

Louis MacNeice in Barcelona, December 1938

When they ration the acorns you know it's all over.
An army has no stomach for such a fight.
The sirens sound the all-clear and the sky is bright;
The trucks in the square have the patience of a lover
Who knows it will be all right on the night.

But as December dries the final leaves
A woman hugs her silent child and grieves,
Eyes big with famine, for the future not the past,
Knowing it will not come out all right at last.

Someone is being tidy in the bars:
The ashtrays harbour not a single stub.
Over it all hang the impeccable stars,
Orion rising, with his hunter's club.
The city waits. The cold gnaws. It is over.

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STAN SMITH

Stan Smith is Professor of Literary Studies at Nottingham Trent University, and has published widely on Modernism and on the 1930s writers, with two books on W.H. Auden. Most recently, he has edited the *Cambridge Companion to W. H. Auden* (2004) and published *Irish Poetry and the Construction of Modern Identity* (Irish Academic Press, 2005), which contains a chapter on MacNeice. This particular poem, Stan Smith writes, “was precipitated by re-reading MacNeice’s poetic sequence “Autumn Journal” (1939) and his autobiography, *The Strings are False* (1965) while preparing an essay on Spanish Civil War poetry for a new Oxford volume on the Poetry of War, ed. Tim Kendall.

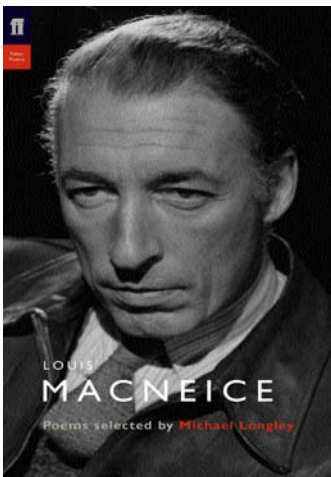
REVIEW

Life for a Day

Louis MacNeice, *Poems Selected by Michael Longley*, London: Faber & Faber, 2005, 111pp., £3.99 RRP.

Joseph Pridmore (Nottingham Trent, UK)

Louis MacNeice was “never a card-carrying thirties poet,” writes Michael Longley in his introduction to this new edition, and here, concisely put, is the key reason why it is so refreshingly enjoyable. For although MacNeice produced a large body of distinguished early works in the 1930s, is always presumed to be a member of the largely imaginary “Auden group” and is one-quarter of Roy Campbell’s “MacSpaunday” composite figure of thirties poets, his works conspicuously reject some of the principal motifs and preoccupations that we have come to associate with poetry of that period. A liberal leftist and anti-fascist who was never tempted (unlike his three fellow MacSpaundays) to join the Communist Party, and a native of Belfast who refused to be labelled either an Irish poet or an exile in England, MacNeice passionately resists the politically categorising, partisan and propagandist voices used by many of his contemporaries.



MacNeice’s ambiguous attitudes to his homeland are one of the facets of his writing

that Longley calls special attention to. Ireland is both a nurturing mother and a “bore and a bitch,” and MacNeice never resolves these conflicting feelings through his poetry. (He himself prefaced his 1954 *Autumn Sequel* with Walt Whitman’s “Very well then I contradict myself,” indicating a playful self-reference to this tendency in his work.) But the way in which the poet articulates his moments of bitterness or disillusionment is almost unique among similar works of the time, for its rejection of the sectarian or politicised. Consider the response of *Autumn Journal*’s sixteenth canto to the then relatively recent Irish Civil War and subsequent Troubles:

And one read black where the other read white,
 his hope
 The other man’s damnation:
 Up the Rebels, To Hell with the Pope
 And God save—as you prefer—the King or
 Ireland.

The pity of prolonged conflict is of more interest to MacNeice than choosing a side, and this is seen again in his poetry written in the run-up to and during the Second World War. It’s true that a rather grimmer, more sombre tone creeps into MacNeice’s work in this period, when he anticipates the horrors to come as many thirties poets did, but his focus is always on the individual sphere and not the world stage. His regret that here is an end to carefree moments of freedom—a stroll in Iceland with W. H. Auden, the happiness fleetingly shared with a loved one, the mere memory of sunlight on the garden—always emerges most strongly.

It is the moment that interests MacNeice above all else: its tragic transience, and the consequent need to draw all the pleasure from it that we can. He is a poet of the senses, painting vivid images of the visually striking and revelling in the various forms of human

sensation, especially the visual and tactile. From the beauty of the natural world to nightmarish industrial dystopias, and from evocations of voluptuous lovers to fond portraits of friends now gone, everything is realized in sensual, stirring style. It is MacNeice's privileging of the immediacy of human experience that sets him apart from the more overtly political poets of his age.

The selection process is always a key issue in any slim volume that pertains to represent a poet with such a huge oeuvre as MacNeice's (he was vigorously prolific from the 1920s to his death in 1963). Longley presents a broad spread, beginning with two of the most important examples from MacNeice's 1920s juvenilia and drawing on most of his major collections, including excerpts from the longer canto poems. The chronological arrangement seems the wisest choice by far, as it reflects not only the poet's reactions to the tumultuous changing times he lived in, but also his development as a poet and the effect of his maturing years. (We see, for example, how the young MacNeice who

produced the abandoned and joyful 'Mayfly' could not have produced 'Truisms', which is steeped in age and experience.) This collection cannot, of course, give us MacNeice in his widely diverse entirety, but it certainly encourages the reader to seek out more.

The aim of Faber's *Poems Selected by...* series is for contemporary poets to give their "personal and critical reactions" to poets of the past, and Longley provides just such an individual response here. He calls upon his established expertise as a MacNeice scholar and gives a stimulating and accessible introduction to the works of that poet. It's true that Longley is on familiar ground: he admits that all the poems contained here can also be found in the 1998 *Selected Poems* that he edited, meaning this may not be an essential purchase for those who already own the earlier collection. However, for newcomers to MacNeice, or readers in search of new perspectives on poetry of the 1930s, this new edition is both highly affordable and highly recommended.

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