

NOTES FOR BROADSHEET POETS

Benjamin Keatinge

Richard Murphy: *A River of Notebooks*

In a late poem collected in *The Pleasure Ground: Poems 1952-2012* (Bloodaxe, 2013), Richard Murphy describes a half century of fishing for poems in his private notebooks:

A River of Notebooks

In a river of notebooks
Under the bridge of my desk
I fish for poems in pools of words
That for half a century
Have flowed from my pen
Gathering less poetry than sludge.
Often I snag
On corroded bars of domestic argument
And effortful literary debris.
Trout on a calm sunny day
Won't rise to a fly
Or swallow a worm on a hook.
A breeze has to animate the surface
And mystify the deep
To bring a reward after years of my
Winkling through dictionaries for bait.
Poetry feeds on the refuse of time
Against whose current it swims.

The poem refers back to an important moment in Richard Murphy's career, in Paris in 1954 when he 'discovered and bought ... a small notebook for mathematicians, the pages lined with little squares, bound in green boards, quite cheap' in the Papeterie de Joseph Gibert on the Boulevard St Michel. These notebooks, which the poet kept assiduously as a resource for both his poems and also his excellent memoir *The Kick* (2002, republished in 2017 by Cork University Press), are full of 'scraps of verse, elusive images, dreams, desires and revelations' where subsequently the poet would 'fish... for poems that might be lured to the surface from the stream of [his] past'.

In 2017, the Clutag Press published Richard Murphy's final book, *In Search of Poetry*. Taken from the notebooks he kept while composing the fifty autobiographical sonnets in *The Price of Stone* (1985), the Clutag volume gives us privileged insights into the poet's technique. Each chapter consists of prose meditations and detailed reflections on personal and family background that are then compressed into a single sonnet which is ventriloquised in the voice of a building associated with the poet's past. For example, the sonnet 'Suntrap' recalls a blissful period from childhood when Richard and his brother Chris spent over a year (May 1940 to September 1941) being educated by kindly tutors at the family demesne of Milford in Co. Mayo, enjoying the peace of neutral Ireland rather than boarding school in Britain:

The house, the *domus*, speaking to you for the family, might ask wasn't that year the happiest learning time of your life? ... when love of your mother, and brotherly competition, inspired you to learn ... from Xenophon's *Anabasis* to local Irish folklore ... legends of the crumbling walled demesne you could ramble around and explore ... parkland, meadows, tillage and peatbog ... woods impenetrable with briars, ivy strangling eighteenth-century trees ... mysteries giving you the shivers ... a rath ringed with hawthorn ... where Chris dug up a flint arrowhead and a skin scraper ... he said, from the Battle of Moytura ... mythical contest ...

I was happy then ... infused with love and confidence ... trying to overcome my fear of death ... terrified of being poisoned by a yew leaf or wild berry in the Pleasure Ground . . .

Forever afterwards, I would want to reconstruct some variant of the happiness I lost after winning a scholarship, and going off again to boarding school in England. Whenever I dreamed of Milford, or went there in its subsequent decay, my body thrilled with joy as I entered the gates ... excitement and joy such as no other place in the world has given me. (*In Search of Poetry*, pp. 91-2)

We can now see how the sonnets emerged organically from the notes that prompted them and we can better understand how the compositional process surged, not unlike a river in spate, in Murphy's intensive work on his sonnets from 1980 to 1983 at his home at Knockbrack, Killiney, Co. Dublin. In his 'Brief Introduction', John Burnside describes *In Search of Poetry* as 'a discourse on dwelling' in which Murphy 'investigates the nature of happiness, and its relationship to *poiesis* and belonging'. Of course, buildings have always been important to Murphy who confesses in one poem to suffering from a form of 'Stone Mania' by which his 'mad

obsession of building more rooms' had kept him from those close friends he really wanted to see. But it is the notion of dwelling that is more important. In an interview with John Haffenden, Murphy said that he sees 'poems as buildings and as music, there's a strong element of architecture in my poetry' and Murphy blends his own backgrounds as a choral scholar at Canterbury Cathedral School in the 1940s with his love of built heritage in the ways he approaches the writing of poetry. Arguably, these interests culminate in the *Price of Stone* sequence where each poem is a 'sonnet house' and where, as Murphy wrote in *The Kick* about his notebooks: 'as numbers underlie music, and a score is essential for composition, so the page might hold in its net the music of poetry, and prevent words from swimming into measureless prolixity'. The 'little squares' used by mathematicians serve equally well Murphy's purposes in condensing and refining the sonnets in the notes that give rise to them. And so the sonnet 'Suntrap' emerges as part of Murphy's broader meditations on dwelling and belonging:

Suntrap

One year at home under our flagging roof
During the war, learning and love made peace.
As with a cottage weaver's warp and woof
Your heart and mind were shuttled into place.

Verbs conjugating in our Pleasure Ground
Held the past present in contiguous time.
Here was the Bower of Bliss, painlessly scanned.
You found the oldest trees were best to climb.

In neutral Ireland, our walled demesne,
While tilting you towards knight-errant books,
Groomed you to mount on war-horses to gain
Rewards beyond our laurels, birches, oaks.

A peeled rush, dipped in tallow, carried light
From the dark ages, kissing you good night.

Richard Murphy's notebooks reveal the disciplined mind of someone who recognised early in his career that 'poetry would never come naturally, as a gift. It would have to be made.' There is a wariness of anything resembling 'measureless prolixity' but also an endeavour to open the sluices of inspiration via prose notetaking. In an interview with Dennis O'Driscoll

– to whom Murphy dedicated *The Price of Stone* – he described how ‘the notes would flow like rain on a mountain gathering into a narrow rocky cleft to make the sonnet’s waterfall.’ These dual poles – of inspiration and conscious craft – can be traced in relation to the poet’s homes in Connemara – his true poetic terrain – and the more metropolitan centres of London and Dublin. As a student, Murphy left Oxford for Connemara in November 1946 to commit himself ‘to writing poetry at Lecknavarna’, a small and isolated cottage near Screebe. Although prevailed upon by his family to return to complete his English degree at Magdalen College, Oxford, Connemara continued to provide Murphy with his waterfalls of inspiration. The waters at Lecknavarna illustrate this harnessing of natural energies in the sonnet form; the finished poem describes these waters ‘flowing steadfast in a flagstone cleft’ and pouring ‘[w]ith resonant gravity, bringing the gift / Of widespread raindrops crafted to great force.’

In his essay ‘The Pleasure Ground’, which serves as the preface to *Poems 1952-2012*, the manicured Pleasure Ground at Milford is contrasted with ‘that older earlier unfenced romantic pleasure ground in the treeless hills of Connemara on the edge of the sea’. The Apollonian and Dionysian sides of Richard Murphy’s poetry are thus delineated tellingly in this signature essay. This river of disciplined inspiration has been very justly elucidated by Seamus Deane in his 1980 review of Murphy’s *Selected Poems*:

[I]t is not accurate to speak of Richard Murphy’s verse as though it had all the chaste Palladian virtues one would expect of a cultivated and gifted scion of Anglo-Irish stock. Alfred North Whitehead once said in conversation that eighteenth-century architecture, whatever it had, lacked transcendence. Richard Murphy’s poetry does not lack this quality but it does have those virtues. At some point, reason and logic do end, without disappearing. They don’t give way to transcendence, they lead to it.

(Seamus Deane, ‘The Long Ascendancy’, review of *Selected Poems* by Richard Murphy, *The Honest Ulsterman* 66 July-October 1980, p. 69.)

Even though Richard Murphy died in January 2018, the waterfalls of his poetry will continue to flow and his reputation will surely continue what Deane describes its ‘deserved and long ascendancy’. With the publication of *In Search of Poetry*, the symbiosis of music and architecture in his notebooks and poems can profitably be studied by all readers and admirers of his work.

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Editor's Note:

This review seems important to add at the end of this 1918 issue as domestic violence and public violence in war, no matter when, are all the same. How lamentable it is that all this still goes on. All profits from the anthology go to Women's Aid.

Sue Mackrell

#MeToo (Fairacre Press) - rallying against sexual assault and harassment - a women's poetry anthology

Edited by **Deborah Alma**, introduced by **Jess Phillips MP**

This is a powerful anthology of poems the winner of Saboteur Awards Best Anthology 2018. It is a witness to the courage and strength of these women, many of whom are very well-established poets, who are at last speaking out. It harks back to Maya Angelou's 'And Still I Rise' and reaches forward to a new era when women's voices are heard and respected. It opens with the barely understood experiences of childhood, the 'whispers of kids being "interfered with,"' (Angela Topping,) the invitations to look for rabbits and lost dogs, and the 'It's just a game... The girl who tolerates it the longest/ is the winner.' (Sally Jenkinson.)

Further poems explore the ways in which women's lives are circumscribed by an implicit sense of threat '...you think/you are being followed/and you pick up speed.' (Meg Cox.) Familiar routes are charted, 'There's the "Cheer up Love it Might Never Happen" Spot' '...Here's the "Avoid At All Costs"/ Underpass' and '...But I still had to walk round/ the block to make sure he didn't know I lived here /on my ordinary street at the end of my ordinary walk home.' (Emma Lee.) Frustration and anger are expressed at everyday abusive language, the '...cocksure roar of boy used to his own way,/one more of the ones we warn each other about, /whose reputations we pass around like classroom/ secrets...' (Jane Commane.)

For some 'all my stories [are] small/but always wary,' the 'ground floor flat/a face at the window/no phone/ no back door' (Amy Rainbow.) But the most harrowing poems are gut- wrenching and visceral, 'Unwrapped/like a parcel of offal/slippery, coming/unstuck.' (Linda Goulden.) Disturbing images stay in the mind, a child waiting for '...the lock that unclicks, the confining dark, the/hooded stranger with Papa's voice, the makeshift bed.' (Pascale Petit.) There are unanswerable questions: 'What do you do when

your child is born of rape?’ (Louisa Campbell.)

But the sheer quality of the writing keeps the reader going. Anger invigorates the language. More reflective pieces are sensitive and nuanced, and flashes of dark humour lighten the tension. Many contributors are nationally and internationally published poets such as Pascale Petit, Helen Ivory, Helen Mort, Roz Goddard, Jacqueline Saphra, Kim Moore, Sabrina Mahfouz and Jane Commane. Others are just beginning to find their voices in writing.

This anthology represents a place of safety where women can speak out without fear. As Deborah Alma writes, it is a call to action from a ‘pride of lionesses’ who ‘learned to roar stories that choked us.’ It is a rallying cry of anger and impatience. ‘We stand together, each one a Spartaca/ no longer silent or alone: each voice stronger,/massing, alive, a wild murmuratio/n/of me too/ me too/ me too’ (Pippa Little.)

This Pandora’s Box will never be slammed shut again.