

Round-up of dlr Poetry Now 2010

By Padhraig Nolan

dlr Poetry Now, which takes place in Dún Laoghaire every Spring, is now firmly established as Ireland's premier international poetry festival, tempting the cream of international poets to visit this pleasant seaside town just south of Dublin. Now in its 15th year - the last three under the stewardship of curator Belinda McKeon - it regularly features a diverse mix of voices. This year's line-up featured Albanian, US, Catalan, Mexican and Scottish poets alongside Irish peers based at home and abroad.

The festival commenced on Thursday 25th March with a lunchtime lecture by McKeon. *One More Folded Sunset : Mapping the Poem* took its title from a poem by Elizabeth Bishop and set the festival in motion with a consideration of the relationship of poem to 'place', while providing a perspective on the work of the festival poets.

That evening we were treated to the festival's keynote address by Paul Muldoon, entitled *Go Fish : Six Irish Poets*. Muldoon's address examined connections and relationships between fish-themed poems by Seamus Heaney, Louis MacNeice, W.R. Rodgers, John Montague, Medbh McGuckian and Nuala Ní Domhnaill. The address was classic Muldoon, displaying his keen sense of the multiple meanings of words and their relationships with each other and the imagination. A touch of disruption at the outset saw a somewhat confused heckler drawing a measured and conciliatory response from Muldoon, to the point where the offending party was invited to the stage to read the first of the evening's poems. With Heaney and McGuckian also present to read their own poems, along with other guest readers invited from the audience, this was a particularly intimate event, despite the scholarly treatment of the selected texts by Muldoon. Varied observations were brought into focus, reiterating the subtext of *Predator and Prey*, which had underpinned the 'fishy' theme. He finished, speaking in the context of the ongoing clerical abuse issue and the government's attendant responsibility in policing criminality, with the comment that it remains "the fish's responsibility to get off the hook."

Essentially, dlr Poetry Now is run over a long weekend and it is amazing at just how much the schedule manages to include. Friday lunchtime saw a panel conversation on

the craft of poetry, featuring poets Homero Aridjis, John F. Deane and Rosanna Warren and moderated by poet and translator Paul Perry. That evening also saw the first of the formal readings – there were seven over the following days, featuring 18 poets in total! Most readings featured three poets, always distinctly different voices, providing an ideal opportunity to immerse oneself in some of the wide variety of approaches, techniques and perspectives of contemporary poetry – in terms of both writing and performing.

A special reading, on Sunday, featured the four poets shortlisted for The Rupert and Eithne Strong Award 2010 and the announcement and presentation of the award to Peadar Ó hUallaigh for his Irish language collection *Tír Tairngire*. The Strong award recognises first collections produced by Irish Writers during the previous year. Of the other shortlisted writers, the witty pastiches and punnery of Tom Mathews's collection *The Owl and The Pussycat and other poems*, were a welcome reminder of the often overlooked place of humour in poetry, as pointed out by this year's judge, Liam Carson.

The Irish Times Poetry Now Award 2010 - recognising the best collection of poems published by an Irish poet during 2009 - was also awarded at the festival. Sinead Morrissey was the winner here, for her collection *Through the Square Window*.

My own highlights of the various readings were those by Paul Muldoon (brief as it seemed), John Burnside and Philip Gross, this year's TS Eliot prizewinner for his collection *The Water Table* who also performed a reading for local children during his visit to Dún Laoghaire. Other notables included US poet Kevin Young, whose reading included intricate and rhythmic 'blues' verse. Luljeta Lleshanku brought reflections on growing up under repressive Stalinism in her native Albania. Catalan Joan Margarit gave us powerful and emotive performances of his work, with English readings provided by his translator Anna Crowe. Rosanna Warren's poems came across as precise meditations on the living of life and its dwelt-in spaces.

On Saturday afternoon, Warren also featured in *Landmarks*, a celebration of the fortieth anniversary of Ireland's leading poetry publisher, Gallery Press. Peter Fallon, founder of Gallery Press, was interviewed by Muldoon, who stood in for McKeon due

to a family bereavement. Fallon spoke frankly of the early days of the imprint, discussing first publications, achievements, disappointments and some interesting perspectives on how attention to the design of their publications helped to develop long-standing brand recognition. This conversation was followed by a number of Gallery Press poets reading their own work alongside selected poems from other poets on the imprint. An elegant commemorative broadsheet featuring some of these poems was distributed to all attendees.

Of the Gallery Press poets, one in particular had a particularly busy festival. As well reading for *Landmarks*, Vona Groarke had featured earlier on the shortlist for the Irish Times award (for her latest collection *Spindrift*) and proceeded to read alongside Kevin Young and Joan Margarit that same evening. Earlier still, on Saturday morning she found time, along with Scottish poet John Burnside, to facilitate one of two Writing Workshops – attended in each case by a dozen aspiring poets at various stages of their career. Feedback from the workshop participants was extremely positive, both poets receiving praise from attendees for their facilitation, constructive insights and time management (often the Achilles' heel of any workshop). The result was two dozen or so happy participants carrying high quality feedback on their poems home to Wexford, Kildare, Cork, Donegal, Sligo and, in the case of one ex-pat, all the way to Cambridge University.

So, dlr Poetry Now is over for another year. Time to decompress from a rich immersion in the myriad rhythms and imagery of contemporary poetry and begin, already, to relish the prospect of next year's line-up in the intimate and comfortable Pavilion Theatre – a great space for poetry.