

Making Integral: Critical Essays on Richard Murphy

Ed. Benjamin Keatinge

362 pages, 2019, €39

Cork University Press

Reviewed by Justin Quinn, University of West Bohemia

In biographical and artistic terms, few Irish poets are positioned as well as Richard Murphy to illustrate the complex contours of postcolonial debate. And yet, as John Goodby has remarked (in a quote in this book), there is, surprisingly, a “total absence of reference to Murphy in current critical debates on postcolonialism” (239). Why might that be? Seamus Heaney, in contrast, has drawn most of this discussion, and his fame beyond Ireland was at least in part due to the perception that he came from the side of the victims. *Pace* his Irish surname (in Irish, Ó Murchú, which means sea warrior), Murphy’s family for several preceding generations belonged to the Anglo-Irish Protestant minority. He was educated at Marlborough College and Oxford University. His father served as a colonial administrator of the British Empire. So, despite Murphy’s later sojourns on the Irish western seaboard, which is considered the area of the country least affected by colonialism and where the Irish language still hangs on, there persists a critical perception that Murphy was somehow distant from what some critics still think of as the native population (who are figured as more spontaneous, connected with the land and Irish culture more generally). While Murphy’s poetry deftly avoids this unhelpful binary, in interviews he often perpetuated it. Now that more romantic ideas of colony in Ireland are in abeyance, it is a good time to reconsider Murphy’s work.

This book opens with two fine essays by Maurice Harmon and Bernard O’Donoghue. The first provides an overview of Murphy’s significant achievements; it cleaves closely to the poetry itself, adducing biography and cultural background only minimally. It is a model of an older critical dispensation that relies on close reading. As has been frequently remarked, much postcolonial criticism has been devoted to novels, and this has often created difficulties for poetry. Jahan Ramazani, in *A Transnational Poetics* (2009), emphasized that we must be alert not just to the paraphrasable content of poetry, but also to the other ways the genre engages us—formally, aurally, and visually, as well as the ways in which it resonates with other poetic texts. Harmon’s chapter does this excellently. His implied binary wherein Murphy is excluded by his Anglo-Irish Ascendancy background from the more “spontaneous” Irish (3) will convince few

readers now; and his stamping of poems as affording “aesthetic pleasure” will seem beside the point; but his lucid, generous account of the oeuvre is good advocacy.

O’Donoghue’s chapter elucidates the way Murphy’s poetry incorporates a range of registers and dialects, while never sacrificing accessibility (the chapter is entitled, “Richard Murphy’s Plainstyles”). Kachru’s three circles of English alert us to the play between Inner and Outer Circles, and to the fractal differences that lie below such broad strokes. Murphy’s background is culturally intricate, and the constituencies of his work are likewise complex, ranging from his neighbors in rural Ireland to his literary associates in London and New York. This range of dialects—from the elite tones of his family, to Oxford (where he was educated), to the fishermen on the Irish Atlantic coast—carries with it complex postcolonial legacies, which Murphy’s rhymes and meters negotiate with admirable tact and sensitivity. In a brief essay, O’Donoghue reveals these implications.

Other highlights include Tom Walker’s essay on Richard Murphy’s radio work, and more generally the effect of radio on poetry in the 1950s and 1960s. The long poem, *The Battle of Aughrim* (1968), was commissioned by the BBC, and it may well be that this remains the best way to encounter the poem. For instance, Walker describes how the radio production used a variety of regional accents to emphasize different historical allegiances. Also of interest are the cultural politics of the BBC commissioning an Irish poet to write about a key event in the island’s history. Mark Wormald’s consideration of Murphy’s relationship with Ted Hughes is likewise illuminating. We see how, confronted with the Yorkshire poet’s Lawrentian melodramas of both theme and poetic form, Murphy responded in poems that defended the virtues of restraint in both areas. Eve Cobain considers Murphy’s relationship to U.S. poets, particularly Theodore Roethke and Robert Lowell, as to elucidating how the Irish poet’s contact with Confessionalism tested some of his ideas of how autobiography should be dealt with. She remarks that “throughout his career Murphy was intent on establishing a transnational conversation” (202), yet we may feel that the poet was ill-equipped for this. For he uncritically followed the dispensation of the time which figured U.S. poetry as untrammelled and British and Irish as more controlled. Cobain falls victim to this also; one wonders if Richard Wilbur, Elizabeth Bishop, Louise Bogan, and John Ashbery are not also U.S. poets.

Perhaps, most importantly of all, Murphy, along with the critics in this book, overlooked James Merrill. Here was a gay U.S. poet who came to maturity a decade before Stonewall, and whose poems of friendship and love drew upon all the formal resources of the anglophone tradition, elliptically describing acts and bonds that were illegal. For Merrill, style and nondisclosure were coevals. It was

perhaps the signal misrecognition of Murphy's career, when in December 1965, he read with Merrill in New York and failed to grasp this. Perhaps the likeness was too much for Murphy. In any case, it is good, then, to have James B. Kelley's essay on the gay aspects of Murphy's poetry. In relation to *The Price of Stone* (1985), he challenges "attempts to read the sequence as tracing the development of the poetic self from sterility to fertility" (225), as it moves from accounts of homosexual encounter to a description of the birth of the poet's son.

Tara Stubbs also engages with the same book, and in the process takes on some of the critical orthodoxies that have marginalized the work. Her advocacy is refreshingly stringent and precise, as she nudges aside the pronouncements of Heaney, Edna Longley, and Alan Gillis, arguing that they are based on vague, unstated criteria of aesthetic quality. Instead she proposes that, in *The Price of Stone*, Murphy allows his chosen form of the sonnet to buckle in ways that represent the complex contours of postcolonial experience mentioned above.

And finally the editor Benjamin Keatinge's own essay follows this implication, considering how Murphy's poetry can be read as part of broader debates about postcolonialism, as he deals with Murphy's time in Sri Lanka and in what was Rhodesia. In Keatinge's words, Murphy was both a "victim, as well as inheritor of imperial values and distortions" (246). So much criticism of Irish literature takes the stand-off with Britain as the major framework, but Keatinge helpfully states that "[t]he poet's background must therefore be situated within a wider context of Irish connections to other locations within the British Empire" (247). This pill has so far proved hard to swallow for Irish criticism. It also raises the question of why the editor did not seek critics from either Zimbabwe or Sri Lanka but has for the most part restricted himself to the academy of Ireland, Britain and the U.S. Such contributions might have provided surprising takes on those Irish connections to other places in the Empire.

Making Integral: Critical Essays on Richard Murphy is, then, an excellent and timely publication, which thwarts simplistic ideas of postcolonial poetry, both in Ireland and further afield.

Works Cited

Ramazani, Jahan. *A Transnational Poetics*. U of Chicago P, 2009.