

CLIVE WATKINS

*How Do You Sew the Night?—Four Decades of Michael Longley's Verse*

I HAVE HEARD MICHAEL LONGLEY READ TWICE. The first occasion was in the winter of 1965–66. During those months, Liverpool University Poetry Society had in turn invited him and Derek Mahon and Seamus Heaney across from Northern Ireland. Forty years on, my recollection has inevitably blurred, but I still recall the room where the readings were held, a lounge in one of the university's newest buildings—stylish modern chairs in green upholstery, coffee tables and the then ubiquitous ashtrays. Apart from the quality of these poets' work, what struck us most was the simple fact that they were almost of our own generation. To see them in the flesh, to hear them read, gave a fillip of encouragement to our own fledgling efforts at verse.

In this group, as we knew even then, Longley was the odd man out. Though he was born in Belfast in 1939 and educated there and at Trinity College, Dublin, where he read classics, his parents were English and had settled in Belfast only in the 1920s. His father was a veteran of the First World War; he died from cancer in 1960. This background would have profound effects on Longley's poetry.

None of our guests had so far published a full collection. On sale were their 1965 Belfast Festival chapbooks: Mahon's *Twelve Poems*, Heaney's *Eleven Poems* and Longley's *Ten Poems*. I seem to think they cost half a crown. Today, an unsigned Heaney is worth around £1000, an unsigned Mahon or Longley around £500. These variations reflect, of course, their subsequent careers or, more pertinently, how those careers have been viewed. Now Cape's handsome *Collected Poems*, which is beautifully set on slightly creamy paper and enclosed in a fine dust-jacket illustrated by his daughter, brings together his eight individual collections (and two new poems) and enables readers to see the four-decade arc of Longley's career from that early pamphlet on.

Though his first two books, *No Continuing City* (1969) and *An Exploded View* (1973), are uneven, from the start there are poems that give glimpses of what is to come. 'Freeze-Up', from his Belfast Festival pamphlet, illustrates something of the young Longley's unshowy skill—the metre hesitating expressively between four-beat and five-beat lines, the mix of full rhyme and half-rhyme, the adroit syntax, the startling final image (the bittern "Cupboarded in ice") and the way, in what appears to be a simple nature poem (in a "catastrophic shortlived reform" the "freeze-up annexes the sea even"), the subtext quietly addresses its occasion. What, in Liverpool, in the winter of 1965–1966, did we believe was that occasion? Rightly or wrongly, we were inclined to read it as an oblique comment on the growing tensions in Northern Ireland. Civil rights were already a public issue ...