

**On Seamus Heaney, by R. F. Foster** 228 pages \$19.95 (hard-cover)  
Princeton University Press, 2020 (“Writers on writers” series)

*Review by Denise Provost*

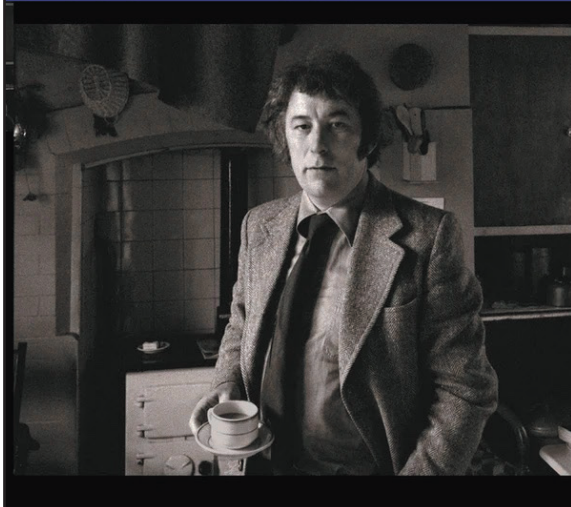
R.F. Foster needs no attention from me to burnish his reputation, any more than Seamus Heaney needs Foster to add luster to his. *On Seamus Heaney*, however, adds welcome layers to our understanding of Heaney as a poet and of the kind of public intellectual who attains moral standing in the wider world. This review aims mainly to draw attention to a valuable book possibly overlooked in the chaos of COVID, and to alert US readers to the merit they will find in Foster’s other writings.

Robert Fitzroy (Roy) Foster is currently Professor of Irish History and Literature at Queen Mary University of London. He was formerly, and remains emeritus, Professor of Irish History at the University of Oxford. As this progression indicates, his academic roots are as an historian. Foster, though, is Irish, and Ireland’s history and literature are intertwined to a degree uncommon among nations. With the publication of Foster’s magisterial two-volume biography of William Butler Yeats, his literary sensitivity and insight became as apparent his exacting scholarship.

*On Seamus Heaney* is a quite different undertaking than the encyclopedic Yeats biography. It benefits, however, from the same basic methodology. Foster sifts through diaries, correspondence, lecture notes, letters, and early drafts of poems to construct a full view of Heaney’s poetic enterprise. Foster braids together Heaney’s biography and writing with the history of his place of origin, giving us a rounded view of how these elements come together in his art.

Foster connects Heaney’s early life on his parents’ farm – along with his classical education as a scholarship student - to the virtuoso ease of his first major poetry collection, *Death of a Naturalist*. Publication of that collection set up a “remarkable connection between Heaney and his readership,” which later grew more complicated. Foster charts Heaney’s growing success in the North of Ireland, even as violence against civil rights protesters and other targets – including some of Heaney’s own kin -

R. F. FOSTER ■ ON SEAMUS HEANEY



provided painful new subject matter.

Foster notes that Heaney's friend, the poet Derek Mahon, "claimed in 1970 that Northern poets operated in a milieu of broader relevance than the 'narcissistic provincialism' of the South." Such a claim may seem astonishing, considering that the Republic of Ireland was at that time not yet fifty years past its war of independence and even bloodier civil war. Yet some poets of the North and others excoriated Heaney for his treatment "of ancient, repetitive, sacrificial violence" in subsequent poetry collections.

Insisting on the "privacy and independence" of the poet, Heaney gave up his teaching post at Queens University, Belfast; moved to the Republic of Ireland, and published his galvanizing fourth major work, *North*. Heaney's later international acclaim makes it easy to forget that at this point in his writing career, some reactions to his work were "viscerally antagonistic." Foster examines criticism of Heaney from this period, parsing out critiques based on professional jealousy or political disapproval to provide a clear-eyed and fair-minded assessment.

Foster goes on to examine the influences of Heaney's religious faith, devotion to Dante, friendships with other poets, and rising international profile in "his remaking of himself in middle age." In demand as a lecturer, Heaney became a literary essayist. He joined the Field Day cultural cooperative for which he wrote his celebrated play, *The Cure at Troy*; around this same time, he composed his collection *Station Island*.

In the long eponymous poem in that volume, Heaney meets the ghost of James Joyce, who says:

*"...Your obligation  
Is not discharged by any common rite.  
What you do you must do on your own*

*so get back in harness. The main thing is to write  
for the joy of it. Cultivate a work-lust  
that imagines its haven like your hands at night..."*

On Heaney's poetic and temporal journeys, Foster is a reliable guide. Of the collections *The Haw Lantern* and *Seeing Things*, written in these later years, Foster sees "a chastened and profound investigation into the depths of death and life. The roof had lifted off his world, opening it to new intimations." One of these was Heaney's arrival in the post of Professor of Poetry at Oxford, which yielded a series of extraordinary and wide-ranging lectures, in which "Heaney demonstrated his analytical command over different modes of poetic expression...."

Years before, Foster reports, "Heaney remarked that he thought it necessary, as an Irish Writer using the English lyric tradition, 'to take the English lyric and make it eat stuff that it had never eaten before.'" Heaney, in turn, later would – metaphorically speaking – eat the Old English epic poem *Beowulf*, translating it into modern English. By his doing so, Foster observes "Heaney's work and reputation were now positioned at the center of the English canon, while operating emphatically from a base in Ireland (North and South.)"

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In this same period, Heaney was exploring “the line that divides the actual conditions of our daily lives from the imaginative representation of those conditions in literature, and divides also the world of social speech from the world of poetic language.” He also began to speak of the power of poetry to redress the world’s injustices and imbalances. Yet, at the same time, in Heaney’s work, the “tension between public responsibility and artistic freedom is framed over and over again, decisively and defiantly refusing a simple answer.”

Then, in 1995, Heaney was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. His remarkable acceptance speech, “Crediting Poetry” was separately published in book form and has become widely read. Foster reflects, however, that its backdrop of “the blood-spattered infliction of tribally decreed violence...has largely faded from consciousness...over the last quarter-century, if indeed it was ever in clear focus.”

Heaney’s tenure as Nobel Laureate expanded his life as a public figure. These demands came at a time of his life about which Heaney wrote: “I think that the political urgency is past for me. This is more the moment of mortality.” It is during the time which Heaney wrote the poems in his extraordinary final collection, *Human Chain*, a work about which Foster writes with poignant insight.

I credit Foster with finding exactly the right observations in the other writings of Heaney and his contemporaries to illuminate Heaney’s body of poetry from multiple angles. I hope that others who care about our literary inheritance will use *On Seamus Heaney* as a standard for writing about writing. Its combination of meticulousness and soul can only enrich our understanding.