

# newswrite

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## **A WORD FROM IRISH POET TERRY MCDONAGH**

NSW Writers' Centre Director Irina Dunn met Irish poet and playwright Terry O'Donagh at the 2004 Ubud Writers and Readers Festival and again in Sydney in 2005 and asked him to write about being an Irish poet. Terry says:

"I'm convinced of the fact that time and talk is the imaginative father and mother of our literary success in the past and today. 'Diversion' was another word for standing on corners telling yarns and stories. There was often little to do, but talk and dream of faraway places. Poverty was cruel and, unfortunately, young people were forced to travel into exile, but they often did take their 'diversion' with them to as far away as the tales they had listened to as children".

*Terry's website is  
[www.terry-mcdonagh.com](http://www.terry-mcdonagh.com).*

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## Poet, get out for a while, at least!

**I**t would be terrible if a poet didn't leave home. There'd just be the mother and bard frying in family fat. Not a happy scenario. No craic! Get out! I say. The great Joyce left "to create in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race". Others amongst us left for less noble reasons, but leave we did carrying a whole bagfull of dreams, ideas and ambitions hoping to realise some of them in the course of the next 40 years or so. The dream of travel was the bug to be cherished – to get away. Wit and wisdom were elsewhere and lips didn't smile much on an island of need.

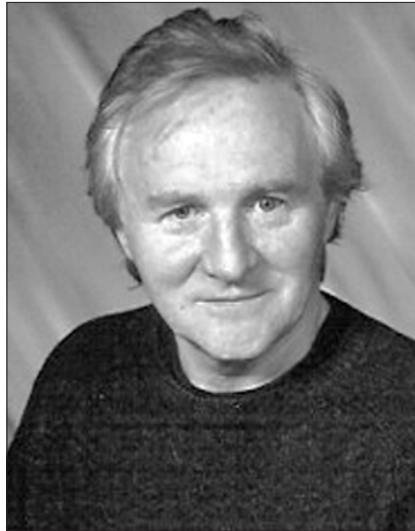
Ireland is a different country, today. Thankfully, its shoreline is no longer dotted with deserted villages and people looking hopefully out to sea. Will the "new" Ireland of hi-tech and software find common ground with the young writer? Can they merge? Should they merge? The earth, the clouds and the stars above are still good. To quote Patrick Kavanagh: "Poetry made me a sort of outcast and I became abnormally normal".

I met a fairly normal Donegal man in Hamburg about 20 years ago — let's call him Billy for argument's sake.

"Couldn't have got a job even if I'd looked," he moaned. "So I didn't bother."

Anyway, to make a long story short, Billy arrived straight from the Literary and Debating Society of University College Dublin in a longish off-white, arty coat; a substantial off-red, untidy beard, and a portable typewriter dangling over his right shoulder to complete the package of new Joyce on the European Circuit.

We worked at the same language school, albeit in separate rooms, until one day about six months later, Billy announced he was heading for Italy; for the sun; for inspiration to write the definitive European novel. A night out with Billy was a blessing in a world where knowledge does not equal money. He suggested he might have



*Terry McDonagh*

done better at College if the demon drink hadn't entered his poetic soul and driven him half daft with literary talk, poetic suffering and the supremacy of faraway poets in a post-Joyce Dublin. This was usually highly entertaining late-night material. He left.

Once in a while word would filter through that Billy was doing fine in this or that language school, but the word novel remained an unknown quantity. The last I heard of him was that he'd got a young Roman woman pregnant and he'd been dragged — surrounded and at gunpoint — to the altar. For all I know, he might still be there chatting away, telling yarns, changing nappies and dreaming of the great novel. "Havin the craic," as he used to say.

People like Billy are an endangered species in a "new" Ireland of two cars in the drive, a second house in Spain and a dangerous superiority complex. This new generation doesn't even go to the pub without a copy of the property page sticking out of a briefcase!

Billy is not the only potential writer

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**"The experience of writing, reading and telling stories is a strange and beautiful practice."**

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to have worn the costume of the poet in an alien land. In fact, the Irish market their writers very well. Take a closer look and you'll see there aren't all that many out there, at all. The Irish do a good selling job on Swift, Shaw, Wilde, Yeats, Synge, Joyce down to John McGahren, Dermot Bolger, Colm Tobin, Philip Casey, or Roddy Doyle who is not at all sure we are still a great literary nation. Perhaps Roddy's right! If attendance at readings in Dublin is anything to go by, writers are a dying race.

But it's not quite so simple. Nothing can come of nothing, I know, but there are many writers alive and well, even as I sit. The experience of writing, reading and telling stories is a strange and beautiful practice. They defy the rules of lines and lawnmowers and can only be considered in the context of restless souls and restless horizons. When the horizon is plastered with housing estates and banknotes, the child is less wild.

We had a neighbour who'd travelled the world; was half-blind and loved to re-enact the Sunday sermon to the merriment and jubilation of those privileged to have been present. The man just adored the sound of his own voice and he was anything but a bore. He never missed Mass. He was a talker; a storyteller; a poor man with time on his hands — time to talk. The man that made time made plenty of it, rings in my ears.

I'm convinced of the fact that time and talk is the imaginative father and mother of our literary success in the past and today. "Divarsion" was another word for standing on corners telling yarns and stories. There was often little to do, but talk and dream of faraway places. Poverty was cruel and, unfortunately, young people were forced to travel into exile, but they often did take their "divarsion" with them to as far away as the tales they had listened to as children.

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In recent years, Irish pubs have felt the need to adopt great Irish literary figures as patrons. Poor Oscar Wilde is much maligned with a beer in his hand on the wall of a pub in Berlin. The list goes on. We know how to talk and will stop at nothing to sell our wares. “Samuel Beckett was a great man, who wrote *Waiting for Godot* and lived in France. Sure everyone knows that!”

This “new” Irishman takes himself so, so seriously. I know it’s easy to generalise; to sound like our fathers, but really! He seems to expend his energy on trying to be part of it all — to fit in, in the worst possible way. I’ll stick my neck out: this individual seems to have no respect for tomfoolery or compulsive lying — that’s the great sin!

Our great poet-prophet and principal celebrant, Joyce took us on a pilgrimage across Europe with Dublin as the subject matter of all his New Religion: “to create in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.” “I will not serve.”

On the other hand, John McGahren, who was sacked from his job of primary teacher by the Bishop, feels privileged to have been part of the ritual, candles and incense of a childhood in Ireland.

“I never left the Church. It left me.”

He left Ireland for a time, but returned with a foreign wife. His second book, *The Dark*, being banned was bad enough but a foreign wife was the last straw in a land so full of comely maidens. The Bishop had to sack him to set an example.

By the way, I have just read his Memoir. I couldn’t leave it down. He has so much to say and he can repeat it as often as he likes as far as I’m concerned. His story remains much the same but so does his wonderful style.

After Last Mass a few Sundays ago, Mary McHale dropped into James Burke, the butcher, to buy a chicken. They greeted each other cordially in the empty shop and agreed the new curate was a bit strange, but he could be worse.

“I’ll have a chicken, James.”

“Right, Mary,” said James, going into the cold-room and appearing again with a chicken. He noted it was his last one.

“There you are, Mary...a nice bird.”

“You haven’t anything bigger, I suppose?”

Without further comment, James took the chicken back into the cold-room, roughed it up a bit and returned.

“How about this one, Mary?”

There was silence for a moment as Mary seemed to consider.

“I’ll tell you what, James. I’ll take the two.”

There was nobody under thirty in the pub when that yarn was being told. They would have been too busy dis-

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**“I left Ireland to ‘dabble in words and rhyme’ among Germans at a time when coming home was dear. It was a good decision. I learned to become a friend of people and some of them became friends of mine.”**

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cussing property at dinner parties.

Irish artists don’t really leave home, anymore. But can the “native strain”, that grew out of Anglo Ireland and the Irish language and which fed into the pens of so many, continue in a country of alarming levels of obesity and groveling up and down to the fortunes of the Euro?

And sin is gone! I can’t believe it. It used to be such an interesting topic. Gone are the days of scruples and impure thoughts. Only a “good” Catholic can fully appreciate the powerful, dramatic response your body was capable of sitting on a bench waiting for Confession. Twitching legs and eyelashes took on a life of their own. Nerves, it must have been, or something like that.

It was cruel when you were the last in the long line of penitents; afraid the

priest might recognise you as he left the box. There was, however, one consolation in having to wait so long; you could almost always guess what people had been up to by the length of time they spent doing penance, afterwards. This was useful information. I’m sure the girls felt the same. Therapists were unheard of.

One particular incident springs to mind: I was in the process of listing an abridged version of my “bad thoughts and actions with myself or with another” when I became aware of the priest trying to tighten a screw on his side of the divide with a small screwdriver. He never once stopped tightening the screw or muttering something in Latin during all of my whispered disclosures.

“A man, I am thinking of myself, innocently dabbles in words and rhymes and finds they have become a way of life” — Patrick Kavanagh.

I left Ireland to “dabble in words and rhymes” among Germans at a time when coming home was dear. It was a good decision. I learned to become a friend of people and some of them became friends of mine. I became less sure of my next move and that’s healthy. I take my stories with me and the poet in me has a special place.

Recently I found a pair of hobnail boots under the stairs and a turf barrow in the shed, in our old house in Ireland. The finding, in itself, was not all that special. The fact that I became all happy and excited gave me something to think about. Is Ireland leaving us, forever? I still love to return.

### TERRY MCDONAGH

*Terry McDonagh, a poet, teacher and dramatist from County Mayo in Ireland, lived in Germany for more than 20 years. He lectured in English at the University of Hamburg and was Drama Director at the International School for 13 years. He has been a member of the International Schools Theatre Association (ISTA) since 1986 and has taken part in their festivals throughout Europe and in Australia. He recently returned to Ireland where he intends to remain for an indefinite period. His next book is a collection of poetry for young people. It was published in January, and is titled Head Lice on the Back Seats.*