

AMBIGUOUS SILENCES? WOMEN IN ANTHOLOGIES OF CONTEMPORARY NORTHERN IRISH POETRY

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Ruth Hooley, poet and feminist activist, observed that in 1985 women's poetry seemed to be less prevalent in Northern Ireland as it was elsewhere, commenting, '[t]his silence is ambiguous. Does it mean an absence—there are hardly any women writing?' (1). This article considers how anthologies of poetry published in the contemporary era in Northern Ireland can be seen as agents of exclusion for women writers at the same time as these anthologies were effectively instating a post-1960s canon and restating a generational dimension for which poetry from the North of Ireland would become known. In drawing on the broad context of anthology publication, this article examines how female poets are absent from an otherwise thriving literary culture and questions whether this silence is, as Hooley suggests, ambiguous. In responding to these issues, this article addresses both the commercial business of poetry production alongside the literary representation of women in poetry published in representative publications such as anthologies in order to re-insert women into Northern Irish poetic discussion. By investigating women's writing as unanthologized and addressing the lack of agency of women figures in verse published by male poets, this article argues that the way in which women are represented inside and outside publication in the second half of the twentieth-century is severely lacking.

i.

As with most other studies of Northern Irish poetry in the twentieth century, there requires an acknowledgement of the necessarily heavy emphasis on the post-1960 period, an era of political turbulence accompanied by an increase in literary activity in Northern Ireland. This wave of poetic industriousness coincided with the launch of the Queen's University Festival in 1962, prolific publication from Belfast presses, and the rise of poets such as Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley and Derek Mahon. This activity notably occurred against a backdrop of

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sectarian civil unrest, the Troubles, the deployment of British troops on British soil, and deaths on every side of the conflict. Less notable is how poetic and political developments were coterminous with the development of the second-wave feminist movement across the Western world; a social change reflected in the subsequent growth in the publication of women's poetry such as Jeni Couzyn's *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Women Poets* (1985) and critical considerations of women's poetry as a movement such as Alicia Ostriker's *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (1986). As Hooley suggests, the growing attention paid to women's writing more broadly did not appear to have much impact in Northern Ireland, despite the cultural renaissance that was ongoing in the province.

As noted by leading figures such as Eileen Evason, sectarian division and unrest *did* stunt the growth of the feminist movement in Northern Ireland. In *Against the Grain: The Contemporary Women's Movement in Northern Ireland* (1991), Evason notes that feminist issues, such as the maltreatment and subsequent uprising of female Republican prisoners in Armagh, were complicated by the uniquely Northern Irish political issues at play. This 'dirty protest'—smearing excrement and menstrual blood on the walls of their cells—was a protest against British authority, modelled on the Long Kesh hunger strikes. Attitudes towards the protest were thus divided as Unionist women felt they could not support an inherently Republican protest. Evason recounts how 'some groups plunged into turmoil' in response to this issue; she regrets 'the lack of a united stand on the Armagh women' and acknowledges it was 'a complex, difficult period' (19–20). The Troubles were so prevalent, and the political picket lines so clearly defined that those issues white-washed feminist thought. Given the pressing political preoccupations, perhaps the encouragement of women's artistic expression seemed somewhat dispensable.

Northern Ireland's feminist movement had some distance to travel given that attitudes were clearly lacking in their approach to equality, even those of educated figures in the literary world. This point is neatly illustrated by an exchange between the poet Padraic Fiacca and the playwright Graham Reid during their preparations to attend a debate at Trinity College Dublin. Upon realising that they will be opposing the female poet Medbh McGuckian, Fiacca remarked to Reid,

'I may be old fashioned but two men against one woman!'

'She's not a woman,' says Graham.

'But if she's not a woman what is she?'

‘She’s a woman’s lib and if you cherish anything on you...and think of me too... tear right into her for a start!’ (Fiacc, 153–54)

This exchange demonstrates that contrasting attitudes towards women pervaded in the attitudes of the intellectual classes: Fiacc still sees women as uneducated, perhaps unable to debate at the level of one man, let alone two. Yet Reid recognises a literate and liberated woman who needs to be restrained and put back in her place. Regardless of these differing views, there does still seem to be a dominant patriarchal view of what a ‘woman’ should be, and, even more noticeably, what a ‘woman’ should *not* be (or do). The threat felt by Reid, the anxiety caused by her intellectual opposition, reinforces the obstacles poets like McGuckian faced. Regretfully, no evidence of who won the debate could be sourced.

In his ‘Preface’ to the second edition of *Poets from the North of Ireland* in 1990, Frank Ormsby, poet, editor of several anthologies of Northern Irish poetry, and arguably *the* gate-keeper to the contemporary canon of Northern writing, presents a brief and dismissive argument concerning the state of women’s poetry in Northern Ireland. He says, ‘[o]f the northern women poets born since 1900 – Barbara Hunter, Freda Laughton, Meta Mayne Reid, Eleanor Murray and Joan Newmann, for example, few have published in book form’ (xiv). Just as in the Trinity College debate, Ormsby’s argument must be informed by supposition about the capabilities and achievements of women writers. The claim is also inaccurate as several of these women *did* have single-author collections during this period: Laughton published *A Transitory House* with Jonathan Cape in 1945, Mayne Reid published *No Ivory Tower* in 1974 with Outposts Publications and Murray published two collections, *Black and Sepia* (1976) and *The Pulsing Earth* (1977) also with Outposts. These women *were* publishing ‘in book form’ with the large presses of the time. The only women he mentions who were not publishing collections at this time are Hunter and Newmann (although Newmann’s first collection *Suffer Little Children* (1991) was likely in press when Ormsby’s introduction was composed). Regardless, Ormsby’s prefatory introduction misrepresents the state of women’s poetry publication in the period. If Ormsby’s real reason for not including these women writers in his anthology was that they had not published more than two collections and were, therefore, in his view, not established ‘enough’ to be representative of poetry at this time, one might question his inclusion of seven male poets that only had one single-author collection, but who nevertheless comprise most of the last

third of his anthology. It seems that the female poets mentioned above have all but been forgotten, in part because of their exclusion from anthologies such as Ormsby's.

An earlier bibliography of Northern Irish writing, published in the last volume of *Rann* in 1953, provides further evidence that women were selectively excluded by the agents of late twentieth-century canonicity, by including women poets publishing since 1900 who by the latter end of the century had fallen into obscurity. Ethna Carbery started publishing in magazines at fifteen, and her posthumously released poetry collection, *The Four Winds of Eirinn* (1902), was, according to an advertisement in her short story collection *The Passionate Hearts* (2), celebrating its ninth edition by 1903). Sisters Celia and Ruth Duffin jointly published two collections, *The Secret Hill* (1913) and *Escape* (1929), while Celia later produced *The Leaping Flame* (1949) under the name Celia Randall. May Morton won the Festival of Britain (N.I.) Prize for best poem and published *Dawn and Afterglow* (1936), *Masque in Maytime* (1948) and *Sung to the Spinning Wheel* (1952). Moira O'Neill's *Songs of the Glens of Antrim* (1900), were 'written by a Glenswoman in the dialect of the Glens, and chiefly for the pleasure of other Glens-people' (Preface, n.p). So successful were these publications that they were set to music by Charles Villiers Stanford in *Six Songs from the Glens of Antrim Op 174* (1920), and followed by subsequent poetry collections *More Songs of the Glens of Antrim* (1921) and *Collected Poems* (1933). Elizabeth Shane was a dramatist and poet with three collections of verse, *By Bog and Sea in Donegal* (1923), *Pipers' Tunes* (1927) and *Collected Poems* (1945). Thus, even if there was not a vibrant localized poetry scene in this period which could be described as a regional school (as the 1960s 'Belfast Group' has been characterized – rightly or wrongly – as), or poets readily sharing common themes, styles or publishers, it is evident that there were a number of women publishing. Not only publishing, but producing multiple volumes, collaborative works, attaining numerous poetry prizes and even having their poems noticed by eminent composers and set to music. That some of these women are not remembered beyond their lifetime is inevitable, but for every one of them to have been forgotten is more curious and, perhaps, indicative of political forces at play in twentieth-century canonicity. It is perhaps no surprise that their absence from literary culture has not yet been notable because, other than these collections, they could have little lasting input due to continually being overlooked by anthologists like Ormsby. The poets who were included in later anthologies, and who thus came to represent poetic output in the early 1900s, were all men; AE, Lyle Donaghy, John Hewitt and Louis MacNeice. While these poets certainly

have something to offer later readers, it seems unfortunate that their women peers were not afforded equal visibility. That there has been a gender bias in the later representation of pre-1960s poetry from Northern Ireland is irrefutable.

Despite evidence to the contrary, in 1991 Ormsby defended his exclusions, both historical and contemporary, on the basis that there were few women writing poetry at this time.

Where are the women poets?... Reviewers will latch on to that and repeat it *ad nauseam*. In my more splenetic moments I think: 'If you think there are all these women poets, then you do an anthology of women's poetry and see how far you get. If you get to 10 pages you'd be lucky'. (qtd. in Lennon, n.p.)

Ruth Hooley's 1985 anthology, *The Female Line*, managed 190 pages, showcasing contributions of verse from twenty-seven women writing in the latter half of the twentieth century, alongside short prose extracts by other women. The publication of this anthology, particularly by the Northern Ireland Women's Rights Movement to mark its twentieth anniversary, suggests that the absence of women elsewhere is symptomatic of misogynistic publishing and editing strategies. Hooley's 'Introduction' implies that continuing male exclusivity is a local concern, pointing out that contemporaneously there were more women's books being published than ever before, yet 'in Northern Ireland there is little evidence of any such evolution', qualifying that 'few female authors find their way onto reading lists...few female authors stare out from the covers of locally published fiction and poetry' (1). In an interview conducted for this article (January 2013), Hooley (now writing as Ruth Carr) reflected on the genesis of the anthology. Initially, 'it was meant to be just a publication of Medbh McGuckian and Eavan Boland', who were already relatively well established, 'but we thought an anthology would be better to represent more women's writing'. An open call for submissions was distributed to writer's groups, and from around 300 submissions, the deliberately 'mixed quality' publication was put together. While, as Evason claimed, the feminist movement may have been divided and stunted, 'the first print run of *The Female Line* sold out within one month' and was subsequently reprinted.

Anthology construction, through the process of exclusion or selection and subsequent recognition, reflects the evolution by which literary canons are produced and reinforced. Inclusion suggests that the work moves from the relatively private domain of the single author

collection to a more public, popular readership and perhaps even canonical status. Understandably, there is a common feminist concern with the number of women included in anthologies, building on alarm from Virginia Woolf onwards who lamented the paucity of women writers in the literary canon. It is not surprising, then, that the number of women published in anthologies has come to be utilised as an indicator of the progress of women's poetry. As Eva Salzman notes:

All things being equal (which, mostly, things are not) editors largely agree that more men than women deserve more pages in mainstream anthologies purporting to reflect the canon; the 'indispensable' list is still comprised predominantly of 'men poets'...any glaring gender imbalance is typically explained away as a 'coincidence' here, an 'accident' there. In that case, one should send for the doctors. If the selection criteria are in fact gender-blind, based on quality alone, this implied opinion of women's writing is an offence demanding a response. (7)

Salzman's compelling argument is well supported with figures of the number of women and men in volumes published 'in the enlightened post-1960s' where men commonly outnumber women by five to one or more (ibid.). In Northern Ireland during this period, the situation seems even worse. Padraic Fiacca's *The Wearing Of The Black: An Anthology of Contemporary Ulster Poetry* (1974) contains the poems of five women and sixty-eight men, roughly one to every fourteen men. Rather than improving on this, Frank Ormsby's *Poets from the North of Ireland* (1990) has one lowly woman poet in comparison to twenty-six men, and his later anthology *A Rage for Order: Poetry of the Northern Ireland Troubles* (1992) includes only six women to sixty-two men, that's one woman to ten men (Although the figures for actual poems included are yet more troubling as there are actually a total of 253 by men and six by women, or one poem by a woman for every forty-two by men). Patrick Crotty's *Modern Irish Poetry: An Anthology* (1995) also includes only one Northern Irish woman. Gerald Dawe's anthology *The New Younger Irish Poets* (1991) includes four women poets to seventeen male writers, '[t]he highest ratio of women poets to appear in an anthology of Irish poetry since the 1960s', yet as members of the Word of Mouth women's poetry collective noted, 'despite the strong showing of Northern poets, there are no women among them' (4).

Reading the reviews of Ormsby's two early-1990s anthologies for an indication of the extent to which the lack of women was noted contemporaneously is also illuminating, since most commentators clearly did not notice. Blake Morrison's short review of *Poets from the North of Ireland* in the national press seemed near to noticing when he highlighted that this second edition 'show[s] off younger talents like Ciaran Carson, John Hughes and Peter McDonald', but pays no heed to McGuckian's groundbreaking inclusion (27). Douglas Marshall places the anthology 'nearer the representative end of the scale' (21), suggesting that Ormsby's choices are not governed by the personal preference of the editor so much as a popular consensus of what should be included in order to best sum up the genre. This suggests that only male poets represent Northern Irish poetry, that popular consensus as well as the anthology excludes women. Richard Kirkland finds many flaws with *A Rage for Order*, none of which are to do with gender representation, conceding that Ormsby 'befit[ting] his reputation as now the best anthologist of Irish poetry...has done a thorough job' (22). That the gender bias not only exists but it not commented on in Ormsby's preface does not indicate thoroughness. That reviewers also fail to notice it is more problematic still.

Based on such reviews, it seems that most reviewers feel the lack of women writers included in these three anthologies is in some way just, reflective of the position of women writers in Northern Ireland more broadly. Incredibly, only Tom Clyde and John Goodby actually mention female omission from such works at all. Clyde feels that the inclusion of McGuckian in *Poets from the North of Ireland* is 'a start' and criticises Ormsby's introduction and editorial practices as 'sound[ing] like John Major justifying his first cabinet: he restates the vicious circle constricting women poets, when what is needed is a positive step to break it' (23). Goodby's review of *A Rage for Order* accuses Ormsby of 'shirk[ing] the challenge of the historical and the sexual...and, in doing so, misses a chance to broaden and deepen understanding of the connections between the 'troubles' and poetry' (48). While it is laudable that women poets have not been entirely overlooked, these two short comments from reviews represent virtually the only attention paid to women's absence from anthology publication in Northern Ireland during this period.

Declan Long pursued the fact that 'there [were] a substantial number of women-only writers' workshops attempting to 'make things happen' in the province' as the basis of his own investigation into the phenomenon of female absence in 1997, 12 years after the publication of *The Female Line*. Long interviewed Hooley who was involved in the

aforementioned Word of Mouth collective, and she stated; ‘all the women have published [in magazines], the age range is 25–60, but none has a book yet! Eight or so women all writing poetry of quality... Something seems to stop them going for it’ (84). By this time little had changed since the publication of *The Female Line*. In the anthology, we can see from the contributor’s biographical information that many were publishing in reputable Irish magazines including *Women’s News*, *Poetry Ireland Review*, *Ulster Tatler*, *Irish Press* and *Belfast Review*, as well as in British publications such as *Literary Review*, *Envoi*, *Outposts* and *Quarto*. Only two of the twenty–seven had published full length collections; Medbh McGuckian (the ‘woman’s lib’ from Fiacca’s memoir) and Una Woods. The editor, Ruth Hooley, was also co–editor of the influential *The Honest Ulsterman* journal in this period. This evidence seems to prove that women were engaged with literary activities such as writers’ groups, publishing in journals and even producing them, yet ‘[s]omething seems to stop them going for it’ (84).

The members of the ‘Word of Mouth’ collective published a collaborative anthology, and in this they stated that their aim was ‘to create an environment in which our poetry would thrive [...]’, where it would be taken seriously’ (1). This is admirable and no doubt important in terms of development and support, yet it also demonstrates how women perceived themselves as positioned outside of the literary mainstream. Collectives, creative writing groups and anthologies associated with such activities suggest a more community–centric or grass roots arts activism. The work produced may be regarded and dismissed more as an activity or interest than a work of art. Rebecca Pelan noted how these women writers in Northern Ireland were ‘[s]tanding somewhere between community and mainstream publishing’ in this period (54). Women writers found themselves relegated to the community sphere, producing work perceived as unworthy of mainstream publication, while the men carried on the more lofty, ‘proper’ artistic production.

McGuckian’s sardonic retort to her own absence from the *A Rage for Order* anthology on the basis that her poetry did not engage directly with the Troubles was to choose a statement by Picasso as an epigraph to her 1994 collection *Captain Lavender*: ‘I have not painted the war ... but I have no doubt that the war is in ... these paintings I have done’ (n.p). While her defence is justified and quite correct, it was not just McGuckian who was missing, but virtually an entire sex. McGuckian is the notable exception; so unusual was her publication that she is the variant which proves the rule. In poetic outputs generally in Northern Ireland before 1995, and specifically outputs such as anthologies which

have canon-forming potential, women had a minor role of little consequence to the broader literary industry.

ii.

In contrast to the silence articulated by the few publication opportunities afforded to women, this was a period in which male poets in Northern Ireland were publishing to immediate and great acclaim within the province and beyond, particularly from the late 1960s onwards. Given this success, and the disparity with the fortunes of women's writing, it is fitting to further investigate female absence on a textual and artistic level, considering how women figures were conceptualised in the verse which was published in representative and canon-forming anthologies at this time. Just as there is a valid feminist concern with the number of women published, so too there is a concern with how women are represented within published work by men since these representations may reinforce and reflect the damning social hierarchy of patriarchy. Indeed, a survey of the poetry included in Ormsby's 'representative' anthology (Marshall, 21) *Poets from the North of Ireland* indicates that when women feature, they exist purely in relation to the (male) speaker. These relations are conservative and limiting since in almost every case the women are described through familial connections such as mother, wife and daughter, and defined only by gender difference.

It is clear that in male-authored poetry of the time, masculinity and femininity are very clearly defined through indicators such as setting, dress and action. In each case, these are deployed in conventionally gendered, that is, patriarchal, fashions. Louis MacNeice's 'Autobiography', included in *Poets from the North of Ireland*, recalls that 'My mother wore a yellow dress;/ Gentle, gently, gentleness' while 'My father made the walls resound,/ He wore his collar the wrong way round' (48). The man is thus defined by the act of articulation and his profession since the collar marks him as a minister while the woman is only defined by her dress, which in turn indicates an inherent feminine gentleness that may be criticised as subscribing to an essentialist and normalised view of women. The colour yellow recalls the feminine madness of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), although interestingly the colour is on the woman, not around her. Similarly, Heaney's 'Sunlight', the first of 'Mossbawn: Two Poems in Dedication', also included in *Poets from the North of Ireland*, features a woman 'in a floury apron/ by the window' (130). The apron she wears, the action of baking and the kitchen setting all compound to infer her femininity. In yet another domestic scene, Andrew Elliot pictures his

mother ‘cracking eggs into a speckled chipped bowl’ on a day he misses school due to illness and ‘stay[s] at home among feminine things’ (280). This poem, ‘The Stay Behind’, addresses failed masculinity through an uncomfortable closeness with femininity and weakness since he feels like the sick child while ‘the men have gone off to the choleric wars’ (280). These representations of women do not appear to subvert in any way the conventional roles and characteristics that are gendered female. The representation of women in this way is often flat, one dimensional, and offers nothing beyond the image of the stereotypical figure itself and the social context which informs it as the binary opposite of manliness.

In many poems of this period, the mother figure is incapable of action because she is often enacted through memory. In some cases, it is death which prompts this recollection: as in Heaney’s *Clearances* sequence wherein the memory of spending time peeling potatoes in silence comes to mind in contrast with the parish priest going ‘hammer and tongs at the prayers for the dying’ (138). While there is no doubt that this is a heartfelt and successful elegy, Heaney continually comes back to differences between mother and son, which reveal just as much, if not more, about the speaker. His mother’s ‘fear of affectation’ in speech reveals her son’s fear of seeming above himself, ‘decently relaps[ing] into the wrong/ Grammar’ (139). While Jahan Ramazani suggests Heaney is an exemplary elegist of the contemporary tendency for elegies of which are skeptical triumphs of “‘melancholic” mourning...this is unresolved, violent and ambivalent’ (4), his elegy for his mother has little of this forcefulness. *Clearances* seems by contrast to be an exercise in sentimental quietness. The sequence itself is composed of neat sonnets with distinct octet and sestet divisions, which seem quite understated when compared to the more furious enjambed lines of the nine seven line stanzas of ‘A Postcard from North Antrim’, another of Heaney’s elegies included in the anthology. Further, his mother’s death provokes silence as ‘High cries were felled’ and ‘The space we stood around had been emptied’ (139), which seems restrained compared to the more arresting ‘your candid forehead stopped/ A pointblank teatime bullet.// Get up from your blood on the floor’ (134–36, 135) of ‘A Postcard from Northern Antrim’, the Troubles elegy for a male friend.

For Paul Muldoon, ‘Ma’ is not even properly enacted through memory because she is accessed through photographs in which the context is hazy. In one she sits ‘with the stranger on the motorbike’, and in another he ‘take[s] that to be a croquet/ Lawn’ (257). The mother is absent through implicit death but also through the inadequate photographs which do not allow her to fit into the role suggested in the title. The mother figure in Frank Ormsby’s ‘Winter Offerings’ is

similarly unfamiliar although she is not actually dead. For the speaker her remoteness is insurmountable, since he continually finds that 'More than marriage divides/ Us. Each visit home/ I measure distances and find them grown' (192). Like Heaney through, the poet remains self-reflexive since while he praises the sacrifices she made for his sake, 'grasp[ing] the chances that would sunder us', he can only picture her as a casualty of his own success. This poem takes a traditionalist elegiac tone because it seems the ideal mode to relate the poet's feeling of separation from his (m)other.

Michael Longley's elegy 'The Third Light' is in fact one of the few poems from this period to give voice to a woman. In this elegy, the mother describes how the opened grave is 'Where I kneel to marry you again,/ My elbows in darkness as I explore/ From my draughty attic your last bedroom' (152). Yet, this slightly macabre love poem addressed to the deceased husband and father is also resolutely in praise of masculine inheritance as the voice lists what 'I have handed over to him', 'your pain', 'your preference for Cyprus sherry', 'your scatter of cigarette butts', 'your limp/ And pills' (152). The mother's voice is used purely for the effect of its manipulation by the poet, through which the poet can explore the relationship between the father who died earlier and the son who knew him through the mother. She is an intermediary, again, the (m)other.

Through the absence of the mother figure, these poems explore manhood indirectly in a time characterised by political unrest; the representation of daughters similarly allows the writers to address the risks of life in Northern Ireland through the role of protector. Daughters, through their relative youth, represent untainted innocence, the polar opposite of the unrest of the outside world. Gerald Dawe's poem 'Solstice', for example, contrasts a 'bad' winter when 'the news was all discontent' (271–72, 271) (suggesting the 1978–9 period of instability the media nicknamed 'the winter of discontent') with the 'first cry of bewilderment' (272) of his daughter Olwen. The emphasis is on the transformative effect the birth has had on the speaker, he is 'transfixed...in such a bitter season', although the haunting 'dead /country–boy faces' on the church wall and gate resonates with the political bitterness of the time. The political context is in fact almost as important as the child who is born into it.

For John Montague and James Simmons, daughters induce feelings of division. Montague's 'The Point' weaves together negatives and positives, danger and relief. The insomniac speaker hears the noise guiding ships to port while 'Upstairs my wife and daughter sleep./ Our two lives have separated now' (107–8, 107). The noise at first reminds

the speaker of loneliness, of a 'cow mourning her calf', but later finds it a 'harsh voice' of friendliness, 'to guide, not lament' (107). While the speaker feels quite apart from the 'life' of the mother and child he too wishes to become a 'friendly signal in distress' to them; suggesting ominously that the future may be one of 'shrouding mist' (108) for his daughter. Coming down more firmly on the negative side of this failure to communicate is James Simmons' nihilistic 'Lullaby for Rachael' which tries to warn the sleeping child of the mental turmoil that awaits, finds words to be only a noise for 'The lullaby was adequate, you'll sleep until the morning' (114–5, 115) and concludes 'How little we communicate,/ how useless is this warning'. For both these poets, the sleeping female is a figure at risk while the wise male fears the distress that lies ahead. Another comparatively dark premonition is found in 'A Birthday Poem', which Simmons addresses to his daughter. This short verse starts positively with 'For every year of life we light/ a candle on your cake', but rapidly extinguishes the innocence of the occasion by stating that blowing out 'each light, each year' gives 'a proper view of death' (116). The parallels between life and death, darkness and light, youth and age, and protection and harm in the Northern Irish political context are clearly presented through the gender roles of father and daughter.

Simmons writes in praise of his daughter and wife in the more joyful 'Join Me In Celebrating'. In this, the daughter is a restorative force, a 'present of life' delivered through his wife, 'My letter box' (115–16, 116). This poem is unusual in addressing labour and birth fairly directly, referring to the 'sweat' and 'crumpled shift' (115). Comparably, in Patrick Williams' 'A Baby In The House' the only acknowledgement of the mother's experience is to note 'She is slim again' (224), which does somewhat underplay the significant role of the maternal figure. These images of motherhood are shown to be lacking when compared to poems by the only woman in the anthology, Medbh McGuckian, whose metaphors of fertility, labour and birth are often layered one on top of the other. 'The Seed–Picture', for example, presents an image of a woman constructed from the potential of life inherent in her image, 'Her hair/ Is made of hoop–shaped marigold, gold/ Of pleasure for her lips' (231–2, 232).

If Simmons' and Williams' poems of maternity were intended as kinds of love poems, they might leave much to be desired. The Northern Irish male suitor poet has considerably more ability with love poems in the pastoral vein, whereby the love is celebrated via a communion with the natural world. In Heaney's 'Sloe Gin' for example we find a bitter–sweet love poem to the woman who prepares the festive drink in

advance. A domestic and seasonal task, ‘She fed gin to the sloes/ and sealed the glass container’ (137–8, 137). The man disturbs the mixture in a vaguely sexual metaphor, toasting the creator of his drink:

I drink to you
in the smoke–mired, blue–black,
polished sloes, bitter
and dependable. (138)

There is some ambiguity and playful disdain pushed through the syntax here. It is not clear to whether it is the sloes which are ‘bitter and dependable’, or the woman herself. Regardless, the addressee is absent in the moment of longing. The experience is singular, the woman is absent, although the effects of her gin many prompt a desire for closeness.

By and large, women, regardless of whether they are young or old, are represented in these poems as angels of the house, muses of the domestic and familial sphere. None of these representations are flawed in themselves; they explore valid experiences, often fairly standard depictions of how men encounter women in their lives. However, the poems discussed here rarely offer the women any agency, and mere inclusion as figures, memories or addressees does not counter an argument addressing their absence.

Further, there are more troubling portrayals. Both James Simmons and W.R. Rodgers explore domestic violence in menacing terms. In Simmons’ scenario, described in ‘After Eden’ (a title evocative the downfall Eve precipitates), an estranged husband is caught attempting to remove belongings from a previously shared home. Upon detection he lashes out at, yet the encounter is described in a sexual manner, ‘they are sharing/ intimate touch – her nose, his knuckles, sore’ (120–21, 121). The wife is portrayed as appreciating the attack as it makes her feel loved, ‘embracing his futile blows’. This poem acknowledges the complexity of emotional breakdown, although that suggests a masochistic desire for assault is certainly a questionable poetic metaphor. W.R. Rodgers’ ‘Stormy Night’ is less explicit about the violence, although it is just as forceful. A man arrives at the house of a lover during the night, although she doesn’t want him there ‘the foot’s within the door’ (60–1, 61). The woman rails against him and he pushes her off and dismisses her rage claiming ‘Fist and foist me off with a cloud of cries,/ What do I care for all your footling rampage?’. Female resistance is futile, and the man seems to appreciate her all the more for her anger, stating ‘On your light–in–gale blows my larking caresses will rise’. He further appreciates her weakness, for when she cries he too submits and throws himself at her feet.

Andrew Elliot's 'Angel' begins as one might expect a love fantasy to by stating 'I think to make love to a nurse would be perfect' (282). Yet, it continues in a surreal and disturbing fashion as he imagines 'Her breasts having nightmares of cancer'. The speaker not only wants to gain carnal knowledge of the nurse, but to bury himself within the bodily horrors she has seen and 'make my love nest/ Among imaginary glands'. Furthermore, the speaker delights in the thrill of the risks involved in the 'pink and white tissues of her genitals;/ Unvaccinated and tempting fate' 'bedding down' with him. This purports to be a love poem about how the speaker could love 'everything that happens under her skin', yet it almost seems a treatise on a violent and gruesome bodily possession. Elliot's poem 'Here Today...' also suggests an uncomfortable sexual politics in its short four lines. It begins with the statement that 'Making love down through the centuries/ Men have left their shadow on women' (283), before describing the sort of shadow he would like to leave, 'that of a bird on the bed of stream'. Like 'Angel', this is presumably meant to be romantically endearing, yet it still resounds with the possible subjugation of women to men; marking a woman through sex, however twee that mark may be.

Presenting evidence of common themes and representative strategies presents an illusory coherence of approach. It also suggests that there are a great number of poems which include women. However, away from these poems women are even more absent, especially in poems about the wider political context which became a preoccupation during the Troubles. My interest in gender does not overshadow reasonable common sense; these poets of course have a great variety of interests, and being men they inevitably explore more often issues relating to masculinity. Yet as discussed here, on the rare occasions that women *are* presented they figure simplistically, idealistically, without any agency, or as objects of lust or dangerous desires.

iii.

Ormsby's next major anthology of Northern Irish writing, *The Blackbird's Nest* (2006) does seem to suggest that the position of women writers in the province has improved somewhat. This anthology celebrates only writers with a connection to Queen's University, Belfast, so there are inevitably omissions. However, it includes an improved proportion of women in the historical and contemporary contexts. Helen Waddell, Joan Newmann, Sabine Wichert and Medbh McGuckian are included, representing women writers born between 1889 and 1950.

Women writers born in the 1950s and 1960s included are Ruth Carr, Tess Hurson, Jean Bleakney, Moyra Donaldson, Kate Newmann and Deridre Cartmill. Sinead Morrissey and Leontia Flynn represent the younger generation of published poets born in the 1970s. If an anthology limited to including only those with links to Queen's University can find such an illustrious line of women poets, then arguably a third edition of *Poets from the North of Ireland*, should there be one, could not possibly mark women out only by absence and lack of agency.

Chris Agee's *The New North: Contemporary Poetry from the North of Ireland* (2010) seems to echo with the sense of Ormsby's previous anthology, yet there is a marked, if not totally overwhelming, improvement in the number of women included. Agee includes five women poets to sixteen men, or roughly one to every four. Look closer and remove from this list those included as 'classic poems'; consider only the 'new' voices included, and the ratio improves further with four women to eleven men, or approximately one to every three men. The 'new' women included are Jean Bleakney, Moyra Donaldson, Sinéad Morrissey and Leontia Flynn. These women represent the two groups of women writers; those younger talents publishing in their youth and those who came to find publication later in life.

Barbara Hunter and Roy McFadden suggested in the 1953 editorial to *Rann* that 'a glance at the shape of Ulster writing over the past fifty years can help us to discover what we look like' (1). Just as their bibliography of Ulster writing helped reflect upon the landscape then, so a bibliography, even one of absence, is crucial to reflections on our own recent half century. Women received little critical attention when they did publish, were accused of not publishing, did not feature in anthologies and were represented in the poetry that was published only as holograms of femininity created to further a self-interested, ultimately masculine and heteronormative, poetic narrative of life at the time. Women had no meaningful presence in poetry of this moment whether physically or symbolically; they are notable only through their absence. This silence seem unambiguous; the climate was simply unsympathetic to writing by women, although it is more difficult to find reasons why this was so.

What is also unambiguous about this silence, however, is that as a result, Northern Irish women poets in the mid-1990s had few popular female foremothers or appealing literary representations to follow. The growing prevalence of women poets after 1995 represents a very clear change of direction for Northern Irish poetry as they begin to publish much more frequently, and to more acclaim, both within the province

and with major British publishers. This change means that the newly emerging poets such as Sinéad Morrissey, Colette Bryce and Leontia Flynn have the opportunity to engage with and perhaps resist this recent history of ambiguous silences. Early indications suggest this has proved a fruitful, if challenging role, to undertake.

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