

POETRY PROFILE: JESSIE LENDENNIE

Jessie Lendennie is founder and Managing Director of Salmon Poetry Ltd, (<http://salmonpoetry.com>). Since 1981, she has commissioned, edited and published over six hundred books, and twenty-six issues of *The Salmon International Literary Journal*.

She is the author of two poetry collections: *Daughter* and *Walking Here*, and has compiled and edited six nonfiction books: *The Salmon Guide to Poetry Publishing*, *The Salmon Guide to Creative Writing in Ireland*, *Salmon: A Journey in Poetry, 1981-2007*, *Poetry: Reading it, Writing It, Publishing It*, *Dogs Singing: A Tribute Anthology* and *Even the Daybreak: 35 Years of Salmon Poetry*. She is currently working on a memoir, *To Dance Beneath the Diamond Sky*.

She has given dozens of workshops, lectures and writing courses in Ireland and abroad, including at Yale University; Rutgers University; the Irish Embassy, Washington D.C; the University of Alaska, Fairbanks and Anchorage; MIT, Boston; and Trinity College, Dublin.

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Interview by Patrick Chapman, poetry advisor, SAH Journal.

SALMON, IRELAND'S INTERNATIONAL POETRY PRESS

Jessie Lendennie, founder and editor of Salmon Poetry, recalls how the press began.

Let's say this is Galway in 1981 and out the door of An Taibhdhearc the dust is settling after a busy morning whirling around the feet of the three passers-by and a handful of mass-goers. If it's windy, the sound is probably careening across the Wolfe Tone bridge and down Quay street, meeting no resistance on the way; bouncing off the door of The Quays, where the 1960s was preserved in jars, and sideswiping the more sedate Naughtons, hurtling down Shop Street, past the bastion of Kennys Bookshop where many were saved from literary starvation, losing a little breath by Moon's Corner, but puffing on up Prospect Hill undaunted, joined by twin breezes chasing up Merchants Road, rattling the empty windows of derelict warehouses ...

... quiet, it was quiet. Sunday streets seeming like boulevards in their emptiness. Not devoid of life, but waiting like a holding area in an airport on the way to somewhere, anywhere else. If the island could have gathered up its battered psyche, picked itself up, humped off to the boat or the airport, it probably would have done so.

1981 and there's another part to the story. This is about the ones who were drawn to the sleepy west coast city, despite the ubiquitous song. Galway City quietly keeping to itself, steeping in its history. Even waiting for its chance to shine, but we didn't think like that then. Only decided to get on with what inspired us. Think of those empty Sunday streets then start placing the markers of literary change:

Gerry Dawe, a Dublin transplant to UCG, started his Writing in the West page in the *Connaught Tribune*. Poet Kathleen O'Driscoll, poet & fiction writer Fred Johnson and others, started gathering to discuss their work. Johnson, from Belfast, came for a National Writing Workshop and stayed. The Galway Arts Festival was taking its first steps, shepherded by Páraic Breathnach and Ollie Jennings; Michael Gorman's groundbreaking first poetry collection *Waiting for the Sky to Fall* was in the works, and emerged a couple of years later, to acclaim; with a cover by Joe Boske, who helped shape the visual story of Galway in the '70s and '80s. Druid Theatre was front and centre, of course. The Arts Centre came into being and movement was afoot.

In August 1981, I arrived in Galway with my then husband, Michael Allen, and my son Tim. Michael and I had been teaching in London and were totally fed up with life in such a monster city, commuting for hours to and from work; while Tim had become a latch-key kid. Mainly we wanted to live where creativity was valued. When we decided to leave, Ireland was the first place in our minds. We spent weeks traveling around the country and chose Galway as a place where we could write and have a creative life together. In fact, we chose well and were totally right, except about the 'staying together' part. By October we had found a writing group, happening upon an ad in the UCG journal, *Façade*, that was just setting up at UCG, in the Ladies' Club. Organized by students, with a bit of advice from Tom Kilroy. Michael and I were happy and we loved it when people asked us 'how long have you been home?'

Early on in our Galway Writing Workshop we started producing a broadsheet of the group's poems; unimaginatively titled 'Poetry Galway' – we aimed to put poetry in the West on the literary map, ground it geographically, so to speak, to give poets a chance; those who wouldn't be dependent on Dublin for publication. By the time the second broadsheet came out it was obvious that there was a demand for a

quality literary journal in the West and we decided to focus and expand, including short stories and artwork. *The Salmon International Literary Journal* was among the first wave of what was to become a tsunami of the arts in Galway. Lots of water twixt then and now... Voices from the depths emerged and that was another important aspect to *The Salmon*.

It became obvious when we began to get poetry submissions from outside Galway that there were many more men sending their work out for publication than there were women doing so. I knew this was true of the UK, I'd worked at the Poetry Society in London and was very aware that male poets dominated the journals, books, readings, and all. I decided that I didn't want that for *The Salmon*, and made an effort to find women poets; giving workshops around the country and shouting a bit. Eavan Boland was a great support in those days, as were other women poets. It was the time described by a woman in one of Eavan's workshops "If I tell anyone that I write poetry, they'll think I don't wash my windows".

In the 1970s, there were only a handful of women poets who had published collections. Eavan Boland began publishing her books in the 1960s; Elaine Ní Chuilleanáin had published four books in the 1970s; Leland Bardwell published *The Mad Cyclist* in 1970 with New Writers Press but didn't publish another book until 1984; Dolmen Press in Dublin published Juanita Casey, in 1968, and 1985; Anne Cluysennar published one book in 1971 with Dolmen Press; Eithne Strong published *Poetry Quartos* in 1945 and *Songs of Living* in 1961 with Ruma Press, which was established by herself and her husband, Rupert in the 1940s. Eithne published *Sarah in Passing* with Dolmen Press in 1974. It's astonishing to think of that now, but in the 20th century, only 106 women poets had published collections of their work. (I'm citing these poets from Joan McBreen's excellent anthology *The White Page/An Bhileog Bhan: 20th Century Irish Women Poets*.) Think of how many women have published collections in the last 20 years, you'd have almost half as many again as the whole of the 20th century. Most started publishing in the 1980s, and many of those were with *Salmon* when we began doing books.

By 1986 the Galway Writers Workshop had moved to a room above Mick Taylor's pub on Upper Dominick St. Michael and I were keeping the journal alive, had established *Salmon Publishing* and published two books, by Galway poets: Eva Bourke's *Gonella* and Rita Ann Higgins's *Goddess on the Mervue Bus*. We were prouder that you can imagine! In 1982, we had set up the Poetry Cooperative, in conjunction with Poetry Ireland, to give local poets a chance to read their work with visiting poets; and we'd organized the first International Poetry Festival (a festival of humorous poetry – 'Laughing Out, Lashing Out!') The Cúirt Literature Festival was in the works. Things were 'hotting up' in Galway.

Forward 39 years and I barely recognize the innocent belief in a common purpose. There are dozens of poetry presses and journals offline and on. Yet there is still a discrepancy in the gender balance, which stems from an institutionalized support of hierarchy.

Ah, but the beat goes on!

JESSIE LENDENNIE: THREE POEMS

Meaning

No wonder you're half in this world and half not
Who could say it would have been any different
If you'd stayed where you were in the beginning
Difference is the last thing that counts
Or has any real meaning
What is meant is a singling out of souls
When there's nothing left to fight over
And the last of the old world is gone
And the greatest thing is to be left alone
With what might have made a difference
In this world or in that

August Garden

And so I put them there
Where the dark earth has receded
And Ivy roots hold up the stone wall
And, you could say, that the moment
Was perfect and you could say
Look how the dry leaves fall
And gather along the path
Where the light has brushed them
Just there

Aliens

There are space aliens
in the trees in my backyard
Only there aren't any trees
just mud and rocky holes
made by stone-mad dogs
digging for dog-gold
and once I went out at 3am
and a dissolving star told me
that I had only one lifetime left
and I thought of meeting you
in another country
and you laughing and saying
that my middle name, Aliene
was alien in disguise
and I thought of all the trees
I'd never live in
and I thought of years spent
digging for stars
watching their alien sparkle
drift through the holes in the sky