
Fred Johnston

BOOKS OF SHARING

Ruth Carr, *Feather and Bone* (Arlen House, 2018), €13.

Michael Coady, *Given Light* (The Gallery Press, 2017), €12.95.

Chris Agee, *Blue Sandbar Moon: a micro-epic* (The Irish Pages Press, 2018), €18 hb.

Some years ago, on my way home from work in a Belfast newspaper, I stepped into a tiny fruit-and-vegetable shop in the centre of Belfast. It was the birthplace of Henry Joy McCracken, and attempts were being made by cultural bodies to have it marked with a plaque; not a great idea then, this was the very height of the ‘Troubles’, replete with three – or perhaps it was four – British Army turnstile checkpoints along Royal Avenue alone, and the newspaper had already had a bomb threat, neutralised by a disposal robot. There’s a Joy’s Entry in Belfast, and a super-pub called ‘Henry’s’. He hasn’t been forgotten, one supposes. A United Irishman, he was hanged on the day of his trial in 1798, aged thirty. Beginning as an apprentice organist, the great harp-music collector Edward Bunting lodged with the McCracken family in Belfast for the bones of thirty-five years.

Mary Ann McCracken, Henry’s sister, was by all measure an activist; somewhat less so was Dorothy, sister of William Wordsworth, herself a poet and diarist. Mary Ann McCracken was a great support to Bunting and, in her own right, a defender of the poor, chair of the Belfast Charitable Society and leader of the Women’s Abolitionary Society at the apex of the slave trade. In her eighties, she was handing out anti-slavery leaflets at Belfast docks. Dorothy Wordsworth shared at least some of McCracken’s ideas. Both women were born at the start of the 1770s.

One approaches, then, a collection of poems about two very different women who never met one another, and yet are paired here: why? Different certainly, but in a real sense women of their age, contrasting immensely, products of their social and political environments. McCracken is a woman of social engagement and action; Wordsworth, a quieter recorder of things and people. Unsurprisingly, there are copious historical notes at the back, not always a good thing in a poetry collection, but necessary here. Belfast-born Ruth Carr has done a fine job, let it be said, to line up the two women not in opposition to one another, but almost as complementary sign-posts to the age. Odd, though, that Dorothy Wordsworth is given the greater and the primary space. Her ‘voice’ permeates the history of herself, which itself appropriates a diary-like feel. There is something injected into Dorothy that occasionally borders on the self-pitying; and just how close was Dorothy to her brother? The critic FW Bateson

postulated the darker question many years ago, and it has, by and large, gone unanswered.

Carr, no doubt wisely, doesn't attempt an answer either. Dorothy was accused of unladylike behaviour, say the notes, for undertaking a walking trip with her brother alone. This poem, like many others, is born from a letter. Dorothy elsewhere goes all woe-is-me (William eventually married), and one can't but think that a sojourn with The United Irishmen up on Cave Hill might have stiffened her up a jot: '... while I, / having fought and fretted and striven, / am still seated here by the fire' ('My Dearest Dora'); and, 'how the bells tolled as you lay, / peeling away your life / with the ring of betrothal' ('The Ring').

This is Carr – a tad forcedly – viewing Dorothy and the imagined sense of loss when William married, but is it real? Dorothy got on well with William's wife, and eventually they all lived happily (enough) together. She perhaps veered towards the melancholic anyway. The poem, like all of Carr's poems here, is deftly crafted and startling in its immediacy. But we long for the active engagement of Mary Ann McCracken. And Carr delivers:

your brother rose to the occasion of his hanging,
accepted the rope like a garland round his neck.
– 'ON'

And, in 'Kilmainham Letters':

... your hand slipping through the bars
to one who reads in that same light
beyond the ordered sentence
of the state, the church, the day
beyond unequal.

It's not hard to imagine that Carr admires Mary Ann with rather more enthusiasm than Dorothy. She seems more engaged with her, dare one say, more relaxed in her poetry when confronting her. Suddenly the two women are chalk-and-cheese, Mary Ann getting fewer poems but being revealed through what she has as a tougher, earthier, more world-experienced individual, almost approaching the heroic. This is a fascinating and erudite and poetically sound collection; but in the end one feels a Wordsworthian sigh coming on, a 'Poor Dorothy' moment, and one's heart belongs to Mary Ann.

If Ruth Carr makes an attempt to re-jig history in one's perception through twinned retellings of women who had famous brothers (and one might consider the provocative argument that they were two women caught in the shadow of two more historically-relevant male siblings), Michael Coady is a historian of a different kind. Certainly, he is an

archiveur. *Given Light* is an archive of things local and intimate in prose, poetry, and photographs, a step forward, arguably, from a collection of poems into the accompanying realms of visual and narrative memory vibrating to the same note; a scrap-book diary, of sorts, in which the close and familiar is given resonance beyond the immediate act of simple recording. The prose pieces have a texture of RTÉ's *Sunday Miscellany* to them; which is to say, they have immediate appeal in a style which is not too taxing yet highly informative. Coady's poetry tends for the most part to eschew imaginative flourishes and flows easily on a current of comprehensible blank verse and prose-lines. In a poem – 'Dear Afterlife' – to the late and much-loved poet Dennis O'Driscoll, the tone is almost conversational:

And so that's where I'm coming from
with this on-the-spot
account of your send-off –
some details you might wish to scan
for reference or even just for fun

The poem is flanked by a photo of a round tower and a Virgin Mary staring up at it with hand-wringing intensity – as if some Viking-enterrored monk has locked her out of it – from the vantage-point of a tomb. It is difficult to separate the images from the poems adjacent to them, and one wonders to what degree their positioning is meant to inform the poems, or if they've been placed at random. (Unsurprisingly, one poem is epigraphed with a quote from Henri Cartier-Bresson). A poem such as 'Last Tryst' nudges a stark, lonely, and lovely image – all images are in black-and-white – of a room empty save for a mirror and a chest of drawers and a lightly-scuffed floor of boards. It recalls the poignant images of Walker Evans which illustrated and complemented the great social work by James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. The poem facing is as lonely as the photo:

She puts on dark coat
and gloves, then opens
the front door

to face
the morning world,
the raw east wind ...

'Morning' here conjures up the unwritten word, 'mourning', for this is a poem about a particular type of mourning, a funeral attended by the one-time lover of the deceased who must now process solemnly with

the deceased's wife. The simplicity of the poem serves to highlight the emotional intensity of the subject. But the poem and photo fit perfectly, both full of absence, both portraying the unsaid, unstated, the poem and its burden reflecting itself, if you like, in the mirror in the photo. In some ways, the poem is the caption. The question stands: is this placing intentional or accidental?

Coady's urge to record the historic local turns up a translated working of Anthony Raftery's poem, 'Cill Aodáin' (some say the title is more properly 'Cill Liadáin', and blame Douglas Hyde for a mistranslation), a poem familiar to many from schooldays and often sung to the same air as 'The Bould Thady Quill'. 'The Blind Poet's Vision of Spring' is Coady's interpretation of Raftery's waxing nostalgic for Co Mayo; it's beautifully remembered in lines the beat and rhythm of which recall the original Irish and are full of music. He serves up two stanzas here of a poem the original of which ran to at least seven, so we get the basics and the idea. Here again, Coady/Raftery is using the local and remembered to investigate a sense of exile and loneliness:

I testify here that the heart in me rises
like a fresh breeze lifting fog from the slopes
when I think on Carra and Gallen below it,
on *Sceathach a' Mhíle* or the plains of Mayo.

'A Joyful Haunting' is, for this reviewer, the most fascinating prose piece, a memoir of jazz, of discovering jazz, of the Chris Barber Jazz Band playing in Carrick-On-Suir and of the great Co Down singer, Otilie Patterson, who married Barber and who died in 2011. I can remember her on the radio from my own teenage days. Coady was 'a schoolboy learner on trombone' when he was introduced to Barber, who advised him to find a good teacher. Coady laments that had 'that option been available to me who knows how it might have changed my life and its direction?' Here is, perhaps, a glimpse of the poet-in-exile from a desired artistic commitment to music; much as many Irish poets are also traditional music exponents or, indeed, part-time painters and photographers. Poetry depends on the seen-and-heard as much as upon any other experience. Are some poets more driven than others to try to encompass in their artistic experience the visual and aural, along with the written? The whole 'holistic' package?

This is a quite remarkable collection of work. It rather goes beyond poetry, though poetry is its main driver. There's great passion underpinning everything here, and a longing, whether it be in Raftery's wish to go back to Mayo, or Coady's musing on a possibly mislaid life as a trombone player. Not a loose note of sentimentality sounds anywhere. Life happens, and one is left with photos, things jotted in margins, and the empty

margins themselves. Coady gives light and meaning to a past which is both our own individually and our own in the sense that it is shared. This is a book of sharing. A small gripe: when did Irish poetry publishers cease to print prices on their books? Neither Ruth Carr's nor Michael Coady's collections have prices printed anywhere on their pages or covers.

Chris Agee's founding of the journal, *Irish Pages*, in 2002, marked a significant threshold in Irish writing; the publication continues to occupy an important, not to say central, role in poetry North and South, in Irish – poet Cathal Ó Searcaigh is Irish Language Editor – as well as in English, and provides a well-appointed platform for literary and wider intellectual discussion. The soul-wrenching tragedy of the death of his four-year-old daughter Miriam Aoife in 2001 was framed in Agee's *Next to Nothing* (Salt Publishing, 2009), a collection composed in 2003 and upon which he elucidates: 'In addition to individual poems and several sequences, *Next to Nothing* includes a section entitled "Heartscapes", which consists of 59 "micro-poems", as I call them.' *Blue Sandbar Moon* is also sub-headed as 'A micro-epic', and comprises, save for a few poems by way of lead-in, short bursts of poems that are haiku-sharp, their held emotional energy compressed like some sort of poetical nuclear fusion, and which range over a number of years:

Orange-golden

orb
low over
the Gasworks
in a gap
in the skyline
one carriage
glides in
another
slides out

The poems appear to have been set out with a little extra spacing between the lines, almost an injunction to the reader to take one's time – even if this is accidental, and I don't think it is, the effect is the same. There is no rush, absorb the poem. Let it sink in. The mainly minimalist poems are dated and placed, this one is underwritten as '*Belfast Central Station / 23 May 2010*'. Knowledge of the where and when of a poem obviously locates the poet at the point of composition; further, given Agee's own direction that this collection of 174 poems 'explores ... the emotional and spiritual landscape of a life sustained in the "aftermath of aftermath"', one suspects that they also constitute a mapping of the progress of grief in

terms of time and geography, as much as anything else. And one feels that the time-and-location detail is also an intrinsic part of the poem. (He cites in his book-jacketed notes WG Sebald's 'use of photographs in his prose', and his own use of 'a time-signature or imaginative context').

The greater portion of the book comprises a lengthy compendium, 'A micro-epic 2008-2017', where each poem, rather than having a title, has an opening line in a larger type size. Confusingly, a relevant section of the jacket notes which pertain to the present book are in quote marks, which might conceivably convey the impression that they are taken from a review of the book, or a different book altogether. In the Contents – and only there – this long 'sequence' is titled 'Openings', which adds another pinch of confusion. But these are quibbles. The first section, 'Proem', comprises seven pieces of stand-alone poems and some prose. But it's the larger sequence that carries the weight here.

The simplicity of language and bare-bones style of the poems indicate a rawness, a woundedness healing:

The strange thing

is that

Death

is always

the same thing

happening

whenever

it happens.

Žrnovo

8-9 August 2012

There is nothing small, nothing 'micro' about the very human rigours being explicated here, where everything – even a Belfast gas-works – is infused with a sort of stifled cry. Agee's creative victory here is to strip each poem to its nature and, in doing so, invite his readers, whether 'dipping in' to the poems or reading them from cover to cover, to share in the dishevelment of grief and a gradual awakening to the world as it is. Each poem, in that sense, is a meditation or prayer, a key slipped into a lock. One may be reminded of Czesław Miłosz's lines, 'I reached into the heart of metal, the soul of earth and fire, and of water / And the unknown unveiled its face.' Chris Agee has produced a fine and delicately-carved ensemble of important small poems which, taken in their entirety, create a moving and inspiring act of navigation between the seen and unseen, remembrance and experience, sorrow and wonder.