

Dublin by Louis MacNeice

Grey brick upon brick,
Declamatory bronze
On somber pedestals -
O'Connell, Grattan, Moore -
And the brewery tugs and the swans
On the balustraded stream
And the bare bones of a fanlight
Over a hungry door
And the air soft on the cheek
And porter running from the taps
With a head of yellow cream
And Nelson on his pillar
Watching his world collapse.

This never was my town,
I was not born or bred
Nor schooled here and she will not
Have me alive or dead
But yet she holds my mind
With her seedy elegance,
With her gentle veils of rain
And all her ghosts that walk
And all that hide behind
Her Georgian facades -
The catcalls and the pain,
The glamour of her squalor,
The bravado of her talk.

The lights jig in the river
With a concertina movement
And the sun comes up in the morning
Like barley-sugar on the water
And the mist on the Wicklow hills
Is close, as close
As the peasantry were to the landlord,
As the Irish to the Anglo-Irish,
As the killer is close one moment
To the man he kills,
Or as the moment itself
Is close to the next moment.

She is not an Irish town
And she is not English,
Historic with guns and vermin
And the cold renown
Of a fragment of Church latin,
Of an oratorical phrase.
But oh the days are soft,
Soft enough to forget
The lesson better learnt,
The bullet on the wet
Streets, the crooked deal,
The steel behind the laugh,
The Four Courts burnt.

Fort of the Dane,
Garrison of the Saxon,
Augustan capital
Of a Gaelic nation,
Appropriating all
The alien brought,
You give me time for thought
And by a juggler's trick
You poise the toppling hour -
O greyness run to flower,
Grey stone, grey water,
And brick upon grey brick.

<http://dib.cambridge.org/quicksearch.do>

MacNeice, (Frederick) Louis
by Terence Brown

MacNeice, (Frederick) Louis (1907–63), poet, critic, dramatist, and broadcaster, was born on 12 September 1907 at 1 Brookhill Avenue, Belfast, the youngest in the family of two sons and a daughter of John Frederick MacNeice (qv) (McNeice) and Elizabeth Margaret MacNeice (née Clesham; 1866–1914).

Background, education, and first works Both sides of MacNeice's family came from the west of Ireland, where his paternal grandfather had been involved in the evangelical movement associated with the Irish Church Missions to Catholics. MacNeice's father was appointed rector of St Nicholas, Carrickfergus, Co. Antrim, shortly after his second son's birth; he was later Church of Ireland bishop of Cashel and Waterford, and then bishop of Down and Connor and Dromore. In Carrickfergus the rector's pro-home rule politics met with some opposition from his parishioners, while as a bishop in Belfast his liberal churchmanship and vigorously expressed views on international affairs in the 1930s made him a considerable public figure. The illness and death in 1914 of Louis's mother affected him profoundly: an underlying melancholy in even his most buoyant lyrical verse perhaps had a source in this childhood trauma. The widowed John Frederick MacNeice married a parishioner, Georgina Beatrice Greer, in 1917 and shortly afterwards Louis was sent to preparatory school at Sherborne in England.

From Sherborne MacNeice went to Marlborough College, where among his fellow pupils were John Betjeman and Anthony Blunt, with the latter of whom he shared a study and a precocious taste in art and poetry. As an undergraduate at Merton College, Oxford, where he read classics from 1926, MacNeice met W. H. Auden, with whose name his own would later be associated (along with those of Stephen Spender and Cecil Day-Lewis (qv)) as one of the 1930s 'pylon school' of poets, which sought to respond to the conditions of industrial society amid economic depression. In his final year as an undergraduate he published a first collection of verse, *Blind Fireworks* (1929), with Victor Gollancz, but the interest of T. S. Eliot in his work made him thereafter a Faber author – Eliot was a director of Faber and Faber, a house renowned for its poetry list; MacNeice's first Faber publications were *Poems* (1935) and *The earth compels* (1938).

The 1930s, Birmingham and London Immediately after taking his final examinations, and on the basis of his appointment as lecturer in classics at the university of Birmingham, MacNeice married Giovanna Marie Thérèse Babette (Mary) Ezra (1908–91), daughter of David and Marie Ezra, on 21 June 1930. He graduated from Oxford with a first-class degree in *literae humaniores*. At Birmingham MacNeice came under the influence of his fellow Ulsterman, E. R. Dodds (qv), then professor of Greek there and later regius professor of Greek at Oxford. Dodds acted as something of a mentor to the young poet (he later became MacNeice's literary executor and editor of the posthumously published *Collected poems* (1966) in a period when MacNeice shed the ostentatious bravura of his apprentice verse for a poetry more rooted in the experiences of ordinary life in the modern city. Friendship with students of working-class background expanded his social awareness. Never a communist like his friend Blunt (with whom he visited Spain in the spring of 1936) or his fellow poet Day-Lewis, his poems of the 1930s were marked nonetheless by his generation's loss of faith in capitalism and expressed fear of impending doom in the face of fascist victories in Spain and the threat from Nazi Germany. The rollicking satire of 'Bagpipe music' (first collected in *The earth compels*) is the quintessence of this widespread mood, and the book of verse and satire co-authored with W. H. Auden as *Letters from Iceland* (1937), which they wrote after a trip together there, was a panoramic perspective on the dangers of the European social and political scene.

In a time of economic deprivation and political anxiety, however, MacNeice's poetry also managed to evoke the sensuous delights of experience in highly charged lyrics, among which 'Snow' (first collected in *Poems*) is a brilliantly memorable and famous example. As critic, in his book *Modern poetry: a personal essay* (1938) MacNeice registered his belief that poetry ought to be socially conscious communication and the poet an educated ordinary man.

In 1935 he and his wife parted and MacNeice was left with the care of his young son, Daniel (b. 1934). He accepted a lectureship in Greek at Bedford College for Women, in the University of London, and took up his appointment in the autumn of 1936. London was the setting for the major long poem he published in 1939 as *Autumn journal*, which many critics consider his masterpiece. It mingles poetic responses to personal and public life: the poet's private world, his memories of childhood and his education, his marriage, a passionate love affair, and the daily business of earning a living all pass through the foreground, while the accompaniment is an anxious awareness of imminent war, as the Munich crisis unfolds and the final months of

1938 bring alarming news from Spain. Marvellously evocative of time and place, the work's sense of the quotidian as the context of history in the making gives it an emotional depth beneath precisely observed surfaces that is a characteristic of MacNeice at his best. Section sixteen of *Autumn Journal* expresses the poet's ambivalent feelings about Ireland (already rejected as a place of grim realities and dangerous evasions in his poem 'Valediction' of 1934); both north and south of the partitioned island are excoriated in a manner that does not disguise MacNeice's conflicted relationship with his native place. An Irish patrimony is accepted with mingled love, hatred, and regret.

The declaration of war between the United Kingdom and Germany in September 1939 made the issue of MacNeice's national identity more than a matter for poetic reflection. A concern with the problems of personal identity was a central focus of the autobiographical prose work that he was engaged on at this time. (Left incomplete, it was published posthumously, together with other autobiographical material, as *The strings are false*, in 1965.) With the Dublin government quickly declaring its neutrality in the conflict, MacNeice hesitated about his future. He applied (unsuccessfully) for the vacant chair of English literature at TCD, and accepted an offer of a post at Cornell University for the spring and early summer of 1940 (he had first visited the United States in the spring of 1939). When this appointment as lecturer in poetry was extended in April 1940, MacNeice resigned his post at Bedford College. He spent most of 1940 in America, only returning to London because he was, as he told Dodds, afraid of 'missing history'. He was ruled out of military service because of a serious illness he had suffered while in the United States, so took a position as a scriptwriter at the BBC. He was to remain in the corporation's employ, though he several times took leave of absence, until 1960, as feature writer and producer and as an innovative practitioner of the developing art of radio drama.

MacNeice's sense of life deepened in the war years. Experience of the German blitz on London in 1941 added an appreciation of death as necessary limit to an instinctively sensuous sensibility, and the passing of his father in 1942 reminded him of the worth of a life lived in courageous awareness of duty. His reading of W. B. Yeats (qv), about whom he published a book-length critical study in 1941, made him aware of how myth can serve as an interpretative resource in the face of historical tragedy. His own poetry began to reflect this in poems such as 'Brother fire' and 'The trolls' (first collected in *Springboard*, 1944), the latter of which evokes the bombing of London in terms of Nordic mythology. But it was his post-war radio work, the widely

admired parable play *The dark tower* (1946), that most fully expressed a humanist faith in life couched in terms of a mythic quest romance. Based on Robert Browning's poem 'Childe Roland to the dark tower came', the piece had music by Benjamin Britten, which added to its haunting atmospherics. On 1 July 1942 MacNeice married Antoinette Millicent Hedley Anderson, known as Hedli, a well-known singer for whom Auden had written lyrics and cabaret songs. Their daughter, Brigid Corinna, who became a painter, was born on 5 July, 1943.

The post-war years and the BBC In the years immediately following the war MacNeice was heavily involved in the features department of the BBC (to which he recruited as a writer his fellow Ulsterman, the poet W. R. Rodgers (qv)) and in the work of the newly created BBC Third Programme. Dylan Thomas was one of the most famous contributors to the BBC in these years and he and MacNeice became friends. It was for the features department that, with Wynford Vaughan Thomas, MacNeice covered the granting of independence to India in 1947; he was appalled by the violence unleashed during the partition of the subcontinent. In September 1948 he travelled to Sligo for the reinterment of Yeats's remains. A new collection of poems appeared as *Holes in the sky* in 1948 and his *Collected poems, 1925-1948* was published in 1949.

From January 1950 until the autumn of 1951 MacNeice served as director of the British Institute in Athens. This Greek sojourn provided inspiration and material for a number of the poems contained in his collection *Ten burnt offerings* (1952). MacNeice believed that this volume contained some of his finest work, but the critics were lukewarm, as they were when in 1954 he published a long poem in twenty-six cantos entitled *Autumn sequel*. The title unwisely invited comparisons with *Autumn journal*, since the account of the poet's daily life in the drab conditions of 1950s England lacked the energy and tension of the earlier success. Indeed, this was a difficult decade for the poet, as his reputation diminished and his own restlessness was not satisfied by tours of the United States to give lectures and readings, or by travels on BBC business to Egypt, Sudan, India again, Pakistan, and Ceylon. Nor was a domestic life that was beginning to unravel secured by enjoyment of the splendid house at 2 Clarence Terrace (formerly the home of Elizabeth Bowen (qv)) near Regent's Park, which the poet and his wife shared at this time.

MacNeice was appointed CBE in January 1958, which might have suggested that he had become an establishment figure, whose poetic achievement was in the past. However, the publication of *Visitations* in

1957 indicated a return to poetic form, which found full expression in MacNeice's final two volumes of original verse, *Solstices* (1961) and the posthumously published *The burning perch* (1963). These three volumes managed to capture the lyrical immediacy of some of his best early poems, together with an intensifying awareness of the inexorable passage of time and of encroaching death. The poet's interest in parable and double-level writing, which had marked his work for radio (particularly *The dark tower*), added a sense of hidden meanings to some of the best of his late work, such as 'Selva oscura' in *Visitations* and 'After the crash' and 'Charon' in *The burning perch*. Between February and May 1963 MacNeice delivered the Clark lectures at the University of Cambridge, taking as his theme 'Varieties of parable', which served as an academically argued commentary on his own poetic experiments in allegorical and parable writing; the lectures were posthumously published in 1965. MacNeice's second marriage ended in 1960. Among his late and last works are poems on new loves, which, with those he had composed throughout his career, made him one of the finest love poets of the century.

Death, reputation, and legacy: In 1963 MacNeice contracted viral pneumonia after a drenching on the Yorkshire moors while testing sound effects for a forthcoming BBC play, his *Persons from Porlock*. He died 3 September 1963 at Shoreditch, London. His ashes were taken to Ireland and buried at Carrowdore churchyard, Co. Down.

MacNeice's reputation declined somewhat after his premature death. He tended to be overshadowed by W. H. Auden, who enjoyed the critical esteem of the North American academy. However, the remarkable flowering of poetry in Northern Ireland after the 1960s revived a reputation, which continued to grow. Derek Mahon, Michael Longley, Paul Muldoon, and Ciaran Carson all acknowledged their debt to MacNeice as exemplary precursor, and critical interest in his work kept pace as they registered their poetic respect.

Collections of MacNeice's letters are held in the Bodleian Library, Oxford; King's College Library, Cambridge; the BBC Written Archives Centre, Caversham Park, Reading; the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University; the Berg Collection, New York Public Library; the Butler Library, Columbia University, New York; the Faber archive; the Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin; the National Library of Scotland; the Oxford University Press archive; the Princeton University Library; the archive of Royal Holloway and Bedford College; and the Library of TCD (see Stallworthy, 492–3). Collections of unpublished poetry and prose and

drafts are held in the Berg Collection, New York Public Library; the Poetry/Rare Book Collection of the University Libraries, State University of New York at Buffalo; the Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York; and the Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin (see Marsack, 159–60). Collections of radio scripts are held in the BBC Written Archives Centre, the Berg Collection, New York Public Library, and the Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin. Armitage and Clark list twenty-nine works by MacNeice published in his lifetime; fourteen new titles appeared posthumously.