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# **INTRODUCTION**

# **HEWITT PAPERS**

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# Hewitt Papers (D3838)

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## Summary

The John Hewitt Papers comprise c.4,500 documents and volumes relating to the life and career of John Hewitt, Ulster poet, and his wife Roberta (née Black), 1904-1987, and principally include: c.115 personal, official and legal papers of John and Roberta Hewitt, 1904-1987; c.390 literary, autobiographical and miscellaneous papers, 1928-1987, including 37 diaries and travel notebooks, 1934-1987, and three scrapbooks, 1928-1970; c.1050 letters, 1930-1987, between John Hewitt and notable friends, professional colleagues and publishers, including the poets, Gordon Bottomley, Austin Clarke, Séamus Heaney, R.P. Maybin and W.R. Rodgers, the Ulster painter John Luke and the Irish folklorist, Michael J. Murphy; c.100 letters and papers of Roberta Hewitt, 1921-1975; c.2430 miscellaneous letters, mostly to John Hewitt, 1929-1987; and c.290 theatre programmes, 1930-1982.



## **An Irishman of planter stock**

At the age of sixty John Harold Hewitt (1907-1987) said of himself: 'I am by birth an Irishman of planter stock, by profession an art gallery man, politically a man of the left....' However, there is much more to John Hewitt than this. In an interview for The Coventry Evening Telegraph in 1968 Hewitt commented 'Now Poetry is what I'm about'; but, although there can be no doubt that poetry was his first passion, he had a wide range of interests and activities: lecturing, broadcasting, short stories and journalism.

His intellectual prowess was no doubt stimulated by his parents. Hewitt was born in 1909 in Belfast, the son of Robert Telford Hewitt (1873-1943), a teacher who became principal of Agnes Street Mixed School, and Elinor Robinson, also a teacher. His formal education began in his father's school in Agnes Street, near the Shankill Road, and continued at Methodist College, Belfast. From there he went on to The Queen's University of Belfast, where he obtained his B.A. in 1930.



## **The Ulster Unit**

Hewitt's professional career began immediately he left university. He took up the post of Art Assistant at the Belfast Museum and Art Gallery, where he stayed until 1957, in due course becoming Deputy Director. The 1930s were important for Hewitt in a number of respects. On the domestic front, he married Roberta Black in 1934. In the same year he helped to form a progressive art group known as the 'Ulster Unit', which included John Luke, George McCann and Colin Middleton. The 'Ulster Unit' was formed on the model of 'Unit one' in England, a group of English painters, sculptors and architects. During the 1930s, Hewitt concentrated more and more on writing poetry and short articles for various literary journals, and by 1943 had established himself as a writer and art critic.



## No Rebel Word

Over the next decade he produced some of his best work, the most notable publication being *No Rebel Word* (London, 1948), a collection of his poems. This collection was strongly influenced by the concept of Regionalism. Hewitt supported the notion that 'small is beautiful', and that 'in a vast, bureaucratic, centralised world ... meaning and significance might be sought in a limited region, with its local history and traditions and special characteristics'. Other writers and artists shared Hewitt's views. Consequently, the socio-literary philosophy of Ulster Regionalism developed. The principal outlet for this philosophy was an Ulster literary annual, entitled *Lagan*, and one of its associate editors for the years 1945-1946 was John Hewitt. In 1951 Hewitt earned an M.A. for his thesis on 'Ulster Poets, 1800-1870' at his old university, and two years later *The Bell* brought this decade of achievement to a close by publishing, over three issues, Hewitt's most important attempt to date at an autobiography, 'Planters Gothic: An Essay in Discursive Autobiography'.



## Ulster Arts Council

Apart from his own individual efforts, he played an important supervisory role in the Ulster Arts scene. Indeed, he served as a member of the Arts Advisory Committee of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (formerly the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts) between 1943 and 1956, and acted as chairman for a number of years. Furthermore, he also served as a member of the BBC Advisory Council for Northern Ireland for roughly the same period.

The year 1953 was a zenith and a nadir in Hewitt's career. The post of Director of the Belfast Museum and Art Gallery became vacant and after 23 years of service in the museum, during which time he had co-ordinated numerous art exhibitions, he naturally expected that he would be appointed to this post. Things did not go as planned. Hewitt was passed over for the appointment, apparently because of his liberal and socialist sympathies. Instead as Séamus Heaney has remarked, 'Hewitt was (in a manner of speaking) sent to Coventry, as Director of the Herbert Art Gallery' in that city.



## Coventry

The disappointment clearly hit Hewitt hard. For the next four years he did not embark on any large-scale projects: rather, he concentrated on journalism, writing the 'MacArt' column for The Belfast Telegraph, and short reviews of theatre productions and art exhibitions for The Irish Times. However, once Hewitt had settled down in Coventry – taking up the Directorship in 1957 - he began to write more seriously again. His most important contribution to the world of literature over the next five years was as Poetry Editor of the Belfast based magazine, Threshold. In this new role he produced regular criticism of new Irish poetry. Hewitt at last won the recognition he sought, and in September 1960 his services to the world of art and literature were formally rewarded when he was elected a member of the Royal Irish Academy, a rare distinction.



## **The Planter and the Gael**

After this short burst of activity Hewitt again entered into a period of reflection and consolidation. Between 1962 and 1966 he published less than at any time since the start of the war. However, 1967 marked the first year for a decade of writing and publishing on the same scale as his works during the period 1943-1953. His most important prose writing was his introduction to *The Poems of William Allingham* (Dublin, 1967). An edition of his *Collected Poems 1932-1967* (London, 1968) followed. Then in 1970 he teamed up with John Montague, who earned his reputation as a translator of Gaelic poetry, to produce another collection of poems entitled *The Planter and the Gael* (Belfast, 1970).



## Honours

His exile from Ulster ended in 1972 when he retired to Belfast. However, his retirement soon turned out to be an active one. In 1974 he received the honorary degree of D.Litt. from the University of Ulster. From 1976 to 1979 he was Writer in Residence at his old university, Queen's, in Belfast. During this period he spent time making a short film of his life and work called 'I Found Myself Alone' with the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. Further honours awaited him. In 1979 he was offered an O.B.E. by Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Government, but refused it. This was probably a demonstration of his socialist sympathies. Indeed, only a few weeks before this offer was made, Hewitt was elected first President of the Northern Ireland Fabian Society.

Hewitt's major publications during the mid to late seventies included two short books on the lives and works of two artists, Colin Middleton (Belfast, 1976) and John Luke 1906-1975 (Belfast, 1978), both of whom he had encouraged in their formative years. This period also marked his association with the Blackstaff Press, Belfast, who published four collections of Hewitt's poems in 1974, 1976, 1978 and 1980, and then published *The Selected John Hewitt* in 1981. Hewitt's final work to be published was *Freehold*, in 1986, again by Blackstaff Press. In the 1980s there was no let up in the honours bestowed on him. In 1983 he was admitted to the degree of D.Litt. at the Queen's University of Belfast, and was made a Freeman of the City of Belfast. A year later he was awarded the Gregory Medal by the Irish Academy of Letters. By this time Hewitt was in his seventies. However, as Alan Warner says, he faced old age with 'calm dignity, still reading and writing and thinking ...'.



## **Roberta 'Ruby' Hewitt**

In 1975 his wife, Roberta, died. Roberta Black had been born in Larne in 1904, and married Hewitt 30 years later. At this time both were active in the Belfast Peace League. She was the secretary of this group and he was on the committee. Apart from her involvement in the campaign to promote peace when war threatened in the 1930s, Mrs Hewitt was also active in the Nursery School movement. In a newspaper interview she said of herself:

'I am a Socialist because I believe in equality of opportunity for all human beings regardless of birth, creed or colour. I feel any exploitation of man by man, class by class or nation by nation to be morally wrong. My ideas came from my home background, which was Christian Socialist, and later working in nursery schools in industrial areas in the 1930s I was shocked by the consequences of insecurity, unemployment and illness.

'Ruby' Hewitt was one of the founders of Edenderry Nursery School in 1938 and Frederick Street Nursery School in 1941, and acted as honorary secretary for both of these Belfast schools. She still found time to serve on the Management Committee for the Northern Ireland Fever Hospital.

When Mrs Hewitt went to Coventry with her husband in 1957 she became active in politics. She allied herself to the local Labour Party and served as Secretary to the Cheylesmore Ward Labour Party. For the next decade she wrote to various parliamentarians, particularly Labour MPs, about the chief political issues of the day such as the Vietnam War. Her return to Belfast in 1972 did not break her links with the Labour movement. Indeed, she joined the Northern Ireland Labour party and acted as canvasser, polling agent, etc, during parliamentary and council election until her death in 1975.



## Final days

Following her death, Hewitt shared his home in Stockman's Lane, Belfast, with a friend, Mrs Jean Craig, and derived great joy from her two sons. Although he never had any of his own he always had a fondness for children. Indeed, during the Spanish Civil War he looked after Spanish children at his Belfast home at Mount Charles. His relationships with adults were slightly more strained. A colleague of Hewitt's from his art gallery days in Belfast, Douglas Deane, described his former associate as 'essentially a shy person which sometimes caused him to be abrupt with other people and he didn't with his wide and keen intellect suffer fools gladly. Yet his great sensitivity and sympathy put people at their ease'.

During his final years Hewitt seems to have deliberately attempted to assemble the correspondence and papers accumulated in the course of his career. In his will of 17 January 1979 he bequeathed to the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland his wife's diaries, his notebooks relating to foreign travels, and all his 'in' correspondence. These specified items (and much more) were eventually deposited in PRONI in January 1988 per Dr Keith Millar, Hewitt's nephew and a joint executor of his will.



## The Archive

The Hewitt archive possesses many items of interest. His notebooks contain accounts of his educational holidays in Europe (D3838/2/1). Because of his socialist sympathies he was naturally attracted to Russia and to iron curtain countries such as Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland and Yugoslavia. Then, there are the three scrapbooks which he compiled (D3838/2/4), composed mostly of newspaper cuttings, they record many events in Hewitt's life and also in that of his wife. However, the correspondence Hewitt received from various sources is the cornerstone of the archive.

There are letters from poets such as Gordon Bottomley, Austin Clarke, Séamus Heaney and W. R. Rodgers which discuss trends in the writing of poetry (D3838/3). Hewitt's interest in the world of art and folklore is evidenced by the correspondence he received from John Luke, one of Ulster's most well known painters, and the Irish folklorist, Michael J. Murphy (D3838/3). Letters from Hewitt's friends also feature prominently in his archive. There is a voluminous correspondence from David Burleigh, a young friend and poet, for whom Hewitt acted as referee (D3838/3/3-5A-B). In particular, there are dozens of letters written by Burleigh from Japan, where he taught English as a foreign language. Perhaps most interesting of all is the correspondence between Hewitt and Robert Patrick Maybin (D3838/3/10-13). They met each other at Queen's, through the poetry circle there, and continued their friendship for many years thereafter. During the Second World War Maybin, who was a doctor in the Royal Army Medical Corps, wrote to Hewitt from West Africa and Italy about poetry and about his experiences in these countries. Fortunately Hewitt's letters to him have also survived and are in the archive. These seem to be the only run of original letters penned by Hewitt still in existence and are therefore of considerable consequence. They were returned to Hewitt by Dr Maureen E. Maybin (née McNeill) after her husband's death. The miscellaneous correspondence, which mostly comprises letters to Hewitt from friends, students, colleagues, institutions, etc, varies in interest and importance (D3838/5 and D3838/6). If nothing else, it demonstrates Hewitt's wide circle of contacts.

Finally, there is a collection of theatre programmes which Hewitt assembled over the years and which would interest students of the history of the British theatre in the 20th century (D3838/7).

Roberta Hewitt's correspondence and papers constitute a self-contained section (D3838/4/1-3), comprising: letters from British MPs; miscellaneous correspondence to and from friends, relatives, employers, etc; and papers relating to her association with Edenderry Nursery School and the Labour movement.

A second deposit of material from the Executors of John Hewitt's Will was made in August 2003. This material is largely correspondence: encompassing over 1550 letters to John Hewitt, to both John & Ruby Hewitt and carbon copies of letters from John Hewitt to his correspondents. There is also a small amount of ephemera including passports, youth hostel membership cards, driving licences and newspapers cuttings. Whilst some of this material has been added to existing

references, largely contained in D3838/2, the large collection of correspondence is detailed in a newly created section at D3838/7.

The correspondence listed at D3838/7 dates from 1928 to 1987, with the majority ranging from the mid 1940s to the mid 1960s. The letters cover a wide range of topics and fully reflect the myriad interests of John Hewitt. In particular, there are many letters relating to John Hewitt's role in local and national art circles. Through his position as the Deputy Keeper of Art in the Ulster Museum (and after 1957 as Art Director of the Herbert Art Gallery and City Museum, Coventry) he helped promote and nurture many of the most successful local artists of the day, including Patrick Stevenson (1909-1983) of Rostrevor, Co. Down (including D3838/7/28/41-57) and Colin Middleton (1910-1983) of Belfast (including D3838/7/23/21-27).

He also corresponded with a large number of individuals who wished to discuss their writing, particularly poetry, and provide support in a field that it is often difficult to become established. As well as a large number of Northern Irish writers, including Roy McFadden (1921-1999) and Padraic Fiacc (b.1924), his correspondents include such disparate names as the Dublin born writer Christy Brown (1932-1981) (D3838/7/40/1-20), the Chinese poet Shelley Wang (d.1939) (including D3838/7/12/1-10) and the English Poet Laureate Sir John Betjeman (1906-1984) (D3838/7/18/21-27).

Whilst John Hewitt is widely known for his significance in the worlds of both art and literature; politics was also a consuming passion. In fact many of the poets and writers John Hewitt most frequently corresponded with held similar socialist views. One only needs to read the reminiscences of Roy McFadden (1921-1999) on their shared firebrand youth to feel the disappointment they feel towards those who have replaced them: 'I have returned, after 15 years, to the same faces in dusty rooms, and don't see any Greacens or McFaddens - or a Hewitt declaiming: "Some are for a fight to the finish -." I loosen the top button on my trousers, and realise I am middle-aged.' Such sentiments are common throughout the archive.

This second deposit is an invaluable addition to PRONI's existing John Hewitt archive. The detailed catalogue at D3838/7 indicates the wide range of John Hewitt contacts and correspondents: covering both short-time acquaintances and lifelong, intimate friends. Furthermore, for those with an interest in the relationship of John and Roberta Hewitt, there are also a large number of letters from Roberta scattered throughout D3838/7, some of which are undated and held at D3838/7/48/1-20. D3838/7 also provides an indication of the quality of material that may be held within the less detailed catalogue of D3838/6. It is not presumptuous to assume that his Northern Irish poetry-writing contemporaries, W.R. Rodgers and Louis MacNeice (who are notable by their absence from the second deposit) may appear in some number within D3838/6.

