Ambitions and Text

Tyler Farrell

Marquette University, tyler.farrell@marquette.edu

Winch’s regret is that he could never record his mother’s voice as she had died before this form of technology has become available to him. At the same time as they carried forward a tradition and handed it on to their children, serving as unpaid and unremunerated custodians, and as doormen to the wealthy and renowned career. It also engages in a survey of criticism about Montague and his works. Criticism and original work are important. Without them we would have no access to the works of the poet. Critical analysis of Montague’s poetry is important for a better understanding of his life and work.

Forms of Exile (1958), A Chosen Light (1967), The Rough Field (1972), Collected Poems (1995) and Smashing the Piano (1999), but also analyzes Montague’s memoir Company: A Chosen Life (2001) as well as collections of fiction, Death of a Chieflain and Other Stories (1964), and essays, The Figure in the Cave and Other Essays (1989). It is an essential guide to the artistic, prolific and poetic sides of John Montague contained in a collection that professor the importance of this man of Irish letters and the skill and genius in which he works.

While there has been a fair amount of scholarship on John Montague in more recent years, there has never been such a complete forum. A collection such as this will champion the curious and allow the Irish literature community a work to look at and use, a work that informs and instructs. It is a guide mandatory for any scholar of Montague (and indeed Irish Writing in general) with a cross section of ideas and insight. As editor Thomas Dillon Redshaw writes in the introductory essay, “this partial survey of criticism about Montague and his achievement cannot do more than suggest the past flow and flavor of the water there” in the commentary that has welled up in response to Montague’s writing over the past four decades” (1). Decidedly this serious study of Montague by respected critics of Irish literature (some of Montague’s contemporaries) is long overdue and welcomed by both Irish scholars and interested readers alike.

John Montague as author and poet is a curious subject considering that his American influence is felt almost as deeply as his Irish one. Criticism and original work has been shaped on both sides of the Atlantic allowing the poet the chance at a new form, a new style of writing that incorporates both nationalities simultaneously. Adrian Fraser states, “Less strict than British verse, more formal than American, Montague poems take a great variety of forms—magical description, dramatic monologues, elegies, lituraries, quest romance” (Irish Times Sept. 25, 2004 p. 13). Montague’s wide and influential style has always moved between these two worlds, slipping into America and soaking up culture at Yale (1953). The Iowa Writer’s Workshop (1954-55), and the University of California-Berkeley (1956) in order to forge a dual voice in writing that was based in Irish sentiment, but also felt quite uniquely American. After his time in the states he returned to Ireland to work for Bord Fáilte and later to compile The Dolmen Miscellany (with Liam Miller in 1962) announcing the arrival of a new generation of writers. Montague has always been a tireless champion of poets and poetry and now his adoring public is able to return the favor. He then worked in Paris as an Irish Times correspondent and continued to hail Irish writers as some of the world’s best while inspiring and organized readings, editing books of poetry (The Faber Book of...}

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**THOMAS DILLON REDSHAW, Editor**


Reviewed by: **TYLER FARRELL**

**THOROUGHLY COLLECTED AND SUPERBLY EDITED, Well Dreams: Essays on John Montague (edited by Thomas Dillon Redshaw) is a collection of 22 essays that fills a long and deep void in criticism on one of Ireland’s greatest living writers. Well Dreams serves new and old generations of artists with scholarly essays on works from much of Montague’s long and renowned career. It also engages in a patient exploration of subject displaying a wide and serious reading of the writer at hand and his value to our literary and artistic world. The criticism not only addresses many books of poems including...**
Irish Verse, 1974) and writing his own work. Montague's career is long and highly recognized as a poet's life filled with the travellings, experiences and ideals that are ever present in his work. Well Dreams attempts to engage in those themes and does so through conciseness and adoration for its subject as well as a chorting of the light that Montague has shed upon the modern poetic world.

Many of the essays in Well Dreams focus on Montague's poetry as well as his comparison and placement with other writers such as Joyce, Yeats, Murphy, and Hussey. Montague is among excellent company, and rightly so. While he is a writer of many styles and genres, Montague will primarily be remembered for his poetry, the bulk of a life work that spans almost fifty years. He even states in the preface to his book of essays, The Figure in the Cove, that "poetry always came first" (ix). In the same work he also hails the critic as someone necessary to the art of writing, someone who has a tremendous influence on creating reviews and analyzing works. "No word is final except the always renewed text, which the critic should serve as enthusiastic mediator... Writers who are sure of their own gift can often show a warming generosity towards fellow craftsmen" (iv). No true words have been written which can be directly related to Well Dreams and its collection of fellow writers giving admiration to a renowned and respected artist, critics that serve as "enthusiastic mediators" and wordsmiths filled with warm generosity towards an Irish literary craftsman. These authors write about Montague with honor and dignity, relating feelings admiration and respect. The reader can almost sense each critic, each essay being a writer who helped shape twentieth century Irish literature.

Many of the styles, forms, and influences on Montague's writings are commented upon luminously in Well Dreams, from Daniel Tobin's superb essay on the "double vision" of Montague's dual identity and the historical, social and political forces acting on his poetry, to Eamonn Wall's look at Montague's Collected Poems and how the poet is underrated despite his tackling of poignant themes in a long going and framed career. There are ideas about Montague and his writing that are not always examined enough, but Well Dreams digs further into the deep water of the poet's sea clearly exhibiting a certain un-enrasable identity, a permanent figuration of language, place, birth and influence. Montague's collections have always been infectious, turning on a generation of writers, but they are also prone to analysis and culminate in a work that tells of his poetic disposition and his long and influential career.

Tobin addresses the notion of Montague being a poet shaped by both Ireland and America as well as a writer who works inside himself, using this "struggle for imaginative self-possession" (145) to identify a perceptible world of vision, knowledge, and reality. This reality is seen from the American shores looking east to a new Ireland, a new understanding and different source from Montague's echoes of Yeats and the link between the mythological and the real, the internal conflicts of the self in a larger framework. It is an important essay in the Montague rhetoric of critical discourse and one that analyzes a theme common to most of his works, a central contemplation on the genesis of the poet's personal meditations, the encompassment of multiple surroundings and influences. Similarly Eamonn Wall comments on the necessity of Montague's Collected Poems and the issues that are raised including the importance of craft, the subjects of politics and history, the illuminating and moving aspects to Montague's poetry and how the writer has "registered the immigrant life so tellingly" (374) in this collection of principal works. The essays allow the reader to see the culmination of subject, the themes and styles in which the writer engages in and how they connect a new sense of art. The clarity and elegance of Montague's writing is only heightened by these essays and their natural standard of vision so clearly defined by these scholars of Irish literature.

It seems that scholars who finally admitting to Montague's impact and studying him in a way that Yeats, Clarke or Kavanaugh (See Thomas O'Grady's essay on "Montague's Tyrone" or Richard Bizot's essay on Montague's Time in Armagh) have been analyzed, looking deeply into the poet's style, form and subject matter while also engaging in the commentary of the times of the poet, in the ways in which the poet creates, the impact the poet has had on other writers (both American or Irish). These scholarly endeavors address the establishment of Montague as well as Grubgeld, birthing like his and future necessity of study. Another excellent essay is one by Elizabeth Grubgeld who looks at Montague in the poet World War II era of America and the "point of origin" of the poet's style, comparing him to such notable American poets as Lowell, Berryman and Ginsberg. Grubgeld focuses specifically on the honest and confessional style that allows the reader to see Montague's emotion and intimacy. His writings often engage the autobiographical and add sections of religion, mythology and history in an aesthetic and transcendental process. According to Grubgeld this voice is present most notably in The Rough Field (1972) and The Dead Kingdom (1984) and both show new ideals of visual ambitions, sentiment and development in the poet. After all, Montague's writing (most often his poetry) is daring, visual, elegant, honest, tribal, important and political or historically especially when placed in the backdrop of the advent of the second Irish revival in 1960's Dublin or the culmination of the "Troubles" in Northern Ireland in 1969. The formation of Montague's Ireland (or Montague's post-war American) can be directly linked to the formation of the poet, the formation of the self: It is a notion of "place" that allows Montague to preserve memory, to engage in a sort of making myth.

Some other essays of note include David Cantwell's essay on Montague and his editing of The Dolmen Miscellanies, an important anthology not only for its inclusion of famous Irish writers, but also for its understanding of the direction in which Irish writing was headed during the middle of the twentieth century. Gardner does a superb job of re-teiling and re-analyzing the importance of such a book and its placement during Ireland's "Emergency" isolation of the soon to be European Union and the economic and political background of a country in an "era of inhibitions" (63). Also something important of note about Well Dreams are the two bookended essays by the editor himself, Thomas Dillon Redshaw. Redshaw begins the collection with an essay about the readers of Montague, the scholarly writers who engage in Montague criticism to discover more about the man and his writing as well as teach the other reasons for Montague's continued and respectable reputation. It is a wonderful and engaging essay filled with historical and literary knowledge of the subject and his provocative poetry. Redshaw essentially gives us a Montague timeline, a look into the criticism and its relation to the book in your hands. Redshaw then finishes the collection, with a short essay of introduction for the impeccable bibliography that is to follow. He relays to us the effort involved in collecting information on a poet of Montague's stature and that sets the preliminary times in this is impressive and telling, a remarkable achievement that will evidently have a formidable impact.

It is interesting to see Montague placed in a huge spectrum of writers. His career is long and extensive as a writer and an editor and scholars who engage on and research him are his most successful. In his essay Dillon Johnston comments on Montague's readership in the 1960's and 1970's while also telling of his breakthrough with certain books, (most notably A Choice Light, The Way to die of a Chieftain), his reading organized by Liam Miller in The Royal Hibernian Hotel in 1961, his founding of Claddagh Records, his work with MacGibbon and Kee on Kavanaugh's writings, his tribute to Austin Clarke. The history of Montague in the middle of the 20th century is a whose of writers and artists, a virtual behemoth of Irish letters, a force to be reckoned with. It seems that he worked tirelessly to promote Irish poetry in every shape and form and his extensive career, as well as these essays, reflect these efforts. For new and young practicing poets Montague's career aspirations will long provide a model for many generations of Irish and Irish-American poets. Scholars and poets alike will see how Well Dreams exhibits essays that stand to outshine Montague's works (from a scholarly angle, but also address the poet's personal quest for freedom as a writer. This work holds stories of an often historical and very real side of a significant writer's extensive and exciting literary life.

In the first installment to Montague's memoir, Company: A Chosen Life, he is asked the question, "Do you think you are a poet?" Montague responds, "I dedicated this question as delicately as possible, murmuring the old Irish belief that it was an honor only others could bestow, and should not be claimed too loosely by oneself, or some such sentimental sentiment" (Company, 138). It is safe to say that Montague is not only a poet, (categorized by his colleagues) but also a renowned Irish/American writer. He has been an artist for many years and his influence is greatly felt among Irish scholars and in the world of Irish letters and place. His poems are intriguing, symbolic, thought provoking and historical while also being personal and internal. Montague has made his career on these ideals and seems to have done it with very little ego or misdirection always channeling a new voice, a unique style that exhibits Irish intelligence and grace. The complexity of the American and Irish poet's adventure is now more understood and Montague can now comprehend that his impact in this realm is greatly felt.

In his essay Eamonn Wall writes that Montague's Collected Poems is a "fitting testament to a great man who occupies a central place in the narrative of Irish writing as it has unfolded in the last half of the twentieth century" (363). We can safely say that Well Dreams has not only added to that placement, but also solidified Montague in Ireland at the beginning of the second millennium. A book that is now readable and a book that scholars and schools will want to order to keep abreast of the best critical writings on Montague. Well Dreams is an exploration into great modern Irish literature, a truly necessary and valuable work that spurs Montague's long career while commenting clearly and thoughtfully on a poet of significant stature and one quite worthy of many future studies.

—University of Missouri-St. Louis