

Review · Ben Howard

Selected Poems. John Montague. Wake Forest University Press, 1982. 189 pages.

To the sorrows of modern Ireland John Montague has brought an historian's understanding and a harper's delicate music. He has kept faith with his lyric gift while bearing witness to violent events. Born in Brooklyn in 1929, thirteen years after the Easter Rising and nine years after partition, Montague might have preferred a contemplative's detachment, had history not thrust him into the roles of activist, elegist, and interpreter of political upheaval. An internationalist at heart, he has accepted the nationalist's mantle reluctantly, in the manner of an exile rather than a native son, but he has worn it with distinction. In three book-length sequences of poems (*The Rough Field*, 1972; *The Great Cloak*, 1978; *The Dead Kingdom*, 1984) he has told a painful personal story—a tale of dislocation, loss, separation, and renewal. Beyond that, he has told the story of Northern Ireland as no other poet has, tracing the present sectarian violence to its roots in Jacobean Ulster. Wary of the “lyric memory” that would “soften the fact” (“The Dancehall”), he has sought “exactness,” employing a “low-pitched style” that will not “betray the event.” Yet his quiet music has persisted, braced and chastened by its encounters with civil strife.

Montague's *Selected Poems* gathers the work of six previous collections. Its earliest poem dates from 1952, its most recent from the early '80s. Montague's diverse subjects include mummers, wartime prison camps, cherished landscapes and troublesome mythologies, monastic relics and Gaelic antiquities, oracular elders and loving aunts. His abiding themes are loss and recurrence (“With all my circling a failure to return”), and his dominant tone is elegiac. But when his thoughts turn to matters of politics and religion, his fluent voice grows harsh. For Montague is an Ulster Catholic, a Northern Republican, reared on a farm in the town land of Garvaghey in Co. Tyrone. As he communes with his ancestors, or surveys the “shards of a lost tradition,” conciliatory talk gives way to bitter anger. Legacies of dispossession perturb his contemplative calm:

This bitterness
I inherit from my father, the
 swarm of blood
to the brain, the vomit surge
 of race hatred,
the victim seeing the oppressor,
 bold Jacobean
planter, or gadget laden marine,
 who has scatter-
ed his household gods, used
 his people
as servants, flushed his women
 like game.

(“Sound of a Wound”)

Montague’s gentler poems reclaim his rural boyhood. Their setting is the North of Ireland, west of the Bann. Their era is the ’30s and ’40s, when electrification and mechanization were altering the Irish countryside. In a recent interview, Montague regretted the loss of small farms like his family’s at Garvaghey, which have been replaced by large-scale factory farms, with their “little white eggs” and “hormone-plumped beef.”* At the same time, he acknowledged that farm life of the ’30s was often brutal, that “people died early.” And, in any event, bulldozers have long since reshaped the “hedged, hillocky / Tyrone grassland,” producing such developments as the new Omagh Highway – and stripping away the objects of nostalgia.

Montague’s realism steadies his backward looks, where the obvious risks are triteness and sentimentality. At times, his lyric memory does get the better of him, as in his sentimental eulogy for Tim, “the first horse I rode / seasick on his barrel back” (“Tim”), or in his pastel sketches of the Irish peasantry:

‘I like to look across,’ said
Barney Horish, leaning on his sleam,
‘And think of all the people
‘Who have bin.’

(“The Road’s End”)

Yet, in his stronger poems, Montague takes a sterner look, as he chronicles such changes as the replacement of horses by machines, the “bulky harness and sucking step” giving way to the tractor’s noise and smoke. Rather than mourn the people who have been, or sigh for the farmer leaning on his turf spade, these poems look clearly and steadily at rural life:

In the girdered dark
of the byre, cattle move;
warm engines hushed
to a siding groove

before the switch flicks
down for milking.
In concrete partitions
they rattle their chains

while the farmhand eases
rubber tentacles to tug
lightly but rhythmically
on their swollen dugs

and up the pale cylinders
of the milking machine
mounts an untouched
steadily pulsing stream.

Only the tabby steals
to dip its radar whiskers
with old fashioned relish
in a chipped saucer

and before Seán lurches
to kick his boots off
in the night-silent kitchen
he draws a mug of froth

to settle on the sideboard
under the hoard of delft.
A pounding transistor shakes
the Virgin on her shelf

as he dreams toward bed.
A last glance at a magazine,
he puts the mug to his head,
grunts, and drains it clean.

(“A Drink of Milk”)

These lines owe something to Patrick Kavanagh, who taught Montague’s generation to value the common life of the parish. At the same time, they share little of Kavanagh’s Catholic mysticism, and they reveal an affinity with William Carlos Williams, whom Montague met while studying at Iowa City in the mid-’50s. The domestic surroundings, the sharp visual details, and the colloquial idiom recall Williams’s shorter poems; and though Montague’s setting is remote, in spirit he is not far from Williams’s cat climbing over the jamcloset or his “poor old woman” eating plums on the street. What sets Montague’s version apart is its backward look, its muted wit, and its adventurous use of traditional form. Homely images grow bright within the confines of irregular quatrains and imperfect rhymes. Compressed syntax heightens the plain diction of the closing stanza.

Elsewhere, Montague looks much further back, as he ponders the depths of the Gaelic past. Denis Donoghue (in *We Irish*, Knopf, 1986) has noted the Irish predilection for juxtaposing Celtic heroes and modern personae—Cú Chulainn and the likes of Leopold Bloom—for the purposes of irony or social comment. Montague sometimes allows the past to interrogate the present, or vice versa, as in “Old Mythologies,” where a “whole dormitory of heroes turn over” in their graves, “regretting their butchers’ days.” More often, he gazes with reverence at the regions of the Gaeltacht, where the ancient ways have been preserved, and the mellifluous Irish language, however threatened, is still intact. Like Pearse Hutchinson, Paul Muldoon, and other postwar Irish poets who write in English, Montague often introduces Irish words and phrases, invoking what Donoghue has called the “true voice of feeling” for an Irish poet. “*Tá an Ghaedilg againn arís*,” intones a speaker in “A Lost Tradition,” chanting a

“rusty litany of praise”: “We have the Irish again.”

It is not easy for an American reader to separate the strands of nationalistic sentiment and original perception in Montague’s encounters with Gaelic culture. As director of Claddagh Records, Montague has been active in the revival of traditional Irish music, and he has written a moving elegy for Sean O’Riada, the Irish composer. At the same time, he has stood apart from the narrow ideologies of Irish nationalism, and in his best work a romantic vision of Ireland, derived from Patrick Pearse and Eamonn de Valera, co-exists with a sceptic’s sense of history. In “A Grafted Tongue,” an Irish schoolchild of the post-Famine years weeps as he attempts to learn the King’s English:

After each mistake
The master
gouges another mark
on the tally stick
hung about its neck

Like a bell
on a cow, a hobble
on a straying goat . . .

Decades later
that child’s grandchild’s
speech stumbles over lost
syllables of an old order.

And in “The Answer,” the poet visits a cottage on the Dingle Peninsula, where the woman of the house “proffers / the ritual greetings”:

Dia dhuit /
Dia agus Muire dhuit /
Dia agus Muire
agus Padraig dhuit

invocation of powers
to cleanse the mind.

By the crumbling fire we talked
Animal-dazed by the heat
While the lawyer unhooked a lamp
From peat blackened rafters
And climbed the circle of stairs.

In “The Lost Tradition,” place-names and visual details, carefully chosen, recreate a tragic moment in Irish history:

Tír Eoghain: Land of Owen
Province of the O’Niall;
The ghostly tread of O’Hagan’s
Barefoot gallowglasses marching
To merge forces in Dun Geanainn

Push southward to Kinsale!
Loudly the war-cry is swallowed
In swirls of black rain and fog
As Ulster’s pride, Elizabeth’s foemen,
Founder in a Munster bog.

Within the compass of two stanzas, Montague evokes the defeat of Hugh O’Neill’s forces at Kinsale in 1602, which precipitated the Flight of the Earls (1607) and augured the end of the Gaelic social order. *The Rough Field*, from which “A Lost Tradition” has been extracted, tells that story in much greater detail, but the method remains the same. Fragments and anecdotes, artfully arranged, do the work of continuous narrative. Historical moments are glimpsed through the loopholes of well-made lyric poems.

Montague employs similar means in his dealings with the present violence in the North. Here, however, his manner and his intent are sometimes at odds. For if his impressions of Derry and Belfast, rendered through brittle images and truncated syntax, create a sense of political chaos and sectarian fragmentation, his general intent is to create a healing vision, a balanced and integrated whole. “A New Siege” records the struggle in Belfast:

Lines of suffering
 lines of defeat
under the walls
 ghetto terraces
sharp pallor of
 unemployed shades
slope shouldered
 broken bottles
pubs and bookies
 red brick walls
Falls or Shankhill . . .

But in “The Unpartitioned Intellect,” an eloquent plea for an “open sensibility” and a united Ireland, Montague renounces the “partitioned intellect” represented, on the one side, by de Valera and the Gaelic Athletic Association, and, on the other, by Ian Paisley and the Orange Order. In its place he would have “a sensibility which is prepared to entertain, to be sympathetic to, all the traditions of which our country can be said to be composed.” Its emblem would be the harp of the United Irishmen. Its symbol would be the Irish poet Francis Ledgwick (1891–1917), who mourned the execution of the leaders of the Easter Rising, while “wearing the British army uniform in which he was to die. . . .” (“The Unpartitioned Intellect,” in *Irish Writers and Society at Large*, ed. Masaru Sekine, Colin Smythe, 1985).

Montague has acknowledged his “ferocious Republican background,” and in the imagery of *The Rough Field* at least one critic (George Watson, in Sekine, *op cit.*) has found a Catholic racial myth and a nationalist’s biased history. Nevertheless, Montague’s plea for tolerance rings as true as the strident complaints he has uttered elsewhere; and his many love poems express an emotion equal to sectarian hatred. Born and bred a partisan, he has not shrunk from the national debate, but he has also shown a capacity for disengagement and impartial detachment. Such is his perspective in “What a View,” where a fictive seagull looks down on the rifts in Garvaghey:

He would be lost,
my seagull, to see
why the names on

one side of the street
(MacAteer, Carney)
are Irish and ours

and the names across
(Carnew, MacCrea)
are English and theirs . . .

and if a procession,
Orange or Hibernian,
came stepping through

he would hear the
same thin, scranneel
note, under the drums.

In another poet this vision might seem offensively Olympian—or naively utopian. A detractor might object that the MacCreas are by now as Irish as the MacAteers, and that such distinctions perpetuate the divisions they purport to mend. Yet in a poet as grounded in history as Montague, as attuned to his country's intractable quarrels, this gentle fantasy has healing powers. "More substance in our enmities," wrote Yeats, "than in our love." To such pessimism Montague's sturdy, curative voice offers a strong rejoinder.

* Mr. Montague was interviewed by Earl Ingersoll and Ben Howard in Brockport, New York, on October 4, 1985. The interview is forthcoming in *The Literary Review*.