

The abundant braes of Yarrow

LAWRENCE NORFOLK

Paul Muldoon is one of the most inventive and ambitious poets working today. *The Annals of Chile* is his best book to date. Such an endorsement, in fact any unequivocal statement, does not affix itself easily to Muldoon, any more than straightforward criticism has to his poetry. His work is oddly ungraspable and Muldoon himself is difficult to place; hipper than Heaney, but junior to him and a less obvious candidate for the canon. He is more fun than most of the Northern Ireland poets, but that is because he has not written enough about The Troubles. He is formidably erudite, for which read "too clever by half". Critical sentiment is warm, but fundamentally undecided. The bandwagon continues to roll, but the ride gets more and more bumpy. From the publication of *New Weather* in 1973 onwards, Muldoon's poetry has by and large eluded questions about its own ultimate worth. There has never been any doubt about his technical facility, nor the acuity of his poetic intelligence. Take "Dancers at The Moy", from that first collection, where a respectable poem somehow scrambles under from under the dead weight of all the more leaden aspects of W. B.

Paul Muldoon
THE ANNALS OF CHILE
 189pp. Faber. £14.99 (paperback, £7.99).
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THE PRINCE OF THE QUOTIDIAN
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Yeats, or "Lunch with Pancho Villa", from *Mules* (1977), whose framing devices and multiplying ironies tie themselves in grotesque knots until a deft tug at the end resolves all. There is a touch of Houdini in all this, and a consequent, nagging suspicion that at root this might be all Muldoon's work is about. Perhaps inevitably, the reason for Browne's leaving remained unspecified in his 1980 collection, *Why Brownlee Left*. Are we being played with?

Quoof (1985) elevated Muldoon to the status

he enjoys today. Its swaggering sure-footed title-poem moves without visible effort from Muldoon's family word for a hot-water bottle to a fresh yeti-turd - it is a love poem of sorts - and established itself as one of those prismatic poems by which all previous works come into a new focus. As in his two previous collections, a long narrative poem concludes the volume, "The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants", which begins with a Sioux Indian landing in Ireland and proceeds via a hijacked milk frost to various kinds of sex and sectarian violence, ending with the landing of a human hand on the forecourt of a bombed-out petrol station. It is a comic poem, a very serious one, its roller-coaster narrative line at once so artfully departed from and rejoined that any paraphrase would need to distinguish more varieties of caesura than the Inuit supposedly do snow.

If "Quoof" plays a summary, retrospective role in Muldoon's oeuvre, then "The More a Man Has" points forward. It has proved a very fertile poem. I think Alan Jenkins, Glyn Maxwell, and perhaps Simon Armitage, all owe it something, though the person who owes it most is undoubtedly Paul Muldoon. In it, he established an idiom capable of both marshalling the superabundance of material which characterizes his work and entertaining the notion that poetry might still be, among other things, fun.

Perhaps the fun got out of hand. Or perhaps it was that "superabundance of material", *Madoc: A mystery* was published in 1990, a single poem of 247 chapters, the first product of Muldoon's move to America. In it, Coleridge and Southey's abortive project to found a "Pantisocratic" community in late eighteenth-century America is realized imaginatively via a gallant parade of quotations, pioneers' histories, real and faked-up episodes of murder and pillage, letters, lists, a talking horse, heaps of literary lost luggage reclaimed by the poet and marshalled beneath the square-bracketed names of philosophers from Thales to Stephen J. Hawking. A further, futuristic device, involving a man named "South", framed this saga:

So that, though it may seem somewhat improbable,

all that follows
 flickers and flows
 from the back of his right eyeball.

One of the gentler comedies of the 1990 publishing season was Muldoon's patent conviction that this made the poem easier to understand. The following is excerpted from the *Independent on Sunday*:

Paul Muldoon: Now, you realised that the story of *Madoc* is retrieved from the retina of a man called South?

Blake Morrison: Er, yes. Initial impressions are of chaotically tangled story-lines, random echoes, weird correspondences, and a network of allusions too recherché to be useful and too insistent to be dismissed. The philosophical headings are particularly exasperating. Here, in its entirety, is "[Empedocles]":

The woodchuck has had occasion to turn into a moose.

Edna Longley in the *Irish Times* glossed this as, "if 'going native' is an irony in the poem, the Indians too pursue tribal quarrels and despoil nature". I prefer to invoke one of the five apocryphal deaths attributed to Empedocles; that, nearing death and wishing to leave no mortal remains, thus to be thought a god, he threw himself into Mount Etna, which promptly regurgitated (chucked?) back one of his (wooden?) sandals, thus giving the game away. This is suggestive, as is Longley's gloss, as is the near-anagram of "moccasin" and "occasion" for that matter, but none of these is helpful. *Madoc* remains baffling, clotted with the labour that produced it, a wild goose chase. Again: though

we know that underneath it all Muldoon is serious, are we being fooled? Is it possible that at some level Muldoon's work is an enormous hoax? Or as Muldoon, in the guise of a talking horse (no long Muldoon poem being really complete without one), puts it to himself in *The Prince of the Quotidian*:

There's not an image here that's worth a fuck.

Who gives a shit about the dreck of your life? Who gives a toss about your tossing off?

Of the poet: Who gives a toss? Of his poetry: What does it mean? These are the pointless, destructive questions which, to date, Muldoon has (rightly) failed to address and (wrongly) failed to dispel, but I do not think it will be possible to ask either in good faith again. *The Annals of Chile* buries them.

The book begins casually, with a revisiting of "Ovid's conspicuously tongue-in-cheek / account of an eyeball to eyeball / between the goddess Leto / and a shower of Lycian reed cutters" (from "The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants") who refuse the goddess a cup of water and are turned into frogs for their stinginess. A few short poems follow. One, "The Sonogram", is extracted from *The Prince of the Quotidian*, a chatty page-a-day diary poem written by Muldoon in January 1992. There are also poems about Muldoon's dog (lying on the bed "like an ancient quoof"), the birth of his daughter, the grave of someone else's parents, a frozen water tub. The volume's title is tucked away in a poem entitled "Brazil", which ends:

"There is inherent vice

in everything", as O'Higgins would proclaim: it was O'Higgins who duly

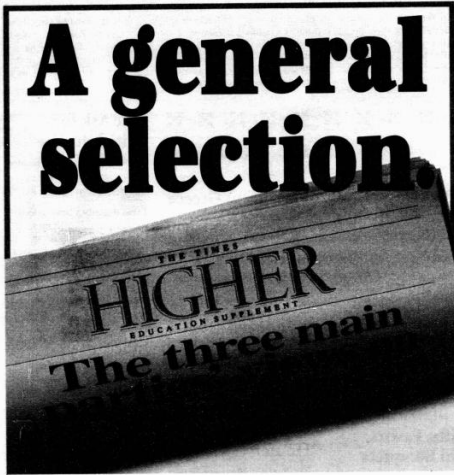
had the terms "widdershim" and "dessil" expunged from the annals of Chile. Whether this is Ambrosio O'Higgins, the Irish (and last) survivor of Spanish Chile, or the more famous Bernardo O'Higgins, bastard son of the above, Chile's liberator and first Director-General, remains unresolved. Neither is exactly notorious for the alleged "expunging" of these terms, which will be explicated further on in the volume.

This might be the place to mention Neruda, whose own extraordinary, monumental (and uneven) *Annals of Chile, Canto General*, looms large as a possible model for this book. Or Vallejo, with whom Muldoon wrestles in a translation of "Piedra Negra Sobre Una Piedra Blanca" which (deliberately?) twists the already puzzling lines, "los huesos me he puesto / a la mala y" to mean "the very bones in my forearms ache" (from "César Vallejo: Testimony"). Muldoon will worry about these lines later in the volume.

I think the question of the shape of a poet's work, among other things, is being raised through these references; Vallejo's works being disparate brilliant performances, Neruda's having more the look of an oeuvre, unafraid of the old bad or inconsequential poem - Neruda's own poem on (Bernardo) O'Higgins is rather vince-making in parts - so long as it adds effectively to the whole. Likewise, these predatory poems appear first as light-footed occasional pieces, gradually darkening in tone until the unspoken menace of the last, "Cows", breaks cover.

Now let us talk of slaughter and the slain, the helicopter gun-ship, the mighty Kalashnikov: let's rest for a while in a place where a cow has lain.

Placed in the midst of these miniatures is "Incantata", a beautiful and heartfelt elegy for Mary Earl Powers, an artist and Muldoon's one-time lover. Forty-five eight-line half-rhymed stanzas beginning, "I thought of you tonight..." recapitulate their life together through a welter of anecdote and meditation. It is Muldoon's most transparent poem for some time, and also his most musical. "That's all that's left of..." rings through the lines, accreting memories of Dublin squabbles, Derain's paintings, Samuel Beckett, a holiday in France, filling its present losses with remembered pleasures until, in the final line of the poem, and only there, the two are reunited. It



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is straightforward, absolutely assured, and very moving. "Incantata" was published in these pages some weeks ago, accompanied by one of Mary Farl Powers's lithographs. One wonders why Faber did not do the same for the jacket.

All elegies work by sleight of hand. The invocation of that which is lost is the occasion of its recovery. A life is detailed, its events revisited, the catalogue of losses grows profuse and enriched, the deficit is gradually transmuted into surplus. Lack becomes abundance. At the last, the original "loss" is mere rubric, a grammatical nicety in the logic of replenishment which is the poem's real business. An elegy asks hard questions of a poet's powers of invention and sustenance, for the dull reality is ever-present and ever-ready to intrude. Banning its own fundamentally dishonest premises is an elegy's first task, and thereafter the imperative of all such high-wire acts asserts itself with increasing stridency. Don't slip. It is the kind of high-risk poetic strategy that might have been invented for Muldoon and underlies not only "Incantata" but also its far longer, more ambitious and complex counterpart in this collection, "Yarrow".

Little by little it dawned on us that the row of kale would shortly be overwhelmed by these pink and cream blooms, that all of us would be overwhelmed...

So it begins, not in loss but the premonition of loss, a temporality, let it be noted, only communicable in writing. This drink of latitude is all Muldoon needs for all that follows. Yarrow, "these pink and cream blooms", recurs interminably through the 150 pages that follow without ever assuming control over the images and incidents surrounding it, as though Muldoon, having already accorded it the title, is reluctant to cede it any more prominence than that. Meaning, in the widest sense, is distributed very evenly through the poem. Derek Mahon's "terminal democracy (of habes and crab)" here being an occasion for celebration rather than lament. There is no single key.

The immediate effect of this non-order of priorities is an impression of something close to chaos: a maddening whirl of incidents and images, references and recherché allusions. "Yarrow" thrusts its reader headlong into several very different worlds: winter 1963 in Muldoon's home village of The Moy in South Armagh; the imaginative inner life of his childhood, stuffed with Stevenson and H. Rider Haggard; childish gangs, their quests and secrets; a love (sex?) affair with "S—", as fiery in her politics as her amours; the suicide of Sylvia Plath; the Profumo affair; the history, or histories, of Ireland; a bombing, or possible bombing... This list is very far from being complete. Intermittent snapshots of a present-day Muldoon wrestling with the remote control of his VCR supply a flimsy scaffold of freeze-frames and cross-fades, amounting almost to a caveat — how not to read this poem.

For "Yarrow" is anything but random. Huge lists of things are strung through its stanzas — of poets, novelists, their books, their characters, places, saints, food, drink, weapons, modes of transportation. Our hero himself is a compendium of heroes: King Arthur, Cuirithir, Cúchulainn, a dash of David Balfour and a pinch of Allan Quatermain. Armed with a "hog-weed blow-gun", sustained only by fuses oil, Anchor Steam ("the best beer in the U.S." — a lie), "scal-flipper terrine" and "pages torn from Old Moore or Wisden", he leaps from S—'s bed to the Spanish Main and back again. When he is late for tea one night (an unforeseen excursion on a U-Boat), his mother upbraids him for not peeling the spuds while his father metamorphoses into a kale-loving Popeye. Stopped for running "those five red lights in downtown New Haven", S— invokes George Oppen:

"there's a poet with fire
in his belly"; this was to the arresting "officer"
who had her try to walk a straight line back to
the Porsche:



Paul Muldoon, 1993

after calling him "the unvoiced 'c' in Connecticut"...
So far, so fun. Add this "c" to "the phantom 'a' in Cesarean" ("Fooling", earlier in the volume) and the "if" in "California" ("Imram", from *Why Browne Left*) and one gains a sense of the diligence with which "Yarrow" recoups and subsumes within itself Muldoon's work to date. Examples like this could be multiplied almost endlessly.

Unsurprisingly, and first impressions notwithstanding, "Yarrow's" own internal relations are intricate to a mind-boggling degree. The puzzling term "widdershins" is scooped out of "Brazil" and glossed as "Wither" as in "widdershins", meaning to turn / against the sun", its Gaelic equivalent chased down and traced to the name of a seed catalogue browsed through by his mother, "Tohill, from *nadhail*, / meaning 'withershins' — with its regrettable overtones / of sun-worship". A "carbon-slip" torn from this lexically loaded source functions as a kind of amulet fluttering through the poem, metamorphosing into "the short slip, / who caught that fiendish Gagooey from *King Solomon's Mines*" or S—'s even shorter "diaphanous half-slip, / with its lime-white gusset".

"How much longer", she cajoled, "must we rant
and rail
against the ermine
yoke of the House of Hanover?"

When might the roots of freedom take hold?
For how much longer must we cuss?
Freedom's green shoot and Freedom's little
green slip?"

A "house in Hanover" later in the poem "stands like a ship on the slips". A page later, "the bounds were straining at their slips", and some time after that "the carbon slip" is lost. This is only a partial account of only one word, but the whole poem is tongued and grooved in this way.

As with the patterning of its vocabulary, so with the checks and balances of its tone. Muldoon is expert at curbing his more lurid idioms, keeping them within the ambit of "Yarrow's" cool but jaunty, almost insouciant tone.

It was now too late for Erce to pull out of Enid while she masturbated her clitoris
and S— and I, like, outparamed the Turk

in the next room: the scent of Vaseline;
her fondness for the crop,
the *arrière-gout* of patchouli oil and urine.

The demotic pull and archly decorous push of "like" and "*arrière-gout*" let just the right

amount of steam out of this steamy vignette. This kind of near-invisible monitoring operates throughout the poem. Every word is calculated. There are no coincidences. Likewise there are no, like, slips. A work more attentive to the calibration of its language than this one is hard to imagine. To what end?

Muldoon's mastery of the language is as often-remarked as his pleasure in it. Both are in evidence here, but with an unsurpassed degree of control. The multiple collisions and overlays, the interpenetrations and contradictions between "Yarrow's" various rhetorics are the real story of this poem. S— upbraids him for not being political, for not being involved ("the only Saracen I know's a Saracen tank"), his mother wants him over the sink (hairwashes, more spud-peeling), "ghastly gagooeys" rocket towards him out of nowhere, and someone's mind the cows' drinking trough. What is a poet to do?

Our hero rushes about (a great deal of traveling gets done in "Yarrow"), juggling his proffered roles. Refrains ("That was the year that..."; "Again and again...") ring through the verses. Everything recurs, though changed by the poem's intricate, near-invisible lexical procedures. Heroic claims S—, cancer Muldoon's mother. S—'s clitoris used to taste of nutmeg, now it tastes of "monk's hood, or acornite", neither of which, like the great compendium of plants offered fruitlessly as cures for Mary Farl Powers's cancer in "Incantata", will help Muldoon's mother. Our hero keeps slaying his enemies and his enemies keep popping back up. "Yarrow" reads and re-reads itself (demanding, incidentally, the same of its readers).

Appropriately enough for a poem as happy under S—'s skirt as aboard ship with a crew of anachronistic Romans, as necessarily lush and flush with inventions as with losses and waste; appropriately enough for a poet dogged by suspi-

cions of incomprehensibility, "Yarrow", and the collection, end with the cracking of an "indecipherable code".

It has to do with a trine, laden with ravensara, that was lost with all hands between Ireland and Montevideo.

"Ravensara" is a variety of Madagascan nutmeg. As to "Montevideo", where else would *The Annals of Chile* reach its conclusion if not Uruguay? The lines send us back into the volume in search of further explanation — a gesture typical of the whole book. The reader shuttles back and forth, drawn by associations and resonances which swell above the din of "Yarrow's" hectic surface activity. Gradually the poem's vector reveals itself.

Yarrow will always be about to overwhelm the kale. It is to the faintest trace of movement within this moment that the poem cleaves. Beneath its crazed activity and intermittent wackiness, this is a fundamentally calm poem. The volume's earlier lyrics are gathered in its retrospective gaze, or make good their own prospective promises, or both. Viewed through "Yarrow", the paradoxical image of Muldoon's unborn child's thumb glimpsed in "The Sonogram" — a gladiator in his net, passing judgment on the crowd! — prefigures the *syzygy* of our own roles as both spectators and players. And, of course, as the makers of both entries and exits ourselves. The genocides, successive invasions, and fertile miscogenations which are the annals of Chile (and Ireland) are also provisions of the individual lives which flicker, always and already extinguished, always and already afloat, and which are sustained in this magnificent poem. "Yarrow" is a new kind of elegy, an elegy for the unborn and the dead alike.

Lawrence Norfolk's first novel *Lemprière's Dictionary* was published in 1991.

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