

A surrealist painting by Francis Bacon, depicting a landscape with figures and a small boat. The scene is dark and moody, with a small boat in the center and figures in the foreground and background. The colors are muted and earthy, with a focus on the human form and the natural world.

EDITED BY

PETER  
ROBINSON

≡ The Oxford Handbook of  
**CONTEMPORARY**  
**BRITISH & IRISH POETRY**

THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF

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CONTEMPORARY  
BRITISH AND  
IRISH POETRY

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*Edited by*  
PETER ROBINSON



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## OXFORD HANDBOOKS OF LITERATURE

The Oxford Handbooks of Literature are envisaged as volumes on an ambitious scale offering around forty newly written chapters in key fields of literary and cultural study. The series aims to represent the latest research and to indicate current trends, with a view to providing a readership of faculty, postgraduate scholars, and senior undergraduates, with both an overview and orientation across a wide range of rubrics, to point up the latest thinking and research among leading specialists and to indicate where significant new departures are in progress.

## PREFACE

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WHEN Jacqueline Baker at Oxford University Press invited me to edit a Handbook dedicated to contemporary British and Irish poetry I was grateful for the opportunity to reflect upon what it had felt like in early 2007 to re-enter a poetry scene I had contributed to from the middle of the 1970s, one I'd then been obliged to leave and keep up with from a distance at the end of the following decade. On repatriation after living and working in Japan, and holidaying mostly in Italy, for the previous eighteen years, I encountered at close quarters conditions in the British and Irish poetry world that were quite different to those I had left: some of the most active publishers were new, a number of the prominent figures were from a younger generation or two, the possibilities for becoming involved, for reading and publishing, were more various and extensive, as were the kinds of opportunity to teach and encourage poetry that opened up before me. Though initially daunted by the challenge of editing a volume that would include approximately forty contributions, which were to contribute original research to an indefinite and rapidly evolving area, I have found the process of doing so immensely informative and educative, and would like to thank Jacqueline for suggesting that I take on the project and then for supporting and guiding me through its various intricacies.

One of the things that hadn't changed, and appeared in some lights to have darkened, was a sense of factionalizing and division, of local, disconnected activity, overlapping circles, exclusivities and the like, which could occasionally erupt into conflict so vociferous that it would reach the daily news-sheets, and always in a manner to feed the intermittent media sideline of disparaging the contemporary arts. Such a state of affairs, which indicates a degree of inattention to poetry, even among poets and readers, has the cultural drawback of preventing development through an appreciation and critical understanding of what has been achieved and where it might be imitated, adapted, added to, or evolved. Thus, while there have been volumes of criticism dedicated to some of the poets whose work is addressed here, and while there have been a number of attempts to argue for directions of development, or to criticize failures to so develop, there is, it would appear, no one volume that attempts to offer at least a partial understanding of the range and variety of poetry being written now and simultaneously in these islands. The way to approach this, I believed, was to allow poets and critics from a range of constituencies the occasion to inhabit the pages of an extensive single volume.

What then came to be called *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary British and Irish Poetry* needed first to be planned and given an outline structure, not least so that it could be reported on and evaluated, and this before any of the contributors to the eventual book were contacted. The volume's shape and sequencing is my own, as is the conception

of what might be a sort of anthropological fieldwork as the best approach to such complex contemporary conditions—ones which, as I argue, can never be more than partially known by any of its individual participants, participant-observers, or interested onlookers. My first thanks must thus go to those commissioned and anonymous reviewers, whose comments, mostly positive but also constructively negative, were without exception helpful in refining the finally accepted proposal.

However much editors may plan volumes that they hope will do such-and-such beneficial things for the field of study to which they are addressed, the fulfilment of those hopes is then more or less entirely dependent on the intelligence, energy, organization, dedication, and commitment of the invited contributors who deliver on their promises to write. Their input helped revise by filling out the bare outlines of a projected contents list, their chapters giving nuance and individuality to, as well as calling for some reconsideration or reshaping of, that editorial armature. I am extremely grateful to all of my writers for their collaborative contributions, and their willingness to respond assiduously when in receipt of editorial suggestions and encouragements.

Though these large gatherings of chapters can of course be read by picking out topics that particularly engage the reader, this Handbook has been planned to create a cumulatively informed and informative sequence. It can be read from the Introduction through to the final chapter, and the five parts into which its chapters are grouped have been conceived to move from accounts of the contemporary period in poetry itself, through to a series of enduring ethical, political, and cultural problems around which much contemporary poetry has variously circled. Thus readers may go from beginning to end, may read single parts, and may pick out individual chapters. Detail of the rationale in planning and sequencing what is much larger than a standard monograph are given in the final section of my 'Introduction: The Limits and Openness of the Contemporary'.

One characteristic of the contemporary period and recent past of poetry is the increase in the number of poets who are employed in higher education and who also publish literary criticism. As a result, the contributors to this Handbook are often themselves poets, and some of their writing is that of parties who are interested in ways that differ from those of literary critics and historians who do not themselves attempt to contribute poetry to the contemporary. Occasionally they are, and I am, the subject of comment in their roles as poets, poet-critics, or, as I prefer to call them, poets who also write criticism. This may seem an unusual feature of a volume of commentary on what for other books in this series can appropriately be called an academic field; but it is an inevitability of writing on contemporary literature, and especially in so theoretically and culturally self-conscious a field as that of contemporary poetry. It would be misleading to pretend that the object of study in this area can be clearly and simply separated from those studying it. This can only begin to seem a fact of the subject when the inquirers are of so much later generations than those of the poets studied, that they, along with their contemporaneous critics, supporters and detractors, are dead. As a result, this Handbook, while contributing to the study of contemporary poetry, also changes—as is the case with all such inquiry, but more directly so here because issues and persons are alive—the object of their remarks in the very process of characterizing it. *The Oxford*

*Handbook of Contemporary British and Irish Poetry* is thus a volume that has been produced as much for the poetry world as for the academy, and it aims to be one that helps inform and explicate the concerns of each to the other.

Editors of collective volumes such as this usually contribute an introduction and one, or more, chapters. Doing so, they too find themselves in need of editorial advice. In my case, I would like to thank Adam Piette, Natalie Pollard, Stephen Romer, and Helen Small for their kind and helpful comments on one or other of my contributions. I would especially like to acknowledge John Kerrigan's generous, and repeated, input into all four.

I would also like to thank my wife, Ornella Trevisan, and our daughters Matilde and Giulia, for their patience and support over the years that I have been involved in this Handbook and, simultaneously, other publications, all of them produced alongside the various and time-consuming aspects of my work at the University of Reading. Without their company and generosity through life I would not have been able so happily to complete this volume or indeed any other piece of my writing, translating, and editing.

Finally, then, let me conclude with a salutation to the poets who are writing now, to the readers who follow their work, and the students of this endlessly fascinating ancient and modern art form. I hope you find as much stimulus from reading and thinking about the subjects explored in these chapters as has been provided to me.

Peter Robinson  
17 June 2012



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