Louis MacNeice and Accidents of Origin: 'Carrickfergus'

When considering the concept of identity - a prevailing theme in Louis MacNeice's canon - the significance of place in one's formative years is, arguably, inescapable. Born in Belfast in 1907, MacNeice spent much of his childhood in 'Smoky Carrick', the family having moved to the County Antrim town in the wake of his birth. In *The Earth Compels*, published in 1938, MacNeice revisits his heritage in 'Carrickfergus'.[1] In this poem, MacNeice's recollection of detail is testament to the enduring impact of geographical origin. Despite later Anglican influences, 'Carrickfergus' conveys a sense of embedded Irishness that hyphenates the poet's oeuvre. Peter McDonald, in *The Poet in His Contexts*, notes that 'Ireland may well prove to be the most important of all contexts for MacNeice's works'.[2] Here, an examination of 'Carrickfergus' intends to yield some understanding of the role this Northern Irish town played in shaping MacNeice's poetic journey.

From the inaugural use of the first person singular, MacNeice sets a tone of subjective retrospection: 'I was born in Belfast between the mountain and the gantries'. This immediately roots the speaker in a setting so familiar in his emotional and topographical landscape that specifics are eschewed: the 'mountain' alluded to is the Black Mountain that is Belfast's backdrop, while the 'gantries' refer to the Arrol Gantry and the Harland and Wolff shipyard. The prepositional 'between' places the young MacNeice as straddling these binary landmarks – the stark presence of nature juxtaposed against hubs of heavy industry - that characterise his formative years. Thus, it could be said that duality made its presence felt in MacNeice's psyche from a young age.

Advancing to the second line, with its evocative soundscape, further immerses the reader into the zeitgeist of period and place. The 'lost sirens' are recalled as 'hooting', imbuing them with connotations of nocturnal nature. Indeed, the punctuation of industrial sounds would have been the norm, as natural to locals as the hooting of owls would be in a crepuscular forest. Such sounds compete with the 'clang of trams', completing this cacophonous world of MacNeice's childhood. These first two lines of

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[1] Louis MacNeice, *The Earth Compels* (Faber and Faber, 1938) p7

[2] Peter McDonald, *Louis MacNeice: The Poet in His Contexts* (Clarendon Press, 1991) p229

sensory distillation are indicative of the poet's geographical branding, of inexorable roots. Notwithstanding Liam Harte's reference to MacNeice as 'tentatively Irish', the opening of 'Carrickfergus' in itself denotes an Irish identity that, if later compromised, can never be eradicated.[3] MacNeice himself admits as much in the later 'Carrickfergus Revisited', describing his original homeland as '[his] childhood's frame', a revelation noted by Edna Longley in *On Poetry*. [4]

Nevertheless, unalloyed national identity is soon open to question, with references to paralysis and oppression: the harbour is a muddy 'bottle-neck' where there are 'jams' of boats. This is underpinned by a history of subjugation, with the small boats described as being 'beneath' the town's 'Norman castle'. The preposition here points not only to the physical positioning of the fortress, but showcases a metaphorical message of empowerment. Invaders and pillagers have established their dominance, while reminders of Carrickfergus's tradition source of income – 'crystal salt' – clings in 'lumps' to the pier that stands in the shadow of the castle. That MacNeice attributes the word 'shining' to this salt implies an affinity with those struggling to retain – or reclaim - their regional integrity. The motif of conquest and imprisonment continues its thread, with the town described as having been 'walled' (by invaders) against the rest of the country. Interestingly, the invaders are characterised using pronouns in the singular possessive form: 'To stop his ears to the yelping of his slave'. This clearly attacks the proprietorial perspective of marauders and gives them aa aggressive machismo by using the male form of the pronoun. It could be, here, that MacNeice is apportioning blame to every individual who enables domination simply being wilfully oblivious to its existence ('stop his ears') and refusal to hear the 'yelping' of the 'slave'. By leaving Ireland, one could question whether MacNeice felt that he himself had chosen disregard his country's plight.

MacNeice's loyalties, as a 'rector's son, born to the Anglican order', should perhaps have sat more readily with the side of the occupiers than the Catholic Irish. MacNeice knew that his religious circumstance rendered him '[b]anned forever from the candles of the Irish poor'. Yet this standpoint is tempered by two factors: firstly, his father was, somewhat ironically, in favour of Home Rule; and, secondly, images of social

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[3] Liam Harte, 'Living Beyond the Severed Ends: Poetry of Louis MacNeice and Philip Larkin' , *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, Vol 89, No 353, 2000, 45-53. *JSTOR*

[4] Edna Langley, '"The Channels of My Dreams": Carrickfergus and Louis MacNeice's Poetic Cosmos', *On Poetry*, 2008, p374

inequality (the 'residential houses' of the Scots and Protestants sit in stark contrast to the 'slum[s]' of the 'Irish Quarter'), evident for all to see. It is perhaps this dichotomy of allegiance that leads to MacNeice often being described as an 'Anglo-Irish' poet. He certainly leaves Irish shores and participates in the 'puppet world' which is '[f]ar from' the environs of Carrickfergus and its 'mill girls, the smell of porter, the salt mines/And the soldiers with their guns'. There may be a suggestion that MacNeice is questioning his own loyalty to Ireland, and could be applying the epithet of 'puppet' to himself - as well as to others who are shielded from harsh political and military realities. John Kerrigan, in *The London Review of Books*, points to MacNeice as being 'self-consciously archipelagic', at least during the war years and beyond.[5] This is hard to argue against, given that he crafted a monologue for Byron in Scots and referenced Wales extensively in the 1954 *Autumn Sequel*, in addition to writing *I Crossed the Minch*, a book about the Hebrides and Western Ireland, leading Kerrigan to describe MacNeice as a 'writer for the whole of the British Isles'.[6] This may not be surprising, given that the notion of true Irishness is embodied in notions of sectarianism. One is either on the side of Ireland or one is not. By this definition, MacNeice has turned his back on his Irish roots and has become, in Kerrigan's words, 'representative of Anglo-Irish hybridity, exile and migration'.[7]

Nevertheless, 'Carrickfergus' hints at some guilt at MacNeice's increasing detachment from his origins. In the fourth stanza the word 'cross' is used twice – ostensibly, this refers to the Anglican Church, as built by settlers. This, in itself, carries connotations of sacrifice and crucifixion. Does MacNeice feel guilt that he has sacrificed his Irish identity in favour of a more worldly reputation? Yet a 'cross' is also an intersection, created by two paths going in different or opposite directions – this could equally apply to the predicament of the young MacNeice's, who travels in one direction while his intuition pulls him in another. Significantly, though, the word 'cross' also functions as a verb. Here, the double use of the word emphatically underscores MacNeice's decision to 'cross' the Irish Sea. This implied regret is emphasised by the use of the word '[c]ontracted': it is used, in 'Carrickfergus' to censure those who shield their offspring from unpalatable truths and keep them safe from danger. In a sense,

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[5] John Kerrigan, 'The Ticking Fear', *London Review of Books,* Vol 30, No 3, 2008, https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v30/n03/john-kerrigan/the-ticking-fear

[6] Ibid
[7] Ibid

though, MacNeice enters into a contract of his own, along with all the implications of having signed off on it, and with the expectation of something in return. As with 'cross', however, the noun takes on more deep-seated imputations when used as a verb, suggesting - as it does – shrinkage and reduction, in this case of national identity. The sequence of quatrains, one wonders, may be an attempt to impose order and stability as a mask for chaos and conflict, both in the actual world and the speaker's inner self.

Northern Ireland's 'echoing' of conquest is accompanied by reminders of concomitant violence, with its 'gibbets', its 'camp of soldiers', its 'funeral cry'. Conflict is a distinguishing and enduring feature of Ireland's history and landscape; consequently, conflict is inherited and absorbed by its inhabitants. It is of little wonder, then, that MacNeice has soaked up the polarities of his birthplace, a duality that permeates his work. Carrickfergus is, as MacNeice suggests in 'Valediction', a fundamental component of his being, making him a 'figure that cannot undo its thread'. MacNeice is, in his own words, a man who has stayed 'loyal to his accidents' - here being the accident of 'origin' – and never fully able to shed the embryonic influence of this Northern Irish town.[8]

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[8] Louis MacNeice, *Selected Literary Criticism*, ed by Alan Heuser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987) p57

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