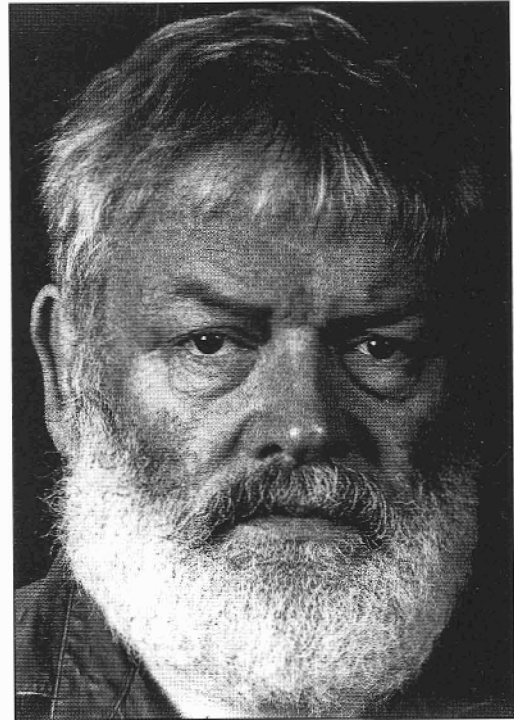


*Due North* speaks to  
the poet  
**Michael Longley**

**DN:** To begin can you tell us a little about your background?

**ML:** Well my father and mother came to Belfast about 1927 from London. My parents were cockneys, Londoners from Clapham Common, SW11. My father had served in the First World War. He was decorated for gallantry. He got the Military Cross and he was a Captain by the time he was about twenty and then I think he withdrew into himself and went and mined for tin and gold in Nigeria. He came back and met my mother and married her and he got a job selling furniture in Ireland. I think he covered the whole territory, worked for a Jewish firm called Harris Lebus. They ended up in Dunmurry. My twin and I were born in 1939 in Belfast. When the Belfast Agreement was signed, I wrote a letter in support of it to the *Irish Times* and a couple of other papers. I said that I feel British some of the time because of my parenthood, my father's history, and I feel Irish some of the time because I was brought up in a part of Ireland and most of the time I feel neither. I welcomed the agreement because it allowed me to feel more British and more Irish and more neither.

My twin and I went to Malone Primary School. In order to survive the battlefield of the playground we learned fairly quickly to adapt our accents. We'd leave home where there were English voices in the air, modify ourselves for the playground and then come back and remodify ourselves so as not to alarm our parents too much. In a way that was



valuable. My father having given it his all in 1914-18 joined up again, can you imagine, in 1939. He was an old fashioned patriot. He didn't get his job back until 1952-53. Harris Lebus had been involved in the manufacture of Spitfires so they couldn't readjust and go back to making furniture immediately. My father scraped a living as a funds raiser, first of all for the Ulster Hospital for Women and Children and then for the Northern Ireland War Memorial Fund. We didn't have much money. We were brought up in a genteel part of Belfast off Balmoral Avenue. Most of my playmates went to schools like Inch Marlo. It was good luck for Peter and me really to go to Malone Primary School which was predominantly working class. Most of my playmates were working class. If you like, they came from the 'wrong side' of the Lisburn Road. So from an early age I was sensitive to class difference and I can remember feeling rather ashamed or embarrassed by the spaciousness of our south Belfast home compared to the two-up and two-down houses of my classmates. So it was a rich

background really, it was complicated. It was complicated in the English/Irish way and it was complicated in its middle class/working class tensions and it was complicated too in a third way. The street where I grew up, Bristow Park, was only partially built-up and my friends and I could play wonderful games. At the weekends we'd go off for hours on end. There were hedgerows and fields and birds' nests and in the Bristow Park fields. I can remember discovering larks' nests. We built tree houses in crab-apple trees, I discovered blackbirds' nests, I remember a thrush's nest. When we got a bit older and owned bicycles, we would only be about a four or five minute ride from Barnett's Park, the Tow Path and the Giant's Ring. There weren't so many cars on the road, so it was safe to cycle. The third complication was being positioned between the city and the countryside, between *rus* and *urbs*. It wasn't suburban, it was more complicated than that. So part of my childhood was 'rural' and the other part was fully fledged urban because as well as having the tow path and the Giant's Ring and the fields, the hedges, the trees, I loved the Lisburn Road and the sweetie shops and there where two cinemas then, the Regal and the Majestic. My twin and I were regular attenders at both. I remember going from school to the pictures and it was thruppence to get into the front stalls of the Regal.

**DN: How much would you say that complicated and textured upbringing influenced your later career?**

**ML:** That's difficult to say. My Longley forebears came from Kent and I've done some research with the help of a genealogically literate friend and I've traced my 7th great grandfather, William Longley, back to 1713 and to a grave in Cowden, just south-east of Tunbridge

Wells. I love Kent and the Romney Marshes. When I'm in Kent I have this rather alarming feeling, I look across from Cowden churchyard, across well-cultivated fields to a copse and bluebell wood, its all so beautiful, the church with its shingled spire - and I think 'This is home'. Then I wonder, how can it be home? Belfast is home, Ireland is home. When I'm here I regard myself as an Irishman. I don't like being called a Belfast poet, I don't like being called a Northern Irish poet, I prefer to be called an Irish poet, but I know I'm not completely Irish. Sometimes when I'm in the midst of people who are ardent and simple-minded like a lot of Irish-Americans, somewhere like Boston or New York, I realise that I'm not Irish as they would want me to be Irish. So I feel not completely at home in either Ireland or England. I feel stranded between my ideas of both and I think that existential unease is probably very good for my writing.

**DN: In a way you've begun to address the next question which is do you see yourself as part of a tradition, a writing tradition, relating to Ulster or Ireland in general?**

**ML:** Partially, I do. Well, there's my generation of poets who by any standards are rather impressive and then after us - you're talking about people who are ten, twenty years younger - there's another generation. I would count as my contemporaries Mahon, Heaney, Simmons and then younger than us come Ciaran Carson, Medbh McGuckian, Paul Muldoon, Frank Ormsby and goodness knows what's in the future. Sinéad Morrissey and Leontia Flynn look like the real thing. Going back I would regard as literary uncles Patrick Kavanagh from Monaghan, Louis MacNiece, originally from Belfast although he became an

English poet with an Irish accent. The granddaddy of us all would be Yeats. So in a way the answer to your question is yes, but I don't have Irish so there's not the Irish language tinge.

And I see myself as part of a great English tradition, the tradition of lyric poetry which goes back, via the Second World War with a great poet who was killed on the Normandy beaches, aged 24, Keith Douglas, and then into the Thirties with MacNiece, of course and W.H. Auden. They rediscovered in the Thirties the poets of the World War I trenches who would be very influential in my soul: Wilfred Owen, Edward Thomas, Isaac Rosenberg, Charles Sorley, he was only twenty when he died. Young geniuses who were killed in the trenches, Owen at the age of twenty-five, Thomas in his late thirties. Their poetic fathers were Thomas Hardy, Keats and Tennyson. I am also aware of John Donne, George Herbert, and beyond them I would read Homer and Ovid and Propertius. It would be too parochial to talk in terms of Ireland or Northern Ireland. I see myself as tuned in, I hope, to the English-speaking strand of a great European tradition.

**DN: Do you think the past, either personal or general, has influenced the way you have approached writing?**

**ML:** I think that's unavoidable. I think part of the climate, the psychic climate in which I write, is influenced by the terrible history of war in the last century. A kind of innocence was completely obliterated by what happened in the trenches. It is the subsequent depression in which we find ourselves still and I write out of that, sometimes consciously with reference to the First World War, but I think most of the time without actually realising it because as I say it's in the air. (The finest mirror for it all really is the first great poem in Europe, Homer's *Iliad*.) It's been

one long war, hasn't it? There was a brief period of peace but then we had the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War, then Korea, then Vietnam and we're still living in that commotion and all that's terrible in that time zone is proleptically dealt with in the *Iliad* which is the great war poem and the greatest poem about death.

**DN: Without meaning to be in any sense political, do you see the demise, for instance, of classics as an academic pursuit at Queen's as having an impact on the way in which we as a society might value things?**

**ML:** Well I was on the side of those who opposed that particular close-down. I think it was awful, it was a very black day. How can a building stand when you remove its foundation? I spoke to the Senate of the University. I was given a few minutes to put my case, because our campaign in the press was really rather effective and we embarrassed them into at least listening to us. The classics, as I said in my address, are a very important part of the map by which we know ourselves and find our way, so I think we may not be finding our way as a society as clearly without Latin and Greek and classical culture. Very hard to quantify these things but I know that in my bones.

**DN: Do you have a favourite piece of Irish or Ulster writing from either a contemporary or someone who you particularly admired from a previous generation?**

**ML:** There are so many pieces and so much poetry. I'll name Sam Hanna Bell's *December Bride* which is a very eloquent portrait of rural Ulster with all its fruitful schizophrenia, and Stewart Parker's wonderful play *Northern Star* which gives us a glimpse of the possibilities of

1798 for both Presbyterians and Catholics. I think Stewart Parker is a great playwright and I would love to see the Belfast Festival put on a series of his plays.

**DN: Do you have a particular part of the country that holds a special memory or somewhere that you feel most at home?**

*ML:* I love the Giant's Ring. I go there frequently to walk around the rampart, if that's what it's called. I think of it as a big earthen radar dish receiving signals from the past, you know the ancient past, and also the more recent past when they used to have horse races round it. Then from my own past when I cycled round it. I love it. In the west of Ireland for thirty years or more, we've been going to this remote, beautiful, Garden of Eden called Carrigskeewaun, which is a one-house townland under the shadow of Mweelrea Mountain. You have to drive past a river and sometimes through the tide to get to it. It's almost an island. It has taught me that you can never exhaust a place I've written about one third of my poems out of the Carrigskeewaun experience. I've just finished a book and there is a sequence of about ten Carrigskeewaun poems in it. When I'd finished the last book, I thought, well, that's the last of the Carrigskeewaun poems but I keep finding things to say. I realised that after thirty years of going back every year and sometimes three or four times a year to this remote corner. I'm still only scratching the surface and there are still things to discover. In a way I suppose the place is related to the earthen radar dish of the Giant's Ring - receiving messages from Carrigskeewaun in County Mayo. I don't know. I hope so.

**DN: If you had the possibility to travel in time and could meet someone, is there**

**anyone in particular who you would like to meet and if so, what would you ask them?**

*ML:* I've thought about that one. I think the person I would most like to meet would be my favourite English poet, John Clare. He was an uneducated man. He was a farm labourer and he wrote some of the most exquisite lyrics in response to the natural world. Great poems about birds and birds' nests and animals. He was, as well as a great poet, the first field man, the first person who had more than vague notions of the countryside as something opposite to the city. He saw the countryside and the wonders of the natural world with a clarity which was utterly new and modern and completely unsentimental. He thought in sonnets really, was a force of nature himself and a giant walking around disguised as a peasant. I'd really like to meet John Clare.

What question would I ask him? I think I would simply say, 'Are you doing anything this afternoon? Would it be possible to walk out in the fields with you?' and then I would walk beside him and try to see the natural world through his eyes. He saw things so clearly, it must have been a torment for him. But out of that torment was born this wonderful body of poetry.

**DN: Finally, how do you see local arts and culture developing in the future and what sort of challenges do you think we face?**

*ML:* I think we should learn from Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and theorise less and put our money where our mouth is with regard to the arts. I think we should jettison words like 'elitist' and 'access'. We should support good artists and let them get on with it and not expect them to fill in the gaps which have been left by our

education system. The way to give people access to the arts is to give them education in the arts, in music, in the visual arts and in literature from primary school onwards. I think we're asking the arts to do too much socially. They are worth it for themselves. I would like our media to be less philistine and more interested in the arts. Ezra Pound said that poetry (and you can apply this to all of the arts) he said that 'poetry is news that

stays news'. The BBC and UTV, should take a more vigorous interest in what the creative people in our community are up to. Their present coverage is abysmal. Compared with the *Irish Times* our three newspapers are pathetic. We were kidding ourselves to believe we were in with a chance of becoming a European Capital of Culture. Listen to the generous voices of the artists, O ye Ulstermen and Ulsterwomen!

**Federation for Ulster Local Studies Ltd.**

# **Annual General Meeting & Book Fair**

**Saturday, 14 June 2003**

**Cultra Manor  
Ulster Folk & Transport Museum**

The Annual General Meeting begins at 10.30 a.m. with Guest Speaker  
**Professor Ronnie Buchanan (President FULS Ltd.)**

All affiliated Societies are encouraged to send at least one  
representative to the Annual General Meeting

The book fair will follow from 1.00 p.m. until 4.00 p.m.

Everyone is welcome to attend.