Thomas McCarthy’s Hidden Irelands

Thomas Dillon Redshaw

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Many Irish readers know the poetry of Thomas McCarthy (b. 1954) from *Mr Dineen’s Careful Parade: New and Selected Poems* (1999). Even though the prose romance at the heart of *Merchant Prince* (2005) amply displays McCarthy’s tale-spinning talents, fewer readers chance to recall his fiction. At home up on Cork city’s Montenotte neighborhood, McCarthy has also published anthologies, a personal memoir, and a generous range of humane criticism since 1978, when Liam Miller’s Dolmen Press produced McCarthy’s first collection *The First Convention*. McCarthy’s everyday life and his ready imagination have been shaped—as was Jorge Luis Borges’s in Buenos Aires—by his chosen service as a municipal librarian for Cork City Libraries. Ever solicitous of the wayward tourist or indigent reader in the Central Library—or exhausted mother or new immigrant at the Hollyhill branch in Knocknaheeny—McCarthy cherishes the fictions of the Anglo-Irish South—of Elizabeth Bowen, Molly Keane, and William Trevor. Having helped save or sort from the city’s shelves the forgotten but informing fictions of nineteenth-century Ireland or pre-famine Cork, McCarthy cheerfully displays each lost world on request as in “Cataloguing Twelve Fenian Novels” or in *Merchant Prince* (2005).

The passé world of Anglo-Ireland and the equally passé world of nineteenth-century Ireland before the
Famine stand in McCarthy’s whole imagination as Irelands worth our knowing. And he knows they stand almost lost to us in the vertigo of the Celtic Tiger’s material exuberance and our dismay at the insubstantiality of those acclaimed goods. If we ask at the desk of the Cork Central Library for reportage on Ireland’s small economy, McCarthy will ultimately take us to the Irish Press, and then to that passé world of de Valera, Seán Lemass, Jack Lynch—of Fianna Fáil on the ground and in the Ard-Fheis. Of course, this is not to say that McCarthy’s poetry and prose neglects the perennial themes of western fiction and poetry—love, family, mortality. Nor is this to say that the librarian trope should cover McCarthy’s livelihood as a shareholder in the cultural fortunes of Cork, or as a citizen in the Republic, or as a public intellectual in today’s Ireland. Rather, the trope helps account for the emergence and persistence of, so far, the three matters of Ireland to which McCarthy has been drawn for more than three decades.

In an essay collected in Repossessions (1995), Seán ÓTuama offered a memoir defending the critic, short story writer, and Irish language activist Daniel Corkery (1878—1964). There Ó Tuama recalls Corkery as an inspiring lecturer at University College Cork, and, later, as a sometimes “tiresome” mentor whose Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature (1931) and Hidden Ireland: A Study of Gaelic Munster in the Eighteenth Century (1925) spark debate even today. In particular, Ó Tuama seeks to readjust Louis Cullen’s 1969 “re-assessment of a concept”—the concept of a “hidden Ireland.” Of course, in Hidden Ireland, Corkery defines the genre of the Gaelic aisling so that
no future Irish writer might overlook it. Corkery also defines not so much a new historiography or sociology of Gaelic, eighteenth-century Munster, but a literary culture that scants the Big House in favor of the Court of poetry and a complex of literary practices formerly unattested to as whole. In effect, Corkery does for the *aisling* what Ezra Pound did by translating *Donna mi prega* and spinning an essay on the Tuscan poet Guido Cavalcanti around it in 1931. Likewise, Corkery does for the literary culture of Munster what the English critic Patrick Cruttwell did in *The Shakespearean Moment* (1954). Interestingly, Corkery’s promulgation of “hidden Ireland” in 1925 corresponded with the oft-noted triumph of the Men of the South in the Dublin government of the Free State at the close of the Irish Civil War. The “hidden Ireland” concept – essentially one of “occlusion” in present critical parlance – entered the conservative curricula of the South and Ireland’s educated imagination. Fifty years after Corkery, the idea of “hidden Ireland” returned to pertinence, but in the North, as attested to by Pádraig Ó Snodaigh’s *Hidden Ulster* (1973, 1977), later subtitled *Protestants and the Irish Language* (1995).

At the risk of offending Irish historians, Corkery’s general concept – that of cultural and therefore critical occlusion – may be applied to some aspects of Irish writing in both Irish and English, and particularly to the fiction and poetry of Thomas McCarthy. Of course, having taken one of Frank O’Connor’s backward looks to glimpse Corkery in Ó Tuama’s memoir, an irony comes to face us. The cohesive traditions and accomplishments of eighteenth-century Gaelic Munster were, in Corkery’s construct, overshadowed by the language and metropolitan
aspirations – to Dublin, to London – by the Ascendancy. And today, after decades of social and political crisis in Northern Ireland, the deeply moralized drama of the North – with all its attendant permutations of theme and expression – might be said to have distorted or discounted the imagination of daily living in the remainder of Ireland – in the Saorstát and the Republic from the “Great Emergency” on – and in that social remainder of Ireland – not the metropolis of Dublin, but those towns and townlands only on the margins of the European Union. For some four decades now, writing from the North has been taken as dominantly important, essential, unavoidable. How can writing from Cork or Cappoquin presume that gravitas of human concern automatically donated to writing from Donaghadee or Derry?

Inadvertently, the way was paved for the hegemony of the matter of Ulster in the moral attention of the reader by writers and critics of the second Irish Revival dating from James Liddy’s Arena (1964—65) through Thomas Kinsella’s The Tain (1969) and John Montague’s The Rough Field (1972). Many Irish writers in the 1960s subscribed to a view of Irish writing and culture summed up by Maurice Harmon in 1966 – the year of the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising – as an “Era of Inhibitions.” Since the publication of Harmon’s article, the meaning of the “Era of Inhibitions”\(^6\) has devolved into devaluative critical commonplaces that, basically, have had the effect of dismissing the literary accomplishments of the South from the time of de Valera’s rise in 1932 through his death in 1975. Those accomplishments that survived did so because they bore the hallmarks of restive complaint, sharp criticism, and impatience with the pieties
of a local and complacent Catholicity. John Montague’s 1951 manifesto for Seán Ó Faoláin’s *The Bell* exemplifies the rhetoric of that critical stance:

...The present anthology of views may help to clear up or at least show the confusion of issues—a kind of ambivalence that comes from wavering between the undoubted achievements of an *exhausted tradition* and the *retarded growth of a real, contemporary Irish literature*. ...It would appear that to write well in Ireland requires greater courage and clarity of purpose and dedication than ever before; no complete rejection of the past will suffice but a *ruthless severing of dead branches* that black out the sunlight.7

Montague’s hedgerow metaphor regards prior Irish writing as shadowing, covering, stunting overgrowth. Later, in a 1973 interview with Eavan Boland, Montague lamented that “For about twenty years Irish literature had no contact with the outside world. Ó Faoláin and O’Connor had their American audiences. But Irish poets had been wiped off the map.”8 By the time these attitudes and their corollaries had become commonplaces of Irish cultural criticism, the more “real” drama of the North proved ready to occupy cleared ground.

Hailing from County Tyrone and educated in the late 1940s at Professor Tierney’s University College Dublin, Montague settled in Cork in 1971 after a decade of writing and teaching in the United States, Dublin, and Paris. A number of now prominent Southern poets – Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Gregory O’Donoghue, Greg Delanty, Seán Dunne – had the benefit of his presence, and of Sean Lucy’s, and of Seán Ó Tuama’s. All may be found in

If Only They Had Strength

When Senator Yeats met with his Academy in Jammet’s Restaurant he was light years away from the common ‘cumann’ life of real power, of street politics and street conditions. His Academy, truly, was without power in the political sense. It was Fianna Fáil that was already forming that country for young men. But Yeats was indeed forming another serious power-base: the polling district of the imagination. He was mapping out an imaginative territory. His action was crucial to poets, perhaps to three generations of poets: but it has absolutely no effect in the polling districts of the ambitious poor who clustered around de Valera and Lemass rather than Peadar Ó Donnell or Nora Connolly. Art must wait. Labour must wait: such an old Irish story.

The poems of Thomas McCarthy figure in both Jumping Off Shadows and The Inherited Boundaries. A native

The title of McCarthy’s first collection – *The First Convention* – alludes to the party political conventions and particularly to the Ard-Fheiseanna of de Valera’s Fianna Fáil party. The formerly unpoetic matter of Irish political life – better the stuff of drama or novels – comes audaciously to the fore in McCarthy’s first book and streams through each collection up through *Mr Dineen’s Careful Parade* (1999). Readers must come into the world of McCarthy’s much maligned party, into that of his
much-complained-of Dáil, and into parochial Irish history through the poems: “Last Days in the Party,” “Returning to De Valera’s Cottage,” “The Standing Trains,” or “The Waiting Deputies,” to name a few. These poems give to plain politics the human heft and intellectual complexity we expect from McCarthy.

Among them one poem in particular – “The Non-Aligned Storyteller” – may be noted for its verbal artistry and telling empathy. The poem is an interior monologue arranged in three richly worded strophes. The persona chosen by McCarthy is that of an aged photographer who has caught on glass negatives and celluloid the passing images of life in a country town in the South, one like McCarthy’s on Cappoquin, from the bonfires marking Fianna Fáil’s accession to power in 1932 on to the 1960s image of an aged politician stranded in snow amidst yearlings standing with their rumps to the wind. The crux of the photographer’s monologue provides the key to McCarthy’s ambitions in these poems and in his fiction.

But politics was the most awkward field. I hung Around to collect images at the centre of its World: dragging old men from the stifling alcoves Of meetings. I didn’t know what I was meant to see Because I was called in at the end of events With camera and tripod. My wife arranged The lights above their heads. She created An aura of strength around their tired faces, A sort of grey metallic, a solder of wisdom. Their chairman I remember best.\(^{16}\)
If we take McCarthy’s cameraman as a historian, then we see that the proofs of historical record must fail to record the quicksilver of actual political life. The history is always tardy and ignorant. Further, perhaps echoing the *aisling* itself, we may take this photographer’s wife not just as Clio but as Cliodhna, so that it is Ireland herself who arranges these politicians to be perceived as more strong than frail, more wise than exhausted, more altruistic than self-regarding. McCarthy’s persona remembers this: “If only they had strength,’ she used to say, when / They were building anew, shedding bloody days.”

*Without Power* portrays country politics on the Cork-Waterford border in terms of “images at the center” of Fianna Fáil’s world—images of an exhausted party, of “old men” hauled “from stifling alcoves” reeking with stubbed-out Woodbines or Sweet Aftons and odors of Powers and Murphy’s. With plain prose McCarthy has composed what we recognize from Northrop Frye’s scheme of all human fictions—a wintery, funereal romance. *Without Power* begins satirically with the funeral of Mrs. Cameron – the last Southern Unionist (alias Elizabeth Bowen) – and a dead dog. Throughout the novel, the local party chairman is dying slowly of stomach cancer. This is the election of 1973. Then, weakened by the 1969 Arms Trials and internal party plotting, Taoiseach Jack Lynch failed to lead Fianna Fáil to a majority in the Dáil. That same plotting divides the local party and leaves it mysteriously short of proper campaign support. Draped in the near background of this defeat are the Republic’s entry into the European Economic Community, the failure of the Northern Ireland Assembly, and the collapse of the Sunningdale Agreement. One further election
counts here: the election of Erskine Childers as president of the Republic in May, 1973. In the midst of these conventions and campaigns, young Eamon Glenville, an autobiographical figure for McCarthy himself, gets his political initiation—one compounded, of course, by all the other usual adolescent initiations. Eamon also acquires a wider sense of the emergent political sensibility of the 1970s and 1980s. He thinks of Conor Cruise O’Brien (1917 – 2008):

...one of the ministers in the Coalition, a man who had been an intellectual and a diplomat, a moral kind of person who had been driven into writing history books. The Party hated that man with an ugly, mediated hatred. But Eamon admired him for his capacity to retain facts like a scientist, and for his public daring in making unpopular judgements. Eamon had kept this admiration secret....

McCarthy’s interest lies with the cottagers on the remaining Unionist estates and with laborers and shopkeepers in the small towns—with those like Chairman Ned Kenny or Condolences Dineen. Dineen raised himself in Fianna Fáil, and raised his family in local society, by expressing the Party’s sympathies to any and all bereaved in an effort to extend the human touch in an old-fashioned way—and to canvass for votes. In turn, the focus of Dineen’s interest lies with the more prominent—Ned Kenny himself, and Senator Glenville, uncle to Eamon and a local schoolmaster representing the interests of rural education in the Seanád. Here, the politics are those of the committee room and dining table, and McCarthy portrays them as Joyce did, but more extensively, for
Without Power is not simply a tranche de la vie politique, but a Fianna Fáil family chronicle. His Gerald Glenville – contemplative, melancholic, unmarried, hoping quietly for modernity and decency – finds himself caught in the dramatic tension between the old party and the unexpected coalition of an energetic Fine Gael party of Free State fame and the liberal Labour party. As the dying Ned Kenny observes to Senator Glenville: “...the Coalition people are laughing at us...” (WP 138). But laughing at what?—at momentary exhaustion, hesitating indecision, and the syncopated beat between the hegemony of one generation and another that throws, like an Irish geis, the momentary glamour of courage and power onto the opponent.

And nowhere in Without Power is that predicament better portrayed than in chapter thirteen where McCarthy portrays local Party efforts during the May, 1973, campaign by Erskine Childers (1905 – 1975) for Ireland’s presidency. In McCarthy’s fable, the Senator, Julie, the ailing Ned Kenny, Dineen, Moynihan, and the two “O’Hara idiots” motor in worsening weather up from a hill-country pub, called the Mountain Mire,” into the Knockmealdown fastnesses. They are pursued up and down the boreens by a Coalition Volkswagen van whose occupants tear down the Fianna Fáil posters that Kenny’s crew have just tacked up. The weather worsens, the fog gathers, the road narrows, and Kenny’s minibus slips off the crown of the road, tumbles over, and rolls into a field. Then the Coalition van does the same. All find themselves shaken, bruised, lost, and surrounded in the “Party bogland.” Both parties are lost. McCarthy continues, with wicked humor:
Frightened by the disembodied voices, the sheep pushed more up the steep incline. ... “Follow the sheep!” Ned ordered. ... The sheep stood around the roadway, as if they expected a vote of thanks or some small honorarium. “What do they want?” asked the carpenter, becoming frightened yet again. “Companionship,” Ned quipped. ... The best thing to do would be to follow the sheep as they moved along the roadway. ... The sheep were already moving. “Follow them,” the Senator said quietly.

(WP 120 – 21)

Childers wins the presidency, but the Coalition endures in the Dáil; mixed infants from the North come and go; the Senator’s daughter Julie becomes a Eurocrat in Brussels; Condolences’ creamery is rationalized out of business and he becomes a gardener at the Winslows’ Big House; Dublin hussies show up a committee meeting speaking on behalf of female pension and property rights. And the Senator despairs of his prospects of becoming a “real” politician, a deputy—one of the “Teachta Dála, an emissary of the Dáil.” And McCarthy closes his novel with the local chairman’s funeral. Kenny’s coffin bears a Glenville heirloom: a photograph of the Senator’s mother Adele “presenting a bunch of arum lilies to a young and hungry looking de Valera” (WP 258). And it is Eamon who fetches the heirloom back from the graveyard to the Glenville house.

Clearly, young Eamon Glenville inherits the Party, and not only because he visits the death bed. Earlier, Kenny had embarassed Eamon by exclaiming “The boy is a gift to the Party” (WP 171). Later, while Kenny is
slipping out of life, Eamon is at work on his National Young Scientist’s project, dreaming of his Dublin fling with Jennifer Dineen, pondering the Coalition and the “Cruiser,” and thinking of the power to be derived from the watery spin of the Pelton wheel. He feels that “Somewhere within there was a key design,” and “He felt this deeply, and this feeling filled his afternoon” (WP 233). When Jennifer interrupts him at this work in the school laboratory, he covers his attraction to her by explaining: “I’m still working on the dynamo. ...Whether the thing works or not will depend upon a strong armature” (WP 234). McCarthy’s double entendre here has significance as well as humor, and it fits the aisling mythologem latent in Irish political discourse, albeit mediated there by the vehicle of technology and the setting of science. Later, Ned Kenny’s funeral fills up with political talk, political subtext, and Eamon begins to practice the science of politics, helped by his infatuation with mechanics. Having concluded that “Politically, Condolences [Dineen] was worth a thousand well-read superior intellectuals,” because “he had genius, he had infinite capacity to take pains on behalf of the Party” (WP 262). At Kenny’s obsequies, it is a sign – one more promising than his final outburst – that Eamon takes democratic notice of social details that others overlook:

Eamon then noticed the small group of people who were waiting a slight remove from the rest of the mourners. They were the poorer Protestants, a milkman, a farm-worker, a gardener, who had no Catholic servants to deliver flowers to the chapel like Mr. Winslow or General White. In their poverty and lack of cosmopolitan experience they had been afraid
to enter the local Catholic church to put their own flowers on the Chairman’s coffin. Eamon wondered if they were really happy. They didn’t look happy. None of them supported the Party, which made them double outsiders in a rural area that was a Party stronghold. But they knew and liked Rebecca.

(WP 273)

Taken together, *Without Power* and *Asya and Christine* make up a chronicle focused on the family of Deputy Glenville. Glenville arrived in Cappoquin in May, 1924, having been on the run with the Anti-Treaty Republicans during the Irish Civil War. Cappoquin, at that time, was a Unionist and Cumann na nGaedheal stronghold. Once the IRA’s quartermaster, their financier, and their agent of escape, Glenville resolved to “plant” his capital – actually IRA funds – in the town. Owing to his disguise, Glenville’s future wife mistakes him for a beggar when first they meet on the quay. Paudie Glenville’s rise from the artisan class into bourgeois prominence, which the Irish Civil War inadvertently made possible, is ensured by his growing implication in Fianna Fáil politics and subsequent election to Dáil Éireann in 1938. Glenville begins by buying the forges and outbuildings left by the British garrison and starts fabricating iron gates for Sir John Keane’s estate, and he hires the father of Ned Kenny. But in McCarthy’s chronicle that tale is all prologue, as McCarthy titles it. Here McCarthy’s publishers did him a disservice. A Faulknerian figure, Paudie Glenville owns an ambiguous history that would have been better told or reflected upon by others in *Without Power* – by the old Republican from Dungarvan, for example – than told up
front. Like the Jewish girl in *Asya and Christine*, whom the Glenvilles shelter and whom their elder son Robert comes fatally to love, Paudie feels that his hidden identity renders him vulnerable.

In *Asya and Christine*, McCarthy presents the reader with the romance of seed-time and the summer marriage procession into modernity, into complexity, and into moral perplexity. Here, neutral Ireland, the war-time metropolis of Dublin, Leinster House and the taoiseach’s office are an alien stage, as it is not in Colm Tóibín’s *The Heather Blazing* (1993), the situations inciting the central character’s display of ethical nerve are not dissimilar. Despite the clumsiness of Tóibín’s portrayal of sexual encounters in it, his novel is urbane. McCarthy’s has the reticence of the period, but its savagery, too. That appears in *Asya and Christine*’s treatment of the Dungarvan family of a condemned IRA man, a nineteen-year-old, who had contravened the Offenses Against the State Act of 1939 by shooting and killing a Garda. The family appears as nameless, impoverished, inconsolable, impervious to argument and to any effort of the local politician to help them—in a word, abject. And the tone McCarthy gives to these scenes is that of similar episodes in Frank O’Connor’s “In the Train”, or John Montague’s “The Cry”. The boy will be hung on August 15, 1943, and Deputy Glenville is without power to help him.

Likewise, Deputy Glenville lacks the power to save his own eldest son Robert, who, craving both contest and romance, is flung from his BSA motorcycle and decapitated. Two sons remain to Glenville: Declan, Eamon’s father, and Gerald, the Senator of *Without Power*. Both the adolescent IRA man and Robert desired heroism,
desired a fight. The Dungarvan boy wished for a revival of Republican physical force campaigns, perhaps inspired by the reincarnation of Sinn Féin or IRB traditions in Aiséirí party. “Bobby” longed for something more military, more epic, on the scale of the Homeric contest of World War II taking place outside the shelter of de Valera’s neutrality. And we recall that Robert, also nineteen, is named for the British soldier memorialized (12/7/1918) on a gold ring that Paudie Glenville found crushed at a workbench when he first took over the Cappoquin forges. Bobby seeks reckless contests—rowing matches with the local Irish Army officers, badger-baiting, testing his father’s patience. Other images of contest mark *Asya and Christine*: betrothal rivalries, angry exchanges over Catholic anti-semitism, angry exchanges between Anti-Treaty Republicans and the Fianna Fáil deputy, and contests of will between de Valera’s concept of Ireland’s self-preservation and the hunger-striking Republicans’ sense of self-sacrifice. And, of course, there is the crucial general election of 1943.

Just as de Valera fiercely contested that election against odds created by the severity of his own policies and by ineluctable external event, so Deputy Glenville must contest his election. Clearly, McCarthy sets Glenville up as a model *in petto* of de Valera. Both face circumstance that counterpose justice and charity, prudence and compassion. Both provide shelter from duress bought by austerity. Both began enterprises with Republican funding—the enterprise of the state reshaped in De Valera’s time, the enterprise of the forges reshaped into a metal manufactory in Glenville’s time. Both enterprises shelter a family whose governance proves a
continual challenge. Both shelter the stranger. Glenville takes in Alice Sloan, alias Asya Schless, as well as Ellie, ill with tuberculosis and dreaming of marriage to Michael Kavanagh. And neither de Valera nor Glenville can save the Dungarvan boy from the consequences of “might,” to borrow Simone Weil’s term. And neither can assure that their ideals will effectively survive into the future, as we know from critical mockery that today greets this oft-quoted passage from de Valera’s famous St. Patrick’s Day speech of 1943:

The Ireland which we have dreamed of would be the home of people who valued material wealth only as the basis of right living, of a people who were satisfied with frugal comfort and devoted their leisure to things of the spirit—a land whose fields and villages would be joyous with the romping of sturdy children, the contests of athletic youth and the laughter of comely maidens, whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of age.  

It is important to remember the context of this address. Isolated and neutral, unable to continue the political struggle of the 1920s or the social struggle of the 1930s, and fully cognizant of the sacrifices and slaughters of the conflict raging across Europe, the populace of the Free State required some statement of a future life worth serving.  

Like the *Bunreacht na hÉireann* of 1937, De Valera’s vision of an ideal Ireland owes some of its force to the 1931 encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*, and in it de Valera attempts to make a virtue of the privations of the “Emergency,” as did many in the South. Even Sean Ó
Faoláin, whose magazine *The Bell* Alice (Asya) brings into the Glenville household, commemorated the idyll of the “Emergency” in his fiction. And here McCarthy’s title – *Asya and Christine* – begins to count in ways more complicated than does the title – *Without Power* – of the earlier novel. McCarthy leaves his reader with two choices. Let Asya or Alice – and her father, the mysterious Mr. Sloan – represent all the Eastern world, the Lithuanian Forest of plenipotential suffering, of “religious work,” and of Old Testament – think of the Book of Micah, of Job, of Ecclesiastes – fear, fury, and privation. And for Bobby Glenville she is, in Edward Said’s sense, orientalized. Thus accoutered in alterity, Asya becomes more real to Bobby Glenville, more heroically desirable than, say, his sister Chrissie or the pathetic Ellie—the serving girl ill with tuberculosis. Like the milder and later romance of Eamon and Jennifer Dineen in *Without Power*, the romance of Bobby and Asya constitutes an *aisling* plot.

“Ireland is the safest place. The Germans won’t invade Ireland. They like Ireland. You’d be safe here.” Bobby touched her face, but she withdrew from him.

“I know! Maybe I could go to England with you. I could help.”

“You couldn’t. My father wouldn’t allow it. Your father wouldn’t allow it. Anyway, it’s religious work.”

(AC 131)

In an Ireland largely insulated from an heroically moral world at war, Bobby lacks the capacity and opportunity to discover ways to serve Asya, and so he must die for her a death that parodies the sacrifice of the RAF airmen in the Battle of Britain. And the more his father, Deputy
Glenville, tries to steady him, the more he inadvertently guides Bobby to his death, all the while trying to figure out how to “save” the imprisoned boy from Dungarvan. And Bobby’s mother senses the death as it happens – “Oh. The Devil has walked over my grave” (AC 204) – as we knew she would from McCarthy’s description of her in the “Dev picture” in Without Power: “...a young woman presenting a bunch of arum lilies to a young and hungry looking de Valera” (WP 258).

Even so, Asya and Christine makes fair summer of 1943, the fourth year of the “Emergency,” by proposing the military romance between Chrissie Glenville and the Lieutenant Kiely from Cork. Soon to be a doctor, Kiely is not required to die for Chrissie, except in the Elizabethan sense, for her premarital pregnancy eventually complicates their romance. The bourgeois status of the Glenvilles will shelter Chrissie, though it can barely protect Ellie’s likewise pregnant sister, whom Deputy Glenville gets to Dublin and a hospice run by the nuns. Chrissie or Christine epitomizes that new future to be made in the 1950s by middle-class Ireland. Pointedly, and early in the novel, McCarthy intimates that, though nursed by the Glenvilles, Ellie will never get to live out her idyll with the bashful woodcutter Michael—an idyll promised by Anglo-Ireland.

“No,” said Ellie calmly. “Sir John Keane is going to give us a cottage on the Melleray road. It’s near the woods. That’s handy for Michael.”
Ellie coughed then, a slow racking cough
(AC 45)
Thus McCarthy suggests that de Valera’s vision of frugal, pastoral piety, while perhaps a comfort to many at the time, was already being carried off by the powerful mechanics of European history. For many in the next generation to come in the 1960s, the cottage ideals of Ireland would be dead and gone, “a myth of O’Connor and Ó Faoláin,” as Montague put it.

McCarthy’s romance focuses, of course, on Deputy Glenville, rather than on Bobby or Chrissie, for he is the entrepreneur, the emissary, the man-in-the-middle. Like most adults on service of human import, he oscillates between the Old Testament realm of judgment, represented by Asya, and the New Testament promise of grace, represented by Christine. Likewise, he oscillates between offices in Dublin and his parlor in Cappoquin and between the business of the Irish state and the business of the Irish family. There are political campaign scenes here, to be sure. Yet, it is in the course of Paudie Glenville’s oscillations and in their train—indeed, actually in an old green-painted coach headed south from Dublin and pulled haltingly by an engine burning Emergency turf—that McCarthy most significantly lifts his fiction out of its novelistic ethical scheme. Doing so, he lifts out of the summery idyll of romance as well. And McCarthy does so by unexpectedly indulging what we now recognize as magical realism. In the train headed for Limerick Junction, and after Deputy Glenville’s unhappy interview with de Valera, McCarthy confronts him with an “illusionist” on his way to Ballybunion. The nuns packed into the other compartments of the coach begin the drone of the rosary, which neither Glenville nor the prosperous magician can abide, and he produces a plague of beetles resembling
black chafers. The nuns panic. This is religious work. The reader thinks of Moses and Pharaoh, of the plagues of Egypt, of Exodus. McCarthy broadly insinuates that the magician may be Asya’s father:

“Oh, my people have always had to use magic, even in the Eastend of London. Magic has prevented my cousins in Poland from being gassed to death. The trains all derailed for a weekend.”

(AC 150)

Paudie exclaims, “By God, you are entitled to a bit of magic.” He speaks of himself here as well, but the only spell given him is that his boiled sweet lasts into McCarthy’s next chapter. This episode suggests that a spell, a working of magic, a miracle like those in the childhood tales of Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas might relieve Glenville of his adult and exhausting intellectual, moral, and emotional “inbetweenness” that, after all, is the existential condition of the local politician. More importantly, this episode suggests that illusions of a certain order are necessary if one is to carry on reiterating the pilgrimage between the world’s justices and the world’s mercies.

Other instances of magical realism occur in Asya and Christine. The next most important among them is when “an amazing thing happened” (AC 163 – 68). Watching rowing practice in the River Blackwater with Lieutenant Kiely, Christine spots flotsam on the incoming tide – bobbing, metallic, silver boxes – gifts from the sea sent by the torpedoing of some convoy freighter in the Atlantic. The boxes contain Bank of China or Kuomintang banknotes, fine porcelain, jewels
and jade, American chocolate, and a medal from the 1934 “Eucharistic Congress in Dublin, which had inscribed upon it: *Good luck to ye where e’er ye be. At home, abroad or on the sea*” (AC 167). These betrothal gifts compose a fairly catholic selection of goods from the external world that may have been bought with missionary service, pious hopes, and personal sacrifice. For the young lieutenant and Chrissie, though, they remain promissory notes and tokens of indulgence, for the Garda sergeant winds up confiscating the lot. In any case, Chrissie’s display of fierce possessiveness here suggests her later choices in life and, consequently, the Ireland that her generation will create, which McCarthy portrays in *Without Power*.

Aspects of McCarthy’s own biography, his family having been drawn into the Fianna Fáil party early on, provide the parish detail and the frame of Dáil politics that structures these two fictions. That frame structures the lives of the Glenville family as it has structured the local life of a nation that, after 1921, became marginal and minor in the world’s moral imagination—and remained so until the drama of the North began to assert its authority in 1968. However, as McCarthy and a few others like Colm Tóibín have been showing, eight decades shaped by governments of the Dáil in the South all articulate ideological choices whose fine and sometimes redeeming points suffer from fashionable, knowing dismissal when cloaked by such terms as “inhibitions,” “malaise,” or “entropy.” True enough, the terms of discourse in Irish life have become more consumerist, more worldly, more European and, thus, somewhat more comprehensible to the outsider—excepting, of course, the internal discourse of Northern Unionism. Reinforced and complicated by
the Fianna Fáil themes in McCarthy’s poetry – the Party, the Dáil, de Valera – the two novels in McCarthy’s trilogy reveal in many ways the choice the South has made between the teach beag of de Valera’s idealizing nostalgia and the bungaló of the developer’s plan-book.

\textit{A Valley of Disappointment}

We struggled through the derelict shell of McCarthy’s Desmond Cinema, now used as a workshop space by Coffey’s garage. The camera crew spotted a corner of the cinema, a high wall with plasterwork designs that could only be from a cinema of the 1940s. Sure enough, a beam of light was created and as the light crossed to and fro the camera went to work, picking up what might have been the flickering of projector lights on cinema walls during a picture show of the postwar years. The whole intention was so artistic, and all of this artistry employed by a film crew who were shooting what was, in effect, a twelve-minute slot in a regional news round-up to follow the evening news.\textsuperscript{23}

\textit{Enfin}, we come back to de Valera. In one sense, McCarthy began there in “State Funeral” in \textit{The First Convention}: “Today / They lowered the tallest one, tidied him / Away while his people watched quietly.”\textsuperscript{24} Revolutionary, politician, and statesman, Éamon de Valera (1882 – 1975) figures in four poems at the start of \textit{The Sorrow Garden} (1981). McCarthy sets these between two on the Brigadier Denis FitzGerald and his garden at Glenshelane House and “In Memory of My Father”.\textsuperscript{25} McCarthy’s most popular single collection, \textit{The Sorrow Garden} takes its encompassing title from the sequence
immediately following that elegy. Directly or obliquely, the key poems in *The Sorrow Garden* mourn the sudden passing of first McCarthy’s father and then, in 1978, of his mother. An evocation of this bereft time—“my frosted life,” as McCarthy puts it—opens “A Short Walk in the Snow” in *Gardens of Remembrance* (1998). Like Brigadier Fitzgerald in McCarthy’s later poems, de Valera figures here largely as a father found and then lost, but he does so only briefly—more propositionally than affectionately.

Of course, McCarthy’s de Valera has mythic status, as does any historian’s de Valera, or any Irish politician’s de Valera in the twentieth century.26 In “De Valera’s Childhood,” McCarthy epitomizes de Valera’s life as points on the skeletal mythologem of *Ein Heldenleben*: first, in rural Limerick’s “folk-solitude,” “even his absences were seen / as duty-filled; second, in his absences from the field or treaty table, McCarthy poses him as the thought-fox wanting “to hunt its own word-wood”; third, McCarthy lets De Valera recall the funeral of a farmer he once worked for in youth and question his end in his beginning, staring out from “the brushwood of Memory” like an old fox or *sionnach* gone to ground. McCarthy simplifies the argument of “De Valera’s Childhood” in “Returning to De Valera’s Cottage” set in Knockmore, Bruree, Co. Limerick. Further, he inverts de Valera’s assumption that he could know the mind of the Irish people by looking within himself with this two-sided tribute: “In finding his cottage we found a life that was / inside ourselves.....,” thus claiming not only de Valera’s accomplishments but also his culpabilities. Although the next poem repeats tropes from “De Valera’s Youth,” it varies them by suggesting McCarthy’s own “uncertain days” in the mid 1970s, as if
to invert Wordsworth’s proposition from *The Prelude* that the “child is father to the man”.

Any reader might concede the pertinence of “De Valera’s Childhood” or “Returning to De Valera’s Cottage” to McCarthy’s meditative reconstructions of local politics in the Party, for those poems simultaneously evoke and query the myth of beginnings we all carry around in our own stories. “De Valera, Lindberg and Mr. Cooper’s Book of Poems” requires more than assent. McCarthy has constructed it in prose, thus marking it off from the poem following, “In Memory of My Father”. McCarthy indulges in Borgesian *trompe l’oreille* when he opens a poem with “Mr Lindberg wore his aeroplane like a tight suit, his eyes pierced the mist, wings dipped to the sea.” He closes it with: “Although Mr Lindberg wore his knowledge like a tight suit; his eyes piercing the mist, wings dipping to the sea.” This is an early Atlantic flight to Ireland, and a flight to the interior. Lindbergh’s mate in the other cockpit is Mr. Cooper of the fledgling Pan American Airways, who leans out to view “the intricate basketry of landforms” and the cottages of the Free State around, say, Thomas MacGreevy’s Tarbert. But what Cooper views is what he “tried to imagine” as set out in “a book of sentimental poems,” as might be found on the bookshelves of America. Coming over Ireland is an act of retrospective imagining, as Wallace Stevens intuited. That PanAm flight over Ireland, unbeknownst to the pilots, is the creature of another’s imagination:

De Valera worked in his subdued room, squinting echoes on the wooden floor shivered when his pencil rose and fell. Somewhere in the blind country farther
West the dripping biplane traced an arc. Dev dreamed a map of the future, of the astonished country threaded by planes; cargoes landing on tarmac like the last consoling phrases in a civil-war poem. (MDCP 56)

De Valera is sketching that flight as if he were doodling out a theorem from Euclid, and McCarthy lets his reader intuit that the historic moment has become the real figment of de Valera’s imagination. This slight of hand reverses the poems values from physics and flight to metaphysics and imagining, as if the actual aviators were, unbeknownst to themselves, acting out the futurity of de Valera’s understanding of Ireland’s modernity. The poem ends with, of course, a ceremonial news photo taken in Leinster House. At the reception, the aviators appear alien in the home of the Dáil: “tough and technical”. Golden and heroic, Lindbergh remains armored by the “tight suit” of his knowledge, but Cooper and de Valera share an imagined connection:

O tough they seemed, and technical, until Mr. Cooper saw the poems that his mother would have loved. Poems broke the strangeness, there and then, as they roamed through the verses of a resolved civil war. (MDCP 56)

McCarthy is up to something in this moment. Lindbergh remains alien and apart here because he is the hero created by the stature of the deed. It is not the mechanics of the flight or the physics of politics that Cooper or de Valera embody. Rather, at this historical moment, they embody the paramount imagination behind them shared in the “verses” – note the pun on “versus” – of a tradition of
national sentiment. Consequently, as unlike as they are, Cooper and Dev share the aspiration of a journey joined, a country connected, and a people reconciled in and by a future that, in the piloting of “lucky Lindy” has not overflown Ireland.

Finding the poetry in de Valera and the poems in the life of his party constitutes, as Eavan Boland noticed in her review of The First Convention (1978), an imaginative expansion of the matter that Irish poetry customarily chooses to treat. McCarthy’s annexation of the unmentionable into poetic articulation went almost unremarked owing, in part to the hegemony of the North in the thinking of readers both Irish and international. In this instance, one imperative national theme cast others in the shade. In the 1970s and 1980s, as the “Troubles” waxed and waned, other national themes momentarily claimed moral stature: the liberation of Irish life by the Irish language, as divined by Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill; the almost unwritten status of women in Irish history, as discerned by Eavan Boland. As the moral stature of the “Troubles” became less urgent in the 1990s, other national themes arose in the writing of the South: chiefly the enervating effects of Euro-consumption in the writing of Dennis O’Driscoll and the complementary enervation of the churches in the writing of John F. Deane. But a chief hallmark of Irish poetry in the South became a reliance on a stylizing interiority that entails a corresponding wariness of communal matters amounting to incertitude.

And the ordinary critical resources for the poetry of the South reinforce this uneasiness with the project of the nation and with the arc of its themes. For example, Ian Hamilton’s Oxford Companion to Twentieth Century
Poetry (1996) gives Seamus Deane but not John Deane, Frank Ormsby but not Seán Dunne, Paul Muldoon but not Thomas McCarthy—and Eavan Boland but not Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill. More particularly, recent Cambridge companions and introductions wink at contemporary poetry from the South. Matthew Campbell’s Contemporary Irish Poetry scants Thomas Kinsella and John Montague, yet notes national themes in Austin Clarke and Patrick Kavanagh. After them it clings to a Northern angle, treating national themes largely as opportunities for “questioning the hypocrisies and injustices of public life.”³⁰ Such histories as John Goodby’s Irish Poetry Since 1950 (2000) or Justin Quinn’s Modern Irish Poetry 1800–2000 likewise come to chafe at treating national themes as their attentions become more contemporary. Quinn relegates Montague and Kinsella to “Modernism” and ends by posing O’Driscoll as a one documentarian of “The Disappearance of Ireland,” as if to say that Ireland’s national themes evaporate as the country swoons into the arms of the European Union.³¹ As noted before, the antidotes exist: Theo Dorgan’s Irish Poetry Since Kavanagh (1996), Watching the River Flow: A Century in Irish Poetry (1999), and Poetry Ireland Review, but only the latter has wide currency.

By mistrusting poetic matter other than the “Troubles,” on the one hand, and by trusting urbane interiority on the other, the Anglo-American critical project circumscribes the imagination it seeks to elucidate. Such a stance assumes that other themes – the political life of de Valera’s party, for instance – are marginal, though they have the power to complicate and renew the matter of Ireland. Unpoetic stuff becomes treasure when
the right imagination raids it, as McCarthy has done in his tales and poems telling and showing the local life of the Party on the Waterford-Cork border. Knowing this formerly hidden Ireland, even the Irish reader can come to understand the ordinary ethical drama of plain politics in the decades before Ireland entered Europe. Here, as Eavan Boland noted in 1978, we find the seat of McCarthy’s originality. If, as Benedict Anderson asserted, a nation is indeed an imagined community, then the present mistrust of national themes as the stuff on which the poetic imagination may properly work winds up constraining that community. At the same time, that constraint helps a writer like McCarthy to “Make It New,” as Ezra Pound commanded, and thus renew and enrich that community. Life in the Party would not have been poetic stuff for poems in the Fianna Fáil decades, but in Euro-Ireland that life – pace Bertie Ahern – can bear the hallmark of poetic matter. But elections, Ard-Fheiseanna, and the Dáil are not McCarthy’s only hidden Ireland.

*Ne Pereant Probationes*

The burning of Cork, the death of Collins, the martyrdom of Terence MacSwiney, all catapulted the Cork literati from a bland petty-bourgeois Catholic landscape of Tim Healy and William Martin Murphy, a landscape of preferment and small local government contracts that was utterly pallid in comparison to the neo-Classical, Arcadian Cork imagined by Maginn, Maclise, J. J. Callanan, and James Barry. It could be argued that the Cork imagination has never again risen to the heights of 1830. That mansion of reckless Classicism was dispersed into the social housing of
1848, into a dispersed imagination founded upon a common national childhood. In a sense, the rest of Irish life emerged from the poorhouse. There’s a dazed, survivor guilt about indigenous Irish life.32

The title page of McCarthy’s Merchant Prince (2005) omits the fanciful subtitle on the book’s cover: “The Life and Passions of Nathaniel Murphy, gentleman-merchant, in Italy and Ireland.” Subtitles have ironic as well as lyric resonance, and here McCarthy’s putting-on of early nineteenth-century style underscores two aspects of Merchant Prince: its inclination toward narrative and its interest in bourgeois Ireland up through the Famine. The cover’s watercolor of the neoclassical Opera House – first called the Athenaeum – suggests both Cork’s foundation in trade and those trader’s cultural aspirations.33 Yet the tale of Merchant Prince is thoroughly modern, as well as Modernist in its telling, owing to the now displaced Romanticism native to Nathaniel Murphy, McCarthy’s chosen persona. Because Murphy is more an alter ego than a simple mask, Merchant Prince winds up combining McCarthy’s signal strengths of invention and historical empathy—strengths well displayed in the prose of Gardens of Remembrance (1998) and in the poems of Mr Dineen’s Careful Parade. Take, for example, the last lines of “Desmond Cinema, Cappoquin” and McCarthy’s recollection of “music from The Song of Bernadette / that haunted mothers who couldn’t emigrate” (MDCP 148).

Percy Bysshe Shelley, Nathaniel Murphy’s contemporary, once exclaimed that “A poem is the very image of life expressed” and it is that employment that engages McCarthy’s seminarian-turned-merchant. The
present that engages him is Cork before the Famine in the years spanning the turn of the eighteenth century—the Rising of ’98 and the Act of Union. Elsewhere McCarthy has remarked that “the Eighteenth Century is always with us in Irish life as an inner, wider text of who we are.”34 These are the decades of James Barry and Daniel Maclise, Richard Brinsley Sheridan and Father Prout, of Henry Grattan and Daniel O’Connell, and of Brian Merriman and Amhlaoibh Uí Shúilleabháin. The world of metropolitan Cork before the accession of Victoria constitutes of course, another of McCarthy’s hidden Irelands. It is a world as different from Fianna Fáil Ireland as Dev is from Lord Byron, or a gillie from a cicerone, or the phrase “Mo grá thú” from the word cicisbeo. Here in Merchant Prince McCarthy’s enterprise again makes poetry of overlooked materials.

Sorted into two groups – Blood at the start and Trade at the end—poems begin and end Merchant Prince and each flashes a cultured view of life in pre-Famine Cork. Fine examples are: “He Goes Through His Father’s Belongings, 1809” or “At the Grace of Amadé Dill-Wallace, 1800” from Blood and “He Witnesses Another Hanging, 1813” or “He Meets Eight Presbyterians Upon the Quays, 1829” from Trade. With his usual tact, McCarthy lets Murphy’s Clonakilty-born wife, Louise Callinan, define his own sensibility as well as her husband’s, when she says that Nathaniel has “an eye only for the foreign or bizarre aspects of the daily hour.”35 In Shelley’s sense, there are sixty-six poems in Merchant Prince, most titled according to the formula of “He Purchases a Street Ballad, 1789”. In this “image of life expressed” in the year of the French Revolution, is dispossession perceived by the possessor:
In Castle Street rain it is the poor man himself
Who is history. I take his ballad-sheet,
His one title-deed, a thing discovered already,
Now rained upon, now perishing in my hand.
(MP 193)

Seeing that the folk art of balladry intrinsically engages “Blaming History,” McCarthy’s sharp-eyed and acute merchant prince again observes Cork life sub specie aeternitatis, as one would expect of a former seminarian in the Irish College in Rome before the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars.

An eighteenth-century man, Murphy has been freed by rebellion and revolution from thinking in eighteenth-century rhyme, and McCarthy has invested his language with a formal, plain-spoken inventiveness. That liberty lets the poems reveal Murphy as a fully developed, almost novelistic character, thus rendering him no mere mask for McCarthy’s contemporaneity. A man of sharp sight and wary insight, Murphy enriches his poems with allusions, judgments, and sometimes political aperçus. In 1812, Murphy registers the oppressions of the Act of Union when he gazes upon his wife fashionably cutting a silhouette:

...I watch the anchor-chains of paper unfold
To lie upon the surface of her shoes.
It is a convict’s head, one bound for Van Diemen’s Land,
That we saw for less than three minutes
When our carriage turned into the Lower Quay.
(MC 22)
Served by lexical restraint and period detail, Murphy’s surprise and discovery articulate residing empathies in the man that he can recognize despite the comforts of his felicitous wealth. Those same empathies helped propel such native impulses toward reform as Catholic Emancipation in 1829 and the first Home Rule campaign. Informed more by Edmund Burke’s example than by James Barry’s, McCarthy’s merchant prince displays a canny but not calculating Tory sensibility—a sensibility that resembles Jane Austen’s. Taking Nathaniel Murphy’s personal example into account, McCarthy’s present readers should be wary of a prosperity that obscures rather than discovers the moral empathy that should undergird, as Murphy says, our “battle for integrity”.

McCarthy has Murphy date his poems from 1770 through 1831, yet he presents them to the reader as if in as-found order—spilled over, say, the damp floor of the old Lee Bookshop. Encouraged by McCarthy’s delineation of Murphy as a character rather than mere persona, readers will be tempted to rearrange them in calendar order and make a diary of them. McCarthy has encouraged this impulse in another way. At the center of *Merchant Prince* comes a memoir recollected in tranquility by Murphy in 1818. In these pages McCarthy offers a witty novella *à clef* in the mode of Flann O’Brien or Italo Calvino. Readers seeking a key can do no better than to consult the biographical head notes in *Jumping Off Shadows*. A few other clues will not spoil McCarthy’s sport: the Principessa’s poem “The Italian Question” is a version of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill’s “Ceist na Teangan”; Alderman Wrixon was president of University College Cork; and the bishop to Ojibway and Canuck trappers
on the upper Mississippi was the late Professor John Bernstein of Macalester College. In these pages, Murphy reconstructs his fall from obedience and credulity into passion and the Romantic, and he reconstructs that fall as a conversion to poetry. And, with a nod to the aisling plot, McCarthy lets Murphy conclude that his four esteemed Italian poets were “half-companions in the final romance of a long marriage.”

Not an idle humor at all, the novella Memory depicts the Sturm und Drang of Murphy’s vocation and sexuality with the purpose of transubstantiating those resources of youth into the sure foundation of a settled present. In “He Serves Mass at Advent, Rome, 1771,” Murphy remembers that he

...came to Zion shouting for joy—
But it was with my father’s breath,

His Sharon, his Glory of Lebanon.
Now, ambitious flesh has undone me.
(MC 45)

Concluding that his fall came while “keeping company” with the “audacious art” of Mr. Barry and “Mr. Barry’s English friends” in Rome, Murphy retrospectively claims his own Romantic purposes. Through Murphy, McCarthy likewise claims this emancipation from his father’s ideals and finds renewed breath in these poems. To accomplish such a liberation, McCarthy’s patient imagination has reached back behind the hurt of the Famine where the popular notion of Irish history seems now to begin. This reach should not seem at all odd to McCarthy’s practiced
readers used to such poems as “Declan, Scientist” from *The Lost Province* (1996) and, of course, “Cataloguing Twelve Fenian Novels”. In *Merchant Prince*, McCarthy deploys Modernist narrative technique in order to reanimate a social history lost to Ireland’s faded but dominant nationalist narrative, which was resuscitated by the “Troubles,” all the while retaining warm feelings for human flaw and forgiveness rather than cold analyses of wrong and accusation. The solace of comprehending Nathaniel Murphy’s other Ireland refreshes McCarthy’s capacity to reinvent Ireland. That same solace also reassures his ready readers that the matter of Ireland has not been definitively circumscribed by either the “Troubles” in the North or the Celtic Tiger years in the South.

*Blessed Particulars without God or Lenin*

The Last Geraldine Officer’s Irish is also quite frail, like my own, but it is very real. In the process of writing and working upon his poems and exchanging them with MacLiammóir, he discovers that poetry is a personal language above all, not a Literary or National language. It delineates a personal territory for him, the undamaged estate of his childhood. His language came from Uncle Walter, from the age of eight to fourteen Captain Walter FitzGerald gives him a rich lode of Deise Irish. And Uncle Walter’s books he carries away from Austin Foley’s cottage are added to the twenty books he carried back to England during the war;...³⁷

In *Merchant Prince* McCarthy has self-consciously drawn a line underscoring stylistically and materially the two realms of his early writing. One of these is the hidden
Ireland of McCarthy’s Party poems and Fianna Fáil fiction. The other encompasses the eternal themes of love, mourning, and family in *The Sorrow Garden* (1981) or *Seven Winters in Paris* (1989). The contrasts that distinguish *Mr Dinneen’s Careful Parade* from *Merchant Prince* tell the tale. But that is not to say a reader might follow forward a few continuities with the help of a “raree”: *A Geraldine Officer* (2002). This little gray book was a thanksgiving gift for the ninetieth birthday of Brigadier Denis FitzGerald (1911 – 2003), McCarthy’s early patron and mentor. This gray-clad “private edition” gathers sixteen poems together alluding to FitzGerald’s life and to his retreat at Glenshelane House and particularly to his woods and gardens—to the Eden he “loaned” McCarthy early on.

Some of the poems in this chapbook, like the title poem, appear in earlier collections: some McCarthy collected for *Mr Dineen’s Careful Parade*, like “A Bowl of Peas,” and some remain strays, like “Sunlight.” “An Exchange of Gifts,” from *The Lost Province* (1996) closes the chapbook by recalling how FitzGerald walked with the poet’s wife among the laurels: “You talk together as if talking to some part / of me: which is what love is, how it should be.” Then McCarthy reflects: “A Geraldine officer, you know about anxiety: / Territory lost, foreign wars, brothers in trouble,” and he concludes:

> It is wrong to gain too much at once—
> you look back and see things diminish, castle by castle.
> Just our organic life is left, then nothingness.
> (MDCP 146)
A family poem, “An Exchange of Gifts” assents to the fragility of human effort and durance; moves from the enduring wood to endangered garden to house; and then sums itself in that pagan Passover and Easter symbol of the Babylonian egg done up in chocolate and tricked out with tinsel—but here welcomed and so redeemed: “What we are sure of / is memory, with its blue and gold Fabergé.”

Brigadier FitzGerald and his world appear directly in McCarthy’s poetry in The First Convention (1978) and in each collection except for The Non-Aligned Storyteller, and in each he and the ethos of his world are the subject of McCarthy’s art—and they instruct his verse. In “Death by Fire,” for example, McCarthy retells FitzGerald’s description – “They were very brave, really” – of the German defense of the bridge at Nijmegen, Netherlands, at the close of World War II. McCarthy likens the snipers to the summer’s butterflies that sought winter shelter on a drawing-room mantel at Glenshelane: “One fly rises slowly; in the first sharp / leap of flame its two wings catch fire” (MDCP 46). And in this moment McCarthy begins to explore a passing world of privilege and sacrifice, of means and impotence, that the world of the Party, of Ard-Fheiseanna, and de Valera cannot quite comprehend or articulate. Here is McCarthy’s third hidden Ireland, one created long before the Famine, and one obscured by the successes of Irish nationalism. This is the fading, forgiven, idealized Anglo-Ireland of Elizabeth Bowen and Molly Keane, of Hubert Butler and Arland Ussher—a world as estranged from contemporary Ireland as de Valera’s “Emergency” idyll.

To this other Eden McCarthy has already given
an affecting sign post in the memoir “A Short Walk in the Snow,” in Gardens of Remembrance. There the poet speaks plainly of respite of the garden at Glenshelane House and painfully of his father, only to conclude: “In many ways my father was my first reader” (GR 42). And Denis FitzGerald was his second, as “Some Hidden Trees” states. Echoing the opening cadence of Yeats in “Responsibilities,” McCarthy writes: “Because I’ve no father to watch raking leaves, / I come to your September garden.”

I set to work in my own clearing,  
Denis anxiously calling at the fringe of things—  
but myself at work like an only son;  
picking off the fruit of Raleigh and Spenser,  
beyond the politics of my anxious youth.  
(MDCP 32)

So in the grown-over orchard of Glenshelane McCarthy closes his allegory of native and planter, son and father, and poet and patron with origins. For Denis FitzGerald, McCarthy has construed a monument more lasting than bronze, and in those poems he appears not larger than life, but as a needful character in the life of the poet and the man.

By gathering the poems of A Geraldine Officer as he did, McCarthy observed an occasion, honored a man, and suggested the fictive continuity of the poems’ affections and affiliations. That suggestion signals McCarthy’s aspirations here, as he has done before. For example, “Grand Tour” in The First Convention forecasts in a fire-fly flash the world of Merchant Prince. Taking the storytelling
side of McCarthy’s literary imagination into account, his readers may guess that his next ambition may be to inhabit the life of the Brigadier FitzGerald almost as he invented the voice, character, and culture of Nathaniel Murphy in *Merchant Prince*. Almost spanning the whole of the twentieth century, and taking in both the Great War and World War II, that life encompasses both Ireland liberated and the British Empire dissolved. Brigadier FitzGerald’s ready access to the trouble and tumult of a world wider than the dells of west Waterford was, of course, military, and so its span of direct ethical experience differs in character from, say, that of the poet Louis MacNeice (1907—1961), Fitzgerald’s contemporary.

For many British of the period – and for many of the Anglo-Irish like MacNeice and Fitzgerald – the seam or scar running through their lives, society, and culture is World War II. MacNeice’s famous poem running “half-way between the lyric and the didactic” is *Autumn Journal* (1939), whose meditative turns MacNeice excused by titling it a “journal”. MacNeice mistrusted the narrative of feeling that the poem records, which he continued less tellingly in *Autumn Sequel* (1954). In the penultimate sentence of his 1939 note to the poem, MacNeice writes: “...I shall probably be called a trimmer by some and a sentimental extremist by others.”

Claiming the honesty of subjectivity, MacNeice’s *Autumn Journal* encompasses not only the tones and tensions of the period in which the Brigadier’s life was shaped, but also its high and low cultural features: “Shelley and jazz and lieder and hymn-tunes,” or “the songs of Harlem or Mitylene” (AJ 48, 50). To reinhabit such a life as MacNeice’s, his biographer would have to encompass such matter of the period. Likewise,
to reinhabit such a life as the Brigadier FitzGerald led, the teller of his tale would have to encompass the same political, social, and cultural materials. And, for the retrospective reader or writer, another seam or scar joins these materials just as the hyphen yokes “Anglo” to “Irish”—in the term “Anglo-Irish.” The realm governed by that hyphen might be said to constitute the third of McCarthy’s hidden Irelands.

*The Last Geraldine Officer* opens with three toasts to the times – to Anglo-Ireland and Britain from the Great War to the Cold War – and to the characters – chiefly the ‘Last Geraldine Officer’ – that inhabit McCarthy’s historical fictions here. McCarthy’s reader will feel inclined to do the same – if not with the cocktails of the 1930s and 1940s – because here his empathetic imagination empowers both the best instincts of his storytelling in concert with the best workings of his verse craft. A fine and funny example of the craft crops up in “Dissident Poet” when McCarthy cannily cross- and half-rhymes his lines: “Jameson and oats” with “ghost-cumann votes.” Always generous even at his most satirical, McCarthy offers two collections in one volume: first come thirty-nine poems titled *The Fiction, The Sea*; then follows the single fiction of *The Last Geraldine Officer*. *The Fiction, The Sea* constitutes more than a rehearsal or overture, even though its allusions – especially in “The Protestant South” with its closing salute to Louis MacNeice – prepare plainly for *The Last Geraldine Officer*. In these opening poems McCarthy returns to the Munster of *Mr Dineen’s Careful Parade* (1999): to Cappoquin and Fianna Fáil, to Cork’s careful Bürgertum, to green-robed Lismore where McCarthy’s pen can “disturb the settling peace of things” (LGO 55).
Sentimental misdirection is McCarthy’s game here. His appeal to the mixed pleasure and pain of old things, to nostalgia, to the “backward look”, to borrow Frank O’Connor’s phrase, balances the two other centers of felt ethical gravity in these poems. One may be found in the ease, warmth, and complexity of McCarthy’s tributes to a loving marriage in “The Fiction, The Sea” and the love poems orbiting around it. To borrow a line from John Montague, McCarthy’s contest is with “the sea of history”, because from history the tasks of the poem seem to make only metaphor, only a “closed thing”. Verse craft sometimes overemphasizes closure, and so McCarthy’s dismay is overstated for love. The other center of gravity in The Fiction, The Sea occasions the same dismay in McCarthy’s five poems on the Celtic Tiger’s reception of the European Union’s refugees, and especially so in “Hiding Joseph in Ireland” (LGO 39).

In ways both direct and glancing, in these first thirty-nine poems McCarthy prepares us for overlooked history, for a new fiction, and for pertinent rendering of World War II and the “Emergency.”

Here McCarthy’s design resembles that of his Merchant Prince; however, his range of reference and allusion takes in more detail—takes in details redolent of the formation of Ireland and, indeed, of Europe under the union. Again, McCarthy’s audacity lies in his willingness to make poems out of overlooked materials in the Irish national allegory: the Gaelachas of Norman Ireland and East Munster, the ‘king’s shilling’ and Imperial service, and the contests of Neutrality through postwar austerity to An Tóstal and the Festival of Britain. In Merchant Prince, McCarthy set Nathaniel Murphy’s self-conscious
memoir of pre-Famine Cork in prose and he put that prose in the midst of the poems. Here, he sets the memoir in verse that wraps around the more immediate materials of *The Last Geraldine Officer*’s wartime experience. Based on a formal count of seven, McCarthy’s verse reveals that Colonel FitzGerald’s story does not come of easy or fond reminiscence, though the Colonel’s *sprezzatura* makes it seem so. Rather, his story comes of his long working through of moral sentiment. Like many Irish stories, the Colonel’s tale constitutes a liberation narrative tracing his entry into art, action, Eros—and, best of all, into humane moral judgment in Liberated Brussels, Germany, and Europe. In “Snow Falling on Germany,” the Colonel recounts his stop in Cologne and a visit to the destitute but intact household of the Celticist Dr. Ratzinger, whose children

…stare in amazement at an Allied officer who seemed To bring honour to their embittered father. I gave to them American chocolates and a bog-oak piglet from home— A mascot from a neutral place, a land of future welcome. (LGO 164)

McCarthy’s audacious inventiveness blooms when he reveals the original and fictional matter of the Colonel’s telling: moldy school copybooks and scuffed document wallets discovered in a disused press when, say, an auctioneer like Mealy’s comes to clear a house like Templemaurice. These are the Colonel’s sources: a notebook of Big House recipes that Darina Allen would have envied; scribbled pages of his own pocket battle diary; and a damp sheaf of poems in the Déise Irish of the 1920s. The receipts – to
use the old spelling – of Mrs. Norah Foley stand as tender for the socially coded fulfillments of human appetite, of sustaining vitality, and communion. For McCarthy’s Colonel FitzGerald, each dish – from *Villierstown Nettle Soup to Gracie O’Connor’s Lobster Grand* (LGO 97,143) – serves up memory à la M. Proust. For McCarthy’s reader, each receipt wittily offers an opportunity to parse the Anglo-Norman Decies à la Lévi-Strauss. The practical vignettes of the Big House served up by these recipes might appear in too fond a Somerville-and-Ross aura, but for the balancing immediacy of the Colonel’s jottings in his war diary and the shaping perspective of his Irish poems.

The entries in Colonel FitzGerald’s “battle book” and some of his Déise poems carry dates. The diary entries register first-hand FitzGerald’s experience of brutal; tank battles, of the liberation of Brussels, of the opening of the Sandbostel *Konzentrationslager*, and of his crossing into Germany at Nijmegan. He writes notes on his leaves back in “Emergency” Ireland and in wartime London – of Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Heat of the Day* – and of a pan-European affair with Hallie Whelan, and Irish-American OSS officer, that culminates in an erotic idyll in San Remo, Italy. Here we notice something accessibly novelistic that seldom occurs in the brevity of the lyric: how Colonel FitzGerald’s moral constitutions grows in empathetic discernment. FitzGerald’s moral urgency registers, usually, first as witness in the hasty English of his “battle book” and then in Irish as feeling shaped into moral discernment. His diary asks: “What happened here, Oh Geraldine?” The question appears again—“Cad a tharla anso, a Ghearalaigh” in “Mí an Aibréain san
Ollchampa Géibhinn, 1945.” This poem in Irish is a key to the fiction of The Last Geraldine Officer, just as “The Non-Aligned Storyteller” was to its eponymous collection and “CCC” was to Merchant Prince.

What FitzGerald’s Irish poems say and show, though, differs from what the Colonel’s English telling says and shows. For example, if McCarthy’s reader sees FitzGerald as Don Quixote, then the Colonel’s countryman Paax Foley becomes his Sancho. Unprepared by his pastoral life in the Free State, Foley faces the unmediated sights of the Sandbostel concentration camp. And FitzGerald sees that Foley’s “fearthainne na nDéise”—“the rains of the Decies,” in English—constitute his heroism:

…Bhí crálacht n Fhaisteanach tharat;
– éagóir príobhaideach do dheineamar
Fé éide Ghallda: saol ionraic san Iodhbaír Dhóite.
(LGO 114--15)

As here, FitzGerald, and McCarthy behind him, locates the touchstone of his discernment first in this local Irish. In English, FitzGerald’s longer, versed and measured, garrulous and ruminative retelling of his life up to 1953 or so touches upon other moments that descend emotionally from his salute to Paax Foley’s eating of the Tree of Knowledge—a salute that remains almost hidden away in intelligent feeling – the Cuisle na hÉigse – because it does not appear in the reportorial narrative of the Colonel’s English.

McCarthy has invested Colonel FitzGerald’s narrative with a rich store of incident, local reference, and cultural allusion that is, in itself, a marvel of felt intelligence and critical historical intuition. McCarthy’s Colonel
sometimes views himself through the wrong end of the binoculars and sometimes fails to recognize that their lenses might be fractured. Likewise, McCarthy often leavens his national themes with an invitation to trace signs and portents back and forth through the levels of character parsed out here in the homely genres of the fireside reminiscence and the lost notebook. Such play reveals McCarthy’s respect for FitzGerald’s character. That respect, in turn, stirs the reader’s affection for the now diminished and overlooked milieu of Anglo-Ireland. This is not Georgian Society revivalism, though. Nor does McCarthy indulge in his version of the Yeatsian fantasy about Major Robert Gregory, for it is not the accomplishments of a faded class or of a privileged individual that matter in The Last Geraldine Officer, rather, it is that, beset by his class and country in its most difficult formative years and by obligations to art and nation conflicting like the geassa of old, a man may perceive and treasure as his own another’s untutored moral response now to human calamity.

Poems are made to answer the yearning created by their absence. Poems are transcendental in a way that ‘revolution’ or ‘social justice’ can never be. It is impossible to communicate this Fact of Life to any well meaning reader or scholar. It is because of this revolutionary humanity, this very transcendence, that poems become the most profound allies of justice and revolution. The poet always believes in the primacy of the poem. And that primacy comes from lived, human experience. The poem stands for what is human. Social injustice stands as an affront to what is human, to what is poetic. Justice adheres to poetry, not the other way round.41

December, 2014
Notes


2. For instance, the librarian trope hardly accounts for McCarthy’s role in helping advise Cork’s successful competition to become the European Union’s “City of Culture” for 2005 and for his role in administering programs during that festival year. Likewise, it does not quite account for McCarthy’s ever ready willingness to take part in such public functions as the annual commemoration of the Chernobyl disaster in Bishop Lucey Park (April 26, 2007).


9. Philip O’Leary’s preface to *Jumping Off Shadows* begins by citing Daniel Corkery’s prescription of the three “forces” that distinguish Irish writing – “Religious Consciousness,” “Irish Nationalism,” and the “Land” – only to assert that the anthologized poets respond to the first force broadly and freely, look askance at the second, and take the third for granted.

10. See The Inherited Boundaries: Younger Poets of the Republic of Ireland, ed. Sebastian Barry (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1986). In a paragraph on Heaney and Montague, Barry’s rich introduction remarks that “the excellence of the Northern work has certainly occluded the equal quality of the Republic[’s work]” (IB 21).


15. McCarthy sets the last novel of the Glenville trilogy, titled “Without Memory,” in early 1990s and focuses on Eamon Glenville’s married life, his business life, and his struggle to escape being put forward as a candidate of the “new” Eurocentric Fianna Fáil party in the election of 1992. McCarthy has described the adult Eamon as “disconnected from the atavism
of Fianna Fáil life, but incapable of ridding himself of the social connections, and historical obligations, of Glenville. Thomas McCarthy to author, 30 September 2002.


18. Erskine Hamilton Childers was the son of Robert Erskine Childers (1870 – 1922), novelist, agitator, gun-runner and captain of the *Asgard* (1914), and Republican. With de Valera he came out against the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921, fought against the Free State government, and was executed for possessing Michael Collins’s revolver. MORE


21. Today critics and historians mock the pastoral rhetoric of de Valera’s vision of the Irish social good, but would anyone wish, except with Shavian irony, to subscribe to the dystopian converse of that vision? Here is what happens when we turn de Valera’s rhetoric inside out: “The Ireland which we dream of would be the mortgaged property of a consumer public who valued material wealth only as a basis of wrong living, of a people who were never satisfied even with excessive self-gratification and devoted their leisure to commodified distraction; a land whose countryside would be dark with abandoned farmsteads, whose fallow fields and emptied villages would be lugubrious with the silence of the unemployed, the coughing of tubercular children, the turf-wars of urban gangs, the come-ons of sex-workers, whose t.v. rooms would be the marketplace of foolishness of anguished old age.”
22. McCarthy’s readers will recall the poems in *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919) in which W. B. Yeats memorializes Major Robert Gregory (1881 – 1918), Lady Gregory’s only son, who died on the Italian front at the end of World War I. Bobby Glenville certainly had the opportunity to read “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory,” but its more likely that “An Irish Airman Foresees His Death” would have appealed to him more.


26. See Diarmaid Ferriter’s well documented and evocatively illustrated *Judging Dev: A Reassessment of the Life and Legacy of Eamon de Valera* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2007).

27. McCarthy consistently spells Lindbergh’s last name without the terminal “h.”

28. McCarthy’s Mr. Cooper is John Cobb Cooper, Jr., the aviator and vice president (1934 – 45) of Pan American Airways. A pioneer in international law governing the air and, later, space, Cooper was a member of the Institute of Advance Study, Princeton (1945 – 50), and taught air law at McGill University, Montréal (1951 – 57).

29. Ferriter gives a 1967 color photograph of de Valera posing a
trigonometry quest to his grandson “Eamon Viv” in the well-stocked study at Áras an Uachtaráin (JD 302). McCarthy’s slight-of-hand plotting here echoes Yeats’s more elaborate construction in “The Phases of the Moon,” one of the doctrinal poems in The Wild Swans at Coole (1919) predicting the geometric metaphysics of A Vision (1925). There, the ruminating poet in the tower creates two wanderers outside (Robartes and Ahearne), who rehearse Yeats’s scheme of history and character and boast that the poet will never comprehend that geometry. Yeats’s reader, however, understands that the poet has intuited all that they have said. Their actuality is his imagining.


31. See Justin Quinn, The Cambridge Introduction to Modern Irish Poetry 1800 – 2000 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 194 – 210. In his last chapter, Quinn finally observes that “poets such as Heaney and Hartnett, even though they have invested much of their imaginative life in matters of ‘Ireland’, clearly also relish the prospect of getting rid of it.” If Ireland “disappears” to poets and their art, as quite seems to anticipate with approval, then the issues at the heart of poetry dissolve into the approved “higher” journalism of anywhere.


33. The Cork Athenaeum opened on May 21, 1855, and was renamed Munster Hall in 1873. Acoustically inadequate, the hall was rebuilt, becoming the Cork Opera House in 1888. The Cork Opera House survived the burning of Cork by British forces in 1920, but was later destroyed by an electrical fire in 1955, when the stages 1891 backcloth depicting the Grand Canal in Venice perished. In 1963 the modern Cork Opera House was built and in 2003 the facade of the hall and the square in front of it were refurbished. See www.corpoperahouse.ie/history.ph.

34. Thomas McCarrthy to author, nd. [2003].

35. Thomas McCarthy, Merchant Prince (London: Anvil Press
Concerning the prose fiction “Memory” in *Merchant Prince*, McCarthy teasingly observes that “There are other things in the ‘novella’ too, but its complete uselessness and unhelpfulness is what gives me a pure Prout pleasure.” Thomas McCarthy to author, 31 May 2005. McCarthy originally cast the matter of “Memory” as discontinuous footnotes to the poems that parody the divigations of early nineteenth-century learned prose.


38. Glenshelane Wood backs on Fitzgerald’s house, which once was owned by the Keane family. Glenshelane is an Anglicization of Gleann Siothláín, which may be translated as “Glen of the Fairies.” See: www.coillteoutdoors.ie.

Thomas McCarthy, *A Geraldine Officer* (Hymenstown, New Inn, Co. Tipperary: Thor Editions, 2002). This chapbook contains color snapshots of Glenshelane House and the woods behind, the garden, and rhododendron and laurel in flower. One hundred copies were printed and bound.


41. “Notes Written…,” 30, *December 18th*. 