

Working Class Heroes and Daydream Nation: The View from the Rotunda Hospital.



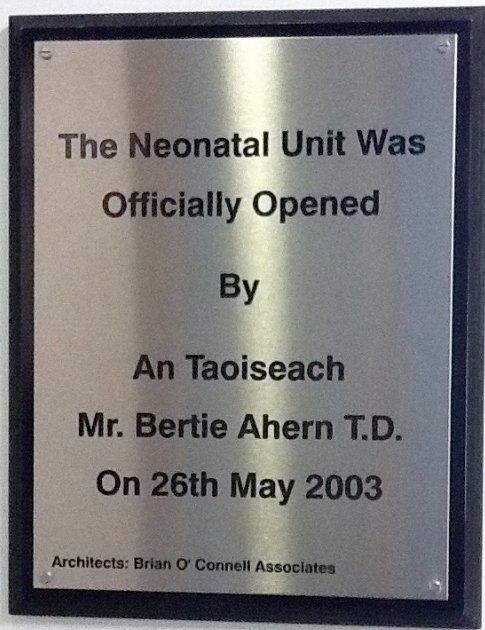
Former Taoiseach Bertie Ahern is haunting the last two weeks of this pregnancy, as is the reporting of the 2011 Irish census.

My entry to the largest maternity hospital in Dublin, and one of the busiest in Europe (it is nicknamed 'The Baby Factory') followed the publication of the

final Mahon Tribunal Report on the 22nd March, 2012. For those possibly uninitiated to Irish politics, its official subtitle is *The Tribunal of Inquiry Into Certain Planning Matters and Payments*. Established by Dáil Éireann in 1997 to investigate allegations of corrupt payments to politicians regarding planning permissions and land rezoning during the 1990s in Co Dublin, it is named after its last chairman Justice Mahon.

The findings of this public inquiry were reported baldly by the headline of the *Irish Times* on the 23rd March- 'Corruption and abuse of power "endemic in politics". Three mug shots with subtitles offered us Bertie Ahern 'UNTRUTHFUL', former European Commissioner for Social Affairs Padraig Flynn 'CORRUPT' and another Fianna Fáil former Taoiseach Albert Reynolds 'ABUSED POWER'. Responding to the report the current Taoiseach Enda Kenny asserted that it indicated how corrupt practices became normalised by a number of politicians. Unsurprisingly, the Fianna Gael Taoiseach seized the opportunity for political point scoring reiterating that Fianna Fáil King Bertie offered the tribunal 'a litany of unacceptable statements'.

And Bertie seems to have left his greasy thumbprint on my entry to the prenatal ward. Having crossed the security guard past reception, you travel up to second floor in the lift to the prenatal unit. As you turn right to enter the prenatal unit you pass the neonatal unit. The rows of covered and sealed incubators ready for use are the first thing you see. On closer inspection however, there is a tightly patrolled door to the neonatal unit prefaced by a brass plaque – 'The Neonatal Unit was officially opened by An Taoiseach Mr Bertie



Ahern TD on 26th May 2003.’ A little further down into the corridor is the door to the ultrasound department. In this wondrous place where one sees the perfect spine shimmering on a screen emerging from the dark, a fetal heartbeat frenetically working to accommodate the growth of cells, and just maybe the slight movement of a tiny hand, is a plaque which announces ‘The Ultrasound and Fetal Assessment Unit was officially opened by An Taoiseach Mr Bertie Ahern TD on 25th April, 2005.’ Bertie, apparently during his reign was happy to officiate at the opening of an envelope, but these are two instances which simulate something of his legacy to the country.

Ireland, contrary to many of its European neighbours, is currently experiencing something of a baby boom. This is reflected in the most recent census taken in 2011. A week following the reporting of the Mahon Tribunal the *Irish Times* ran a sixteen-page supplement chronicling some of the facts garnered from the most recent figures. Some facts are surprising for example: 2,112 people born in Ireland speak Yoruba, the number of atheists has increased by 320% since the last census to 3,905 and the number of same sex couples now stands at 4,042. But as *Irish Times* columnist Fintan O’Toole alerts us, the baby boom is perhaps Fianna Fáil’s most surprising legacy following the demise of the Celtic Tiger. O’Toole proposes that the census indicates how Ireland now has ‘More people, more immigrants more babies, more commuters, more religious diversity: post crash Ireland’s story is of boom time trends continuing.’ There have been 365,000 babies born since the last census in 2006. Reflectively he adds that ‘A rapidly growing population demands more of many things- jobs, school places, healthcare, economic growth... Is mother Ireland now supposed to weep because she has so many more mouths to feed?’

Trying to sleep at night in the prenatal ward I think that I ‘get’ what O’Toole means. My ward has become an overflow for women in early labour – the labour ward is too busy to accommodate all the pain and panting. I sometimes have to check with other longer-term

patients in the morning that I did not imagine the sounds and cries, dimmed lights on, off, consolations from partners and the clip-clop of fetal heartbeats on the tracing monitors. Early morning before breakfast our own **the** tracing monitors orchestrate the soundtrack of day break. Imagine the cantering sounds of 3 fetal heartbeats moving from 130 bpm to 160 bpm amplified sometimes hiccupping into the day. Is my child faster than my neighbour's? Does that hiccup mean anything? Should I be embarrassed that my wayward baby kicks at the pads which are meant to do her good? Would Bertie, the neonatal and fetal assessor, beam munificently at us- complicit in aiding the birth rate, creating more mouths to feed? My child kicks again.

Bertie's plaque near the Neonatal Unit is complemented by donated artwork from Bono penned by his own hand. These are prints taken from Bono's illustrated edition of *Peter and the Wolf* published in 2003 in aid of the Irish Hospice Foundation. The artwork is striking- a chromatic vision of a nightmare wolf and a frenzied duck attempting flight. I



waddle past it every time I make a break for fresh air and a coffee in the ground floor. Bono's preface to the book is also offered in a framed print. I cannot help but think that the title offered in bold 'Rage is not a great reason to do anything, but it'll do' provides a useful epithet to Mahon's report. Reinserted into Ireland's present, Bono's words serve as an ironic counterpoint to Bertie's plaques announcing their love of public good as

opposed to personal profiteering.

Extending the Document- What Can Poetry Do?

Fifteen years in the making the Mahon tribunal report is 3,270 pages. I wonder whether poetry can ever engage with this mammoth document. How can poets incorporate such important legal language in their work? Can a litany of facts be reanimated to form a compelling read? What happens when my word search of the document is overwhelmed by instances of 'corruption' in the text- is this in itself a beginning? Can poetry ever reframe or break down terms to become less monolithic and more immediately palpable to a reader?

A template to a documentary poetic would be the work of those writing in the thirties and forties such as Muriel Rukeyser and Charles Reznikoff. Both used poetic forms as a way of examining social inequity through their own investigations. Examples are Rukeyser's serial poem 'The Book of the Dead' (1938), and Reznikoff's account of the fate of Jewish families in *Holocaust* (1975), which was composed solely of Holocaust survivor testimony taken from twenty-six volumes of documentation of the Eichmann and Nuremberg trials. Rukeyser's volume investigates one of the worst industrial accidents at Gauley Bridge (West Virginia) as a result of *Union Carbide's* tunnelling of the Gauley Tunnel, and the subsequent cases of recurring silicosis amidst miners (due to mismanagement of health and safety issues). Her documentary sources included local geography, medical reports, design plans and congressional reports, personal testimonies and accounts of legal action. The arrangement of these materials, combined with lyric interludes creates in Rukeyser's work a poetry that in her words can 'extend the document'.

I struggle with my document; I try to fillet the Mahon Report during the normal daytime clatter of the prenatal ward with its requests for blood samples, fetal monitoring, temperature and blood pressure taking. The results are not great. My computer is overwhelmed by a search for instances of 'corrupt' in the report, but I attempt to see what word clusters frame this word. This process of derivation seems to lack the *melos* which normally permeates my writing. But here is an initial attempt at extending the nuances of the 3,270 page document, in three sections:

I

Nature - the investigation
Of corruption.
A slow process
dearth of documentation.

Its battle-
Attempts by threats
of deception or inducement
to compromise public duties.

Laundering and misuse
corruption
in political life
endemic and systemic.

Operated with
impunity and invincibility.

II

Deep rooted
becomes
regular in public role.

Interests of cash
and other benefits
ultimately rezoned.

Faith in democracy?
Scale dissuading those of integrity
to public office.

An open secret:
Rampant affected public apathy-
Corrosive and destructive.

III

Corruption is equal to:
Perverting integrity and fidelity,

Abuse of influence
to bribe, to induce

Dishonestly, unfaithfully
Unequal access, a favouritism

Detrimental to duties.

Is this is a politically responsible poetic- or a poetic of perfunctory cut 'n' paste? I hope to persevere with the project, but need to create more friction between lyric agency and the found materials of the report. A contemporary poet successfully making a politically responsible poetry from Internet source materials is the labour activist Mark Nowak. His volume *Coal Mountain Elementary* (2009) combines photo-document, reportage, government reports, workers' testimony and academic primers. One could even add that Nowak's role is as an arranger or compositor of source material. *Coal Mountain Elementary* juxtaposes three categories of source material, which are interspersed throughout the volume and combined with photographs taken by Nowak and Ian Teh.

Nowak places in bold, verbatim extracts from the transcripts of testimony of mineworkers who survived a methane gas blast in Sago West Virginia on January 2, 2006, when 12 miners lost their lives and fourteen were rescued. The testimonies were recorded between 17 January 2006 and 19 June 2006 and the 6,300 pages uploaded to the West Virginia mine safety website. Secondly, Nowak uses three lessons excerpted from the *American Coal Foundation's* 'Lesson Plans'. Finally, sources placed in italics throughout, focus on Chinese Mining disaster news reports and bulletins accessed from the web. Nowak's relentless use of news material informs the sickening regularity of mineworkers' deaths – to this end he has also established an ongoing web page which records recent disasters and reports. These frictions between materials are something I note which must be aspired to- as counterpoints in a textual creation. I'll try to raise my poetical game...

Coda

A couple of days following the publication of the Mahon report, my neighbour's partner hands me a copy of the *Irish Daily Star*. He adds 'Bertie has a brass neck'. The headline reads 'Shameless Bertie pockets €30k for African Gig- ex Taoiseach quits Fianna Fail and legs it to Nigeria' It is a fact universally acknowledged (or at least in Ireland) that Bertie still presents himself as a consultant of a Celtic Tiger era and midwife of the Northern Irish peace process, not the architect of Ireland's spectacular economic collapse. Framing himself as a global leader he continues to gig his legacy of 'shaping economic policies', for payment of course.



Some weeks later I leave the Rotunda, weak but happy, with my husband and a small bundle that is my daughter. She is wrapped in the cardigan which my husband bought in the coffee shop downstairs.

Emblazoned with words in pink 'Born in the Rotunda' our cardiganed baby has her eyes emphatically closed as we leave Bertie's old constituency of Dublin Central.

‘Corruption, and in particular political corruption, is a deeply corrosive and destructive force. While frequently perceived as a victimless crime, in reality its victims are too many to be identified individually.’ – The Mahon Tribunal