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Paul Muldoon

Title	Paul Muldoon
Author(s)	Barry, Kevin
Publication Date	1987
Publication information	Barry, Kevin.(Fall 1987). "Paul Muldoon" Irish Literary Supplement. pp. 36-37
Publisher	Irish Literary Supplement
Item record	http://hdl.handle.net/10379/176

Paul Muldoon was the Judith E. Wilson Fellow at the English Faculty of Cambridge University for 1986-87, and will be at Columbia University and Princeton University for 1987-88. Kevin Barry interviewed Paul in Cambridge this spring.

Q. You have taken up your bags and walked away from a steady job in Belfast at BBC and now- Dingle, Cambridge, New York all in twelve months. Why has Brownlee left?

A. Well, I suppose that the notion of staying or going is one that occupies anybody who lives in Northern Ireland. We're a nation of voyagers. I enjoyed very much living in Belfast, and I had a job which was challenging and rewarding for the most part, but I've been doing it for almost thirteen years and I couldn't see myself staying until retirement age if ever I see retirement age. Also, the climate within BBC had changed considerably. When I joined BBC there were notions of public service broadcasting, and those notions are still bandied about, but I don't really think that anyone who runs the show believes very much in them. I covered the arts, and a lot of my time, a lot of my energy far too much of it was spent fighting management figures within BBC Northern Ireland who professed an interest in the arts but frankly didn't give a damn about them. I decided that I was getting too long in the tooth for that. Much as I like Belfast I spent all my life there I got to the stage where I decided that I didn't really want to reach the age of sixty and say to myself, you know, perhaps there was something else that you should have done. Perhaps you should have given this other thing a whirl. I've no illusions about being a full-time writer. In fact that's the last thing I want to be, since I'm only really interested in the poems, which you can't do full time. I'm not interested in hacking about doing anything else. I'd much sooner sweep the streets.

Q. So for several different reasons you didn't want to go on being an insider in Belfast?

A. Yes. There were other things, too. I've no connections there any longer. My father died a couple of years ago, and that had been one of the reasons I stayed around for so long. Not that I saw him as often as I should, but he was still in the country and I'd go down and see him. I'm still attached to the place; it's my home, it's where I'm from, but I don't have the same attachment as I did when my parents, my father specifically, were alive.

Q. You want to feel a sense of being in places where you're positively not at home?

A. I didn't feel an outsider in Dingle. Naturally I felt an outsider in the same way my family were outsiders in Collegelands in Co. Armagh, where they moved when I was four or five, almost thirty years ago. It was really only when my parents were buried there that we even remotely belonged. To belong in a place like Dingle, one would have to have several close relatives buried in the vicinity. In that sense I felt I was an outsider, a blow-in. But I enjoyed it there very much; it's a marvelous spot for a town that size, partly because it is to a large extent a tourist town, though one would have found that difficult to believe during the bad summer. It has a very good bookshop. There are a lot of people, a lot of foreigners, so being an outsider is not strange to the folk of Dingle. Many of the people who reside there are German or come from Cork, which is almost the same thing.

Q. Edna Longley's new book. Poetry in the Wars, presents you in approximately these terms: "Muldoon's writing is anti-tribal. The manner in which he writes is that of an escaped prisoner of war, of a secret agent, of a double agent, of a saboteur. "

A. I didn't know about that. I am the last person in the world equipped to comment on my things. I don't like knowing too much about what I'm doing. That's not to say that I don't try to be circumspect, but I don't want to be able to categorize myself. Those words may have a certain colouring in the Irish context .

Q. ... *Which they do have.*

A. Well, they do; they have colouring in any context. I think a writer's job is to be an outsider, to belong to no groups, no tribes, no clubs. So far as any of us can, it's to be a free agent, within the state of oneself, or roaming through the different states of oneself.

Q. *Is the pressure of that description with the kind of colouring it has in an Irish situation as limiting as if one had a fixed political allegiance?*

A. Yes, intellectually it's part of the same thing. I don't go around thinking of myself from day to day as being an outsider. There's no tribe in Ireland for which I would feel comfortable as a spokesman. I wonder who would, who does, who is? I think Seamus Heaney flirted I think 'flirted' is the word with the idea of it for a while. Seamus is so well known, is a public figure, that these are concerns that impinge more on him. He did become associated, for example, with the Northern Catholic nationalist position. I was brought up in that society with a similar background as Seamus. But things have changed a bit in the ten or fifteen years between us. Ireland has changed; well, certainly, it had unchanged. But I don't think even Seamus flirts with that now. From what I can work out from his recent poems, I think Seamus is now much more interested in the idea of the free agent, arguing very much for the supremacy and separateness of art. You see, there's a lot of nonsense about this. At moments like these one would almost be tempted to believe that the writer has some status in Ireland, which we know perfectly well is not the case at all, or that anyone pays attention to what writers say, which they don't. It's at times like these when constructs are placed on writers' positions, in a critical or journalistic way. That's all very fine and well, but actually it's somewhat beside the point. Nobody gives a damn what I do or where I live. I have no sense of an audience; nobody much reads me, and I think that's wonderful because it means that I don't have a sense of having to fulfill anyone's notion, including my own, of what I might do next, and it's that freedom I want.

Q. *You say that the critical and journalistic way of looking at writers in Ireland tends to draw writers back into the idea of writing for a community, writing as a part of a community, that a community is their audience, and this actually doesn't happen from day to day in terms of the business of writing?*

A. Absolutely not. There's a lot of lip service paid to even a figure like Seamus Heaney. A lot of people have read him, but a lot of people who have talked about him still haven't read him simply as the man who wrote the poems about frogs and flax dams properly, which he's moved away from considerably. So a certain amount of tip service is paid to that notion. A country can only entertain one writer at a time, and Seamus is the man, quite rightly. I think Seamus is a brilliant poet, but there *are* a few others. Unfortunately, internationally, that's also the case. The same is true of England. There can only be one poet for England. It's hilarious to watch the scramble at the moment, not so much among the writers as among the critics' fainthearted attempts to, for example, canonize Fenton as the new Auden, which is a lot of nonsense. Fenton is very good at his best, but he's not the new Auden.

Q. *In recent poetry readings, you have read again and again the poem "Anseo." There are two people, particularly, in that poem, in that schoolroom; there's Paul Muldoon and Joseph Mary Plunkett Ward.*

A. I don't think Paul Muldoon is in that poem.

Q. *Okay. Apart from the Ward figure, who becomes a Provo? What happened to the other people in your class at school?*

A. They represent a cross-section of any parish in Ireland, North or South. One of them is involved in computers at some high level, but most of them are on the dole or working in factories, if they're lucky

enough to have jobs, and some of them are working on the land.

Q. So they were never going to become part of what you're writing about? Do they stop there; do they stop in that room? Or are they the people who ten, fifteen years later in their lives populate your poetry?

A. Very few of them are in the poems because they're not the people I know. I didn't know them terribly well; having left that primary school. I didn't mix with them because I was stuck in most of the time doing my homework or writing poems. But are you suggesting that in some way I might have responsibility to know more about them? I don't think I have a responsibility to anything at all.

Q. But in that poem, and maybe in other poems like that, there is a sense of people living in a particular place at a certain time and, in the case of Joseph Mary Plunkett Ward, being a creature of circumstance.

A. To some extent, he wishes the circumstances upon himself.

Q. In the later poems about Belfast, people appear in a less concretely-realized world. They move in and out of the poems in a sort of edgy, surreal, sudden set of movements, where they're here and then they're gone.

A. One of the things about those "area" poems is that while they draw on physically very viable locations and psychologically very viable reactions and responses to situations, they are almost completely fictionalized. The figures who appear are characters of fiction. The landscapes are often little shorthand, thumbnail sketches to establish characters. As it occurs in the poems, my family is from the earliest invented, invented brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers. The father who appears with, for some people, distressing regularity in these poems is a fictitious character or characters. Sometimes he's illiterate and sometimes he's extremely literate, allusive and speaks in a way that the real "father" would never have done. I often use that as a little shorthand, just to establish a notion of a world with everything more or less in order in which something slightly extraordinary happens. What am I trying to say? I'm trying to say that the figures who inhabit the earlier poems are no more or less shadowy or real than that of the later poems. Except, I suppose, historically I wrote a lot of poems about that place or imagined place.

Q. Take one of the invented fathers; "I imagined him sitting outside a hacienda somewhere in the Argentine. / He would peer for hours into the vastness of the pampas or he might be pointing out the constellations / Of the southern hemisphere / to the open mouthed child at his elbow. / He sleeps with a loaded pistol under his pillow." Now, the open-mouthed child at his elbow; this child isn't a Patrick Kavanagh child, he's much more a Stephen Spielberg child who meets with extraterrestrials that Patrick Kavanagh's child didn't meet.

A. I was brought up on television and the frost on a puddle or someone playing the melodeon. When people came into our house to play a melodeon, my father and mother got out the tape recorder, the Philips tape recorder, to record them. That's a measure of the society I was brought up in. It was also the society in which mother had bought a piano at vast expense and each of us in turn, the three kids, were sent off to piano lessons and to elocution lessons and all the rest of it. Each of us failed miserably on the piano. The piano was finally sold and a tape recorder was bought.

Q. There seems to be a simple direct connection between this wide-eyed child and a much older figure in the poems who wishes to see things clearly.

A. Yes, that's the aim. We've all got to open our eyes and try to be surprised by the fabric of that brick over there or by the gooselamp. To see them again, that's one of the things that writing is all about.

Q. *It is, but there's also a feeling that in contrast to a lot of writing at the moment, which is nostalgic, holding things in place, you enjoy dislocating things. You have recently completed a long poem about, among others, W.H. Auden. In which there is a strong sense of constant dislocation.*

A. Yes, although perversely it's about a very specific place and a specific time. Thanks giving Day. 1940, 7 Middagh Street, and is a series of monologues with Gypsy Rose Lee, Benjamin Britten, Chester Kallman, Carson McCullers, Salvador Dali and Louis MacNeice, but at a crucial time and a crucial place. That allows for all kinds of invention, inventions that are I hope if not in character then not out of character. In a way, it gets back to what I was trying to say earlier with the strict descriptions of places in some of the earlier poems, those areas of the canvas are carefully coloured so that the areas where nothing is said, or where things are implied where other logics are operating, become more persuasive. One could say roughly that the central preoccupation or thrust of it has to do with the notion of responsibility, the relationship between the artist and the world and his or her time. It sounds pretty crude, but that's what it's about.

Q. *As an afterword to writing it?*

A. The word "responsibility" was in my mind, but what kept me going was just the cast list, and the fact that in reality all these people, with the exception of Dali were in that room on that date or some time around then.

Q. *You have recently edited The Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry. Derek Mahon said that he hopes you will live to regret it. Have you lived to regret it?*

A. Well, I have a good idea what Derek was up to in that *Irish Times* review, but I don't know if it's appropriate to say it. Anthologies, as you know, are minefields. The reviews of every anthology by and large comprise alternate anthologies that the reviewer would produce. That's good, because one of the things that people choose to forget is that anthologies are actually monomania and fascism. People dress them up in all sorts of moral disguises. They write very fancy introductions but basically they are saying, "these are a few of my favorite things" with some kind of intellectual explication. It was almost what I didn't want to do that determined what I did in the end. I did not want to produce another anthology of Irish poetry. There are many of them, including Derek Mahon's.

Q. *But did you want simply to select the poets who were dearest to you?*

Or the poems, there are many poems. I would argue against myself, against the procedures of that book by saying that I don't believe in poets - *poems* are what matter. Then are poems by poets who were not included, as good as the best by some of the poets who were included. The poets who were included managed to write a considerable number of good poems, which is a different matter. If people want to devise arguments against the book, (here are real arguments which I'm surprised no one in the fury of composition of reviews at three o'clock in the morning hit on. One, for example, is that most of the work available in the anthology is *readily* available elsewhere. Now if anyone wants a strong argument against the book, that is the strongest one. But there's been a certain amount of hassle over it. It's a way to lose friends and influence people. Some of the complaints, though, are quite extraordinary: that there's a Northern bias because I'm a Northerner. There was the implication that I hadn't read Austin Clarke and that I think Clarke's a bore. Derek had a very snide remark in his *Irish Times* review about Irish language poets, that I ought to know what these people are writing in Irish. As if he did and I didn't.

Q. *In "Quoof" you write of a "shy beast . . . that has yet to enter the language." Does your poetry aim to realize gentleness more than intelligence or scepticism?*

A. Possibly. I would not be able to divine this and I wouldn't want to. Perhaps one of the things is the tone; there's a range of tones. There is that jokey thing, perhaps too much. But there is that sweet, inveigling voice, and the speaker quite often says, "Come on in. Please come in. and sit down and make yourself at home." Usually what happens then is that the next thing you know you get a punch in the nose. In fact, you know there's been some shift, some change, some dislocation. The voice is a soft soapy sort of voice quite often; in that sense not particularly attractive. It seems to me that one of the things that one's trying to do is to discover something, is to *be* disturbed. It's not about assurance.

Q. It seems that the emphasis is on what happens at a level of privacy or intimacy between two or three people, but never at a level of community, nor of the louder voice speaking in a public forum.

A. That's right. I hope that there are many things happening. I don't set out to do different things for the sake of doing different things. I want to be able to approach anything and to be able to approach it in the tone of voice or the attitude that will best reflect it or the language that floats around it. The tone is not buttonholing the public in a rhetorical way but to buttonhole them perhaps in another way. You see. I don't have anything to say to mankind. I have nothing to say to a mass audience. I'm suspicious of people who do.