



# Contemporary British and Irish Poetry

An Introduction



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*To my parents, Alison and Brian*

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# Contents

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<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
Introduction	1
1 'Wanna yoo scruff': Class and Language <i>Tony Harrison, Tom Leonard, Don Paterson</i>	10
2 'My tongue is full of old ideas': Race and Ethnicity <i>Benjamin Zephaniah, Jackie Kay, Moniza Alvi</i>	46
3 Gender, Sex and Embodiment <i>Simon Armitage, Carol Ann Duffy, Grace Nichols</i>	75
4 'Widdershins round the kirk-yaird': Gender, Sexuality and Nation <i>Eavan Boland, Gillian Clarke, Kathleen Jamie, David Kinloch</i>	110
5 'A fusillade of question marks': Poetry and the Troubles in Northern Ireland <i>Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, Ciaran Carson</i>	142
6 'A rustle of echoes': Self, Subjectivity and Agency <i>David Dabydeen, Paul Muldoon, Denise Riley</i>	181
7 The Tribes of Poetry <i>Tom Raworth, Geraldine Monk, Catherine Walsh, Peter Reading, Patience Agbabi</i>	222
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	262
<i>Index</i>	273

# Introduction

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Nearly every overview or anthology of contemporary poetry in Britain and Ireland published in the last two decades has asserted the radical democratisation and pluralisation in poetry publishing and reviewing that has occurred since the 1960s. As a general trend this is undeniable. The poetry scene in the 1950s in Britain was overwhelmingly white, male, middle-class and centred around Oxbridge and London, and in Ireland (where class and regional relationships are differently inflected) it was overwhelmingly white and male. Since the 1960s and 70s there has been a gradual but radical diversification of the poetry being published and reviewed, so that women poets, poets from working-class, rural and non-metropolitan backgrounds, and poets from ethnic minorities have become prominent and recognised figures within the poetry world.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, this process has been tortuously slow, and often more loudly proclaimed than actualised; a glance at the critical overviews published in the 1990s, even, will show a marked under-representation of women poets and poets from ethnic minorities.<sup>2</sup> But it has been steady, propelled firstly by changes in the education system in Britain and Northern Ireland which extended free secondary school education to all children, allowing working-class young people access to university; secondly by feminism and movements for racial equality; thirdly by the dynamic towards devolution within the United Kingdom; and fourthly by the impact of postmodernism's valuing of diversity, hostility to hierarchies of value, and alertness to the voices of the marginalised. However, not everyone joins in with this fanfare to pluralism; poets from the avant-garde community are justified in noting that the impression of 'diversity' in poetry is too often produced by simply bringing together poets of diverse backgrounds, rather than by being truly open to diversity in poetic form. As Chapter 7 suggests, a sense of discontent over the formal conservatism of the Irish and British poetic and critical establishments seems to be growing, and this hurdle may be the next to be overcome.



This book seeks to give a sense of the state of poetry in Ireland and Britain today. It cannot hope to be all-encompassing (the number of excellent poets who had to be excluded is rather horrifying) or representative (there are styles and kinds of poetry being written which are not even covered in this book, themes which are untouched, and regions which are unrepresented), but it seeks to provide for the reader a number of different and fascinating pathways into a remarkable poetic territory. This territory is geographically delineated by the deceptively simple phrase 'Britain and Ireland'. Problematic at first glance in its bestowal of priority on Britain, this phrase is requisitioned to act as shorthand for a multiplicity of regions and nations with histories which have varied and diverged enormously over the last four or five decades. In the last decade or so, Ireland has perhaps seen even greater societal changes than Britain. Startling economic growth in the Republic has effected a complete reversal of the longstanding emigration problem, with large-scale economic immigration forcing a difficult adjustment to multiculturalism. The Republic's integration in Europe has also led to major changes in terms of social norms, with the legalisation of homosexuality (1993) and divorce (1995). The last decade in Northern Ireland, marked momentously by the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, has witnessed gradual and significant political progress, despite recurrent setbacks and stand-offs. Scotland and Wales have also experienced dramatic political change, in the establishment of the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly, and, in Scotland at least, in an increasing desire for independence. These changes in the constitutional structure of the United Kingdom, together with a growing uncertainty about the significance of 'Britishness' (despite New Labour's earnest efforts in the late 1990s to cultivate 'Cool Britannia') have also led to some growth in – and anxiety about – a new English nationalism, even as the British government starts to assess the level of interest within England for regional assemblies.

Although this book pays close attention to these devolutionary dynamics, and to regional and national difference, I have chosen for the most part not to *structure* it around national and regional divisions, because of the sense that if this train of inquiry were followed, it would inevitably dominate the book and exclude all other areas of interest. The only exception to this is the chapter on poetry that has emerged out of the conflict in Northern Ireland.

I have made this exception because the Troubles have produced a cultural context that has no equivalent or comparison elsewhere. No doubt the same could be argued for particular dimensions of other regions, but the extremity of the Northern Irish political situation over the last few decades makes it a particularly unique and compelling focus for discussion. Otherwise, I have chosen to pursue themes that draw out similarities and differences between poets from the different regions and nations of Britain and Ireland. One of these themes is in fact the idea of nation itself, in its intersection with gender and sexuality.

Some of these themes – gender and sexuality, class, race and ethnicity – are familiar, and their recurrence might be criticised by those who argue that we should move beyond ‘identity politics’, or by those who claim that poetry criticism should be ‘saved’ from cultural studies.<sup>3</sup> It is true that ‘identity politics’ can be restrictive and reductive, if one understands by this term the kind of discourses that claim absolute solidarity and uniformity around any given term of identification, whether it be ‘black’, ‘woman’, ‘gay’, or whatever. But this kind of identity politics has very much had its day, and political and activist discourses as well as academic discourses are these days much more likely to emphasise the multiplicity of subject positions which an individual simultaneously inhabits; the contradictory and plural identities which individuals acknowledge as their own. Meanwhile the identity labels themselves are undergoing constant revision and evolution, and those pertaining to race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality are still contentious, explosive, unpredictably fluid, and utterly central to the cultural debates of our times. The term ‘class’ is rather different; although it is often cited in discussions of identity politics, its history is actually quite separate, and many Marxist theorists see identity politics as undermining materialist analysis. But Marxism was the first of a series of group-based paradigms to undergo attack for reductiveness (as ‘identity politics’ generally would later), and now the term ‘class’ itself seems to be losing its cultural currency, even if the inequalities to which it refers remain. This is in itself an interesting issue, which will be discussed in Chapter 1. Terms relating to gender, sexuality and race/ethnicity, though, show no such sign of fading from public discourse, and indeed the chapters on these issues will demonstrate that for poets writing in Ireland and Britain today these issues are urgent, stimulating and profoundly important.

There is absolutely no contradiction between paying attention to such issues and paying attention to poetry as an art form. This book shows that formal diversity is thriving in Irish and British poetry; if we reach for examples we might first light upon the rap rhythms of Patience Agbabi, the classical metres of Peter Reading, the minimalist poems in Ciaran Carson's latest work, the column poems of Tom Raworth, the 'eye dialect' and poster poems of Tom Leonard, the prose poems of David Kinloch, and the rhyme pyrotechnics of Paul Muldoon's poetry. Although formal issues feature in every discussion, the final chapter gives particular attention to the question of formal difference, in its investigation of the simmering animosities between 'mainstream' and 'experimental' poetry. It also investigates the other major, but less hostile, divide in contemporary poetry: performance versus the page. Another chapter explores the nature of self, subjectivity and agency, a conceptual nexus which brings together some of the most difficult and provocative questions which face us today. While theorists and philosophers struggle to develop new concepts of self which engage with but move beyond poststructuralism's radical questioning of human agency, and when a sense of individual disempowerment is one of the dominant notes in popular culture, poets are being driven to explore the nature of the self and the scope and limits of human agency, particularly in terms of the relationship between the individual and language. This is an issue that will emerge in various different contexts in this book, but is given particular attention in Chapter 6.

Postmodernism has been one of the key terms in most introductions to critical surveys and anthologies of British and Irish poetry since Morrison and Motion's 1982 *Penguin Book of Contemporary Poetry*, which even then looked decidedly odd in its choice of poets to represent 'the spirit of postmodernism'.<sup>4</sup> The term itself is now starting to sound strangely dated; as Marjorie Perloff notes, "postmodernism" seems to have largely lost its momentum: How long, after all, can a discourse – in this case, poetry – continue to be considered *post-*, with its implications of belatedness, diminution and entropy?<sup>5</sup> Perloff, a prominent American advocate of avant-garde poetry, puts her energy into tracing the continuities of contemporary avant-garde poetry with early modernism, and a sense of the continuity between modernism and postmodernism is becoming ever more prevalent, with the former term regaining currency in relation to formal

experimentation. But now more than ever, it feels inadequate to attempt to herd poets together under either term. Poetry written today in Britain and Ireland often does have characteristics associated with postmodernism (for instance self-consciousness, irony, fragmentation, allusiveness, an attention to the materiality of language, a collapsing of the divisions between 'high' and 'low' culture) but it has many other characteristics too. Some of the 'I' voices we hear in contemporary British and Irish poetry *are* pre-occupied with the ontological status of that 'I' – but not all. Not all eschew the lyrical in favour of irony; the best are able to combine the two in a way that confounds the categories.

The last decade has seen the usual mixture of optimism and pessimism about poetry's future. In Britain, the New Generation promotion of 1994, with its slightly foolish claim that poetry was 'the new rock'n'roll', generated a brief flurry of attention for poetry in the media and a sense of buoyancy among at least some sections of the poetry community. If poetry's profile was edged a little higher by this promotion and other innovations in the early 1990s, the publicity did not pay off in any increase in sales figures for poetry collections in general, and a panel discussion at the University of Warwick in 2002 on 'The Crisis in Poetry Publishing' emphasised the enormous difficulties facing poetry presses, given the radically decreasing space assigned to poetry by large bookstores and their tendency to fill these shelves with anthologies and a few big names.<sup>6</sup> Oxford University Press's decision to close its poetry list in 1998 was a symptom of the times and sent shock waves through the poetry world.

But the permanently echoing complaints about poor sales, struggling publishers, and the difficulty of reaching 'general readers' (complaints which are less prominent in Ireland, where poetry's role in cultural life still seems more secure) are balanced out by more positive signs of the state of poetry. More and more poetry is being published, even if the publishers have difficulty selling individual 'slim volumes'. Sales of anthologies are strong, especially of the more populist variety; Neil Astley's 2002 Bloodaxe anthology *Staying Alive* sold 35,000 copies in its first six months. While the financial difficulties of small presses, and presses which focus exclusively on poetry, *are* a real cause for concern, the fact is that innovative presses are still entering the field (the tang which Salt Publishing has recently added to the poetry world being a case in point). Meanwhile, strategies that bring

poetry directly to potential readers and listeners, such as the internet, television and live performance, have a growing and encouraging role. The internet in particular, which has since its beginnings been crucial to the experimental poetry scene, offers the possibility of truly international exchange and awareness, something which is currently being actualised by online magazines like *Jacket* and *Contemporary Poetry Review*, as well as many online discussion lists. The readership for online publications, whether they focus on criticism or poetry, is vast compared to that for traditional little magazines, and is rapidly growing; as *CPR*'s 2004 mission statement notes, '*The Criterion*, at the height of T.S. Eliot's fame, had 700 subscribers. For the *Contemporary Poetry Review*, that is a day's audience—and it doubles each year.'<sup>7</sup>

Andrew Michael Roberts notes that editors of anthologies are frequently caught in 'the double bind of typicality and novelty', wanting to provide a selection of poetry which is typical of prevailing writing, but at the same time wanting to assert a new version of literary history or draw the public's attention to a new kind of writing, two desires which do not necessarily sit easily together. The other double bind he notes is that of absolute versus relative value; anthologists tend to want to represent the range and diversity of poetry, to be open to a variety of forms, yet at the same time 'few anthologists can resist the implication that, whatever other criteria of selection they have applied, some notion of pure "quality" is in operation.'<sup>8</sup> The author of a critical introduction such as this must face these issues and more; the choice of poets emerges in a two-way process alongside the choice of chapter themes, so that it is possible that some very good poets may be excluded simply because they are difficult to discuss in conjunction with other poets writing today. Like most anthologies and overviews, this book picks a precarious and pragmatic pathway between the different imperatives, seeking to represent a range of the kinds of poetry that have been written over the past few decades, but, within these various categories, exercising an inevitably subjective critical judgment as to which poetry is the most rewarding of close attention.

Critical texts such as this one are less able to represent novelty than are anthologies, as in seeking to provide critical writing which will be useful in teaching contexts (among others) there is a need to focus, for the most part, on poets who have published several collections and are relatively established. For this reason

there is less coverage than I would have liked of the youngest and/or newest generation; future books of this kind will no doubt include the likes of Colette Bryce, Paul Farley, Leontia Flynn, Caitríona O'Reilly, Pascale Petit, Jacob Polley, Justin Quinn, Jean Sprackland and David Wheatley, to name just a few. Some of these names (but not those from the Republic of Ireland) were included (along with Patience Agbabi, whose poetry is covered in this book) in the Poetry Society's rather unconvincing effort to recreate the New Generation buzz by anointing a 'Next Generation' in 2004. Alice Oswald, while having only emerged relatively recently, has made a strong impression on the poetry world, and I regret that I have not been able to cover her work. Among more established poets, there are also many whom I would have loved to discuss, but for various reasons could not; they include Caroline Bergvall, John Burnside, Fred D'Aguiar, Paul Durcan, Lavinia Greenlaw, Vona Groarke, W.N. Herbert, Selima Hill, Medbh McGuckian, Derek Mahon, Bernard O'Donoghue, Tom Paulin, J.H. Prynne and Peter Riley. Of course there was also a need to decide how far back the book would reach. I decided to make the generation of Heaney, Harrison, Clarke, Raworth and Longley (all born 1937–39 and beginning to write during that decade of change, the 1960s) the elders of the book, which means that there are several older figures like Geoffrey Hill, Fleur Adcock, U.A. Fanthorpe, Roy Fisher and Edwin Morgan who stand behind these poets.

Because of the decision not to orient the book around national divisions, the inevitable national headcounts will reveal some imbalances. I regret the under-representation of Wales generally, and of the younger generation from Ireland, but I hope that this is compensated for by the book's thematic momentum and integrity. I have not included poetry in languages other than English, apart from poetry in Scots dialects that are accessible for English-speakers. Obviously there is a wealth of poetry in Irish, Scots Gaelic and Welsh, and in other languages, which is excluded because of this, but although wonderful translations of this poetry are often available, critical discussion which is based purely on a translated text can often feel inadequate.

This book has been written, for the most part, in New Zealand, to which I returned recently after many years in Britain. My years spent in Britain revolved around researching and teaching contemporary Irish – to begin with – and British poetry. They took

me through Leeds, Oxford and London, with considerable time spent in Ireland along the way, and then back to New Zealand where I have been teaching contemporary British and Irish poetry to New Zealand students. My particular position as insider/outsider has, I hope, given me a unique perspective on contemporary British and Irish poetry; a perspective which values difference and diversity and is sensitive to the ways in which links and connections may be formed between different contexts. I have now spent twelve years thinking and writing about British and Irish poetry, and I would suggest that the poetry's capacity to hold and reward my interest and commitment, as it compels the interest of many other readers who do not come from either Ireland or Britain, is a testament to the strength, richness and depth of what is being written in Britain and Ireland today.

## Notes

- 1 The poetry world in Ireland is still overwhelmingly white, something which will no doubt change as immigration alters the ethnic mix of Irish society.
- 2 David Kennedy, for instance, states 'I have chosen not to write about Black British or Afro-Caribbean poetry not only because it seems inappropriate for a white critic to do so but because these poetries are still being theorised through perspectives of language and difference.' This is perplexing; the logic of the first part of this statement would surely exclude him from writing about women's poetry as well, while waiting for some moment of completion in 'theorising' seems like a hopeless and self-defeating strategy (*New Relations: The Refashioning of British Poetry 1980–1994* (Bridgend: Seren, 1996), p. 8). Likewise, Neil Corcoran devotes only two pages to the history of 'Westindian-British poetry', noting that it would be 'presumptuous' for him to tell this story, which is 'as yet better told elsewhere' (*English Poetry Since 1940* (Harlow: Longman, 1993), p. xvi). Such anxieties, while understandable, have too often been used as an excuse for perpetuating the marginalisation of this poetry.
- 3 See, for example, Edna Longley's comment that 'the language of poetry criticism must stop making concessions both to "identity-discourse" ... and to cultural studies.' 'Not Blinkbonny Enough', *Thumbscrew*, no. 13 (Spring/Summer 1999), pp. 4–9 (p. 9).
- 4 Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion (eds), *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* (London: Penguin, 1982), p. 20.
- 5 Marjorie Perloff, *21<sup>st</sup>-Century Modernism: The 'New' Poetics* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), p. 2.
- 6 'The crisis in poetry publishing: The Warwick debate', [www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/undergrad/modules/second/en238/small\\_presses/poetry\\_in\\_crisis/](http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/undergrad/modules/second/en238/small_presses/poetry_in_crisis/), accessed 11 October 2004. In the discussion Esther Morgan

expresses perplexity at 'why ... this raised profile, all this activity at literature festivals, the rise of performance poetry etc, *hasn't resulted in greater sales*'.

7 [www.cprw.com/missionstatement.htm](http://www.cprw.com/missionstatement.htm), accessed 13 October 2004.

8 Andrew Michael Roberts, 'The rhetoric of value in recent British poetry anthologies', *Poetry and Contemporary Culture: The Question of Value*, ed. Andrew Michael Roberts and Jonathan Allison (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), pp. 101–22 (pp. 102–3).



# 1

## ‘Wanna yoo scruff’: Class and Language

*Tony Harrison, Tom Leonard, Don Paterson*

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The poets included in this chapter all come from working-class backgrounds in which poetry seemed a most unlikely career choice or leisure pursuit, but whereas Paterson's first memorable experiences of poetry as an adult were encounters with the poetry of Tony Harrison, and in particular his sonnets about his working-class family background, Harrison himself saw no such role models around him, and had to work out for himself that the Cockney Keats and the Northern Wordsworth could be used as models in quite different ways than had been suggested to him hitherto. For Leonard and Harrison, the sense of the necessity of battling against a class-bound literary establishment has been a dominating and driving force. Paterson's poetry, with few exceptions, takes on a much less confrontational stance, something which may be partly due to his sense of coming after poets like Harrison, Leonard and Douglas Dunn, and may also be related to the very different political climate of his formative years.

‘Class’ in recent years has started to sound like a rather old-fashioned term, as politicians avoid it and Marxist class-based analyses have fallen out of fashion in academia. But although the discourses are changing, economic and social stratification remains, and for this reason it is interesting to compare Paterson, a working-class poet who grew up in the Thatcher years, with Harrison and Leonard, two poets who experienced the heyday of working-class activism in the 1970s. The 1970s were also a time of innovation and excitement for theorists interested in the role of literature in society, as Marxist theory began to engage with