

# The Dark Horse

## EDITORIAL

I FIRST WROTE TO SEAMUS HEANEY sometime in 1995, after the appearance of issue one of the journal, sending him a copy. I was living in a caravan in Ayrshire. Somehow, I'd got hold of his address. I had heard him read for the first time in, I think, 1991 in St. Andrews. I joined the lengthy post-reading queue to have a little group of his books signed. I presented him with the paperback of his *Selected*, on the cover of which he is wearing a stout duffle coat. I was sublimely indifferent—as I was, in those days, to many things—to the cover's big coffee-stain ring encircling his image's face and torso. 'Ah, a well-used copy,' he said magnanimously. He had reminded me then of an Irish uncle, which I told him in my letter; I also mentioned that my mother had been born and raised a handful of miles up the road from him in County Derry. The river Moyola was more than a name to me. As a youngster I had 'forked' for eels among its boulders with my cousin Joey O'Neill from Magherafelt.

Back came a note and a cheque for €100 to help the magazine. He became therefore a lifetime subscriber. I took to sending him occasional evidence of projects I'd been involved with, or books—anything which I thought might elicit the special occasion of a reply. I remember with particular pleasure one unexpected little masterpiece of encomia responding to the pamphlet of a project I'd done with primary school children in Ayrshire. It came from his other, Glanmore address—what he called his 'silence bunker'. There seemed nothing habitual about his letter. I felt buoyed and validated. He was a terrific *praiser*.

So it was with some gloom I sent him issue 20 of the journal which contained Seán Haldane's forensic dissection of Seamus's translation of Sorley MacLean's magnificent poem, 'Hallaiig', about the Highland Clearances. Haldane, a poet-critic not known for tip-toeing round reputations, however major, had great sport with the Heaney version. I offered Seamus right of reply in the subsequent issue. A few weeks later, a thickish white envelope addressed in his hand thudded onto my doormat. 'Ah,' I thought, nervily, 'the rebuttal.' But no. It was a print out of something connected with my editorial which he thought would interest me, and a letter in which he gently turned down any right of reply, saying that Haldane was obviously in 'fuller possession' of the Gaelic than he was and that yes, he generally agreed with him. That said, he finished mildly, he did think his critic had 'gone on a bit.' The letter also included a cheque for €500 to help the magazine and its editor.

I'm pleased to feature Alasdair Macrae's fine piece on his friend in this issue. Formerly a lecturer at the University of Stirling, Alasdair was good friends with many poets of the so-called Scottish Renaissance—MacCaig, Crichton Smith, MacLean and others. He is a critic with the enthusiasm and engaged seriousness of a poet. The photograph below, sent to accompany his piece, shows, from left to right, Iain Crichton Smith and his wife Donald, Norman MacCaig, Renee MacLean, Seamus, and Sorley MacLean. Alasdair is in the foreground.

