

**SIX POEMS BY MARY O'DONNELL: "DUBLIN, "AN IRISH LEXICON",
"CELTS", "MÁTHAIR MO CHROÍ", "MISE LE MEAS" AND "REBUKE TO
IDEOLOGICAL FEMINISTS"¹**

Mary O'Donnell²

Dublin

You slid your streets around my waist,
whispered riddles from the cobbles,
rose to my ear till I was dazed with your secrets,
never failed me, old boy of the black pool.
Your river offered a silken, stinking edge
to spring nights, rough braiding at low tide
when the sea rushed to consume you.
My feet have become Dublin feet,
tramping streets from Parnell to Molesworth
trodden by those who speak to presidents
of outrage, bearing banners, voices
low, the heels of our boots gritty,
as we cross O'Connell beneath seagulls
that shriek against the regimes of people.
We speak of poverty, loss,
our candles flicker in the night streets
for the rights of those who are not safe.

Old city, you gave me room to breathe out,
breathe in, to lose myself in the peace of the crowd,
you offered gift on gift in the quayside junk-shops –

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Date of acceptance: 16/07/2013

² Poet, novelist, short-story writer, translator, essayist and critic, Mary O'Donnell's fiction includes the best-selling literary novel *The Light-Makers*, *Virgin and the Boy* and *The Elysium Testament*. Her fourth novel *Where They Lie* will be published in 2014. Her seventh poetry collection *Splitting the Difference* appears from Arc UK, also in 2014. A prolific writer, Wena Poon, writing of her poetry in the *Quarterly Literary Review*, Singapore (April 2010) remarked that "The aesthetics and sensibility are quite thrilling when played through the instrument that is a modern woman". She is a member of the Irish artists' organisation Aosdana. www.maryodonnell.com; ✉ maryodonnell4@gmail.com.

an Empire photograph album bought for a pound
 beneath wavering Christmas lights,
 depicting an Edwardian Dubliner's trip
 from Westland Row to Burma. This Christmas
 I remain that vanished family's keeper, my eyes
 Watch over its dead women and men,
 their blonde children in high foreign fields,
 with dun-faced nannies close to hand.

Your offices high and low taught me about people,
 possession: one woman chained her chair to her desk
 every evening, others had talismanic mugs for tea-break,
 yet others lingered between partitions, overtime
 for the sake of being together, not the work.
 I have walked, trudged, run the pavements,
 in frost and snow have angled an arm close to shop
 fronts, tip-toeing along, never far from a friend.
 Old gossip-shop, warm as whiskey and cloves,
 impenetrable as Zanzibar, run
 on the petrol of violence, alcohol, and citizens
 who decry the present, like a garment
 that cannot fit to their skin.
 Yet there is only us, who pass through.

You slid your streets around my waist, all wiles,
 whispered riddles from the cobbles,
 perfumed my ear till I was dazed.
 You never failed me, old boy of the black pool.

An Irish Lexicon

(A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, L, M, N, O, P, R, S, T, U)³

Twilight, and the deer are grazing in the Phoenix Park.
 Someone dreams of Arkle, Beara, Drumlins, Errigal.
 A poet writes of Dubh Linn, Lonndubh, Belfast,

³ The Irish language alphabet has only 18 letters.

Glens of Imal, Antrim, The Downs,
Devil's Bit, Vinegar Hill, The Hook, Bannow,
Ships, helmets, Ogham, Newgrange,

Dawn chorus, dawn light, grave passages,
Burren limestone, dolmen, capstone, and Dowth.
In school they speak of Flight, Grammar, Imram,

Lir, Marian, Naoise, Oriel, in the Dáil it's Partnership,
Rights, salmon, Taoiseach/Toscairí.
Sea fog and frost are rolling in. Land holds its breath.

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The SOMEONE, the TEACHER, the POET,
the POLITICIAN weave a dialogue of badger-bait,
bull-bait, dog-fight, and greyhound,
Cú, Cuchullan, Dun Dealgan, Eamhain Macha,
Tháinig long ó Valparaiso, tá tír na n-óg
Ag cúl an tí, tír alainn trina céile,
Mise Eire, Micheal Ó Suilleabhán,
The Long Hall, The Brazen Head, The Oliver
St. John Gogarty, The South Pole Inn, Omagh bomb,
Gugán Barra, Guests of the Nation, La Mon,
Oedipus Complex, Lough Swilly, Anna Livea,
National Museum, Síle na Gig, jigs and reels,
Riverdance, Liberty Hall, the Limerick pogrom of 1904,
the bee-loud glade, the beehive hut, Georgian Dublin,
Liberty Hall rebuilt and scaling the clouds,
Custom House, Guinness, the fighting boys of Annabelle's,
Fairview Park, The George, Dawn Run, the Curragh.

Wren Women, Glencree, Synagogue, Germans and Jews,
Wicklow Jail, ghosts, Kilmainham,
Dawn executions in Dublin,
the Disappeared, Jean McConville, 1994, Abercorn, poteen,
the Black Pig's Dyke, De Valera, Crazy Jane,
Old Croghan Man at rest in the his glass box,
clean as a newborn, renewed for viewing by MILLIONS.
Arigna, slit nipples, The Clonskeagh Mosque,

laundries, the Imam, Good Shepherd Convent,
 CPRSI, Bessborough, the Protestants of Cork in 1921,
 Monaghan 1974, Belfast Agreement, Fish on Friday,
 Good Friday Agreement, that blackbird over Emy Lough,
 gold at Clontibret, ghost estates in Laois, a haunted house
 in Lucan, golden apples of the sun, whatever-you-say,
 oil off Cork, Daghda, the Boyne, UB-65,
 September 1913, extra points for Honours Maths,
 Gaelscoileanna, Bodhráns and spoons, harp-making
 in Portlaoise jail, piebalds in Jobstown, free buggies
 for immigrants, free curtains, money-for-old-rope-
 single-mothers-of-four, Arkle, Beara, a wherewithal
 for bags of coal, turf, as a wretched frost descends.

And yet we have a fabled coast, where sea-cattle plunge
 into the WAVES. Inland, hill-sprites on DRUMLINS,
 pismires on the bog, all CELT and tribe in South Ulster,
 further north there's ERRIGAL, but speak not,
 SAY-NOTHING, for words will never count so much as
 gesture.

Flight of the Earls, O'Neill in Rome, Michael Robartes,
 Kenny in D. C., Irish artists in New York,
 bringing-It-All-Over-there, the knowledge,
 the Gathering, the sliver of salmon, the sucked thumb,
 Fairtrade, Taltainn, free-range eggs, free-loaders,
 curlews, buzzards, Lissadell.

Twilight, and the deer are grazing in the Phoenix Park.
 Someone dreams of Arkle, Beara, Drumlins, Errigal.
 On the Curragh, whin bushes dream, and horses
 are stabled for the night. Frost bites down.

Celts

The exotic myth of origin, spread its cloak
 from Eire to Scotland, Wales, Brittany, Galicia.
 Even today, defies the MONGREL MIX.

I'm an Irishwoman (*you're Irish? I love
The way you people speak!*). Then part Scotswoman,
part Norman-maid, part O'Donnell on the way home
from KINSALE, some fragment of embattled clan,
lingering in Limerick, not a Donegal gene in my bones.

IT DOES NOT MATTER, WHAT WE FORGET,
AND MYTH IS NOT EXOTIC, (in text-speak this is
SHOUTING, but to stretch the letters high,
to break the stifled code of poetries on the Island
of the Mongrel Mixture of frayed saints and devils.
Search for SCHOLARS. All gone to homes
in America's universities. The saying used to go,
'At least, we're not British' as the gombeen men
set up their 70s supermarket empires in ribboning
suburbs, ran despite themselves away from rural,
Catholic, the West, in denial until Robinson
hit the Presidency: how we rejoiced at her inauguration,
at the chewed-wasp faces of Lenihan and Haughey.

But in denial till then,
I AM A BECAUSE I AM NOT B. I AM IRISH
BECAUSE I AM NOT BRITISH

Máthair mo Chroí⁴

Front line of the defence, a line with no power
unless in the home, twisting sons into priests,
daughters to carers like themselves. Mine simmered.
EDUCATION! she cried, IT'S CARRIED
LIGHTLY ALL YOUR LIFE, MY DAUGHTERS!
In old age, educated, with three university
degrees, her modesty comes from knowing
we know nothing when facts are put to bed,
and all that's left is the heart-thorn of experience,

⁴ Literally, "mother of my heart", this is a common cliché derived from traditional songs and poems in Ireland.

although she does not refuse her HAUTE COUTURE,
 smudge-pot colours brightening her eyes at eighty-six,
 alive and equivocating to the end, but moved
 by *The Deer's Cry*, *The Fox-Hunt*,
 music from the culture dancing in her soul.

Mise Eire and O'Riada once strung and boomed
 through the house of my girlhood, between Acker Bilk
 and Renata Tebaldi. Music, she said,
 WAS PORTAL TO THE SOUL.
 And so she taught her daughters, guiltless.

Mise le Meas⁵

Everybody knew the telephone girls listened in.

You had to be careful what you said, and women
 having affairs around the town learned fast.
 The phone was not safe, and the local MI5
 custodians of half-baked morality liked to chatter.
 But this was Monaghan. Nobody had affairs
 in the 1960s, did they? Nobody committed suicide,
 did they? Nobody was gay. Some parents
 had a copy of TANTRIC SEX, beside
 THE CATHOLIC MARRIAGE, secreted in the high
 wardrobe, and Mary McCarthy a presence
 in that east-facing bedroom, where my parents could see
 foxes at play in the high field,
 beyond wind-tilted knots of holly trees.

But the telephone girls, those telephone girls,
 how they tattled in the town! They knew
 who owed what to whom, who in HIGH POWER
 was doing his secretary, and the garda known
 to lightly squeeze a woman's breast, great paw
 in through the car window as he advised her

⁵ The official way of signing off a Government letter, it means "Yours, respectfully" but even today is associated with indifference, anonymity and unaccountability.

on traffic conditions.

Hear them, that Irish sibilance: *Putting you through now. . .*
Hello Clones, call for you . . . ah how are ya Elsie, not a bad day,
yesterday was pure shockin' . . . right now, call waiting . . .
Caller? Putting you through now . . .

Rebuke to Ideological Feminists

"I was not one of the popular feminists who knew what a sound-bite was . . . never took the Contraceptive Train north,⁶ nor went to Greenham Common . . . " (the poet, 2013)

We never moved as one, ladies, girls, women,
 to suggest that it was otherwise would be a lie.
 Today, some of you are CIVIL as any servant,
 as IVORY-TOWERED as any ruminating scholar,
 as unsmiling, grim and frightening as women would be
 who thirty years ago spent time contemplating cervixes,
 took classes in How Not to Smile All the Time.
 Too much smiling – agreed – too much compliance
 and willingness. You can be anyone you want!
 Self-invent, renaissance women all!
 We'll help you on the way to smash that glass ceiling!

*(If we are to believe the weekly Elle, the woman of letters is a remarkable
 Zoological species: she brings forth, pell-mell, novels and children.
 We are introduced, for example, to Jacqueline Lenoir (two daughters, one novel);
 Marina Grey (one son, one novel); Nicole Dutreil (two sons, four novels), etc).*

But what does it mean? *This: to write
 is a glorious but bold activity; the writer is an 'artist',
 one recognises that he is entitled to a little bohemianism ...⁷*

⁶ "The Contraceptive Train", as it was known, was boarded in Dublin's Connolly Station in 1971 by a group of feminists who then travelled to Belfast to buy contraceptives that were at that time illegal in the Republic. They then returned that afternoon and brandished their purchased, daring the Customs Officials to challenge them.

⁷ Roland Barthes. 1957. *Mythologies*. Paris: Editions du Seuil.

Even so. It does not include the ordinary women
getting on with ordinary lives, the ones who wrestle
infant feet into little shoes, who wipe up puke, wipe shitty bums,
clean the rooms where some of you work out the policies.

*But make no mistake: Let no women believe
that they can take advantage of this pact without having first
submitted to the eternal statute of womanhood.*

*Women are on the earth to give children to men;
let them write as much as they like, let them decorate
Their condition, but above all, let them not depart from it ...*

Some of you never recognised that we were not so helpless,
despite biology, so victimised, or speechless,
nor saw that we were ON YOUR SIDE.

The suspicion often fell that *this* was how you wanted it:
you, on the band-wagon, questioning the language
(*that* remains a GOOD IDEA).

*A careful analysis of the teacher-student relationship
at any level, inside or outside the school, reveals
its fundamentally narrative character. This relationship
involves a narrating Subject (the teacher) and patient,
listening objects (the students).⁸*

The sexuality, the *mode d'emploi* of every bloody thing
not quite your business. Your business was – is –
JUSTICE, FAIRNESS, HUMAN RIGHTS, not
CONDESCENSION AND KNOWING WHAT WAS
BETTER FOR YOUR MINIONS.

The battle goes on – ladies, girls, women. The principle remains correct and this enquiry
asks that you get your hands dirtied in the ordinary smut, break your own networks and
move into the favellas, the country, wherever the road is twisted and UNTHINK IS IN
CHARGE, get working with the people, SEE WHERE JUSTICE IS DONE and learn
from that. Or: remember Orwell, that thing about everyone being equal, But some are
...? He got it right, all charged up with a memory of native male backsides skinned by

⁸ Paolo Freire. 1972. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. London: Penguin Education.

the bamboo rod, released from prison to impoverished wives who soothed it all with
mashed banana. M – A – S – H – E – D B – A – N – A – N – A .

*

So Unthink the Englishmen were let loose.

But to each generation its Unthinks. Unthink the Nation,
the State, the Federation, the Republic, the Monarchy,
the Commune, the Parish, the County, the GAA, League,
Union, Association, Gathering, Meeting, in every unstarry
constellation where people meet there's a Mr. Unthink,
partered by Ms Unthink and all the Littler Unthinkums.

All Unthinking how they need LOVE, how LOVE rules the world,
how LOVE is everything and we surely ALL LOVE one another,
thee-most-bee-ewt-iful-word in thee world! But the same one
all the same for man-woman, mother-child, child-parent,
bro and sis, covering the spectrum as if it were one colour.

It ain't one colour Ma'ams: it's not black, it's not white,
it's all and any hut, it hides so deeply it's like Mars the planet,
people wondering if there ever was life, and if liquid water
ever flowed in that barren territory. That's what LOVE is.

And then love flows into politics. Into ideals. Into agendas.

Enter: Stage Right: The Leader of the Women's Forum
*come to speak to the Constituency, plus the Chief Female Poets,
addressing the great iambed on cross-rhyme
and good-tempered rhyme, on Being one's Own Best Critic,
on Seizing Permissions.*

Stampede Stage Left: the confused massing women,
all apparently worrying about window cleanliness,
toilet-bowls, children and curries.

Until: behind them,
a quieter entering: the old, the weak,
the sick, the confused, the mad, the neurotic, the demented:
such fill the stage, while behind them again serried lines
of workers, bee-women, the soft hum of labour, creased brow,

compliant to the nature of life's business:
love of the task that transforms.
The only love, perhaps.

*

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Glens of Imal, Antrim, The Downs,
Devil's Bit, Vinegar Hill, The Hook, Bannow,
ships, helmets, Ogham, Newgrange,

Dawn chorus, dawn light, grave passages,
Burren limestone, dolmen, capstone, and Dowth.
Whin bushes on the Curragh toss and dream

as the wind untethers them. Horses are stabled
for the night. A fox runs close to the ditch,
beyond the steady shearing of evening cars, headlights.

Frost trembles on the air, falls firm across the land,
cooling an ardour of wintry argument.
The earth rounds in on its prayer to itself.