

Interviewee: John F Deane, Poet Founder of Poetry Ireland

Interviewer: Angela Maye-Banbury

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Angela: My name is Angela Maye-Banbury. I'm an oral historian. I have the pleasure of being here with John F Deane, the celebrated poet, at Poetry Ireland. It's Monday 6th January (2020). It's exactly 2 p.m., John, so we're with the atomic clock. Thanks so much for agreeing to, you know, meet with me. I'm really, really honoured.

John: Pleasure.

Angela: Can I just begin by asking you what your first memory is of life in Achill, John?

John: My first memory is probably a false memory. I'm sure it's looking back at a photograph of something. But it is of being in the front of our home in Bunnacurry. It's there situated at the crossroads. I don't know if you know it.

Angela: Oh, I do. I'm familiar with it yeah.

John: There's a big frontage, with a big hedge in front. So the front part of it is actually a sun trap in so far as anywhere in the west of Ireland can be. And my memory seems to be of being in a pram and of being outside and sitting up in the pram and taking in something or other. Now that's probably just looking back. Then I have a definitive one which is maybe three years, four years (old). And that is again, that was in the same place. Me playing on the grass among the daisies and my mother lying on a deck chair - the old fashioned deck chairs that they used to have. And suddenly jumping up in fright and saying "Somebody has walked over my grave." And I looked at her and she looked at me. And then she kind of laughed and laid back down. But that has stayed in my consciousness forever.

Angela: So how old would you have been then?

John: Three or four or five.

Angela: And this was in Bunnacurry, of course, which is where, of course, you were born. Can you tell me a little bit about those early years in Achill, you know, before you went to school and then a little bit about what life was like when you were at school?

John: Are you talking about primary school?

Angela: Primary school, yeah, initially and then we can move on to secondary.

John: Well, I presume I went at the usual age which would have been four. So my memories are all good, very happy at Bunnacurry Boys National School. Used to walk to school which was half a mile and walk back and playtime and so on. And it was run by the Franciscan monks, third order of monks. And I was lucky to have very gentle ones. In those years, there was a reputation for cruelty in schools. Kids used to get bashed around a lot. And I witnessed some of that. But very, very little. And nothing disastrous. So I just drifted through that. My joy always was to get out and to be out in the open air. Climbing among the hedgerows of rhododendrons. Where we lived in Bunacurry, there was a grove of very fine trees that my grandfather had planted to shelter the house. And when I was growing up, these were Scots pines and they were in great shape and great size. So the joy was to have a house up in the trees and to climb and spend ages up there sitting, listening to the wind moving with the wind and looking out over the island. It was just beautiful. I loved it.

Angela: So very tranquil. Very quiet amongst nature. And obviously that's a big theme in your poetry that relationship that you had with Achill.

John: Yes.

Angela: And so when did you leave Achill?

John: Well, I left Achill when I was 12 to go to boarding school in Limerick. Mungret College, Limerick which is a Jesuit run place. And my older brother Declan who died 2010 was two years ahead of me. So he had blazed a trail. And he was a very bright intelligent man. I was the wild one. I hated, I disliked, my secondary schooling enormously.

Angela: Yeah. What was it about it that you didn't like?

John: I didn't like being if you like locked up. You came to your four o'clock class, ended, you had to walk around a bit or play a game and then there was study time and all of that stuff. So there was no going out to climb trees. No going out to take your bike out and wander around the island. No freedom. I'd lost every sense of being free to do what I wanted to do. It was also not a great school at that particular time. There were a lot of pretty poor teachers in it. And I did rebel quite quite a lot. Got into a lot of trouble and was punished a good deal physically.

Angela: Oh no - that's terrible.

John: Yes. But it was my own fault. I deserved everything I got. It was kind of deliberate boldness. Just be wild. And my brother got me off any serious punishments. I was threatened with expulsion two or three times. But they told me because my brother Declan, who was actually going to go on to become a Jesuit, that they would overlook all my misdemeanours. So getting out of there was a great relief.

Angela: You were very relieved not to be at the school because your freedom had been curtailed having had the childhood that you had where you had this whole paradise, freedom, being able to roam. Yeah. Did you...did you like poetry when you were at school? Was that a recurring thing or?

John. No. Poetry. Reading meant very little to me in those years. We used to get a box of books from the library in Castlebar, I think. A big trunk full of books. And they were delivered by CIE bus. And I think once a month or once every two months this box would change and a new one would come. And I remember often sitting at the front of the stairs going through this big box and picking out stuff. But not a great deal of it held my attention in those times. Any literary sense that came out of those times came out of my father, Lord rest him too, who worked in Achill Sound, in the dole office. And it was just a terrible job for him. He disliked it intensely, in an office all day stamping things and all that. So when we came home, he looked for a bit of wildness and he found it in literature. So he studied German at home. He studied Russian at home with records and so on. Became quite fluent in German and Russian.

Angela: He was self- taught in Russian and German. That's amazing.

John: Yes. And there were two consequences of that basically from my perspective. Number one was that Heinrich Böll lived two miles away from us. And my father used to get these books from Germany direct from the publisher of Heinrich Böll. So he had read everything that Heinrich Böll had written. So when I came to consciousness better, I said :”Hey Dad, you know, the man’s living three miles away. Why don’t you go and have a chat with him in the original German? He loved to know that someone is reading him in the original.”

Angela: In German - the language that it was intended to be read in.

John: Yes. So he said “No, no. I’d be too shy to disturb the man. I won’t do that.” But it already gave me a sense of who Heinrich Böll was and what he was doing and where he was living and what was going on in his life which mattered much later on when the Heinrich Böll cottage came up for sale if you like. The other consequence was he loved Russian literature so much and the wildness of it.

Angela: Dostoyevsky...

John: Dostoyevsky. But mostly a guy called Gogol and the whole war and battle kind of life between the Tatars and the Cossacks. So, as we grew up, we did not play cowboys and Indians. Quite literally, we were Cossacks and Tatars.

Angela: Ah, that’s brilliant (laughs).

John: So I got an insight into Russian literature that way as well. So his, my Dad's dealing with us, he used to tell us stories at night. And these two I remember from Pushkin, with the book in Russian in his hand, just telling us the story in English as he went through that. So he opened my imagination, he opened our imagination for children. Wonderful, he was.

Angela: So the world of fiction through your dad having, you know, taught himself to read Russian and German. That one fragment of fiction can be a lifetime of experience for many people. It opens up this whole realm of thinking and that there is this whole world which is out there which was very, very rich and very textured.

John: Absolutely. Yes. He was an incredible man that way. Good story.

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 (sp) 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.

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: Indeed not. It would need several series of trucks.

Angela: So you were seeing philosophical insights and theological insights in the poetry of Hopkins. Was the Achill sense of place always there with you spiritually or psychologically? Or what that another epiphany of sorts that happened?

John: No, that just has been permanently there ever since I remember. I just love the physical landscape of Achill Island. During the holidays when I'd come home from boarding school, in those years, you were free. There was no worries about being assaulted or being mugged or anything being stolen from you. So we had bikes. And basically we'd be told after breakfast "Go on. Wander off. Be back for rosary in the evening." And that is literally what we used to do - myself and my brother and another good friend. We'd cycle off. We'd climb cliffs. We'd go swimming. We'd go up and down the mountains.

Angela: So where did you go? So you were in Bunnacurry. What were your favourite places to go to?

John: The haunts would have been... Keem Bay obviously was the place. We always swam there. It's still a family tradition that somebody swims in Keem Bay every year.

Angela: It's just breathtakingly beautiful. I mean, what can you say, you know?

John: Yes, we used to cycle all the way.

Angela: You would have the words to describe it, I know. I don't. It's just a stunning place

John: It is absolutely beautiful. It's small and in those years it was secretive. It was not very easily accessible. Nowadays, you can't park there.

Angela: Did you collect amethysts there? I read about your quest for amethysts.

John: We used to look for amethysts. Probably just in the wrong place. We never found any - no. We weren't that fussed about the amethysts - jumping around, swimming, fishing.

Angela: Feeling perfectly safe.

John: Utterly safe. Never any fears. Except once when I actually climbed a mountain called Mweelin.

Angela: Where is that now?

John: With the big high mast. The television mast.

Angela: Oh, yes. OK. Of course. Yes.Yes.

John: There was no road up to that in those years. So we climbed. And then we come to the top of that and you either go back down to the Bunnacurry side.

Angela: It's very exposed up there.

John: It is exposed. Or you could go over which brings you down to the river. Dookinella Beach. Down at the end of that where there are very sheer cliffs. Some of them were so beautiful and high that they were called the Cathedral Rocks. They were standing when we were young but they collapsed. I have been trying to find out what year they actually collapsed. I haven't been able to get a definite year.

Angela: I've seen photographs of them from the late 1960s and early 1970s.

John: Sean Cannon has a very fine photograph of them from his book of photographs recently. So I remember being on my own once because Declan was away, I suppose. His novitiate and my friend, was somewhere else. And I remember climbing them and descending and trying to come down the cliffs And of course, looking back on it now, it was frightfully dangerous.

Angela: Very dangerous. You had no equipment or anything.

John: Not at all.

Angela: You wouldn't have had in those days. Just the shoes you were in. Your shirt and away you went.

John: I got stuck half way down. I had a moment of intense panic. I realised I couldn't get back up. And I couldn't see any way to reach. I was at least 240 maybe 300 feet up.

Angela: Gosh. Goodness me.

John: I was seeing a figure away over the beach, miles away. I was trying to signal. But no go. Eventually, I took this chance and I jumped.

Angela: You jumped.

John: I jumped on to a tussock which was quite a distance from me. And made it. But looking back, I quite often now I realise just, if that hadn't worked out, I was gone.

Angela: That was a leap of faith and a half to coin a phrase.

John: It was a leap of foolishness!

Angela: So how old were you have been then?

John: I would have been 15 or 16 at that stage.

Angela: Right. OK. I can feel...my heart's skipping a few beats you just telling that story. So I don't know what it was like when you were on that ledge. But thank goodness you were safe and well.

John: (laughs), It was panic. I can remember the panic so well. And the dread and the fear.

Angela: Did you tell anyone about that?

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

Angela: Well, that's the thing. It might have curtailed your freedom a bit more because of the worry. Yeah, my goodness. So when you think of Achill now.

John: We haven't been back for over a year. I go back any time I get an opportunity. We have no relations or anything there.

Angela: I was going to ask whether you still had any family there.

John: No. No family. My mother and father left. My mother because she was suffering from bronchitis and that was developing a little. We knew it was the mists that came in from the sea in Achill which were not good for her. So she moved - they moved - to Dublin - whilst I was actually still in the monastery, the seminary. So I came back to a very different world. So Achill for me - I used to go back on my holidays when I was teaching.

Angela: You taught..this was when...you didn't teach in Achill.

John: I finished my degree in university. I left the Holy Ghost Fathers and I found a teaching job near where I lived in Dublin in a secondary school. So I taught French and Spanish and some English.

Angela: Wow. So you were a very accomplished linguist.

John: Not really. But I'd stay a couple of pages ahead of the class so I could run it like that I didn't like teaching English because I found it destructive of imagination the way it was done in those years. But I used to present English. I used to read poems at them and mimic them. I got them to love poetry but I know in that area, I would not have got them through exams because that wouldn't do, a sheer love of poetry. I had a lot of them writing poems, would be destroyed by the education system and the exam system at the time.

Angela: That's so true. So very true. There are so very few opportunities for people to be very creative and to follow their true muse and just kind of open up. So how did that happen for you then, John? So you were teaching for a while. And then when did you first begin to publish?

John: I began to publish three or four years after that. Because of my organ work, I was good at the organ, I was invited by the parish priest where the school was situated and where we lived actually in Whitehall in Dublin would I come and take the choir which was a four voice choir - male and female - and would I play the organ in the church. So I did that. We had got together a very fine choir. So the priest - the parish

priest at the time - said we were being offered the opportunity to do the mass - the Eurovision Mass - which happens once a year. I think it still happens. And would I get the choir ready for that. And he said "I have a musical group covering it as well." And I said "Who are they?" "And he said The Chieftans." So with The Chieftans and my choir, we actually performed created a mass, a very beautiful mass, And I put the words and Paddy Malony put them to music.

Angela: How wonderful.

John: So the offertory was the first poem I actually wrote that I actually wrote that he set it to music. And we sang it at Eurovision and it got published in a very fine magazine. My first poem to get published.

Angela: That's really fantastic.

John: I got five shillings for it.

Angela: You must have felt very good to have your work in the public domain.

John: I was delighted. One funny little story. I was called Jackie growing up because my grandfather was John. So I don't know where the Jackie part came from. So I had signed the poem when I sent it to the editor Jackie Dean. So he wrote back saying "I love the poem very much and I'd love to publish it. But I don't know whether your Mr, Mrs or Ms." So I said "Right, here's a problem!"

Angela: So it was one of these unfortunate names where they couldn't quite fathom whether you were male or female!

John: Yes. My name is John Francis. So I said John Dean doesn't sound good. It's too clickety click. So I put in the 'F'. John F Kennedy was big at the time. So I said will there be another John F? So I use that as my name all the time.

Angela: Well, it really works, It has a certain lyricism to it, you know. It's really lovely.

John: I think it does.

Angela: That's great, John.

John: So that's all roundabout way of covering to explain how I got to write.

Angela: What is it about Achill that is very special for people like yourself, for people with this really creative drive, you know, writers, poets, artists?

John: Well, it's spectacular. I also think that in miniature, if you think about it, it's got all of Ireland in miniature. So you've got an Atlantic coastline which is wild and huge and very powerful with America visible in the distance. And then you've got the other side between Achill and Ballycroy, the mainland, which I would call a feline sea, it's a quiet as a cat, it purrs, whereas the other one is a lion on the other side. And then it's got these sea cliffs over the other side of the island back over the mountain which are extremely high.

Angela: Croaghaun is that where you're thinking of? And Sliabh Mór...

John: Sheer drop the other side of Croaghaun. You've got Sliabh Mór which is climbable. And then you've got a few areas of flat land and bog land. And the bog land, I always found fascinating. You could spend a day out on the bog just down at my hands and knees just looking what's amongst the heathers, the little pools, the bird life...

Angela: Your poem about the Swallow is beautiful. So beautiful.

John: Thank you. I actually try occasionally to keep Achill out of the poetry and I can't. If the subject at all touches anywhere deep in me, the images, the grounding that I give it is Achill. It's a landscape that I feel very much part of physically, spiritually, mentally and every possible way. And it's kind of hard to shift. So I have been working on Olivier Messiaen and his music. And right now, I'm working on something which is also Messiaen based but it's a much more complicated sequence than "Seven Visions Of A Man."

Angela: OK. So it must be pretty complex - and challenging music.

John: It's complex. It's called "The Twenty Gazes At The Infant Jesus." So it starts off with Jesus in the manger. But each piece takes it so much further. And I haven't even - I don't think I mentioned the sea so far in responding to these in language.

Angela: I know in one of your poems you talked about visiting the crib. I remember another interviewees, Tommy Johnston, very supportive of this project. John Twin McNamara.

John: Lovely people.

Angela: Wonderful, wonderful people. And Tommy talks about the crib in a very beautiful sense. Just going to see it. And going to see it on St Stephen's Day, Lá an Dreoilín. Nip down and see it and spend some money in Sweeney's. It wasn't all, you know. So this is this new project you're working on. It sounds amazing.

John: But it will take a while before it emerges.

Angela: Well, all good things take their time. They do.

John: I'm trying to make it unAchilly. Make it. It's obviously faith based. It has to be faith based. Like The Dewfall. Like most of my poetry is faith based. But not in the sense that I would call myself a religious poet.

Angela: It's a very language you use. Very beautiful language that carves out these spiritual places for people, I think, in each piece of verse. Well, for me anyway, that's my personal reading of it.

John: Good. That's generally the idea. I mean, I was brought up absolutely a strict Catholic. Catholicism on Achill is just it. There's nothing else. Talk about the '50s and '60s and even up to the present day nearly. So when I began to question all of that, I realised that there are two options. You can just say to hell with all of it. Or you can say there's an awful lot of beauty in it. Can I revamp all that beautiful thinking and beautiful way of living and make it relevant to our own times, to make myself first of all and see if it can touch other people. Because I think people are lost for some sort of spiritual hold on life.

Angela: I agree the lack of anchors that maybe you used to have when you were younger. And the world's changing. And albeit it that Achill does have this universalism about it, you know, which is absolutely true. It does have this microcosm of all these different kinds of things. It is still very distinctive itself in terms of place. I think we have this relationship with time where it's almost transient yet times takes different guises. As we get older too as well, we look back on things and memories become more burnished or elusive. Or we may not know that we have them.

John: Exactly.

Angela: So they become fabricated memories which is still a memory in its own right, I'd argue myself. Well, thanks very much John. That's brilliant. Would you be able to do a reading? I've brought two of your books.

John: The small one, 'Like The Dewfall' is a limited interim publication. The book won't appear. It has been accepted. The next collection of poems will be called 'Like The Dewfall.' But it will contain that and a lot more. But it won't appear until December 2021.

Angela: OK. Oh, right. Something to look forward to.

John: Always working behind times. Publishing is so difficult now.

Angela: There's the commissioning and then the editing and the proofing.

Angela: Not just that. My publisher in England. He takes on an awful lot. He's a very good publisher Carcanet and I'm very happy and proud to be with him. But you have got to get your name in there and the book in on time. Otherwise you're pushing yourself further and further away. So he accepted my next collection about a year and half ago. But it won't come out until 2021.

Angela: OK. December 2021? OK.

John: And the one after that is actually collected poems and that's scheduled in the list for 2023. And he tells me all I have got to do is stay alive until then.

Angela: (laughs). Well you've got so much to look forward to.

John: You're very kind.

Angela: I don't what (poem to read) you want to choose. Whatever one.

John: There is one I do like that's travelled round the world a fair bit in an exhibition. There's an exhibition of Irish Famine artefacts that went all over the place. And I was lucky enough to have my 'Slievemore The Abandoned Village.' And that had a drawing with it by a very fine woman. And that exhibition has been travelling round the world. So it's called 'Slievemore - The Abandoned Village.'

(Recital begins)

You park your car on a low slope

under the graveyard wall. Always

there is a mound of fresh-turned earth, flowers

in pottery vases. There is light, from the sea and the wide

western sky, the Atlantic's

soft-shoe nonchalance, whistle

of kestrels from the lifting mists, furze-scents, ferns, shiverings –

till suddenly you are aware

you have come from an inland drift of dailiness to this shock

of island, the hugeness of its beauty

dismaying you again to consciousness. Here

is the wind-swept, ravenous

mountainside of grief; this is the long tilted valley where famine

came like an old and infamous flood

from the afflicting hand of God. Beyond all

understanding. Inarticulate. And pleading.

Deserted. Of all but the wall-stones and grasses,

humped field-rocks and lazy-beds; what was commerce and family

become passive and inert, space

for the study of the metaphysics of humanness. You climb

grudgingly, aware of the gnawing hungers,

how the light leans affably, the way an urchin once might have watched

from a doorway;

you are no more than a dust-mote on the mountainside,

allowing God his spaces; you are

watercress and sorrel, one with the praying of villagers,

one with their silence, your hands

clenched in overcoat pockets, standing between one world

and another. It has been easier to kneel

among the artefacts in the island graveyard, this harnessing of craft

to contain our griefs;

here, among these wind-swept, ravenous acres

where we abandon our acceptably deceased to the mountain earth.

In grace. In trustfulness.

This, too, the afflicting hand of God. Beyond all

understanding. Inarticulate. Though in praise.

(Recital ends)

Angela: That's really just beautiful. Very powerful.

John: Thank you. It's a nice poem. I like it, actually, myself.

Angela: As you were talking then, I was transporting myself back to the Deserted Village picturing myself walking in the steps of the people who had occupied the village.

John: It's fantastic, fabulous place.

Angela: Very, very special. John, thanks so much for your time with me today. That was just absolutely wonderful.

John: Thank you, Angela

Angela: Thank you very, very much indeed. I really appreciate your time.

Ends.