

HIGHLIGHTING LINKS ACROSS CENTURIES

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Samuel K. Fisher and Brian Ó Conchubhair, eds. *Bone and Marrow / Cnámh agus Smior: An Anthology of Irish Poetry from Medieval to Modern*. Winston-Salem: Wake Forest University Press, 2022. 963 pp. ISBN 978-1-943667-00-0.

Modern anthologies of Irish-language poetry already have a long tradition and a fascinating history. The monolingual *Nuabhéarsaíocht* (1950) edited by scholar, poet, and playwright Seán Ó Tuama and published by the then newly established company Sáirséal agus Dill, was, despite its slight volume, a landmark publication, introducing to the public the work of the first generation of Irish-language modern(ist) poets, including Máire Mhac an tSaoi, Máirtín Ó Direáin, and Seán Ó Ríordáin. It is regarded until this day as an important stepping stone in the revolution that took place in Irish-language writing during the 1940s and 1950s. Subsequently, Seán Ó Tuama focused on older material and with the help of poet Thomas Kinsella, produced *An Duanaire 1600-1900: Poems of the Dispossessed* (1981). A bilingual anthology in this case, it brought to the attention of a wider readership the sheer scope and variety of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century poetic output. Thomas Kinsella's careful, matter of fact, yet subtly poetic translations gave unity to the volume and showed that the poetry of the period does not have merely philological or historical value, but overflows with imagery, wit, and creative force.

An Duanaire was soon followed by the first bilingual anthology of modern Irish-language poetry, *The Bright Wave: An Tonn Geal* (1986), edited by Dermot Bolger and featuring the output of (principally) *INNTI* poets translated by their English-language peers, including Paul Muldoon, Thomas McCarthy, Philip Casey, and Bolger himself. The anthology appeared at a time when many Irish intellectuals were turning their back on the Irish language, viewing it as an item of the state-supported nationalist baggage that impeded the engagement with modernity and the cosmopolitan world. The anthology of works by poets who “were willing to embrace all aspects of modern life and modern Ireland in their work, which has served not to destroy the Irish tradition but to take it out into the real world again where it has become a living and exciting discourse,” as Bolger wrote in the introduction,¹ contributed to the change of the public attitude to Irish in the 1990s and inaugurated the subsequent boom of bilingual editions of poetry by Gallery Press and others.

¹ Dermot Bolger, ed., *The Bright Wave: An Tonn Geal* (Dublin: Raven Arts Press, [1986] 1987) 10.

The most comprehensive of these (i.e., prior to the appearance of the present volume) was Louis de Paor's *Leabhar na hAthghabhála / Poems of Repossession* (2016). The title consciously alludes to Ó Tuama's 1981 anthology as de Paor felt that "'an act of repossession' is still required for Irish language poetry produced between the cultural revival of the Celtic Twilight and the economic insanity of the Celtic Tiger."² This meticulously researched and spotlessly produced volume featured newly commissioned translations intended to stay close to the letter of the original, although "different approaches [...] have also been adopted where a more literal translation might occlude rather than clarify the tone and temper of the original poem in Irish."³ De Paor's magisterial volume, apart from reaffirming the already established canon, also brought to the fore previously neglected poets, such as Liam S. Gógán, and for the first time offered the reader the translation of the most important Irish-language long poem of the twentieth century, Eoghan Ó Tuairisc's *Aifreann na Marbh*, complete with detailed and helpful notes.

Samuel K. Fisher and Brian Ó Conchubhair's *Bone and Marrow / Cnámh agus Smior* constitutes so far the most ambitious endeavour in this venerable anthologising tradition. It is a substantial volume, only a little short of a thousand pages and stretching over the longest time period possible – from early medieval poems attributed to St. Brigid and Colm Cille to a 2021 reflection of the Covid-19 pandemic (931-35). The book is by necessity a collective project, divided into chapters according to historical periods, each entrusted to one to three editors who are specialists in the respective fields. In total, twenty-four scholars based at universities in five countries and on two continents collaborated in this enormous work and they all should be congratulated on a singular achievement.

The title *Cnámh agus Smior* is taken from Seathrún Céitinn's classical seventeenth-century treatise on Irish history *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn*. In the relevant passage, which also serves as the anthology's epigraph, the author defends the use of poems as a historical source: "i nduantaibh atá cnáimh agus smior an tseanchusa" / "the bone and marrow of history are to be found in poems" (23). Above all countries, the statement is certainly true about Ireland, where, for a substantial part of its history, poems frequently served as chronicles or pieces of journalism, praising military achievements of chieftains, making a particular political point, or urging to action. This historical sense is, scope apart, what constitutes the main difference between the present volume and the previous anthologies listed above – even *An Duanaire*, despite its past-oriented focus,

² Louis de Paor, ed., *Leabhar na hAthghabhála / Poems of Repossession* (Hexham and Indreabhán: Bloodaxe Books and Cló Iar-Chonnacht, 2016) 13.

³ de Paor, ed., *Leabhar na hAthghabhála* 14.

emphasized mainly the poetic qualities of the material and kept the historical dimension in the background. In contrast, numerous chapters of *Bone and Marrow / Cnámh agus Smior* may serve to provide welcome material for historians exploring particular periods or themes in Irish history: the assimilation of Norman nobles into the Gaelic system in the late Middle Ages, the response of the Irish to the cataclysmic events in the seventeenth century, or the various guises of Jacobite hope a century later. Of particular interest in this respect is Chapter 4, which brilliantly traces the formation of Irish national identity within the larger European context of Reformation and Counter-Reformation. Irish-language sources have often been ignored in the field of history and the present anthology goes a long way to redress this shortcoming.

The historical and political focus of the volume is by necessity at the expense of other, more literary aspects of Irish poetry. The opening chapter representing the rich and variegated poetic output of early medieval Ireland is welcome indeed and opens new worlds for the reader, yet one cannot escape the feeling that it has too little prominence within the overall build-up of the book – merely ten poems standing for a period of six hundred years, as opposed to more than forty reflecting the turbulent period between 1534 and 1691 alone. The inclusion of more poems from the early Middle Ages could have brought more variance and underscored interesting continuities in Irish poetry, such as reflections on nature, especially relevant in the current context of climate crisis. Likewise, the following period between 1200 and 1700 offers many examples of poems not directly connected to history or politics – personal statements of bardic poets, the Norman-inflected *dánta grá*, or the Fenian lays with their share of adventure, romance, and humour. Some of these genres are represented, but the historicizing slant of the anthology necessarily relegates them to the margins. The volume thus runs a certain risk of re-emphasizing the connection of Irish to divisive history that Bolger strove so much to escape in 1986, as much as the editors have responded to this danger by carefully explaining the contradictions of the times. It should be noted as well that starting with the chapter on the eighteenth century, the historical focus, while always present, becomes toned down in favour of a greater diversity of themes.

Another crucial difference between *Bone and Marrow / Cnámh agus Smior* and the previous bilingual anthologies is the attitude to translation. It is true that *An Tonn Geal* favoured a freer approach while *An Duanaire* and *Leabhar na hAthghabhála* opted for greater fidelity to the letter of the original, yet what connected all these endeavours was a unified translation policy motivated by a concern for the effect of the anthology on the Anglophone reader. In contrast, the note on translation in the present volume begins by stating that the very fact that

the poems in question will be read in English by monolinguals “is a problem” due to the obvious issues of colonization, modernization, and the sheer disproportion between a minoritized language and the global *lingua franca* (29). As “there might not be a good way to deal with this fact, or a way that is obviously better than all the others,” no overall translation strategy was chosen. Instead, free rein was given to the chapter editors to “create their own translations, of whatever kind, or to choose previously published translations, done by others, of whatever kind.” (30) The intended result is that the book “became not only a history and anthology of Irish-language poetry but also of translation from Irish to English. [...] It is messy in here, dear reader, and this is by design.” (30) The anthology thus makes no attempt to hide the fact that the knowledge of Irish is necessary to enjoy the volume in full; this is further underscored by the ‘macaronic’ layout of the introductions to chapters and individual poems, where the English and Irish versions are frequently not equivalent, but complement each other. As a welcome bonus, the great variety of translation approaches provides an added point of interest to translation scholars who are thus offered an ample amount of valuable examples spanning a large period of time.

The volume features many instances of inventive translation with various degree of poetic licence by Greg Delanty, Colbert Kearney, Thomas MacDonagh, Frank Sewell, David Wheatley, and others, yet often (especially in the case of older poems) inclines to prose-like versions which aim to convey the semantic content of the original only. The latter fact may be a setback for readers unfamiliar with Irish in its various historical forms: to state, in essence, that translation from Irish to English is politically problematic, and therefore the readability and poetic qualities of the translation do not matter much, clearly creates some problems of its own. The act of creative translation into a major language need not always be harmful. In 2001, Michael Cronin published an article advocating for the translation of Máirtín Ó Cadhain’s *Cré na Cille* into English, dismissing the fear that such an endeavour would obscure the original. On the contrary, a skilful translation elicits a desire in the reader to explore the original and thus to engage with the language in which it was written: “The better the translation, the more compelling the case for going to the original.”⁴ Time has proven Cronin right – since the two English translations of *Cré na Cille* appeared in 2015 and 2016, the novel has been republished twice in Irish and also the author’s short stories have drawn more attention. The well-being of Irish, as a minoritized language, depends to a significant extent on the good will and interest of speakers of English and

⁴ Michael Cronin, “It’s Time for *Cré na Cille* in English,” *The Irish Times*, 7 April 2001, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/it-s-time-for-cre-na-cille-in-english-1.299458>.

other languages: while Paul Muldoon's translation of a poem by Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, despite all its licence, has the potential to awaken the reader's desire to go to the original, a hundred-year-old philological translation of a bardic poem (102-111) is not likely to fare so well in this task. While economic and copyright factors might have played a role as well, the lack of attention to the quality of translation in the case of certain poems can be seen as a missed opportunity.

The fact that the individual chapters were necessarily limited by space led to the risk of merely reiterating the existing canon, without much originality. The various ways in which this danger has ingeniously been avoided belongs to the principal merits of the book. Throughout the volume, considerable attention is devoted to female voices, and one may also commend the use of Scottish material in the fourth and sixth chapter. To mention some specific examples, the chapter "Ón Seacabíteachas go dtí an Gorta Mór / From Jacobitism to the Great Famine" gives space to previously neglected authors from Dublin with an international outlook and personal focus in their work, thus modifying the rural slant of the established canon. The following section, "Amhrán na nDaoine sa Naoú hAois Déag / Nineteenth-Century Song Poetry" is one of the most original in the whole anthology, using oral instead of print versions for better-known pieces such as Raftery's "Máire Ní Eidhin," and introducing an amazing variety into the material, as regards both form and matter. We can thus enjoy lyrics of songs treating, among other themes, alcoholism, faction fighting, battles in Europe, Daniel O'Connell, death at sea, mental illness, or even (potentially) homoerotic love. A similarly eclectic approach is apparent in the concluding chapter on twenty-first-century poetry, which, apart from established poets, includes some exciting new voices, such as that of Ola Majekodunmi, an Irish speaker of Nigerian descent. In the introduction to her poem on black women's hair, a link is made to the theme of fashion in seventeenth-century Irish poetry (918, 919) – a bold connection only an anthology of such scope can make.

A long debate could be waged concerning the inclusion of some poets and exclusion of others, as well as the choice of poems in certain cases – one may, for example, doubt the selection of the controversial "A Mhic Bhig na gCleas" as the only work by Patrick Pearse in the volume. Yet, any anthology naturally raises similar questions, and thus prompts scholars and poets to reconsider established canons and as years come by, compile new books of this kind. If *Bone and Marrow / Cnámh agus Smior* contains one statement that is plainly incorrect, it is Thomas McCarthy's praise at the back of the cover: "Believe me, in possessing this book you will never need another Irish anthology." Still, it cannot be denied that this is a landmark publication, a worthy member of the stately progression outlined at the beginning of this review. Symbolically, the anthology starts by "Pangur Bán,"

a famous medieval poem about a monk and his cat, and finishes with a 2016 reworking of the same poem by Ailbhe Ní Ghearbhuigh. It is perhaps in this highlighting of unexpected links across centuries and in giving historical depth to the individual poems that the most lasting merit of the anthology may be found.

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