

Edited by Benjamin Keatinge

Cork University Press €39

Review by Alannah Hopkin

What a pity that the poet Richard Murphy, who died on 30 January, 2018 aged ninety, did not live to see this magnificent collection of essays. A quintessential outsider, who defied easy categorization, he was often misunderstood and misjudged. This beautifully produced volume, ably introduced by editor Benjamin Keatinge, puts him where he belongs, at the very centre of 20th century Irish poetry, and right up in the first rank.

He was a contemporary of Anthony Cronin, Pearse Hutchinson, Thomas Kinsella and John Montague, ten years or so older than the much-lauded generation that produced Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley and Derek Mahon. All three, like Murphy, also followed Yeats' advice to J.M. Synge, and travelled to the Aran Islands while still students, seeking the supposedly more "authentic" west of Ireland experience.

For Murphy it was in fact a return to his origins. He was born at Milford, his mother's family home near Shrule, county Mayo, delivered by his grandmother. His father was the last British mayor of Colombo, and Murphy spent part of his childhood in Ceylon, before returning to a traditional English public-school education and Oxford. So far, so Anglo-Irish, but after Oxford, unable to settle to the life he was expected to lead, he started to write poetry and reviews. Winning a sum of money in a poetry competition allowed him to rent a cottage in Connemara, and to buy and restore a Galway hooker. Long before the Wild Atlantic Way was invented, he saw the west of Ireland's tourism potential, and made a living in the summer taking visitors out in his boat.

The poems that resulted from this experience, including 'Sailing to an Island', and 'The Last Galway Hooker' marked the start of a solid body of work including 'The Cleggan Disaster', based on a verbal account of a shipwreck (brilliantly analyzed here by Bernard O'Donoghue), and his masterpiece, 'The Battle of Aghrim', originally commissioned for radio, with music by Seán Ó Riada. He was published by T.S. Eliot at Faber & Faber, and among the friends who visited him in Connemara were Theodore Roethke, Philip Larkin and most famously, Ted Hughes and his wife Sylvia Plath.

The distinguished academics assembled here, four of whom – Maurice Harmon, Bernard O'Donoghue, Gerald Dawe and Siobhan Campbell – are also poets, offer a well-balanced, jargon-free account of Murphy's life and achievement. Murphy fought against the Anglo-Irish label,

identifying closely with the fishing and farming families he lived amongst. Later in his life he returned to Ceylon, and wrote about its people with great warmth.

It was only towards the end of his life that Murphy was able to write openly about his bisexuality, chiefly in his memoir, *The Kick* (2002, reissued by C.U.P. in 2017). Barbara Brown, a retired academic who worked closely with him on it, contributes a fascinating account of their long and intensive collaboration.

The collective intention of these essays – to recognize Murphy as a poet for today, rather than a poet of a past era – is triumphantly achieved.