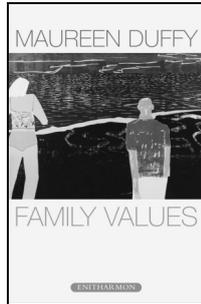


RUNNING DOWN TO WINTER

MAUREEN DUFFY INTERVIEWD BY RUTH O'CALLAGHAN



“The poems bubble up from somewhere clothing themselves in things I know, have read, that interest me. I don’t consciously research for them...”

ROC: You were born between the wars in an age when illegitimacy was considered shameful and, with only your mother as a provider, life must have proved hard. Could you describe your early years, please.

MD: My mother bought herself a wedding ring in Woolworths and called herself Mrs Duffy when my father left us when I was two months old. We survived on National Assistance, supplemented by what my mother could earn when she was well enough by dressmaking and, at least once, from a housekeeping job. From time to time she would go into a sanatorium for a few months to get remission from the TB which eventually killed her. I would be fostered out longing for the time when we could be reunited and find somewhere to live. We moved a lot because of this and so I had a series of primary schools. Our then house was destroyed by a bomb in 1940 so we evacuated ourselves when I was nearly seven to the West Country where my mother had a brother.

My mother sent me to London three weeks before she died, to Stratford where her family came from, to live with her elder sister and family. I think she knew she was dying and wanted me to be safe, but I didn’t realise how ill she was and it was a terrible shock. I went off my head for a year with shaking fits and nausea. I was taken in hand by my form and Latin teacher at my new secondary school who had me seen by a psychiatrist and helped me through the trauma. Eventually she became my official foster mother when I wanted to leave my aunt’s home because I was technically under age and still in the care of the local council.

ROC: You began publishing poetry at sixteen – perhaps surprisingly in such adverse conditions?

MD: I’d forgotten that some were as early as that. I thought I started publishing at seventeen. I think it was a bit like the young John Clare hiding his poems in the chimney-breast. Perhaps it began as a way of communicating with my mother when we were separated by showing or reciting them to her when I was taken to see her. She always encouraged me in any aspect of my education because as she said: ‘It’s the one thing they can’t take away from you.’ However the rest of the family found it and me rather pretentious and not at all leading to getting a proper job as a teacher or in an office, or bank. My mother, I should say, was herself a great reader during her many months in bed.

ROC: You studied for a degree at Kings College and later edited a poetry magazine, *the sixties*. What have been your influences?

MD: My influences are all male and trad I’m afraid: Wyatt, Donne, Keats, Clare, Browning, Hopkins, Dylan Thomas, Yeats... I come out of Eng. Lit. not a movement.

At King’s I was lucky enough to coincide with a group of students interested in writing, especially BS Johnson and John Ackerman. We had a very lively English society which invited professional writers to give readings, giving us contact with the professional world and an excellent college magazine, *Lucifer*, to publish our work in.

the sixties arose as an anti-Movement protest. We felt that mode was too dominant and excluding, so a group of us who wanted something more passionate, more ‘bardic’ to use John Ackerman’s expression, set up the magazine as a co-operative with our own money and ran it ourselves. It collapsed when my marriage to a fellow student also collapsed and my life changed radically.

ROC: Has the status of women poets changed since the ’70s?

MD: The status of women writers in every medium has improved, though still not enough as a head count of books reviewed and their reviewers shows. There are currently more opportunities for women in the theatre, they dominated and indeed won the last Mann Booker and we have the first woman Laureate. But we still need to keep watch and be proactive so that women’s poetry isn’t designated merely personal or we are pushed back into suitable genres, the equivalent of seeing real fur back on the catwalk or the return of Clause 28.

ROC: What is the process by which you compose a poem? From which sources do you draw your inspiration?

MD: The poems bubble up from somewhere clothing themselves in things I know, have read, that interest me. I don’t consciously research for them unless I’m translating. They start happening in my head with a first line that accretes more to itself, often quite rapidly. Anything may provoke one if I’m lucky. I write them down quite fast in a notebook, read and tinker with, leave overnight and then type up making more adjustments. They have to sound right aloud in my head.

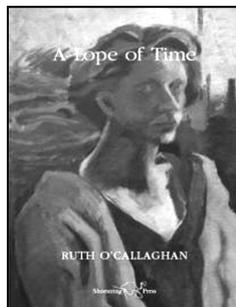
London is endlessly important to me as a place especially in childhood poems as in *Family Values*. But I like to give the requisite ‘local habitation and a name’ to my aery nothings as for example coming suddenly upon a house I once lived in as in *Revenant*, the *Nova Scotia Sequence*, *Fur Christoph*, *A Dublin Diary*, *Old Brompton Churchyard* and so on.

I think my love poems are themselves a form of sexual politics against the invisibility of women and gay women in particular. But I also write other political poems about the Irish troubles, Nigerian Executions, animal rights in *Bestiary* and on many other questions, including women’s lives and how they are perceived.

ROC: “Running down to winter the vines put on a last spurt” (*Eirlys* in *Family Values*). Would this be applicable to you in any way?

MD: I very much hope so though I hope not to quite run out yet. The Greeks were particularly good at exhorting us to live to the last drop, especially Anacreon, and then there’s Marvell’s *To His Coy Mistress*; “Thus though we cannot make our sun stand still / Yet we will make him run.”

ROC: Thank you.



Ruth O’Callaghan, Hawthornden Fellow, competition adjudicator, interviewer, reviewer, editor and mentor, was awarded a gold medal for poetry, tutors on poetry courses in the UK and abroad and hosts two poetry venues in London. Translated into six languages she was awarded an Arts Council grant to visit Mongolia. Her three collections have all sold out but *A Lope of Time* has been reprinted. Her latest collection *Goater’s Alley* has been reprinted twice.