sup> Louis MacNeice, ‘Dublin’, in *Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. by Greacen and Iremonger, pp. 117-8.

<sup>98</sup> Robert Greacen, ‘Poem to K.D.’, in *Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. by Greacen and Iremonger, p. 65.

‘Poem to K.D.’ lent its final line to the title of Greacen’s second solo volume, *The Undying Day* (1948), which sold fewer than one hundred copies.<sup>99</sup>

*Contemporary Irish Poetry* fared better with reviewers, although Greacen would not have been pleased with the conclusion of the *Belfast Newsletter* that, despite the quality of the contents, ‘one wishes [the poets] [...] would cheer up and write us a rollicking song for a change’.<sup>100</sup> Such comments confirmed Northern Irish poets’ belief that they were writing in a largely philistine culture. Greacen’s greatest coup in the compilation of *Contemporary Irish Poetry* was in attracting the support of Eliot and Faber. The Faber imprint had the power to validate the work of younger writers, many of whom had not published volumes of poetry, and to disseminate the anthology to a much larger international audience than could be reached by the New Frontiers Press. Never before had Greacen’s projects had such prominent advertisements in the *Times Literary Supplement*. *Contemporary Irish Poetry* treads a fine line between the co-operative and retrospective anthological models, as it is both an introduction of living poets to an international audience and an act of consolidation of the achievements of writers who were working during the war.

Despite their differences, in 1950 Hewitt hailed Greacen as an ‘indefatigable anthologist, and editor, to whom the Northern poets owe a great deal’.<sup>101</sup> Yet the low sales of *The Undying Day* discouraged Greacen and, after he moved to London, marital, financial, and emotional difficulties led to a hiatus in his writing career. Even so, the anthologies he had produced during the nineteen forties made a considerable contribution to the development of poetry in Northern Ireland, often

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<sup>99</sup> Anon., ‘Outstanding Poet with a Strong Strain of Social Awareness’, *The Irish Times*, 19 April 2008, p. 12.

<sup>100</sup> Anon., ‘Modern Poetry’, Review of *Contemporary Irish Poetry* ed. by Robert Greacen and Valentin Iremonger, *Belfast Newsletter*, 30 April 1949, MFC CN3, p. 35.

<sup>101</sup> Hewitt, ‘Poetry and Ulster’, p. 8.

bringing together work by the younger poets influenced by the New Apocalypse and that of the slightly older generation.

Implicit in this discussion of Greacen's editing career is the dearth of women writers represented in his anthologies. Waddell and Salkeld were the only women poets included in the early collections, whilst in *Contemporary Irish Poetry* Salkeld features alongside Rhoda Coghill and Freda Laughton. In contradiction to these representations of Northern Irish poetry, several women played key roles in the region's developing literary milieu during the war years. The next chapter will examine the contribution made by Laughton and Morton to this scene, as well as exploring in detail some of their poetic responses to the war.

## Chapter Six

### Women ‘with a wreath of words’ (*TH*, p. 14): May Morton and Freda Laughton

#### Introduction

The foregoing analysis of anthologies edited by Greacen during the nineteen forties reveals the names of few women poets. Similarly, periodicals such as *The New Northman*, *Lagan*, and *Ulster Voices*, in addition to post-war memoirs by key members of Belfast’s literary community, contain few references to women writers. However, as this chapter demonstrates with particular reference to Morton and Laughton, women poets made a significant contribution to poetry in Northern Ireland during this period. They wrote, published, and were involved in a number of literary organizations, vividly articulating their own experiences of the war years.

The first section of this chapter examines these two poets’ involvement in Belfast’s social scene, already mapped out in earlier chapters of this thesis, and thus reveals much about the literary group’s dynamics and interests. The second section of this chapter will consider the poetry of Morton, and the third, Laughton. Our understanding of the diversity of Northern Ireland’s nineteen forties poetry is enriched and extended by analysis of these two dramatically different poetic voices. Morton engaged more closely with regional ideas, predominantly writing pastoral verse derived from a disappearing folk culture. Laughton’s introverted and symbolic aesthetic practice deals more explicitly with issues surrounding female identity and the body. For both, the image of the house – either bombed or intact – is a symbol of female selfhood.



## I. Women in Northern Ireland's literary milieu

During the war, both Morton and Laughton were closely involved in the social life of Northern Ireland's literary community, although Morton was a more active presence within the various formal organizations. Born in Limerick in 1876, Morton moved to Belfast in 1900 and was the Vice Principal of the Belfast Model School for Girls until 1934.<sup>1</sup> Morton was a founder-member of the Young Ulster Society, a member of the Ulster Union Club, and acted as secretary, and later chairperson, of the Belfast PEN.<sup>2</sup> She was the author of four volumes of poetry; a contributor to Sean O'Faoláin's anti-partition anthology (*The North*, 1944); the winner of the Festival of Britain Northern Ireland Poetry Award in 1951; a frequent contributor to poetry programmes on the BBC Northern Ireland Home Service (NIHS); and the editor of a volume of poetry by Blanche Desmond Clyne, a young Belfast poet who died in 1943.<sup>3</sup> In 1980, McFadden referred to Morton affectionately as 'Maud Gonne of the Ulster Union Club, Lady Gregory of PEN', whose 'gentle gloves sheathed knuckle-dusters, and for whom young poets were slight challenges in plasticine'.<sup>4</sup>

Morton's energy and enthusiasm for literature is revealed by a photograph taken at the Vienna PEN conference in 1955, which she attended with the Hewitts despite being in her late seventies.<sup>5</sup> Elegant and well-dressed, she is shown casually smoking a cigarette. She died just two years later. Morton's commitment to the encouragement of younger poets and the significant role she played within the local literary scene were confirmed by the establishment of the May Morton Poetry Prize

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, the information in this paragraph is drawn from the biography of Morton, in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, ed. by Angela Bourke and others (Cork: Cork UP, 2002), iv, p. 1038.

<sup>2</sup> Anon., Biographical note, *Lagan*, 3 (1945), 134-5 (p. 135).

<sup>3</sup> Press cutting with no identifying details, found inside the Queen's University Belfast copy of Blanche Desmond Clyne, *Fleet of Dreams*, ed. by May Morton (London: Fowler, 1946).

<sup>4</sup> Roy McFadden, 'The War Years in Ulster', *Honest Ulsterman*, 64 (January 1980), 11-62 (p. 53).

<sup>5</sup> A reproduction of this photograph can be found in Hewitt, *A North Light*, n.p.

after her death. At the age of seventeen Derek Mahon entered the competition for the prize of one hundred pounds, but was beaten by John Montague's 'Like Dolmens Round my Childhood'.<sup>6</sup>

Although Morton and Laughton met at the Hewitts' flat, they were only passing acquaintances.<sup>7</sup> Laughton was some years younger, being born in Bristol in 1907.<sup>8</sup> She studied art in London before her second marriage brought her to County Down in 1932 where, according to Roberta Hewitt, she owned a farm.<sup>9</sup> However, it is likely that Laughton lived in Belfast.<sup>10</sup> Her husband, John Midgley, was the son of the Labour politician Harry Midgley and served with the Inniskilling Fusiliers in India during the war; his service overseas gave rise to a number of epistolary poems addressed to an absent lover.<sup>11</sup> Although little more is known about Laughton, there is evidence to suggest that she worked as a teacher and a children's book illustrator.<sup>12</sup> She began to publish in periodicals during the war, soon stirring up controversy when her 'sensuous' poetry was printed in *The Bell*. Her only volume of poetry, *A Transitory House*, was published in 1945. Laughton appears to have had more contact than Morton with writers in Dublin, perhaps through her friendship with Greacen, who moved to the city in 1943. It was there that she gave a poetry recital in 1945, with *The Bell* poetry editor Geoffrey Taylor as chairperson, and where she joined Iremonger, Greacen, and others for a poetry reading in 1946.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Clark, *The Ulster Renaissance*, p. 21.

<sup>7</sup> Roberta Hewitt, Diary Entry, 17 July 1948, Diary Volume 1, pp. 117-8.

<sup>8</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, the information in this paragraph is found in Anon., 'Ulster Books and Authors 1900-1953', *Rann*, 20 (June 1953), 55-72 (p. 58).

<sup>9</sup> Roberta Hewitt, Diary Entry, 20 June 1948, Diary Volume 1, p. 109.

<sup>10</sup> Roy McFadden, 'An April Anthology', BBC NIHS Script, MFC M30, p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Greacen, *Irene*, p. 152.

<sup>12</sup> McFadden, 'An April Anthology', p. 1; Anon., Biographical Note to Freda Laughton, in *Poems from Ireland*, ed. by Donagh MacDonagh (Dublin: The Irish Times, 1944), p. xiv.

<sup>13</sup> Anon., Advertisement, *The Irish Times*, 23 April 1945, p. 3; Anon., 'Poetry Reading', *The Irish Times*, 30 May 1946, p. 6.

Greacen and Iremonger visited her several times, leading to her inclusion in their 1949 anthology, *Contemporary Irish Poetry*.<sup>14</sup>

Several other women played important roles in Northern Ireland's mid-century literary scene, often assuming editorial or directive positions within various collaborative literary projects. They engaged in literary discussions and social events, mentored younger poets, wrote, and published. Barbara Hunter, a scholar of Spanish Literature at Queen's University and wife of the Yeats critic Oliver Edwards, co-edited *Rann* with McFadden from 1948 to 1953 and wrote several verse plays for the NIHS.<sup>15</sup> On her return from London in the late nineteen-forties, Oxford-educated Nesca Robb gave lectures and co-edited *The Arts in Ulster* (1951) with Hewitt and Bell. In addition to several prose works, Robb composed one volume of poetry (the undated *Ards Eclogues and Other Poems*), a verse play about King William III, an unpublished autobiography, and several programmes for the NIHS.

Although she did not publish any poetry or prose, Roberta Hewitt was an aspiring poet and diarist whose detailed record of the nineteen forties and fifties remains a significant personal and historical document. Roberta's contribution to Northern Irish poetry in general, and to her husband's in particular, is impossible to assess accurately. Marjorie Howes credits her with making 'many of the political observations and gestures that are interrogated as well as supported in her husband's poetry'.<sup>16</sup> At the time of her marriage to Rodgers, Marie Harden Waddell had already written several short stories, which were to remain unpublished.<sup>17</sup> Dame Dehra Parker, the only woman in the Northern Ireland cabinet, also influenced local

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<sup>14</sup> Greacen, *Irene*, p. 152.

<sup>15</sup> Shovlin, *The Irish Literary Periodical*, p. 156.

<sup>16</sup> Marjorie Howes, Introduction to 'Roberta Hewitt, 1904-75', in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, ed. by Bourke and others, iv, p. 1012.

<sup>17</sup> Longley, 'Introduction', in *Poems*, p. 14.

literary culture through her involvement with CEMA. The poets Elizabeth Shane and Moira O'Neill died in 1951 and 1955 respectively; neither appears to have been actively involved in Belfast's wartime literary scene and the majority of their poetry was written in the pre-war period. Few traces remain of the lives and work of many other women whose names are scattered across a wide variety of publications.

However, most of the anthologies and periodicals which were produced during this period privilege the male voice, and it is the poetry by male writers which has been preserved and recently republished. Anne Mulhall argues that whilst:

[...] it is true that there is evidence that the women poets of the mid-twentieth century made some impact on the poetry culture of their time, this was not enough to ensure their endurance. The conditions of their occlusion were already laid down at the same time as these women poets were being published, in ways that have clearly endured.<sup>18</sup>

It would be an oversimplification to assume that these conditions included unilateral prejudice against women writers. Instead, the picture which emerges from archival evidence and memoirs of the period is a multifaceted interplay of support and disregard for women's contributions to local literature, which is further complicated by a variety of other issues which were current in literary discussions of the time.

As associate editor of *Lagan*, McFadden tried to promote women poets. A letter from Edwards to McFadden, dated 1945, reveals that they had discussed the difficulty in encouraging women to contribute to *Lagan*. Edwards reminds McFadden that 'you spoke of seeking verse by women for *Lagan*: I told Barbara [Hunter], and she would like, if it is in order, to submit the enclosed poem'.<sup>19</sup> One can only speculate as to why Hunter did not submit the poem herself. This poem, a political ballad entitled '22 August 1922', appeared in the third issue of *Lagan*

<sup>18</sup> Anne Mulhall, "'The Well-known, Old, but Still Unbeaten Track': Women Poets and Irish Periodical Culture in the Mid-Twentieth Century", *Irish University Review*, 42.1 (May 2012), 32-52 (p. 50).

<sup>19</sup> Oliver Edwards, Letter to Roy McFadden, 4 March 1945, MCF L.

alongside one by Morton and another by Muriel Breads Clarke (an American on wartime service in Northern Ireland).<sup>20</sup> Despite McFadden's efforts, the list of contributors to the other three issues is unequivocally male-dominated.

When McFadden joined forces with Hunter to edit *Rann* and establish the Lisnagarvey Press, he continued to use his editorial position to support women's writing. As a consequence, and perhaps also due to Hunter's involvement, the names of many women poets can be found in *Rann*. Hunter's influence is clearly felt in the editorial statement of purpose printed in the first issue: the periodical aimed to offer 'this region an opportunity to find its voice and to express itself in genuine accents in these pages'.<sup>21</sup> The choice of the word 'accent' indicates that this aim combines McFadden's growing interest in regional writing with Hunter's specific fascination with local dialects. Lucy Collins emphasizes the significant role journals play in relation to women's writing of the twentieth century, positing that journals often determined 'what kinds of creative work was written and published, and so the extent to which women read, and wrote for, these publications is significant'.<sup>22</sup> In the case of *Rann*, the relationship between text and editorial policy is more complex than the model proposed by Collins. *Rann*'s regional stance developed from pre-existing concerns and interests pursued in *Lagan*, in discussions between contributors and editors conducted in a variety of social and formal settings, and in the work of individual poets. As in *Lagan*, editors and contributors often overlapped. Thus, women did not simply respond to an editorial line, but played a part in shaping it.

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<sup>20</sup> Anon., Biographical Note, *Lagan*, pp. 134-5.

<sup>21</sup> Anon., 'Editorial', *Rann*, 1 (Summer 1948), n.p.

<sup>22</sup> Lucy Collins, *Poetry by Women in Ireland: A Critical Anthology, 1870-1970* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2012), p. 34.

The poems which appear in *Rann* by both men and women generally conform to the regional stance the editors wished to promote. For example, Morton's

'Rowallane' celebrates the pastoral beauty of an Anglo-Irish demesne in County

Down:

So wide these vistas eager morning brings  
a score of rainbows on transparent wings,  
so radiant tired evening kneels to bless  
with hands of gold their jewelled loveliness,  
so magical the young moon from her throne  
leans down to claim their beauty with her own.<sup>23</sup>

Not Morton's most accomplished poem, the sonnet's sestet exemplifies the tranquil tone and conservative form of the many landscape descriptions by women printed in *Rann*. The poem is significant as it reveals the poet's holistic vision of Ulster, which stretches from Donegal to Belfast, incorporating the Anglo-Irish, dissenting Protestant, and Catholic communities. Several more formally experimental poems by women did find their way into the journal's pages, probably due to Hunter's employment in the language department of Queen's University. Ruth Duffin's 'Tanka', 'Hokku', and translation of Rimbaud's 'Le Dormeur du Val' (a poem also imitated by Greacen in *The Undying Day*), Laughton's 'Now Linnet', and Barbara Green's version of Verlaine's 'Femme et Chatte' push the boundaries of subject and the poetic modes available to women.

*Rann*'s support for Morton in particular was unstinting. In an editorial of 1948, Morton's *Masque in Maytime* (published by the Lisnagarvey Press) is hailed as an 'ambitious poem' which 'has attempted a ballet in words', adding 'something individual to Ulster writing'.<sup>24</sup> A later issue contains an admiring review of *Sung to the Spinning Wheel* (1952). The reviewer writes that the 'sensitive responses of the earlier poems remain unabated and are now expressed with increasing sureness of

<sup>23</sup> May Morton, 'Rowallane', *Rann*, 10 (Autumn 1950), 7.

<sup>24</sup> Anon., 'Editorial', *Rann*, 2 (Autumn 1948), 2.

technique', whilst they 'add not only colour and fragrance, but the endurance of good breeding to our thin crop of poetry'.<sup>25</sup> The representation of regional poetry as rooted in local place and a largely agrarian culture is apt for a journal with a regional focus. However, it is notable that Morton's work is praised primarily for its ornamental qualities and is compared to the stereotypically feminine images of dancing and flowers, which are suggested by the poems themselves. Yet, Laughton and, to some extent, Morton reconfigure these modes of writing to convey a sense of female sexuality. In many ways, Laughton's use of nature imagery to articulate issues relating to female identity and experience anticipates Medbh McGuckian's more experimental and challenging poetry.

Taylor and Iremonger of *The Bell* supported Laughton in a manner comparable to *Rann*'s enthusiasm for Morton. As the war drew to an end, controversy arose in *The Bell*'s reviews and comments pages in response to the journal's publication of several of Laughton's poems and the announcement that she had won the prize for the best poem of 1944. The prominence given to Laughton's work is all the more striking because, as Mulhall points out, *The Bell* demonstrates an 'apparently inverse relation between gender inclusivity and political radicalism'.<sup>26</sup> Only a handful of women poets can be found within its pages and only two (including Laughton) appear alongside sixteen male writers in its 1944 anthology, *Irish Poems of To-Day*.

The first review of Laughton's work appeared in the January 1945 issue. In this, Iremonger contrasts the 'exactness of [Laughton's] visual observation' with the 'damp cloth of the New Romance, blown in by the hurricane of war'. Whereas the

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<sup>25</sup> Anon., Review of *Sung to the Spinning Wheel* by May Morton, *Rann*, 18 (Winter 1952-3), 23.

<sup>26</sup> Mulhall, p. 34.

latter has caused English poets to suffer from an ‘inability to think’, Laughton’s ‘sensuousness and imaginative quality’ allow the reader to catch ‘a glimpse of God’ whilst being rooted in reality, a quality of key importance for *The Bell*. Her poetry, in Iremonger’s interpretation, is therefore a corrective to the New Apocalypse’s overemphasis on the unconscious mind and neglect of contemporary events.

Iremonger concludes by stating that like ‘most female good poets, she shows a strong intellectual bent but still does not forget that

... there is danger in utterly forgetting  
The setting of fine jewels,  
The subtle arrangement of the perfumed bouquet,  
The studied mosaic of the harem.’<sup>27</sup>

Such comments excuse Laughton from two charges often levelled against women poets at that time. Firstly, her poetry’s luxuriant and exotic ornamentation redeems it from unfeminine intellectualism. Secondly, its sensuousness excuses it from prudery or a false sense of propriety. By treading the fine line between being unfeminine and overly modest, Laughton obtained the admiration and acceptance of the male-dominated literary milieu. Mulhall puts this point more strongly, arguing that *The Bell*’s continued support of Laughton is ‘dependent on her aesthetic accomplishment reflecting back to the male poet-critic his own narcissistically gratifying investment in the woman as decorative, fragrant, and suppliant’.<sup>28</sup>

A riposte from a reader named Patricia K. Harrison appeared in the issue of August 1945. Harrison argues that the poetry’s ‘sensuousness [is] for the sake of sensuousness, and not real imagination’.<sup>29</sup> She objects to the gratuitous use of alliteration, internal rhyme, and metaphor which serve to obscure, not reveal, the poems’ significance. Iremonger and Taylor’s responses support Laughton

<sup>27</sup> Valentin Iremonger, ‘The Poems of Freda Laughton’, *The Bell*, 9.4 (January 1945), 349-50.

<sup>28</sup> Mulhall, p. 43.

<sup>29</sup> Patricia K. Harrison, Letter, *The Bell*, 10.5 (August 1945), 446-8 (p. 446).



wholeheartedly, if not entirely convincingly. Taylor reminds Harrison that ‘sensuousness’ is an important facet of the work of Milton and Keats. Iremonger concludes his argument that Laughton’s technique is ‘calculated’ with the question, ‘what on earth other reason ought one to be sensuous if not for the sake of sensuousness?’<sup>30</sup> The weight of the literary establishment legitimizes Laughton’s voice by contextualizing it in relation to a male tradition and by silencing objections with a fatuous conclusion. Discussing Harrison’s letter, Gerardine Meaney posits that her objections are founded on Laughton’s violation of an image of ideal Mariological womanhood in a poem entitled ‘The Woman with Child’.<sup>31</sup> The stark contrast between Laughton’s verse and a poem such as Katharine Tynan’s ‘Mater Dei’, which also describes the pieta, emphasizes this point. Whereas Laughton’s woman is embodied, changing, and sensual (‘like the moon I mellow to the round / Full circle of my being’), Tynan’s Mary is motionless and idealized (*TH*, p. 50).

Although, as Meaney argues, ideas about ideal femininity unquestionably underpin Harrison’s comments, it is interesting that this reader’s response to Laughton is similar to questions posed about Rodgers. As discussed in Chapter Two, readers such as Greacen lamented Rodgers’s lapses into ‘a rather tiresome revelling in alliteration’ and occasionally felt that linguistic panache masked Rodgers’s lack of subject.<sup>32</sup> *The Bell* discussion points to a wider debate regarding superficiality or depth of meaning, and the poet’s control over the imagination or the unconscious, questions which were associated with the wartime fashion for neo-romanticism. It is

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<sup>30</sup> Geoffrey Taylor, ‘Comment on the Above’, *The Bell*, 10.5 (August 1945), 448-9 (p. 448); Valentin Iremonger, ‘The Poems of Freda Laughton’, *The Bell*, 11.4 (January 1946), 895-901 (p. 899).

<sup>31</sup> Gerardine Meaney, *Gender, Ireland and Cultural Change: Race, Sex and Nation* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 9.

<sup>32</sup> Greacen, ‘Survey of Ulster Writing’, p. 13.

notable that the readers of ‘The Woman with Child’ situate it within this wider literary context, not simply in relation to a circumscribed body of work by women.

A passage in Roberta Hewitt’s diary hints at some of the obstacles faced by aspiring women poets when they consider submitting their work for publication in journals. In an entry of 1948 Roberta records a crisis of confidence which succeeded her husband’s comments on a poem she had intended to send to *Rann* or *The Irish Times*. The central issue was the individuality of her poetic voice and whether or not it could be mistakenly associated with Hewitt himself. (She had planned to use her mother’s address to mask her identity.) Roberta threw the poem in the fire, only for it to be recovered and reconstructed by Hewitt. She later wrote in her diary:

But I felt he didn’t think it much of a poem & yet he said it was a good wee poem & he wouldn’t mind having written it. Of course it is very like him & it probably isn’t really my own. So I don’t think I’ll send it anywhere.<sup>33</sup>

However, she did transcribe the poem into her diary, a document which she explicitly intended to be ‘read later when we are no more and fill in a part of the Belfast picture’.<sup>34</sup> By preserving the poem in this way, Roberta integrated it into this narrative of the cultural history of her life and city.

Although Roberta’s experience was unusual – she was married to a well-known local poet – it points to anxieties about reception and individuality which are particularly relevant to women writers. Many of their male contemporaries were dismissive of women’s interest in literature and openly shared their feelings in a variety of publications and in private communications. In 1944, for example, the painter Arthur Campbell wrote a short prose piece for an anthology entitled *Now in Ulster* in which he analyses the attitude of ‘Fred the Insurance Official’ to art. In a few lines, Campbell describes Fred’s wife:

<sup>33</sup> Roberta Hewitt, Diary Entry, 12 June 1948, Diary Volume 1, p. 107.

<sup>34</sup> Roberta Hewitt, Diary Entry, 30 October 1947, Diary Volume 1, p. 1.

He had a wife who wrote a little – verse and snippety stories of little consequence but satisfying to herself – and moved in writerish circles. She was a bookish woman in a mild sort of a way and was on more than nodding terms with most of the rising authors.<sup>35</sup>

The diminutives which describe the unnamed wife's compositions and her interest in literature suggest that for a woman writing is a fashionable, but ultimately inconsequential, leisure pursuit which will not lead to true artistic achievement.

In Belfast and Dublin, women were openly criticized for their dominance of 'writerish circles' during the war and post-war years, often being blamed for the insipid quality of the discussions. Mulhall explains that literary organizations were derided by male poets because they were:

[...] judged as febrile, outmoded, amateurish, and bourgeois, at least in part because they actually include women. Thus Kavanagh refers to 'that old women's bridge party, the Dublin P.E.N.', while Valentin Iremonger disdains the use of the word "soul" in reference to poetry, associating it with 'the wilting young ladies of the verse-speaking societies'.<sup>36</sup>

These comments were printed in *Envoy* (June 1950) and *The Bell* (November 1946) respectively. Thomas Carnduff was more scathing about women's attendance at literary meetings. Writing to his wife in October 1942 about the Young Ulster Society, he complained that female members in their thirties greatly outnumbered the men. He speculated that these women have probably 'side-tracked the fullness of life through fear or inability to grasp opportunities, and this is their way of escape – to seek romance in words and illusions rather than face the ventures and pains of life in the full'.<sup>37</sup> Greacen reportedly provoked PEN's female audience members: '[t]heir knickers are made of crêpe-de-chine, Robert Greacen confided in his Louis MacNeice voice to the Belfast PEN Centre on a Saturday afternoon, and a poetry-loving WAAF [Women's Auxiliary Air Force volunteer] blushed from scalp to

<sup>35</sup> Arthur Campbell, 'More than Bread', in *Now in Ulster*, ed. by Arthur and George Campbell (Belfast: Baird, 1944), pp. 76-8 (p. 76).

<sup>36</sup> Mulhall, p. 39.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in John Gray, p. 50.

cleavage'.<sup>38</sup> Such comments contributed to the atmosphere of 'male croneyism' identified by Foster and effectively excluded women from a core group of male writers, which was apparently more committed, liberal, and liberated.<sup>39</sup> Women are cast as readers, rather than writers, who value sentiment and propriety above truth.

A combination of women's hesitancy in submitting work for publication and male 'croneyism' led to the predominance of male voices in mid-century publications. A brief survey of anthologies reveals that Padraic Colum's *An Anthology of Irish Verse* (1948) contains twenty women and ninety-five men; of the thirty-seven contributors to Devin Garrity's *New Irish Poets* (1948), eight are women; and five out of forty-one poets represented in Donagh MacDonagh's *Poems from Ireland* (1944) are women. Laughton is the only Northern Irish women poet who appears regularly in such publications and is therefore alone among her female contemporaries in progressing from local magazines to collections which were distributed internationally. She was also the only woman based in Northern Ireland to be accepted by an established publisher (Jonathan Cape). Limited print runs of volumes by Morton and Hunter were produced by the small, non-commercial Lisnagarvey and Quota Presses.

Greacen's constant obsession with newness and modernity may have been the root cause of his disinclination to anthologize poetry by women, much of which is – or appears to be – formally and thematically conservative. Moreover, the language he employs in the introductions to his anthologies reflects his conception of poetry as a male domain. In *Poems from Ulster*, for example, Greacen outlines a generational progression in which the 'young men' of the nineteen forties succeed

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<sup>38</sup> McFadden, 'The War Years in Ulster', p. 50.

<sup>39</sup> Foster, *Between Shadows*, p. 208.

the 'unimaginative old men', giving rise to a new poetic movement. He argues that 'poetry is the natural medium for the young man at once sensitive, intelligent, urgent and articulate'.<sup>40</sup> In *Northern Harvest* Greacen again refers to a generational progression in which the young man is the heir to 'the men who are his literary progenitors'.<sup>41</sup> Several of the poems in *Poems from Ulster* are open to Eavan Boland's criticism of a male tradition in Irish poetry which assumes 'the intense passivity of the feminine within the poem'. In Harold Brooks' 'Prothalamion', Alex Comfort's 'Elegy on a Hill', and Greacen's 'With Green Eyes' the explicit sexualization of the female body is closely linked to the woman's function as bearer of the male speaker's children. In these three lyrics women do not even function, to borrow Eavan Boland's words, as 'the silence [the poems] were addressed to'. Instead, the women are bodies to be disclosed to a male readership.<sup>42</sup>

The marginality of women's poetry was perpetuated by the minimal attention reviewers paid to their work during the nineteen forties and fifties. That the most important reviews of Morton's and Laughton's work have already been discussed above reveals the dearth of contemporary critical engagement with their work. Browne's survey of local poetry in *The Arts in Ulster* provides an apt example of the way in which women's poetry was approached during the period. Discussing women in a separate section from their male contemporaries, Browne isolates them from the region's dominant literary culture and allocates them only two pages of consideration in an eighteen page essay. He describes Morton's *Masque in Maytime* as evidence of 'the delicacy of touch which gives her lyrics a charm, a gaiety, and a

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<sup>40</sup> Greacen, 'Introduction', *Poems from Ulster*, pp. 1-2.

<sup>41</sup> Greacen, 'The Editor Says...', in *Northern Harvest*, n.p.

<sup>42</sup> Eavan Boland, *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in our Time* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995), p. 27, p. 110.

buoyancy which is wholly attractive'.<sup>43</sup> Although very different in character, Laughton's poetry excites comparable comments. Her world, writes Browne:

[...] is rich in texture and colouring like some fabulous tropical garden, and while at times her rather stiff imagery, gleaming with the smooth patina of lacquer or enamel, brings to mind some features of the work of Edith Sitwell there is nothing merely derivative in mannerism that is as individual as a gesture.<sup>44</sup>

Browne delves no further and does not mention major themes which animate Morton and Laughton's poetry, such as sexuality, identity, or the search for an appropriate lyric voice, focussing instead on superficial impressions. In his comments on Hunter's verse-play, *Who'll Carry the Bag?* (broadcast on the BBC NIHS in 1946), Browne does not even note that the plot depends on a challenge to conventional gendered roles within patriarchal society, but focuses instead on the writer's relationship with regionalism. His comments bear out Mulhall's argument that there is an 'occasional tendency on the part of male reviewers of work by women to adduce from it a somewhat bizarrely fragrant and idealized feminine aesthetic' which 'erects a containing *cordon sanitaire* around writing by women'.<sup>45</sup>

The subsequent marginalization of mid-century women's poetry is an inevitable result of this tendency to undervalue their work, leading to misunderstanding regarding the literary and historic significance of poets such as Morton and Laughton. To provide detailed analysis of theoretical questions arising from the process of the recovery of women's writing is beyond the scope of this thesis. Even so, a few comments are necessary. The following analysis of Morton's and Laughton's poetry contributes to recent, and increasingly vocal, re-evaluations of Irish women's writing. Literary critics and historians have recovered a wide range of women writers who played a variety of roles in the island's literary scene prior to

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<sup>43</sup> Browne, p. 148.

<sup>44</sup> Browne, p. 148.

<sup>45</sup> Mulhall, p. 41.

the advent of a new generation during the nineteen sixties.<sup>46</sup> Consequently, the lives and work of poets as different as Emily Lawless, Katherine Tynan, Blanaid Salkeld, Eithne Strong, and Rhoda Coghill have been re-examined. The achievements of writers from the north of Ireland have also gained some recognition, with attention being focussed on Alice Milligan and Helen Waddell.<sup>47</sup>

Such projects generally lead to one of two conclusions: the creation of a separate canon of women's literature, or their inclusion in an expanded canon. Both options present a plethora of difficulties. The former risks creating a supplementary canon based on a patriarchal model, with the underlying assumption that work admitted into this category is inferior to that which has been able to gain acceptance in the dominant literary tradition. Yet, to argue for women's inclusion in the existing canon would involve a failure to challenge the assumptions on which it is based.

Collins's research on little-known twentieth-century Irish women writers provides a possible way forward within the limitations of the present thesis, although not a solution to wider issues of gender and canonicity. According to Collins, women poets:

[...] tended to see poetry as connective, rather than in hierarchical, terms and this perspective offers a productive reading of the landscape of Irish poetry in these years: it was one of diverse industry, with many individuals forming their own poetic oeuvres in spite of limitations.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> See, for example, Collins; Mulhall; Kelly; Susan Schreibman, 'Irish Women Poets 1929-1959: Some Foremothers', *Colby Quarterly*, 37.4 (2001), 309-325; Moynagh Sullivan, "'I Am Not Yet Delivered of the Past': The Poetry of Blanaid Salkeld", *Irish University Review*, 33.1 (Spring-Summer 2003), 182-200. A database has been compiled by Maria Luddy and Gerardine Meaney, *Women in Modern Irish Culture: A Database of Irish Women's Writing, 1800-2005*, <<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/history/irishwomenwriters/>> [accessed on 16 June 2014].

<sup>47</sup> See, for example, Catherine Morris, 'Becoming Irish? Alice Milligan and the Revival', *Irish University Review*, 33.1 (Spring-Summer 2003), 79-98; Jennifer Fitzgerald, *Helen Waddell Reassessed: New Readings* (Pieterlen: Peter Lang, 2013); Helen Waddell, *Writings from Japan*, ed. by David Burleigh (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2005). The 'Ulster Scots Poetry Project', run by Frank Ferguson and Kathryn White at the University of Ulster, aims to recover and preserve texts by writers including Sarah Leech and Moira O'Neill. Information can be found at <<http://www.arts.ulster.ac.uk/ulsterscotspoetry/>> .

<sup>48</sup> Collins, p. 50.

To view poetry as ‘connective’ and poets as part of a complex network of individuals is a model which is particularly apt for the present study, which aims to assess the dynamics and concerns of a nascent literary group prior to the poets’ absorption into, or exclusion from, the overlapping canons of Northern Irish and Irish poetry. It emphasizes the fact that during the nineteen forties, reputations were still being made and the literary hierarchy remained fluid. Laughton, for example, received more enthusiastic reviews than Hewitt during the nineteen forties. By the end of the war she had already found a reputable publisher, whilst Hewitt’s first volume did not appear until 1948. Rodgers and McFadden also published volumes before Hewitt and received positive reviews in Northern Irish, Irish, and English periodicals. Yet, it is Hewitt who became an iconic figure within Northern Irish poetry whilst, with the exception of MacNeice, both his male and female contemporaries have been largely left in shadow.

## **II: May Morton**

Summarizing women’s poetry of the mid-twentieth century, Meaney identifies two key categories: ‘one popular, formally much indebted to the nineteenth-century literary ballad and concerned with folk-life; the other modernist, formally experimental, often concerned with the revision or interrogation of myth, self-conscious and self-reflexive’.<sup>49</sup> In many ways, Morton’s poetry conforms to the first category and appears to belong to an earlier generation than that of writers who came to maturity during the nineteen thirties. Her poetry demonstrates the ‘studied simplicity’ and ‘devout ruralism’ Brian Fallon identifies in Joseph Campbell’s

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<sup>49</sup> Gerardine Meaney, ‘Identity and Opposition: Women’s Writing, 1890-1960’, in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, ed. by Bourke and others, v, pp. 976-80 (p. 980).



verse.<sup>50</sup> Both Morton's *Dawn and Afterglow* and the post-war volume *Sung to the Spinning-Wheel* draw on and continue the tradition of the Rhyming Weavers, articulating a profound attachment to the local region in poetry which approximates the themes, language, and rhythms of folk lyrics. The use of local diction and place names, hints at a fairy world, dramatic monologue, and song-like rhythms and rhyme schemes are all reminiscent of the work of poets such as Sarah Leech, Moira O'Neill, and Elizabeth Shane.

By drawing on the work of these writers, Morton created an idiosyncratic idiom which contributed to the wartime enthusiasm for regional and regionalist literature. In *Erin's Orange Lily* (first published in 1956), Bell reflects on the significance of the declining culture of local folk-songs: the 'Ulsterman's' preferred songs 'are those that have grown out of his own environment, the field, the fair, the pages of history. [...] And everywhere you go you'll hear people singing the praises of their native place'.<sup>51</sup> Morton's use of folk-songs is a means of embedding her poetry in the region and appealing to a wider audience than the educated, liberal intended readership of the coterie magazines and anthologies of the nineteen forties. It is also a means of salvaging or recording a mode of life which was being eroded by modernity and the war.

Morton's celebratory songs of the Glens of Antrim represent the landscape as a safe and familiar space. Even when her speakers explore unpopulated areas, they walk through a relatively tame natural world. Hewitt also avoids potentially wild places in his poetry, preferring the 'well-hedged fields' of Antrim and Armagh's agrarian communities to the 'raw earth gashed with water' (*HCP*, p. 22). Despite

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<sup>50</sup> Fallon, p. 117.

<sup>51</sup> Bell, *Erin's Orange Lily*, p. 112.

such similarities, Morton's poems are less self-conscious and provisional than some verses written by Hewitt about the same geographical area. In 'Glendun' (1940), Hewitt represents the 'bitter fate' of war which encroaches upon the landscape, whilst in 'Haymaking in the Low Meadow' he differentiates between visitors and locals (*HCP*, p. 424). In contrast, in many of her poems Morton adopts the persona of a young person native to the Glens. Whilst Hewitt is at pains to legitimize his claim to place (see, for example, 'Sunset Over Glenaan' [1950]), Morton assumes the speakers' unquestionable rootedness in the region. Her language is consequently less restrained and more rapturous than Hewitt's.

Kirkland describes Morton's approach to place as 'dominated by an erotically charged delight in the Ulster countryside which, as in "Mountain Mist", could reach moments of ecstatic contemplation'.<sup>52</sup> The first stanza of this poem reads:

Maiden of the mountain mist,  
 Stooping boldly to be kissed  
 When the young and ardent sun  
 First pursues you – half in fun,  
 Wherefore snatch your robe of grey  
 From his grasp, and haste away  
 When his passion's hot desire  
 Follows you with lips of fire?<sup>53</sup>

Whereas on first reading one might be tempted to dismiss Morton's poetry as lacking depth – a judgment perhaps implicit in Meaney's categorization of some women's poetry as 'popular' – such moments highlight the poet's wish to discover language appropriate for the articulation of issues surrounding feminine sexuality and desire. The erotic natural imagery employed in *Masque in Maytime*, which has many similarities with Rodgers's 'Europa and the Bull', was the culmination of such experiments. Laughton pushed the boundaries of the language available to women

<sup>52</sup> Kirkland, 'Poetics of Partition', p. 222.

<sup>53</sup> May Morton, *Dawn and Afterglow* (Belfast: Quota Press, 1936), p. 27. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

poets at the time, seeking to express similar themes, although with very different results.

Morton's poetry is shaped by her conviction that Northern Ireland was an integral part of Ireland and that such cultural unity should be manifested in its political status. In 1944 she contributed to *The North*, an anti-partition anthology edited by O'Faolain and published by the deceptively named Ulster Union Club. The introduction states that the contributors 'claim to represent Ulster in its true role as one of the four provinces of Ireland', an area with 'a certain local distinctiveness [...] but as closely bound to the rest of the country as Ireland is itself bound together by the encircling sea'.<sup>54</sup> In accordance with this, the geographical scope of *Dawn and Afterglow* and the post-war *Sung to the Spinning Wheel* includes the entirety of Ulster, not just the six counties of Northern Ireland. Poems entitled 'Lament of the Keening Women – Arranmore', 'By the Still Lake – Gweebarra', and 'The Daughter of Tír Conail' bring Donegal within the boundaries of the region and draw on Gaelic mythology. Elsewhere Morton expressed discontent that 'education [in Northern Ireland] was very pro-English' as this detracted from the distinctiveness of Ulster literature.<sup>55</sup> The tangible Gaelic influences on her work, as revealed in 'Song of the Wild Bees (From an old Gaelic song)', differentiate it from Hewitt's oeuvre.

*The Spinning Wheel* develops the techniques and ideas found in *Dawn and Afterglow*, but shows a greater readiness to acknowledge the urban world, a wider range of subjects and moods, and a diminished dependence on the formal devices of folk-songs. Yet, these are still tangible in the almost ubiquitous end-rhymes and the strong, regular rhythms which energize the verse. Fundamental to this volume is the

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<sup>54</sup> Anon., 'Prefatory Note', in *The North: A Collection of Short Stories, Articles and Poems*, ed. by Sean O'Faoláin (Belfast: Ulster Union Club, 1944-5), p. 1.

<sup>55</sup> Quoted in Ferris, *Poet John Hewitt*, p. 73.

image of the northern working woman who sings as she spins, matching the rhythm of her song to the beat of her foot on the spinning wheel's pedal. Morton positions herself within this tradition of local women's poetic modes and articulates the difficulty of reconciling domestic and employment responsibilities with the impulse to create. Unlike the earlier volume, in which poems of sorrow and loss do not ultimately disrupt the overarching sense of pastoral harmony, a selection of blitz poems disturbs the 'living tapestry' Morton weaves.<sup>56</sup>

'Wings' encapsulates the movement from pastoral to war, a pervasive trope in Second World War poetry written in Northern Ireland. The foregoing chapters have already identified instances of this in Hewitt, Rodgers, MacNeice, and Maybin. It is also found in the work of many other local poets. In 'Escapist', for example, Elizabeth Shane both acknowledges the attraction of the '[g]reen countryside' and recognizes that it is impossible to find a place where one does not ask '[w]hat's Hitler doing?'.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, Blanche Desmond Clyne contrasts pastoral imagery with war. Referring to the Belfast Blitz in 'Spring 1941', Clyne juxtaposes the vision of spring 'flam[ing] / So gloriously' with the realization that 'mankind has never drunk / So deep the cup of agony'.<sup>58</sup> The allusion to the passion of Christ and, in particular, to his prayer in Mark Chapter 14 evokes the atmosphere of despair experienced in the Garden of Gethsemane, a pastoral space transformed into a context for intense suffering. The pastoral mode represents the values which these poets wished to retain or escape to in the midst of war. Its connotations of stability, rootedness, and permanence were attractive in a time of chaos, as was the traditional association of

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<sup>56</sup> May Morton, *Sung to the Spinning Wheel* (Belfast: Quota Press, 1952), p. 12. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>57</sup> Elizabeth Shane, *The Collected Poems of Elizabeth Shane* (Dundalk: Dundalgan Press, 1945), ii, p. 73.

<sup>58</sup> Clyne, p. 54.

this mode with psychological healing and rest. Furthermore, the local landscape, particularly the pre-mechanized communities depicted by Morton, provided a sense of continuity with the past in contrast to the futuristic technology which terrorized the United Kingdom at night.

In 'Wings' Morton presents the natural world as a hive of harmonious activity which is threatened by man and technology:

Shuttle of thought, traffic of flying things:  
a bird, a butterfly, a honey-bee  
and, high above the spire-crowned lilac tree,  
a bomber plane. Tireless the brown bee clings  
packing his merchandise, the blackbird brings  
beak-load on beak-load to his family,  
the butterfly makes love, white-robed, carefree;  
the plane brings death on shining silver wings.

Survival's gifts: the bee's fine armoured sting,  
the beak that's curved to slay as well as sing,  
the urge that prompts the butterfly to steal  
a cabbage-leaf to give her child a meal;  
but whence, that man may man annihilate,  
synthetic wings and scientific hate?

(SS, p. 36)

The poem extends the weaving imagery found throughout *The Spinning Wheel*, figuring the observing mind as the shuttle which binds the threads together and incorporates this scene into the volume's poetic tapestry. The sonnet's use of alliteration and assonance and its tightly woven rhyme-scheme, which is balanced by the fluidity of the line endings, contribute to the sense of nature's harmony. The perpetual ebb and flow of life and energy which characterizes Morton's descriptions of the natural world here and elsewhere (see, for example, *Masque in Maytime*) is captured in the use of enjambment and caesurae. However, the bomber hovering in the background during the octet becomes a menacing presence in the sestet, which reflects on different modes of attack or defence. Whereas the bee, butterfly, and bird's actions are necessary for survival and self-protection, the bomber is an unnatural aberration which is designed only for destruction.

The final question, ominously left unanswered, points forward to the next two poems which explore the terrifying experience of aerial attack. In ‘We May Not Sing – We Dare Not Sleep’ nature is immune from fear, whilst man is preoccupied with dread:

Only the birds have songs for April morns,  
beasts find the soft, enfolding arms of night:  
we may not sing that have forgotten how,  
we dare not sleep whose dreams are haunted now.

(SS, p. 37)

Paradoxically, these lines articulate the silencing of the imagination. The relinquishment of the folk-song idiom reflects this: it is as if the celebratory, buoyant qualities of music have become inaccessible to the poet, who now feels oppressed and alienated from the natural world. A different version of this poem, printed in *The North*, concludes with the lines ‘[t]o sing, to sleep! We have forgotten how, / Only the sleep of death is dreamless now’.<sup>59</sup> This more pessimistic ending alludes to Psalm 13, in which the psalmist cries out to God for protection against his enemies, asking for the release offered by the ‘sleep of death’.<sup>60</sup> Unlike the psalmist, in this version Morton’s speaker does not reassert faith and hope, but remains trapped in despair and unable to see an end to suffering.

The next poem in the volume, entitled ‘Blitzed’, is the climax of Morton’s literary engagement with the war. Although the first stanza employs the strong, iambic rhythms and preference for end-rhymes familiar from the earlier poems, ‘Blitzed’ soon splinters under the pressure of the horrors described:

All down our street  
the houses have no eyes,  
no shining friendly glass  
to greet me as I pass.

<sup>59</sup> May Morton, ‘To Sing, To Sleep’, in *The North*, ed. by O’Faoláin, p. 27.

<sup>60</sup> Psalm 13. 3, *King James Version*

Grim company.  
 Dark, cavernous sockets in a skull,  
 aloof, indifferent and dull.  
 They once had eyes that smiled. Like me  
 they shed their facile, useless tears;  
 but now – no hopes, no fears.

One last wild look –  
 (What horrors did they see  
 in that eternity?)  
 One shuddering cry of terror and surprise  
 when hell's winged hate drove heaven from the skies,  
 blasting and burning, every sulphurous breath  
 screaming of death.

All down our street  
 where houses have no eyes;  
 bereft of sight,  
 with hands outstretched as in a cave  
 I grope for light.  
 The windows of my mind,  
 shuttered so well, are blasted too and blind,  
 black with despair:  
 and how shall I grow wise  
 that have no eyes?

(SS, p. 38)

Unlike MacNeice, who wrote of the London Blitz as an enlivening act of destruction, or Rodgers, who focussed on the morality of aerial warfare, Morton hones in on the individual's psychological experience. There is no glory, heroism or aesthetic beauty about the bombed street and the observer's response to it. The houses initially symbolize the bodies of those who died, then becoming a representation of the speaker's own mind. Traditionally a symbol of stability and feminine domesticity, the house is the central image in Laughton's *A Transitory House*. Laughton employs this image in reference to an eggshell, which is protective, loving, and 'maternal', but fragile (*TH*, p. 10). In Morton's *Dawn and Afterglow*, occupied cottages suggest love and happiness, whilst deserted dwellings are full of sorrow. Morton's use of the image of the house in 'Blitzed' therefore communicates the destruction of permanence and family cohesion. In this post-apocalyptic context, the speaker feels entrapped, isolated, and disoriented.

The third verse-paragraph of 'Blitzed' reveals Morton searching for language appropriate to describe an experience alien to poetic representation and, in particular, to the language available to women writing about war. Irish-born writer Ruth Tomalin's 'Embroidery, 1940' reveals that the modes of art traditionally associated with women are unsuited to descriptions of war:

The sickening dive of planes, the dripping glass,  
the bloody fire-bomb singing to the kill,  
are sewn in delicate bright wings and grass,  
and writ, in satin-stitch, upon the squill.<sup>61</sup>

How should a woman poet of this era approach the war in verse without falsifying its horror? In 'Blitzed', Morton employs religious imagery appropriate to her poetry's Christian framework, depicting the air raid as an apocalypse in which fire and sulphur fall from the skies. The emphasis on these details is reminiscent of descriptions of Satan and Hell in Book I, and of the war in heaven in Book VI of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Unlike the heroic pilot of interwar poetry, the bomber in 'Blitzed' is Satanic, bringing hell, chaos, and destruction on the innocent people below. It is possible that the rhyme of 'breath' and 'death' echoes Yeats's use of the two words in 'An Irish Airman', a rhyme also used by Greacen in a poem about an airman entitled 'Death was Accidental'. However, whereas Yeats and Greacen's use of these rhyming words has the effect of balancing life with death, Morton records the terrifying stifling of breath. There is no heroism, valour, or honour in Morton's poetic treatment of the deaths of ordinary non-combatants.

The final poem about war which appears in *The Spinning Wheel*, 'With Beak and Claw', asserts the belief that 'joy is dead' in a world in which nature itself has become sterile. The speaker calls on the reader to see 'how the flowers of mirth / wither and rot upon the barren earth' (SS, p. 39). A poem included slightly later in

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<sup>61</sup> Ruth Tomalin, 'Embroidery, 1940', in *Second World War Poems*, ed. by Haughton, p. 286.



the volume is more hopeful. 'Easter – 1946' records nature and man's recovery as God's presence and 'the healing of the years' bring peace (SS, p. 41). After her return to Belfast from London, Nesca Robb described the post-war period in similar terms on an NIHS programme: the war years 'have left me for one with such a sense of the amazingly [*sic*] and lovely detail of the natural world'. Continuing, Robb admits that these 'may not be very logical reactions to one of the most hideous epochs in history – and they don't, believe me, involve any denial of its hideousness'.<sup>62</sup> Interpreted in the light of Robb's comments, the resurgence of the pastoral mode in Morton's work does not signify a return to an unreal world of 'faery' found in her first volume. Rather, it is an assertion of life in the wake of death, of survival and hope following destruction. In 'Oneness' Morton insists that '[d]eath is always implicit in life' and 'joy is enfolded in pain' (SS, p. 42). Although their poetry is very different, Greacen, McFadden, and MacNeice all found that war and death highlighted the significance of life. If 'it were not for / Death', writes MacNeice in 'The Trolls', 'we should have nothing to lose' (MNCP, p. 218).

### III: Freda Laughton

Laughton's volume, *A Transitory House* (1945), does not convey the generally positive, life-affirming tone of *The Spinning Wheel*. In fact, Clarke rejected *The Bell's* wholehearted support of Laughton when he criticized her 'gloomy poems written in an exhausted mode'.<sup>63</sup> The volume is much more introspective than Morton's work, being dominated by a sense of entrapment with only tentative moments of release, and there is no comparable consideration of national or regional

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<sup>62</sup> Nesca Robb, 'After Ten Years', Broadcast 23 November 1949 on BBC NIHS, PRONI D/3847/6, p. 5.

<sup>63</sup> Quoted in Collins, p. 50.

themes. In contrast to every other poet considered here, her descriptions of place are generally non-specific and only two poems can be related to a particular locality.

These are 'Afternoon in a Garden at Vinecash' (Co. Armagh) and a post-war poem, 'Now Linnet' (the Mourne Mountains).<sup>64</sup> As Collins notes, Laughton's 'work gestures towards universal experience rather than precise cultural location'.<sup>65</sup>

Perhaps for this reason, and due to Laughton's English birth, she was not included in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*. In Laughton's case, the criteria for 'Irishness' do not seem to include adult residence in Northern Ireland, publication in magazines and anthologies based in both parts of the island, or her inclusion as an important figure in contemporary and retrospective accounts of nineteen forties Irish literature. To omit Laughton's poetry, and that of her female contemporaries, is to marginalize an important period in the development of women's poetry, as Margaret MacCurtain does. In the *Field Day Anthology*, MacCurtain privileges the nineteenth century and the last four decades of the twentieth century:

The outstanding achievement of Irish women's poetry in the twentieth century is the emergence of authentic women's voices. Their nineteenth-century predecessors' devotional and mystical poems speak from female *personae*, and the voices tend to be depersonalised; often the speaker is a child or child-like. [...] The later twentieth-century poets retain distinct women's voices, mythological and historical, as well as the voices of ordinary women.<sup>66</sup>

Laughton's poetry demonstrates the struggle to create such a distinctive woman's voice in lyric poetry as it reveals a search for language and forms appropriate to the articulation of female sexuality and selfhood, the experience of childbirth and motherhood, and time spent waiting for a loved one to return from war.

Like all of the poems studied in this thesis, Laughton's were written at a point of convergence between the literatures of Ireland, Northern Ireland, and Great

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<sup>64</sup> Freda Laughton, 'Now Linnet', *Rann*, 1 (Summer 1948), 3.

<sup>65</sup> Collins, p. 49.

<sup>66</sup> Margaret MacCurtain, Introduction to 'Poetry of the Spirit, 1900-96', in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, ed. by Bourke and others, iv, pp. 623-4 (p. 623).

Britain, and so it is important to contextualize her work in relation to developments elsewhere. In general the early nineteen forties was a time in which British poets turned away from an intense focus on political concerns and moved towards personal, rather than declarative or public, modes of expression. The New Apocalypse was an extreme manifestation of this tendency. Despite Iremonger's celebration of Laughton's poetry as an antidote to neo-romanticism, the introverted lyric voice and eschewal of politics in *A Transitory House* coincides with this shift in literary fashions. Although Laughton's poetic accomplishment sets her apart from many other writers included in Catherine Reilly's anthology of Second World War English women's poetry, *Chaos of the Night* (1984), her choice of subjects is often consistent with that of her British contemporaries. Elegies and laments for an absent lover, the epistolary love poem, poetry about the blitz and evacuation are common themes in such work.

The first poem of absence and loss found in *A Transitory House* is 'When You Were With Me':

When you were with me I was made of love,  
And when you loved me I became a vase,  
And in me, by a gesture and caress,  
You placed a hundred thousand different flowers.

When you were absent even furniture  
Took on expressions alien and sad.  
I felt my bones vacate the listening flesh  
The day they came to tell me you were dead.

(*TH*, p. 19)

Clarke's description of Laughton's poetic voice as 'exhausted' seems appropriate when lyrics such as this are contrasted with Rodgers's energetic style or Morton's early poetry, in which young lovers court each other in an idealized pastoral setting. Even Morton's poems of loss often conclude with the discovery of hope in nature and the divine. 'When You Were With Me' offers two alternative interpretations.

First, it can be read as a delicate and beautiful, yet quietly sorrowful, articulation of the relationship between two lovers. The sexual intimacy hinted at in the image of the vase and flowers is expressed tenderly, whilst the synaesthetic phrase – the ‘listening flesh’ – challenges the bounds of propriety by conveying the body’s anticipation and longing for the lover’s return. The final lines provide a compelling and visceral image of despair as the half rhyme (‘sad’ and ‘dead’) chimes mournfully.

The second reading is more troubling. The speaker is transformed into a beautiful ornament which is receptive and responsive, but nonetheless static and passive. Her purpose, sense of self, and body are dependent on her lover and associated solely with feminine emotion and domesticity. The second stanza extends the image of the vase and the woman becomes identified with the interior of the domestic space. In ‘Rebirth’, Laughton relates a similar scenario in which the presumably male lover dies:

Once unto you  
 Leaned all there was  
 In me. I mirrored me  
 In you, but ever your black glass

Inscrutably withheld  
 Yourself from me,  
 Displayed me that  
 Which only decked the mask.

In your dense forest  
 [...]

I lived, as in the womb,  
 And only came to birth, at last,  
 From your dark tomb.

(*TH*, p. 27)

Again, the woman’s identity is founded on the man’s response to her presence.

Referring to Luce Irigaray, Sullivan explains that imagery of reflection often

indicates that ‘women function as a mirror upon which patriarchy’s desires and fears

are projected'.<sup>67</sup> Although she articulates the same idea, Laughton alters this paradigm, presenting the male lover as a misleading mirror which reflects an image of femininity ornamented and shaped ('decked') according to his desire. It is only after the lover's death that the speaker is able to emerge from the 'mask' he has created for her. An ominous shadow is cast over the birth of the new self, as the words 'womb' and 'tomb' echo the description of the woman as 'doomed' in the fourth stanza. Despite the poem's narrative of liberation, this new selfhood is precarious and beyond language: it remains unrealized within the scope of the poem.

A group of three poems on the subject of wartime letters written between lovers presents a more positive picture of gender relations. A tempting biographical reading, which depends on the assumption that Laughton is identical with the volume's speaker(s), is that 'When You Were With Me' and 'Rebirth' describe an unhappy first marriage, whilst the epistolary poems are written to her second husband on active service overseas. Whether or not this is the case, these poems and the two preceding lyrics about lovers' 'quiet ecstasy' provide some relief from the darkness and doubts which culminate in 'Rebirth' (*TH*, p. 32). As in the majority of her poems, in 'Of Letters Written During War' Laughton prefers to experiment with abstract imagery rather than giving specific details which would root her poetry in a particular context.

Churlish the night that holds out separate cloaks  
For you and me,  
Our once-one darkness now division,  
Cleft by the sea.

A little moment more we tried to coax  
From Time's clenched hands,  
Who, giving it, then split our common vision  
Into two strands.

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<sup>67</sup> Moynagh Sullivan, 'Raising the Veil: Mystery, Myth, and Melancholia in Irish Studies', in *Irish Literature: Feminist Perspectives*, ed. by Patricia Coughlan and Tina O'Toole (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2008), pp. 245-77 (p. 248).

These, a new fabric weaving which is held  
 Taut by the years,  
 Threading thoughts, shuttlewise, through the warp  
 Of two hemispheres,

Richly refashion that vision, now withheld  
 Not since we've this  
 Excellence easing the severance sharp  
 Of late ecstasies.

(TH, p. 34)

In Piette's terminology, this poem narrates a private story under pressure from public representations of war. Piette argues that throughout British literature of the early nineteen forties, one finds unease about the way in which '[w]artime culture, with its big propaganda machine, its fabricated communal feelings and military regimentation, arrived at transforming private imagination into public spirit'.<sup>68</sup> Much like the pastoral mode discussed above, the epistolary poem tries to make room for the private imagination and personal relationships amidst the chaos of war. To this end, Laughton only mentions the war in the poem's title, then writing that the lovers are separated by 'the sea' and 'Time'. Employing the imagery of weaving, which also runs throughout Morton's *The Spinning Wheel*, Laughton presents letters as shuttles which bind the lovers together. The resonances of the weaver Penelope's faithfulness to Odysseus are appropriate here. The speaker is engaged in creative labour which cements the relationship, making a poem which is itself tightly woven by rhyming words which link the stanzas together.

Similarly, 'The Bombed House' avoids a panoramic or public view of the war. In a manner comparable to Morton's 'Blitzed', this poem concentrates on the individual's psychological response to aerial bombing. Neither poet contextualizes the event within the wider scope of the war, although the lack of specific detail means that people from any bombed area could relate to the poems' content.

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<sup>68</sup> Piette, p. 5, p. 2.

Consequently, there is no attempt to make sense of suffering and death in terms of military strategy, no effort to explain the event, or to show that ‘Britain can take it’. A pertinent contrast is found in MacNeice’s articles about the Blitz, mostly written for a US market, which often emphasized London’s endurance in the face of destruction.<sup>69</sup> However, where Morton’s ‘Blitzed’ closes down possibilities for the speaker, Laughton hints at the imaginative possibilities which may be opened up by war:

This house has lanes not corridors.  
Some walls are cliffs, and some,  
Whilst drunkenly dancing,  
Committed suicide.

One night the inhabitants  
Of this corybantic ruin,  
One-time desirable residence  
Replete with indigestible furniture,

Aroused without warning into death  
Found their bedroom passage  
An unsuspected lane leading  
Into the unimaginable.

(*TH*, p. 52)

As in ‘When You Were With Me’, this poem balances two possible interpretations. Firstly, one could read ‘unimaginable’ as pointing towards the terrifying, unprecedented ordeal experienced by the house’s inhabitants and the poet’s consequent inability to render this in poetry. Alternatively, the destruction of the house, which has been associated with womanhood throughout *A Transitory House*, symbolizes the destabilization of constraining social values and traditions. A new and unknown realm beyond the domestic suddenly comes into view. In the first stanza this world is linked with nature, which is itself associated with liberated womanhood elsewhere in the volume (see, for example, ‘The Woman with Child’).

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<sup>69</sup> See, for example, Louis MacNeice, ‘The Morning After the Blitz’, *Picture Post*, 3 May 1941, 9-15 (reprinted in Louis MacNeice, *Selected Prose*, ed. by Alan Heuser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 117-22). Leo Mellor comments on this issue in *Reading the Ruins: Modernism, Bombsites and British Culture* (Cambridge: CUP, 2011), p. 63.

This imagery underpins the depiction of the house as a ‘corybantic ruin’. Referring to the attendants of the Cybele, the Greek goddess of wild nature and motherhood, ‘corybantic’ signifies creative and sexual liberation in frenzied dancing and music.<sup>70</sup> In an essay entitled ‘Psycho-analysis and Literary Criticism’ (1924), Herbert Read quotes Plato’s *Ion* in support of his argument that inspiration emanates from the unconscious mind:

And as the Corybantian revelers when they dance are not in their right mind, so the lyric poets are not in their right mind when they are composing their beautiful strains; but when falling under the power of music and metre they are inspired and possessed. [...] And the soul of the lyric poet does the same, as they themselves say; for they tell us that they bring songs from honeyed fountains. [...] For the poet is a light and winged and holy thing, and there is no invention in him until he has been inspired and is out of his senses, and the mind is no longer in him[.]<sup>71</sup>

In light of these comments, the ‘unimaginable’ realm referred to by Laughton can be interpreted as a world of possibilities free from social limitations and in which the imagination and the unconscious mind can be accessed. In the volume’s title poem an egg is compared to a house which, being destroyed, allows the emergence of a ‘winged beauty’ (*TH*, p. 10). So too, when the home is destroyed in ‘The Bombed House’, the poet is able to emerge.

The connection between a true selfhood, poetic creation, the woman’s body, and nature is found throughout *A Transitory House*. Art and nature fuse in ‘While to the Sun the Swan’, in which the bird mirrors ‘with the music of her form / The cadence of the sliding river’ (*TH*, p. 9). In ‘All that has Made This I’ the self is described as a honeycomb, ‘each day’s experience hived and shrined / In an impregnate wax’ (*TH*, p. 13). In ‘Nightly into Slim Adventures Slide’ the speaker

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<sup>70</sup> Anon., ‘Great Mother of the Gods’, in *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online Academic Edition*, <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/243491/Great-Mother-of-the-Gods>> [accessed on 16 May 2014].

<sup>71</sup> Herbert Read, ‘Psycho-analysis and Literary Criticism’, in *Selected Writings: Poetry and Criticism* (London: Faber, 1963), pp. 98-116 (pp. 105-6).



follows ‘some familiar river’, entering the unconscious dream-world via nature. This is a place where there:

[...] walks a woman with a wreath of words  
Transposed, beheaded, biting their own tails  
In blue-flamed fires among her tall hair-combs.

(TH, p. 14)

In the speaker’s imagination a woman radically remakes language, commanding words which are constantly in flux, continually being transmuted into something new. This endless cycle of recreation is suggested by the symbol of the ouroboros, a serpent biting its own tail. Yeats alludes to this image in an essay entitled ‘In the Serpent’s Mouth’ (1906), in which he argues that the ‘poet must not seek for what is still and fixed, for that has no life for him; and if he did, his style would become cold and monotonous, and his sense of beauty faint and sickly’. Accepting impermanence, and that ‘things return’ in a different form, Yeats imagines that the ‘poet has made his home in the serpent’s mouth’.<sup>72</sup> Laughton also presents creation as cyclical, figuring art as a ‘winged beauty’ which is ‘ephemeral’, being ‘[e]rased by inexorable / Perpetual genesis’ (TH, p. 10). In this cycle, the bird is then replaced by the egg, from which emerges a new, beautiful being.

Despite the differences of mood and subject found in Morton and Laughton’s poetry, both find that creation can follow destruction. Even the horrors of the blitz can be succeeded by the regeneration of nature and the imagination. McFadden, the subject of the next chapter, was much less positive about the potential aftermath of war. Throughout his life, he believed that he was caught in a cycle of violence, which he tried to break through protesting in favour of pacifism. The final chapter

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<sup>72</sup> W.B. Yeats, ‘In the Serpent’s Mouth’, in *The Collected Works*, ed. by Richard J. Finneran and George Bornstein (New York: Scribner, 2007), iv, p. 209.

explores how he attempted to reconcile this passionately-held conviction with regional poetics.

## Chapter Seven

### Roy McFadden, Pacifism, and Regionalism

#### Introduction

McFadden was born in Belfast in 1921, a year of ongoing violence throughout the island. ‘I was born in violence,’ he later explained, ‘and my whole life was dominated by violence’.<sup>1</sup> In ‘I Won’t Dance’ (1966) he recalls that the McFadden family moved house in 1922 due to threats from the IRA, while soldiers, ‘without leave or pardon, / Shot snipers on the roofs from our front garden’ (*MFCP*, p. 207). Alongside interwar sectarian unrest, the legacy of the First World War was formative in the maturation of McFadden’s political and poetic sensibility. In the late nineteen thirties he matriculated at Queen’s University to study Law and became an active member of the PPU. It was at a PPU meeting that he met Greacen, who later recalled that the two aspiring poets ‘became close friends and in those non-workshop days eagerly read and criticized each other’s poems’.<sup>2</sup> McFadden soon became a key figure in the cluster of young, ambitious poets whose work was published in *Poems from Ulster* and who were influenced by the New Apocalypse. His early poetry appeared frequently in periodicals including *The Adelphi*, *The Bell*, *Poetry Quarterly*, and *The Irish Times*. The spring of 1941 saw another move caused by violence, this time following the Belfast Blitz. After a brief stay in Downpatrick, the family settled in Lisburn, where McFadden completed his first full-length volume,

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Peter Hobsbaum, ‘Obituary: Roy McFadden’, *Independent*, 17 September 1999, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/obituary-roy-mcfadden-1119573.html>> [accessed on 17 June 2014].

<sup>2</sup> Robert Greacen, ‘Roy McFadden: 1921-1999’, *Poetry Ireland Review*, 64 (Spring 2000), 5.

*Swords and Ploughshares* (1943). This was followed in 1945 by *Flowers for a Lady* and in 1947 by *The Heart's Townland*.<sup>3</sup>

McFadden's second and third volumes clearly demonstrate his connections with a second cluster of local wartime writers. Early in the war, he began to correspond with writer Michael McLaverty and, around the time of Greacen's move to Dublin in 1943, became friends with Hewitt.<sup>4</sup> Both older writers responded enthusiastically to McFadden's poetry. He became an associate editor of *Lagan* (1943-6) and later joined forces with Hunter to edit *Rann* (1948-53). These periodicals had a regional outlook which was, in some ways, compatible with the New Apocalypse's emphasis on cultural and political decentralization. Similarly, a reaction against the machine and a preference for the organic is a hallmark of both movements, although manifested in different ways. Rodgers had already forged a style which was indebted to neo-romanticism and regionalism, although the former was alien to writers such as Hewitt and McLaverty.

Although McFadden was associated with these two movements, from the beginning of his literary career he insisted on the individuality of his poetic voice and on his refusal to join any literary group wholeheartedly. In a post-war manuscript he explained that the 'desire to belong to a group is, of course, a natural one; but when it reaches the point of a poet attempting in his poetry to express a group feeling, then it becomes a real danger'.<sup>5</sup> In the late nineteen eighties, for example, McFadden claimed that he never saw himself as part of the New Apocalypse or even the looser, more diverse group of neo-romantic writers: 'while I

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<sup>3</sup> This biographical information is based on Sarah Ferris, "'One Who Stayed': An Interview with Roy McFadden", *Irish Studies Review*, 17 (Winter 1996-7), 21-4.

<sup>4</sup> McFadden, "'No Dusty Pioneer'", p. 171.

<sup>5</sup> Roy McFadden, 'The Poet's Audience', MFC MP5, p. 1.

never identified myself with the neo-romantic movement in particular, I did contribute to the same magazines and anthologies, and share the same publisher'.<sup>6</sup> Whilst this comment somewhat falsifies the reality, in several important ways McFadden's wartime poems do deviate from the Apocalyptic style of writing and he did begin to distance himself from this group after 1943. Within Northern Ireland's literary milieu, his absolute adherence to pacifism and anarchism set him apart from left-wing writers who, McFadden recalled, viewed the conflict as 'another Capitalist war'.<sup>7</sup> His discomfort with some aspects of regionalism, such as its tendency towards provincialism, led to disagreements with Hewitt and the often strained tone of editorials in *Rann*. Even so, Northern Ireland is central to McFadden's oeuvre and much of his wartime poetry demonstrates an attempt to reconcile pacifism with attachment to his locale.

This endeavour, a central theme of this chapter, culminated in McFadden's reimagining of the Cuchulain myth. This chapter will begin with analysis of McFadden's early links with the pacifist strand of the New Apocalypse, before moving on to explore the Cuchulain poems and their relationship with pacifism and regionalism.

## **I. The New Apocalypse and active pacifism**

The neo-romantic mode flourished during the late nineteen thirties and found a focus in the self-styled New Apocalypse group, whose ideas McFadden describes in detail in a *Dublin Magazine* article of 1944. Covering ground already familiar from

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<sup>6</sup> McFadden, "'No Dusty Pioneer'", p. 176.

<sup>7</sup> Tom Clyde and Roy McFadden, 'Reiterations: Roy McFadden in Conversation', *Rhinoceros*, 1 (1989), 86-91 (p. 90).

Greacen's introduction to *Poems from Ulster* and which is discussed in Chapter Five of this thesis, McFadden begins by rejecting the poetry of 'actuality'. This phrase encompasses the politically engaged work of the Auden generation and, perhaps, the social realist style which was prominent in periodicals such as *The Bell* and *Lagan*. The poet's imperative, McFadden explains, must be to restore 'to man a sense of wholeness' by valorizing emotion above reason and thus liberating the individual from the totalitarian machine. The article deviates from Greacen's thinking in the emphasis it places on death and on the creeds of pacifism and anarchism which were espoused by many younger associates of the New Apocalypse. Drawing on ideas found in Alex Comfort's work, McFadden asserts that death is a 'continuing fact' within life. Yet, the 'acceptance of the tragic involves certain positive values' which allow the poet to move from a consideration of individual suffering to a 'realisation of universal tragedy'. In other words, the elegiac mode, which pervades McFadden's oeuvre, allows the poet to transform personal experience into verse with a social function. The poet can offer a positive response to suffering, using death to highlight the value of life, even while protesting that it is essential to protect that life. In this way, the poet's 'quasi-priestly function' unites the provision of consolation with the responsibility of 'speaking for the voiceless', a quotation borrowed by McFadden from Comfort.<sup>8</sup> This responsibility, he insists, is to individuals rather than the state. Inspired by Gandhi, McFadden believed that in situations in which the individual disagreed with the state, pacifist poetry could be complemented by civil disobedience and non-violent protest.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Roy McFadden, 'A Trend in Poetry', *The Dublin Magazine*, 19 (September-October 1944), 43-48.

<sup>9</sup> McFadden later recalled that 'I did feel that it was incumbent on me to make a stand against the war. I was under the influence of Gandhi'. Brown, *In the Chair*, p. 19.

McFadden's early poetry demonstrates his attraction to the style and concerns of the New Apocalypse. A rather unsuccessful poem entitled 'The Guest' transposes the fears of the early war years into an allegorical morality tale, in which Death strides through a devastated landscape: Death's 'mouth was cruel, and his eyes / Hard like stones thrown up by northern seas; / The blood of a million souls drooled from his hand'.<sup>10</sup> As Hewison notes, the 'chief subject matter' of Apocalyptic poetry is 'Death, a figure stalking a *grand guignol* landscape of purple and black mountains, dotted with gibbets, broken lyres, ravaged fields and winter woods'.<sup>11</sup> Turning away from poetry of 'actuality', McFadden luridly describes a figure from which no-one is immune in a crude attempt to tap into universal archetypes of death.

As discussed further below, the omniscient, prophetic voice McFadden adopts in 'The Guest' is a hallmark of his early work. In several poems, particularly the eight elegies for McFadden's mother printed in *Flowers*, this prophetic tone gives way to an intensely introspective, personal voice which was also characteristic of Apocalyptic poetry. Another trope borrowed from the New Apocalypse is the use of excessively romantic and overworked diction, which is often combined with sexualized imagery. In 'Rain Towards Evening', for example, raindrops '[p]ulse in quivering nipples on the ground' (*SP*, p. 7). When McFadden substantially revised his wartime poems during the nineteen seventies, he altered this line to describe raindrops which scatter 'like spiders spinning to the ground' (*MFCP*, p. 307). Whilst the central idea remains the same, in the revised version the diction is sharper and more focused than the effusive imagery of the nineteen forties poems.

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<sup>10</sup> Roy McFadden, *Swords and Ploughshares* (London: Routledge, 1943), p. 23. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>11</sup> Hewison, p. 112.

Brown perceptively argues that McFadden's employment of these Apocalyptic techniques was superficial and distracted from the basic elegiac tendency of his poetic imagination:

The frequent imperatives and massive apostrophes in [*Swords*] seem very forced; they suggest, indeed, that they were employed as the simplest stylistic ploy by which the poet might invest his verse with the exuberance and uplift that the New Apocalypse demanded of its acolytes. Rhythmically McFadden's early verse lacked the required buoyance [*sic*] for the New Apocalypse, since he was, as later books reveal, temperamentally more suited to calm reflection than romantic fervour.<sup>12</sup>

However, unlike the Apocalyptic, from the beginning of his poetic career McFadden did not entirely reject Apollonian restraint in favour of Dionysian excess. Romantic phraseology is sometimes contained within carefully constructed poems which demonstrate McFadden's lifelong preference for the energizing restraint of poetic form. The syntax of a poem such as 'St. Stephen's Green, Dublin', discussed below, is carefully crafted and deftly handled; this is not an untrammelled outpouring of images originating in the unconscious mind.

As with many writers who were influenced by the New Apocalypse, McFadden's commitment to pacifism and anarchism was confirmed by the writings of Comfort and Read. (As literary editor for Routledge, Read would have selected McFadden's volumes for publication.) Much more militant in his pacifist beliefs than Greacen and Maybin, McFadden eagerly supported the PPU and, by 1941, he was editor of the Belfast branch's magazine and an outspoken protester against the Second World War.<sup>13</sup> In *Carnival at the River* (1990), Greacen depicts his friend as a passionate campaigner: 'McFadden hawked *Peace News* in Royal Avenue, / Outraged the moon-faced citizens. / END THE WAR! PEACE NOW!' (*GCP*, p. 139). Whereas Maybin's pacifism in the early years of the war was primarily

<sup>12</sup> Brown, *Northern Voices*, p. 133.

<sup>13</sup> Dennis Barrit, Letter to Roy McFadden, 24 October 1941, MFC L. Interestingly, in this letter Barrit suggests Morton as a contributor to the magazine's poetry section; there is no other evidence to suggest that she was a pacifist, or sympathetic to this movement.



political in origin and waned as he became convinced that a military response would be the only effective opposition to fascism, McFadden's motivation was largely humanitarian. Reflecting on his involvement with the PPU in 1989, McFadden criticized those who 'can't seem to look beyond a dead soldier, on either side, and see his family and children, never mind generations to come'.<sup>14</sup> He remained an absolute pacifist throughout his life, choosing not to follow the many writers, intellectuals and members of the public who renounced their anti-war beliefs as the conflict progressed, meaning that by 1947 the membership of the PPU had fallen to 16,000.<sup>15</sup>

The title of McFadden's first volume, *Swords and Ploughshares*, proclaims his pacifist convictions with reference to Isaiah Chapter Two, verse four, a key text in the Quaker anti-war movement: 'and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more'.<sup>16</sup> The verse prophesies a New Jerusalem which will come into being after the apocalypse and is, therefore, an apt text for a writer who hoped for radical social and political reconstruction after the war. However, it is significant that McFadden alters 'into' to 'and'. On one level, this signifies the volume's balancing of both war and regional concerns, which co-exist, compete, and overlap throughout. It could also express a critical attitude towards contemporary society, indicating that at the present time humanity is unable to emulate Isaiah's vision of an ideal city. Despite the title's clear indication of the poet's pacifism, in accordance with Comfort's assertion that 'poets can carry banners

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<sup>14</sup> McFadden and Clyde, p. 90.

<sup>15</sup> Ceadel, *Pacifism in Britain*, p. 313.

<sup>16</sup> Isaiah 2. 4, *King James Version*

though poems shouldn't' the volume itself is not propagandist.<sup>17</sup> Comfort and McFadden agreed that the poet's personal convictions naturally spill over into the work, but should not transform art into a purely political tool.

The most accomplished of McFadden's early poems is placed first in *Swords*. As in many poems already discussed in this thesis, 'Lines by Slieve Donard' reflects on the impact of war on the local, rural landscape and its population. The location is in the Mourne Mountains, which was the setting for Rodgers's 'Ireland' and Laughton's 'Now Linnet'.

The men who made these walls,  
Rimming the iron mountains with stubborn stone,  
Lost in the white mists or sheathed with sun,  
The leathern hands heavy but beautiful,  
Pausing, did they cast their minds  
Forward to the years grey in the mist,  
Hearing the echo ring like a sword in the mountains,  
Seeing the shadow fall, the spattered sheep,  
Stuttering in flight, and the cattle lumbering  
In the thundering valley loud with fear?

Pausing, did they see the silent symbol  
Of stone on stone, blocking the downward tremble  
Of the breaking wave, the grim  
Triumphant wall guarding the iron peaks  
From the black uneasy flood heaped in the valleys?

Pausing, did they pray,  
The heavy hands incongruous in prayer,  
To see an ark on the waters, and a white  
Flame of wings piercing the waste of sky,  
Seeing in Donard another Ararat?

(*SP*, p. 7)

The depiction of the labourers is imbued with visual immediacy as the past and present collapse into one scene, and the intervening years are telescoped by the present participles. The flexible metre of the first ten lines is unhurried and the tone is contemplative, whilst alliteration and sibilance contribute to the calm musicality of a verse paragraph which articulates the harmonious relationship of man and nature. McFadden appears to idealize the historical landscape as a peaceful point in time and

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<sup>17</sup> Alex Comfort, Letter to Roy McFadden, n.d., MFC L.

place in which men existed free from the mechanistic social structures of the nineteen forties.

As in MacNeice's 'The Coming of War' and Rodgers's 'An Irish Lake', the Second World War casts a shadow over this apparently idyllic retreat. Thoughts of violence are introduced with the reference to a sword, followed by an allusion to Owen's 'Anthem for Doomed Youth'. The description of the 'sheep / Stuttering in flight' recalls the 'stuttering rifles' rapid rattle'.<sup>18</sup> McFadden draws a clear line of historical continuity between the labourers and the speaker, indicating that inescapable doom continually hangs over the deceptively peaceful rural area. When McFadden rewrote this poem in 1978, he altered the first verse paragraph to emphasize the proximity of past and present. The sounds of war echo back through history and the workers 'lift their heads to hear / The hunted echo scurrying through the whin' (*MFCP*, p. 307). The second line quoted is salvaged from 'The Prisoner', a poem which appeared in *Swords* but was later dropped from McFadden's oeuvre. It alludes to the famous image from Andrew Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress' and Rodgers's reworking of it in 'Sing, Brothers, Sing': 'At our back-door we failed to hear / War's dust-bin chariot hurrying near' (*RCP*, p. 12). Mortality and transience penetrate even into the heart of the pastoral space, where only the stones laid by the workers are able to endure.

These hints of violence culminate in the apocalyptic scene imagined in the poem's final lines, in which the wave of war engulfs the valley. The representation of the Second World War as a flood of biblical proportions has precedent in Rodgers's 'End of a World', in which a corrupt society is swept away in the tide of revolution which creates a 'levelled world waiting to be made new' (*RCP*, p. 15).

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<sup>18</sup> Owen, p. 44.

This is one of many nineteen forties texts which imagine war as an opportunity to refashion a bankrupt and unequal society. In ‘Brother Fire’, MacNeice similarly gave voice to the illicit exhilaration which some experienced during the Blitz: ‘Did we not on those mornings after the All Clear, / [...] / Echo your thought in ours? “Destroy! Destroy!”’ (*MNCP*, p. 217). ‘Slieve Donard’ concludes in a similarly enigmatic manner as the open-ended question poses the problem of whether any space can be protected from the war. Yet, the speaker’s prophetic, omniscient voice marks ‘Slieve Donard’ out from ‘End of a World’ and ‘Brother Fire’. Whereas the observers in the latter poems enter into the joyful annihilation of social and metropolitan corruption, McFadden’s speaker watches the destruction of a pastoral retreat. The poem articulates a general fear that the encroachment of war is unstoppable and will destroy everything, leaving chaos in its wake. It also expresses a particular concern that the vulnerable local region will be swept away.

Despite McFadden’s absolutist adherence to pacifism, Shovlin believes that his ideology is inherently conflicted:

McFadden’s stance is an oddly contrary one. On the one hand, in his youthful identification with the New Apocalypse school he argues for pacifism, and yet he condemns the twenty-six county state for its neutrality. Equally, he is dismissive of the South’s inward-looking gaelicism yet is disdainful of ‘glib international sentiment’[.]<sup>19</sup>

Shovlin argues that whereas one would expect an absolute pacifist to approve of neutrality, McFadden’s anger at Ireland’s policy is clearly articulated throughout *Swords and Flowers*. Agreeing with Shovlin that McFadden was both a pacifist and opposed to neutrality, I propose that these are actually compatible viewpoints.

Although literary critics and historians have recently revised attitudes to Ireland’s neutral status, Greacen, O’Faoláin, McFadden, and others believed that during the war Ireland was isolated politically and culturally from history, modernity, and the

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<sup>19</sup> Shovlin, *The Irish Literary Periodical*, pp. 159-60.

world, immersed in an outdated vision of Irish Ireland.<sup>20</sup> For McFadden, to maintain this pose required a deliberate and continuous act of will in a world which was suffering from the pervasive effects of modern warfare. He wrote that ‘mechanised malice has split the sacred veils / Of yesterday’s *Sinn Fein*’.<sup>21</sup>

For British commentators on Ireland’s neutrality, the most contentious point was the state’s refusal to assist during the Battle of the Atlantic. They were pressured to return the so-called ‘Treaty Ports’, which Britain had relinquished in 1938, for use by the Allied Forces in the protection of cross-Atlantic convoys.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, images of the sea and shipwrecked bodies recur in the many poems in which McFadden attacks Ireland’s neutrality. ‘The Pattern’, written at the height of the Battle of the Atlantic in March 1943, locates Ireland within the ‘latent sea of history’ which is ‘always flowing, / Casting its shipwreck and its mariners / Stark on the fleeing beaches of the mind’ (*SP*, p. 31). As in Hewitt’s poem ‘Ireland’, discussed in Chapter Three, the sea literally reminds Ireland’s population that a nation cannot extricate itself from history or completely ignore pressing global issues. The bodies of the dead which wash up on shore function as synecdoches for the global crisis which has impacted Ireland and in which the nation could play a part. MacNeice puts this point more strongly in ‘Neutrality’ (1942), commanding his Irish readers to see that ‘to the west off your own shores the mackerel / Are fat – on the flesh of your kin’. Whereas MacNeice locates ‘[t]hat neutral island’ in the ‘heart of man’, McFadden finds it in the psyche (*MNCP*, p. 224). For both writers, neutrality is a

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<sup>20</sup> See Fallon, p. 9; Bernard Share, *The Emergency: Neutral Ireland, 1939-45* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1978); Clair Wills, *That Neutral Island: A History of Ireland During the Second World War* (London: Faber, 2007).

<sup>21</sup> Roy McFadden, ‘In Ireland Now’, in Comfort, McFadden, and Seraillier, *Three New Poets*, p. 21.

<sup>22</sup> Wills, p. 7.

state of mind as much as it is a political standpoint and involves a lack of empathy for those who are suffering, in part, to protect Ireland.

Several months later, in July 1943, McFadden composed 'St Stephen's Green, Dublin'. Although the Battle of the Atlantic had passed its climax, the image of the sea remains central to his poetic assault on neutrality:

You who remember history, recollect  
That history moves like rivers into seas,  
Accepting no horizons: that its strands  
Of generous sun and laughing limbs are drowned  
Or spattered with white shipwreck and grey bones.

(*FL*, pp. 14-15)

In this verse letter from Dublin to Belfast, from a city described as full of peace and plenty to one of war and hardship, the speaker adopts a prophetic voice familiar from 'Slieve Donard'. As a detached observer, an outsider within Dublin society, he believes that he can perceive the emptiness and moral decay which lie behind the city's façade of 'light and laughter'. The resentment of Emergency conditions implicit within these lines is soon superseded by pointed criticisms of an isolationist policy of neutrality. Adherence to nationalist dreams, McFadden suggests, has led to the city's transformation into a place of stasis in which 'frozen spires' tower over the park. The Georgian architecture of St Stephen's Green highlights the city's decline from its eighteenth-century heyday, whilst also reminding the reader of the cityscape of Yeats's 'Easter 1916'.

McFadden had earlier alluded to the events of 1916 in 'Easter 1942', a poem which reflects on how dreams can become 'sour[ed]' (*SP*, p. 9). From McFadden's point of view, in refusing to progress from the ideology behind this seminal event in national history, Ireland opted out of history and became blind to the moral imperative to intervene in the war. The 'easy lie' accepted in Dublin, McFadden

writes in 'St Stephen's Green', is that 'some may live and laugh while others die'. The water imagery employed in the poem unites these ideas about neutrality and nationalism, as the island is not simply bounded by the sea – as in 'The Pattern' – but is penetrated by the 'quiet river' of history. In 'Easter 1916' Yeats sounded a warning note about the petrification of nationalist ideals into stones which 'trouble the living stream' of history but do not move with the current (*YMW*, p. 86). McFadden implies that Ireland must become like the river rather than the stone, opening itself to progress and the rest of the world.

McFadden agreed with Greacen that there was a close connection between political isolationism and a declining, introverted Irish literary tradition. They saw neo-romanticism as a means to reinvigorate this stagnating culture and to bring it into contact with modernity which, for them, was symbolized by the war. In Northern Ireland, McFadden wrote in *The Bell*, there 'are no mists on our bogs, but there have been bombs in our cities'.<sup>23</sup> However, McFadden's poems against neutrality are not clarion-calls to arms. Instead, they should be interpreted as incitements to Ireland to take an actively pacifist stand against the war. In 'The Orator' McFadden selected the writer and 'down-to-earth pacifist' Francis Sheehy-Skeffington as a role-model for modern Ireland.<sup>24</sup>

Apart from taking part in street protests and pamphleteering, McFadden left no written evidence of his understanding of what would constitute a viable pacifist alternative to the war. It is possible to hypothesize what he might have hoped for by referring to the work of Gandhi, who influenced McFadden and many members of the anti-war movement in Britain during the nineteen thirties and forties. Gandhi

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<sup>23</sup> McFadden and Taylor, p. 343.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Ferris, "One who Stayed", p. 22.

distinguished between non-violent resistance and retreat. The former is active and requires courage to oppose a violent aggressor, whilst the latter demonstrates cowardice. A non-violent person, argues Gandhi, 'is bound, when the occasion arises, to say which side is just'. However, he compromised by admitting that it 'would be cowardly of a neutral country to allow an army to devastate a neighbouring country'.<sup>25</sup> Protests, civil disobedience, and peaceful human shields were central to Gandhi's proposed responses to violence. From this perspective, the south's refusal to act or openly support either the Allied or the Axis powers would be interpreted as cowardly.

In several poems MacFadden admits the difficulty of formulating an appropriate pacifist response to a war which has already commenced. For example, in 'Poem' the speaker laments that, despite his humanitarian impulse to help 'Belgium's starving children', he remains sitting 'pinioned between fat arms of a leather chair'.<sup>26</sup> Overwhelmed by the scale of the war and the sheer numbers of non-combatants caught up in it, the speaker is unable to think of any positive course of action. The conclusion of 'St Stephen's Green' is similarly unsatisfactory. Rephrasing the famous and contentious line from Auden's 'September 1, 1939' ('We must love one another or die'), the speaker concludes:<sup>27</sup>

I send you greeting in a strange, torn time,  
When only those who love can dare to die,  
When only those who love will never die.

McFadden had quoted Auden's line a year earlier in *The Bell*, writing that 'young poets of the North [...] are pacifists for the same reason that they are poets, believing

<sup>25</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *For Pacifists* (Ahmedabad: Navijivan Press, 1949), p. 12, p. 58, p. 60, p. 48.

<sup>26</sup> Roy McFadden, 'Poem', in *Poems from Ulster*, ed. by Greacen, p. 19.

<sup>27</sup> W.H. Auden, *Selected Poems*, ed. by Edward Mendelson (New York: Vintage, 1979), p. 88.



what Auden professes: *We must love one another, or die*.<sup>28</sup> ‘Love’ for fellow-man was fundamental to McFadden’s pacifism as he thought it could function as an antidote to Ireland’s disengagement from the world and could potentially prevent future conflicts. But McFadden did not clarify how love’s spiritual value could be applied practically to prevent violence, particularly on a global scale and in situations where conflict is already under way.

## II: The Cuchulain poems: protesting against war

In ‘St Stephen’s Green’, McFadden refers to the legendary Ulster hero Cuchulain. Berating Ireland for its neutrality, the speaker accuses the country of leaving ‘sick Cuchulain [to fight] his wars alone’. The figure of Cuchulain took hold of McFadden’s imagination in the early years of the war, leading to the composition of several poems about this hero and, in 1951, a drama for the BBC NIHS. McFadden’s sympathetic representations of Cuchulain, like his invectives against Ireland’s neutrality, may initially appear to have an uneasy relationship with his outspoken pacifist convictions. Known primarily as a warrior of the Ulster Cycle and a hero of early twentieth-century nationalist art and literature, Cuchulain ostensibly symbolizes the violence McFadden opposed. In this section, I will seek to reconcile the Cuchulain poems with McFadden’s political views.

Following the publication of Standish O’Grady’s English versions of the Cuchulain legends during the late nineteenth century, the hero gained significant cultural currency in Ireland as a symbol of the pre-colonial period. Many Irish

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<sup>28</sup> Roy McFadden, Letter, *The Bell*, 4.6 (September 1942), 442-4 (p. 443). This letter is in response to an article by Denis Ireland entitled ‘Books and Writers in N.E. Ulster’, *The Bell*, 4.5 (August 1942), 317-22.

writers of the early twentieth century looked back to this period as a time when an authentic ‘Irishness’ flourished and was free from the taint of Anglicization. Writers such as Synge and Yeats celebrated the remnants of this identity and society which, they thought, could be found in ancient mythologies, literature, and in the Gaeltacht. By creatively drawing on these repositories of Gaelic culture, they engaged in the formation of a national identity which was presented as being continuous with the pre-colonial period. Perhaps the most influential depictions of Cuchulain are found in five plays and several poems by Yeats, in which he sought to reinvigorate national culture by invoking a masculine heroic ideal in order to counteract the feminization of the Irish in texts such as Matthew Arnold’s *The Study of Celtic Literature* (1867). In Patrick Pearse’s rhetoric, Cuchulain became a symbol of the Easter Rising and a statue of the hero, sculpted by Oliver Sheppard in 1911, was installed in memory of this event in the General Post Office in 1935.<sup>29</sup> As Brown explains, Cuchulain became a ‘metaphor of political hope’ for nationalists.<sup>30</sup>

A second tradition grew around the figure of Cuchulain in the north-east of Ireland. Although Yeats and others had re-imagined Cuchulain as a hero for all of Ireland, the northern branch of the Irish Literary Revival emphasized his Ulster identity. According to Eugene McNulty, this allowed northern writers to construct ‘a representational bridge connecting the nationalist cause in Ulster with the rest of the island’.<sup>31</sup> Unionist poets, such as F.S. Boas, similarly perceived Cuchulain as an Ulster hero, but divorced their representations of him from any association with the nationalist cause. In Boas’s *Songs of Ulster and Balliol* (1917), written in part as a

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<sup>29</sup> Robert Tracy, “‘A Statue’s There to Mark the Place’: Cú Chulainn in the GPO”, *Field Day Review*, 4 (2008), 202-15.

<sup>30</sup> Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History*, p. 69.

<sup>31</sup> McNulty, p. 31.

response to the First World War, soldiers from Ulster are compared to the warriors of the Red Branch:

Heroes re-born of the Red Branch,  
They leapt into the fray,  
Whelmed by the steely avalanche,  
That long midsummer day.<sup>32</sup>

Using language reminiscent of Brooke's sonnets, Boas depicts the soldiers as untiring, enthusiastic combatants who gain glory and honour in the heat of battle. Jim Haughey argues that Boas 'celebrates the legendary warrior Cuchulain – the Red Hound of Ulster – who defended his homeland against the invading "Irish" forces of Connacht's Queen Maeve [...], and so the spirit of Ulster separatism emerges as the ancient warriors are linked with those on the Somme battlefield'.<sup>33</sup> In this context, Cuchulain became a symbol of unionists' sacrifices in the service of the British crown which, many unionists believed, confirmed their undeniable right to remain within the empire.

Although McFadden was aware of these precursors, he was primarily interested in what he termed the 'tragic element' of the myth, rather than its heroic aspect.<sup>34</sup> Within a larger narrative framework based on Yeats's plays in general and *On Baile's Strand* (1904) in particular, McFadden focused on the moment of tragic anagnorisis which follows Cuchulain's killing of his own son. Cuchulain, bound by an oath of loyalty to High King Conchubar of Ireland, is compelled to fight an unknown man who has travelled from Queen Aoife's country. The Fool and the Blind Man, who counterpoint the main action throughout, reveal to Cuchulain after he has killed his opponent that the young man was actually his son. Maddened by this knowledge, Cuchulain runs to the shore where he fights the waves in a frenzy.

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<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Haughey, p. 119.

<sup>33</sup> Haughey, p. 119.

<sup>34</sup> Brown, *In the Chair*, pp. 19-20.

The play ends as the Fool repeatedly asserts that the ‘waves have mastered him’, whilst the Blind Man’s thoughts turn to food (*YMW*, p. 269).

In the above discussion of the New Apocalypse, I noted that, for McFadden, tragedy involved the transformation of individual experience into art with a universal significance. This process occurs in McFadden’s first poem on the Cuchulain theme, ‘Evening in Donegal’, which begins with the individual but soon expands to include the wider community:

Cuchulainn the crimson-handed slew his son  
And gave a soft name to a yellow strand,  
Now, the timeless wheel revolves and I  
Stand transient, grasping the minute’s peace  
With the filtering sand-dust. But his ghost strides the waves,  
Tall against the violet mist of hills.  
The blood of Conlaech is on all our hands.  
Evening moves like a blessing on this island,  
And on the sea a sudden turn of wings.

(*SP*, p. 25)

This brief poem originally appeared under the title ‘Evening on Trag na dTreannach’ in the neo-romantic periodical *Poetry Quarterly* in 1941, before being collected in *Swords*. Significant revisions were made by the time of the 1943 printing, most of which involve a paring back of superfluous, romanticized diction which distracted from the central epiphanic moment. The earlier version also contains a line which indicates more clearly that the poem was composed in the aftermath of the Belfast Blitz (the speaker retreats to Donegal from ‘the white man’s bombings’).<sup>35</sup> In the midst of a global crisis, the individual is searching for a panacea to heal his experience of war and loss.

Yet, the sense of peace he finds in Donegal is destroyed by the ghost of Cuchulain whose appearance reminds the speaker that he too is part of a community which is responsible for the effects of violence. In ‘The Return’ Hewitt had already

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<sup>35</sup> Roy McFadden, ‘Evening on Trag na dTreannach’, *Poetry Quarterly*, 3.3 (Autumn 1941), 65.

argued that by ignoring the seriousness of the events in Europe, such as stories told by dissenters fleeing Nazi Germany, society was blindly walking the path to conflict: 'war [is] imminent', wrote Hewitt, but 'its black wing [is] unnoticed / by careless gapers at a showy neon'. In this situation, the poet's function is to 'rouse and warn them' (*HCP*, p. 14). Rodgers energetically adopted this role in *Awake!* and employed a similar image in 'Sing, Brothers, Sing!': '[i]n cinemas we sought / The syrupy event' instead of paying attention to the '[a]larming' reports of the approaching conflict (*RCP*, p. 12). Writing later in the war, and believing that Ireland's neutrality demonstrated callousness and introversion, McFadden argued that both the United Kingdom and Ireland were culpable of causing the conflict. He implicates both nations by setting 'Evening in Donegal' in a county which was both part of historic Ulster and neutral Ireland. Returning to this theme in an essay published in *The Bell*, McFadden alluded to a line from Rodgers's 'Awake!' when he uncompromisingly argued that the war 'grew out of our stinking ditches'.<sup>36</sup> This strong image suggests that the war was not only the result of external events which were ignored by people in the United Kingdom and Ireland, as posited by Hewitt and Rodgers, but that it also developed out of social ills closer to home.

Throughout his poetry and prose, McFadden reiterates his belief that such violence was ultimately self-destructive. In an interview he explained that 'as a figure Cuchulain tied in with my own feeling about the futility of violence. Cuchulain kills the boy, who turns out to be his son, before he knows who the boy is'.<sup>37</sup> The unthinking act of brutality symbolically leads to the loss of life and Cuchulain's suffering, as well as to the destruction of the murderer's own future. In a

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<sup>36</sup> McFadden and Taylor, p. 341.

<sup>37</sup> Brown, *In the Chair*, pp. 19-20.

poem entitled 'And Like Cuchulain', McFadden reflects on the consequent disintegration of the self and the overwhelming madness of guilt:

A time comes when the stiff resisting self,  
Circled and tongued by flames of circumstance,  
Breaks through the burning ring into mad seas  
And, like Cuchulain, claws down crumbling waves,  
Crazed by the absence of a guilty hand.

(*FL*, p. 36)

In *Flowers*, this poem is included immediately after an elegy sequence for McFadden's mother, who died in 1943. The desperate grief articulated in this poem consequently undercuts any consolation found at the end of the preceding sequence. McFadden later linked 'And Like Cuchulain' with his mother's death, describing himself as 'Cuchulain fighting the waves'.<sup>38</sup> Although she died of natural causes, as a young man McFadden attributed this event to the war, drawing a direct connection between her illness and the failure of pacifist opposition to the conflict.<sup>39</sup> In this poem, the despair which follows violent death is augmented by the guilt the survivors feel at being unable to prevent the events or exact retribution for them.

In order to articulate this explosion of emotion, McFadden turned to techniques familiar from Rodgers's poetry. In its brevity, theme, and the use of alliteration and consonance, 'And Like Cuchulain' is similar to Rodgers's 'The Lovers':

After the tiff there was stiff silence, till  
One word, flung in the centre like single stone,  
Starred and cracked the ice of her resentment  
To its edge. From that stung core opened and  
Poured up one outward and widening wave  
Of eager and extravagant anger.

(*RCP*, p.15)

Both poems relate moments of revelation in which silence and restraint – appropriately embodied in the repeated and resistant fricative sounds – give way to

<sup>38</sup> Brown, *In the Chair*, p. 20

<sup>39</sup> Ferris, "One Who Stayed", p. 22.

powerful and violent emotions which overwhelm the conscious mind. For both poets, the sea and water correspond to the unconscious. Cuchulain abandons rational thought and action to lose himself in the tumultuous chaos of the sea.

This moment of despair is the subject of a much longer dramatic poem, simply entitled 'Cuchulain', which is dated 28-29 July 1944 and was published in *Flowers*. The poem falls into four sections and there are several speakers (the narrator, the voice of the sea, Cuchulain, and the townspeople) who provide different perspectives on the action. As in the earlier Cuchulain poems, the events narrated occur after the killing of Conla and so neither the reasons for the fight nor the moment of death are included. By removing the justification for Cuchulain's act as dramatized in *On Baile's Strand* (Cuchulain is bound by oath to Conchubar, who provokes the fight with the unknown youth), McFadden heightens the reader's awareness of the protagonist's guilt. The constrained narrative frame also means that Yeats's interest in the hero's honour, the occult, and the power-play between the kings of Ireland is not mentioned.

The poem's opening lines echo the dense alliterative, assonantal, and consonantal patterns of 'And Like Cuchulain'. However, rather than conveying the energy found in the earlier poem, these lines create a mood of calm despair:

Cold at the frills of the sea, in the wet sand,  
Foam-footed, he watched purposeless wings like leaves  
Scooped and swirled by the wind. He studied them  
Curiously, with one part of his mind  
Swinging out like a scarf after their course,  
But heavy, cold as stone, in the depths of him.

(FL, p. 52)

Here Cuchulain is an introspective observer standing on a cold Atlantic beach.

Although he is very different from the '[v]iolent and famous' mythic hero of Yeats's early plays, the imagery of birds and the stone is appropriate to the poem's Yeatsian

source (*YMW*, p. 256). Throughout *On Baile's Strand*, and at points in Yeats's other Cuchulain plays, the protagonist is associated with birds. For example, Cuchulain describes himself as living solitary, free, and wild, 'like a bird's flight from tree to tree' (*YMW*, p. 256). After being tamed and bound by oath to Conchubar and then fighting his son, in McFadden's poem Cuchulain can only look longingly at the birds. The violent act reflects back on the perpetrator, so that his mind is drained of its vitality, becoming a stone, static, emotionless, and dead.

The liminality of the beach is a significant element in McFadden's portrayal of Cuchulain's mind, which is on the brink between chaos and stability, death and a return to life. He is compelled by the lure of the 'death-deep sea', of eternal oblivion in a place where 'no clock whirs' (*FL*, p. 55, p. 58). Yet, as in 'And Like Cuchulain', the sea also symbolizes his unconscious mind: 'I meet myself', Cuchulain says as he prepares to fight the waves (*FL*, p. 55). The sea taunts him, speaking the harsh truth of Cuchulain's old age, weakness, and guilt. In fighting the sea, therefore, he seeks to overcome despair and death, even while undertaking a self-destructive attempt to punish himself for the murder.

Returning to the beach, Cuchulain sees the body of his son. If the sea is connected with the mind, the beach is associated with 'the dry heart'. 'Each man has a desert in his heart', Cuchulain says, '[a]nd I was sand, a figure draped in sand' (*FL*, p. 53, p. 57). Imagery of sand pervades *Flowers* as a representation of isolation, sterility, exhaustion, and 'lives' which 'fall apart' (*FL*, p. 37). Unlike the population of Hewitt's rural landscapes, the individual cannot sink secure roots into the ever-shifting, friable sand and so is condemned to a life of uncertainty outside of the community. Biblically, the desert is a scene of trial where individuals or groups of people are removed from the securities afforded by an established society and



demonstrate, or learn, dependence on God. It is a place of suffering and a struggle for survival beyond the possibility of outside earthly help. Within McFadden's poem, Cuchulain cannot emerge from this space of testing and so remains trapped in his guilt, haunting the coastline. In addition, the sand imagery hints at a reading which links the poem with the Second World War. For MacNeice, the desert represented the individual's experience of war: '[p]erhaps we all need a dose of the desert', he wrote in *Horizon* in 1940, 'and perhaps that is just what we shall get, whether we want it or not'.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, the presence of Conla's body on the beach is a reminder of the corpses washed up from the Battle of the Atlantic. The use of this trope, which recurs throughout McFadden's wartime poems, suggests a link between his attitude to Ireland's neutrality and his interpretation of the Cuchulain myth as a morality tale about personal culpability.

In his radio play about Cuchulain, McFadden wrote that the 'violent powerful man destroys the ground / In narrowing circle around him, and in the end / Cuts the ground from under his own two feet'.<sup>41</sup> These words summarize the key message of the Cuchulain texts: violent deeds are self-destructive. McFadden can foresee no positive outcome to war as it not only impacts on innocents (his mother and Cuchulain's son), but also reflects devastation back on the belligerent parties. That *Swords* and *Flowers* are overwhelmingly dominated by wartime elegies indicates that even a region on the very edge of war cannot escape the harrowing impact of the conflict.

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<sup>40</sup> MacNeice, 'American Letter', in *Selected Prose*, pp.75-7 (p. 77).

<sup>41</sup> Roy McFadden, 'The Angry Hound', Broadcast 20 January 1952 on BBC NIHS, MFC MP21, p. 19.

### III. Writing the region

McFadden's Cuchulain poems engage with the increasingly popular appeal of regional and regionalist writing during the Second World War. By 1943, McFadden was interested in Hewitt's version of regionalism. He later described his first reading of *Conacre* (1943) as a moment of profound realization, explaining that the:

[...] poem made an impact on me, at the age of 21, because it referred me to my immediate environment and local traditions; & it suggested that a poet need not go to books for a mythology, as older poets did, but could make a mythology out of his own locality.<sup>42</sup>

Hewitt's engagement with place in *Conacre* is primarily in terms of his experience of the landscape, its history, and its people. In other poems he revealed a fascination with the mythological figures Oisín and Cuchulain, and the sixth-century missionary Colmcille. Indeed, it was partly in response to Hewitt's composition of a radio play on the subject of Colmcille (*The Angry Dove*, 1952) that McFadden wrote his Cuchulain play (*The Angry Hound*, 1952).<sup>43</sup> Both were commissioned by MacNeice on behalf of the BBC, although they were broadcast on the NIHS rather than national radio.<sup>44</sup> Whilst Hewitt played a significant role in prompting the younger poet to explore local culture in greater depth, from the outset McFadden had several reservations about regionalism. Furthermore, McFadden's poetic mode is substantially different from Hewitt's. It would therefore be more accurate to describe McFadden's poetry using the broader term regional, rather than the more specific word regionalist.

By reimagining Cuchulain for the modern age, McFadden sought to create a local mythology and to shape a regional poetic voice. In his poems and radio play, McFadden reclaims Cuchulain from the Irish Literary Revival, consistently viewing

<sup>42</sup> Roy McFadden, Notes on a Poetry Reading of John Hewitt's Work, MFC L7.

<sup>43</sup> McFadden, "No Dusty Pioneer", p. 176.

<sup>44</sup> Smyth, 'Introduction', p. 17.

him as an Ulster tragic figure instead of a hero for all of Ireland. McFadden's descriptions of Cuchulain as 'crimson-handed' and having 'red hands' not only emphasize his guilt, but also link him with iconography familiar from the cover of Greacen's *Poems from Ulster* (*SP*, p. 25; *FL*, p. 54). Echoing statements of rootedness in place found in poems such as Hewitt's *Conacre* and Rodgers's 'Ireland', in McFadden's 'Cuchulain' the hero states that 'every road in Ulster veined my heart' (*FL*, p. 57). McFadden reiterated this image in *The Angry Hound*, in which Cuchulain protests that there is 'little I wouldn't do for Ulster; its paths and roads run through my heart'.<sup>45</sup> The landscape becomes fused with Cuchulain's identity and his primary allegiance is to his locality.

Like Hewitt, McFadden believed that his poetry should speak from within, to, and for the region. Both desired the establishment of a local literary tradition which was distinct from the English and Irish canons. However, whilst Hewitt famously declared that a regionalist poetic voice fundamentally involved the 'careful rejection of the rhetorical and flamboyant, the stubborn concreteness of imagery, the conscientious cleaving to the subjects of sense', McFadden chose a different mode.<sup>46</sup> Nor did McFadden fully subscribe to Rodgers's combination of 'spiky consonants' and 'Irish' exuberance or to Morton's use of local folk songs. His approach was closer to Greacen's, who welcomed the rise of the New Apocalypse and energetically rejected the Irish mode. Writing in *The Bell*, McFadden argued that 'the duty of conforming with the Gaelic mode' is not appropriate in Northern Ireland, where writers were 'faced with the problem of creating a literary tradition' which would 'inevitably be strongly influenced by contemporary happenings in English poetry'. Instead, McFadden proposed that Northern Irish poetry would naturally be

<sup>45</sup> McFadden, 'The Angry Hound', p. 23.

<sup>46</sup> Hewitt, 'The Bitter Gourd', p. 111.

‘in closer contact with current English trends’, by which he means the New Apocalypse and neo-romanticism, whilst remaining absorbed in the local ‘environment’, as Greacen failed to do.<sup>47</sup> Hence, in his regional poems about the Ulster figure of Cuchulain, he wrote in a neo-romantic mode, emphasizing tragedy, death, the unconscious mind, and emotions.

However, the convergence of pacifist and regionalist ideas in McFadden’s treatment of Cuchulain led to a strained balancing act of not entirely compatible priorities. On the one hand, Cuchulain’s tragedy is a demonstration of the self-destructive effects of violence. For McFadden, Cuchulain’s new-found weakness reveals that, in the post-1918 world, heroism is no longer a viable concept and war can achieve nothing. On the other hand, as McLaverty commented in a letter to McFadden, the Cuchulain poems have an ‘indigenous core, thought and image’.<sup>48</sup> By dwelling on Cuchulain’s experience of despair and the enticement of oblivion, McFadden aimed to move from an individual to a regional experience of the war and then, by extension, to a reflection on the universal response to death. In doing so, he further divorced Cuchulain from the heroic model inherited from the Irish Literary Revival. The figure who was once an emblem for an embryonic nation fighting to establish its existence becomes, in McFadden’s hands, a flawed, human character whose despair symbolizes the grief of those who lost friends and family in the war.

In *The Arts in Ulster* Bell posited that Ulster heroes such as Cuchulain ‘are too vast, too amorphous; they lack the saving salt of human vulgarity’ and are thus inadequate for the creation of a regional literature.<sup>49</sup> McFadden restores Cuchulain’s humanity in order to make his myth applicable to the modern region. In ‘Cuchulain’,

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<sup>47</sup> McFadden and Taylor, pp. 343-5.

<sup>48</sup> Michael McLaverty, Letter to Roy McFadden, 31 May 1945, MFC L8.

<sup>49</sup> Bell, ‘A Banderol’, p. 15.

the warrior has become an old man, human rather than heroic, afraid rather than fearless: 'But now you calculate / Each sword-thrust, substituting craft for strength, / Avoiding quarrels, words replacing wounds' (*FL*, p. 53). However, whilst McFadden theorized that the 'acceptance of the tragic involves certain positive values', this is not apparent in the Cuchulain poems and so they do not present a constructive mythology upon which to build a regional culture.<sup>50</sup> It is evident that in this long, ambitious poem McFadden tried to unite too many ideas into one symbol. Consequently, the pacifist elements of the poems are more convincing than its regional aspects.

More successful in terms of McFadden's interest in regional poetry are two poems about friendships with the writers McLaverty and Boyd. In these texts, McFadden alludes to other writers in an attempt to foster a creative coterie and audience. Dedications, allusions to other poets, and verse letters flourished in Northern Irish poetry during the nineteen forties and again in the late nineteen sixties, times when poets were unsure of their relationship to a wider reading public and the stability of a nascent literary group. These tropes are found most commonly in Hewitt's poetry, such as in the descriptions of Rodgers, McFadden, Maybin, Morton, McLaverty, and others in 'Roll Call'. The list of friends in MacNeice's *Autumn Sequel* (1954) has a similar motivation. Similarly, Morton composed a poem in praise of Hewitt, whom Maybin conversed with in 'Thoughts from Abroad'. In addition, Hewitt sent several verse letters to his fellow poets after he read their work.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> McFadden, 'A Trend in Poetry', p. 43.

<sup>51</sup> John Hewitt, 'To Roy: On Reading his New Book of Verse', in Letter to Roy McFadden, 23 May 1945, MFC L7 (reprinted *HCP*, p. 541); John Hewitt, 'Antrim April', in Letter to Patrick Maybin, 10

In 'Letter to an Irish Novelist', dated July 1944, McFadden both addresses

McLaverty and presents him as an ideal writer:

In all of us the worm eats at the heart  
And the rot spreads. But you seem whole, your pen  
A plough knifing straight furrows in firm ground,  
Your hills and valleys clear against the sky,  
Your fields secure, your people hard like buds  
Opening to your fingers, the flower within.

(*FL*, p. 45)

McLaverty preserves his integrity and individuality in a time of corruption, being nurtured by the local landscape, writing perceptively about the region, and seeing beyond the surface of life to the beauty within. Anticipating a central image in Heaney's *Death of a Naturalist*, McFadden compares the act of writing to the cultivation of the land. In the third verse paragraph, McFadden contrasts this ideal with the attitudes of three unidentified writers. The first is so immersed 'in his tree' that he does not notice glaring social inequality, which is symbolized by the 'beggars' hands [which] / Sprout from the shadows'. The second writer '[t]alks of revolution from a chair'; he lives in comfort, recognizing the flaws in society but failing to act. The final person is a 'sad man [...] gnarled with bitterness / At missing greatness'. His own failed career eclipses any impulse towards assisting other people.

Concluding this section of the verse letter, the speaker wonders '[w]hat is an accent if the mind is blind?' The rhetorical question implies that engagement with the region is pointless if it leads to provincialism and ignorance of, or the failure to intervene in, wider political and social issues. Both Hewitt and McLaverty were opposed to such introversion. As demonstrated in Chapter One, Hewitt believed that regional attachments should be mediated by engagement with the wider world.

Similarly, writing to McFadden in 1945, McLaverty insisted that writers should ‘explore and not exploit the people and their language – using the local speech with a delicate sense of selection’ in order to ‘escape from static and stultifying provincialism’.<sup>52</sup>

In ‘The Upland Field’, published in 1947, McFadden reflects on his friendship with Boyd. The war has torn apart a world they both knew, ‘beat[ing] into the mire / Much I counted permanent’ so that only a few can now ‘struggle to the firmer ground’. Whereas in his wartime poetry, Hewitt ignores many of the negative aspects of Northern Ireland’s culture, the speaker of ‘The Upland Field’ is forthright in admitting his ‘dislike’ for many of the people, ‘the loutish drums’, and the pervasive ‘bigotry’. Searching for new certainties and relief from sectarianism, he finds a place which might prove ideal, allowing this location to fuse with his psyche. Alluding to the image of the roads which ‘veined’ Cuchulain’s heart, the speaker stakes his claim to place:

Land- and sky- and hill-shape, strand  
 And sea of cloud loose in the mind:  
 A moon-meshed bridge, a crying tram,  
 And roads as lively as my veins:  
 These things I love; for these I am.  
 Yet I’ll not praise them, but insist  
 On finding answers to the clay,  
 A blind man fighting for firm ground  
 Who still believes he’ll find a way  
 To the high field that has the sun  
 And holds its harvest in the hail.  
 So, walking with my friend to-night,  
 Within the threat of the hobnail  
 Boots of Europe, now I draw  
 These things around me, and those friends  
 Who’ve fought the gummy mouth of clay  
 And all that pays death’s dividends  
 – Gravelocked ones, remember me –  
 For the wind about the hill  
 Carries voices that deny  
 That upland field we hope one day to till.

[...]

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<sup>52</sup> Michael McLaverty, Letter to Roy McFadden, 20 August 1945, MFC L8, p. 2.

I name my friends against the waste  
Hastening from Europe[.]<sup>53</sup>

It is significant that the speaker's thoughts frequently return to the importance of companionship. For a poet who was wary of stating allegiance to any particular literary group, this is an important recognition of the role friendship plays in his sense of place and his literary development.

Such relationships are manifested in allusions to the work of Hewitt and Rodgers which McFadden employs to explore and critique their understanding of the connection between the poet and the region. The syntax of the first lines quoted above, in which a list of phenomena is followed by a statement of identity, parallels the opening lines of Rodgers's 'Ireland' (discussed in Chapter Two). McFadden's definite claim 'these I am' echoes Rodgers's '[t]hem I am' (*RCP*, p. 42). In both poems, this appears to be an unreserved statement of identity and rootedness in the locality. Yet, McFadden's list differs subtly from that found in 'Ireland'. Rodgers names only natural features of the landscape, whilst McFadden includes manmade structures. The urban world has a greater attraction for the younger poet, who implicitly indicates that Rodgers has not successfully absorbed the whole of the region into his poetic geography. The most significant difference is the rejection of pure 'praise', the overriding attitude of Rodgers's 'Ireland', in favour of a more profound exploration and a realization that the clay, the foundation of identity, might give way at any moment. Just as McFadden had admired McLaverty for examining the core of life, so elsewhere he had criticized Rodgers for focusing on superficialities: 'Mr. Rodgers sees only the surface of things: he is too busy juggling with words to penetrate very deeply into his time and place'.<sup>54</sup> Although this is not

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<sup>53</sup> Roy McFadden, 'The Upland Field', *Irish Writing*, 3 (November 1947), 59.

<sup>54</sup> McFadden and Taylor, p. 344.



necessarily the case in Rodgers's oeuvre as a whole, it is an accurate description of 'Ireland'.

'The Upland Field' also brings to mind Hewitt's 'Antrim April', written in 1940 while staying with Maybin in Dunadry, a rural area about fifteen miles north-west of Belfast. Hewitt details the vitality and beauty of the natural world, before moving on to describe the context of these observations:

this was in Clady walking with my friend  
 remarking damson gay the misty crest  
 of beeches tall above the dove-grey house  
 at April's end when Antrim's loveliest  
 somewhere in Europe men were locked in war  
 and rocked to crush us from their tilted peak  
 we spoke of urgent things like poetry  
 but there were certain things we did not speak.

(HCP, p. 24)

McFadden employs the same phraseology ('walking with my friend') and context (a country walk with a friend under threat from the encroaching war). Both poets attempt to abstract and preserve a rural space and personal relationships from the war, and both are poignantly aware that deaths have already occurred, whilst more suffering may be imminent. Again, McFadden pays closer attention to both the rural and urban aspects of the region, and his approach is more provisional than Hewitt's. The relative stability and fruitfulness of Hewitt's world is undermined in 'The Upland Field', in which the friends have not yet reached the 'firm ground' and the war is a more destructive and all-encompassing presence.

In 1950, Hewitt claimed that in 'actual fact the conscious regionalist outlook has been confined to Roy McFadden and myself, and as yet McFadden is not wholly committed to it'.<sup>55</sup> The phrase 'as yet' was optimistic as, towards the end of the nineteen forties, McFadden increasingly distanced himself from both the New

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<sup>55</sup> Hewitt, 'Poetry and Ulster', p. 9.

Apocalypse and Hewitt's regionalism. He abandoned much of his wartime romantic imagery for a more refined poetic mode and, whilst he still wrote about Northern Ireland and its people, he openly disagreed with Hewitt. Reflecting on the cooling of their friendship, McFadden recalled that he had realized that 'the Ulster Regionalist idea could be used to provide a cultural mask for political unionism or a kind of local counter-nationalism'. He was also impatient with Hewitt's failure to define 'Ulster'.<sup>56</sup>

However, McFadden's intense awareness of war and his fascination with Cuchulain persisted throughout his writing career. He mentions Cuchulain in poems such as 'The Golden Boy' (for J.F. Kennedy), 'In Drumcliffe Churchyard' (for Yeats), and 'Smith' (for victims of the Troubles). Always associated with death and violence, for McFadden Cuchulain became shorthand for suffering and grief. The pathetic refrain in 'Smith' encapsulates this: '*Men of Ulster; behold, I bring you my son*' (MFCP, p. 157).

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<sup>56</sup> McFadden, "No Dusty Pioneer", p. 176.

## Coda

### The Legacy of the Poetry of the Second World War

In Glenn Patterson's novel *Burning Your Own* (1988), Francy and Mal look out over the Larkview estate on the outskirts of Belfast. It is the summer of 1969 and Francy summarizes the city's experience of the Second World War for his spellbound companion:

‘The war had that going for it: by and large it happened somewhere else. And then, it wasn't as bad as the first one – no trenches, or any of that shit, not the same danger of the men coming home all packed up in their old kitbags. And there was work too in the war, unlike the thirties. So, if you could put up with the blackout, the ration books, and the odd air-raid ... well, things could've been worse. Still and all, they danced in the streets and sang when it was over. Because we'd won. Good old we.’<sup>1</sup>

Francy's speech evokes many of the issues which affected Northern Ireland during the nineteen forties and which have been discussed in this thesis. The depression, memories of the First World War, terrifying new technologies, rationing, and sectarianism impacted on the lives of those who found that, for the second time in thirty years, their communities were part of the war machine. However, the war did leave some parts of Northern Ireland relatively untouched: as Hewitt observed with delight, much of the landscape remained ‘unmastered’ and ‘unregimented’ (*HCP*, p. 23, p. 29). Hostilities officially ceased in August 1945 with the surrender of Japan, leaving Northern Ireland to stumble into a new era of radical reform and reconstruction as social welfare provisions were introduced. The estate Francy and Mal live on is a result of such post-war initiatives.

In 1946, Boyd set out the problem facing writers in Northern Ireland:  
‘LAGAN has survived the war: and the problem now is to survive the peace’.<sup>2</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> Glenn Patterson, *Burning Your Own* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2008), pp. 21-2.

<sup>2</sup> Boyd, ‘Comment’, *Lagan*, 4, p. 9.

reinstatement of regional broadcasting after the war provided a much-needed platform for the dissemination of poetry to a local audience, with the additional benefit of modest financial rewards.<sup>3</sup> Even if poets and critics were sceptical about the existence of a coherent group, the ‘new growth’ in nineteen forties poetry was celebrated handsomely in Greacen and Iremonger’s *Contemporary Irish Poetry* (1949), the 1950 ‘Ulster Issue’ of *Poetry Ireland*, and an essay collection entitled *The Arts in Ulster* (1951).<sup>4</sup>

However, poetic energies began to wane towards the end of the forties and the poets dispersed beyond the confined geographical area they had occupied at the beginning of the war. Hewitt did not complete another volume until *Tesserae* (1967), although Ormsby’s chronology indicates that many poems were written during the intervening period.<sup>5</sup> Rodgers moved to London in 1946 and his second and final collection, *Europa and the Bull and Other Poems*, appeared in 1952. He and MacNeice continued to visit Belfast to work with the BBC. In 1948 Greacen also left for London and became preoccupied with work and marital difficulties.<sup>6</sup> Later, he recalled that in ‘my mid-thirties I ditched poetry. Or did poetry ditch me?’<sup>7</sup> Consequently, he was not to publish his poetry again until the nineteen seventies. A new collection by Laughton was rumoured, but never appeared.<sup>8</sup> Morton’s final volume was *Sung to the Spinning Wheel* (1952), whilst Maybin apparently stopped writing poetry. Although McFadden co-edited *Rann* between 1948 and 1953, he wrote and published his own work only sporadically. His next full volume was *The Garryowen* (1971). In *Rann*, McFadden admitted that he had lost confidence in any

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<sup>3</sup> McIntosh, p. 93.

<sup>4</sup> Bell, ‘A Banderol’, p. 19.

<sup>5</sup> Ormsby, pp. 553-6.

<sup>6</sup> Sarah Ferris, ‘Robert Greacen: Getting on with the “Job of Living”’, *Irish Studies Review*, 15.1 (February 2007), 73-82 (p. 77).

<sup>7</sup> Anon., ‘Outstanding Poet’, p. 12.

<sup>8</sup> Anon., ‘Notes on the Poets’, in *New Irish Poets*, ed. by Garrity, pp. 203-9 (p. 206).

group identity: 'no concerted movement exists among our poets' he wrote, as they are 'working in isolation'.<sup>9</sup>

Many important forums for publication also closed down. *The New Northman* had long reverted to its original format, whilst the Mourne Press ceased operations during the war, and *Lagan* folded in 1946 due to a decline in readership when military personnel left Northern Ireland.<sup>10</sup> McFadden reflected on the symbolism of *Lagan*'s demise, writing that it 'ended the hopes of a group literature; of a body of writers writing self-consciously from a shared background, & a body of readers educated to recognize their aims & criticize the measure of their achievement'.<sup>11</sup> In 1953, *Rann* ceased publication and the Lisnagarvey Press disappeared at around the same time. The Quota Press closed a year later. Literary life did continue throughout the nineteen fifties but, as Kirkland acknowledges, 'it was an activity that was increasingly wary of attaching itself to a movement, let alone a revival'.<sup>12</sup> For the poets, the shared desire to create a regional literary mode became an unrealizable ideal rather than a distinct possibility. There would be no group of writers with a clearly defined social function who were supported by an enthusiastic readership. Furthermore, the reduction in travel restrictions meant that, once again, Northern Ireland's poets could move around the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Europe more freely, spending increasing amounts of time outside of Belfast.

Despite the sense of failure which pervades the poets' articles, private notes, and silences during the post-war period, they had created a foundation on which the

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<sup>9</sup> Roy McFadden, Editorial, *Rann*, 4 (Spring 1949), 1.

<sup>10</sup> Hewitt, *A North Light*, p. 151.

<sup>11</sup> McFadden, 'Megarrity', p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> Kirkland, 'Poetics of Partition', p. 223.

next generation could build. This final section of this thesis opens a potential avenue of further research by suggesting how the two generations interacted and briefly sketching the ways in which the war years were remembered or imagined in poetry of the late twentieth century.

In *The Ulster Renaissance*, Clark emphasizes the importance of mid-century poetry for the resurgence of literature in Northern Ireland from the late nineteen sixties onwards. She quotes Heaney's comments regarding his postgraduate essay on local literary magazines:

[This essay] gave me a certain purchase on what had been happening at Queen's and in Belfast during the 40's and 50's, so I ended up with a good sense of the efforts made at that time to get a 'regional literature' going. I knew about the work done by people like Robert Greacen and John Gallen in *The New Northman* at Queen's in the early 40's, by John Boyd and John Hewitt in *Lagan*, and by Roy McFadden in *Rann*. At this time I also met Michael McLaverty [...] and the painter T.P. Flanagan. Through Terry and Sheila Flanagan I got to know the artist Colin Middleton and eventually became personally friendly with John Hewitt. All this grounding in a pre-Hobsbaum, pre-Group, pre-Longleys and Mahon context was important to me. ... [I also had a] connection to an older generation of writers, such as Sam Hanna Bell and Joseph Tomelty. These met in a café in Fountain Street. ... They were not particularly 'influential' at a stylistic level, but they gave one a strong sense of local context, of creative endeavour having been there from the start, of high (or highish) artistic ambition proceeding in an Ulster accent.<sup>13</sup>

As Heaney explains, the mere existence of an earlier generation of writers in Northern Ireland was extremely significant. The writers of the nineteen forties had demonstrated that poets could survive in ostensibly hostile surroundings, engaging closely with the language, culture, and traditions of their locality rather than being drawn to London or Dublin.

Rodgers and Hewitt's pioneering work with CEMA was essential to the important role the organization played in subsidizing literature and thus enabling poetic creation from the nineteen seventies onwards. Hewitt joined the Art Advisory Sub-Committee when CEMA was founded in 1943 and remained a member until he

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Clark, *The Ulster Renaissance*, p. 112.

left for Coventry in 1956.<sup>14</sup> He consistently supported CEMA's work in music, drama, and visual art, also trying to redress their lack of interest in literature.<sup>15</sup> After communication with Hewitt on this matter, Rodgers lamented the dearth of local publishing opportunities in a 1955 article in the *Times Literary Supplement*. In this, he argued that the 'dramatist is better served [in Northern Ireland] than the novelist or poet', leading to 'slow development' of poets who are left to 'range and forage' in isolation.<sup>16</sup> Rodgers joined CEMA in 1964, remaining involved until his death in the USA in 1969.<sup>17</sup>

Michael Longley, who was employed by the renamed Arts Council of Northern Ireland in 1970 as the Combined Arts Director, particularly appreciated the precedent set by Rodgers. Longley later explained that in 1970 he 'discovered on file a brief commissioned report in which Rodgers surveyed the local literary scene and praised the new generation of Ulster poets who had just started to get their work published. [...] The generous enthusiasm of Rodgers's report helped to prepare the way for the literature programme which I was later to initiate'.<sup>18</sup> This programme led to the establishment of a reciprocal relationship between generations as they promoted and encouraged the dissemination of poetry in Northern Ireland. For example, the rise in Hewitt's reputation towards the end of the twentieth century began when he featured alongside John Montague in one of Longley's first initiatives, a poetry tour entitled *The Planter and the Gael* (1970).

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<sup>14</sup> Hewitt, *A North Light*, p. 156-7.

<sup>15</sup> Hewitt, 'Toast of H.M. Government', p. 2; Hewitt, Letter to Mr. Downer, p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> Rodgers, Letter to John Hewitt, p. 1; Rodgers, 'Ulster's Inheritance', p. 452.

<sup>17</sup> BBC, 'W.R. Rodgers: Words Melted into Motion...', <<http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/northernireland/bbcnistory/Exhibitions/WRRodgers/WRRodgersBooklet.pdf>> [accessed 25 July 2014].

<sup>18</sup> Longley, 'Introduction', in *Poems*, p. 21.

Similarly, the new generation was largely responsible for the reinstatement of the reputations of both MacNeice and Rodgers. Writing about the younger poets' efforts on behalf of the previous generation, Clark posits that:

By recuperating a Northern poetic tradition – particularly through the work of MacNeice and Hewitt – [the younger] Northern writers were able to legitimate the hybrid or, in Longley's words, "schizoid" Irish/English identity with which they grappled, and to clear a space for their own work as something forged by but independent of both traditions.<sup>19</sup>

In different ways and with varying degrees of success, the older generation had criticized both staunch unionism and nationalism, eschewed the poetic styles primarily associated with these communities, and tried to write poetry which transcended at least some of the limitations of the region's divided socio-political heritage. Their poetic legacy gave confidence and alternative modes of thought to new writers who grappled with the same issues in an increasingly tense atmosphere.

In a number of poems, essays, reviews, and anthologies Heaney, Mahon, Longley, and Muldoon presented these predecessors as key figures in Northern Ireland's literary history. Longley also edited new compilations of MacNeice's *Selected Poems* (1988) and Rodgers's *Poems* (1993). Mahon concludes his positive review of *Poems* by indicating that Rodgers's identification of a connection between 'my people' and 'the spiky consonants in speech' was 'taken up by the younger poets'.<sup>20</sup> Mahon's aurally and politically pointed critique of Presbyterian dogmatism in 'Ecclesiastes' ('God- / chosen purist little puritan that') may owe something to Rodgers's example.<sup>21</sup> Yet, his more enduring legacy was his linguistic vivacity and striking images, rather than his idiosyncratic diction and rhythms. For example, Heaney's image of the poet as 'The Diviner' echoes Rodgers's explanation that there is 'a lot of divination and divining' in poetry as the writer strives to access the

<sup>19</sup> Clark, *The Ulster Renaissance*, p. 12.

<sup>20</sup> Derek Mahon, 'An Imprudential Poet', in *Journalism*, pp. 88-91 (pp. 90-1).

<sup>21</sup> Derek Mahon, *Collected Poems* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1999), p. 35.



‘hidden springs’ of inspiration.<sup>22</sup> In ‘First Love’, Mahon describes poetry as ‘a blind with sunlight filtering through’, echoing Rodgers’s desire for words to become the ‘windows of feeling (and not mere blinds)’ (*RCP*, p. 49).<sup>23</sup>

MacNeice was a more important precursor for Mahon, as suggested by the elegy ‘In Carrowdore Churchyard’. Several critics have explored the interrelationship between MacNeice and the younger poets, often highlighting the enabling example of a writer whose attitude to his place of origin was ambivalent.<sup>24</sup> Mahon found MacNeice’s example more appealing than Hewitt’s dismissal of the ‘airy internationalist’ in favour of ‘rootedness’: this ‘is a bit tough on the thistledown’, Mahon wrote, ‘and, speaking as a twig in a stream, I feel there’s a certain harshness, a dogmatism, at work there’.<sup>25</sup> Despite such disagreements, Simmons referred to Hewitt as ‘the daddy of us all’, a forefather and a mentor for poets who interrogated and reinvented his ideas about place.<sup>26</sup> For Heaney, Rodgers also productively complicated ideas of place and identity in poetry which reveals the ‘triple heritage of Irish, Scottish and English traditions’.<sup>27</sup>

As poetry flourished in Northern Ireland during the nineteen sixties, Hewitt (who returned to Belfast in 1972), McFadden, and Greacen began to write more copiously and to publish once again. Many of the poems Hewitt and McFadden produced during the final decades of the twentieth century were revised versions of their Second World War lyrics, and all three poets composed new work which

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<sup>22</sup> Rodgers, ‘Balloons and Maggots’, p. 12.

<sup>23</sup> Mahon, *Collected Poems*, p. 18.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Clark, ‘Revising MacNeice’; Johnston, pp. 206-46; Edna Longley, *Poetry in the Wars* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1986), pp. 211-43.

<sup>25</sup> Hewitt, ‘The Bitter Gourd’, p. 115; Derek Mahon, ‘An Honest Ulsterman’, in *Journalism*, pp. 92-4 (p. 94).

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Richard Kirkland, ‘“The Daddy of us All?”: John Hewitt’s Writing and Regionalism in Northern Ireland’, *Causeway*, 1.3 (Summer 1994), 19-23 (p. 20).

<sup>27</sup> Seamus Heaney, ‘Through-Other Places, Through-Other Times: The Irish Poet and Britain’, in *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose, 1971-2001* (London: Faber, 2002), pp. 364-82 (p. 365).

revisited the war years. Perhaps, as Longley commented in response to demands for ‘war poets’ of the Troubles, ‘the artist needs time in which to allow the raw materials of experience to settle to an imaginative depth where he can transform it’.<sup>28</sup> That Longley felt pressured by a question which was asked three decades previously, at the beginning of the Second World War, suggests that the poets felt a fundamental similarity between the two conflicts. Brearton and Haughey have discussed Irish poets’ responses to the First World War and how the 1914 conflict became a lens through which Heaney, Longley, and Mahon could view the resurgence of the Troubles.<sup>29</sup> For Hewitt, Greacen, and McFadden, memories of the Second World War functioned in much the same way, being transformed by, and providing the opportunity to comment obliquely on, contemporary violence.

The Second World War is an apt correlative for the Troubles for two reasons. Firstly, the intrusion of violence into the Home Front and the presence of military garrisons in Northern Ireland are experiences which, in some ways, paralleled the conditions of the late twentieth-century. Secondly, behind Francy’s ironic comment in *Burning Your Own* (‘Because we’d won. Good old we.’) lies a gamut of questions regarding the sectarian divisions within the winning nation. Nationalist and unionist communities became increasingly polarized during and immediately after the war<sup>30</sup>, a situation which contributed to the fermentation of the later conflict. In 1944, the unionist writer Hugh Shearman hypothesized that ‘the connection between Ulster and Great Britain has been made more secure’ due to the ‘contrast between Eire’s

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<sup>28</sup> Michael Longley, ‘Introduction’, in *Causeway: The Arts in Ulster*, ed. by Michael Longley (Belfast: Arts Council of Northern Ireland, 1971), pp. 7-9 (p. 8).

<sup>29</sup> Brearton, *The Great War*, p. 186; Haughey, p. 247.

<sup>30</sup> McIntosh, p. 18; Hennessey, p. 92.

neutrality and Ulster's ready participation in the war'. On the other hand, Shearman continues, the lack of conscription 'tended to separate Ulster from Great Britain'.<sup>31</sup>

The negative preconceptions of many members of the unionist community were confirmed by the actions of some nationalists during the Second World War. Wills explains that during 'the first weeks of the war [...] gas masks had been publicly burnt, and streets and houses left illuminated in Nationalist areas of Belfast, in defiance of the blackout (in retaliation Catholic workmen were turned out of the Belfast shipyards)'.<sup>32</sup> Heaney identifies nationalist alienation from the war effort in the prose poem 'England's Difficulty':

Behind the blackout, Germany called to lamplit kitchens through fretted baize, dry battery, wet battery, capillary wires, domed valves that squeaked and burbled as the dial-hand absolved Stuttgart and Leipzig.  
'He's an artist, this Haw Haw. He can fairly leave it into them.'<sup>33</sup>

Listening to German radio propaganda behind closed doors, this nationalist family living in Northern Ireland is sympathetic to Germany and neutral Ireland rather than to the Allied Forces. Such stories are not found in the work of the predominantly unionist poets who were writing during the nineteen forties, and are thus presented by Heaney as an alternative to the prevailing historical memory of the war. The word 'artist' resounds in Heaney's poem, posing the question of the function of poetry in relation to politics, propaganda, and war. In addition to such tensions, the continuation of politico-religious discrimination and Britain's 1940 offer to Eamon de Valera to end partition reinforced increasingly divergent attitudes to national identity and the statelet's constitutional position.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Hugh Shearman, 'Ulster To-Day', in *Northern Harvest*, ed. by Greacen, pp. 117-30 (pp. 126-7).

<sup>32</sup> Wills, p. 213.

<sup>33</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Opened Ground: Poems 1966-1996* (London: Faber, 1998), p. 85.

<sup>34</sup> Hennessey, pp. 82-92.

Like the speakers of Keith Douglas's 'Vergissmeinnicht' and Longley's 'Letters', McFadden's *Collected Poems* repeatedly return over 'the nightmare ground' of the war.<sup>35</sup> By organizing this volume in reverse chronological order, McFadden guides the reader backwards through time to the origins of his pacifism. The reader must view the nineteen forties in conjunction with the end of the twentieth century. The speaker of 'Downpatrick' (c. 1977) telescopes the two decades into one thought: 'exhausted with refugees / From German bombs' the train from Belfast 'stumbled forward / To a waiting future of Irish bombs' (*MFCP*, p. 163). The train moves from one moment of destruction to the next, its route determined by a cyclical and violent historical pattern.

A similar alignment of past and present is found in 'Stranmillis Road' (1974), which is dedicated to Greacen and refers to the location of his teenage home near Queen's University:

Leaves offcourse,  
The river's trespass bright  
On Ridgeway Street;  
Your narrow room above  
76 the shop:  
Drummond Allison's war.

Then; but today,  
Minding his own business,  
A shopkeeper was shot,  
Assassin's customer  
Getting short shrift,  
You'd say within earshot  
Of 76 and our ghosts –  
No leaves scuttling but  
Flags like a stench in the air.

(*MFCP*, p. 176)

Like many of the poems Greacen and McFadden wrote during the Second World War, this was initially sent privately to the addressee and contains references to

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<sup>35</sup> Michael Longley, *Collected Poems* (London: Cape, 2006), p. 53.

personal memories.<sup>36</sup> McFadden appeals to his friend to join him in remembering and witnessing these events, articulating his horror whilst trying to recapture something of the wartime milieu which had created space for poetry in a context apparently inhospitable to the imagination. However, in 'Coffee at Crumbles' (c. 1979) McFadden indicates some of the failures of this literary group. The writers who gather in Crumble's Café (a thinly veiled reference to Campbell's Café) become embroiled in deliberations about maintaining linguistic propriety and in their memories of Yeats's Dublin, ignoring the pressing events occurring outside their nostalgic and introverted discussion.

The first few lines of 'Stranmillis' sparingly evoke an alternative nineteen forties setting, in which Greacen and McFadden made personal and working connections with English poets. The war is the province of their friend, the aspiring neo-romantic poet Drummond Allison, whose premature death in Italy in 1943 made him a 'war poet'.<sup>37</sup> As with Longley's references to Douglas, McFadden's allusion to Allison raises the question of the role of the poet in wartime. For McFadden, the poet must memorialize the dead and protest against violence. Yet, the poem's bare diction and brief, stilted lines – so different from McFadden's wartime neo-romantic idiom – demonstrate the difficulty in expressing these ideas or writing about the recurrence of violence in an artistic medium. In a scene repeated throughout Northern Irish poetry of the late twentieth-century, the assassin disrupts the habitual acts of daily life. For McFadden, the deaths of Allison and of the shopkeeper are the collateral damage of such outbursts of senseless violence which result from the belligerency of competing nationalisms. McFadden does not raise the flags of these

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<sup>36</sup> Roy McFadden, Letter to Robert Greacen, n.d., Linen Hall Library: Robert Greacen Papers, Box 3, Envelope 1.

<sup>37</sup> Tolley, pp. 250-1.

nations as rallying points, but as symbols of defunct ideologies which can only end in destruction.

‘The Grand Central Hotel’ (c. 1983) focuses on another precise location in Belfast in order to explore the city’s history. Beginning with elocution examinations held in the hotel during the nineteen thirties, the poem highlights the divided allegiances, accents, traditions, and heritages of Northern Ireland’s population. The ‘officers and their whores’ who frequent the hotel during the nineteen forties are evidence of the seedier side of wartime cosmopolitanism (*MFCP*, p. 96). The British soldiers who occupy the building in its final incarnation do not seek entertainment, but are responsible for security operations in nineteen seventies Belfast:

This hostile territory’s symbolized  
By the bricked-up hotel  
Inside a cage to keep the bombers out,  
Where soldiers document  
The dirty tricks of violence[.]

(*MFCP*, p. 98)

As in Mahon’s ‘The Last of the Fire Kings’ – in which ‘Sirens, bin-lids / And bricked-up windows’ evoke the atmosphere and landscape of the Troubles – inexpressible turmoil underlies the simple statement of facts, which gesture towards upheaval throughout the region.<sup>38</sup> The connection McFadden makes between the Second World War and the Troubles indicates his perception that even if the causes of war are different, the results of violence are similar. The hotel is an appropriate symbol of this war-torn territory. As a place designed for temporary habitation, it evokes a sense of transience and instability rather than the rootedness many writers yearned for during the nineteen forties.

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<sup>38</sup> Mahon, *Collected Poems*, p. 65.

A version of the young McFadden hovers on the edges of ‘The Grand Central Hotel’, symbolizing an ineffective counter-cultural voice within the turmoil of the Second World War. He is glimpsed as a ‘reluctant activist’ on the pavement outside the hotel, or as one of the poets ‘patronis[ing] the lavatory’ and audaciously speaking to ‘persons of consequence in the hotel foyer’ (*MFCP*, pp. 96-7). McFadden humorously emphasizes the marginality of the wartime literary group to public events; yet, it is the poet who later reorganizes his memories and observances into a document of social history. Although from the late nineteen forties onwards McFadden disassociated himself from Hewittesque regionalism, in his later work he acted as a local archivist, chronicling anecdotes and personages which would otherwise be lost within the larger picture of Northern Ireland’s eventful history. By imaginatively piecing together his memories, McFadden demonstrates the connections between events which have shaped Northern Ireland and its culture. That he saw violence as the most potent force in this process is deliberately troubling.

In ‘Operation Jubilee’, published in *Young Mr. Gibbon* (1979), Greacen questions the adequacy of various forms of public remembrance. The poem is part of a sequence about the enigmatic secret agent Captain Fox which Greacen began to write on his return to literature during the nineteen seventies. Although Fox was born in 1920 (the same year as the poet) to a Northern Irish mother, Greacen explicitly rejected assumptions that this twentieth-century Renaissance man represents his own identity.<sup>39</sup> Rather, as Derek Stanford and Sarah Ferris conclude, Fox provided Greacen with a means to indulge in unlimited imaginative possibilities.<sup>40</sup> The

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<sup>39</sup> Robert Greacen, Letter to Derek Stanford, 18 March 1975, RGP, Box 1, Envelope 2.

<sup>40</sup> Derek Stanford, ‘Robert Greacen’s Captain Fox: Poet and Persona’, *Poetry Ireland Review*, 36 (Autumn 1992), 108-11 (p. 110); Ferris, ‘Robert Greacen’, p. 80.

Captain's memories of 'Operation Jubilee' are remote from Greacen's experience of the war, which he spent as a non-combatant in Belfast and then in neutral Dublin.

The Captain describes his part in Operation Jubilee and the scene he witnessed in Dieppe in August 1942:

'And then the beaches insulted with corpses,  
The anarchic architecture of death and wreckage,  
The screams, the hastily bandaged heads.  
I'll spare you the details you can see in Goya.

'I went back there a while ago.  
There's a stone of remembrance near the cemetery  
On which they've cut the words:  
*Their Name Liveth for Evermore.*

'Ah yes, as a Sergeant from Toronto put it –  
*Buddy, it was one helluva trip.*'

(GCP, 97-8)

The sanitized myth encapsulated in the five engraved words transforms this chaotic and bloody event into a heroic struggle which has guaranteed the soldiers' place in history. The stone is an image of fixity, like the pebbles which spell out 'Lest We Forget' in Longley's 'The Cenotaph'.<sup>41</sup> The italicized quotation from the Apocrypha, selected by Rudyard Kipling from Ecclesiasticus Chapter 44 as an appropriate epitaph for war memorials, is as inadequate to the reality as the Canadian sergeant's comment.<sup>42</sup> He can only find the words to present the battle as an exciting adventure. Both modes of memory are problematized by the lurid details of the first four lines quoted. But even these words are insufficient and Fox quickly shies away from a narrative which cannot evade clichés or melodramatic diction.

As in McFadden's world, for Greacen there are no true heroes. Fox is described ironically as a 'T.E. Lawrence searching for his Arabia', yet he admits that in 'war or politics' there are 'no heroes, / Only exploiters and exploited, con-men and conned' (GCP, p. 94, p. 79). The Audenesque myth of the Truly Strong Man,

<sup>41</sup> Longley, *Collected Poems*, p. 259.

<sup>42</sup> Hynes, *A War Imagined*, p. 271.



largely based on Lawrence's image as a man of both action and art, is undermined by this cynical appraisal of the modern world. Similarly, the bankruptcy of the heroic ideal dominates Hewitt's retrospective reflections on the Second World War, several of which reiterate the images of youth betrayed and uncountable casualties familiar from much First World War poetry. In 1974, Hewitt revised some of his early work for a collection of short lyrics entitled *Scissors for a One-Armed Tailor: Marginal Verses, 1929-1954*. The sub-section about war begins with 'Epitaph for a Conscript, 1940':

I go to seek the peace we could not save  
because we left it to the fool and knave,  
will maybe find instead my father's grave.

(HCP, p. 151)

Alluding to Herbert Read's poem, 'To a Conscript of 1940', Hewitt writes of a soldier who goes to 'fight without hope'.<sup>43</sup> The full end-rhymes reinforce the sense of entrapment and determinism which dominates the young soldier's life in the army, conflicting with the opening statement which indicates that the individual acted on his own free will.

Even though McFadden stated that 'Hiroshima was a word to shut all poets' mouths', in the post-war period Hewitt and many other poets addressed the global ramifications of the six years of war.<sup>44</sup> In 'To the People of Dresden', written in 1959 after Hewitt attended a ceremony in the Germany city on behalf of the people of Coventry, he proclaims his hope that 'by the common will of common men / no war shall ever darken day again' (HCP, p. 363). When this poem was published in *Loose Ends* in 1983 by the Belfast-based Blackstaff Press, the concluding couplet was loaded with irony. In this context, Hewitt's socialist protest against war in

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<sup>43</sup> Herbert Read, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber, 1966), p. 152

<sup>44</sup> McFadden, 'Megarrity', p. 15.

general can be interpreted as an objection to the Troubles, as he resituated his experiential and literary memories of the Second World War in relation to contemporary events. Hewitt visited Auschwitz in 1962, drawing on this experience in two poems. In ‘An Ulsterman in England Remembers’, published in September 1969, Hewitt aligns memories of the nineteen twenties Troubles, the Auschwitz visit, the assassination of J.F. Kennedy, and televised reports of events in Belfast:

I ran  
against a briskly striding, tall young man,  
and glimpsed the rifle he thought well concealed.  
At Auschwitz, Dallas, I felt no surprise  
when violence, across the world’s wide screen,  
declared the age imperiled: I had seen  
the future in that frightened gunman’s eyes.

(*HCP*, 133)

If the word ‘frightened’ humanizes the perpetrators of violence, ‘Strangers and Neighbours’ (1971) unreservedly condemns acts of persecution. At Auschwitz the speaker’s ‘eyes burn[ed] dry beyond tears / at the swathes and billows of human hair / in the long museum showcase’ (*HCP*, 199). Hewitt’s habitual iambic pentameter fractures as he searches for words under the pressure of intense emotion and the physical evidence of the sheer number of deaths. He goes on to describe the different types of hair (‘grizzled tufts, plaits, ringlets, / blond, brown, black, lank, curling’), identifying such particularities in order to salvage the what he can of each victim’s individuality.

For Longley and Mahon, the appalling reality of the Holocaust is an example of violence which is found globally and throughout history. Longley’s brief couplet, entitled ‘Terezín’, completes an exploded sonnet which is comprised of four vignettes of the Second World War. The poem’s panoramic sweep encompasses German soldiers in ‘Eva Braun’, Japanese civilians in ‘Geisha’, the bodies of dead children in ‘Blitz’, and concludes with the Holocaust in ‘Terezín’. The couplet ends

the poem with a haunting half-rhyme: 'No room has ever been as silent as the room / Where hundreds of violins are hung in unison'.<sup>45</sup> As Brearton points out, in 'its evocation of the unmentionable, the poem is a stay against silence, but at the same time it seems almost to approach the condition of silence'.<sup>46</sup> The words on the page press against the white space which floods around them, insistent that the deaths must be acknowledged and remembered, even if language is insufficient in its ability to provide consolation or to represent the scale of the suffering.

Unlike Hewitt, Greacen, and McFadden, Longley, born in 1939, has few personal memories of the Second World War. However, the speaker of 'Sweetie Papers' describes the end of rationing from a child's perspective, moving seamlessly to images of a 'death camp survivor, the skin across his chest / Transparent as cigarette paper' via the artwork of Pierre Bonnard.<sup>47</sup> The child in Mahon's 'Autobiographies' similarly struggles to differentiate between the significance of post-war novelties and the barely comprehended suffering of the Holocaust. 'Oranges and bananas, / Forage caps and badges / And packets of Lucky Strike' are juxtaposed with pictures of 'released Jews / Blinking in shocked sunlight'.<sup>48</sup> As Haughton points out, in Mahon's *Collected Poems* (1999) 'Autobiographies' is immediately preceded by 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford'. In this poem, the trapped mushrooms – the '[l]ost people of Treblinka and Pompeii' – are abruptly awoken by a camera flash. Haughton explains that the 'photographic image of the mushrooms' taken by the intruder 'merges obscenely with photographic images of concentration camp inmates taken at the end of the war' in 'Autobiographies'.<sup>49</sup> As

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<sup>45</sup> Longley, *Collected Poems*, p. 186

<sup>46</sup> Fran Brearton, *Reading Michael Longley* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2006), p. 181.

<sup>47</sup> Longley, *Collected Poems*, p. 262

<sup>48</sup> Mahon, *Collected Poems*, p. 91.

<sup>49</sup> Hugh Haughton, *The Poetry of Derek Mahon* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), p. 119.

in McFadden's poetry, different historical moments collapse into one another. In addition to the Holocaust and the volcanic eruption at Pompeii, these times of violence include the Irish Civil War, the bombing of Hiroshima, and the Troubles in Northern Ireland.

In 'Autobiographies', the connection between the Second World War and late twentieth-century Belfast is reinforced by the hidden rhyme of 'home' and 'bomb'. This rhyme alludes to the more obviously troubling alignment of the same words in 'Afterlives', in which the speaker considers the effects of living in Belfast through the Troubles: 'Perhaps if I'd stayed behind / And lived it bomb by bomb / I might have grown up at last / And learnt what is meant by home'.<sup>50</sup> For all of the poets discussed here, the impact of both conflicts is felt primarily in the home.

In Mahon's 'Autobiographies' the new-born child sleeps beside the 'light meter' during the Blitz. This phrase also appears in 'A Disused Shed', in which, as Haughton notes, both the photographer and the poet are incited to employ their 'light meter[s]' responsibly. Mahon considers this issue in 'The Forger', one of several dramatic monologues in the poet's oeuvre which are spoken by artistic 'solitaries in the cold' who lived through the Second World War.<sup>51</sup> This group of poems, dispersed throughout Mahon's oeuvre, raises the question of the poet's social function during war. 'The Forger' takes as its subject the Dutch artist Jan Van Megheren's sale of forgeries to the German military commander Hermann Goering. Van Megheren exclaims '[t]o hell with the national heritage, / I sold my *soul* for potage'. Despite this betrayal of his own artistic vision, Van Megheren 'sheltered in

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<sup>50</sup> Mahon, *Collected Poems*, p. 58.

<sup>51</sup> Haughton, *Derek Mahon*, p. 117, p. 102

my heart of hearts / A light to transform the world'.<sup>52</sup> Van Megheren insists on the primacy of personal poetic vision, which can then have a positive impact on wider society.

Another monologue, entitled 'Hunger' and spoken by Norwegian author Knut Hamsun, alludes to the ostracized Van Megheren's experience of physical and artistic 'hunger'. Somewhat like the forger, Hamsun 'shook hands with Hitler, knew disgrace'. Yet 'Hunger' concludes with an image which provides another perspective on Van Megheren's belief in the artist's transformative function:

For who, unbreakfasted, will love the lark?  
Prepare your protein-fed epiphanies,  
Your heavenly mansions blazing in the dark.<sup>53</sup>

Again, light symbolizes the radiance of the poetic vision which can transform the flawed society in which the artist lives. Alluding to Yeats, Hamsun suggests that he prefers the comfortable existence of a successful writer accepted by society.

Haughton explains that the poem 'is simultaneously a satire on the romantic idealism of the young bohemian and the cynicism of the successful Nobel laureate'.<sup>54</sup>

Mahon's pairing of poems, which are sometimes written years apart, is characteristic of his oblique approach to the issues he raises. The apparently clear conclusion of 'The Forger' is undermined by the irony of 'Hunger', which points out the flaws in both an idealistic and cynical approach to art's social function.

The poets of the Second World War were confronted with the same question. Like Mahon, MacNeice was reluctant to delineate the poet's social function. In *The Strings are False*, for example, he rejects his friend's belief that the poet must 'show

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<sup>52</sup> Mahon, *Collected Poems*, p. 24.

<sup>53</sup> Mahon, *Collected Poems*, p. 24, p. 118, p. 119.

<sup>54</sup> Haughton, *Derek Mahon*, p. 178.

us a course' in times of war.<sup>55</sup> However, those poets based in Belfast were less reticent. For McFadden, poetry could be a form of protest against war. For Greacen, it was a means of asserting 'faith in man's essential good' and imagining a better world in the face of brutality and destruction.<sup>56</sup> In *Awake!* Rodgers employs art to maintain a place for the imagination in the face of the potentially dehumanizing effects of the war machine, as well as to warn people about the coming conflict and the consequences of social inequality. Hewitt agrees with this function in 'The Return' and, in 1939, asserted that poetry could inspire humanity in times of turmoil.<sup>57</sup> The landscape poetry of Hewitt and Morton is a means of counteracting Maybin's sense that 'it's impossible for us to feel rooted, when it seems just now that we're standing on an avalanche which is rapidly gaining speed and volume'.<sup>58</sup> For these three poets, the pastoral mode provides some shelter from 'the ruffling wind' of war (*HCP*, p. 38).

As with Mahon, Longley considered the question of the poet's function with significant reservations. As Longley put it, poets writing during the Troubles were under pressure to conform to a type of 'super-journalist commenting with unfaltering spontaneity on events immediately after they have happened'.<sup>59</sup> At this time, the violence was closer to home and more politically sensitive than the Second World War had been in Northern Ireland. Whereas the poets of the nineteen forties could denounce fascism with impunity, it was problematic to take sides during the Troubles. Thus, from the nineteen seventies onwards, McFadden and Hewitt

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<sup>55</sup> MacNeice, *The Strings are False*, p. 27.

<sup>56</sup> Greacen, 'Introduction', in *Poems from Ulster*, p. 5.

<sup>57</sup> Anon., Review of 'The Necessity of Poetry', p. 58.

<sup>58</sup> Patrick Maybin, Letter to John Hewitt, 3 September 1942, PRONI D/3838/3/10, p. 2.

<sup>59</sup> Longley, 'Introduction', in *Causeway*, p. 8.

protested against violence from any source and elegized the dead. In 'Smith' (c. 1977), McFadden memorializes civilians who have become innocent victims:

Never troublesome, she said:  
A good boy; helping, he was shot  
Drawing the bedroom curtains, dead.  
*Men of Ulster; behold, I bring you my son.*

(*MFCP*, p. 157)

The refrain juxtaposes contemporary events with another moment of destruction and despair: Cuchulain's killing of his own son. Cuchulain can formulate no adequate response to his own crime, just as the elegy itself seems insufficient to console the families of the dead. In 'Bog Cotton' Longley also recognizes the limitations of elegies. He offers healing, white bog cotton as a panacea in place of the poppy's blood red petals. Yet, as Brearton points out, bog cotton "'bring[s] to mind" comfort and healing' but 'cannot itself actually do any of these things', just as poetry is limited in its ability to assuage grief.<sup>60</sup>

Reflecting on the similarities between the historical context which gave rise to two generations of poets in Northern Ireland, Greacen asked '[d]oes violence stimulate creativity?'<sup>61</sup> Yet, Hewitt, Rodgers, MacNeice, Morton, and Maybin began to write before the Second World War, just as the poetry of Heaney, Longley, and Mahon had its genesis prior to the summer of 1969. That all of the poets discussed in this thesis responded to violence in their poetry does not demonstrate a causal link between war and the revival of art. As Clark hypothesized with regard to the poets of the Ulster Renaissance, 'it is my contention that the rise and fall of the Belfast coterie had as much to do with friendship and rivalry as it did with the political situation in Northern Ireland'.<sup>62</sup> Although the war cast a shadow over all the poetry

<sup>60</sup> Brearton, *Michael Longley*, p. 142.

<sup>61</sup> Robert Greacen, 'Northern Poets', *The Irish Times*, 18 June 1974, p. 11.

<sup>62</sup> Clark, *The Ulster Renaissance*, p. 12.

of the nineteen forties and created conditions favourable to the stimulation of local poetry, personal and textual interactions between writers were equally significant. First and foremost, Northern Irish poets of the Second World War were concerned with questions about group identity and a regional idiom.



## Conclusion

This thesis has proposed that scholars have undervalued Northern Ireland's mid-century literature. It has redressed this issue by examining the poetry of eight writers who were domiciled in, or closely connected with, the statelet during the Second World War. Using previously neglected archival and published materials, it has demonstrated that the war years were a time of much literary activity as writers from Northern Ireland and elsewhere met in Belfast and its environs to write, read, and debate on a wide range of subjects. The diverse work produced by these poets is united by shared concerns regarding the possibility of a literary revival, the development of a poetic voice appropriate to the region, and the war. Although MacNeice was more loosely connected with this milieu, he remained an important figure within Northern Ireland's wartime literary scene.

The foregoing chapters demonstrate the energy with which the poets engaged with these ideas. The first chapter traced the origins of this poetic community to the preceding generation of poets who lived and wrote in Northern Ireland, before outlining left-wing literary activity in Belfast. Such political affiliations were perceived as an alternative to the dominant nationalist and unionist ideologies. They facilitated the development of an international perspective which tempered rootedness in the region with global affiliations. Rodgers was equally interested in regional ideas and, as Chapter Two argues, sought to create a poetic voice which united 'Gaelic' and 'Puritan' modes of expression. This strikingly individual poetic voice also emerged from Rodgers's desire to prompt his readers into an active engagement with their communities and, thus, to counteract the dehumanizing power

of the war machine. The third chapter proposed that MacNeice was more closely associated with this cultural milieu than is often recognized. Although Hewitt, McFadden, and Greacen did not necessarily openly state their admiration for MacNeice, his poetry existed in creative tension with developing theories of regional culture.

MacNeice's perception that the atmosphere of the Second World War echoed aspects of the 1914 conflict was shared by his contemporaries in Northern Ireland. Maybin, discussed in Chapter Four, frequently alluded to poets of the earlier war in both his pre-war protest poems and his wartime regional verse. As with socialism, pacifism was an alternative to Northern Ireland's competing political ideologies and was adopted by several poets as a marker of their difference from the status quo. Maybin's letters to Hewitt demonstrate the significance of friendship to the process of composition, as do the close connections between Greacen and McFadden outlined in the following chapter. This section of the thesis identified the paucity of publishing opportunities available to contemporary poets who wished to reach a local audience, in addition to Greacen's attempts to rectify this situation. Although Hewitt and others disagreed with Greacen's belief that the influence of the New Apocalypse would reinvigorate local literature, they welcomed his editorial efforts.

The picture of nineteen forties poetry which emerges from Greacen's anthologies is a gendered one. The position of two of the most prominent women poets – Morton and Laughton – was discussed in Chapter Six, which identified their contribution to poetic debates and publications in the province. The final chapter elaborated on the topic of pacifism and considered McFadden's oeuvre in the light of his lifelong absolutist stance. The Coda noted some of the ways in which this literary community developed after the end of the nineteen forties, specifically considering

their connections with the poets who rose to prominence from the nineteen sixties onwards.

Throughout this thesis, I sought to establish whether this surge in literary activity during the Second World War constituted a revival or indicated the establishment of a coherent literary coterie. The poets themselves differed widely in their assessment of the scene. In 'The Bitter Gourd', Hewitt recognized an increase in literary production, but insisted that 'it is no rebirth'.<sup>1</sup> He reiterated this view in 1950, commenting that 'there can be no such thing as Ulster Poetry which may be readily identified and described as such. We simply have poets of Ulster birth'.<sup>2</sup> Greacen was more forthright, declaring in 1944 that there was a 'renaissance'.<sup>3</sup> In 1982, he referred to the 'intense though short-lived renaissance in the Northern arts'.<sup>4</sup> Yet, he later admitted that he was 'not sure that this did amount to a renaissance, although at the time I would have wanted it to be and I probably thought that it was'.<sup>5</sup> In 1969, McFadden referred to the wartime 'Ulster Literary Renaissance' and, in 1996, he termed this a 'literary awakening in Northern Ireland'.<sup>6</sup> However, elsewhere he stated that the 'Ulster Literary Revival' was a 'fiction [...] invented by Mr. Greacen and myself in the early 'Forties'.<sup>7</sup> Reviewing the work of these writers, Kirkland concluded that 'if there was an Ulster poetic renaissance it was one of writing not reading'.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hewitt, 'The Bitter Gourd', p. 108.

<sup>2</sup> Hewitt, 'Poetry and Ulster', p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Greacen, 'The Editor Says...', in *Northern Harvest*, n.p.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Greacen, 'Review: Ulster Senior League', *Books Ireland*, 62 (April 1982), 55-6 (p. 55).

<sup>5</sup> Robert Greacen, 'Review: In the Wars', *Books Ireland*, 38 (November 1979), 190-1; Brown, *In the Chair*, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Roy McFadden, Letter to Robert Greacen, 17 August 1969, RGP Box 4, Envelope 5, p. 1; McFadden, 'Preface', in *Collected Poems*, p. xv.

<sup>7</sup> Roy McFadden, 'Ulster's First Great Novelist – When?', MFC L3, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Kirkland, 'Poetics of Partition', p. 221.

This thesis has proposed that there was a minor revival which was promoted by a loosely-formed group of poets. Within this, there were two fluid clusters of writers, one which formed around Hewitt, and another around Greacen. The former comprised Hewitt, Rodgers, Maybin, and Morton, and the latter Greacen and McFadden. MacNeice and Laughton were more distantly connected with these writers, although there is strong evidence to suggest their involvement with the group on a social level. After Greacen's departure for Dublin in 1943, the dynamics shifted and the clusters became more closely linked. Unlike other literary movements, the poets did not issue a single manifesto to which they all subscribed. However, although they disagreed regarding the possibilities afforded by the New Apocalypse and regionalism, they were united by fundamental preoccupations, including the desire to revive local poetry, to create a regional poetic idiom, and to oppose the limitations of mainstream unionism. The divisions between the poets were often productive, prompting individuals to define their own positions and aesthetics more clearly.

In his assessment of the poets' achievements, Kirkland quotes Greacen's retrospective comments about the period: 'We should have shared concerns about living in a divided community and exploring how this could be resolved in terms of decent human relationships'. Kirkland adds that it is in the poets' 'ultimate failure to refashion these antimonies that their interest now resides'.<sup>9</sup> In hindsight, the poets failed to challenge the fundamental social and political dichotomies which divided Northern Ireland, or to seek a viable solution to this situation. By continually skirting around the issue of what constituted the region – whether it was the six counties of Northern Ireland or the nine counties of Ulster – they rendered it impossible to

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<sup>9</sup> Kirkland, 'Poetics of Partition', p. 224.

imagine a viable vision of an ideal statelet. The collapse of the embryonic publishing industry reveals that they did not enthrall their intended audience. Indeed, Greacen and McFadden's early idioms were deliberately alienating and challenging. If these criticisms presume that the artist performs a social function, this was an assumption made by the majority of the poets discussed here.

However, the poets did accomplish much. Their most important contribution to Northern Ireland's art was the insistence on a local context for the composition and publication of their work, and their resistance to the centripetal force exerted by the literary capitals of Dublin and London. The majority of poets discussed in this thesis promoted the idea that it was possible to write and remain committed to a provincial region with no great reputation for literary achievement. Even if the response within Northern Ireland was muted, Clyde has observed that during the war 'writers could (if they chose) fill their diaries with engagements'.<sup>10</sup> Editorial meetings, discussion groups, speaking engagements, and informal social gatherings abounded. A collaborative approach to publication proved to be essential and most anthologies and magazines had multiple editors. By pooling their resources and ideas, the poets managed to generate the creative momentum which was a necessary stimulus for wartime art.

The range of voices which has been uncovered in this thesis indicates the diversity of the resultant poetry. Hewitt's regionalism, Rodgers's maverick idiom, Greacen's regional neo-romanticism, and Morton's folk-inspired lyrics developed from the same impulse: in different ways and to varying degrees, the poets renewed Northern Irish poetry and imbued it with a range of local accents, landscapes, traditions, and experiences. In doing so, they extended the gamut of poetic registers

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<sup>10</sup> Clyde, "A Stirring in the Dry Bones", p. 250.

available to the next generation. By drawing on a variety of influences, ranging from Wordsworth to Chinese poetry, from Yeats to the New Apocalypse, the poets prevented their work from becoming tainted by provincialism and situated it within a wider context.

Furthermore, the poets succeeded in promoting the region's poetry in Ireland, the United Kingdom and, to a lesser extent, the USA. Whilst the circulation of local publications most likely remained low amongst Northern Ireland's population, audiences elsewhere were relatively receptive. For example, the first three issues of *Lagan* sold well (around 2,000 copies), reaching many members of the Allied Forces stationed in Northern Ireland.<sup>11</sup> Some publications (including *Awake! and Other Poems*, *Swords and Ploughshares*, *The Heart's Townland*, and *Contemporary Irish Poetry*) stimulated interest beyond Northern Ireland and attracted the attention of reviewers from prestigious literary periodicals such as the *Times Literary Supplement*. The majority of solo volumes mentioned in this thesis found publishers and a market in England. As demonstrated in Chapter Five, all eight poets featured in a range of anthologies and magazines, some of which were aimed at audiences in the USA, where Rodgers and MacNeice had already established their reputations via *The Partisan Review* and American editions of their poetry.

An additional aim of this thesis was to contribute to the increasing inclusivity of studies of war poetry. However, many aspects of regional war literature remain unexplored in this thesis and in literary criticism in general. Future studies could expand on Wills's cogent account of Ireland's Emergency culture, on Featherstone's comments about Scottish poets Hamish Henderson and Sorley MacLean, or on poets from the north-east of England, such as Basil Bunting. A bibliographic study into

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<sup>11</sup> Boyd, *My Journey*, p. 27.

regional variations of wartime book production and readership would provide a highly useful resource when assessing non-metropolitan literary cultures.

When writing this thesis, I experienced the same feeling which informed O’Faolain’s editorial to *The Bell’s* 1942 ‘Ulster issue’. Enthusing about contributors from Northern Ireland, O’Faoláin wrote that ‘we have received so much material that it has become necessary to have an overflow meeting’.<sup>12</sup> Given the scale of the resources available in archival deposits and libraries, this thesis has only succeeded in illuminating a portion of mid-twentieth century Northern Irish culture. As indicated in the introduction, some work has already been done on mid-century novelists, dramatists, essayists, visual artists, and broadcasting, but many avenues remain as yet unexplored.<sup>13</sup> Single author studies of Hewitt, Rodgers, Greacen, McFadden, Bell, Boyd, and others would enrich our understanding of the period. More detailed evaluations of Northern Irish women’s art of the early and mid-twentieth century would complement those already conducted with regard to Irish writers.<sup>14</sup> Published editions of Roberta Hewitt’s diary and Nesca Robb’s autobiography would be of benefit to both Irish and women’s studies. Furthermore, a full history of CEMA would make fascinating reading, as would more research on Ireland’s publishing houses and anthologies.

Such studies would serve to reinforce the fundamental argument of this thesis by providing even more evidence in support of the proposal that a vibrant, imaginative, socially-engaged poetic milieu did indeed exist in Northern Ireland during the nineteen forties.

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<sup>12</sup> O’Faolain, ‘An Ulster Issue’, p. 229.

<sup>13</sup> See Introduction, footnote 7.

<sup>14</sup> See Chapter Six, footnotes 47 and 48.

## Appendix 1: Chronology

- 1879 Birth of May Morton in Limerick
  
- 1900 Morton moves to Belfast
- Birth of Barbara Hunter
  
- 1904 Foundation of *Uladh* (-1905)
- Foundation of the Ulster Literary Theatre (-1934)
  
- 1907 Birth of John Hewitt in Belfast
- Birth of Louis MacNeice in Belfast
- Birth of Freda Laughton in Bristol
  
- 1909 Birth of W.R. Rodgers in Belfast
  
- 1914 28 July, Declaration of the First World War (-1918)
- Third Home Rule Bill suspended
  
- 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin
- The Battle of the Somme
  
- 1917 Birth of Patrick Maybin
  
- 1919 Irish War of Independence
  
- 1920 Government of Ireland Act and the partition of Ireland
- Birth of Robert Greacen in Londonderry
  
- 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty signed
- Birth of Roy McFadden in Belfast
  
- 1922 Irish Civil War



- 1924 First Labour Government elected in Britain  
15 September, First BBC broadcast from Belfast
- 1927 Foundation of the Quota Press in Belfast (-1954)
- 1928 Opening of David McLean's Progressive Bookshop in Union Street, Belfast
- 1929 First Censorship of Publications Act in the Irish Free State  
MacNeice, *Blind Fireworks*
- 1931 Foundation of the Revolutionary Workers' Group in Belfast
- 1932 Outdoor Relief Riots in Belfast  
Laughton moves to Co. Down
- 1933 Adolf Hitler becomes Chancellor of Germany
- 1934 Peace Ballot for the League of Nations' Disarmament Conference  
Founding of the Peace Pledge Union  
Founding of Belfast Peace League (-1936)
- 1935 Communal rioting in Belfast  
MacNeice, *Poems*
- 1936 Outbreak of Spanish Civil War (-1939)  
George V dies; Edward VIII accedes and abdicates; George VI accedes  
Founding of the Left Book Club  
Founding of the Young Ulster Society  
May Morton, *Dawn and Afterglow*
- 1937 Second Sino-Japanese War (-1945)  
MacNeice and Auden, *Letters from Iceland*

- 1938 29 September, The Munich Agreement  
 Hewitt meets Shelley Wang  
 MacNeice, *The Earth Compels*
- 1939 1 September, Declaration of World War Two (-1945)  
 Wang dies in China  
 MacNeice, *Autumn Journal*
- 1940 J.M. Andrews becomes Prime Minister of Northern Ireland  
 British evacuation of Dunkirk  
*The Bell* founded, with Sean O'Faolain as editor (-1954)  
 Ulster Group Theatre founded (-1960 [?])  
 MacNeice lectures at Cornell University in the USA, before returning to London  
 MacNeice, *The Last Ditch* and *Selected Poems*
- 1941 Belfast Blitz, 7/8<sup>th</sup> and 15/16<sup>th</sup> of April; 4/5<sup>th</sup> and 5/6<sup>th</sup> May  
 McFadden relocates to Downpatrick, then Lisburn  
 Greacen and John Gallen become editors of *The New Northman* (-1942)  
 Greacen, *The Bird*  
 McFadden, *A Poem: Russian Summer*  
 MacNeice writes *The Strings are False* whilst returning from the US; *Plant and Phantom* is published  
 Rodgers, *Awake! And Other Poems*
- 1942 Arrival of US troops in NI  
 Foundation of the Mourne Press by Richard Rowley  
 Foundation of the Committee for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts

Northern Ireland (CEMA; later the Arts Council of Northern Ireland)

Greacen, ed., *Poems from Ulster*

Greacen and Alex Comfort, eds, *Lyra*

1943 Sir Basil Brooke becomes Prime Minister of Northern Ireland

Greacen moves to Dublin

Greacen and McFadden, eds, *Ulster Voices*

Hewitt, *Conacre*

McFadden, *Swords and Ploughshares*

1944 *Lagan* appears, edited by John Boyd (-1946)

Arthur and George Campbell, eds, *Now in Ulster*

Greacen, ed., *Northern Harvest*

Greacen, *One Recent Evening*

Greacen, Valentin Iremonger, and Bruce Williamson, *On the Barricades*

MacNeice, *Springboard*

1945 Foundation of the United Nations

Laughton, *A Transitory House*

McFadden, *Flowers for a Lady*

1946 Regional broadcasting reinstated (BBC)

Rodgers moves to London

Greacen, ed., *Irish Harvest*

1947 India gains independence

Education Act (NI)

Rodgers, *The Ulstermen and their Country*

McFadden, *The Heart's Townland*

1948 General Election in Ireland: a coalition government is formed under J.A.

Costello

Greacen moves to London

*Rann* appears, edited by McFadden and Hunter (-1953)

Hewitt, *No Rebel Word*

Greacen, *The Undying Day*

MacNeice, *Holes in the Sky*

Morton, *Masque in Maytime*

1949 Formal declaration of the Republic of Ireland

Greacen and Valentin Iremonger, eds., *Contemporary Irish Poetry*

MacNeice, *Collected Poems*

1951 The Festival of Britain

The Lyric Theatre founded in Belfast by Mary O'Malley

Sam Hanna Bell, Hewitt, and Nesca Robb, eds., *The Arts in Ulster*

1952 McFadden, *The Angry Hound*

MacNeice, *Ten Burnt Offerings*

Morton, *Sung to the Spinning Wheel*

Rodgers, *Europa and the Bull and Other Poems*

1953 McFadden, *Elegy for the Dead of the Princess Victoria*

1954 MacNeice, *Autumn Sequel*

- 1956 IRA conduct a border campaign  
John and Roberta Hewitt relocate to Coventry  
Hewitt, *Those Swans Remember: A Poem*
- 1957 MacNeice, *Visitations*  
Rodgers, *Ireland in Colour*
- 1957 Death of Morton
- 1961 MacNeice, *Solstices*
- 1963 Lord Brookeborough stands down as Prime Minister of NI; Terence O'Neill  
elected  
Death of MacNeice  
MacNeice, *The Burning Perch* and *Star-Gazer*  
Rodgers, *Essex Roundabout*
- 1964 MacNeice, *Selected Poems*, ed. by W.H. Auden
- 1966 MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, ed. by E.R. Dodds
- 1967 Foundation of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association  
Hewitt, *Tesserae* and *The Poems of William Allingham* (as ed.)
- 1968 Hewitt, *Collected Poems: 1932-1967*
- 1969 Eruption of sectarian violence throughout NI  
Death of Rodgers  
Hewitt, *The Day of the Corncrake*
- 1970 Hewitt and John Montague, *The Planter and the Gael*

- 1971 Hewitt, *An Ulster Reckoning*  
 McFadden, *The Garryowen*  
 Rodgers, *Collected Poems*
- 1972 30 January, Blood Sunday  
 Rodgers, *Irish Literary Portraits*
- 1974 Hewitt, *The Chinese Fluteplayer, Scissors for a One-Armed Tailor, and Out of my Time*
- 1975 Death of Roberta Hewitt  
 Greacen, *A Garland for Captain Fox*
- 1976 Death of Maybin  
 Hewitt, *Time Enough* and *Colin Middleton*
- 1977 McFadden, *Verifications*
- 1978 Greacen, *I, Brother Stephen*  
 Hewitt, *The Rain Dance* and *John Luke*
- 1979 Greacen, *Young Mr Gibbon*  
 McFadden, *A Watching Brief*
- 1980 Hewitt, *Kites in Spring*
- 1981 Hewitt, *Mosaic*
- 1983 Hewitt, *Loose Ends*  
 McFadden, *The Selected Roy McFadden*

- 1986 Hewitt, *Freehold and Other Poems*  
 McFadden, *Letters to the Hinterland*
- 1987 Hewitt, *The Selected Prose of John Hewitt* (ed. Tom Clyde)
- 1988 Death of Hewitt
- 1990 Greacen, *Carnival at the River*  
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- 1991 Hewitt, *The Collected Poems of John Hewitt* (ed. Frank Ormsby)
- 1995 Greacen, *Collected Poems* and *Even without Irene*
- 1996 McFadden, *Collected Poems*
- 1997 Greacen, *Protestant Without a Horse* and *The Sash my Father Wore*
- 1998 10 April, the Good Friday Agreement
- 1999 Death of McFadden
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- 2008 Death of Greacen
- 2013 Hewitt, *A North Light*, ed. by Frank Ferguson and Kathryn White

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