

# CHOSEN LIGHTS

*Poets on poems  
by John Montague*

*Edited by Peter Fallon*



Gallery Books

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## Preface

'The poet who survives is the one to celebrate, the human being who confronts darkness and defeats it is the one to admire.' By Donald Hall's yardstick John Montague, on the occasion of his 80th birthday (28 February 2009), more than half a century after the publication of *Forms of Exile*, has earned a right to our applause.

We at The Gallery Press have been publishing John's poetry since 1988, following his long alliance with Liam Miller and Dolmen Press. *Collected Poems* (1995) was the first apogee of our association. I wrote then of it, his life's work to that point: 'part self-portrait, it is even more a "landscape with figures" — and it has the look of a masterpiece'. Since then we have published two new collections and we discuss others, including a round-up of his French translations.

Frequently Festschrifts remain tied to their occasion so, to mark the milestone of John's birthday, we decided to invite an assembly of poets who have published books with The Gallery Press to select one of his poems and to outline a claim for its worth in their estimation and affection. There was an immediate and enthusiastic welcome for the idea. To discover, in particular, young poets' first encounters with poems and/or collections was both enlightening and corroborative. (We regret that a number of John's peers, despite their best wishes, felt unable to participate.)

I wondered if certain phases of the work — early? middle? recent? — or, indeed, if the 'greatest hits' would attract or inhibit responses. Our book offers evidence that John Montague has admirers of all ages for all stages and registers of his work. It is a remarkable testimony that the essays respond to poems from each of his published collections.

Individual choices seem both uncanny and natural — Michael Longley's of 'Windharp', with its 'heatherbells and ferns', a poem I imagine he'd be proud to have written himself; Eavan Boland's of 'A Lost Tradition'; Ciaran Carson's of 'The Country Fiddler'; or Michael Coady's (with *his* passion for music) of 'O Riada's Farewell'. Derek Mahon gravitated

towards one of John's 'eco-poems', Frank McGuinness to one that embraces a theme of Ibsen's, while the most recent conscript to Gallery's list, Ciaran Berry who now lives in New York, attends to 'A Graveyard in Queens'.

*Chosen Lights* could be called a democratically determined *Selected Poems*. It is a book which provides insight into a plethora of poets' methods and interests and a storehouse of critical insight and personal remembrance. Above all, we hope it serves to honour an artist of uncommon dedication and ambition, a maker of enduring poems. It's long since some of his lines and phrases entered the consciousness of Ireland. We salute a poet who is, as Eamon Grennan concludes, 'a marvellous, marvel-making force that for all these years has won the admiration, affection and gratitude of so many of us'.

*Peter Fallon*

C H O S E N   L I G H T S

## *The Water Carrier*

Twice daily I carried water from the spring,  
Morning before leaving for school, and evening;  
Balanced as a fulcrum between two buckets.

A bramble-rough path ran to the river  
Where you stepped carefully across slime-topped stones,  
With corners abraded as bleakly white as bones.

At the widening pool (for washing and cattle)  
Minute fish flickered as you dipped,  
Circling to fill, with rust-tinged water.

The second or enamel bucket was for spring water  
Which, after racing through a rushy meadow,  
Came bubbling in a broken drain-pipe,

Corroded wafer thin with rust.  
It ran so pure and cold, it fell  
Like manacles of ice on the wrists.

You stood until the bucket brimmed  
Inhaling the musty smell of unpicked berries,  
That heavy greenness fostered by water.

Recovering the scene, I had hoped to stylize it,  
Like the portrait of an Egyptian water carrier:  
But pause, entranced by slight but memoried life.

I sometimes come to take the water there,  
Not as return or refuge, but some pure thing,  
Some living source, half-imagined and half-real,

Pulses in the fictive water that I feel.

*Poisoned Lands (1961)*

## Justin Quinn *The Water Carrier*

Yves Bonnefoy's sequence 'La maison natale' begins with the statement: 'Je m'éveillai, c'était la maison natale', and in the following sections he repeats this moment of waking in the house where he was born. We keep returning to childhood for our various reasons — psychoanalysis, art, public justification, nostalgia. It is both a source and resource. It is protean in that it changes its demeanour, shading and outlines each time we go back to it. We make it say what we want it to say, not what it would tell us, on each occasion. As a subject for poetry it is particularly treacherous, because when we return to it we are more likely to encounter Wordsworth than our younger selves, a stylized view of early events, rather than the events themselves. Poetic structures can sometimes seem too willingly to hand, the epiphanies prefabricated and suspect.

John Montague's 'The Water Carrier' is a report from the poet's rural childhood, from pre-industrial Ireland, a country without running water, television and electricity, a country which imposed daily rhythms and natural encounters that are rare today. It would seem to guarantee some kind of authenticity (that is, if one finds the present somehow inauthentic). What is engaging about the poem is that it refuses hackneyed consolations; that it insists that the water, and indeed the whole experience, is 'fictive', and, with the final image of water running through the child's hands, that it is also ungraspable, unusable. Granted, the 'halfs' of the penultimate line are straight out of Wordsworth, and some of the other diction suggests authenticity, but phrases like 'pure thing' and 'living source' are curiously vacant of meaning, and all we are left with at the poem's end is the poet uncertain as to how such experience might be slotted into larger structures (perhaps structures of autobiography and the nation, as evidenced in Montague's other work). The speaker might indeed physically 'feel' the water at the end, but he also tells us that this immediate sense experience is not true: it is invented, created, fabricated, 'fictive'. As that last word sends beautiful suggestions rippling outwards through the

stylized scene (for he *has* stylized the scene, despite his assertion to the contrary), we can observe other freedoms as they offer themselves to the poet. It is an exhilarating moment.