

Galvin, Patrick

by Patrick Maume

Galvin, Patrick (1927–2011), writer, was born on 15 August 1927 in a tenement building at 13 Margaret Street, Cork, the second child of Patrick Galvin, a docker and boxer, and his wife Bridget (née O'Brien), a charwoman. He had three brothers and three sisters; two brothers remained in Cork, and the others emigrated. Galvin's father was illiterate and often unemployed, but participated in a rich oral culture, which led the young Galvin to conceive the ambition of becoming a bard; he was dismayed when he realised this was not practical in the twentieth century. While Galvin's father was a treaty supporter who sympathised with the Blueshirts, his mother was a left-wing anti-treatyite; Patrick was strongly influenced by her support for the republicans in the Spanish Civil War. He received his primary education at the South Presentation Convent, and helped support his family from the age of seven by working as a messenger boy and selling ballads and giving recitations in public houses. When he finally left school aged about 11 (assisted by a falsified birth certificate) to work full time, he was semi-literate. (He was later introduced to formal literature and ideas by an elderly Jewish neighbour who collected books.) In the following three years he worked as a butcher's delivery boy, a newsboy, a draper's assistant, and a projectionist in the Washington Street and Lee cinemas.

In 1941–3 he spent two years in St Conleth's Reformatory School, Daingean, Co. Offaly, run by the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, for being generally disorderly and out of his parents' control. Galvin recalled that while he never experienced or heard of sexual abuse, the inmates were subjected to severe beatings and harsh living conditions, including semi-starvation. He attributed his survival to a lay teacher of left-wing views (subsequently killed in the D-Day landings), who introduced him to literary poetry. Daingean left a permanent mark on Galvin, destroying his catholic faith.

After leaving in 1943, Galvin went to Belfast to join the American army, but inadvertently joined the RAF instead, serving in the UK, the Middle East and west Africa, and witnessing the aftermath of mass bombing of European cities. After demobilisation, he hitch-hiked around Europe, paying his first visit to Spain. He then settled in London, moved in left-wing and literary circles, and began to establish himself as a poet and ballad singer, encouraged by Séamus Ennis (qv), whom he met on the BBC radio programme *As I roved out*, and by David Marcus (qv), who published Galvin's first poems in his magazine *Poetry Ireland*. (The poetry grew out of ballad singing as Galvin took to improvising and incorporating new material; much of his poetry remained strongly influenced by the ballad form.) His ballad 'James Connolly' ('Oh where, oh where, is our James Connolly?') became widely popular and has been recorded by many artists. Galvin moved in the circle of John Gawsworth (1912–70)), RAF veteran and writer, and made the acquaintance of

poets, including Dylan Thomas, Louis MacNeice (qv) and Brendan Behan (qv). He published and distributed his own literary magazine, *Chanticleer* (1952–4), with the assistance of the poet Ewart Milne (1903–87). Their friendship broke down some years later when Milne discovered after the death of his wife that she had had an affair with Galvin (inspiring Milne's poetry sequence *Time stopped* (1967)). Galvin recorded songs, and in 1955 published the ballad collection *Irish songs of resistance* for the Workers' Music Association (associated with Topic Records), later recording many of the same songs on seven long-playing records for Stinson Records of New York.

Galvin opposed Soviet repression of the 1956 Hungarian uprising, and thereafter considered himself a non-aligned Marxist tinged with anarchism, believing that writers should not join parties. When he lectured on folk songs in East Germany in the early 1960s, he found its official promotion of world peace frighteningly aggressive.

In 1959 his first book of poems, *Heart of grace*, was published by Linden Press, London. Dominated by poems reflecting his experience in Daingean, it served an obvious therapeutic purpose. (Galvin recalled that for years he was unable to discuss Daingean. Even his 1991 memoir is mostly written in the third person and about other people, and did not exorcise the experience, as he had hoped it would.) A second collection, *Christ in London*, followed in 1960, of which Austin Clarke (qv) remarked: 'one dimly perceives a Southern Ireland of reformatories, inarticulate rebellion, hypocrisy and pietistic self-sufficiency' (*Ir. Times*, 25 June 1960). Galvin rode a trend towards the demotic and emotional in poetry, but was wary of being presented in purely literary terms, remarking that he was called a surrealist when he could barely spell the word. Critics noted his hallucinatory emotional power but complained that his poetry to some extent shared the weaknesses of the ballad: it was too inclined to shout, and to lapse into repetition.

Galvin also wrote plays, which he considered a sideline to his true poetic vocation. 'And him stretched', set in a Dublin doss-house where a leader of the 1916 rising lies dying while drunks quarrel about politics, was first produced in London by the semi-amateur, left-wing Unity Theatre (1961), and received a professional production in September 1962 as part of the Dublin Theatre Festival at the Eblana Theatre (in the basement of Busáras). It was preceded in Dublin by 'Cry the believers', Galvin's first-written play, staged in February 1962, which depicts intensifying conflict between a pious wife and her husband, whose religion was beaten out of him in a clerically controlled orphanage. The 2011 report of the Ryan Commission of Inquiry into Child Abuse noted that Archbishop John Charles McQuaid (qv) sent an observer, whose generally accurate report on the play's content focused on its anti-clericalism.

In 1965 the BBC broadcast Galvin's television play 'Boy in the smoke', set in north London and criticised for excessively sentimental portrayal of down-and-outs. (Galvin may not have been entirely responsible for this: he later complained that the

problem with writing for television was 'too many people taking away and changing my work' (*Belfast Telegraph*, 15 December 1973.) In the same year, Galvin took up residence in west Co. Cork. He had acquired a number of Cork-based champions, including the literary critic Robert O'Donoghue (qv) and the academic Seán Lucy; the latter included Galvin in his anthology *Five Irish poets* (1970). Galvin travelled in 1967–9 in Spain, Germany and Israel (he had spent some time on a kibbutz in the early 1960s) before returning to Ireland.

He moved to Belfast in the early 1970s, drawn by the city's Lyric Players' Theatre, which had published his poetry in its associated literary magazine, *Threshold*. Galvin was chiefly driven, however, by a sense that on both political and artistic grounds he should experience the Northern Ireland troubles for himself. While remaining a radical republican and anti-partitionist, he was horrified by what he saw as a senseless conflict (he returns repeatedly to the image of the shredded bodies of bomb victims being scraped up with shovels and placed in plastic bags). At the same time he was somewhat disturbed and uneasy by receiving cultural and emotional stimulation from the violence. His poetry collection *The wood burners* (1973), which contains his best-known poem, 'The mad woman of Cork', was deeply marked by his experience of Belfast.

Galvin's first Belfast play, 'Nightfall to Belfast', which combines Brechtian displays of material about the troubles with the story of a family's disintegration, while representatives of church, state and business idly play cards in the knowledge that they will always come out on top, was presented in the Lyric Theatre in July 1973. As it finished its run, UVF members tried to blow up the theatre on 4 September 1973 with a car bomb (they were intercepted by the RUC and a controlled explosion did only minimal damage). Galvin became the Lyric's first writer in residence (1973–5), funded by the Leverhulme Trust, and simultaneously co-edited *Threshold*. His play 'The last burning' (1974), very loosely based on the story of Briget Cleary (qv), coincided with a scare about alleged ritual witchcraft in Northern Ireland. Galvin suggested that his play resembled the Northern Ireland troubles in that the protagonists, however horrific their actions, are convinced that they are doing the right thing. The same concept underlies the most successful of Galvin's Lyric plays, 'We do it for love' (first produced in May 1975), a black comedy in the form of an old-style variety show, drawing on popular songs and slogans and street ballads collected by Galvin in the ghettos. The stage is dominated by a merry-go-round, symbolising the troubles, whose animals have the faces of military and political figures; the merry-go-round's proprietor (based on the real-life Belfast 'character' Mickey Marley) acts as chorus while admitting he is as much implicated as anyone else by his fascination with the merry-go-round. The run was extended several times; the Belfast production was seen by 20,000 people, and it subsequently toured in the Republic and in Britain, receiving equally enthusiastic responses; an album of songs from the show was released. It also had its detractors. Some saw it as an outsider ridiculing Northern Ireland, and its Brechtian shock tactics as shallow and offensive. Stewart Parker (qv) thought it a facile crowd-pleaser, and was so angry he

had difficulty in reviewing it. In 1976, the texts of *The last burning*, *Nightfall to Belfast* and *We do it for love* were published as a special issue of *Threshold*.

After falling out with the Lyric, Galvin became associated with Actors Wilde, a rival players' company which used the Arts Theatre in Botanic Avenue, Belfast. His play 'The devil's own people' (1976), a darkly comic treatment of the conflict between the IRA and Blueshirts in 1930s Cork, was produced at the Dublin Theatre Festival. Galvin disowned the production, claiming alterations to the script made it excessively sentimental and obscured his storyline. He published *Man on the porch: selected poems* (1979) and wrote several radio plays (and a number of adaptations) for the BBC and RTÉ, notably *The class of '39* (BBC Radio 4, 1981), about former inmates of a reformatory school. In 1981 he was writer in residence with East Midlands Arts at Mansfield in Nottinghamshire (commuting from Belfast), and gave readings at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC.

Galvin returned to the Lyric in 1981 with 'My silver bird', a play about Grace O'Malley (qv), which doubled as an eulogy to the Lyric's founder, Mary O'Malley (qv), who directed the play. It proved a swan song for O'Malley's vision of the Lyric: a large cast and elaborate sets combined with poor audience figures produced a financial disaster and led to her resignation. Galvin then wrote and directed at the Belfast Festival, before revisiting Spain and moving to east Cork. In 1984 he was elected to Aosdána. Influenced by Federico García Lorca and his own experience of Spain's post-Franco cultural explosion, he published the poetry collection *Folk tales for the general* (1989). He finally settled in Cork city in 1991, helping to found the Munster Literature Centre to provide assistance and encouragement to local writers. In 1995 he founded the Dún Laoghaire–Rathdown Poetry Now Festival while serving as the county's writer in residence.

In 1990 Galvin published a fictionalised autobiography of his childhood, *Song for a poor boy* (an earlier version had been serialised in the *Cork Examiner* in 1986–7). A sequel, *Song for a raggy boy* (1991), describes a fictionalised Daingean through the perspectives of a left-wing lay teacher and an inmate resembling Galvin himself. A film version of the latter appeared in 2003, directed by Aisling Walsh. Although Galvin was unhappy with changes made to his original script, the film was accompanied by a tie-in volume containing both autobiographical titles along with a third, the previously unpublished *Song for a fly boy*, covering his experiences in the RAF. He planned further memoirs but these never appeared, partly because of a stroke he suffered later in 2003, which largely confined him to a wheelchair (though he continued to give creative writing workshops and wrote until a few months before his death). In 2006 he was awarded an honorary D.Litt. by UCC.

Patrick Galvin died in Cork University Hospital on 10 May 2011, and was laid out and waked in Connolly Hall (the regional Cork headquarters of SIPTU on Lapp's Quay), before cremation at the Island Crematorium, Cork.

Of Galvin's four marriages, the first three ended in divorce. He was married for the first time briefly during the second world war; secondly, to Stella Jackson, daughter of the Marxist historian T. A. Jackson; and thirdly, to Diana Ferrier, general manager of the London Old Vic theatre, with whom he had two sons. His last marriage was to Mary Johnson, whom he met in Belfast and who cared for him in his last years (she died a few months after his death); they had a son and a daughter. Galvin had three sons and two daughters; his eldest son was the entertainment writer Patrick Newley (1955–2009).

There is general agreement that Galvin's principal achievement lies in his poetry and memoirs. He is regarded as one of the definitive literary voices of twentieth-century Cork, his South Parish a deeply recognisable landscape and a major witness to brutalising, hidden Irish cultures of poverty and incarceration. Yet he is also a paradoxical figure: a socialist individualist, at once rooted and cosmopolitan. This, along with the fact that many of his plays remain unpublished and much of his occasional writing uncollected (his papers are in the NLI), makes an overall assessment difficult. Yet such an assessment should not domesticate him or allow the fantasticated and visionary quality of his best work to obscure the fact that, as his friend and literary protégé Thomas McCarthy points out, it is simultaneously a rendering of everyday violence and of the hallucinogenic qualities of hunger.

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