

## *Introduction*

by Moya Cannon

**A**s the title of his first book, *In the Light on the Stones*, suggests, Francis Harvey's work is grounded in a celebration of landscape and of light, the tumble and abundance of light, most particularly on the mountains of south Donegal, which he has walked, alone or in the company of his wife or children, and which he conjures for us as Norman McCaig conjured the mountains and the mountain lakes of Sutherland, or as R.S. Thomas gave us the austere valleys of Wales:

It is going down the mountain  
again after going up  
past the high lakes

most never see  
that aches in the heart  
like love lost.

'Selves'

Vividness and lucidity are his hall-marks, often the vividness of winter light after a long day's hill-walking, when every detail of a mountainside is cast into relief:

I check my route and  
watch a hare white  
in its winter coat  
sit back in a gap of light  
scanning a stone whose  
lichen maps  
worlds  
unknown to me and  
cartography.

'Map Lichen on Slievetooley'



or in ‘The Deaf Woman in the Glen’ —

...she is  
locked in this  
landscape’s fierce

embrace as  
the badger is whose  
unappeasable jaws only

death unlocks from  
the throat of rabbit  
or rat and

moves, free yet  
tethered,  
through  
time’s inexorable weathers.

This compassion is also manifest in the many poems which refer, directly or indirectly, to the northern troubles. Born in Enniskillen to a Presbyterian father, who died when Harvey was six years old, and to a Catholic mother, he was better placed than most to experience and articulate the pain of both communities.

Loyal Iniskilling or  
Inis Ceithleann, fierce  
Ceithleann’s island,  
forged me true.

‘Mixed Marriage’

One would be tempted to say that Francis Harvey’s work combines the passion for precision of a naturalist and the yearning for grace of a poet, except for the fact that a passion for precision, for naming, is also part of the bedrock of poetry. In the later poems there is a vivid sense of how we are all moving, “free but tethered, through time’s inexorable weathers.” In the context of Irish poetry, Francis Harvey is a Basho-like figure, guided by an unwavering sense of true north, always moving to the washed light on higher ground.

## *Beachcombing*

SCULPTORS

*In memory of Con O'Mullane*

It sits on my desk being nothing but what  
I know it to be: a perfection of form.  
The stone that we found washed up on the shore  
at Enniscrone more than fifty years ago.  
Smooth as flesh stretched over bone and shaped  
so sensuously by the sea I can't keep  
my hands off it each time it catches my eye.  
Like that Brancusi we saw in London once  
and kept on wanting to touch and touch and touch.

LOOKING DOWN AT THE SKY

Look at that mad stargazer studying  
astronomy by looking at the sand  
where the receding tide's left a single  
starfish and added a tail to each one  
of the countless tiny shells embedded  
like comets in the sky on the strand.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF TIME

That time I followed the arrows a bird  
had inscribed on the sand with its feet  
was the time I realised the arrow  
of time was the time I wasted following  
what was pointing me forward by leading me back.

## SANDHOPPERS

A cloudless blue sky and the patter  
of raindrops that, no matter  
how long they fall, will never wet a single one  
of these windrows of seaweed drying in the sun.

## THE CRYPTOGRAPHERS

When it's not drawing circles and half circles,  
what the marram grass inscribes on the sand  
with the fine point of its rusting nib is  
as enigmatic as the cryptograms  
these flocks of waders have printed with their feet.

## CHINOISERIE

The eyes of the girl with the pigtail  
in the coolie hat on an Irish beach  
among the tiny pagodas of sea sandwort  
go suddenly Chinese in the sun's glare  
as she places the willow-patterned dish  
of picnic sandwiches  
on the reed mat made in Hong Kong.

## THE TIRELESS SEAMSTRESS

The incoming tide that unstitches  
the seams and irons out  
the tucks and pleats  
in this beach's cloth-of-gold  
will shortly recede and leave

new seams, tucks and pleats, holes  
in the cloth-of-gold  
for the next incoming tide  
to unstitch, iron out, darn,  
on and on *ad infinitum*.

#### WALKIES AND TALKIES

The ringed plover, dashing about the beach  
in spurts of manic energy,  
seems intent on showing me  
and the dog how frantically  
it's been rehearsing for its role  
in the next early Chaplin movie  
until the dog decides to become  
a barker for the talkies  
and the plover goes walkies  
in a way that would not be possible  
for Chaplin or the dog or me.

#### BLUEBELLS

June and, as I was caught out  
telling a lie to you,  
a shimmer of blue and green  
on a grassy islet  
in Loughros Beg Bay  
was striving unsuccessfully  
to counterfeit aquamarine.

## *Corrie*

They say it happened a long time ago  
when the glaciers were on the move  
like the circus from town to town  
and littered the landscape with rocks  
and scooped out holes in the ground  
and even left this dent in the hat of the clown.

## *Animal Husbandry*

John has a few acres of bog and rock.  
Mostly rock. His two cows are always breaking  
out to go roaming for sweeter grass.  
When I told him that limpets graze on rocks  
and that their grazing range was three feet  
he said maybe he should be taking his cows  
to the limpet instead of to the bull.