

Paul Muldoon and the BBC: Representing Irish Poetry to the Audience

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Introduction

Paul Muldoon obtained a position as a radio producer for the BBC in 1973 just after his graduation from the Queen's University of Belfast in the same year. After working for almost thirteen years he resigned from the job in January 1986, and left Northern Ireland. During his BBC career in Belfast, Muldoon established himself as a distinguished poet. His first book *New Weather*, published in the same year as he entered the BBC, received good reviews. Three acclaimed collections followed – *Mules* in 1977, *Why Brownlee Left* in 1980 and *Quoof* in 1983. Faber and Faber then commissioned him to edit an anthology, which appeared as *The Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry* in 1986. In the same year his own poetic career was compiled as *Selected Poems 1968-1983*. As well as his poetic career and the public environment of the Troubles, his private life of the period too was punctuated with important events: marriage in 1974, his mother's death in the same year, divorce in 1977, his relationship with Mary Farl Powers, and finally, his father's death in 1985, which was one of the factors behind his leaving Northern Ireland (Muldoon, 1987b, 36). The Belfast years are thus a period of profound significance in his life, even if some of these contexts, outside the 'Troubles', remain largely unexplored in Muldoon criticism. In particular, his BBC career in this important period has not gained enough critical attention.¹ To shed more light on this aspect, this paper examines Muldoon's work at the BBC with a special focus in his representation of Irish poetry.

Thatcherism and the Troubles

Although Muldoon is humble and joking in attributing his employment to being an excellent tea-bearer,² his talent was obvious to some, so that the then drama producer Ronald Mason spotted and recruited him. Michael Longley testifies that he was 'one of the best arts producers the BBC ever had': 'He was punctilious. According to those who worked with him, even his paperwork was the best they'd seen. He worked with

enormous efficiency and originality. Not what one would have been led to expect by his university career!' (Potts, 2001, 6). After working for almost thirteen years, however, he decided to leave the BBC. In an interview Muldoon gives a brief comment on how he left:

I had a job which was challenging and rewarding for the most part, but I've been doing it for almost thirteen years and I couldn't see myself staying until retirement age – if ever I see retirement age. Also, the climate within BBC had changed considerably. When I joined BBC there were notions of public service broadcasting, and those notions are still bandied about, but I don't really think that anyone who runs the show believes very much in them. I covered the arts, and a lot of my time, a lot of my energy – far too much of it – was spent fighting management figures within BBC Northern Ireland who professed an interest in the arts but frankly didn't give a damn about them. I decided that I was getting too long in the tooth for that. (Muldoon, 1987b, 36)

The idea of 'public service' was problematic indeed. The climate change mentioned above was brought about largely by Thatcherite pressure. Although the nature of the 'public service' of the BBC had been constantly brought into question, it was Margaret Thatcher who most harshly criticised it. McLoone reviews the situation as follows:

In the 1980s, the Thatcher government was fundamentally hostile to the post-war consensus and sceptical of its public service achievements and began to look for ways of privatising public utilities. The BBC was an obvious target, especially for a government which also felt that market forces could be relied upon to deliver a media system more politically supportive of its underlying ideology than that which the public service requirements and traditions of the BBC could offer. (McLoone, 1996, 2)

The arts were one of the major fields that the post-war consensus treasured. They, and their implicit advocacy of the use of uselessness, must have been the opposite of the Thatcherite pursuit of cost efficiency. According to Chris Spurr, a BBC Northern Ireland producer who has worked for the corporation since 1979, the regular arts feature slot was lost in the late 1980s. He also remembers that the ethos in which

everything was accounted for restricted freedom and spontaneity in programme making (Spurr, 2003). The climate change is also reflected in the fact that Muldoon was the last writer/producer of BBC Northern Ireland in fulltime and permanent employment. The days when a committed writer and a full-time producer were seen as compatible, or at least parallel roles, have gone.

The arts section of BBC Northern Ireland was under another kind of pressure: the greater importance attached to news and current affairs because of the Troubles. The political climate in Muldoon's BBC years was a hard one: those years began with the Sunningdale Agreement (December 1973) and ended with the Anglo-Irish Agreement (November 1985), both followed by massive Unionist protests; between them was the Republican prison protest from 1976, which culminated in the fatal hunger strike in 1981. In the region where there is a serious division in the public, the question of what 'public service' means becomes more crucial. It has always been a difficult issue for the BBC. Rex Cathcart traces three stages of the BBC's strategic change:

In the pre-war period, the BBC ignored the division [of the society] and sought to prevent any of its manifestations from impinging on programmes. [. . .] In the post-war world, the pursuit of such a strategy proved impossible. The BBC then sought to be the means of bringing both sides of society together. The feeling that this should be done without provoking vociferous and possibly violent reaction from the unionist majority meant that positive aspects of community relations were emphasised and the negative underplayed. A consensus emerged which had a false basis. When the civil rights movement attempted to give it a real basis, the BBC's strategy became irrelevant. Broadcasting House, Belfast, threw over the incubus of having always to placate local unionist feelings and there then emerged the third and current strategy which requires the broadcasters to reflect the whole of society in Northern Ireland as it is, in its negative and its positive aspects. [. . .] The price of the strategy is that neither community is satisfied, for each manifests exclusive political and cultural attitudes, harbours the ultimate determination that the other side will not be seen or heard. If there is middle ground, then that is where the BBC in Northern Ireland endeavours to stand. (Cathcart, 1984, 262-63)

This even-handed strategy of the BBC to place itself as a broker between two enemies, however, is problematic precisely because of its being a public, or 'British', corporation.

The BBC often became a target of direct violence: for example, the 1974-75 Annual Report records the explosion of two car bombs outside the Belfast Broadcasting House, and a bomb attack on the Newry transmitter. Beside these actual explosions, BBC Northern Ireland suffered numerous IRA bomb scares. Attacks also came from the Loyalists who saw the BBC as a traitor: according to the 1985-86 Annual Report, some members of the news staff were injured and equipment was damaged when covering the Unionists' protest against the Anglo-Irish Agreement, and at Easter some crews received death threats from paramilitary organisations.

The arts – Muldoon's work

According to Grania McFadden, the arts had more slots before the late 1960s with arts review programmes like *The Arts in Ulster* and *Soundings*; but this situation was drastically worsened by the Troubles (McFadden, 2001, 238). Bardon, however, says that the launch of BBC Radio Ulster in 1975 created a more frequent output on arts (Bardon, 2000, 133-34). In any case, the arts were seen as distanced from the sphere of political violence. BBC Annual Reports often stress that the majority of their programmes were unconnected with the Troubles, reflecting the normal life of Northern Ireland. Among them were, the Reports state, those on arts. Indeed, the programmes Muldoon produced are mostly unrelated to the issue of the Troubles. The Troubles seem to have been a threat to the programme makers: Spurr recalls that the Troubles were always there like 'an elephant in the room', which made him want to make a programme on something else as an antidote to the elephant's oppressive presence (Spurr, 2003). The following lines from 'The Soap-Pig', a poem in memory of the BBC drama producer Michael Heffernan, may indicate the arts' position in relation to the news and current affairs field in the BBC:

Together we learned from Denys
Hawthorne and Allan McClelland³
to float, like Saint Gennys,
on our own hands
through airwaves mostly jammed by cub-
reporters and poisoned pups. (Muldoon, 1987a, 25)

The arts 'float' through the political minefield. The simile of a saint floating on his own

hand seems to imply trickiness in the arts business rather than the sacredness of its mission. The implication is that the way of the arts is not straightforward, which would end up being 'jammed', but oblique. Another passage from the same poem goes:

Many's an Arts Club

night with Barfield and Mason⁴
ended with me throwing up
at the basin.
Anne-Marie looked on, her unspoken,
'That's to wash, not boke in.' (Muldoon, 1987a, 26)

The way of arts seems to share something of this improper use of a basin. In Muldoon's poetry too, although we do not have enough space to discuss it here, things are looked at from different angles and perspectives.

Although the poem above indicates the same congenial group mentality as Muldoon's predecessors Louis MacNeice and W. R. Rodgers (who worked for BBC London, from 1941-1963 and 1945-1966, respectively) had in the London Features Department, one of the main differences from them is that Muldoon did not write major creative pieces for the radio, be it poetry, drama or short stories.⁵ Yet this did not mean the BBC totally deprived him of creative energy, as another of his predecessors John Boyd, who worked for BBC Northern Ireland from 1947 to 1972, deplored that the job was so busy that it prevented him from writing (the contract he signed when he entered the BBC indeed prohibited writing or engaging in public speaking (Boyd, 1990, 86)), thus he 'could not serve two masters – the BBC and literature' (Boyd, 1990, 161). Muldoon published significantly during his BBC years. The medium he primarily chose was print not broadcast, although his poems were occasionally broadcast and the BBC and the RTÉ are acknowledged in his books. It seems he strictly differentiated the sphere of his own creative writing from his job of public broadcasting.

Nonetheless, the arts programmes Muldoon involved himself with as producer or writer covered a wide range of cultural interests as the catalogue of BBC Northern Ireland radio archives shows (Loughran and McCavana, 1993). They covered arts review, music, drama, architecture, history etc, though the main field was, of course, literature. For example, *Poetry Now* gathered together contemporary talents, while *Morning Story* displayed a variety of short stories by writers old and new, North and

South. Weekly and monthly arts review programmes, such as *Bazaar*, were another important job that brought many writers into the studio and then to the public.⁶

Although he did not undertake any major creative writing for the BBC, some programmes indicate a link to his poetical works. There are programmes on wren hunting, cock-fighting, horses and hounds, which reflect Muldoon's poetic interest in animals. And seven out of twelve titles of the series *Irish Poetry* concern birds, the most featured animals in Muldoon's poems. Among the programmes on early Irish writing was 'The Voyage of Mael Duin', written by Muldoon for part of the successful Irish history programme series for schools. Transmitted in May 1974, it was the precursor of his masterpiece 'Immram' in his 1980 collection *Why Brownlee Left*. Also, *Eighteen Belfasts* (transmitted in August 1981) – a programme written by Alastair Smyth about the role of the Scots-Irish in the formation of the United States where there are 7 Derrys, 19 Tyrones, 9 Antrims, and 18 Belfasts – might have given him a hint for his later *Madoc – A Mystery* (1990).

Representing Irish poetry on the air

One of the most important aspects of the programmes he produced or compiled concerns the representation of Irish poetry. 'Representation' is, of course, always a difficult business, and often fought over through anthologising Irish poetry. Reviewed briefly, the following major anthologies appeared during this period: Brendan Kennelly's *The Penguin Book of Irish Verse* in 1970, revised in 1981, John Montague's *The Faber Book of Irish Verse* in 1974; Northern Ireland had Padraic Fiacc's *The Wearing of the Black: An Anthology of Contemporary Ulster Poetry* in 1974 and Frank Ormsby's *Poets from the North of Ireland* in 1979 (revised in 1990); and Blake Morrison's and Andrew Motion's *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* in 1982 was criticised as a British colonisation, or appropriation, of Irish poets. Muldoon's *The Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Verse* and Thomas Kinsella's *The New Oxford Book of Irish Verse* both published in 1986 were seen as a contrast between aesthetic and nationalist enterprises. While Peter Fallon's and Derek Mahon's *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry* in 1990 was frankly opposed to Muldoon's Northern bias, Ormsby's *A Rage for Order: Poetry of the Northern Ireland Troubles* in 1992 focused on the Northern issue. Meanwhile, the supposedly inclusive project of Seamus Deane's *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* in 1991 was severely criticised for its under-representation of female writers, who were supplemented about a decade later

in the fourth and fifth volumes published in 2002.

Considering that Muldoon was involved with this polemical business, it is worth seeing how he produced radio programmes on Irish poetry. The radio archive records three main such works: *Irish Poetry* (transmitted in September–November 1974), *Faces of Ireland* (January–June 1976), and *Time for Verse* (August–September 1986).⁷

The first one, *Irish Poetry*, is a series of twelve programmes on Irish poetry from the earliest times to the present day discussing how modern poets see their heritage. Every programme is written and presented by a different writer under a different theme. The first programme is titled ‘The Belfast Blackbird’, written and presented by Brendan Kennelly, dealing with the Early Irish poems translated by Kuno Meyer and Kennelly himself; the second programme, ‘The Scald Crow’, is on the Early poetry in myth and legend (presenter not recorded); the third, ‘The Bird King’, is on *Buile Shuibhne*, presented by Seamus Heaney; John Montague talks about Brian Merriman’s celebrated poem *Cúirt an Mheán-Óiche* in the fourth programme, ‘The Midnight Court’; the fifth, ‘The Drowned Blackbird’, by Michael Hartnett deals with the poems of Peadar Ó Doirín and Art MacCumhaigh read both in Irish and in Hartnett’s English translation; in the sixth, ‘Davis, Mangan, Ferguson’, John Hewitt deals with the three poets; Derek Mahon talks about the heritage of W. B. Yeats in the seventh programme, ‘Wild Swans at Coole’; Yeats is discussed from a different perspective in the eighth programme, ‘The Wild Old Wicked Man’, by James Simmons; the ninth, ‘The Great Hunger’, is on Patrick Kavanagh’s heritage presented by Seamus Deane; in the tenth, ‘Home Thoughts from Abroad’, Michael Longley uses poems by W. R. Rodgers and Louis MacNeice; the eleventh is ‘The Robin’s Tail’ by Seán Ó Tuama talking on modern Irish language poets like Máirtín Ó Direáin, Máire Mhac an tSaoi and Seán Ó Ríordáin; and the last of the series ‘An Exploration of Larks’ was written and presented by Muldoon discussing contemporary poets.

In this series Muldoon functions as a facilitator – a role which seemingly suggests a certain neutrality – who gathers a good variety of contemporary talents to present the various heritages of Irish poetry, although female poets are rather under-represented. The line-up of poet-presenters themselves – Kennelly, Heaney, Montague, Hartnett, Hewitt, Mahon, Simmons, Deane, Longley, Ó Tuama and Muldoon – can be seen as a representation of contemporary Irish poetry, and shows how the BBC played a role as a medium through which these writers co-worked. The series is not a simple anthology but an assemblage of dialogues between contemporary poets and their literary fathers

(rather than mothers). These multiple dialogues, and Muldoon's almost invisible role as facilitator, differentiate the project from the single-editor anthology.

One striking aspect in this series is that the Irish and English language traditions are allocated equally, each with six programmes, although most of the Irish language poems are read only in English translation. This is an indication of Muldoon's attitude toward Irish language. In an interview he says: 'Through living in Ireland and having the kind of education I had, I was very much aware of the Irish language and history' (Muldoon, 1981, 131). Sean O'Boyle was his teacher at the grammar school St. Patrick's College in Armagh, and gave him 'a sense of this marvellous heritage of literature and song in Gaelic' (Muldoon, 1981, 132).⁸ His first published poems were in Irish, but he 'gave that up because [. . .] [he] didn't have a real control of the language' (Muldoon, 1981, 132). In another interview, on the other hand, he denies the idea of consciously carrying over Gaelic form and rhythm to English poems. Such an attempt, as in Moore, Mangan, Davis or Synge, is inappropriate because 'English has its own prosody' (Muldoon, 1985, 78). He also questions the too-easy assumption that English spoken in Ireland is more colourful and musical. He says: 'I would say that in some respect the English language is still being learned in Ireland, but I wouldn't become overly romantic about it' (Muldoon, 1985, 78). The radio series seems to reflect this balanced respect of English and Irish languages, rather than the dilemma between them that his senior poets had to articulate, like Kinsella in his 1970 essay *Davis, Mangan, Ferguson? Tradition and the Irish Writer* or Heaney in his early essays. Also, the respect for Gaelic poetry may partly have been inspired by Kennelly's and possibly Montague's anthologies that emphasised the Gaelic tradition, although they presented the poems in English translation only. In this regard, the most interesting among these radio programmes is Hartnett's presentation of the 'forgotten' (as Hartnett bitterly says) Ulster-Gaelic poets of the eighteenth century. While other presenters read mostly in English translation only, he reads both the original and its English translation, even a few poems in Irish only. In terms of the arts, the BBC was also liberal enough to allow him to refer to the eighteenth century Protestants as 'barbaric capitalists' or to say: '[the English] stole our manuscripts. We didn't steal their books'.

Muldoon in his own presentation introduces four poets from the South and five from the North. (He admits in the programme the border is a convenient division to give some sense of difference between the two.) He chooses Kinsella ('Another September'), Richard Murphy ('Little Hunger'), Kennelly ('My Dark Fathers') and

Hartnett ('A Sonnet') as examples of those who successfully got out of a mild climate of Southern parochialism, or a 'parish pump syndrome', that looks for audience and publisher no farther than Dublin, where Patrick Kavanagh is remembered as a lounge bar philosopher rather than a poet. Muldoon, however, illustrates how these four poets share a consistent tone, by picking up one line from each poem to make up a stanza. He then shifts to the North, where he says the voice is more various and wilful. Muldoon's stance seems to be on a delicate balance: on one hand he sees the border as a matter of mere convenience and tries to avoid an easy summary; on the other hand, he acknowledges the difference between the North and the South and has to explain it in a neat and clear way in this type of radio programme.

This recognition of North/South division seems to correlate with that of Seamus Deane's early essay where he examines the difference between Montague's North and Kavanagh's South, one is 'the historical moment' and the other 'the eternal moment' (Deane, 1975, 16). In other words, poetry reflects the political stability of the Republic and the instability of Northern Ireland. Muldoon, however, also comments in the programme that Northern poetry is practised as a real alternative to politics and religion, and is more exciting and energetic than any other English poems. Hewitt ('April Awake'), Simmons ('A Reformer to His Father'), Mahon ('The Spring Vacation'), Longley ('Galapagos') and Heaney ('The Seed Cutters') are chosen. Muldoon thus deliberately avoids 'Troubles poems' to evade the pitfall of easy representation – as he avoids typical parochial poems in selecting from Southern poetry. This also reminds us of Deane's comment on the 'apolitical' nature of some contemporary Northern literary activity:

No reader of *The Honest Ulsterman* could find there a politics, an aesthetic; but he could find a good deal of laughter at the thought of having one or the other. This is fair enough, except that the laughter is itself borrowed; it involves the kind of 'free spirit' attitude you got in Berkeley in the early sixties. And that looks rather precious in the North at the moment – although preciousity is not a sin to which Northerners think themselves prone, largely because they think it means the opposite of crudeness. (Deane, 1975, 14)

The apolitical attitude seems to have partly been a response to a journalistic notion of the Troubles. When Padraic Fiacc edited *The Wearing of the Black* in 1974, it was

answered by James Simmons's bitter review in the *Honest Ulsterman*: 'If he is not "exploiting the troubles", then perhaps Fiacc has allowed himself to be exploited by them, by their news value and the questions of journalists' (Simmons, 1974/75, 68). By this exploitation, Simmons argues, the aesthetic value of poetry is severely neglected. Another journalistic aspect is the notion of 'Northern Poets', i.e. an easy combination of poetry and the Troubles. Many writers detested this notion: for example, Deane in the above essay regards it as 'no more than a newspaper phenomenon' (Deane, 1975, 14), and in later years Kennelly comments that it is 'misleading' (Kennelly, 1981, 41) and for Kinsella it is 'a journalistic entity' (Kinsella, 1986, xxx). However, this is not a complete denial of a speciality of the Northern poets. Deane comments that 'a good deal of what they represent has had no previous existence in Irish literature at all' (Deane, 1975, 14). And Mahon, though admitting it is to some extent a journalistic phenomenon, says: 'The poetry and the "troubles" had a common source; the same energy gave rise to both, though it's worth noting that the poetry preceded the politics' (Mahon, 1991, 5).

Muldoon's evasion of the Troubles in the programme seems to be a consequence of the detestation he shared with other writers of the journalistic attitudes towards Northern writing. The irony is that by this evasion his programme apparently becomes suitable for the BBC's aspiration that its arts programmes reflect a normality of the society unconnected to the current violence. The aspiration becomes problematical because the idea of normalisation implies the Northern conflict is a kind of temporary aberration, denying the significance of its roots. Poetry, as Mahon suggests, cannot deny those roots. Muldoon's solution seems to be to present conflicting poetic voices in the North while avoiding overt violent features that might be misleading. Where Southern poetry is seen as harmonious, tonally and stylistically, Northern poetry's variousness and wilfulness becomes a covert expression of the complexities of the society.

The second representational work, *Faces of Ireland*, is a series of six programmes of poetry, prose and song on various aspects of Irish life, on the themes of 'Work and Play' (presented by Gerry Downey), 'Love' (Mary Murphy), 'The Irish and Their Creator' (Tom Mullarkey), 'War and Peace' (Peter Mullan), 'Heroes and Villains' (Gerry Downey), and 'The Irish Abroad' (Frank D'Arcy). Irish poems in this series are put in a different, wider context set alongside prose and songs. Its social, rather than literary, aspect is emphasised. So, for example, Kavanagh's 'The Great Hunger' is read under the

theme of 'work and play' along with poems 'The Scholar and His Cat' (which Muldoon later translates as 'Anonymous: *Myself and Pangur*' in *Hay*, 1998), 'The Student's Life Is Pleasant' (both by unknown authors, translated by Kuno Meyer), 'Derry' by Seamus Deane and so on; with prose from William Carleton's 'Note to Schoolmasters', Patrick Gallagher's 'The Hiring Fair', Brendan Behan's 'Hold Your Hour and Have Another' etc; and with the songs 'One Day for Recreation', 'The Limerick Rake', 'A Maid Going to Comber', 'The Rocks of Bawn', 'Fear A'Bhata' and 'McAlpine's Fusiliers' (which is featured in Muldoon's 'I Remember Sir Alfred' in *Why Brownlee Left*). The focus is therefore not on the poet Kavanagh but on the harsh peasant life of the poem's protagonist in the context of various Irish social situations. While the borderline between poetry and other art forms blurs, art and life come closer. A similar approach is seen in programmes like 'Horses and Hounds' (transmitted on 8 Oct. 1978) and 'Fighting Cocks' (21 Nov. 1982), both of which Muldoon produced. These programmes are representations of Irish life through literature rather than a representation of Irish literature.

The third one, on the other hand, is literary. *Time for Verse*, produced by Clive Brill and transmitted after Muldoon left the BBC, is a series of seven short morning programmes (ten minutes each) in which Muldoon picks up what he considers to be the best Irish poems over the previous twenty years. Introducing the programmes he says that he does not set any themes but suggests the variety of recent Irish poetry, and that he wants to avoid the pitfall of any easy construction. The introductory comment on each poet is kept to a minimum. Selected poets and poems are as follows: 1) Thomas Kinsella ('Ancestor', 'Bally David Pier'), Richard Murphy ('Coppersmith'), William Peskett ('Moths'), Michael Davitt ('The Mirror'); 2) John Montague ('Windharp', 'The Trout'), Desmond O'Grady ('Sightseeing'), Harry Clifton ('Magyar Coat'), and John Hewitt ('Sonnets for Roberta' I and II); 3) Seamus Heaney ('Widgeon', 'The Given Note', 'Night Drive'), Brendan Kennelly ('My Dark Fathers'), Michael Hartnett ('I Saw Magic on a Green Country Road'), Peter Fallon ('Winter Work'); 4) Michael Longley ('Second Sight', 'The Third Light', 'Sea Shanty'), James Simmons ('The Harvest is Past'), Hugh Maxton ('Ode'), Michael Foley ('I Remember Adlestrop'), Aidan Carl Matthews ('Spectrum'); 5) Derek Mahon ('Nostalgias', 'A Garage in County Cork'), Ciaran Carson ('The Irish for No'), Frank Ormsby ('Islands'); 6) Medbh McGuckian ('The Standing', 'To My Grandmother', 'Slips'), Eavan Boland ('In His Own Image'), Eilean Ní Chuilleanain ('Swineherd'), Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill ('As for the Quince');

7) Paul Durcan ('Making Love outside Áras an Uachtaráin', 'In Memory of Those Murdered in the Dublin Massacre'), Thomas McCarthy ('State Funeral'), Tom Paulin ('A Rum Cove, A Stout Cove', 'A Written Answer'), Seamus Deane ('Return'). Apparently the list is based on his Faber anthology, published before this programme. The eight poets (excluding Kavanagh and MacNeice) of the book are more featured than others in this radio programme. That said, those who severely criticised the Faber anthology would be happier with this selection of contemporary Irish poets: no dead poets, wider selection from the North and the South, and more female and Irish language poets, though not enough and the Gaelic poetry is read in translation only. The series does not avoid political issues and violence, yet they are not in the foreground but are presented as pieces that make a whole picture of variety. Although Muldoon did not read his own poems, without which the picture would never be satisfactory, the programme turns out to be a more inclusive, certainly less risky, and less adventurous representation of contemporary Irish poetry.

Representing Irish poetry in book form

In a book form, Muldoon is much more demanding and challenging towards his audience, and a great deal of attention has been devoted to discussion of the politics of Muldoon's anthologising, although the different slant provided by the above context is usually absent. His edition of *The Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry* received a number of criticisms for its unusual, but typically Muldoonesque, way of editing: the book contains only ten poets (Kavanagh, MacNeice, Kinsella, Montague, Longley, Heaney, Mahon, Durcan, Paulin, McGuckian) with no introduction and no explanatory notes. In the words of one reviewer, 'It in no sense offers a fair picture of contemporary Irish poetry, nor has Paul Muldoon performed the real job of an editor, merely that of a selector with some curious blind spots' (Grennan, 1986, 58). Inclusion of two twenty-year-dead poets under the title of 'contemporary' can be questionable (Dawe, 1986, 21). A 'Northern bias' (Mahon, 1986) is obvious: eight out of the ten poets are from the region of Ulster, of whom seven are from Northern Ireland (somehow achieving a decent Northern religious balance of 4 Catholics and 6 Protestants); only one female poet; no Irish language poet; and no Muldoon (so Muldoon readers are implicitly led to buy his *Selected Poems* published from Faber in the same year).

The lack of an introduction is especially problematic, as if Muldoon is replicating his role in the BBC as invisible facilitator who allows others to speak. That said, the

'prologue' of the anthology is an interesting editorial message. It is an extract from a radio discussion between F. R. Higgins and Louis MacNeice, broadcast on BBC Northern Ireland on 11 July, 1939^o. Muldoon thus picked up a radio programme for the preface to an enterprise he could not do for the radio. Yet this can be seen as one last job as a BBC producer, bringing to a new audience the broadcast which it would not otherwise have reached, and proving its pertinence to a contemporary problem.

In it Higgins says: 'Reading through the anthologies made from contemporary English poets I would say that there is little sign of such magic; indeed there are few signs of the awful sense of respect for words which poetry demands'. MacNeice replies: 'Perhaps half-a-dozen poems in fifty, which is not a bad average' (Muldoon, 1986, 18). Muldoon thus tangentially addresses the question of anthologies. He later explains the approach more directly (there is, of course, some irony in the fact that Muldoon feels compelled to explain his absence of explanation after the event):

I think had I written the introduction I would have pointed out [. . .] that this is not meant to be an exhaustive, all-embracing record of every Irish poet who's put pen to paper over the last fifty years. Any number of anthologies do that. And they come, at least for me, to look depressingly similar. Anthologies do, after all, tend to be composed of 'anthology pieces'. And I wanted to avoid not only the bitterness I associate with these more conventional anthologies, but the insidious value judgements implied by the number of pages, for example, assigned to each contributor. [. . .] So what I chose to do was to limit the number of poets to ten in this book, and to represent them with substantial selections [. . .]. Something, in other words, that a reader might get his or her teeth into, rather than nibble at. (Muldoon, 1994)

It is his belief that 'anthology pieces' cannot represent a poet, in which case Higgins's concept of contemporary English poetry is implicitly invalidated because he judges only from anthology pieces. On the other hand, however, it is questionable if Muldoon's limited selection of ten poets can represent the 'contemporary Irish poetry' of the volume's title. As one reviewer suggests, '*Ten Irish Poets*, selected by Paul Muldoon' would be a more accurate title (Grennan, 1986, 58). But is it anyway possible to represent contemporary 'Irishness', or desirable to try and do so? This is another point Muldoon questions by way of the prologue. For Higgins, 'such magic' referred to above

is that of 'pure poetry' of Ireland that comes from 'a belief emanating from life, from nature, from revealed religion, and from the nation'. An Irish poet, Higgins says, cannot escape from this 'blood', or 'blood-music that brings the racial character to mind'. MacNeice answers that he and his contemporaries belong to 'an impure age', and that 'one may have such a thing as one's racial blood-music, but that, like one's unconscious, it may be left to take care of itself. The poet's function, MacNeice continues, is just to record anything which interests him, be it a gasometer or the Marxian dialectic, with the greatest integrity and music that he can (Muldoon, 1986, 17-18). Muldoon's attitude is closer to MacNeice's than Higgins's. Muldoon certainly demands that readers read as many poems as possible, without the easy guideline of explanatory notes, to know the poets properly; thus ideally avoiding quick, easy and misleading conclusions.

This does not mean his selection is random. He sets Kavanagh and MacNeice up front as the two pillars who have had the most influence on contemporary Irish poets – the parochial sensitivity of Kavanagh, who lived all his life in Ireland, and MacNeice's cosmopolitan sense of place. Muldoon sees that Kavanagh became an icon to later poets such as Montague, Heaney and Durcan, while MacNeice is an exemplar to Longley, Mahon and Paulin, or 'Protestants who see themselves as occupying a particularly complex area between the pulls of England and Ireland' (Muldoon, 1994). Then, following the celebrated five poets, the anthology ends with the varied voices of three younger poets who explore social, political and private spheres. *The Faber Book* therefore has a well-thought construction.

Its Northern bias, however, was – and is – seen as problematical. As Michael Allen comments, the anthology 'seems to have dropped into the middle of a continuously seething sense of outrage in Dublin at the idea that any Irish poets should be called 'Northern' (Allen, 1990, 100). Kinsella in his edition of *New Oxford Book of Irish Verse*, published in the same year 1986, dismisses the so called 'Northern Ireland Renaissance' as 'a journalistic entity' (Kinsella, 1986, xxx). Peter Fallon and Derek Mahon's *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry*, published in 1990, purposes 'to correct imbalances created over the years by editors, publishers and critics, and to dispel the illusion that Irish poetry has been written exclusively by persons of Northern provenance, whether they live in Belfast, Dublin, Dingle or Berkeley, California' (Fallon and Mahon, 1990, xx). This is a mischievous swipe at Muldoon, who after leaving Belfast lived in Dingle and taught at the University of California. The conspicuousness of the border, the Troubles, and the Belfast Group certainly helped to publicise

Northern Irish poetry on one hand; but such things on the other misled critics as to the degree of its homogenisation. Edna Longley, however, argues that the Northernness of Muldoon's anthology rather indicates dissensus in contemporary Irish poetry and society: it is a 'counter-bias' against a singular, unified tradition of Irish poetry that Kinsella's anthology claims (Longley, 1994, 201).

That said, the anthology still has its unusual aspect – the very limited number of poets presented without any guidelines – for the vessel named a 'book of contemporary Irish poetry'. One reviewer even suspects: 'one can only assume that Faber were simply availing of the opportunity to consolidate their position as the leading publisher of Irish poets in Britain which is, of course, sound commercial sense in these difficult times' (Dawe, 1986, 21). Considering anthologies became popular in the twentieth century with the expansion of the institution of higher education, one may, as some reviewers are, be concerned about the danger of misrepresentation especially outside Ireland. Or one may, on the other, worry about its sales as a textbook, which would be better if it were introduced and annotated. Interestingly, as Muldoon revealed later, it was his editor at Faber, Craig Raine, who persuaded him that he should not write an introduction to the anthology (Muldoon, 1994). The Muldoonesque quality of the anthology was thus partly created by the publisher. It is, of course, Muldoon's poetical talent, which is a commercial value for the publisher, that enabled the publication of this challenging anthology. Faber's sense of values is certainly different from that of the BBC. And Muldoon alters his agenda accordingly, although his principal attitude toward poetry, that is, to let poems themselves speak, does not change.

Conclusion

Overall, Muldoon's activities in the BBC were politically moderate, though artistically interesting. If they were not directly significant in terms of his creative writing, they nevertheless constitute another layer of the context for that writing, beyond the more obvious one provided by the Troubles. Muldoon later looks back at his BBC years in an autobiographical poem 'They That Wash on Thursday' in *Hay*:

The Armalite in one hand
and the ballot box in the other. Men dying at hand.
Throughout all of which I would hand
back to continuity as the second hand

came up to noon. 'On the one hand . . .
On the other . . .' The much-vaunted even hand
of the BBC. Though they'd pretty much given me a free hand
I decided at length to throw in my hand
and tendered my resignation 'by hand'. (Muldoon, 1998, 83-84)

The lines suggests that Muldoon, or the arts, at the BBC was sandwiched in a narrow space between the violent reality of the Troubles and hourly news programmes that report such violence. The news and current affair programmes had to deal with socio-political issues with a sensitive 'even hand', while the arts were given a 'free hand'. However, the poem itself is controlled by the same 'hand', which gives this poem a formal framework as the end word of every line. The poem is typical of Muldoon who employs poetic forms, or he would rather say the forms use him, to release his poetics. Yet, on another level, in terms of Muldoon at the BBC, it can be allegorically read as the Corporation in the particular political situation at the time, be it the Troubles or Thatcherism, putting him under certain restrictions even if he claims freedom. Meanwhile, his off-BBC literary activities seem to have released him from this restriction. His BBC career, however, indicates many important aspects in his involvement with the cultural formation of contemporary Northern Ireland.

Notes

¹ The four monographs on Muldoon published so far (Kendall, 1996; Wills, 1998; Kendall and McDonald, 2004; and Holdridge, 2008), for example, fail to incorporate this aspect into their essential arguments; Muldoon's work in the BBC amounting to nothing more than biographical notes referred to in passing.

² During his interview, a tea trolley arrived. 'I'd been so well brought-up', Muldoon recalls, 'that I just naturally leaned over and said, "would you like a cup of tea?". They must have thought, "Here's a fine tea-bearer to the gods", which is basically what being a radio producer is' (Potts, 2001, 6).

³ Denys Hawthorne (1932-2009) and Allan MacClelland (1917-1989), Northern Irish actors.

⁴ Brian Barfield and Ronald Mason, arts producers at the BBC.

⁵ Exceptionally, he wrote a verse play for a St. Patrick's Day programme: 'The Great Debate', a version of the dialogue between St Patrick and Oisín, broadcast simultaneously by Radio

Ulster and Radio Éireann on St Patrick's Night of 1976. Only a couple of extracts were published in *Fortnight*, issue 131.

⁶ Michael Longley recalls: "The magazine programme Bazaar encouraged writers to do their own thing or try something entirely new. "I hear you're trying to give up the fags. Would you like to write about it? Five minutes, say?" Who could refuse? Part of the fun was wondering who else would be in the studio [. . .]. Paul brought us all together on the air and, without trying too hard, made Belfast feel like the centre of the universe' (BBC Northern Ireland, 2003).

⁷ The author listened to the recordings of these programmes by the courtesy of the BBC Northern Ireland Archives at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum. Their reference numbers are as follows: *Irish Poetry* (TBE37/UT680U, TBE38/UT681, TBE37/728U, TBE39/UT729, TBE41/UT730U, TBE42/UT731, TBE43/UT732, TBE43/UT733, TBE40/UT734U, TBE44/UT735, TBE47/UT737); *Faces of Ireland* (BBE02/140U031, BBE06/140U035, BBE11/140U038, BBE14/140U076, BBE19/140U077, BBE19/140U078); and *Time for Verse* (TBE627/86DBO142, TBE627/86DBO703, TBE627/860BO744, TBE627/860BO745, TBE627/86DBO746, TBE627/86DBO747, TBE627/86DBO748).

⁸ It is worth remembering that O'Boyle worked with Sam Hanna Bell for the BBC. He also worked on a number of other BBC programmes, among which was the programme Muldoon produced on Sam Henry's collection of traditional Ulster music, transmitted on 14 May, 1978. This programme was presented by Bell.

⁹ It is also published as "Tendencies in Modern Poetry: A Discussion between Prof. Higgins and Louis MacNeice" in *The Listener*, 27 July 1939.

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