

## Towards a farewell: a brief life

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Michael Hartnett was born on 18 September 1941 in Croom Hospital, Co. Limerick, to a backdrop befitting a man destined to disrupt conventions, break moulds and shake foundations. In his ‘Maiden Street Ballad’ he proclaims:

Nineteen forty-one was a terrible year,  
The bread it was black and the butter was dear;  
You couldn't get fags and you couldn't get tea –  
We smoked turf-dust and had to drink porter.  
To work in the bog brave men volunteered  
When Hitler was bombing the land and the sea,  
And to cap it all off I appeared on the scene  
And threw everything into disorder.<sup>1</sup>

Not unlike his literary career, Hartnett's childhood was characterized by a duality in terms of family, place and language, giving him a sense of being on the outside from the start. One of six children (two others died at an early age) born to Denis and Bridie Harnett, he grew up in the town of Newcastle West, Co. Limerick, with his sister, Mary and brothers Billy, Dinny, Gerard and John. His son Niall tells a fascinating story about Hartnett's surname which suggests an early beginning to his linguistic duality. His birth certificate incorrectly entered the surname Hartnett, as opposed to Harnett, but Michael was later reluctant to change it back because he felt that Hartnett was closer to the Irish Ó hAirtnéide, indicating an early fascination with the symbiosis between Irish and English. At the age of three Hartnett was sent to live with his grandmother, Brigid Halpin, who lived in Camas, a townland in the parish of Templeglantine, west of Newcastle West. He was educated in the local primary school, and then in the well-known and enlightened St Ita's secondary school in Tarbert, Co. Kerry, run by the redoubtable Jane Agnes Mc Kenna, a school that would later boast both Gabriel Fitzmaurice and Brendan Kennelly as alumni. The change from Newcastle West would have been dramatic, taking him from the working-class neighbourhood of Maiden Street in the town to a small rural

<sup>1</sup> Michael Hartnett, *A Book of Strays* (Oldcastle, Co. Meath, 2002), p. 28.

farm. In his 'Maiden Street Ballad' he portrays a bustling town-life full of comings-and-goings, and a childhood landscape not unlike that of working-class communities in the inner-cities, an environment that he was to evoke at a later stage in his *Inchicore Haiku*. It is in this cross-cultural exchange that Hartnett's poetry finds some of its most effective expression:

Full of stolen autumn apples  
 We watched the tinkers fight it out,  
 The cause a woman or a horse.  
 Games came in their seasons,  
 Horseshoes, bowling, cracking nuts,  
 Sceilig, marbles – frozen knuckled,  
 Bonfire Night, the skipping-rope  
 And small voices on the golden road.<sup>2</sup>

Paralleling this proto-urban wasteland was the life he encountered on a small farm in Camas. What is particularly noticeable about these poems is the typical Hartnett lack of sentimentality about both the urban and the rural, a stylistic feature of his poetry that contradicts the often near romanticization of Irish rural life that places Hartnett closer to Kavanagh than Yeats, and it can certainly be argued that these two worlds would inform his poetry and his poetic sensibility for practically all of his career. Indeed, the lack of sentimentality about nearly all aspects of his often troubled life infuses his poetry with a refreshing honesty and consequent harrowing brutality. Hartnett writes in his poem 'A Small Farm':

All the perversions of the soul  
 I learnt on a small farm,  
 how to do the neighbours harm  
 by magic, how to hate.  
 I was abandoned to their tragedies,  
 Minor but unhealing.<sup>3</sup>

Hartnett's well-documented travels began soon after leaving secondary school and included labouring jobs in London in the early 1960s. In 1962 he went to Dublin and there began his gradual initiation into the world of the literati. He had been writing poems since he was 13 and now aged 21 he found himself in the midst of

<sup>2</sup> Michael Hartnett, *Collected Poems* (Oldcastle, Co. Meath, 2001), p. 102. <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

Dublin's vibrant, competitive and vitriolic literary culture. He quickly found a supporter and ally in the shape of the founder of *Poetry Ireland*, John Jordan, who generously paid Hartnett's fees at UCD where he studied for an Arts degree. However, he soon discovered that the disciplines of the scholar were not part of his make-up: 'My first and only year in university was not distinguished. I was more interested in the streets of Dublin than in the infallibility of the Angelic Doctor.'<sup>4</sup>

After a stint with *Arena*, an influential literary magazine that he co-edited with James Liddy and Liam O'Connor from 1963 to 1965, Hartnett eventually left for London in 1965, having also spent time in Madrid the previous year. It was in London, in 1965, that he met his future wife, Rosemary Grantley, and they were married on 4 April 1966. They had two children; Lara, born in 1968, and Niall, born in 1971. The marriage was initially very happy and the poems in *Anatomy of a Cliché*, a book of love poetry dedicated to and about his relationship with his wife, was published in 1968 by Liam Miller's Dolmen Press to great critical approval. This collection displays some of Hartnett's finest lyrical meditations on love and death in variant tones, often tender, sometimes violent, but always capable of capturing what he perceived to be the essence of a particular emotional experience. The poems are raw, powerful evocations of an intense relationship that was, unfortunately, to later unravel. The deep and passionate nature of their initial bond is captured in the poem 'Mo Ghrá thú':

So rare will my flesh cry out  
I will not call at strange times.  
We will couple when you wish:  
for your womb estranges death.  
Jail me in this gentle land,  
let your hands hold me: I am  
not man until less than man.<sup>5</sup>

In the period leading up to 1975 Michael Hartnett experienced what could be described as an epiphany both as man and poet. It was this year which saw the publication of *A Farewell to English*, which would be his final collection of poems in English until his reversion in 1985. In what is now generally considered to be recognized as his signature poem, Hartnett describes the gradual and inexorable lure of the Irish language as it increasingly became his language of literary com-

<sup>4</sup> Michael Hartnett, 'The Dublin literary world', *Merre Eleven* (Winter 2001/2), p. 133. <sup>5</sup> *Collected Poems* (2001), p. 62.

munication. It was, in many ways, like a slow birth, painful but irreversible, frightening but ultimately joyful, and it is in this dual language tradition that Hartnett achieved perhaps his greatest literary notoriety. In the opening lines of 'A Farewell to English', he elucidates the burgeoning love of an ancient language that was soon to become his exclusive medium:

The clichés came at first, like matchsticks snapping from the world of work: *mánla, séimb, dubhfholtach, álainn, caoin*:  
they came like grey slabs of slate breaking from an ancient quarry, *mánla, séimb, dubhfholtach, álainn, caoin*, slowly vaulting down the dark unused escarpments, *mánla, séimb, dubhfholtach, álainn, caoin*.<sup>6</sup>

Hartnett's journey towards Irish was greeted with a mixture of applause and derision, twin reactions that were to regularly feature in the critical reaction to his new oeuvre. There were those who read his manifesto-like poem as shallow posturing and were cynical about the eventual result of such a venture. It was especially difficult as derision came from two sides: his contemporaries writing in English and from Irish language purists who would have been suspicious of his competence in the language. Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill writes of this typically dualistic response:

He got little thanks from the established writers of either language for this enormous sacrifice. The English-language literati, perhaps threatened at some deep level by this action, turned snide, muttering about his farewell to English that 'nothing so became him as his leaving it'. He also found the welcome of the Gaeilgeoirí less forthcoming than he might have expected.<sup>7</sup>

Hartnett was aware that this appropriation of the Irish language was potentially an exercise in falsehood and self-delusion. He was clearly concerned that he might well be crossing into a tradition not fully accessible to those considered outside the linguistic parameters of his native cultural tradition, and this concern is one that features strongly in many of the essays in this collection. His unease is brilliantly captured in these lines of the 'Farewell':

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 141. <sup>7</sup> Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, 'Foighne Chrainn: The Patience of a Tree', *Metre Eleven* (Winter 2001/2) p. 151.

Then Pegasus pulled up, the girth broke and I was flung back  
on the gravel of Anglo-Saxon.  
What was I doing with these foreign words?  
I, the polisher of the complex clause,  
wizard of grasses and warlock of birds,  
midnight-oiled in the metric laws:<sup>8</sup>

This engagement with the Irish language coincided with what could be seen as Hartnett's experiment in living when he decided, in the summer of 1975, to take his family from the capital and settle in the perceived pastoral idyll of Templeglantine in West Limerick. Though he often described this move in terms of exile his journey was more about the rediscovery of a familiar childhood landscape than a journey into unknown territory. The new house was a mere five miles from Newcastle West and Niall Hartnett traces the beginning of the end of his parents' marriage from this time. Hartnett's well-documented fondness for drink increasingly became a dominant influence in his life and he gradually slipped into what would eventually become a fatal alcoholism. Hartnett was returning to an area with which he was familiar, his grandmother being one of the last native Irish speakers in West Limerick and as such she proved to be a hugely influential figure in his attempt to legitimize what many perceived to be a false conversion. Though she spoke English to Hartnett he recalls listening to her from his attic room late at night as she conversed in Irish with neighbours. In these years he became acquainted not only with a language but with a world-view which was on the verge of annihilation. In his poem 'Death of an Irishwoman' he describes her otherworldliness:

Ignorant, in the sense  
she ate monotonous food  
and thought the world was flat,  
and pagan, in the sense  
she knew the things that moved  
at night were neither dogs nor cats  
but púcas and darkfaced men,  
she nevertheless had fierce pride.  
But sentenced in the end  
to eat thin diminishing porridge  
in a stone-cold kitchen

<sup>8</sup> *Collected Poems* (2001), p. 141.

she clenched her brittle hands  
 around a world  
 she could not understand.<sup>9</sup>

If his grandmother offered him a certain legitimacy on entering the confines of Gaelic tradition, the poetic legacy of his native place was also an important ingredient in his reasoning. In 'A Farewell to English' he sees a landscape in which the past and its ghosts are tangible manifestations of a tradition coming under increasing pressure from the forces of modernity. In the following lines he magically encounters the figures of three of the most important poets of the Gaelic tradition, Pádraigín Haicéad, Dáibhí Ó Bruadair and Aogán Ó Rathaille, giants of a tradition that he so desperately wanted to join:

These old men walked on the summer road  
 Súgán belts and long black coats  
 With big ashplants and half-sacks  
 Of rags and bacon on their backs.  
 They stopped before me with a knowing look  
 Hungry, snotnosed, half-drunk.  
 I said 'grand evening',  
 And they looked at me a while,  
 They took their road  
 To Croom, Meentogue and Cahirmoyle.  
 They looked back once,  
 Black moons of misery  
 Sickling their eye-sockets,  
 A thousand years of history  
 In their pockets.<sup>10</sup>

Though these elements offer a context for Hartnett's adoption of Irish they do not quite explain the strength of his conviction and the purity of purpose at the heart of this poetic endeavour. To readers of poetry in English and people outside of the Irish language movement there is an obvious temptation to see Hartnett as a language revivalist or a torchbearer for the cause of cultural and linguistic renewal. When Hartnett turned to the Irish language he was automatically in danger of being branded a '*Gaeilgeoir*', which in Irish simply means a speaker of the language

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 139    <sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 142.

but when used by English-speakers it tends to be pejorative signifying a narrow nationalism infused with a heavy-handed Catholicism. This is wholly understandable in a country where most non-native speakers of the language had encountered the 'enthusiast', whose hardline approaches had rarely engendered anything more than alienation and resentment. Hartnett's *volte face* ultimately shed light on the contentious position of the role of language revivalists in a country that had turned its back on a language long associated with poverty, famine and a resistance to change. When questioned about his reasons for turning to Irish he was quick to disassociate himself from the mainstream language revivalist movement:

My main and most simple reason for changing to Gaelic is that I love the language (I have no interest in *Conradhs*, *Cumanns*, *Comisiúns* or churches). That any language would be allowed to die and that poets who are acquainted with it, borrow from it and even love it, should do nothing, is to me incomprehensible.<sup>11</sup>

This idealism is reflected in many of Hartnett's poems. He was disconcertingly political, fully prepared to nail his colours to the mast without appearing to be a zealot. He managed to engage with the thorny issue of Irish nationalism without the usual sectarian undertones, and this, given the unstable political climate in which he found himself, was an important legacy. In the conclusion to the 'Farewell' he outlines his poetic manifesto:

Poets with progress  
make no peace or pact.  
The act of poetry is a rebel act.

Though he shunned any attempt at political or ideological categorization, his decision struck at the heart of a political imperative in which the fostering of the native language was a central politico-cultural ideology. In Irish he had found a tool of subversion against 'the attitude of the government of the time – a coalition government containing Conor Cruise O'Brien et al. Irish was an embarrassing language to have – you couldn't trade with it in Brussels. I wanted to make a stand, for what it was worth.'<sup>12</sup> Following on from this decision in 1978 he published his first collection in Irish, entitled *Adharca Broic*.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Hartnett, 'Why write in Irish?', *Irish Times*, 26 August 1975. <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*



What is particularly interesting in the development of Hartnett's Irish poetry is the fact that during this period he was also publishing ballads in English, poems which were not given a great deal of critical acclaim and attention. These ballads, however, attempted to capture the vernacular of the town of Newcastle West and in many respects they were as subversive an act for a 'high-brow' English poet as the adoption of Irish. The poems were very often works of social and political critique, harking back to the traditional Irish ballad of social and cultural protest. The opening verse of 'Maiden Street Ballad', for example, makes it quite clear that this work is by no means a return to his previous status as an intellectual poet:

Come all you young poets and listen to me,  
and I hope that my words put a flea in your ears;  
a poet's not a poet until the day he can write a few songs for his people.  
You can write about roses in ivory towers  
and dazzle the critics with your mental powers,  
but unless from your high horse you cannot come down  
you're guilty of poetic treason.<sup>13</sup>

If the Irish language was a gateway to the world of his grandmother and the great Gaelic masters, his 'Maiden Street Ballad' was a vehicle to celebrate and immortalise the urban environment of Newcastle West and in so doing write for his other 'tribe', embodied in the person of Denis Hartnett. His father's socialist politics and urban upbringing paralleled the Gaelic tradition on his mother's side, and this conflict provided Hartnett with a good deal of personal debate and poetic exploration. The importance of his father in Hartnett's perception of his artistic vision can be clearly seen in the 'Maiden Street Ballad':

Your friends are your friends, for better or worse,  
to speak to the straight put rhyme in your verse;  
if the critics don't like it they can all kiss my arse –  
as long as it's read by my father.<sup>14</sup>

In the Irish tradition, the ballad has a long and enduring history having its genesis in the tradition of *amhránaíocht na ndaoine*. The ballad form is generally associated with the theme of romantic love and the celebration of place and tribe. The ballad form is also associated with satire and as a tool in the proliferation of revo-

<sup>13</sup> *A Book of Strays*, p. 27. <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*



lutionary politics. In the twentieth century it has become associated with socialist ideology as it is generally deemed to be an art form of and for the people. In his 'Maiden Street Ballad' (often to be sung to the tune of 'The Rakes of Limerick') Hartnett has produced a classic of the genre, characterised as it is by a strong sense of place, humorous and biting satire and a recognisably socialist political outlook:

So come all you employers, beware how you act  
for a poet is never afraid of a fact:  
your grasping and greed I will always attack  
like Aherne and Barry before me.  
My targets are only the mean and the proud  
and the vandals who try to make dirt of this town,  
if their fathers were policemen they'd still feel the clout  
of a public exposure in poetry.<sup>15</sup>

In recent years the whole area of translation studies has garnered greater acceptance as an academic discipline, exemplified in the work of Michael Cronin. In Ireland this is particularly welcome as its history of translation activity is rich and diverse. From an early age Hartnett embraced the practice of translation and adaptation, which he saw as an important part of his apprenticeship in the craft of poetry. As early as 1963 he wrote an English version of the Chinese *Tao* based on a Victorian translation while in 1964 he went to Spain, deliberately learning Spanish in order to attempt a translation of Lorca's *The Gypsy Ballads*, a text which appeared in 1973. In 1969 he completed his first major translation from the Irish of *The Hag of Bearard* and over the years he translated many texts from Old and Middle Irish into English. He has been instrumental in bringing the work of contemporary poets such as Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Gabriel Rosenstock to an English-speaking audience.

He will, however, be best remembered for his translation of three masters from the Irish tradition: Dáibhí Ó Bruadair, Pádraigín Haicéad and Aogán Ó Rathaille. The following extract from his introduction to *Ó Bruadair* reveals his rigorous approach to the art of translation:

Many would say that I have created an unnecessary and insurmountable barrier between myself and Ó Bruadair in my insistence that a poet who is such a consummate craftsman should be translated with obsessive care, that his techniques should be brought across as faithfully as possible.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30. <sup>16</sup> Michael Hartnett, *Ó Bruadair* (Oldcastle, Co. Meath, 1985), p. 13.

By 1984, Hartnett's marriage was effectively over, largely as a consequence of his heavy drinking, and he moved alone to Dublin, settling eventually in Inchicore. In September, 2004, Dublin Tourism honoured Hartnett with a plaque to commemorate his *Inchicore Haiku* of 1985 and this work was to mark his return to writing in English:

My English dam bursts  
and out stroll all my bastards.  
Irish shakes its head<sup>17</sup>

In his *Inchicore Haiku* Hartnett displays his ability to easily adapt to strict poetic forms and this collection remains one of his most widely recognized achievements as a poet. The collection also charts, with startling honesty, Hartnett's struggle with alcohol, and the self-portrait that emerges is not a pretty one. His reliance on alcohol was a clear factor in not only the breakdown of his marriage, but his increasing personal isolation and eventual early death from liver damage in 1999.

In the years that followed he wrote in both languages, often writing in Irish and translating into English. In 1987 he published *A Necklace of Wrens*, which was his first dual-language collection. In 1989 he published *Poems to Younger Women*, his first full collection in English since 1975. In 1992 he published *The Killing of Dreams* and the nineties see Hartnett grappling with the fear experienced by many middle-aged poets, namely that of the waning muse as well as expressing an ever-deepening spiritual consciousness. John McAuliffe has said of his later poetry: 'The later volumes introduce more thoughtful and ruminative poems, and his designs on his reader are joined by a self-scrutiny that is as unsettling as ever.'<sup>18</sup>

Michael Hartnett died on 13 October 1999, from Alcoholic Liver Syndrome brought about by his prolonged drinking, and was buried in the graveyard in Newcastle West. His partner of almost fifteen years, Angela Liston, was immensely supportive of Hartnett as his health declined and is credited by many observers as being a hugely influential figure in his later years. His body of work is a testament to his lifelong struggle with complacency and a desire to write with an honesty and integrity that marks him out as one of the most over-looked yet influential Irish poets of the twentieth century.

<sup>17</sup> *Collected Poems* (2001), p. 149. <sup>18</sup> John McAuliffe, 'Alien nation: Michael Hartnett and his audience', *Metre Eleven* (Winter 2001/2), p. 191.