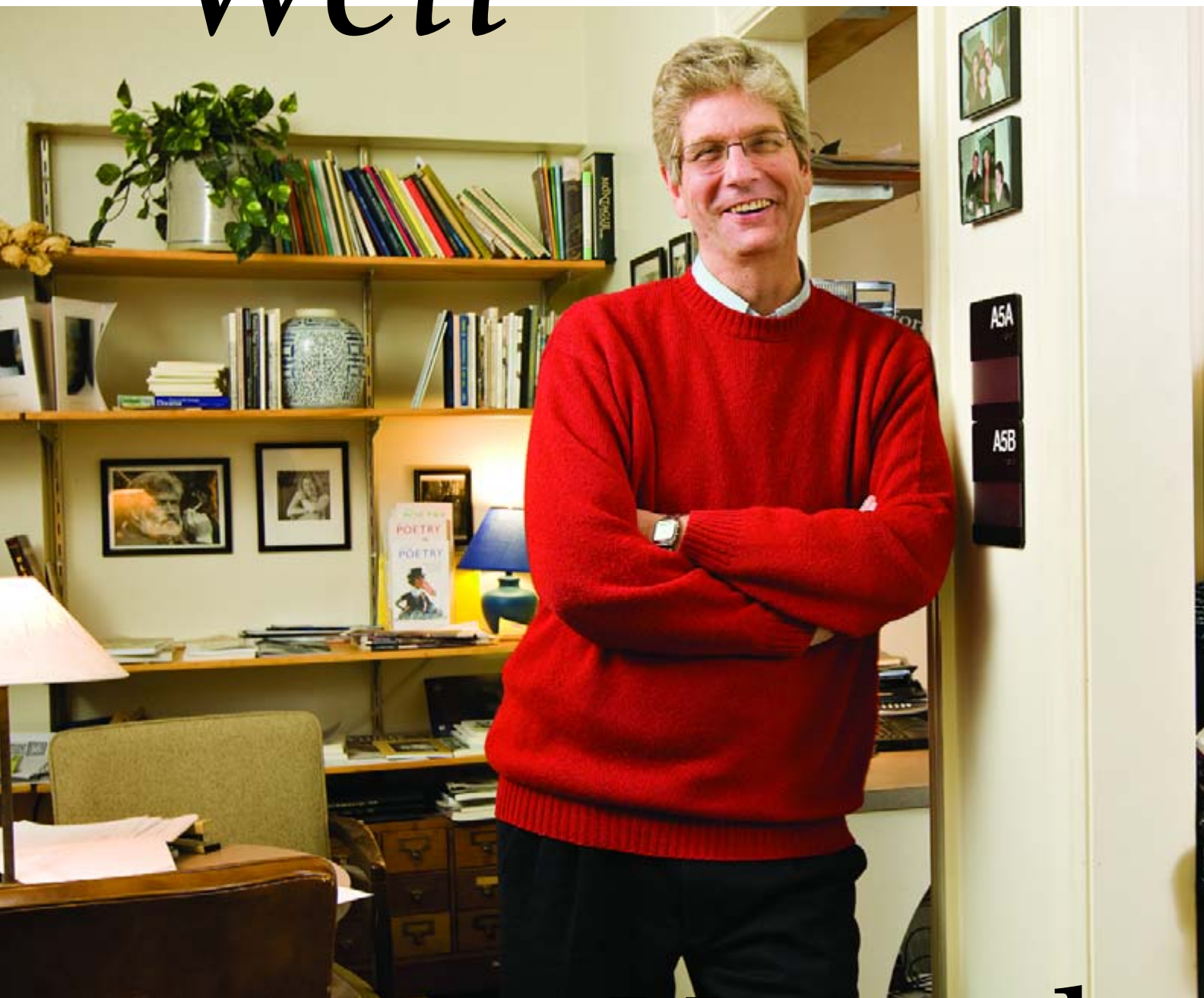


Well



*Jefferson Holdridge and Candide Jones:
'What we do [at the Press] is important spiritually.'*

Versed

Wake Forest University Press is withstanding the ill winds buffeting the publishing industry—and riding the winds of change sweeping Ireland—to retain its stature as North America's leading publisher of Irish poetry.

By David Fyten



BY THE TIME TRIBBLE HALL OPENED IN 1962, anxiety over the threat of nuclear war with the Soviet Union had built to a critical mass in the United States. The ten days of the Cuban Missile Crisis detonated all that pent-up tension into full-blown fear that October, and Wake Forest College responded to the emotional

fallout by designating the building's basement as a bomb shelter. Food, medical supplies, bedding, and barrels for drinking water were stored on its subterranean level to withstand the hard rain that many were certain was going to fall.

Today, Wake Forest University Press is located there, and somehow a former fallout shelter seems a fitting site for a small press in a precarious publishing environment, especially one with a specialty as circumscribed as Irish poetry. The Internet, with its loose adherence to copyright and even looser standards of quality; the economic and distribution challenges posed by publishing as it becomes more homogenized and commercially driven; the diminishment of poetry in secondary schools; the truncated attention spans of younger readers and the implications of that for a literary form whose concentrated language demands focus and reflection; the waning of the independent bookshop, the traditional and stalwart source for poetry; the dwindling purchases of poetry volumes by academic libraries as they emphasize the building of their digital collections... all of this can be toxic to the long-term survival of an enterprise such as this.

Yet, Wake Forest Press prospers in its own modest way, thanks to the spirited resurgence of Irish culture and its writing in particular, and to the talents and ingenuity of its tandem of staff members and its founding advisor. Now in its fourth decade, the Press is recognized internationally as the premier publisher of Irish poetry in North America. Its catalog includes virtually all of Ireland's foremost poets except Seamus Heaney as well as a new generation of younger writers who are

reflecting on the dramatic transformation of Irish society and the Celtic economy over the past decade and a half, along with the traditional concerns of Irish poets—faith, oppression, family, backwardness, poverty, and of course, *The Troubles*.

Within its catalog of more than sixty volumes are editions of the collected poems of Thomas Kinsella, Michael Longley, John Montague, and Richard Murphy—who, along with Austin Clarke, whom the Press also published at its outset, are on most short lists of the most eminent Irish poets of the post-Yeats period—and books featuring works by such prominent writers as Peter Fallon, Derek Mahon, Conor O'Callaghan, Medbh McGuckian, Ciaran Carson, Paul Muldoon, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill. "I believe that by publishing some of the best Irish poetry of the moment," noted Fallon, who also directs Ireland's preeminent poetry publishing house, Gallery Press, "Wake Forest is by extension publishing some of the best poetry of our time."

In addition to publishing them, the Press periodically brings its poets to Wake Forest's campus to read their poems or teach. O'Callaghan and his wife, Vona Groarke, whom the Press also publishes, have taught for two years and are on campus again this spring. Longley, Ní Dhomhnaill, Carson, Mahon, Murphy, McGuckian, Muldoon—all these and others have given public readings and met with students and patrons of poetry at the University.

The Press traces its origins to 1975, when Dillon Johnston, then a professor of English at Wake Forest, was compiling an article on Irish poetry for a literary journal. To his surprise,

he could locate very few American editions of works by well-known Irish poets. The few that were available were either promoted poorly or periodically out of print.

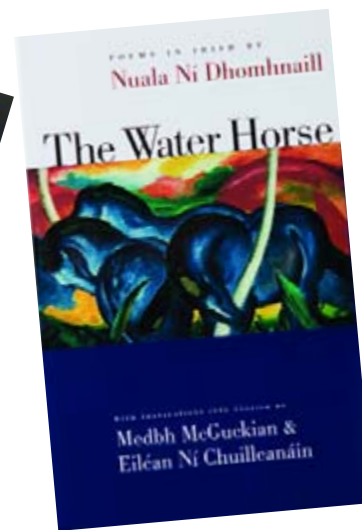
Johnston's response was to become a publisher himself. Then-provost Edwin G. Wilson ('43) gave him his enthusiastic support and a generous annual subsidy to launch the enterprise, and the Irish literature scholar parlayed his redoubtable network of contacts in the North and the Republic into building an A-list of artists. Very much a hands-on editor, Johnston involved himself in all aspects of production and actively sought out promising young poets in the north and the south. One was Ciaran Carson. When Johnston found him out on a trip to Belfast, he didn't have a publisher. Johnston recommended him to publishers in Ireland and published him in America. The outcome: *Belfast Confetti*, Carson's tempestuous ode to his besieged home, won the prestigious Irish Times/Aer Lingus Literature Prize for Poetry in 1991 and established his enduring international reputation.

Johnston left Wake Forest in the late nineties to join his wife as a lecturer at Washington University in St. Louis, but he continued to look after the Press for a time and remains close to it today in an advisory capacity. His successor as director, Jefferson Holdridge, is an American scholar of Irish literature with an extensive professional editing and research portfolio who lived in Dublin for the better part of two decades, eventually earning his doctoral degree and teaching at University College Dublin. He was appointed to the directorship in 2002.

"Ireland, and the whole question of 'Irishness,' are changing profoundly, and this extends to its poetry," says Holdridge, a native of the northeastern United States who traveled to Dublin for his brother's wedding in 1981 and ended up staying for a year of study at a house for American students at the School of Irish Studies, a private institution staffed by faculty from University College Dublin, the renowned "Catholic college" of James Joyce and Gerard Manley Hopkins, and Trinity

wasn't unusual for one of our instructors to adjourn an evening's class to a local pub. I loved it."

Dublin still possessed much the same charm when Holdridge returned in the early nineties to resume his studies after spending five years in New York as a student, teacher, and editor. But it wasn't very long before the metamorphosis began. "The EU [European Union] came and Ireland made good use of it," he points out. "The global service economy that relied upon



College Dublin, the traditional bastion of the Protestant gentry. "The eighties were one of Ireland's lowest points in the post-war era. The economy was dismal, and just as during the Famine, emigration parties were held for friends and relatives leaving the country. *The London Times* printed a photograph of one of the University of Dublin's graduating classes and circled the two-thirds of the class that was emigrating.

"The hard times, though, made Dublin a cheap and bohemian place, much like Greenwich Village in the fifties," he goes on. "Poetry flourished then for that reason; rents were low and writers could live by working as critics. Once, the Chieftains gave us a private concert at our residence. It

computing needed an educated work force and Irish universities had always been free or at least very cheap.

"[Economically] Dublin asked itself if it wanted to be Boston or Brussels," he says. "For the most part, it chose Boston, and the consequences soon became apparent. A house that sold for 40,000 euros in 1989 sells for a million today. Whereas Dublin traditionally had been a strolling city where people shared a rich social life on the streets, today social life has been privatized with dinner parties and many traditional values and skills have been lost. Church attendance has plunged from 90 percent in the early nineties to less than half today. Dublin has been overwhelmed by traffic and road rage is common."

Ireland's economic miracle has had another outcome: an influx of foreigners into a historically homogeneous and xenophobic population. "A lot of people have resettled in Ireland in recent years, from Poland in particular," he notes. "There are many more blacks today, and racism has become more evident. In the eighties, I rarely heard English accents in Dublin. By the late nineties, they were common. The situation has a dual nature to it. Ireland has been invaded so often throughout its history that it has assim-



ilated many different cultures. But perhaps because of that, [the Irish] are deeply suspicious of foreigners and tend to be very clannish, even in the cities.

"The challenge for Ireland today is reconciling tradition and modernity. The whole question of 'Irishness' is changing."

Irish poets, like their country, are torn between the sod and the world. "Irish poetry is famous for the poetry of The Troubles, as all of the most prominent contemporary poets, with a few notable exceptions, are from the North," says Holdridge, an associate professor of English who teaches four courses a year in Irish literature on

the graduate and undergraduate levels. "But there are also the international and local models. The former, of which Paul Muldoon and Derek Mahon are exponents, follow in the footsteps of Louis MacNeice [1907–1963], an urbane poet of the world who focused on international themes. The latter, of which Heaney is a prominent example, dwell more on distinctively Irish concerns in the tradition of Patrick Kavanagh [1904–1967], whose poems spoke of the narrowness and frustrations of rural Irish life in the last century. Joyce and Yeats used

Jones. "It has encouraged us to get more into anthologies. In 2005 we released Volume I of *The Wake Forest Series of Irish Poetry* featuring five poets [Harry Clifton, Dennis O'Driscoll, Sinéad Morrissey, David Wheatley, and Caitríona O'Reilly] who had not been widely published in North America. Results have been encouraging and we're working now on Volume II, which will be a very important title for us. The women's anthology has been used in classrooms a lot, and we think the academic market will be increasingly vital."

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both [models]—that's what made them great.

In fact, the best work of any Irish writer employs both models."

The Press generally publishes five or six editions a year and has been buoyed by a \$35,000 award from the National Endowment for the Arts to function as the North American publisher of an anthology of Northern Irish poetry titled *The New North* this year. But Holdridge and Assistant Director and Manager Candide Jones ('72, MA '78), who has been with the Press since 1990, note that sales overall are flat, and they are devising strategies for bolstering the bottom line. One is to publish anthologies featuring the work of several poets instead of editions dedicated to one. "In 1999 we published our first anthology of [Irish] women's poetry, and it's been the book that's garnered the most attention of late," notes

On the expense side, Jones says the Press has published limited collector's editions of selected titles to counteract the rising cost of printing hardbound books, which some poetry lovers prefer. It also is investigating the feasibility of printing on demand to hold down the size of its inventory, already one of the largest among all poetry presses in America.

Whatever changes the future might bring on the business side, the stewards of Wake Forest Press are committed to sustaining the viability of something larger. "When push comes to shove—when we want to say something truly important—we turn to poetry," Jones says. "It's how we communicate at our deepest level. In that sense, what we do [at the Press] is important spiritually."

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