



Interviewee: John F Deane, Poet And Founder of Poetry Ireland

Interviewer: Angela Maye-Banbury

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Importance of faith in John's poetry; Kimmage Manor and Earlsfort Terrace University College Dublin; coalescence of Gerard Manly Hopkins and La Messe Sur Le Monde and impact on John's poetry.

Angela: So that introduced you to the world of writing, I suppose and the literary world. And what was it about Achill, in particular, do you think which enabled you to connect through poetry, this connection between poetry and place which is so much in evidence in your work, John?

John: Yeah. That took again quite a long time to come about. I think it wasn't...it didn't start with a sense of poetry or a sense of literature really. It started with a sense of faith. Of the Catholic faith. Because after my secondary schooling instead of coming free, I tied myself again to become a priest. So for four and a half years, I was in the Holy Ghost Fathers where I was immensely happy. But I regard myself as having lived...this would have been 1961- 1966 or thereabouts - I see - we spoke in Latin to each other. We kept perpetual silence except during a play half hour or our free time. We studied philosophy and theology through Latin. But they also sent me then to study French and English in University College Dublin 'cos we were in Kimmage Manor which is close to where I'm living now in Dublin. And we were sent to UCD which was in Earlsfort Terrace in those years, now the National Concert Hall. And we used to cycle in and out. And in our clerical garb which looking back on obviously must have been amusing and be amusing to a lot of the students among whom we were. But I was given control, charge of a novice from the island of Mauritius who had joined up and had very, very little English. And I had been a good scholar in French so I was introducing him to the life and explaining things in English and in French with him. So we used to cycle in and out of UCD together where we were studying English and French. And I fell in love with the poetry of Hopkins during my time there because I was forced to read it. And one day our French teacher didn't turn up. So being good clerical students, we stayed on anyway though everybody else left the classroom. And the Mauritian guy I was with - he was called Maurice Piat - and he produced from his pocket a small little book. He said, "I got this very recently." and it was called 'La Messe Sur Le Monde' by

one Teilhard de Chardin. 'Mass over the world' by Teilhard de Chardin. And in beautiful French. And a short book. We read it for the last, say, 25 minutes of our class time. Read it together.

Angela: Beautiful.

John: And it just was an opening up of my whole Christian view of life and living and what the world was all about. Just that one short particular time.

Angela: Just that incident with that happening opened up this whole new way of thinking of or thinking about Christianity.

John: The whole notion of evolution - if it's to be accepted and it has to be accepted - interruptive and disruptive. Number one our notion of original sin if evolution is true and it is true. Then original sin as we used to know as Catholics lost its any possibility of having any truth to it which was a joy as well. It was all of the major things in there. Consequences obviously from that in other areas of Christianity So I actually got interested in the whole notion of Gerard Manley Hopkins had in fact got a sense of something beyond the Christianity of the Catholicism that I had grown up with. So I began to read Hopkins from a perspective of Christianity rather than the poetry.

Angela: That's so interesting.

John: I began to read, to try and find the rest of Teilhard de Chardin but I couldn't because he was banned by the Catholic Church and banned by the Jesuits. So he was unfindable in those years. But 'La Messe Sur Le Monde' is a prose poem if you like. Very. very beautiful piece of writing as well.

Angela: I must read it.

Poetry and music: how Gerard Manly Hopkins influenced John's poetry.

John: So the two, these two things now coalesced in my mind. And it was actually then the music of Gerard Manley Hopkins that made me think of how beautiful this is, this poetry and this way of exploring life. So it was then the noise of Hopkins appealed wonderfully to my musical sense.

Angela: So did you read his poems out loud? Was that how you kind of engaged with the musical sense or was it just reading?

John: No. Just reading them to myself. I had a very strong sense. We had been musical at home. We had all taught music and some of us got reasonably good at it.

Angela: Do you play any instruments?

John: No, I don't any more. I sing badly. My party piece is a Latin piece from my time in the seminary believe it or not.

Angela: That sounds amazing.

John: In Latin. But my elder brother became a full - time professional musician. He's a composer.

Angela: Right. OK. Classical or?

John: Classical. Contemporary classical.

Angela: John, that's so interesting.

John: And when we came to Kimmage Manor, when I came to (Dubh?), the big seminary, there were about 600 seminarians when I actually arrived in Kimmage. Now the place has closed down and it has become a telecommunications centre. But we had an enormous church with a wonderful church organ and I, because I had some piano behind me, was sent also to study the organ, to play the organ in the church for our ceremonies which were all day long, everyday nearly. So I got pretty good at the organ, the church organ. But it's not actually something you can actually carry around with you.

Angela: (laughs) It's not very portable - that's true. It's not like a penny whistle you can whip out of your pocket (laughs).

John: I never told anybody. They would not have let me out ever again.

Ends.