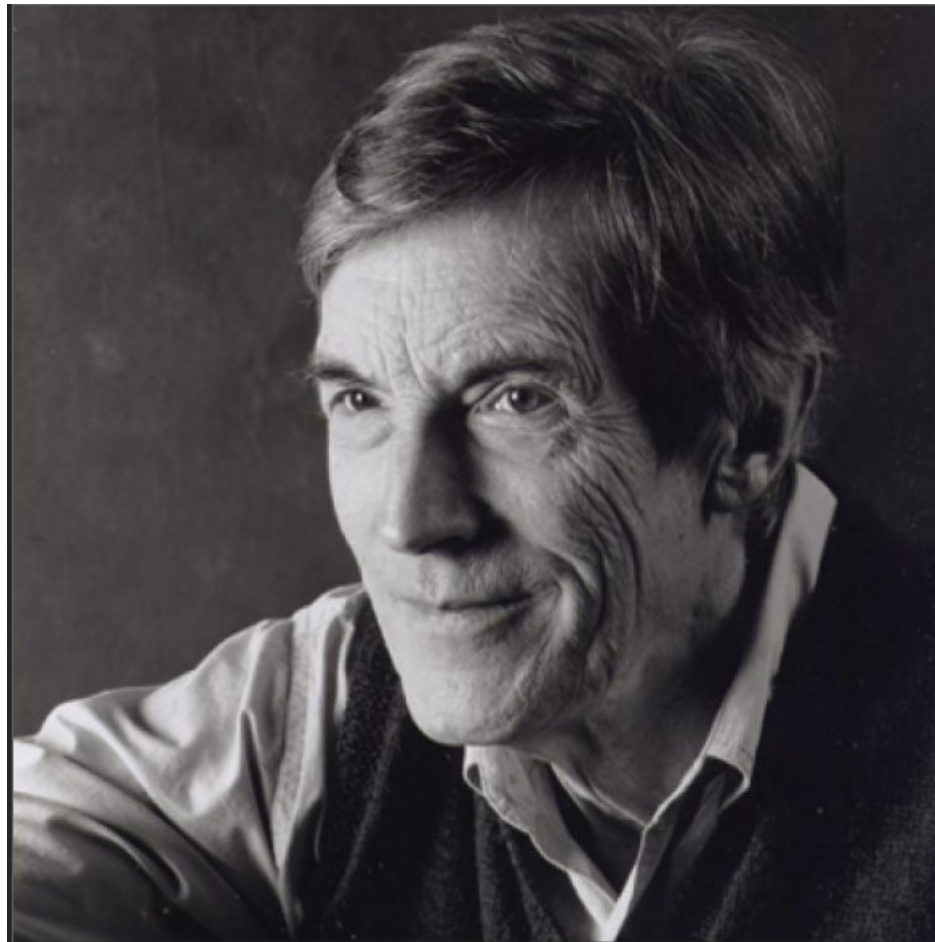


Richard Murphy (1927-2018)

The Hassett Collection in Honour of Professor
John Kelly, St John's College, Oxford



St John's College Library,
14 January—31 July 2019

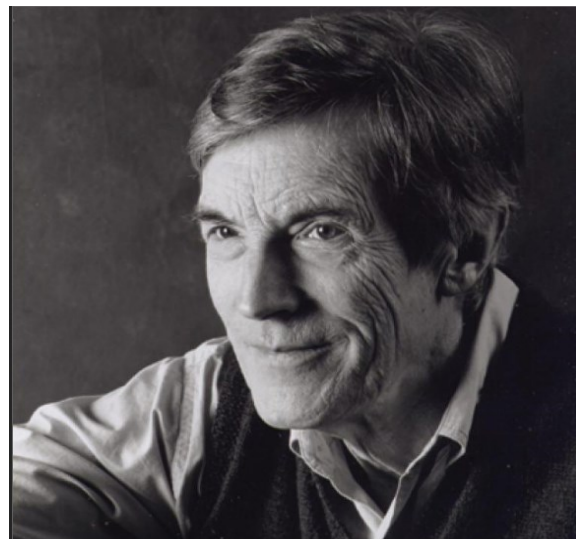
Richard Murphy (1927-2018)

At the height of his renown in the late 1970s, Richard Murphy was celebrated as a poet of “two traditions”: one inherited from his Anglo-Irish mother and the other from his Irish father. Indeed, Murphy’s Anglo-Irish identity lies at the heart of his early poetry in the 1960s with the collection *Sailing to an Island* (Faber & Faber, 1963), which includes not only the title poem but also ‘The Last Galway Hooker’ and ‘The Cleggan Disaster’, and the epic ‘The Battle of Aughrim’ (Faber & Faber, 1968). Ireland is later revisited in *High Island* (Faber & Faber, 1974).

Yet, this is only part of the story. As Benjamin Keatinge observes, Murphy’s work goes beyond the confines of his Anglo-Irish heritage, because Richard Murphy was “a child of the British Empire” (‘Richard Murphy’, *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Poets*, ed. G. Dawe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 211-223, at p. 212). His father, the last British Mayor of Colombo, moved the family to Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) in 1927 shortly after Richard Murphy’s birth. Murphy spent his early childhood there and lived abroad for parts of his adulthood. He revisited Sri Lanka for the first time as an adult in the 1980s. In his memoir *The Kick* Murphy recounts a wish to “examine my colonial past in the light of its legacy” as a key reason for returning to Sri Lanka (p. 340). In 2007, Murphy moved permanently to Sri Lanka, where he died on 30 January 2018.

It is thus not surprising that Murphy's poetry is about so much more than Ireland, Ireland's uneasy relations with England, and Murphy's own place therein. Seamus Heaney remarked in 1977 when discussing 'The Battle of Aughrim' that Murphy's poetic reflections about his inheritance is at heart "his quarrel with himself" ('The Poetry of Richard Murphy', *Irish University Review* 7:1 (1997), 18-30, at p. 25).

Summarising Murphy's achievements, Keatinge emphasises that the "great and abiding value of Richard Murphy's poetry lies not only within an Irish tradition, or Anglo-Irish tradition, but, more importantly, as a poet who has traced the aftermath of great historical transitions: Ireland after Aughrim, Ireland after independence, and more generally, a world in which the hypocrisies of the British imperial project are entirely discredited." (p. 221).



Richard Murphy (from <https://www.bloodaxebooks.com/ecs/category/richard-murphy>)

The exhibition in St John's College's library aims to present a glimpse into the poetry and life of Richard Murphy.

This exhibition would not have been possible without the generous donation of the displayed materials by Joseph M. Hassett, distinguished Yeats scholar and author of *W.B. Yeats and the Muses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Dr Hassett was awarded a PhD in Irish Literature at the University of Dublin in 1985. He also practises law in Washington DC, having graduated from Harvard Law School in 1967.

St John's College is exceedingly grateful for this donation, which includes volumes with personal dedications to Dr Hassett and autographs of Murphy's poems in several volumes as well as a framed typescript of the poem 'Newgrange' from *The Price of Stone* that is accompanied by three black-and-white images of the Neolithic monument.

The exhibition honours the renowned scholar of Irish literature Professor John Kelly, Fellow of St John's College since 1976. Standing out among his many publications is Kelly's work as the general editor of the prestigious multi-volume publication of *The Collected Letters of W.B. Yeats*, published in Oxford by the Clarendon Press since 1986. This was marked by the exhibition *Visited by All the Gods: Celebrating the Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats* at St John's College in 2014/15.

Selected Works of Richard Murphy

Sailing to an Island (London: Faber & Faber, 1963)

The Battle of Aughrim and The God Who Eats Corn
(London: Faber and Faber, 1968)

High Island (London: Faber & Faber, 1974)

Selected Poems (London: Faber & Faber, 1979)

The Price of Stone (London: Faber & Faber, 1985)

New Selected Poems (London: Faber & Faber, 1989)

The Mirror Wall (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 1989)

Collected Poems (Oldcastle: The Gallery Press, 2000)

The Kick (London: Granta, 2002)

The Pleasure Ground: Poems 1952–2012 (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2013)

The Woman of the House: An Elegy

Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1959

Murphy wrote this poem in memory of his maternal grandmother, Lucy Ormsby (née Thomson), and her house, Milford, where he was born in 1927. Milford is near the border between County Mayo and County Galway.



Murphy spent much of his childhood outside of Ireland. In a journal entry from 1982, he described the excitement of returning from Choir School in Canterbury, Kent, to Milford for the holidays: “[...] and we pass a tinker’s camp in a ditch where sad-looking children scowl at us [...] till excitement reaches a climax, as if all the stops were pulled out in the diapason of an organ voluntary loud enough to make the cathedral glass vibrate ... while the car [...] comes to a breathless halt at the gates of Milford [...] where we wait for the door of the lodge inside the gates to open [...]” (*In Search of Poetry*, pp. 119–20).

Even though for Murphy, his family was Milford and Milford was his family (*In Search of Poetry*, p. 121), it was only in 1954 that Murphy returned to Ireland, settling down in Cleggan on the coast of Galway, not very far away from Milford.

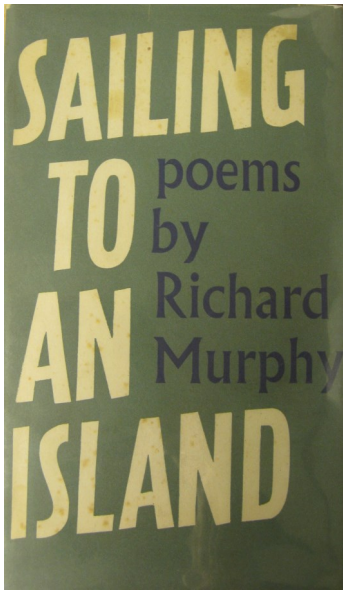
Sailing to an Island

London: Faber, 1963 (hbk) & 1968 (pbk)

Sailing to an Island was Murphy’s first landmark collection of poems and his first publication with the renowned publisher Faber & Faber. In the original 1963 edition, Faber & Faber praises his “sensuous yet strictly disciplined verse inspired mainly by the land, the boats and the people of the west of Ireland.” This publication was based on the choice of the Poetry Book Society (founded in 1953 by T.S. Eliot, whom Murphy met in 1962).

The title poem, ‘The Last Galway Hooker’, and ‘The Cleggan Disaster’ especially were inspired by Murphy’s love for the sea around Cleggan and the island Inishbofin and the way of life at this stretch of the western Irish coast.

‘Sailing to an Island’ recounts Murphy and his brother’s attempt to sail to Clare Island in 1952, a journey he described in *The Kick* (p. 141): “We set out in a head wind, making little progress towards Clare. The sea was calm until the tide changed, when wind and sea rose together, forcing us to change course and run for shelter to Inishbofin. It took us nine hours of buffeting over high waves to get there. [...] As we sailed through a short narrow channel to a little inner harbour,



Cover of original Faber & Faber edition from 1963

watched by a group of fishermen on the quay [...] [a] grey-whiskered statuesque captain, known as the Squire, looked down from the quay into our boat and said [...], ‘May the Lord help the poor mother that ever let you put to sea.’ Murphy started writing “a short narrative poem, recording my rite of passage to Inishbofin” (*The Kick*, p. 142) shortly afterwards, but did not complete the final version until 1960.

Murphy kept returning to Inishbofin, most notably so in June 1959 after his divorce, when he purchased and restored the *Ave Maria* (a Galway hooker). Eventually, Murphy set up a business, taking “tourists out of Cleggan on combined sea angling and day trips to Inishbofin” (*The Kick*, pp. 190-1). The leaflet and the post-card displayed in the exhibition date from that time.



Leaflet front cover

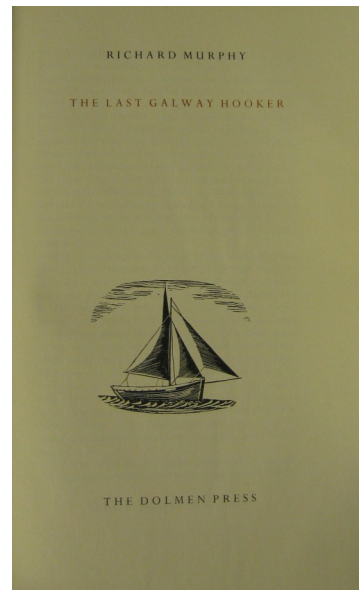


Leaflet back cover

The Last Galway Hooker

Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1961 & 1962

Murphy described the Galway hooker as “a strong, safe, fishing and cargo boat designed before the age of en-



First Dolmen Press edition
(1961)

gines to sail the dangerous sounds between mainland and islands off the Galway coast” (*The Last Galway Hooker* (1961), p. 6), referring to his *Ave Maria* in particular.

The poem celebrates the boat he purchased in Inishbofin in the late 1950s. Murphy recounts the boat’s history in the Dolmen Press publications (ibid.), pointing out that despite the traditional superstition that women were bad luck at sea, the *Ave Maria* was planked by a woman. Moreover, launched in 1922, it was the last hooker built in Claddagh (by Galway City) and one of few still in commission in the late 1950s.

In his foreword, Murphy also refers to the loss of traditional life as inshore fishing with boats under sail with hand-lines and without engines was virtually “wiped out by powerful modern trawlers” (ibid.).

The second Dolmen Press edition from 1962 was presented to Joseph Hassett by Richard Murphy in 2007 on the occasion of the opening of The Yeats International Summer School in Sligo, Ireland.

‘The Cleggan Disaster’ (first published 1962)

here in *Poems 1952-2012* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2013)

Murphy began working on ‘The Cleggan Disaster’ in 1960. The story had been told to him in 1953 by Patrick Concannon, a fisherman from Inishbofin, one of the survivors of the storm that raged on 28 October 1927 off the west Ireland coast and claimed the lives of 45 fishermen. *The Kick* (pp. 143-46) recounts Concannon’s story in prose: “[...] That was the hardest test any man could have in his life, what I went through, to hold on to those nets all night and not to give up with the waves breaking in my face and on my chest all the time. The nets saved us because the ebbtide dragged them against the storm away out far from the shore. [...] What can I say of such a hard night now? I’m alive myself. Good men are gone. When a man doesn’t know what to do, he does what he can, and he may do wrong. [...]”.



Postcard showing the *Ave Maria*

The Battle of Aughrim and the God Who Eats Corn

London: Faber and Faber, 1968

‘The Battle of Aughrim’ was commissioned by BBC Radio 3 shortly after Murphy first contemplated the subject matter. The poem was written in Connemara between 1962 and 1967 and first broadcast in August 1968, read by Cyril Cusack (actor), C. Day Lewis (poet), Ted Hughes (poet), Margaret Robertson (actress), and Niall Tóibín (actor).

The poem recounts the decisive battle on 12 July 1691 between the Jacobite Irish Army and William III’s army in the County Galway. Over 7,000 people were reported to be killed in the battle that finished the Jacobites in Ireland. The Faber & Faber edition includes a note to provide the historical context for Murphy’s poem.



John Mulvany, 'Battle of Aughrim' (1885) [at <http://www.gorrygallery.ie/catalogs/2010Nov.pdf>, accessed 20-12-2018]

In *The Kick* (pp. 216-7), Murphy recounts that while writing the poem he began pondering over the Irish-English conflict and the site of the battle as well as remembering that one of his mother’s ancestors acquired Milford from a dispossessed Catholic. The starting point of the poem was a question:

Who owns the land where musketballs are buried
Under whitethorns on the esker, in the drained bogs
Where flocks of sheep browse and redcoats waded?

In the 2013 collection of Murphy’s poems *The Pleasure Ground: Poems 1952-2012* (Bloodaxe Books, p. [59]), ‘The Battle of Aughrim’ is described as a “meditation on colonial war and its consequence in Ireland”. This description harks back to the other question that concerned Murphy at the time of writing: “why we still had borders and bigotries” (*The Kick*, p. 217).

The poem is divided into four parts (Now—Before—During—After) and in dramatic monologues as opposed to “straight narrative”, a decision in which Murphy was encouraged by Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes during their visit to Connemara in September 1962 (*The Kick*, p. 228). Five years later, Ted Hughes praised ‘The Battle of Aughrim’ as “a terrific panorama, original and relevant”, linking it to the horrors of the Vietnam War (*The Kick*, p. 259).

The Price of Stone

Madley: Five Seasons Press, 1985

London: Faber & Faber, 1985

On its publication *The Price of Stone* was celebrated as “a major event in Anglo-Irish poetry” (J. Sendry, ‘The Poet as Builder: Richard Murphy’s *The Price of Stone*’, *Irish University Review* 15:1 (1985), p. 38). Murphy as the poet does not speak himself in these formal sonnets which trace his life, but “presents himself as spoken to [...] by inanimate, usually architectural, structures of human making” (ibid.). Faber & Faber published the title sequence of sonnets preceded by 21 poems of varying lengths and forms.



C.S. Lewis in 1946 (from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/C._S._Lewis)

The poem ‘Oxford Staircase’ harks back to Murphy’s time as an Oxford student. He joined Magdalen College to read English in 1944. As recounted in *The Kick* (p. 87), Murphy chose Magdalen because C.S. Lewis taught there and because he had seen a picture of Magdalen Tower. While awed by C.S. Lewis, his admired tutor, and liking Oxford very much, Murphy summarises his English studies as follows:

“Oxford, stronghold of Cavaliers under King Charles I, not only encouraged but compelled me to look back through all of England’s literature from Beowulf to 1830. Nothing modern was on the syllabus. No student’s poetry was

taken into consideration in the awarding of a degree, as it was at Cambridge. [...] My Oxford was a better preparation for a memoirist than a poet.” (*The Kick*, pp. 93-4).

The typescript of the poem ‘Newgrange’ from *The Price of Stone* framed together with photos of a kerbstone and the interior of Newgrange was given to Joseph Hassett by Richard Murphy in 1984. Newgrange is a Neolithic passage tomb built ca. 5,200 years ago in what is now County Meath, Ireland. The passage and the chamber are illuminated by the winter solstice sun. It is assumed that the construction was to “mark the beginning of the new year [and] may have served as a powerful symbol of the victory of life over death” (<https://www.newgrange.com/> [accessed 14/01/2019]). Murphy’s poem describes this annual influx of sunlight into the tomb, contrasting, as Dewsnap observed, not only stone and light, but death and renewal (‘Richard Murphy’s “Apologia”: *The Price of Stone*’, *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 22:1 (1996), 71-86, p. 80).



Newgrange (from <https://www.newgrange.com/images.htm>)

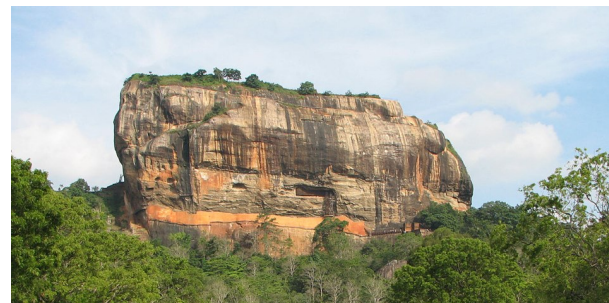
The Mirror Wall

Winston-Salem: Wake Forest University Press, 1989

Although born in Ireland, Richard Murphy spent his early childhood in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon), where his father was the last British Mayor of Colombo. He first returned to Sri Lanka in the 1980s “to examine [his] colonial past in the light of its legacy and to purge [his childhood] fears” (*The Kick*, p. 340). Much later, in 2007, Murphy settled on the island permanently near Kandy, where he died on 30 January 2018.

The Mirror Wall is a collection of poems inspired by the songs on the so-called Mirror Wall in the remote fortress of Sigiriya in Sri Lanka. The fortress itself dates back to the 5th century CE, while the graffiti, which includes the songs, dates back to the 8th-10th centuries.

Some of Murphy's poems are close to the original Old Sinhala songs, whereas most are free interpretations.



Sigiriya (from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sigiriya>)



Graffiti (from <https://www.sigiriya.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Sigiriya-Graffiti.jpg>)

The volume displayed includes a handwritten dedication to Joseph Hassett by Murphy and two autograph poems: ‘National Tree’ on a blank page towards the front and ‘Double-Vision’ on the back fly-leaf.

As noted by Murphy underneath the poem ‘National Tree’, it was written at the Institute for Fundamental Studies in Kandy after a visit to the Sam Popham’s Arboretum near Dambulla on 8 January 1989, a time between the Presidential and General Elections during which “large numbers of people were slain”. These atrocities were linked to the Second JVP Insurrection (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, radical Marxist organisation), in which the JVP killed voters and candidates in order to disrupt elections held in December 1988 and early 1989 (see *Sri Lanka Brief* at <http://srilankabrief.org/2014/04/sri-lanka-the-years-of-blood/> [accessed 9/01/2019]).



Ironwood , national tree of Sri Lanka (from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mesua_ferrea)

Throughout his career, Richard Murphy published a number of individual poetry collections, such as *Niches* and *Care*.

Niches

Dublin: Gallery Press, 1978

Ten years after ‘The Battle of Aughrim’, two short poems by Murphy, ‘Niches’ and ‘A Nest in a Wall’, were published by Gallery Press with illustrations by Timothy Engelland.

Thematically, ‘**Niches**’ is all about love lost. Technically, it is a masterpiece of formal poetry. A review of *Poems 1952-2012* (Lilliput Press, 2013) in the *Irish Literary Supplement* (22 March 2017) points to ‘Niches’ as a “prime example of craftsmanship [being] a sonnet which is mostly unrhymed but sonnet-like in its lineation, a mixture of enjambed and end-stopped lines, and it also possesses the skeleton of an octave-sestet structure”.

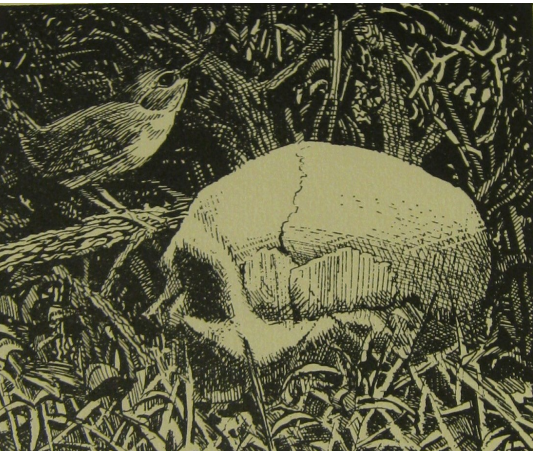


Illustration opposite ‘Niches’ in Gallery Press edition (1978)

Care

Amsterdam: Cornamona Press, 1983

Care is a collection of 30 poems, which include ‘Niches’ and ‘A Nest in a Wall’. Thanks to Joseph Hassett’s generosity, St John’s College holds two Cornamona Press editions of *Care*, one of them being the English original and the other a “double-book” together



Ross Errilly Franciscan Friary

with a Dutch translation entitled *Zorgzaamheid* by Jan Eijkelboom.

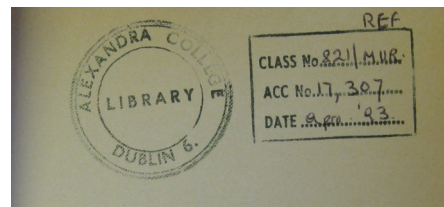
Richard Murphy dedicated the single volume to Joseph Hassett. Murphy also wrote a poem on the front fly-leaf, ‘Friary’. This sonnet would be published as part of the *Price of Stone* collection two years later. According to a journal entry from March 1982, the poem was inspired by a visit to Ross Errilly Friary, a mile northwest of Headford, County Galway. The Franciscan friary was founded around 1460 and gradually fell into ruin around the middle of the 18th century. Still, it is one of the most complete Franciscan foundations in Ireland today (see, also for image, <http://monastic.ie/history/ross-errilly-franciscan-friary/> [accessed 9/01/2019]). In the poem Murphy “confesses a limited faith in words written as epitaphs that may achieve, not immortality, but a resurrection of the love they express each time they are read” (Murphy, *In Search of Poetry*, p. 73).

Numerous selections and collections of Richard Murphy's poems have been published over the years and a selection of these are displayed here.

High Island (Faber & Faber, 1974) contains new and previously published poems. The new poems in this then eagerly anticipated volume were written after Murphy had bought the uninhabited island High Island in April 1969. The poems cover not only the maritime and historic themes with which Murphy had built his reputation, but also nature and ecology, love, spirituality, and heritage.

Faber & Faber's ***New Selected Poems*** from 1989 is a reprint of the US edition entitled *The Price of Stone and Earlier Poems* (1985). This particular copy of *New Selected Poems* was given to Alexandra College Dublin, a girls' school founded 1866, with a rather personal dedication. For almost a half a century Murphy's great-aunt was the fearsome school mistress of Alexandra College and the two-and-a-half-year-old Richard Murphy was alleged to have kicked her once instead of saying good-bye.

The Kick: A Memoir (London: Granta Books, 2002) is Murphy's acclaimed autobiography and ***In Search of Poetry*** (Thame: Clutag Press, 2017) is a collection of journal entries, verse experiments and finished poems that recount the creative process when writing the poems in *The Price of Stone*.



St John's College Library
St John's College
Oxford, OX1 3JP

Phone: +44 (0)1865 277331

Email: library@sjc.ox.ac.uk

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