

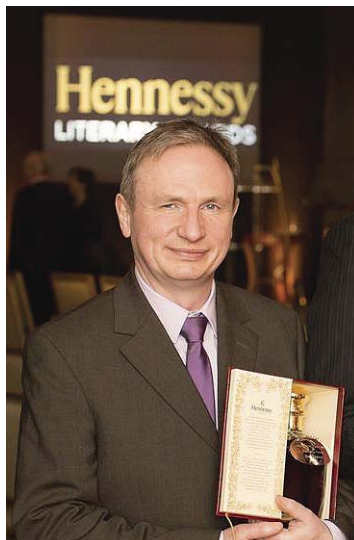
Hennessy Emerging Poetry Award Winner

Bláithín Gallagher talks to David Cameron on his achievement in winning the Hennessy Literary Award for Emerging Poetry

IN APRIL 2014, the Scottish writer and Manorhamilton resident David Cameron was presented with the Hennessy Literary Award for Emerging Poetry. Previous Hennessy winners include such now-familiar names of Irish literature as Patrick McCabe, Neil Jordan, Dermot Healy, Deirdre Madden, Eilís Ní Duibhne, Frank McGuinness, Sebastian Barry, Dermot Bolger, Joseph O'Connor, Colum McCann, Mary O'Donnell, Mary O'Malley, Vona Groarke, John Boyne, Anne Enright, Hugo Hamilton, and Philip O Ceallaigh. Here, in conversation with Bláithín Gallagher, David discusses the award, his poetry and other writing, as well as life in Leitrim.

Bláithín: Hello, David. Congratulations on the award. Tell me a little about yourself and your background. Were you fond of poetry from a young age?

David: Well, I didn't grow up in a literary house. There were books, but not poetry books. I remember there being poems in the 10-volume Arthur Mee's *Children's Encyclopedia*, but I used to skip the poems to get to the interesting stuff. I started paying attention when I had to learn a poem for Burns Day in school. I learned Burns's poems 'To a Mouse' and 'Auld Lang Syne' – all the verses. That was the Scottish bit of my early poetic education. It was much later that I discovered that my Tyrone grandfather and great-



grandfather had written poetry. Poetry's in my blood—my Irish blood. But I think the main influence on me when I was young came through the record-player. Songs by the Beatles, David Bowie, Bob Dylan. My dad, who died after a road accident at the end of 1968, used to sing *Hey Jude* to me – the song was released a couple of months before his death. I played it a lot afterwards, and remember being puzzled and excited by the line 'The movement you need is on your shoulder.' It didn't seem to make sense, yet it communicated something to me. Interestingly, Paul McCartney meant to change that line but Lennon wouldn't let him, as he said it was the best line in the song, which it is. I could explain why now, but back then I could feel why. A few years later I was intrigued by Bowie's lyrics, which were

psychologically complex. The idea of meeting yourself on the stair, for instance. And then Dylan opened up a whole new lyrical world for me. I read books about his lyrics and would see quotations from the likes of Keats and T S Eliot. To paraphrase Dylan, after that I didn't look back.

Bláithín: What about school? Was English a favourite subject? Were you influenced by any particular teacher?

David: I seemed to have a flair for English, yes. But it came alive for me in my fourth year at secondary school when I had a great teacher, Margaret Mary O'Sullivan. We've become friends since. Her husband was also an English teacher, and she gave me copies of books where they had duplicates. I remember an anthology of French verse, reading poems by Rimbaud. His poem 'First Communion' was better than anything I'd ever read.

Bláithín: What is the first poem you remember (not nursery rhymes!). Do you remember it because it had an impact on you?

David: I'm going to answer that by ignoring your instruction. Nursery rhymes are hugely important – not that anyone has a nursery nowadays, or they didn't where I grew up. I had my own toy record-player and used to play nursery rhyme records on it – 'Oranges and Lemons', 'Pop Goes the Weasel', and so on. It's not a big leap from those to

William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, which are among the earliest poems I read. *'My mother bore me in the southern wild'* — even just that one line makes the hairs on my arms stand on end, which is always a good test of real poetry.

Bláithín: If your first love is poetry, you also write fiction, with the publication of *The Ghost of Alice Fields* in 2014, and I understand you are in the final stages of preparing another novel for publication, *Femke*. Can you discuss the difference in these processes for you?

David: Poems come when they come, but you have to work at fiction, preferably every day. On the other hand, I don't choose the subject-matter of my fiction—I let it choose itself. There is a low-level inspiration involved in writing a novel. Personally, I prefer to read novels of low-level inspiration and poems of high-level inspiration. Robert Graves said: 'Prose books are the show dogs I breed and sell to support my cat'—the cat being poetry, of course. Neither of my two books of fiction has won Crufts yet.

Bláithín: Why do you write? Would you say you ever made a conscious decision to become a writer?

David: I write because I must. Especially with poems, it's an involuntary process. I used to work with children who had epilepsy, and I witnessed some of them experiencing the so-called

'aura' that seems to precede certain types of seizure. We know now that it isn't really an aura, a prediction of what is about to happen, but the beginning of the seizure itself. Similarly, I often feel a poem 'coming on' before any words arrive. I think it's an event in the psyche, an eruption of unconscious material into the conscious mind. I wait as long as possible before writing anything down. If I forget, then it just means the poem wasn't memorable. Take one of the two poems that won me the Hennessy Award. *'Night Singing'* came to me when I was getting my young daughter to sleep in my arms, so of course there was no question of writing it down. It's short, but I had no idea where the poem was going, what the last line would be. The other poem, *B&B*, was written about 20 years after the event it describes. And it was only a small event. No, I would never have consciously decided to become a poet. I remember wanting to be a detective as a boy. Maybe Columbo. Not Kojak—I never liked lollipops.

Bláithín: How did you end up living in Leitrim?

David: As Winnie-the-Pooh says, 'That's a long story, longer when I tell it.'

Bláithín: Is there any one thing in particular that attracts you about our county?

David: My gran, who lived with us from when she was 80 and I was 6, grew up not far from



■ David Cameron

here, on a farm in Sligo. She was a formidable presence, and I think I was always drawn to Ireland and Irishness. Now that I live in Ireland, I can appreciate Scotland more than I did. You need that distance sometimes, or I do. Ireland is changing, but in counties like Leitrim it hasn't completely lost touch with rural traditions. I think poetry, like a lot of primitive things in life, needs that connection with the earth. Even a townie like me knows it. Manorhamilton, specifically, has a good mix of locals and blow-ins, making it a surprisingly cosmopolitan place.

Bláithín: So tell me, what does winning the Hennessy award mean to you? Was it a surprise to win?

David: A complete surprise on the night, as I'd misread all the signs – it's just as well I didn't

become a detective. What it might mean in the long-run, I don't know yet. But it's an award that is well-known to the public, even if financially it isn't all that lucrative. I've been congratulated by people on the street and in the shops. Poetry always felt like a secret before.

Bláithín: Are there any of the previous award winners that you particularly admire?

David: Dermot Healy. I'm privileged to have known him. We both are.

Bláithín: Have you any tips for aspiring writers?

David: I'd say, read the best of the past, but don't be intimidated by it. Nobody has ever expressed the particular truth of your own life, not even Shakespeare. Only you can do it. I once criticised my friend Robert Nye for spoiling what I thought was a great line in one of his poems. He told me he didn't want to be great, he wanted to be accurate. So that's a good tip, though it isn't my own. That's the bit you can control,

but in terms of becoming known and achieving recognition you are at the mercy of the world of publishing, which is the devil himself. I once turned down a publisher who wanted to bring out a book of my poems when I was in my late teens, and now I'm 48 and still don't have a collection out. I also turned down a Hollywood screenwriter who wanted to adapt my novel. So my advice is: don't do as I have done. I'm trying to take that advice myself.

NIGHT SINGING

David Cameron

*There comes a time in singing to a child,
As the small limbs go limp and the breaths deepen,
That you become aware of weight. It's then
You hear your voice, and in it something wild.
Why do fears come? Nothing on any shelf
Can tell you in this place of simple rhyme.
The child's asleep, and has been for some time.
You're only singing now to soothe yourself.*

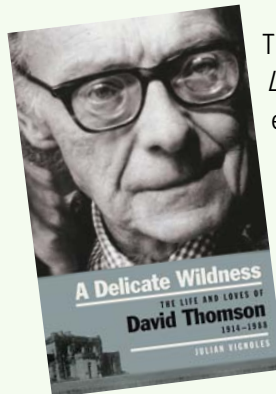
B & B

David Cameron

*'Fortuitous,' hissed the landlady.
One double left, so late at night:
Where was the fortune there? For me
It was in you, in your eyes bright
With youth, and longing. We had spent
The day in that sun-gilded town,
Following where the river went
– To this hall-hovering, snooty frown.*

*We were new lovers, wandering
The world and unafraid of all
Landladies with their laundering,
Their fake-gilt frames upon the wall.
We saw instantly through the fuss
A bed made for the two of us.*

A Delicate Wildness The Life and Loves of David Thomson 1914-1988 Julian Vignoles



THE BOOK: *A Delicate Wildness—the Life and Loves of David Thomson, 1914-1988*, is the first exploration of the contribution—and soul—of a relatively unsung but uniquely talented man. This resonant biography boasts more than 50 unseen photographs.

Thomson was a Scotsman who became an honorary Irishman, writer, folklorist and radio producer. His life took a fateful turn when, while a history student at Oxford, Thomson

came to County Roscommon in the early 1930s as tutor to an Anglo-Irish family. He fell in love with the daughter of the house, became a farmer and 'went native', caught up in the history and landscape of counties Roscommon and Leitrim.

He wrote his first book when he was forty, *The People of the Sea*, an exploration of seal lore. He went on to write eleven published works including autobiographical fiction, before turning to the genre in which he most excelled—memoir: *Woodbrook* (1974), about his time in Ireland, is regarded as an Arcadian masterpiece and minor classic. For his final book, *Nairn in Darkness and Light*, he returned to the north of Scotland to meditate on childhood, and was made *Scottish Writer of the Year* in 1988.

David Thomson had an impish grin, was wary of literati and drank with the London homeless. His friend Seamus Heaney described him as having a 'delicate wildness'.

The author, Julian Vignoles, launched the book in Leitrim at the Reading Room in Carrick on Shannon.



PHOTO BY MATTHEW GANNON