

**Classic Poetry Series**

**John Montague**  
**- poems -**

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# John Montague(28 February 1929--)

John Montague is an Irish poet. He was born in New York and brought up in Tyrone. He has published a number of volumes of poetry, two collections of short stories and two volumes of memoir. He is one of the best known Irish contemporary poets. In 1998 he became the first occupant of the Ireland Chair of Poetry.

## <b>Early Life</b>

John Montague was born in Brooklyn, New York, on February 28, 1929. His father, James Montague, an Ulster Catholic, from County Tyrone, had gone to America in 1925 to join his brother John. Both were sons of John Montague, who had been a Justice of the Peace, combining his legal duties with being a schoolmaster, farmer, postmaster and director of several firms. John continued as postmaster but James became involved in the turbulent Irish Republican scene in the years after 1916, particularly complicated in areas like Fermanagh and Tyrone, on the borders of the newly divided island. Molly (Carney) Montague joined her husband James in America in 1928, with their two elder sons. John was born on Bushwick Avenue, St. Catherine's Hospital, and spent his earliest years playing with his brothers in the streets of Brooklyn, putting nickels on the trolley lines, playing on a tenement roof, seeing early Mickey Mouse movies.

## <b>Return to Garvaghey</b>

Although Uncle John ran a speakeasy, where he employed his brother, James Montague did not find life in New York easy during the Depression years. So the three boys were shipped back to Ireland in 1933, the two eldest to their maternal grandmother's house in Fintona, Co. Tyrone, where they had been born, but John was sent to his father's ancestral home at Garvaghey, then maintained by two spinster aunts, Brigid and Freda, who welcomed the boy of four.

From New York to a farm on the edge of the Clogher Valley in County Tyrone was a significant step backwards in time. John did all the usual farming chores. He became a normal Ulster farm child, though haunted by the disparity between what the house in Garvaghey had been, in the days of his grandfather and namesake, and the reduced present.

John went first to Garvaghey School and then to Glencull, three miles away, where he was coached by a young and ardent master. Scholarships brought him to St. Patrick's College, Armagh, the junior Diocesan Seminary and the place

where his Jesuit uncle, Thomas Montague, had gone.

## <b>Education</b>

The teacher he remembers most from Armagh was Sean O Boyle, one of the leading experts on Ulster folksong and Irish poetry. From him John imbibed, almost against his will, a strong sense of the long tradition of Irish poetry. John studied at University College Dublin in 1946. He found an extraordinary contrast between the Ulster of the War Years and post-war Dublin, where the atmosphere was introverted and melancholy. Stirred by the example of other student poets (including <a href="http://www.poemhunter.com/thomas-kinsella/">Thomas Kinsella</a>) he began to publish his first poems in The Dublin Magazine, Envoy, and The Bell, edited by Peadar O'Donnell. But the atmosphere in Dublin was still constrained and Montague left for Yale on a Fullbright Fellowship in 1953.

John had already met Saul Bellow at the Sazburg Seminar in American Studies and now he worked with Robert Penn Warren as well as auditing the classes of several Yale critics, like Rene Wellek and W. K. Wimsatt. He extended his sense of contemporary American literature, attending Indiana Summer School of Letters where he heard Richard Wilbur, Leslie Fiedler, and John Crowe Ransom, who like the Irish poet <a href="http://www.poemhunter.com/austin-clarke/">Austin Clarke</a>, encouraged Montague, finding him a job at the Iowa Writers Workshop in 1954-55.

## <b>Life during the 50s and 60s</b>

From Iowa to Berkeley, a year of graduate school convinced Montague that he should return to Ireland. He sailed back to France that summer, to marry his first wife, Madeleine, whom he had met in Iowa, where she was also on a Fullbright; they settled in Herbert Street, Dublin, a few doors down from Brendan Behan. Working by day at the Irish Tourist Office, Montague at last gathered his first book of poems, Poisoned Lands (1961).

That year he also moved to Paris, to a small studio a block away from <a href="http://www.poemhunter.com/samuel-beckett/">Samuel Beckett</a>, with whom he slowly became on good drinking terms. There, he also met another neighbour, the French poet Claude Esteban, with whom he became friends — Montague recently translated into English and published some of his poems. A regular rhythm of publication saw his first book of stories, Death of a Chieftain (1964) after which the musical group The Chieftains were named, his second book of poems, A Chosen Light (1967), Tides (1970), the latter both also published by Swallow in the U.S.

All during the sixties, Montague continued to work on his long poem, *The Rough Field*, a task that coincided with the outbreak of the Civil Rights Movement in Northern Ireland. A *Patriotic Suite* appeared in 1966, *Hymn to the New Omagh Road* and *The Bread God* in 1968, and *A New Siege*, dedicated to Bernadette Devlin which he read outside Armagh Jail in 1970. In 1972, the long poem was finally published by Dolmen/Oxford and Montague returned to Ireland, to live and teach in University College Cork, at the request of his friend, the composer Seán Ó Riada, where he inspired an impressive field of young writers including Gregory O'Donoghue, Sean Dunne, Thomas McCarthy, William Wall, Maurice Riordan, Gerry Murphy, Greg Delanty and Theo Dorgan. In a birthday tribute for his 80th, William Wall wrote: "It would be impossible to overestimate his influence on the young writers who went to UCC (University College Cork) at that time." *The Rough Field* (1972) was slowly recognized as a major achievement.

<b>Since 1974</b>

Settled in Cork with his second wife, Evelyn Robson, Montague published an anthology, *The Faber Book of Irish Verse* (1974) with a book of lyrics, *A Slow Dance* (1975). Recognition was now beginning to come, with the Award of the Irish American Cultural Institute in 1976, the first Marten Toonder Award in 1977, and in 1978, the Alice Hunt Bartlett Award for *The Great Cloak*, "the best book of poetry in two years" according to the Poetry Society of Great Britain. A Guggenheim in 1979-80 enabled Montague to complete his *Selected Poems* (1982) and his second long poem, *The Dead Kingdom* (1984) both co-published by Dolmen (Ireland), Oxford (England), Wake Forest University Press (U.S.) and Exile Editions (Canada).

In 1987, Montague was awarded an honorary doctor of letters by the State University of New York at Buffalo. Governor Mario M. Cuomo presented Montague a citation in 1987 "for his outstanding literary achievements and his contributions to the people of New York." Montague serves as Distinguished Writer-in-Residence for the New York State Writers Institute during each spring semester, teaching workshops in fiction and poetry and a class in the English Department, University at Albany.

In 1995, Montague and his second wife, Evelyn, separated, and he formed a partnership with American student Elizabeth Wassell (later to be author of *The Honey Plain* (1996)).

In 1998, Montague was named the first Irish Professor of Poetry, a three-year appointment to be divided among The Queen's University in Belfast, Trinity

College Dublin, and University College Dublin. He held this title from 1998 to 2001, when he was succeeded by Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill.

In 2000, Montague was awarded The Vincent Buckley Poetry Prize.

In 2008 Montague published *A Ball of Fire*, a collection of all his fiction including the short novella *The Lost Notebook*.

### **<b>Style</b>**

Montague's poems chart boyhood, schooldays, love and relationships. Family and personal history and Ireland's history are also prominent themes in his poetry.

Montague is noted for his vowel harmonies, his use of assonance and echo, and his handling of the line and line break. Montague believes that a poem appears with its own rhythm and that rhythm and line lengths should be based on living speech.

### **<b>Awards</b>**

John Montague was awarded an Honorary Degree of Doctor of Letters from the University of Ulster, Coleraine on 29 June 2009.

# Like Dolmens Round My Childhood, The Old People.

John Montague

# White Water

for Line McKie

The light, tarred skin  
of the currach rides  
and receives the current,  
rolls and responds to  
the harsh sea swell.

Inside the wooden ribs  
a slithering frenzy; a sheen  
of black-barred silver-  
green and flailing mackerel:  
the iridescent hoop  
of a gasping sea trout.

As a fish gleams most  
fiercely before it dies,  
so the scales of the sea-hag  
shine with a hectic  
putrescent glitter:

luminous, bleached—  
white water—  
that light in the narrows  
before a storm breaks.

John Montague