

# **UCD*scholarcast***

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***The Lyric Flow of Street***

*If Ever You Go* is a collection of poems on the general theme of Dublin and was conceived as part of a programme called *One City, One Book*.

What strikes me immediately about this book is how many of the poets understand their role in the society around them. Of course there are intensely personal connections to the city but there is a deep sense of poet as citizen, taking responsibility for forming the communal imagination.

Dublin, like many cities around the world, has grown and continues to grow. It is reckoned by the Central Statistics Office that by 2020 it will have a population of 2.1 million. Again, just like so many other cities, Dublin has constantly grown by drawing in the country's rural population. Now the city also has a growing immigrant population and no doubt that will in turn reshape our definitions of who a Dubliner is. The poets in this book reflect the complex identities of those born in Dublin, those who've settled there or simply use it as the country's capital. There is a whole spectrum of relationships from the few who come from a line of Dubliners, through those with either one or two Dublin parents, those who have moved there and made it their own, and on to those for whom Dublin is where they deal with bureaucracy or visit doctors or hospitals.

*If Ever You Go* is a vast collection of poems by a wide array of poets both living and dead. As you might expect the whole range of affinities with Dublin are represented. There are so many that I'd like to mention and quote from. I've decided simply to choose a handful of poems in order to give a sense of some of these relationships.

**I**

For me the pulse of any city is in the throb of its streets. Its streets are literally the arteries at the heart of a city. An endless beat of life swirls in its streets. The title of this book is taken from Patrick Kavanagh's well-known poem 'If Ever You Go to Dublin Town'. I'm delighted that the editors chose a line of Kavanagh's for their title as for me he is the best Irish poet of the twentieth century.

It's no surprise that in the title poem he mentions both Baggot Street and Pembroke Road. For all his rural background and the earlier poems rooted in the countryside, Patrick Kavanagh has made Dublin his own.

If ever you go to Dublin town  
In a hundred years or so  
Inquire for me in Baggot Street  
And what I was like to know.  
O he was a queer one,

Fol dol the di do,  
He was a queer one  
I tell you.

It's a lovely, jaunty, devil-may-care opening and typical of Patrick Kavanagh. It has almost the air of a folksong with a formulaic start like 'As I Roved Out' or 'One Morning in May' and you feel at once that this is a kind of street ballad. The use of 'town' rather than city has a folksy tone. Then there is the 'fol dol the di do' refrain.

Of course, Kavanagh is wrong-footing us as the poem unfolds a moving and realistic biography with the haunting verse:

On Pembroke Road look out for my ghost,  
Dishevelled with shoes untied,  
Playing through the railings with little children  
Whose children have long since died.  
O he was a nice man,  
Fol dol the di do,  
He was a nice man  
I tell you.

Patrick Kavanagh reading and speaking about his own poems in a recording made in Dublin in October 1963, called 'Almost Everything', begins with Kavanagh singing 'If Ever You Go to Dublin Town' in a husky voice and on one lung. It is also recorded by Ronnie Drew of 'The Dubliners'. But there is a fascinating difference between the two recordings. Ronnie Drew plays up the extra vowel in 'Dubilin' Town. Although Ronnie Drew was born in Dún Laoghaire, it was part of his stock-in-trade as a member of a band called 'The Dubliners' to lay it on thick. Patrick Kavanagh, on the other hand, pronounces it as 'Dublin' with two syllables. I'm drawing attention to this because Ronnie Drew is appealing to a stereotype that has to imagine the archetypal Dubliner as speaking in an inner city dialect. Patrick Kavanagh was an Inniskeen man who settled largely in Dublin and, as Anthony Cronin once pointed out, he made Baggot Street and Pembroke Road his village, with the Grand Canal substituting for Inniskeen's River Fane.

Another widely known poem from this Dublin village, which is also included in the anthology, is 'On Raglan Road'. This beautiful poem is written for Hilda Moriarty, a medical student eighteen years younger than Kavanagh and with whom he'd fallen in love. The writer Ben Kiely once told me that Kavanagh had come into the offices of the *Irish Press* with the poem. He told Ben that it should fit the tune of 'Fáinne Geal an Lae' and he sang it for him. It has since been recorded by many singers with a particularly popular version by Luke Kelly of 'The Dubliners':

On Raglan Road on an autumn day I met her first and knew  
That her dark hair would weave a snare that I might one day rue;  
I saw the danger, yet I walked along the enchanted way,  
And I said, let grief be a fallen leaf at the dawning of the day.  
  
On Grafton Street in November we tripped lightly along the ledge  
Of the deep ravine where can be seen the worth of passion's pledge,  
The Queen of Hearts still making tarts and I not making hay -  
Oh I loved too much and by such by such is happiness thrown away.

## II

I'm sure that many poets find it easier to think, to meditate, and to self-commune in the flow of a street. But familiar places too absorb us and our memories. As Thomas Kinsella puts it:

There are established personal places  
that receive our lives' heat  
and adapt in their mass, like stone.

Thomas Kinsella, a superb poet and a towering meditative presence in Irish poetry, was reared in Inchicore. There is no trace of the sentimentality of 'the rare aul' times' or indeed of Patrick Kavanagh's jaunty mood. Instead there is a turning into the world of his own memory and mind. A great admirer of Auden, his style is measured, cerebral and forensic in poems such as 'Bow Lane' or in '38 Phoenix Street' which is included in this anthology. His street poems tend to describe in detail the interiors of particular houses associated with his personal memories:

We knelt up on our chairs in the lamplight  
and leaned on the brown plush, watching the gramophone.  
The turning record shone and hissed  
Under the needle, liftfalling, liftfalling.  
John McCormack chattered in his box.

Thomas Kinsella has also contributed to the Baggot Street area, which some like to call Baggotonia. The editors have included an early poem from his *Another September* (1958) entitled 'Baggot Street Deserta'. The final lines are:

Out where imagination arches  
Chilly points of light transact  
The business of the border-marches  
Of the Real, and I – a fact  
That may be countered or may not –  
Find their privacy complete.  
My quarter-inch of cigarette  
Goes flaring down to Baggot Street.

## III

One year younger than Thomas Kinsella, the poet John Montague was born in New York and raised in Tyrone. Apart from his time as a student in UCD, during a period in the late 1950s while he worked for Bord Fáilte, he lived with his wife Madeleine on Herbert Street, which is off Baggot Street. John Montague's life has been nomadic and his relation to Dublin is more episodic than Kinsella's. Though he is rooted in Ireland, John Montague has appropriated the best of the French and American traditions. The series of poems called 'The Dead Kingdom' must be one of the most moving books I know. I think of all the Dublin poems 'Herbert Street Revisited' must be one of my great favourites. It is a street I know well and I spent time with friends there during my own

student days. I admire the affectionate and unshowy detail of the poem. It is based on memory but there is an added poignancy. It is part of a series of poems entitled 'Separation' in his book *The Great Cloak*, where he describes the breakup of his marriage to Madeleine. The poem is dedicated to her:

A light is burning late  
in this Georgian Dublin street;  
someone is leading our old lives!

And our black cat scampers again  
through the wet grass of the convent garden  
upon his masculine errands.

The pubs shut: a released bull,  
Behan shoulders up the street,  
tumbles into our basement roaring 'John!'

A pony and donkey cropped flank  
by flank under the trees opposite;  
short neck up, long neck down,

as Nurse Mullen knelt by her bedside  
to pray for her lost Mayo hills,  
the bruised bodies of Easter Volunteers.

Animals, neighbours, treading the pattern  
of one time and place into history,  
like our early marriage, while

tall windows looked down upon us  
from walls flushed light pink or salmon  
watching and enduring succession.

The second part of the poem is a heartrending reference to the past of his marriage and then the third part literally recalls the time spent on Herbert Street as the poem turns back to echo itself:

So put the leaves back on the tree,  
put the tree back in the ground,  
let Brendan trundle his corpse down  
the street singing, like Molly Malone.

Let the black cat, tiny emissary  
of our happiness, streak again  
through the darkness, to fall soft  
clawed into a landlord's dustbin.

Let Nurse Mullen take the last  
train to Westport, and die upright  
in her chair, facing a window  
warm with the blue slopes of Nephin.

And let the pony and donkey come –  
look, someone has left the gate open –  
like hobbyhorses linked in  
the slow motion of a dream

parading side by side, down

the length of Herbert Street,  
rising and falling, lifting  
their hooves through the moonlight.

#### IV

Brendan Kennelly relates to Dublin in much the same way as Patrick Kavanagh. His approach is similarly bifocal. While he has made Dublin his home and the place where he has lived most of his life, he can also draw on his Kerry childhood memory bank. Indeed like Kavanagh, his earlier poems centred on his rural background. I have quoted Thomas Kinsella's lines:

There are established personal places  
that receive our lives' heat

Of course, our lives and memories are inscribed in streets. Yet flow and movement is so much part of a street. We walk or drive through streets. Brendan Kennelly is a major figure in our literary landscape and a poet who likes to ask the big questions about human lives. He has for many years lived in Trinity College and is an inveterate walker. He often spends many hours a day roving Dublin. One of the poems included in this volume is called 'Clearing a Space'. It begins with the lines:

A man should clear a space for himself,  
Like Dublin city on a Sunday morning  
About six o'clock.  
Dublin and myself are rid of our traffic then  
And I am walking.

In fact here Brendan Kennelly is celebrating temporary lack of movement and the lack of traffic as he roams Dublin. I sense a deep loneliness lurking within his affable and popular personality. The poem continues:

Houses are solitary and dignified,  
Streets are adventures  
Twisting in and out and up and down my mind.  
The river is talking to itself

And doesn't care if I eavesdrop.

No longer cluttered with purpose,  
The city turns to the mountains  
And takes time to listen to the sea.  
I witness all three communing in silence  
Under a relaxed sky.

Bridges look aloof and protective  
The gates of the park are closed  
Green places must have their privacy too.  
Office-blocks are empty, important and a bit  
Pathetic, if they admitted it!

After a brief allusion to the history of the city, which proves a symbol for his own life, the poet discloses that he has been sleepless:

To have been used so much, and without mercy  
And still to be capable of rediscovering  
In itself the old nakedness  
Is what makes a friend of the city  
When sleep has failed.

I make through that nakedness to stumble on my own,  
Surprised to find a city is so like a man.  
Statues and monuments check me out as I pass  
Clearing a space for myself the best I can,  
One Sunday morning, in the original sun, in Dublin.

## V

I live near St. Vincent's Hospital and indeed it is a site of deeply personal memories. Often travelling home on the bus, I hear people, who clearly are not Dubliners, asking to be let off at the hospital. I'm very conscious of how for many the connection with the capital is founded on dealing with centralisation of one type or another, or on visiting relations in hospital. Inevitably this leads to an ambiguous and frequently fraught relationship to Dublin.

Mary O'Donnell was born and reared in Monaghan. She now lives near Maynooth. She is of a younger generation than the other poets I have quoted here. As I have written about her elsewhere, Mary O'Donnell has a wide-ranging restless intelligence and an extraordinary poetic gift. She is both local and global, realistic and imaginative, probing and rooted, learned and passionate.

A poem of hers called 'Doctors, Daughters' in this anthology is taken from an exquisite series of poems concerning her father's death in St. Vincent's Private Nursing Home in Dublin. In this poem her mother's frustration at her own helplessness is beautifully caught. She vents her bafflement on the doctors and on her daughters. Her mother still

lives in Monaghan. Her anxiety in this poem must be shared by so many hospital visitors who travel to visit loved ones in Dublin hospitals.

My mother's small face is wreathed  
and criss-crossed by fear. She has  
no time for food or sleep.

Away from the hospital,  
she rails at us her daughters,  
who can do nothing,

her days layered with quests for solutions.  
This man, whose pyjamas she irons  
and re-buttons, which she brings to him

laundered and crisp, to whom she carries  
perfect nectarines, cranberry juice,  
is failing her. She wards off visitors

lest they witness his decline,  
frantic to capture an antidote,  
that special inscribed phial,

to bear it back in her hands  
from monstrous caves like a magical gift,  
past nurses, past mulling consultants

and, having fought, to shout in scorn:  
'See? Fools!' Her every word,  
attests to the useless of doctors

and daughters, who cannot heal.

## VI

As Grafton Street featured in Patrick Kavanagh's poem 'On Raglan Road' which I quoted earlier, I'll bring this talk to a close with a short poem of mine chosen by the editors. It's called 'Morning on Grafton Street'.

I'm one of the poets in this book who was born and bred in Dublin. In some ways I am the archetypal Dubliner. By this I mean that I'm probably the most common type of Dubliner in the kind of mixture I represent. My father was an Ulsterman but his mother was from Connacht and his father from the midlands. My mother was a Dubliner but her father and all his people were from Tipperary.

I was reared in the South Dublin suburbs but as a boy I also spent time in the west of Ireland. I have all the provinces inscribed in me and I love this city of mine.

As I have said it seems to me that streets and streetscapes epitomise the life of a city. There is a mystery to the drift and stream of anonymity. And Grafton Street, of all Dublin streets, has so many memories knitted in me from childhood. My mother would meet



friends for morning coffee in Fullers Café where Peggy Dell played the piano. On the corner of Clarendon Street a husband and wife played harps. When as a teenager I was daring first dates, I met girls for coffee in Roberts' café. For years my Bríd and I would walk down Grafton Street just for the sheer pleasure of it.

And yet, once again, I'm sure like most middle-classers reared in suburban Dublin, my appreciation of Grafton Street as emblematic of my city is sharpened by knowing the streets of other cities where I've lived. I love Karl Johan, the main street in Oslo where I was a student. In Tokyo I think of Shibuya Kōsaten. So, in some ways, Grafton Street both summons memories and expresses my delight in city streets. The final line of the poem sums up the rapture and exhilaration of a living street.

Morning on Grafton Street  
Grafton Street is yawning, waking limb by limb;  
jewellers' steel shutters clatter upwards, the sweet doughy smells from hot-breadshops steam the frosty morning, warm our passing;  
disc-stores' sudden rhythms blare an introit, launch the busy liturgy of day.

Look! Two breakfast wooers fallen in love with farewell smooch, soul-kiss on the kerb.  
Gently, my street puts on her face.  
Grafton Street, witness of my time, seer, watcher of every mood, traps me the grandeur, the melancholy, ever-new carnival of man.  
Walk here alone in broodiness, inwoven, anonymous, swept along; stroll here infatuated, self-communing, lost in the lyric flow of street.

### References

All references are taken from *If Ever You Go: A Map of Dublin in Poetry and Song*. Dublin: Dedalus Press, 2014.

Patrick Kavanagh, 'If Ever You Go To Dublin Town', pp. 187-8 ; 'On Raglan Road', pp. 284-5.

Brendan Kennelly, 'Clearing a Space', pp. 226-7.

Thomas Kinsella, 'Baggot Street Deserta', pp. 190-2. ; '38 Phoenix Street', pp. 268-9.

John Montague, 'Herbert Street Revisited', pp. 208-9.

Mary O'Donnell, 'Doctors, Daughters', p. 300.

Micheal O'Siadhail, 'Morning on Grafton Street', p. 158.

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