

Poetry of the Middle Ages

Thomas Kinsella (b. 1928)

> *The New Oxford Book of Irish Verse* (1986):

- one of the first anthologies of Irish verse in English translations, edited but also translated by Kinsella himself
- the Irish poetry of the Middle Ages was mostly love poetry, from the points of view of both men and women

Anonymous Love Poetry of the 15th and 16th Centuries

- mostly on subjects of jealousy, faithlessness, breaking up etc., mostly from the point of view of male speakers
- > 84: the male speaker desires a married woman, who favours him, rather than unmarried girls, however beautiful
- > 85: a man breaks up with his unfaithful mistress and implores her to ignore him in public and not mention him
- > 86: a man refuses to die for a woman, however beautiful in body or noble in mind, for he knows how women are
- > 87: an advice to jealous men to live in peace and ignore the moods of their wives for they cannot help themselves
- > 88: an advice to a jealous husband that he does not need to be suspicious because nobody would desire his wife
- > 89: wives at a fair study jealously a young beautiful girl with loose locks while they are plaiting their own hair
- > 90: an elaborate compliment to a beautiful girl with bright eyes and with long yellow curly hair of striking beauty
- > 91: a deserted lover contrasts his profound love with the superficial love of his mistress who left him for riches
- > 93: a lover invites his mistress to intimacies which he deserves for his love and for his resigning at all other girls
- > 94: a deceived woman warns inexperienced girls not to believe the vain promises of men whose love is fleeting

Jonathan Swift, ‘The Description of an Irish Feast’ (1720)

- a translation of the original Irish song recited by O’Rourke, a chieftain of Ulster, in the reign of Queen Elizabeth
 - a description of a wild and merry feast with guests eating heartily, drinking heavily and fighting drunkenly
- [READING: selections from Kinsella’s *New Oxford Book of Irish Verse* – see above]

Eighteenth-Century Satire

Jonathan Swift (1667 – 1745)

- born in Dublin of newly settled English parents and educated according to Anglican principles in Ireland
- devoted his energies and talents to politics and religion, which were not clearly separated at the time
- ordained a priest of the Irish Church, consistently but unsuccessfully sought promotion in the English Church
- supported the Anglican Church and was hostile to all who seemed to threaten it, including Deists, Roman Catholics, Non-Conformists or merely Whig politicians
- associated originally with the Whigs, but abandoned them for their indifference to the welfare of the Anglican Church in Ireland and turned to Tories for whom he served as a political journalist
- dedicated to the cause of Irish independence from English interference, was considered the quintessential voice of the 18th century Protestant Ascendancy in Ireland, but felt himself a stranger in both Ireland and England
- called a misanthrope because of his satires, explained that he loved individuals but hated mankind in general, was provoked by the spectacle of human beings capable of reason and of reasonable conduct, but refusing to act on it
- believed that human nature is deeply and permanently flawed and nothing can be done against it unless we recognize our moral and intellectual limitations

> *A Tale of a Tub* (written c. 1696, published 1704, revised 1710):

- contrasts the opinions of three brothers who represent Roman Catholicism, Anglicanism, and Calvinist Dissent
- attacks the Catholic additions to and Protestant detractions from the fundamental doctrines of the Church, which are metaphorically represented as a coat which the brothers alter according to the whims and fashions they justify

> *The Drapier’s Letters* (1724):

- a series of five public letters purporting to be the work of ‘M.B.’, a Dublin draper
- aroused Ireland to refuse to accept the new copper coins, which would only further debase the coinage of Ireland
- enjoyed great popularity stemming not only from the general assent of the Irish to his opposition to the relatively petty injustice, but also from the carefully constructed narrating voice attuned to please a broad Irish audience

> *Travels Into Several Remote Nations of the World* (known as *Gulliver’s Travels*, 1726)

> *A Modest Proposal* (1729):

- presents a monstrous proposal for the human consumption of surplus infants
- a political dimension is added by his proposing specifically Irish infants of the poor to feed the rich Englishmen

[READING: *A Modest Proposal*]

Irish Literary Renaissance

Irish Drama

- the first major theatrical movement of the 20th century originated in Dublin
- the Irish Literary Theatre (1899 – 1902): founded by W. B. Yeats, A. Gregory, G. Moore and Edward Martyn
- the Irish National Theatre (1902 – 1904): the renamed theatre, maintained a permanent all-Irish company
- the Abbey Theatre (since 1904): the theatre was renamed again after it had moved to a building of that name
- William Butler Yeats: uses the themes from old Irish legends in his plays
- John Millington Synge: uses the speech and imagination of Irish country people
- Sean O’Casey: uses the Irish Civil War as a background for plays mixing tragic melodrama, humour and irony

George Moore (1852 – 1933)

- born in a wealthy family of both Irish/English and Catholic/Protestant background
 - brought up by listening to the Irish stories of the servants and voracious reading of Walter Scott
 - his family was on the side of the peasants in uprisings, also was known for their kind treatment of tenants
 - his father was elected a Member of Parliament and moved with the family to London
 - in 1870s started painting, studied art in Paris with the intention to become an artist
 - for some time moved back and forth between Paris and London, studied writing, read Poe and Baudelaire
 - made acquaintance with writers and painters, including Zola and Turgenev, Renoire and Monet
 - in 1880s returned to Ireland to take care for the estate inherited from his father and deteriorated in his absence
 - started publishing poems and novels, some of them with a political background
 - in 1900s embarked on his best phase during which he published his most enduring short stories
 - > *Confessions of a Young Man* (1886): a lively memoir of his twenties spent in the bohemian Paris and London
 - > *Pamell and His Island* (1887): a collection of satirical essays on Irish politics
 - > *Modern Painting* (1893): the first English scholarly volume on contemporary art, introduced impressionism
 - > *The Untilled Field* (1903): a collection of stories, a major event in the history of the English short story
- [READING: ‘Home Sickness’]

Lady Augusta Gregory (1852 – 1932)

- born in county Galway in western Ireland, which is the centre of population and the most Irish part of the country
 - came from an Anglo-Irish Protestant landowner aristocratic family and inherited the family fortune
 - devoted to peasants, realized that poverty was exploited (fought exaggerated prizes in shops by opening her own)
 - brought up by her nurse, a native Irish speaker, who made her familiar with histories and legends of the local area
 - explored the rich literary tradition in Old Irish, translated folk histories, myths and songs from Irish into English
 - wrote in ‘Kiltartanese’, an attempted transliteration of the Hiberno-English dialect spoken around Coole Park
 - involved with the Gaelic League, a movement aiming at making Irish an official language to be taught at schools
 - married an older military officer who introduced her to travelling, culture and society and expanded her views
 - held anti-imperialist views, wrote political essays on unfair exploitation, also criticized the British rule in India
 - became a leading cultural nationalist, the main organizer and driving force of the Irish Literary Revival
 - made her house at Coole Park a meeting place for the leading Revival figures, including William Butler Yeats
 - together with Yeats founded the national theatre, became a playwright, also collaborated on Yeats’s early plays
 - contributed to the renaissance of Irish drama, was a prolific playwright, director and an occasional stage manager
 - > *The Kiltartan History Book* (1909), *The Kiltartan Wonder Book* (1910): tales from around Coole Park
 - > *Spreading the News* (1904), *The Rising of the Moon* (1906), *The Gaol Gate* (1906): one-act peasant plays
 - > *The White Cockade* (1905), *The Canavans* (1906), *The Deliverer* (1911): folk history plays
 - > *Our Irish Theatre: A Chapter of Autobiography* (1913): a history of the Abbey Theatre
 - > *Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland* (1920): a two-volume study of the folklore of her native area
 - > *Ulster Cycle*, *Fenian Cycle*, *Fianna*: three basic cycles of heroic myths translated from Irish
- [READING: ‘The Daughter of King Under-Wave’]
- ‘leprechaun’ = a creature in Irish mythology, an omniscient but mischievous dwarf, usually a red-haired old man
 - ‘fianna’ = semi-independent warrior bands in early Ireland, lived in forests as mercenaries, bandits and hunters

William Butler Yeats (1865 – 1939)

- influenced by William Blake, the first to discover and understand his esoteric work *The Book of the Four Zoas*
- involved with magic, mysticism and occultism, became a member of The Eternal Order of the Golden Dawn
- founded the private Cuala Press, with his sisters as artistic editors, published limited editions for the initiated only
- involved with the Irish actress and revolutionary Maud Gonne, later with her beautiful daughter Iseult Gonne
- inspired by Lady Augusta Gregory to whose house he was invited (> collection *The Wild Swans at Coole*, 1919)
- occupied and refurbished a Norman tower on Lady Gregory's land (> *The Tower*, 1928; *The Winding Stair*, 1933)

Early Poems

- based mostly on folk stories or sceneries recalled from his childhood
- > 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree':
 - Innisfree, meaning Heather Island, is a small lake island situated in county Sligo in the west of Ireland
 - the author was given the idea by an advertisement, wrote the poem in London when he recalled his childhood
 - the poem puts much emphasis on a special rhythm, unusual for English poetry, it was also made into a song
 - the speaker describes a peaceful withdrawal into a pastoral idyll which he imagines while staying in a city
- > 'The Fiddler of Dooney':
 - Dooney is a place not far from Innisfree where the author picnicked in his childhood
 - the poem praises merry fiddlers who are as good as priests and are the first to be admitted and welcome to heaven
- > 'The Song of the Old Mother':
 - a complaint of an old woman who must toil in the house while the young rest and dream their foolish dreams

Later Poems

- poems from *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921), preoccupied with male-female relationships
- > 'Michael Robartes and the Dancer':
 - a he-and-she dialogue (Yeats and Iseult Gonne)
 - the woman wishes for education but the man discourages her, claiming that beauty is enough value in a woman
- > 'Solomon and the Witch':
 - a dialogue between Solomon, the wisest of men, and the witch, the most powerful of women (Yeats and his wife)
 - the 'strange tongue' discussed in the poem refers to the automatic writing of Yeats's wife
- > 'An Image from a Past Life':
 - a he-and-she dialogue (Yeats and Maud Gonne)
 - the woman in the arms of her lover is frightened by a recollection of a man from her past
- > 'Under Saturn':
 - written against the background of Yeats's marriage and the Irish Uprising which occurred at about the same time
 - a man addresses a woman and expresses deep feelings for both his present, that is the love for the bride, and his past, that is the love for the native village
- > 'Easter, 1916':
 - the title refers to the Easter Uprising as a result of which 'a terrible beauty is born'
 - the poem recalls once familiar men, the intellectual leaders of the Uprising, now all of them changed, but still all connected by the Irish cause
- > 'Sixteen Dead Men':
 - pays a tribute to the sixteen men who were shot for their belief in the Irish cause
- > 'The Rose Tree':
 - influenced by Blake's poem 'The Sick Rose' as well as by the concept of the rosy crucifixion
 - uses a sickly rose tree as a metaphor for the suppressed nation, hopes in recovery for the both
- > 'On a Political Prisoner':
 - describes a female prisoner, once a beautiful young woman who grows old and withers away in the captivity
- > 'The Leaders of the Crowd':
 - realizes that truth comes to light only with education and that uneducated crowds do not know it
- > 'Towards Break of Day':
 - a married couple shares the same bed but not the same dreams
- > 'The Second Coming':
 - an apocalyptic vision, influenced by the Irish Uprising and the WWI which were overlapping
- > 'A Prayer for My Daughter':
 - expresses the hopes for a good and well-balanced life for his baby daughter

> 'A Meditation in Time of War':

- the 'old grey stone' mentioned in the poem is taken from Wordsworth's poem 'Expostulation and Reply'
- suggests the revelation of the speaker that God is alive while men are not

> 'Coole Park, 1929':

- recalls with both pleasure and melancholy the artistic circle gathered around Lady Gregory in her house at Coole [READING: selected poems – see above]

John Millington Synge (1871 – 1909)

- born in a family of Protestant missionaries, but experienced a religious crisis in his teens and became a naturalist
 - grew up without his father, with women only, which accounts for the strong female characters in his plays
 - possessed a musical talent, played the violin, even won a musical scholarship
 - won a scholarship to study Old Irish in Paris, where he met Maud Gonne and William Butler Yeats
 - spent several summers at the Aran Islands, the Irish-speaking area off the western Ireland, where he studied Irish
 - was fascinated by the story-telling form, but became a playwright because of the demand for plays at the Abbey
 - minimizes conventional action and achieves the singular effect of his plays through the language
 - echoes the rhythms of the Western Ireland English moulded by Gaelic syntax and provincial Catholicism
 - influenced by the 17th century London comedies, but perfected a distinctively Irish comic form
 - > *The Aran Islands* (1907): an early modernist text intermingling diary entries, short stories and memorandums
 - > *Riders to the Sea* (1904): a one-act poetic tragedy, suggests the perennial failure of those working with and on the sea, subsumes characters and action in a choric flow expressive of a submissive fatalism
 - > *The Tinker's Wedding* (1903–7) ['tinker' = a wandering white gypsy]
 - > *The Well of the Saints* (1905)
 - > *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907)
- [READING: *Riders to the Sea* and *The Playboy of the Western World*]

Mid-Twentieth-Century Fiction & Drama**Frank O'Connor (1903 – 1966)**

- born in an unimpressive family marked by his father's alcoholism, indebtedness and ill-treatment of his mother
 - joined the IRA, served in combat during the Irish War of Independence, later imprisoned for his republican views
 - served as the Acting Director of the Abbey Theatre where he introduced financially the most successful era
 - wrote novels, short stories, essays and reviews, also translated from the Irish
 - based his serious short stories on Russian models, especially on Chekhov
 - following the ban of his translation published his humorous stories in the magazine *New Yorker*
 - won a great acclaim and popularity in the US, taught at a university and travelled with his lectures
 - appreciated also as a literary critic, concentrated on both past and contemporary Irish literature
 - admired Yeats and Synge for their 'presence' when reading their work
 - > 'My Oedipus Complex': a short story
 - > *The Midnight Court* (1945): a translation of the 18th century Irish poem by Brian Merriman, banned by Irish Catholics, humorously describes a court held by women against a man in his thirties for his being unmarried
 - > *The Big Fellow* (1937): a biography of the Irish leader Michael Collins, on the principles of republicanism
- [READING: 'Guests of the Nation', 'First Confession']

Brendan Behan (1923 – 1964)

- born in an educated working class family of famous folk singers in both Irish and English
- involved with the IRA, at 15 went to a bombing mission to Liverpool docks, was discovered and imprisoned
- learned the Irish language in prison and started writing poetry and autobiographical stories
- published some of his stories in the leading Irish literary magazine *The Bell* (> 'I Became a Borstal Boy', 1942)
- in the late 1940s spent some time in Paris (> 'After the Wake', an explicitly homosexual story)
- his life-long habit of heavy drinking resulted in his premature death
- > *Borstal Boy* (1958): an autobiographical novel on his prison experience [Borstal = a youth prison]
- > *The Quare Fellow* (1954): a tragicomic play set in prison, written in both English and Irish ['quare' = queer]

> *The Hostage* (1957): the Irish version was very popular in Ireland, the English was even brought to New York, the script was changed everyday so as to keep it always topical, made him famous and rich
 [READING: ‘*The Confirmation Suit*’]

Later Twentieth-Century Poetry

Seamus Heaney (b. 1939)

- born in Northern Ireland into a Roman Catholic family, received both Catholic and Protestant education
- published pamphlets arguing for blurring the borders between the English/Irish and Protestant/Catholic in Ireland
- received the Nobel Prize for Literature (1995), his speech on the occasion tried to define the purpose of poetry

Collections

- > *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) and *Door into the Dark* (1969): recalls a familiar childhood landscape peopled by farmers, labourers and fishermen, influenced also by the Czech poet and biologist Miroslav Holub whose poetry is very popular in English-speaking countries
- > *Wintering Out* (1972) and *North* (1975): more political collections, includes less of a private remembered landscape and more of the troubled circumstances of Northern Ireland
- > *Field Work* (1979): the title refers both to the naturalist character of the poems and to Field Day Group which tried to redefine the idea of Ireland and included the dramatist Brian Friel or the writer and critic Seamus Deane
- > *Station Island* (1984), *The Haw Lantern* (1987), *Seeing Things* (1991), *The Spirit Level* (1996)
- > *Opened Ground: Poems 1966 – 1996* (1998): a voluminous collection of poems of the period
- > *The Poet & The Piper* (2003): a studio recording of Heaney’s poems accompanied by Liam O’Flynn on pipes

Poems

- > ‘*Digging*’: muses on his father and grandfather who literally dug into the earth, he will follow them with his pen
- > ‘*The Given Note*’: a fiddler leads an untrained crowd in playing a tune which comes from nature, from the air
- > ‘*Bogland*’: reflects on the Irish bogs which preserve the most ancient history in their peat as if in a treasure chest
- > ‘*The Otter*’: describes an otter and his failed attempt to touch it, the otter may be a metaphor for a woman
- > ‘*The Tollund Man*’: wonders at the miracle of a man’s body, killed in a ritual sacrifice, preserved in a bog
- > ‘*Postscript*’: captures the fleeting nature of a moment as well as love for his windy and rainy homeland

Translations

- > *Sweeney Astray* (1983): a translation from the Irish version of the poem
- > *Beowulf* (1999): an acclaimed translation of the Old English epic poem
- > *Diary of One Who Vanished* (1999): a translation of Leoš Janáček’s song cycle

Anthologies

- > *The School Bag* (1997) and *The Rattle Bag* (2005): edited together with Ted Hughes, anthologies of English poetry which is fun to read, now widely used in schools in Britain and elsewhere
 [READING: the Nobel speech ‘*Crediting Poetry*’ and selected poems – see above]

Seamus Deane (b. 1940)

- born in Northern Ireland into a Catholic nationalist family
- novelist, poet, critic, general editor of two influential anthologies of Irish writing
- > *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (1991): a massive all-comprising anthology in three volumes
- > *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Irish Women’s Writing and Traditions* (2002): in two volumes