

Here, **Megan Oliver**, a third-year student of English and History, and **Clare Ní Cheallaigh**, who has just completed her degree in English and Classics, consider the personal, political, and literary implications of the appearance of two poems by Seamus Heaney in *Young Commonwealth Poets '65* (1965) an anthology edited by P. L. Brent.

Some of Seamus Heaney's most recognisable lines of verse come from *An Open Letter*, which was published in pamphlet form by the Field Day Theatre Company in 1983. In this 198-line poem, he urges the reader to:

Be advised
My passport's green.
No glass of ours was ever raised
To toast The Queen.

This confident assertion of Irish national identity came as a direct response to Heaney's inclusion in *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* (1982), edited by Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion. Heaney objected to Morrison and Motion's definition of him as "British". *An Open Letter* constitutes a sustained criticism of their decision which, as James Fenton later discussed in the *New York Review of Books*, they received with shock and dismay. What has perhaps made the lines above so memorable is their contrast to what was sometimes regarded as the politically tentative tone of Heaney's poetry. Here we find not the cautious teasing through of complex issues that is characteristic of Heaney, but instead an unqualified pronouncement of identity, an active rejection of Britain and the British monarch.

However, as Fenton also noted, it is not surprising that Morrison and Motion were shocked at Heaney's response, considering that his poetry had "previously appeared in at least six anthologies with the word "British" in the title." One of those anthologies, *Young Commonwealth Poets '65*, is featured in this exhibition. It was published seventeen years before *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* and a year before Heaney's *Death of a Naturalist*, and it treated Heaney as a citizen of the British Empire.

Although "Commonwealth" is, in the Northern context, perhaps a less immediately loaded label than "British", it is obviously controversial. Ireland left the Commonwealth in 1949, formally asserting its status as a Republic and distancing itself from the international organisation of former British colonies, headed by the Queen. The introduction of the anthology, by its editor P.L Brent, advocates a common identity between the countries of the Commonwealth, arising out of their common language and history. He emphasises cultural similarities and glosses over the colonial implications of the project. He seems concerned with making the Commonwealth "real" and his introduction can sound defensive at points. He writes, "If it is a language which defines a culture, then the Commonwealth exists," and: "Almost uniformly throughout the Commonwealth, people connect with literature warmly offered help, contributions or advice as soon as approached; they made the Commonwealth seem very real."

The anthology was produced as part of the 1965 Commonwealth Arts Festival, which aimed, as Gail Low has explained, "to bring together far flung lands, connected by the legacy of empire." Brent, in his introduction, conceives of the festival as an event which would continue to be held for years to come, a dream which did not transpire.

Heaney's inclusion within the anthology is indicative of his status, and the opportunities which were available to him, as a young poet in Northern Ireland in the mid-1960s. The literary world was unsure of how to place his work contextually and he himself had not gained the confidence to proclaim his passport green and defy any association with Britishness. The anthology is also indicative of a different

time, the calm before the Troubles, when, despite independence movements in many countries and the shift towards an increasingly postcolonial world, it still seemed reasonable to attempt to promote, or assume, goodwill between the nations of the Union and the Commonwealth, particularly in this case Northern Ireland, through culture and the arts.

The poems by Heaney which were included in this anthology make for a solid introduction to his works. In his introduction Brent mentions how many of the poets in this collection are unknown: "Many of the writers are unknown outside their own countries and are finding here their first sizeable audience." When *Young Commonwealth Poets* was published in 1965, Heaney's work had already appeared in *Hibernia*, the *Dublin Magazine* and the *New Statesman*, among others, and yet his first collection *Death of a Naturalist* had not appeared. Therefore, for many readers both Irish and international, this would have been their first introduction to the poetry of Seamus Heaney, and a very good one at that.

The two poems included, 'Scaffolding' and 'Soliloquy for an Old Resident' deserve some consideration. 'Scaffolding' is something of a quintessential early Heaney poem. It is a simple and approachable poem yet still demonstrates Heaney's skills as a poet. Heaney's use of metaphor highlights the need for solid structure in human relationships. Heaney writes about the universal theme of cementing relationships, an engaging concept for new readers. This relates to the larger themes of *Death of a Naturalist* such as childhood and identity.

'Soliloquy for an Old Resident', which Heaney did not include in *Death of a Naturalist*, is more nuanced, concerned about issues of ownership and propriety. It details the initial splendour of a house, in which all is done with elegance and grace. It then proceeds to detail the demise of this grandeur, and how the new residents have contributed to a sense of garishness.

They come and go, each year they come and go,
Bringing no family, leaving only stains.

This poem is particularly interesting in an anthology written to celebrate the literary achievements of the Commonwealth. The poem's concern with ownership might be extended to encompass colonial connotations. The idea of a once pristine house passing into the wrong hands, who are ultimately responsible for its downfall could be read, in this contextual situation which foregrounds the Empire and its legacy in the Commonwealth, as a subtle critique of the process of colonialism itself. This is a compelling example of the way that the circumstances of publication can reform our interpretation of a literary text. Considering the title of the anthology, it would have been a brave stance for the poet to take. However, even if we read 'Soliloquy for an Old Resident' on a literal level, it is also exemplary of Seamus Heaney's poetry: it takes a metaphorical event and breaks it down so that it appears personal and intimate. The final lines of the poem: "No neighbours, no respect and no good name / These new proprietors are much to blame" are particularly emotionally charged. Heaney has the ability to take an event remote from his readers, and then through his anecdotal language, the reader cannot help but become invested.

Whatever the controversy surrounding Heaney's publication in this anthology, one cannot deny that the inclusion of these poems gave readers a fantastic initial introduction to the early career of the poet. Many of the tropes we recognise in *Death of a Naturalist* and throughout Heaney's work are apparent in these two early poems. It is fitting that during this year, as we mark the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of the first collection, his earlier poems are considered in this less familiar context.