

A Literary Outsider, Gerry McDonnell Continues to Find Inspiration in Irish Jewry

by [Shai Afsai](#) (November 2018)



The Tinkers, Louis le Brocqy, 1946

In preparing for my recent summer visit to Ireland to learn about Jewish life there, I came across a March 2012 program produced by Dublin City University's School of Communication and Inter Faith Center that featured Zalman Lent, rabbi of the Dublin Hebrew Congregation, [as its guest](#). Asked by one of his

interviewers about places of Jewish significance in Ireland, Rabbi Lent highlighted Dublin's synagogues and its Jewish museum, and then added that the city's old Jewish cemetery in Ballybough was a noteworthy place to visit, too. "I think there's actually a book of poems . . . I think it's called *Elegy–Mud Island Elegy*—that was written about the graves in the Ballybough cemetery. That's quite interesting," Rabbi Lent said.

Intrigued about this Irish poetry collection dealing with a Jewish cemetery, I searched online for the book and information about its author. Though out of print, I succeeded in procuring a copy of *Mud Island Elegy* (2001) was once owned by University College Dublin. I also found it was composed by Gerry McDonnell, a contemporary Irish poet and Dublin resident who subsequently wrote a number of other Jewish-related works put out by the Belfast-based [Lapwing Publications](#).

Now a retired civil servant, the sixty-eight-year-old McDonnell's Lapwing oeuvre includes *Lost and Found* (2003), an extended poem about a homeless Jewish man living in Dublin's Phoenix Park and intimated to perhaps be one of the thirty-six righteous ones that, in rabbinic lore, ensure the continued existence of the world; *James Joyce: Jewish Influences in Ulysses* (2004), a slender volume of poems and short essays revolving around Joyce's choice to make Leopold Bloom, the main character of his immense stream-of-consciousness novel, ethnically Jewish; and [I Heard an Irish Jew](#) (2015), a collection of poems and prose with Jewish content. The final poem in that collection is "The Missing," which references Irish mythology as part of a crushing critique of the way Irish bureaucracy prevented Jews from finding refuge outside Nazi-controlled Europe.

The Missing

The children of the tribe of Dan
of the Tuatha De Dannan,
Esther in the middle
the twins David and Michael on either side
and Daniel in front of her
came to our door
and we closed it on them.
The birds stopped singing
and never sang again.

*It's five to five on a Friday
close of business;
stamp the permit for God's sake!*

The children of the tribe of Dan
of the Tuatha De Dannan
of Le Marais in Paris
went to school that morning

kissed by their mothers.

By lunch time

they were gone

in the thundering trucks.

Each child was chained to the other,

Esther in the middle

the twins David and Michael on either side

and Daniel in front of her.

When the silver chains were broken

they became withered people.

The birds stopped singing

and never sang again.

It's five to five on a Friday

close of business;

stamp the permit for the children's sake!

The children of Abraham

were buried standing;

as were the children of Lir.

In the introduction to *Mud Island Elegy* McDonnell describes how he grew up in the area of Dublin once known as Mud Island, containing the Fairview and Ballybough neighborhoods, but only became aware of its Jewish cemetery as an adult. "On Fairview Strand, where at one time the sea lapped the shore, is a curious house with a more curious date over the door. As a child I wondered at this date which reads 5618. I wondered was it 1856 in reverse," he recollects. "The puzzle over that date, cut in stone, remained unsolved for me until recent times. I discovered that the house is the caretaker's house for a Jewish cemetery which lies behind it" (p. 9).

Having ordered, received, and read several of his books, I hoped I might be able to see McDonnell when I arrived in Ireland, but my initial emails to him were all returned undelivered. Eventually, with the help of Lapwing's Dennis Greig—who shares McDonnell's curiosity about the Jewish people—I was able to inform McDonnell of my desire to connect in Dublin and discuss his work.

"I've received your correspondence from Lapwing Publications. I would like to meet you," McDonnell informed me in an email. "I was thinking of the Westin Hotel on Westmoreland Street near Trinity College. I haven't been in it recently but my memory of it is a spacious and quiet hotel. We should be able to find a suitable spot in which to talk."

On the agreed upon day, I made my way to the Westin Hotel from Trinity College's Manuscript and Archives Research Library, adjoining the famous Long Room, to which I'd been granted access during my stay in the city in order to gain information on [Theodore Lewis](#), the Dublin-born and Trinity College-educated rabbi who moved to Rhode Island and then served as

spiritual leader of Newport's Touro Synagogue for thirty-six years.



Gerry McDonnell, photo by Shai Afsai

The Westin Hotel is indeed spacious. After I located McDonnell—white-bearded, bespectacled, wearing a blue fedora, blue shirt, and blue slacks—we found a quiet spot to sit. (See Left, photo by author.) I'd been looking forward to a pint of beer or a shot of whiskey with the author following my research

at Trinity College's library, but McDonnell informed me that he gave up alcohol years ago. For him, it was either drinking or writing, and he preferred writing. We ordered coffee and cookies.

I'd asked McDonnell for a copy of one of his works that I wasn't able to purchase, *Martin Incidentally: A Novella* (2013), which concludes with a short story related to Ireland's failure to aid Jews trying to flee the Nazis during World War II. McDonnell presented me with the novella and in addition gave me a 2016 Romanian translation of his *I Heard an Irish Jew* (in this case titled *I Heard an Irish Hebrew—Auzit un evreu irlandez*).

The Romanian book's front cover displays a black and white photograph of one of Ireland's most famous Jews, Yitzhak HaLevi Herzog, the Polish-born rabbi who lived in the Emerald Isle for twenty years, became Chief Rabbi of Ireland, was later appointed Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of British Mandate

Palestine, and then became the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of the state of Israel. The rabbi's Belfast-born and Dublin-raised son, Chaim Herzog, was Israel's sixth president; the rabbi's grandson, Yitzhak "Bougie" Herzog, who was formerly chairman of Israel's Labor party, currently chairs the Jewish Agency for Israel.

I asked McDonnell about his literary interest in Irish Jews. "I don't know why I was so interested in Jewry, except for that caretaker's door we were fascinated by as kids," he replied, referring to the Ballybough cemetery. "I bought a copy of Louis Hyman's *Jews of Ireland: From Earliest Times to the Year 1910* from the mother of a friend of mine. It had a registry of deaths and my imagination just went wild with it."

Joyce's decision to place an ethnic Jew at the center of *Ulysses*—in part because he wanted a character who was a foreigner, representing the unknown and arousing the contempt of his Dublin neighbors—influenced McDonnell as well. "*Ulysses* and Bloom also played a role. I felt an outsider myself as a writer," McDonnell explained. "I was interested in the Other—in the Jews. In Dublin, they were outsiders. If you wanted a subject to write about, what better one?"

McDonnell, who never allowed monetary concerns to guide his writing, feels fortunate to have connected with his publisher, Dennis Greig. "There's no way to make a living as a poet. I wasn't even trying to," McDonnell said. "And for Dennis, it's a labor of love. He goes from book to book. I'm in a happy position: I've retired now and can write without worrying about money." (For his part, Greig told me: "I was absolutely delighted to publish Gerry's work which focused on Jewish themes; however, there has been no interest in Belfast, even

within the Jewish community.” Like McDonnell, he views himself as an outlier: “I am not one of the elite cultural hierarchy here and have for years stood outside the general local literary culture of Northern Ireland.”)

In any case, McDonnell has no regrets about the decades of labor he has so far poured into his craft. “It certainly was time well spent. It was certainly better than working in the civil service. I never considered that my career. I considered writing my career,” he said, adding, “I still feel like I’m outside the inner circle of core Irish writers. I’m not good at publicizing my work.” In August 2017, however, McDonnell was invited to read some of his poetry at the Irish Jewish Museum during the country’s Heritage Week. When I visited the museum, I spotted a copy of his *I Heard an Irish Jew* in its collection of literature connected to Irish Jewry.

In his introduction to *I Heard an Irish Jew*, McDonnell states: “The Irish Jewish community has been an enduring influence of mine. I am not altogether sure why” (p. vii). Perhaps his persistent self-identification as an outsider helps explain why he continues to be so drawn to Jewish characters. When I returned to Rhode Island, he sent me an as yet unproduced play, *Song of Solomon*, which likewise has a Jewish theme. “Our meeting came at an opportune time in which I am taking stock of what I have written over the last thirty years. There are no coincidences,” he wrote me.

During our Dublin conversation McDonnell revealed a degree of uneasiness with being a non-Jewish writer of poems, stories, and plays about Jews, as well as a recognition that he’s selected an obscure subject with a limited audience. “I’ve always felt a bit of an interloper when I was writing about

Jewish stuff, not being part of the community, and yet I can't really get away from it," he relayed. "With the Jewish material, there are not going to be people queuing up at bookshops, and yet it's what I've chosen to do. Or maybe the subject chose me?"

Shai Afsai's writing has been published in *New English Review*, *The Forward*, *Haaretz*, *Arutz Sheva/Israel National News*, *The Jerusalem Post*, *The Providence Journal*, *Anthropology Today*, *Underground Voices*, *Jewish Quarterly*, *Journal of the American Revolution*, *Midstream*, *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies*, *CCAR Journal: The Reform Jewish Quarterly*, *Rhode Island History*, *The Jewish Link of New Jersey*, *The Times of Israel*, *CJ: Voices of Conservative/Masorti Judaism*, *Heredom*, and *Rhode Island Jewish Historical Notes*.

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