

Desmond MacHale: The Poetry of George Boole, Logic Press, 2020.
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REVIEWED BY TOM CARROLL

To be clear from the outset, this is not a ‘poetry collection’ in the usual sense of, say, a collection of Seamus Heaney’s poems. George Boole was, in MacHale’s words, ‘at best a recreational poet’ (p. 28) and made no concerted effort to publish his poetry. Seventy or so poems have been painstakingly retrieved by MacHale from various of Boole’s copybooks and sundry sources, beginning with translations of poems from classical Greek and Latin and the modern languages Italian, French and German. These translations date, for the most part, to when Boole was a teenager. Later chapters treat Boole’s own poetry, organised under the headings of ‘Sonnets’ (Chapter 4), ‘Family and Friends’ (Chapter 5), ‘Religious Verse’ (Chapter 6) and ‘Miscellaneous Poems’ (Chapter 7). MacHale situates each set of poems in the context of Boole’s life, both personal and professional, as Boole progressed from the self-taught student in Lincoln to the first Professor of Mathematics at Queen’s College Cork, now UCC.

As is MacHale’s intention in writing this book, Boole’s poems provide a valuable insight into what was important to him and into what motivated him in his life and his work. This is possibly most apparent in the twenty or so surviving sonnets that MacHale collects and comments on in Chapter 4. Nature (with a capital ‘N’) and its restorative powers feature strongly in his work, (Sonnet 10, p. 41, for example):

Yes! Though art med’cine to the weary mind,
Dear Nature! They whom busy Life’s affairs
O’erburden - whom the wasting city wears,
To Thee return and consolation find.

As a deeply religious man, Boole was keenly conscious of his responsibilities to the Almighty and of the duty and service that He is rightly owed (Sonnet 18, p. 48):

Labour on Earth and rest in Heaven, fulfil
Thy destiny below, each wish resign
That leads thee adverse to the Master’s will,
Or casts oblivion on His work and thine;
One thought the murmur of the breast thrusts still
To be the co-worker in His high design.

Perhaps again steered by his religious beliefs, Boole felt morally obliged to make maximum use of his God-given intellectual talent (Sonnet 2, p. 35):

Oh, what reproach is thine if thou remain
Inactive now the golden hours invite,
Sole loiterer in a world o’er which the bright
Perpetual stars their ordered courses sustain.

Again, in a poem *Life in Earnest* dedicated to his sister Mary Ann Boole (p. 55) he writes:

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Oh, leave thy desert lone recluse,
 For all thy gifts the world hath use
 Calm though thy hours and sweet thy prayers
 Yet far the nobler aim is theirs
 Who live the earnest life.

The ‘earnest life’ here is that of ‘Faith, Hope and Love/Charity’ or, again, ‘Justice, Truth and God Himself’.

Even from these short extracts we glimpse the main forces acting on Boole and directing his life: a sense of duty to his family, his friends, his work, a sense of duty built on a strong religious faith. This is clearly evident in the poems gathered under ‘Family and Friends’, and especially ‘Religious Verse’. The latter include meditations on episodes in the Bible with titles such as *Consider the Lilies of the Field* and *Paraphrase of the 137th Psalm*, a hymn *The Communion of Saints* (which was sung at the memorial service in Blackrock, Cork, to mark the 150th anniversary of his death on 8 December 2014), *I thank thee, O thou source of every good and Virtue*, to give some examples. MacHale positions each of Boole’s poems in the arc of Boole’s life and his experiences, a subject on which he is the undisputed expert. His goal of shedding light on ‘Boole the Man’ through the medium of his poetry is exceptionally well-achieved.

Boole’s poetic style is also clear from these short extracts: the use of the archaic forms ‘thee’ and ‘thou’, old-fashioned poetic wordage such as ‘o’er’ instead of ‘over’. The quotation from Sonnet 10 above, for example, continues with ‘And hereunto wast thou by Heav’n designed:’. Some of Boole’s poems were included by his wife Mary Everest¹ Boole in her ‘Collected Works’, even if she forbade Boole from ever again writing poetry after discovering, soon after their marriage, that he did so. This she did, ostensibly, so that Boole’s energies would not be diverted from his more important scientific work. Some of his translations from the Greek were published in a local Lincoln newspaper, resulting in some controversy in that paper’s letters page. Since Boole himself seems never to have claimed or sought recognition of his poetry from the literary establishment, it may therefore be somewhat unfair to judge his poetry from a literary perspective. Nevertheless, it is unavoidable that such an evaluation finds a place in MacHale’s book. An appraisal of the young Boole’s translation of Meleager’s *Ode to the Spring* is given by Dr Patrick Cronin, Department of Ancient Classics, UCC, in Chapter 1. A brief, critical evaluation of a selection of Boole’s poetry, dated to the early 1980’s and written by Seán Lucey, formerly Professor of Modern English at UCC, is included in ‘Critical Evaluation’ (Chapter 9). This makes for entertaining reading: it begins ‘Boole was a very able versifier who sometimes rose to poetry.’ Lucey identifies Wordsworth, ‘particularly - alas - the later Wordsworth whose moralistic sonnets follow each other with thunderous monotony’, and ‘the massive loom of Milton and the ordered voices of the eighteenth-century philosophic poems’ as influences, as well as the ‘second-generation of Romantics’. Nevertheless ‘Here and there a real feeling strikes through. Here and there in spite of imitation a fine image pleases the mind and transcends generalisation.’ Boole’s poetry is not entirely without literary merit.

As well as commentary on Boole’s poetry and life, MacHale includes some personal essays on the Arts and Sciences and on beauty in mathematics. As MacHale describes in the ‘Critical Evaluation’ chapter, this was prompted by a criticism, or perhaps a reservation, by a ‘dear friend’ from a literary background but with little understanding of or interest in mathematics. There is an implication here, and in Chapter 1’s discussion on the Arts and Sciences, that the Arts look askance on the Sciences and fail to appreciate the inherent beauty of good mathematics: ‘The notion that mathematics could be in any sense beautiful would be met with incredulity and even scorn by the

¹George Everest, after whom Mount Everest is named, was her paternal uncle.

average poet. The artistic world, especially poets and artists, feels it has a monopoly on beauty, and would feel threatened by any such claims by outsiders' (p. 3). It is unclear how widespread this attitude may be. In my own experience, poets and artists display, at worst, a benign commiseration for my lot as a mathematician. I doubt that they would feel threatened by any artistic claims of beauty I might make on behalf of mathematics.

It would be remiss of me not to mention Sonnets 15 and 17 written in mid-November 1849 shortly after Boole moved to Cork. The aftermath of the famine was evident on the streets of Cork. Boole addresses Ireland in Sonnet 15:

... though want be bold
 And clamours in thy streets, and where the gold
 Of plenteous harvests waved, lie plashy plains,
 O'er which the bulrush towers, the ragweed reigns,
 Yet thou in wisdom still art young, though old
 In misery and tears. ...

These two sonnets on the subject of Ireland display, as MacHale recognises, a political and historical naivety that is difficult to ignore. Boole wishes that Ireland would forget its 'store of bitter thoughts, which brood upon the past'. If only that could be achieved, 'the brightness of thy coming Morn' would emerge. Sonnet 17 follows a similar vein. It concludes with:

In noble breasts past injuries are tame;
 Courage distains them. Patience makes them light,
 The wise forget them, and the good forgive.
 O ye who seek the Patriot's holy aim!
 Teach Ireland this - the self-sustaining might
 of Duty teach - instruct her how to live.

We should not, perhaps, be overly critical of Boole on account of these private musings. We are not to know how Boole's views on Ireland, its past and its future, evolved over the ensuing years in Cork. Moreover, Boole's opinions would presumably have been widely shared at the time. A further consideration is whether one should take for granted that a brilliant mathematician will necessarily have equally keen insights into the political or the human sphere.

At worst, Boole's appeal to the Irish to show courage, patience, wisdom and goodness in forgetting and forgiving 'past injuries' displays an ingenuousness on his part when it comes to the politics of the time. In contrast, taken as a whole, his poetry is evidence of a man who is faithful, rigorous, religious and dutiful in all aspects of his personal and professional life. In any case, and this is key, he should be judged on his mathematics above all else, in which case the poems herein and the accompanying commentary by MacHale provide novel insight into the working mindset of the mathematician George Boole.

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