

Irish Working-Class Poetry 1900-1960

In 1936, writing in the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, W.B. Yeats felt the need to stake a claim for the distance of art from popular political concerns; poets' loyalty was to their art and not to the common man:

Occasionally at some evening party some young woman asked a poet what he thought of strikes, or declared that to paint pictures or write poetry at such a moment was to resemble the fiddler Nero [...] We poets continued to write verse and read it out at the 'Cheshire Cheese', convinced that to take part in such movements would be only less disgraceful than to write for the newspapers.¹

Yeats was, of course, striking a controversial pose here. Despite his famously refusing to sign a public letter of support for Carl von Ossietzky on similar apolitical grounds, Yeats was a decidedly political poet, as his flirtation with the Blueshirt movement will attest.² The political engagement mocked by Yeats is present in the Irish working-class writers who produced a range of poetry from the popular ballads of the socialist left, best embodied by James Connolly, to the urban bucolic that is Patrick Kavanagh's late canal-bank poetry. Their work, whilst varied in scope and form, was engaged with the politics of its time. In it, the nature of the term working class itself is contested. This conflicted identity politics has been a long-standing feature of Irish poetry, with a whole range of writers seeking to appropriate the voice of 'The Plain People of Ireland' for their own political and artistic ends.³

¹ W.B. Yeats (ed.), *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892-1935* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1936), p. x.

² For more on this see W. J. McCormack, *Blood Kindred: The Politics of W. B. Yeats and his Death* (London: Pimlico, 2005). For more on Yeats and the Blueshirts see R.F. Foster, *W.B. Yeats: A Life: II The Arch-Poet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 475-7.

³ Brian O'Nolan is perhaps the most overt example of this in his column for the *Irish Times* 'Cruiskeen Lawn'. For examples of this humorous appropriation of the working-class man and woman see Kevin O'Nolan (ed.), *Flann O'Brien: The Best of Myles: A Selection from 'Cruiskeen Lawn'* (London: Flamingo, 1993), pp. 79-111.

Changes in secondary education during the late nineteenth century in Ireland were to have a remarkable effect on the cultural and poetic life of the country. Between 1861 and 1901 the number of children receiving a secondary education rose from 22,000 to 35,000, with 'the increase being almost exclusively the result of increasing numbers of Catholics entering the system'.⁴ During this time we see the rise of the poets of revolutionary Ireland, writers such as Patrick Pearse, Thomas MacDonagh, Joseph Mary Plunkett, James Stephens, Terence MacSwiney and James Connolly. Common to their work was the appropriation of the voice of the oppressed and downtrodden. For example, Thomas MacDonagh's poem 'The Man Upright' contrasts the indifferent struggles of the working-class people of an Irish village with his own revolutionary world view. MacDonagh, the lower middle-class son of two teachers, was part of this educated generation that would come to liberate the sleeping masses from their slumber:

There came a man of a different gait ---
A man who neither slouched nor pattered,
But planted his steps as if each step mattered;
Yet walked down the middle of the street
Not like a policeman on his beat,
But like a man with nothing to do
Except walk straight upright like me and you.⁵

Perhaps most seductively, and with a nod to the assumed middle-class readership of poetry in Ireland, MacDonagh colludes with the reader by suggesting that they both have an upright gait and can walk facing the world. The leaders of 1916 were not the only commentators upon the working classes in their poetry. There were other writers and critics who engaged with

⁴ Ciaran O'Neill, *Catholics of Consequence: Transnational Education, Social Mobility, and the Irish Catholic Elite 1850-1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 9.

⁵ Thomas MacDonagh, 'The Man Upright', *The Collected Poems of Thomas MacDonagh* (Dublin: the Talbot Press, 1916), pp. 125-126.

nationalist fervour at the turn of the century, and attempted to claim the voice of the working classes for their own; of their poetry Alice Milligan's 'A Country Girl' is a striking example.

Milligan (1865-1953) was born into a Methodist family in Omagh, County Tyrone. Her father, Seaton Milligan, was a writer and established member of the Royal Irish Academy. Despite her strong Unionist and Protestant background, Milligan, like James Stephens, would be swayed by the rising tide of the Irish Revival and became an early convert to nationalism after the death of Parnell in 1891. Along with her fellow nationalist and writer Ethna Carbery (Anna Johnston), she founded and contributed many poems and articles to the controversial journal *Shan Van Vocht* (1896-99).⁶ Milligan's 'A Country Girl' is revealing about class attitudes between Protestant and Catholic and also between the established upper class and their working-class counterpoints.⁷ The poem describes a working-class girl who serves a table on All Souls' Night in the home of her Ascendency employers. It finishes on something of a corrective, a corrective that again replicates this ambiguity between the representation and appropriation of the working-class voice:

They think "she would not understand,"
But she is wiser than the wise,
A simple Southern country girl
Whose faith is that her dead will rise.⁸

There is a skilful positioning of a duality of meaning in Milligan's last line. On the one hand, the girl has faith that her lost relatives, ancestors and lovers will rise on All Souls' Night and her prayers will intercede on their behalf on their journey towards heaven. On the other hand, when read in light of Milligan's overt nationalism, there is the threat to the Ascendency order

⁶ For more on Alice Milligan see Sheila Turner Johnson, *Alice: A Life of Alice Milligan* (Omagh: Colourpoint Press, 1994); Catherine Morris, *Alice Milligan and the Irish Cultural Revival* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2012).

⁷ Milligan's 'A Country Girl' was first published in a collected edition in 1908; see Alice Milligan, 'A Country Girl', *Hero Lays* (Dublin: Maunsel and Co., 1908), p. 33.

⁸ Alice Milligan, 'A Country Girl', *Poems by Alice Milligan* (Dublin: M. H. Gill and Son, 1954), p. 123.

from the rural Catholic working classes who have traditionally risen in agrarian violence throughout the bloody history of Ireland. As a portent of the Easter 1916 Rebellion Milligan's poem is prescient, as many of these same simple working-class country girls would join the ranks of Cumann na mBan in support of Easter week.

If the Rising was a site of contested class politics, so too was the First World War, where working-class soldiers fought and died alongside their upper-class officers. One of these soldiers was the Donegal-born poet and novelist Patrick MacGill, whose books *Red Horizon* and *The Great Push* give a direct insight into the experience of the working-class men who made up the bulk of the British Forces.⁹ MacGill produced three complete collections of poetry, *Songs of the Dead End* (1912), *Soldier Songs* (1917), and *Songs of Donegal* (1921). As with his prose, MacGill's poetry is filled with the concerns of the working classes and their plight as wage-slaves under oppressive conditions. MacGill was born in 1890 and worked as a navy before he enlisted with the London Irish Rifles, so he had seen first-hand the difficulties faced by these labourers, as his poem 'Played Out' reveals:

As a bullock falls in the crooked ruts, he fell when
the day was o'er,
The hunger gripping his stunted guts, his body shaken
and sore.
They pulled it out of the ditch in the dark, as a brute
is pulled from its lair,
The corpse of the navy, stiff and stark, with the
clay on its face and hair.¹⁰

⁹ Patrick MacGill, *The Red Horizon* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1916); Patrick MacGill, *The Great Push: An Episode of the Great War* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1916).

¹⁰ 'Patrick MacGill, 'Played Out', *The Navy Poet: the Collected Poems of Patrick MacGill* (Dingle: Brandon Books, 1984), p. 51.

MacGill's work offers a direct challenge to the more effete and mystical poetry of many of his contemporaries, and instead places emphasis upon, 'physical strength, endurance, the ability to face danger but also stoicism' of the Irish navy.¹¹ MacGill's poetry is an eclectic mix of socialist propaganda, war memorials and Revival-inspired romanticism. His *Songs of the Dead End* collection is devoted to the difficulty of the working-class life, and, in particular, the life of the navy, as his Walt Whitman inspired poem 'Dedication' makes clear:

I sing of them,
The underworld, the great oppressed,
Befooled of parson, priest, and king,
Who mutely plod earth's pregnant breast,
Who weary of their sorrowing,
—The Great Unwashed — of them I sing.¹²

MacGill was joined in the trenches of the First World War by his fellow compatriot and poet Francis Ledwidge (1887-1917).

Ledwidge was born the son of a manual farm labourer in Slane in Co. Meath. He too spent time working as a navy on the roads before taking work at a copper mine near his home. Ledwidge did not last long at the mine before he was dismissed for agitating for better conditions for the workers.¹³ Although a more sophisticated poet than MacGill, Ledwidge's poetry shares some of his concerns with the working classes. Ledwidge wrote for his fellow working-class comrades in arms in the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers. His poem 'Soliloquy',

¹¹ David Taylor, *Memory, Narrative and the Great War: Rifleman Patrick MacGill and the Construction of Wartime Experience* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), p. 94.

¹² 'Patrick MacGill, 'Dedication', *The Navy Poet: the Collected Poems of Patrick MacGill* (Dingle: Brandon Books, 1984), p. ix.

¹³ For more on the life of Francis Ledwidge see Liam O'Meara, *A Lantern On The Wave: A Study of the Life of the Poet, Francis Ledwidge* (Dublin: Repest Books, 1999); Alice Curtayne, *Francis Ledwidge: A Life of the Poet 1887-1917* (London: Martin Brian & O'Keeffe, 1972).

captures some of the tensions he felt as a soldier-poet in France and for the faceless thousands who will be remembered only by their collective deeds of war:

To thank the gods for what is great;
A keen-edged sword, a soldier's heart,
Is greater than a poet's art.
And greater than a poet's fame
A little grave that has no name,
Whence honour turns away in shame.¹⁴

Perhaps the most celebrated Irish poem of the First World War is Thomas Kettle's 'To my Daughter Betty, The Gift of God', whose touching lines articulate a vision of why he chose to fight with the National Volunteers in support of John Redmond. Interestingly Kettle, who was born into a prosperous Catholic farming family, also claims to fight for the working-class poor of Ireland:

Know that we fools, now with foolish dead,
Died not for flag, nor King, nor Emperor,
But for a dream, born in a herdsman's shed,
And for the secret Scripture of the poor.¹⁵

Kettle's lines resonate with some of the poetry of the 1916 leaders in that they portray the poor as a symbol of Ireland and replace their voices with that of a singular national identity. He was a committed propagandist on behalf of the National Volunteers and their role in World

¹⁴ Francis Ledwidge, 'Soliloquy', *The Complete Poems of Francis Ledwidge* ed. & intr. Lord Dunsany (London: Herbert Jenkins Limited, 1919), p. 98.

¹⁵ Thomas Kettle, 'To my Daughter Betty, the Gift of God', quoted in Gerald Dawe (ed.), *Earth Voices Whispering: An Anthology of Irish War Poetry 1914-1945* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2008), p. 55; W.B. Yeats makes similar claims to speak for the working-class poor where Robert Gregory's countrymen are 'Kiltartan's poor', thus eliding their tenant/landlord relationship. See W.B. Yeats 'An Irish Airman Foresees his Death', *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1994), p. 111.

War One, collecting marching songs for the National Volunteers and even going as far as seeing a Nietzschean ideology as underpinning the German rise to war.¹⁶

However, Kettle's views were contested by a number of Irishmen and women who saw the war, and Ireland's role in it, as part of a wider imperialist and economic system to keep the working classes oppressed. Amongst their number was James Connolly, who was involved with the Irish Trade and General Workers Union (ITGWU) and co-founded the Irish Citizen Army in order to protect workers' rights after the 1913 Lockout. Connolly edited the socialist newspaper the *Irish Worker* and was himself an author of plays, ballads and poetry. Much of the material written by Connolly was designed for entertaining the working-class men and women involved in the Irish Citizen Army, and he produced socialist realist plays such as *Under Which Flag* (1916) to promote union values.¹⁷ For Connolly, 'no revolutionary movement is complete without its poetical expression'. Without such poetical expression the revolutionary movement fails its working-class supporters and becomes 'the dogma of the few, and not the faith of the multitude'.¹⁸ Connolly wrote many ballads to be sung to the tune of popular airs, such as 'Freedom's Sun' which was sung to the air of 'Love's Young Dream', the Thomas Moore poem from *Irish Melodies* (1820). However, he also left behind a number of didactic poems such as 'The Legacy of a Dying Socialist to his Son' that marks the injustices that were felt by the working classes in Ireland, being oppressed by the rich who controlled their capital:

"My Legacy." Ah, son of mine! Wert thou a
rich man's pride,

¹⁶ See Stephen Gywnn and Thomas Kettle (eds.), *Battle Songs for the Brigades* (Dublin and London: Maunsel, 1915). For more on Nietzsche and the war see Thomas Kettle, *The Ways of War* (London: Constable, 1917), pp. 214-223.

¹⁷ James Connolly 'Under which Flag' in James Moran (ed), *Four Irish Rebel Plays* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2007), pp. 104-132.

¹⁸ James Connolly introduction to his 'Songs of Freedom' in The Cork Workers' Club (eds.), *The James Connolly Songbook* (Cork: Cork Workers Club, 1972), p. 1.

He'd crown thee with his property, possessions
far and wide,
And golden store to purchase slaves, whose
aching brain and limb
Would toil to bring you luxury as such had
toiled for him.¹⁹

Connolly was joined by other political poets in support of working-class people in the pages of publications such as the *Irish Citizen* and the *Irish Worker*.

The *Irish Worker* began life under the editorship of Jim Larkin before Connolly took over; from the outset it contained poetry submissions from those who wished to see the working classes unite and agitate for a more equitable society. Poems such as 'The People's Claim' wonder, 'must we be ever the slaves of a class, / That laugh at the labourer's plea for life'. Or the poem 'From the Earth a Cry' bemoans that the 'earth was made for Lords and the / makers of law' and encourages workers, again associated with the earth and soil, to rise up:

Insects and vermin, ye, the starving and
dangerous myriads, List to the murmur that grows and growls!
Come from the mines and mills [...] Pour from your dens of toil and filth,
out
To the air of heaven.²⁰

Patrick MacGill also contributed to the *Irish Worker* regularly, with poems such as 'He Rose a Man' being a homage to the tradition of Irish political martyrdom where the anonymous hero of the poem, 'spoke of the struggle that was to come / To end the times of woe, / He asked for help, and a few said "aye," / Whilst hundreds answered "no."' ²¹ MacGill's poem appears

¹⁹ James Connolly, 'The Legacy of a Dying Socialist to his Son', *The James Connolly Songbook*, p. 32.

²⁰ Anon, 'The People's Claim', *Irish Worker*, vol. 1, no. 1 (27 May 1911); John Boyle O'Reilly, 'From the Earth – A Cry', *Irish Worker*, vol. 1, no. 44 (16 March 1912), this latter poem was a reprint from the poetry of the Irish Fenian poet John Boyle O'Reilly, thus wedding socialism to the older physical-force tradition of Irish nationalism. For more on John Boyle O'Reilly see Ian Kenneally, *From the Earth, A Cry: the story of John Boyle O'Reilly* (Cork: Collins Press, 2011).

²¹ Patrick MacGill, 'He Rose a Man', *Irish Worker*, vol. 1, no. 45 (23 March 1912).

next to one titled 'The Striker', a prophetic reminder of the employment conditions of the working classes in a city that would be rocked a year later by the 1913 Dublin Lock-out.

'The Striker' calls on the employers to 'Pray God that mammon's brood may yet / Lears [sic] reason, / Nor seek to mould humanity through / Slaves'.²² Such working-class political poetry was commonplace in the *Irish Worker*, and the paper also printed poems by regular contributors such as 'Mac' and 'Oscar'. They wrote poems of the day and humorous little verses to satirise public figures, such as Mac's 'A Topical Alphabet', that claims:

K is for Kelly – John Saturnus [sic], don't
you know?
L is the place where he will surely go.
M stands for Murphy, sometimes known
as William Martin.
N is his ugly nob, a twisted one, for
sartin.²³

John Saturninus Kelly was an anti-Larkinite labour counsellor and William Martin Murphy was a press baron who led the employers during the 1913 Lockout.²⁴ Such political poetry was common in the working-class newspapers of the time and played an important role in keeping morale lifted during the difficult times of strike and in conveying the ideology of the papers themselves. However, the working-class readership of these papers also had an appreciation of more sophisticated poetry, and, crucially, the critical means to interpret it.

When the social worker, poet and suffragist Eva Gore-Booth released her collection *The Agate Lamp* in 1912 it was reviewed by A.P.W. (Andrew Patrick Wilson) for the *Irish Worker*.²⁵ He found Gore-Booth's poetry to be a cut above the 'verse-making' poets such as

²² J.M.P., 'The Striker', *Irish Worker*, vol. 1, no. 45 (23 March 1912).

²³ Mac, 'A Topical Alphabet', *Irish Worker*, vol. 11, no. 34 (11 January 1913).

²⁴ For more on John Saturninus Kelly and William Martin Murphy and their role in the 1913 Lockout see Pdraig Yeates, *Lockout Dublin 1913: the Most famous Labour Dispute in Irish History* (New York: Palgrave, 2000).

²⁵ Eva Gore-Booth, *The Agate Lamp* (London: Longmans and Co., 1912). Andrew Patrick Wilson was a Scottish poet and dramatist who was producing Larkinite plays for the Abbey Theatre, for more on this see Ben Levitas, 'Plumbing the Depths: Irish Realism and the Working Class from Shaw to O'Casey', *Irish University Review*, vol. 33, no. 1 (Spring – Summer 2003), pp. 133-149.

Mac or Oscar, writing that it contained something 'worth preserving'. Although a long-time admirer of Eva Gore-Booth's poetry, A.P.W. found her more effete and esoteric themes in this collection to be somewhat unpalatable, particularly the theme of reincarnation. For A.P.W., the idea of reincarnation was something he disliked, and he shared this dislike 'with the whole of the working class', before adding dryly that some people 'get sufficient of the world in one pilgrimage without anticipating another one'. Because of the hardships of working-class life, the idea of reincarnation would 'probably be the most dreadful hell some people could anticipate'. Despite such criticism, A.P.W. found room to approve of Gore-Booth's poetry, in particular her poem 'The Fishermen', a poem that sentimentalises the lives of ordinary fishermen in Ireland who 'watch for a silver fin / In a sea of gold'. This poem anticipates W.B. Yeats's 'The Fisherman', which was first published in *Poetry* in 1916, in its idealisation of the Irish working class, and shares its central subject. However, as A.P.W. was keen to point out, the romance of the sea may have a harsh reality for those who depend upon it for a living and it may 'call the breadwinner far, far away and leave those dependent upon him without shelter'.²⁶

Political poetry of the working classes then was commonplace at the beginning of the twentieth century, and there was also a sophisticated body of criticism in the organs of publication. Nowhere is this more evident than in the poetry of the suffragist movement, and, in particular, that which appeared in its newspaper the *Irish Citizen*. Poems such as 'Suffrage Sonnets' by the poet and dramatist James H. Cousins mark out a space for direct criticism of the political system that denied women the right to vote. Its opening lines highlight the injustice heaped upon those who would seek the vote for women: 'Who sets her shoulder to

²⁶ A.P.W. 'The Agate Lamp', *The Irish Worker* vol. 2, no. 35 (18 January 1913).

the Cross of Christ, / Lo! Shall she wear sharp scorn upon her brow'.²⁷ It is interesting to note that Cousins would also deploy the Christ imagery so common to the muscular Christianity of the age in order to make his political point. James Cousins was married to the formidable organiser and Honorary Secretary of the Irish Women's Franchise League (IWFL), Margaret E. Cousins, who, along with many others in the IWFL, had been imprisoned for her politics.²⁸ Many women poets also wrote for the *Irish Citizen*, of which the established poet and major Irish Revival figure Dora Sigerson Shorter was one. Her poem 'A Vagrant Heart' outlines the passion and adventure that she longed for, whilst suffering under unjust social restrictions that limited her freedom: 'Ochone! to be a woman, only sighing on the / shore— / [...] Must join in empty chatter, and calculate with / straws— / For the weighing of our neighbour— for the sake / of social laws'.²⁹ Although Sigerson Shorter was an establishment figure, her poem contributed to the emancipation of women of all classes, just as the *Irish Citizen* would publish anti-war poems once the horror of World War One and the damage to the working-class men fighting in it became apparent.³⁰

Working-class poetry in Ireland was influenced by the Irish Literary Revival in its use of recurring tropes such as the idealisation of the working-class figure as part of, or in tune with, nature, the deployment of the Christ figure as shorthand for the universal man, and in its concerns with the spiritual world. However, as we have seen, there was a vibrant culture of resistance from working-class poets themselves, either in the production of topical political poems or in a genuine attempt to capture the working-class experience in art. Nowhere was this resistance more evident than in the industrialised heartlands of what in 1920 became

²⁷ James H. Cousins, 'Suffrage Sonnets', *Irish Citizen*, vol. 1, no. 18 (21 September 1912).

²⁸ For more on Margaret E. Cousins see *Irish Citizen*, vol. 1, no. 38 (8 February 1913).

²⁹ Dora Sigerson Shorter, 'A Vagrant Heart', *Irish Citizen*, vol. 1, no. 6 (29 June 1912).

³⁰ For an example of this type of anti-war poem see AE, 'Gods of War', *Irish Citizen* vol. 3, no. 21 (10 October 1914).

Northern Ireland. One such northern light was the shipyard poet and dramatist Thomas Carnduff (1886-1956). Carnduff was from an impoverished working-class background in Belfast. He played an active role in the Larne gun-running of 1914 with the Ulster Volunteer Force before signing up to fight in the First World War. He eventually rose to become the Worshipful Master of Sandy Row Independent Loyal Orange Lodge. However, Carnduff's politics evolved to become more communist in outlook and he believed in the emancipation of the working class above his Orange political views.³¹ Carnduff's *Songs from the Shipyards and Other Poems*, published after his return from the war in France, eulogises the working-class man of Belfast and the pride he felt in her shipyards:

We are the men of Belfast,
Her sinew, marrow, and bone,
By the graft of our brain and muscle
We fashioned for her a throne;
And the people, or Lord, or parson,
Class, or creed, or clan,
Its little we care for the title,
If they play the part of a man.³²

This collection also makes a substantial contribution to Irish war poetry, containing many poems directly relating to his time on the front. Carnduff would go on to publish another collection of poems titled *Songs of an Out-of-Work* in 1932 that built on his concerns with working-class men and women. Although at this stage the collection is notable for its more communist informed politics, losing some of the nationalism that informed *Songs from the Shipyards* and replacing it with a more specific internationalist vision.³³

³¹ For more on Carnduff's life and works see John Gray (ed.), *Thomas Carnduff: Life and Writings* (Belfast: Lagan Press, 1994).

³² Thomas Carnduff, 'Men of Belfast', *Songs from the Shipyards and Other Poems* (Belfast, Thornton, 1918?), p. 11.

³³ Thomas Carnduff, *Songs of an Out-of-Work* (Belfast: Quota Press, 1932).

Working-class writing in Ireland has a strong tradition in the large urban centres of Dublin and Belfast. This is also true of England which still celebrates the proletarian poetry of the 'Auden Generation' of Cecil Day Lewis, Stephen Spender, and Louis MacNeice. Although two of these four poets were Irish, they have been subsumed into the British canon of communist poets.³⁴ They were a generation that fretted over their position in society. Despite their ideological commitment to the working classes, they were Oxford educated, middle-class and worried about a literature of commitment and the role of the poet in light of the rise of fascism.³⁵ Their poetry is of the metropolis, its industrialised factories debasing human experience for worker and artist alike.³⁶ This is one of the fissures that divides Irish working-class poetry in southern Ireland from its northern and English counterparts - it is largely rural in its outlook, it reflects the growing number of young writers that were moving to Dublin, but retained their rural worldview, and this is mirrored in the works produced at that time.

Urban working-class writing in Ireland is particularly strong in the field of drama, best represented by writers such as Sean O'Casey and Brendan Behan. But these writers also produced work in a variety of other forms from memoir to poetry. Behan began his fledgling literary career by publishing nationalist poetry in the *Wolfe Tone Weekly* and he maintained an interest in poetry throughout his writing life in both English and Irish. His poem 'The Prayer of the Rannaire' acutely recalls the pain he felt at the hijacking of the Irish language by an aspirant middle class using it as a tool for personal advancement. Behan also displays in this

³⁴ See Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England of the 1930s* (London: Viking Press, 1977).

³⁵ For an account of these poets that complicates this easy picture of them see Adrian Caesar, *Dividing Lines: Poetry, Class and Ideology in the 1930s* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991); Tom Walker has most recently argued for MacNeice's place in the Irish canon; see Tom Walker, *Louis MacNeice and the Irish Poetry of his Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

³⁶ For an example of this see Louis MacNeice's account of industrialised Birmingham: Louis MacNeice, 'Our sister water', in Dodds, E. R. (ed.), *The Collected Poems of Louis MacNeice* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), p. 299.

poem the resentment of the urban working class as their city swells with the ranks of ambitious and conservative rural poor in search of employment:

But Jesus wept! What's to be seen?
Civil servants come up from Dun Chaoín,
More gobdaws down from Donegal
And from Galway bogs — the worst of all,
The Dublin Gaels with their golden fáinnes,
Tea [*sic*] -totalling toddlers, turgid and torpid,
Maudlin maidens, morbid and mortal,
Each one of them careful, catholic, cautious.³⁷

If some of this nationalist ideology made for bad poetry, then marxist/socialist ideology also pervaded working-class writing with equally questionable results. The ubiquity of such weak poetry amongst Dublin's urban working class is memorably satirised by Flann O'Brien in his novel *At Swim-Two-Birds* when the characters Paul Shanahan and Antony Lamont are discussing the value of Gaelic poetry but seem concerned that the working-class voice is entirely absent from it. Shanahan asks his other fictional friends: 'But the man in the street. Where does he come in? By God he doesn't come in at all as far as I can see'.³⁸ He then proposes Jem Casey as the great poet of the labouring classes and as an exemplar of the type of writer whose work exhibits something of 'what you call *permanence*' for his oft-quoted great work 'The Workingman's Friend':

When money's tight and hard to get,
And your horse has also ran,
When all you have is a heap of debt —
A PINT OF PLAIN IS YOUR ONLY MAN.³⁹

³⁷ Brendan Behan, 'The Prayer of the Rannaire', quoted in Michael O'Sullivan, *Brendan Behan: A Life* (Colorado: Roberts Rinehart, 1999), p. 158.

³⁸ Flann O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds* (London: Penguin Classics, 2001), p. 74.

³⁹ Flann O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds* (London: Penguin Classics, 2001), p. 77.

Incidentally, the urban working-class poets of the *Irish Citizen* and the *Irish Worker* are not the only targets here for O'Brien's jaundiced view of Irish society, but also the didactic Temperance crusader and poet-priest Reverend James Casey whose forgettable poems on the dangers of drink were wildly popular towards the end of the nineteenth century.⁴⁰

If working-class poetry of the urban centres of Belfast and Dublin sought to challenge and overcome the long shadow of W.B. Yeats and the Revival, then perhaps the most successful writer in rising to this challenge came from beyond the poetic pale of the city. Patrick Kavanagh was the most original voice to develop in Irish working-class poetry, but his origins and subject matter were distinctly rural. Although he was a nature poet of some considerable talent, his best poetry is in an anti-pastoral mode, and his real genius would come in his ability to synthesise both the rural and the urban in poems such as his late canal bank sonnets, where a city lock 'Niagarously roars' by a quiet Dublin bench.⁴¹ Kavanagh's poetry was deeply infused with Catholicism and with the 'ordinary plenty' of working-class life, and this turn of the poetic gaze from Yeats's vision of celestial towers towards the 'clay-minted' earth offered the surest roadmap for the direction of Irish poetry in the second half of the twentieth century.⁴² Kavanagh offered a working-class poetry that was distinctive in being rural, Catholic and poor; his work contrasts with that of the 'Auden generation' who were urban, atheist and middle-class. Crucially, Kavanagh's poetry is working-class writing by a member of that class and his work demonstrates a sincerity that is often missing from other writing.

⁴⁰ For more on the Reverend James Casey see John Foley, 'The Historical Origins of Flann O'Brien's Jem Casey', *Notes and Queries*, vol. 52, no. 1 (March 2005), pp. 97-99.

⁴¹ Patrick Kavanagh, 'Lines Written on a Seat on the Grand Canal, Dublin', *Collected Poems* (London: Penguin Classics, 2004), p. 227.

⁴² Patrick Kavanagh, 'Advent', *Collected Poems* (London: Penguin Classics, 2004), p. 110.

His importance to those who followed him was captured by Seamus Heaney when he recalled that there 'came this revelation and confirmation of reading Kavanagh. When I found "Spraying the Potatoes" in the old *Oxford Book of Irish Verse*, I was excited to find details of a life which I knew intimately – but which I had always considered to be below or beyond books'.⁴³ Born the son of a cobbler and subsistence farmer in Monaghan in 1904 Kavanagh most successfully bridges the divide between working-class life and its expression. He manages this by writing with an authority that can be savage in its criticism of provincial Catholic Ireland, as with 'The Great Hunger', but also capable of showing its consolations, as with a poem such as 'Advent'. Of all the poets to follow in Yeats's footsteps, then, Kavanagh's rural working-class spirituality offered a more holistic view of Irish life than that posited by those urban poets who were writing from an overtly ideological perspective:

With all reasonable
Poems in particular
We want no secular
Wisdom plodded together
By concerned fools.⁴⁴

Certainly, Yeats too was dismissive of those proletarian poets whose subject matter debased the sanctity of art by promoting the 'man on the tube' as their subject:

The young English poets reject dream and personal emotion; they have thought out opinions that join them to this or that political party; they employ an intricate psychology, action in character [...] When I stand on O'Connell Bridge in the half-light and notice that discordant architecture, all those electric signs, where modern heterogeneity has taken physical form, a vague hatred comes up out of my own dark and I am certain that wherever in Europe there are minds strong enough to lead others the same vague hatred rises.⁴⁵

⁴³ Seamus Heaney, 'The Placeless Heaven: Another Look at Patrick Kavanagh', *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 138.

⁴⁴ Patrick Kavanagh, 'To Hell with Commonsense', *Patrick Kavanagh Collected Poems* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1964), p. 155.

⁴⁵ W.B. Yeats, 'A General Introduction for my Work', *Essays and Introductions* (London: MacMillan, 1961), p. 525.

For all of Yeats's eloquence in fighting against the 'filthy modern tide' of this new world, his battle was fundamentally lost.⁴⁶ As the hopes of the working-class poets for a more equitable Ireland began to fade, the time of the aspirant shopkeeper had come into its own with the rise of a debased middle class that 'fumble in a greasy till/And add the halfpence to the pence'.⁴⁷ However, despite Yeats's concerns that 'every rank above the lowest must degenerate, and, as inferior men push up into its gaps, degenerate more and more quickly' poetry in Ireland survived.⁴⁸ That it also thrived is down, in no small part, to Patrick Kavanagh and his rural working-class vision of an embryonic society in growth.

⁴⁶ W.B. Yeats, 'The Statues', *Collected Poems*, (London: MacMillan, 1950), p. 376.

⁴⁷ W.B. Yeats, 'September 1913', *Collected Poems*, (London: MacMillan, 1950), p. 120.

⁴⁸ W.B. Yeats, 'From "On the Boiler"', *Explorations* (London: MacMillan, 1962), p. 423.