
A Poet's Colloquy: From Manuscript to Published Poem

It was at a meeting at 11.00 am on what seems like an age ago in Chris Williams's restaurant The Brasserie in William Street that the idea of Cúirt, Fred Johnston's brainchild was first floated. Present at that meeting were Fred Johnston, Dick Donaghue, Ronnie O'Gorman and myself. Johnston had just come to work for a six-month stint in the Galway Arts Centre with a vague literary brief. Dick Donaghue, the then director, asked him on his first day what he was going to do. Johnston replied that it was a dream of his to organise a Literary Festival in Ireland that was dedicated solely to Poetry. This meeting was held to explore the possibilities of such a festival.

The reaction to the idea around the table that morning was positive but there was a long way to go. Initially the Arts Centre committee threw the idea out as a non-runner but somehow or other it didn't go away and within a year, the first Cúirt Festival was run due almost entirely to the work of Fred Johnston and Dick Donaghue. The key question was whether there was a Galway audience that would support a Poetry Festival and it was answered on the last night of the first Festival at the final reading. The readers were John Cooper Clark and Paul Durcan.

To the organisers' delight and surprise over 400 hundred people turned up for that reading. Donaghue was able to pay Durcan £75.00 not the pre-arranged fee of £50.00, and, the Festival made a profit of £30.00. Cúirt was on its way.

Gradually the Festival gained national and then international recognition, becoming one of the most important events in the Poetry Calendar. Pressure was applied to include Prose in the Festival and with the carrot of increased funding from the Arts Council of Ireland this was acceded to. To some this was an unfortunate compromise but it didn't hinder progress and it still remains one of the more important literary festivals in Europe today.

One of the main reasons for its continued success is that it has never strayed away from its initial aim to feature Irish and international poets on an equal footing and to

give the new and upcoming poet a platform on which to perform with their more established colleague. It is not unusual for a reading to include a virtually unknown author along with a Nobel Prize laureate and both given the same billing. This policy contributes immensely to the sense of discovery and celebration that surrounds the festival.

From the Bookseller's point of view, the greatest difficulty facing the unknown poet is having his or her work published. There are, of course, many reasons for this ranging from shyness to lack of confidence in their work or how to present the work to a potential publisher. There may also be a perception that publishers are not interested in new work.

As part of their 70th year celebration this year and in line with the invaluable contribution, Cúirt has made down through the years in promoting the work of unknown poets, Kennys Bookshop in Liosbán are hosting a forum whereby all unpublished poets are invited to present their work to a panel of publishers with a view to discussing how the work can progress from manuscript to published poem. The panel will consist of Pat Boran (Dedalus Press), Elaine Ní Chuilleanáin (Cyphers Magazine) and Caitriona O Reilly (Poetry Ireland Review).

This will be an open discussion in the hope that there will be positive results in having work published. Contributors will be given the chance to read the work and all are welcome. It is hoped that this Poet's Colloquy will be the first of many such editing workshops.

The Poet's Colloquy:
From Manuscript to Published Poem will take place in Kennys Bookshop, Liosbán Retail Estate, Tuam Road on Saturday the 24th of April (2010) at 12 Midday and all are welcome.