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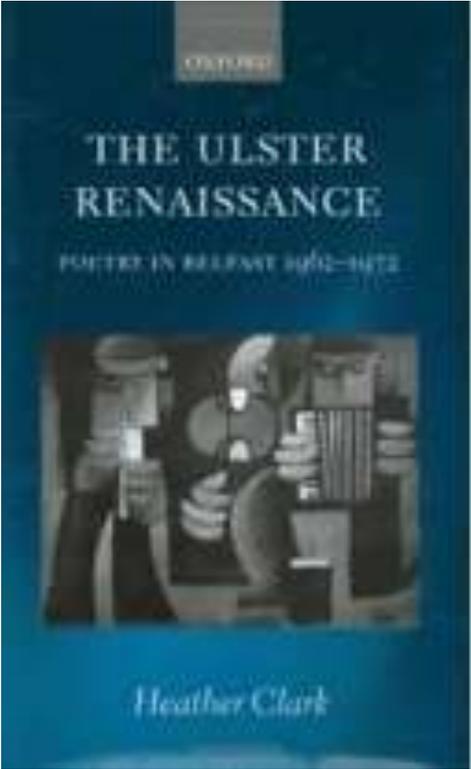
# Heather Clark. *The Ulster Renaissance* - *Poetry in Belfast 1962-1972*

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## REFERENCES

Heather CLARK, *The Ulster Renaissance - Poetry in Belfast 1962-1972*. Oxford University Press, 2006, x + 245 pp., €54.15, ISBN 0-19-928731-7

- 1 The idea of what has been termed an Ulster Renaissance to refer to the surge of new poetry in the North of Ireland in the late 1960s and 1970s together with what is known as the Belfast Group is often dismissed by the poets themselves and serious critics as a mere shorthand and inaccurate way to describe the vitality of that decade. Heather Clark's study, originally a PhD dissertation, challenges this and argues for the significant impact of Hobsbaum's group, later Heaney's group, as well as of the Trinity coterie (Longley, Mahon, Boland) on the development of literary and artistic life in the period prior to the Troubles and the burgeoning of individual talents. She thus shows how it helped poets such as Heaney, Muldoon, Simmons, Longley, and Mahon to become famous and autonomous. To Heather Clark, friendship and rivalry were crucial to their intellectual and artistic development. Her main argument is based on the concept of influence first developed by Harold Bloom (*The Anxiety of Influence*) and the idea of collaborative writing. As a result, she questions the authority of the author as an individual separated from its social and cultural context.
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- 2 In the first chapter she starts with examining in detail the relationship between Mahon and Longley, Heaney and Deane, establishing a parallel between the two pairs. Drawing from their unpublished correspondence, manuscripts and unedited texts of interviews held at the Special Collections Archive at Emory University, as well as information gleaned through personal correspondence with the poets themselves, she tells the story of their encounters and friendships from their schooldays in Belfast to their education at Trinity or Queen's University and early adulthood. Her description and narrative bring to light some hitherto undisclosed aspects of these early friendships and how the aspiring poets gradually and mutually nourished their dreams of becoming famous, anxious for recognition, jealous of one another's success and progress. She also makes clear their perceptive and often abrasive criticism of each other's poems (including Edna Longley in the circle) before they went into print: the "final shape" of the printed poem was thus the result of a collaborative process, something which was acknowledged in the dedications pointing to the happy few who could understand. For instance, Mahon's *Night-crossing* (1968) dedicated to the Longleys benefited from this kind of collaboration and was warmly reviewed by... the Longleys: "After all they had read much of the collection as it had been written, and had offered their voices to its final shape. In a fitting gesture, Mahon dedicated the book to both of them" (35).
  - 3 The second chapter is devoted to "The Belfast Group" and centred on the late Philip Hobsbaum (died in 2005), his background and education, his role in bringing together young poets, and his methods in chairing and running the critical discussions on the poems circulated among the group. Clark particularly emphasizes Hobsbaum's

influence on Heaney who attended the weekly meetings regularly and gained confidence in his possibilities there. When Hobsbaum arrived in Belfast, artistic and literary life was quasi non-existent. An older generation of poets and writers was not on the forefront (and never had been), some had left for England (Hewitt, Greacen) and younger aspiring poets were still students at Queen's, Trinity or Cambridge. Agriculture in the North and industries had declined and unemployment was high. Nevertheless, between 1963 and 1966, Hobsbaum's activity would reveal latent energies and contribute to breathe new life in possibilities that lay dormant. Originally Hobsbaum had first set up a creative writing workshop, a kind of laboratory used to test his own ideas inherited from R. F. Leavis for whom "literature was the only remaining national 'tradition' left in a world degraded by the Industrial Revolution and the subsequent march of progress" (45). Leavis's methods were based on close reading of the text in order to bring its meaning to light. The creative workshop was soon turned into a writers' group whose aim was to read and criticize one another's production. Clark describes the proceedings of the Group (which started to meet on a regular basis in 1963), names the participants and insists on the "intimidating" atmosphere of the seminars, as they were later described by Edna Longley. She particularly insists on Heaney's enthusiastic presence and Longley's more reluctant participation. Early participants, apart from Heaney, were Joan Newmann, B. MacLavery, James Simmons and Edna Longley. She goes into detail explaining how the Longleys befriended the Heaneys, how Mahon and slightly later, Boland remained outside of it all although Mahon took part alongside Heaney and Longley ("The Tight Assed Trio" in Michael Foley's words [HU 29] quoted on p. 57) in poetry readings in Belfast and various venues in the North. She carefully weighs the positive and negative aspects of the Group. Hobsbaum's main advantage was that because he was Jewish and had come from England, he was an "outsider" and therefore not involved in sectarianism or political struggles. He also knew people in London, which somehow gave him prestige, and he was taking all of those Belfast young men seriously. So, things could happen in Belfast, things could be voiced: "For Hobsbaum's Group was one of the few places in Belfast—perhaps the only place—where these writers felt free to voice social grievances and to explore the complexities of cultural identity. And it was not just the Catholic poets who felt dispossessed—Ulster Protestants, outsiders in both England and Ireland, were also alienated to a large degree from both cultures" (61). The Group served as a forum where anxieties about cultural identity, estrangement, could be voiced freely in front of an audience. It most importantly allowed these young poets to become friends and rivals while at the same time providing impetus, instilling mutual admiration, and helping them to find their individual voices against one another. Some of the difficulties arose from Hobsbaum's Leavisite background which influenced the underlying aesthetic of the Group and discouraged "abstract work based upon a writer's private code of language" (62). Poems should include a dimension of experience, be accessible to the reader and easy to interpret. Therefore plain diction, dramatic monologues, autobiographical lyrics were favoured. For all these reasons, Heaney was perhaps more than any other poet most influenced by Hobsbaum's aesthetic. His influence continued to be felt even after his departure for Glasgow (March 1966), in various ways: the Group continued under Heaney's direction (until 1972): "Seamus and Marie Heaney continued the workshop at their home on 16 Ashley Avenue and at the Four in Hand pub on the Lisburn Road, where they welcomed new members Paul Muldoon and Ciaran Carson" (69). The whole enterprise had paved the way for asserting literature: "Yet, through their varied efforts, Simmons, Frank Ormsby, Longley, Muldoon, and others would make sure poetry

remained at the forefront of the Belfast arts scene throughout the Troubles” (69); and finally, reading one’s work at least to one’s “immediate circle” and thus breaking away from ingrained reticence had become a habit: “Even after Hobsbaum left Belfast, the poets continued to apply the same unrelenting critical eye to each other’s work” (68).

- 4 In the following chapter, Heather Clark gathers the threads that lead to the indisputable fact that those years saw a “renaissance” of artistic and literary life in Ulster. From the point of view of the actors of that renaissance it is clear that there were reasons to be optimistic. However, that flurry of activities may have blinded many to the smothering ancient sectarianism that still undermined good-will and certain political overtures and the optimism that prevailed in the mid-sixties was soon going to turn sour: “though Belfast was alive with poets and readings, the increasingly fragile political situation threatened to destroy the literary momentum that had been building since the early days of Hobsbaum’s Group” (87). At an individual level, other changes were perceptible too as alongside collective endeavour, each poet was seeking recognition on a wider scale and as Clark writes: “The larger the poet’s reputations grew, the less they wanted to admit the extent of collective endeavour and achievement [...]”, an attitude that would contribute to strain relationships and, as she rightly underlines, would foster the poets’ competing reluctance and desire to be labelled part of a regional group.” At some stage or another, all would deny “the idea of an Ulster movement with one hand, only to invoke it with the other. Mahon even advised Longley in 1965 to ‘Adopt a Yeatsian pose. Be arrogant’” (86).
- 5 This is the context of the beginnings of *The Honest Ulsterman* founded in 1968 by James Simmons and the rest of the chapter is devoted to the history and impact of the magazine whose longevity marks it apart from other “little magazines” of the same kind. Simmons turned to the Arts Council for support, went on a poetry reading and singing tour through the Province (a fiasco), and on another tour in the North of England, which was more successful, but he was eventually excluded from the “Room to Rhyme” tour organized by the Arts Council including Heaney, Longley and David Hammond. And so this new venture was a means to restore his own reputation in the Province while giving voice to his frustration by challenging all that was conservative in Ulster and addressing a younger audience (“an under-thirty readership” 89). The magazine was publicized and well received in Ireland, and more specifically in the North. Favourable reviews appeared and it was seen as an “airhole” (Sam Hanna Bell). John Jordan wrote in the *Irish Press* that “One feels—and not for the first time—that the coils of literary expression that lie at the heart of Ulster culture are at last freeing themselves. This may give us a major regional creative movement in the North” (“Magazine Scene”, *Irish Press*, 12 Apr. 1969, quoted p. 91). However, some voices (John Hewitt, *Threshold*) expressed concern at the irreverent and bawdy tone, and in the US, the vanity of its editor was severely reviled by a critic. Clarke, who only considers the editorships of Simmons and Foley, insists on the fact that the magazine was a “forum for Northern writers” (97) but also and most importantly “a vehicle for corroboration and cohesion” (99).
- 6 In her fourth chapter, Clarke discusses the vexed question of the poets’ Northern identity and finds answers in their acknowledgement of both Hewitt and MacNeice’s legacies. The former provided them with a tolerant vision of regionalism even though later events were to undermine that sense of identity based on a shared geography of landscapes and diversity of “accents”. The latter, an icon of reconciled acceptance of a divided self and sceptical outsider’s distance, shaped another kind of relationship with their native province and cultural tradition. She examines their influence each in turn after

reminding the reader of their biographical details and connections to Ulster. By moving back to the forties, she links up the two periods to show the permanence of such questions as identity and what it means to be Irish while also establishing the continuity and vitality of a literary tradition in Ulster. Hewitt and MacNeice are definitely the poetic father-figures of the generation that set up a renaissance in motion. The Second World War may also have distracted the minds from latent contrary energies for a while: on the one hand, because of travelling restrictions, it caused people to keep within the boundaries of the province, on the other hand it gave the Protestants an opportunity to prove their loyalty to Britain. Then, post-war reforms concerning education and artistic life, initiated by the British government as a way to control its regions, created the possibility for changes in the cultural life of the province. However, it could be argued that the very necessity of finding some ways of defining one's self and identity also shows that the ancient seeds of sectarianism and social violence were at work within the fabric of society and undermining the fragile cohesion of the Group of poets. The gap between literature and the underground forces that were to lead to sectarianism and violence in the 1970s and the complexities of a region alienated from the Free State and from England also form part of the backdrop and context.

- 7 In the next and sixth chapter Clark first gathers the threads of her development so far and re-asserts that the poets themselves invented their "Belfast Group identity". According to her, this ought to be better acknowledged: "one [identity] centred around the idea of a local literary community which shared aesthetic principles and claimed kinship with Ulster poetic father-figures" (142). One of the advantages of a literary community was to offer them recognition and promotion. As a group they formed a literary community that redefined a poetic tradition as distinct from that of Dublin. A bad point was that the reviewers made comparisons and found it difficult to assess individual works without referring to the others. It also revived Hewitt's idea of regionalism enabling them to deal with the complexities of the North. In this chapter, she also comes back to the idea of collaborative process and in order to prove her point and illustrate it, she briefly explores poems by Heaney, Longley, Mahon, and Muldoon that constitute variations on the same theme revealing each poet's autonomous voice as well as their similarities. The poets themselves have admitted to their collaboration and critical response to the poems they wrote and exchanged before they were published.
- 8 This poetic dialogue which lasted for a while after some of them (Heaney, Mahon) had left Belfast under the pressure of the events, did not resist the tensions created by the deterioration of the situation. These tensions exacerbated differences between the Catholic poets and the Protestant poets. They foregrounded deep cleavages and Clark's last chapter brings to light old grudges, envies and jealousy that splintered the cohesion of the group. Often personal petty misunderstandings gave rise to rows and quarrels that ended in deeper criticism of their poetic output. The publication of *North* in 1975 was certainly a turning point. Thus, Clark retraces the poets' steps in the years following the 1962-1972 decade to show how they eventually defined themselves "against" one another (Mahon against Longley and Heaney, Muldoon against Heaney), drawing the line between those who stayed (the Longleys, Simmons) and those who left (Heaney, Mahon, Muldoon). At home, and in spite of The Troubles, literary life went on confronted to the dilemma of staying aloof or taking sides. Different associations were formed and problems reconsidered otherwise: the *Crane Bag* founded in 1977 hoped for "a fifth province of the mind", a place "beyond any geographical or political dimension which forms a place of

poetry transcending any bigoted or partisan connections.” (Hederman quoted p. 197). Later, Field Day, the theatre company started in 1980, followed suit, with Deane arguing for post-colonial reading of Irish literature. And so, other literary ventures have continued to keep Northern Ireland and Belfast at the centre of a lively artistic and literary life.

- 9 Heather Clark’s study is a highly readable and particularly well-documented work. She mainly relies on unpublished materials and personal papers sold by the poets to Emory University and held at the university’s Special Collections Archive, as well as personal correspondence with some of the poets under scrutiny. She also methodically adopts the same approach throughout her work, dealing with the general context first, then with biographical details and finally with the issue raised. She starts with a general outlook (first three chapters) and then comes back to the past on the one hand and close parallel reading of some poems on the other hand to prove her point in (the second part of her book).
- 10 However, her discussion somehow fails to win the reader over completely for several reasons: firstly her account reads more like a narrative than a theoretical analysis of the concept of “collaboration” as illustrated among other things by the mutual influence these poets exerted on each other; secondly, in spite of the wealth of information drawn from first-hand material, it seems that she too easily selects the unedited and non published passages from already published interviews. Then the question is: do these elements (which for some reason have probably been discarded for publication by the interviewers and interviewees) actually add to previously published material or do they simply confirm what could well be inferred from a reading between the lines? A third weakness in the argument is what reads like contradictions. The first one could be seen as methodological: Clark dismisses the poet’s own statements regarding the reality of the Belfast group, literary friendship and mutual influence but trusts their correspondence which probably has the same transient value as the oral words but is simply given more weight because it bears the written mark of sincerity and authenticity and is now preserved for ever. Not that it should be dismissed altogether but simply taken for what it is, one element in the overall picture, seen and assessed in the perspective of the poets’ statements and poems themselves. A second contradiction in the first chapter concerns a detail on Longley’s and Mahon’s education at Inst. The former did not read Irish literature if only on the sly whereas the latter did: “[...] the school maintained the Unionist status quo in its curriculum; [...] As a result, Longley had little exposure to Irish literature, and no opportunity to study Irish history, language, or music” (17-18) and “Mahon’s experience at Inst, which he entered in 1953, solidified his commitment to religious tolerance and, perhaps, equally important, acquainted him with English and Irish poetry. [...] the book, he said, ‘that did it for me’—his first real literary *frisson* (‘aside from the hymns’) came with reading Yeats’s ‘The Stolen Child’” (20, my emphasis). Again, the two statements may be perfectly accurate if different teachers adjusted the “English” curriculum to their tastes and audience but some clarification is wanted here, given the fact that Mahon only entered Inst two years after Longley. A fourth point might be a discrepancy between the more detailed account of Longley and Mahon’s friendship and that of Heaney and Deane’s. This difference might indicate a more favourable bias to Longley than to any of the other poets (also perceptible as one reads along).
- 11 The same method of investigation is used throughout her study, the author relying on interviews when personal details are needed and paraphrasing the information while

reorganizing it to give it a narrative twist (examples of this would be p. 56 with the rephrasing of the interview Longley gave to Jody Allen Randolph, or Longley's quotation p. 69 ["A convection current seemed to be lifting us upwards. We wanted to get better and better"] in which the pronouns *us* and *we* only refer to Heaney, Mahon and Longley, and is not all inclusive). One of the consequences of this method is that Clark tends to use quotations to serve her own needs and interpretation. For instance, although she notes Mahon's refusal to be involved, she insists on his belated acknowledgement of the Group's significance and seems to imply that he was impressed by Hobsbaum (see p. 60). In fact, the quotation from Mahon's 1970 article "Poetry in Northern Ireland" (in *Twentieth Century Studies* vol. 4, 89-93) simply records an undeniable fact and transcribes what people said or thought ("Here was this man from London, *people thought* [my emphasis] [...], and he's actually taking us *seriously*" [quoted p. 60]). This is reported speech which Mahon probably assumes but simply to convey what people felt at the time while he only implicitly acknowledges Hobsbaum's role in the brightening of Belfast literary scene: "The Hobsbaum's seminar (known as 'the Group' after its parent body in London) was *probably* first to crystallise the sense of a new Northern poetry" (my emphasis), he goes on writing (*TCS*, 91). Indeed, the first "happening" or event was the Group but Mahon also includes Harry Chambers whose journal *Phoenix* (then edited in Belfast) and presence in Belfast also contributed to "bring alive the poetic possibilities of this 'armpit of Europe'" ("Poetry in Northern Ireland", in *Twentieth Century Studies*, Vol. 4, Nov. 1970, 89-93, 93).

- 12 In spite of the occasional contradictory statements and minor flaws, the reader will find food for thought in the argument that many celebrated poems of that exciting period are the results of a collaborative process. Such a complex interaction between people involving personal relationships as well as relationships based on a common "business" which was the writing of poetry is well worth exploring further. It implied and generated unrelenting and severe criticism which not anyone was prepared to take in but helped define a new canon and aesthetic. It encouraged reading to one another and resulted in a greater self-awareness of one's idiosyncrasies, weaknesses and strengths. It certainly played a major role in the formation of all those poets who gained confidence in the process before individually reaching an international audience. That it started in Belfast only challenges the too easily admitted view that Northern Ireland was no territory for poetry and proves, in hindsight, the continuity and vitality of a poetic tradition rooted in Ulster and at the time quite distinct from Dublin literary production.

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