



***Well Dreams: Essays on John Montague.* Edited by Thomas Dillon Redshaw. Creighton University Press, 2004. Paperback, 443 pages. ISBN 1881871452. \$24.00.**

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The importance of John Montague and Thomas Kinsella as longstanding contemporary poets cannot be oversold. They have reigned over the poetry of Southern Ireland for over forty years. It was in their shadows that we, the next literary generation, set out to conquer the University, Dublin, a wider English-speaking world. Montague has the more social personality of the two writers, an intriguing charmer.

The County Tyrone poet was of special interest to us because of his connection to Paris and his North American residences, specifically his time in San Francisco where he worked with Allen Ginsberg and Robert Duncan and was mentored by Thomas Parkinson, the author of *A Casebook on the Beats*, the first critical account of a new vision of poetics. Michael Allen provides a list of American influences on Montague that includes Berryman, Thom Gunn, Sylvia Plath.<sup>1</sup> This list could include more. Montague the New World writer is not to be ignored in terms of the development of Irish poetry.

In many ways, and in further extension of his capacity to entice his readers, Montague took up early the mantle of Patrick Kavanagh. This became a vital connection in terms of impact among later Irish writers; for my generation it represented a second stage of our personal liberation in a changing national outlook. I remember how electrified I and my circle of friend-writers were with Montague's seminal quoting from Cavafy's "The City" in Peadar O'Donnell's *The Bell*: "You will find no new lands, you will find no other seas./The City will follow you. You will roam the same/streets. And you will age in the same neighborhoods;/and you will grow grey in these same houses."<sup>2</sup> That added an unusual music to our blood, that our first destiny would be our final destiny, we would be Stephen Dedalus wherever we lived.

Montague has brought out publications like the prodigal son of the Irish literary tradition that he is. The poet has selected and collected poems to his credit, plus autobiographies, short fiction collections, anthologies, translations. *The Figure in The Cave*, a collection of Montague's critical essays, is especially valuable to theorists and critics of Irish-American contexts. Montague exhales a mid-Atlantic fecundity that yields both accessible and esoteric insights of the double

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vision of the Irish diaspora. Montague is likewise a Vergil in the native context, he also presides over an Irish-at-home divide: he can act as the seer in the generation changes that have occurred since his beginnings as a writer in the early 50s. His "Chosen Light" (to use a title of one of his volumes) is situated in the mid-point between the defined semi-Nationalist tribe and our current detribalisation consequent on the arrival of sophisticated global capitalism, the breakdown of Church authority, and the new shamrock secularism.

Here Montague is the commentator in verse par excellence. To put it in a critical nutshell he can revive the majesty of the aristocratic O'Neill chieftains, the waning of sectarian Ulster symbolized by the Premiership of Captain Terence O'Neill, all this backed up by his intimacy with the dark, sodden, side of the Irish character exemplified in Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*.

This book of twenty-one essays on varying aspects of Montague's *oeuvre*, edited by Professor Thomas Dillon Redshaw of the University of St. Thomas and dedicated to the late Sean Lucy, appears five years after our author's seventieth birthday. It is an absorbing book on Irish poetry in general, ably edited and brilliantly introduced by the editor who in the opening part conducts a survey of Montague's publications with detailed accounts of their critical receptions. He uses quotations and references adroitly and in depth to demonstrate the cultural effect of Montague's voyage through what has been termed the second literary renaissance. Montague is such a public poet, like Heaney, that his writing is a public statement about and a challenge to the history of this period. By comparison, Kinsella is a private poet whose innerness is comparable to Rilke's, Kavanagh's, Saba's and Spicer's (just to mention the poets whose voices call to me). Professor Dillon Redshaw shines great light on the activist panorama of Montague.

Of the essayists in the book, four by my account are Irish born or bred, including ACIS President Eamonn Wall, the rest are North American. Their subjects and styles are varied and interesting; particular contributions stand out, memorably David Gardiner's analysis of Liam Miller and *The Dolmen Miscellany*, the editor's clever dissection of the drafts of *Death of A Chieftain*, and Patrick Crotty's redoubtable Advocatus Diaboli case against Montague's "[s]low *inexactness* of language" and the partly failed innovations of "The Rough Field." Crotty traces the usage of "the flexible line of its recitative" in *The Dead Kingdom* to Kenneth Rexroth, "the Daddy of the Beats." Elizabeth Grubgeld contrasts the American and Irish styles of elegy in relation to Montague and American Confessional poetry of the 60s and 70s. An important aspect of the compilation is the use of archival material; here Dillon Johnson makes extensive use of the Montague/Liam Miller Dolmen Press correspondence.

As Eamonn Wall correctly reminds us in his contribution, "Ireland remains tied to history, a mixed blessing and to place, which is constantly celebrated." My commentary might take this formula and refine it: a mixed blessing and imperishable, and one might add, constant celebration in taverns which become the places. Essays like these will concentrate readers on what is unmistakably enduring in Irish poetry. Readers will acquire a larger sense of where to look in the critical texts that define a poetry nation like Ireland. Will there be in time future Montague taverns like there are Yeats and Joyce titled establishments? With these pages in hand you dream well of Irish writing.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Allen, Michael. "Celebrations," *The Irish University Review*, 7 (Autumn 1989), p. 99.

<sup>2</sup> Montague, John. "The Young Writer," *The Bell*, Vol. XV11, No. 5 (October 1950).