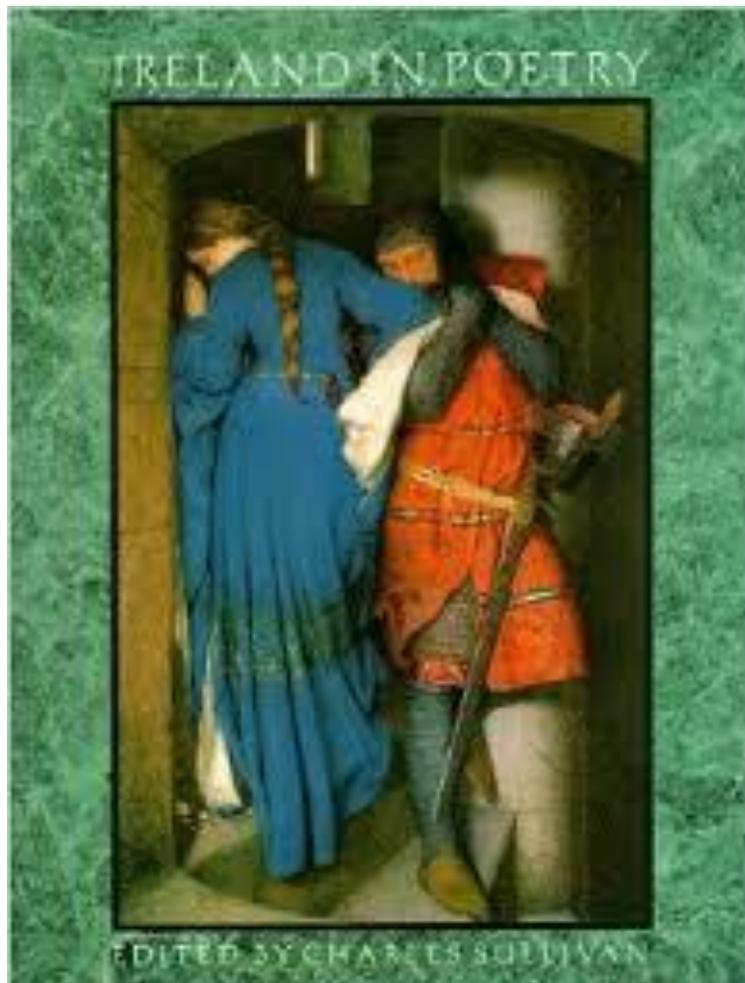


Ireland in Poetry

A Review by Garry Victor Hill



Ireland in Poetry: With Paintings, Drawings, Photographs and Other Works of Art. Edited by Charles Sullivan. 1990. New York; Abradale Press/harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1995. Illustrated. 208 pages

All images are from the public domain.

This review must start with an admission that few reviewers ever make: this reviewer has not read all the book. A very good reason for this

exists: *Ireland in Poetry* is too good a book to rush through. It should be savoured, mulled over, mused on. Like the best anthologies it contains expected classics in its genre, but also many surprises that are wisely chosen.

Those surprises start with the cover. Surely an anthology of Irish poems would have a beautiful Irish landscape on the cover? If not then a gallery of famous faces from the world of Irish poetry? Failing that surely an iconic symbol, a four leaf clover or a harp and at the least, the title and author's name resplendent in Celtic fonts? No. Instead for a front cover we have a Pre-Raphaelite medieval scene of strained love and what appears even better, the work and the artist are little known of.

The anthology does not follow the usual chronological structure or one based in personalities. Instead Sullivan divides his book into four parts based on themes: country, history, people and future. This structure means that verses from medieval manuscripts can be on pages next to poetic descriptions of driving around Ireland's coast. Even so, the contrast does not jar.

The surprises continue with the works. Some of Yeats's works which are rarely anthologised are here. These include 'Brown Penny' 'Friends' 'Are You Content?' 'Red Hanrahan's Song' and 'About Ireland.' Also welcome as surprises are the works of poets little known outside Ireland, especially those born in the post-war generation. The youngest contributor was a schoolgirl born in 1975 when she wrote the poem included here. A third surprise is the inclusion of English speaking foreigners writing about Ireland; Andrew Marvel, John Milton, Robert Burns, Walt Whitman, Rudyard Kipling, Robinson Jeffers, Marion Moore, Eugene McCarthy, W.H. Auden, Shirley Graves Hughes, Ted Hughes and Mary Ann Larkin. Each of these poets have one work selected.

Most anthologies of Irish culture usually start with the Celtic Revival. This started in the middle third of the nineteenth century with

the works and editorship of Thomas Davis being central to this cultural preservation and celebration of Irish culture. His work was continued, expanded and developed by George Fox, Aubrey De Vere, Mary O'Donovan Rossa, Lady Gregory, Lady Jane Wilde, Douglas Hyde, George Russell, Kathleen Tynan, Padrig Colum and many others. A work each from most of these mentioned are included, but the works of the Celtic revival do not dominate the collection here.

Instead the editor Charles Sullivan begins his collection with the first known Irish poems, some undateable, some from the ninth century. He takes his collection from there through the medieval period, but a big gap emerges from the later Plantagenet era through Tudor times into the early eighteenth century. This is not the editor's fault. These were the centuries of the suppression of Irish culture. Elizabeth I actually banned Irish harpers from performing. The Catholic religion survived, but under persecution and discouragement. Both the creation of culture by individuals and the patronage system for art became heavily dependent on the Protestant ascendancy. A few remarkable and culturally isolated individuals such as Jonathan Swift, Oliver Goldsmith and Thomas Moore did produce great Irish poetry in this period, but it took the Celtic revival to make this a vibrant national culture. After gaining independence in the 1920s this movement became static in its development. Great efforts were necessary and were done to preserve Irish culture, but much of what was achieved looked backward. Efforts to create new works were made but overall financed productivity seemed less concerned with new works than with the old.

New directions and outlooks did develop in the 1950s and the 1960s. Influential poets from this era include Samuel Beckett, Louis MacNeice, Brendan Behan, Frank O'Connor, Patrick Kavanagh, Seamus Heaney, and two expatriates resident in Ireland, C. Day Lewis and John Montague. Each of these writers have at least one contribution in this work. Montague and Heaney have several.

Oddly no contributions by Lady Gregory, Oscar Wilde or Brendan Behan are included.

Later work in the last selection concerns those works which have always looked towards the future, either pensively, optimistically or with uncertainty. The latest poems deal with the 1980s, but the last poem, best known as a song, 'A Nation Once Again' comes from Thomas Davis. He died in 1845. That is enough to make anyone wonder if his optimistic vision of one united Ireland will ever happen.

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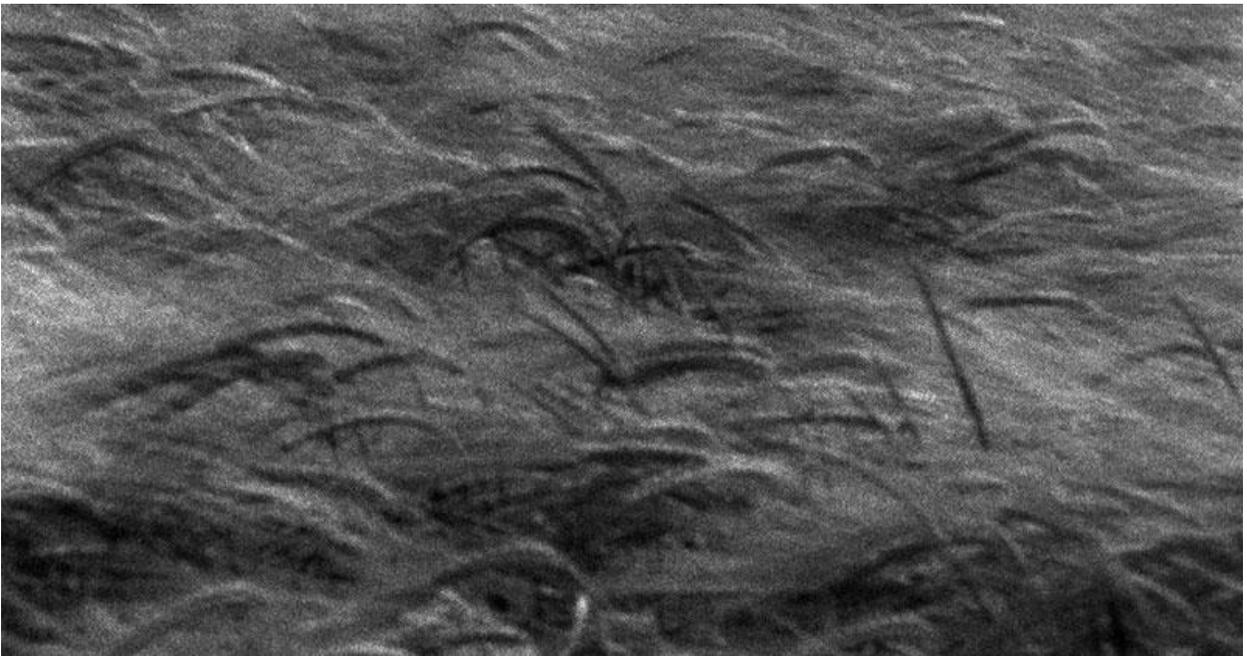
Ireland in Poetry: With Paintings, Drawings, Photographs and Other Works of Art. The title obviously shows that the anthology is profusely illustrated with varied types of works of Irish art. The illustrations are frequently beautiful, often vivid, always wisely picked and make the past come alive. However do we as readers go along with the idea that poetry should stand alone and focus on only words?

The logic here being that poets express one meaning or they try to articulate a mood they might not fully understand or that they narrate a story, but art work does something at best similar but separate. Decorating art confuses by adding to what was separately created.

My answer has to be that in some egregious cases this happens, but in *Ireland in Poetry* this is not so. The reason for this view must be that the poems and the pictures are often following different themes. They are only united by their concern with something Irish. To give one example the poem 'A Nation Once Again' has a page of its own and facing it is a modernistic sculpture of a dove, also on its own page. Readers might want to link the two and can, but were such links intended?

Others seem to link, they make the topic, not the poem vivid. Poetry exists in Ireland's visual art, as the illustrations below show. They are Irish images, but are not from the book.



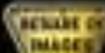


A black and white portrait of Seamus Heaney, an elderly man with short, light-colored hair, wearing a dark suit jacket, a white shirt, and a dark tie. He is looking slightly to the right of the camera with a thoughtful expression. The background is dark and out of focus.

History says, don't hope
On this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme.

So hope for a great sea-change
On the far side of revenge.
Believe that further shore
Is reachable from here.
Believe in miracle
And cures and healing wells.

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