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Interview: Kathleen McCracken

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Double Self Portrait with Mirror: New & Selected Poems (1978--2014)

is a milestone publication from Canadian poet Kathleen McCracken. Published by Brazil's Editora Ex Machina press, the bilingual edition brings together original new poems with selections from her seven previously published collections. Lagan Online's Colin Dardis speaks to Kathleen about her upcoming release.

How does a Canadian poet, who's been living in Ireland for over two decades, now has this bilingual edition – in English and Portuguese – of your New & Selected Poems coming out?



To go back to square one, I've been here twenty-five years, almost half my life in Northern Ireland; I came here in 1989 on a post-doctoral fellowship, and had published at this point I think about four or five books in Canada. I had an academic post but continued to write poetry, and published a couple of more since that, both with Canadian publishers. This book came about really through an academic, scholarly friendship with the woman who is the organiser of it, Beatriz Kopschitz Bastos, who is an independent scholar in San Paulo. She was very interested in my work, and asked if she could let an acquaintance of hers in the publisher, Ex Machina, have a look at it.

There's a big interest in English language literature in Brazil; it's a country that's beginning to become First World in a way, you might say, so they want to translate as much as they can. Poetry hasn't been the major genre, it's always been fiction and some play; Beatriz was involved in translating Brian Friel, for instance. As fate would have they, they were just starting a poetry series. The press saw the last couple of books – Mooncalves and Tattoo Land – really liked them and asked to see some more.

As that evolved, it was like, 'well, you sort of mid-career, it's about time you did a New & Selected.' I had some new work but not enough for a full collection at that stage, so I say, 'ok, you can take some of those new poems and I've selected from the previous collections.' So the intent was double-edged really, to introduce my work to a Brazilian readership and to consolidate what I thought was the best of what I had done thus far, and to make that available to readers here, and perhaps in Canada

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as well.

It's interesting that you use the term 'double-edged'. I was wondering perhaps as a poet, you obviously have the Canadian background and influences, but you've immigrated to here and been open to so much here, do you ever suffer an identity crisis in a way?

Ha, well it's not so much an identity crisis, but to use a Portuguese word, *saudade*, longing to be back in my places. I'm here a long time, and I do feel at home here, but this isn't home in the way Canada is, and when you look at the writing, I guess that's obvious, that most of what I write about is about there.

As a writer that's based here in Northern Ireland at the moment, having worked almost exclusively with Canadian publishers in the past, how have you found integrating yourself? Are you still seen as an outsider here?

Less so in recent years I think, due to the network that's been built up: I do more readings here and publish more here than I use to. I've kind of made an effort towards that, as in the past I was very aware that my books were published in Canada so I should try to promote the stuff there, but it became harder and harder to do that as I went back less and less frequently. I'm kind of at a point where I need to make a choice whether I start to try to publish a book here or same with a Canadian publisher, but then I'm not they to do the promotion and marketing which means quite a bit these days.

And then now you have a new ground opening in front of you with the bilingual edition coming out in Brazil. Are you going over to do any promotion there?

Yes, I'm going in April for ten days to do three launches and an academic paper. I have done readings over there a couple of years ago - which is when I met the translator, José Roberto O'Shea - which were well received and all, but again you're not there, so having the translation will be a big help in that regard.

And working with José, did the publisher recommend him, or was this a translator you particular wanted to work with?

Well when I say that that book came about because of my acquaintanceship with Beatriz, but that's not totally true: I was invited to speak at a symposium in Brazil in 2013, to speak about my own writing and to give a couple of readings, and that's when I met José. He said, it would be wonderful to translate your work, while at the same time, Beatriz was saying, I'll like to show this work to a publisher I know here. So it kind of evolved out of the two of them, plus the publisher, plus me being there.

José was a very good translator; we did the translating about this time last year, over three or four months, mostly by Skype. I selected the poems from my back catalogue and sent them to him more or less as a manuscript. When he had a full translation, we started to work together, collaboratively. So every week or two weeks, he had a two or three hour Skype, and really went over them with a fine toothcomb. We had a great time, a lot of laugh, because some things we got completely wrong, and other things were just so exquisitely wrought that he kind of enhanced the poem. He was a wonderful learning experience for me on how Portuguese operates, Brazilian Portuguese in particular.

Were there any particular words or lines in your work that were difficult to translate?

There was one that I do remember, yes, and José won't like me saying this! There's a poem, one of the new ones, which is about my father; he died about five years ago almost now, so there are a clutch of poems about him. So I had this one, 'The Finger Bird', which is about how he use to play with my daughter when she was small. He would take his fingers and make the beak of a bird, and so I said 'fingers, tip to tip, tap

tapping'. And José just didn't get what I meant by the finger bird. In Portuguese, it's like us saying 'to give someone the finger' – to flip the bird – and he very politely tried to reconcile this with what I was saying in the poem. So it finally through our conversation came out, and he said, 'I didn't know why your father would be doing this with your daughter!' So we had a great laugh over that.

There were a few idiomatic things like that, where the idiom isn't right for the other language, but generally speaking, he was very close to what I was at.

The preface of the book was written by Medbh McGuckian; how did that come about, and how do you feel she has presented the case for yourself?

I met Medbh in 1985 in Saskatoon in Saskatchewan, we were at an Irish Studies conference and we got on very well. I think I had read some of her work at that point, but since I've been here, she's always been very supportive and interested and close as a friend. So when the publisher asked if there was a person I would like to write a preface for this, she was the first person I thought of. And of course she said yes, and I was very grateful for that.

What she offers in the preface is an interesting look at my position as a Canadian writer in Northern Ireland; it says a little of what I've contributed over the years here. She talks a lot of the significance of the title - she has her own take of what the title means, Double Self Portrait with Mirror – and a lot about the poems about my father. She sees the North Atlantic Ocean as the mirror between myself and Canada, so it's a take on it I hadn't even considered, which was very interesting to see.

You mentioned that you had made the selection yourself for the book; when it came to reviewing your work, how did you determine which poems made the cut? Were they ones you especially wanted to highlight, or were they even ones that you thought were weaker in reflection, but were a good snapshot of where you were at, at that particular time?

There are fewer from the very first books, that any of the others, because I was sixteen when I published my first, and you go back to that and it feels beyond juvenilia. There's a section called 'Early Poems', which contains three or four books, so I pared it down to eight poems, which takes me up to my early twenties. And then Blue Light, Bay and College, I consider the first book I really came of age, so that was the logic behind the selection.

I chose the ones that I thought were the strongest, but when I look at them together, I realise they do kind of encapsulate ideas and themes I've stayed with – the West, stars, Ursa Major, things to do with indigenous culture and life, stuff that I am still writing about and still very intrigued by. They're pretty much all to do with Canada, apart from 'Ghazal of the Hunt' and 'There Are No Castles in Australia'. I had a review years ago, I think of Blue Light, Bay and College, where somebody said 'McCracken is obviously very well-travelled,' because I had referenced all these exotic locales. But it's what I've always done; I like writing about places I've don't necessarily have experience in.

And how about when it came to selecting the later work?

The Mooncalves ones, I only did four, because to me that is a concept album. It was harder to select from that because the poems work together for me, and work chronologically, and they talk to each other. It's a book about people who historically would have been called freaks, but have a disability or are unusual in some physical way. But they all have voices and they talk to each other, so it was hard to disentangle one from another in that series.

The bottom line again was which one ones did I think were strongest. I did want this to showcase what I felt was the best of my work, possibly personal favourite as well, but they are also ones that I thought stood well on their own, without needing any of the others around to support them.

I seem to like long poems in sections – 'Snow Tea' in a very long poem in sections, the 'Mustangs' sequence, and Mooncalves is like that

– pieces put together, photographs set side by side. Tattoo Land has the most from it as it's the most recent, and again, I thought were a bit stronger than the earlier ones.

Looking at the new poems as a hint at what's to come, as I know there's plans for two new books in the pipeline that you've mentioned...

In a way, the new poems reflect that, because there are the seeds of two books. The 'Mustangs' sequence, I hope, will be a book onto itself, with photographs interspersed through it. There are twelve or thirteen of them here, little two or three liners, with the word 'mustang' somewhere in the lines or title.

The other one, I originally thought would be a whole collection about my father. I had Sharon Olds's book, *The Father*, in mind when I starting writing that sequence. I haven't done so many of them recently, so I'm not sure if that will end up being a section of a book.

Mentioning photos, artwork has strongly been tied into your publications in the past – Brian Molyneaux's photos in *Into Celebration*, Gabriela Campos's lithographs in *Tattoo Land*, and particularly the design of *Mooncalves*, did you feel it was a shame that the artwork couldn't be couple with the selected poems in this new book?

No, it didn't bother me that they couldn't be there, because the artwork that is in each of the books is integral to that particular publication. But visual art is really important to me; I've written a lot of poems out of looking at visual art, photos, cinema, as well as paintings.

The *Mooncalves* book, I didn't have much control over the artwork there. In some ways, it is a hodgepodge of different kinds of art, in other ways it maybe enlivens because of the visual art. It means a lot to me, the design of the book, the look of the cover as well as the interior artwork if there is some.

For the design of *New & Selected Poems*, how was that chosen, especially the photograph that goes across the front and back cover?

The interior was really up to the publisher. I like the font, and he asked me about the font and I was quite happy with it, he has a good eye. The cover design, we thought a lot about. It's a photograph called 'Navajo Motel, Arizona, 1984' by John T. Davis, a local filmmaker and photographer. I've collaborated with John on a number of projects, and I sent the publishers several photos by him, all black and white, all from a 1984 reece shoot on one of his films, 'Route 66'. There's a mirror in the photograph, which matches up with the title of the collection, which comes from one of the Mustang poems. So the fact that the mirror just happens to be reflection a pop image of a girl with long black hair...

There are a lot of poems here about the American South West, it's an area of the world I am absolutely enamoured of, and so the photo has that kind of resonance for me. But it's also a bleak picture: it suggest a kind of loneliness, sadness, emptied-out-of-ness, on the part of whoever may have just walked out that door, or is about to. It's one of the photographs I use with the mustang poems, if it's connected to any particular poem there, it's probably those ones. It captures the spirit of this person that's wandering around the West and isn't quite sure what's he's doing with himself.

Do you find any synchronicity between the space of the South West and the space of rural Ireland?

I've written a few things which look at my position here in relation to over there, but in a way how I imagine myself to be there, feeds what I write, whether I live there or not. There's Canadian West and American West, that's where my heart is, that's where my soul is. I came here for very practical reasons: I had a post-doctoral fellowship; I got a job out of that. It was never my intention to stay, although I was interested in Irish literature and I'm a great fan of all Irish writing, but as a place, it's not my country of the heart. But perhaps in a way keeping the country of the

heart elsewhere allows one to write about it in a way one wouldn't have if one were in it. That wasn't a choice for me, it was a position life had put me in, so it has made those places all the more romantic and dear and desired, and that created a source without me consciously manipulating it to be that way.

Double Self Portrait with Mirror: New & Selected Poems (1978--2014) [launches in No Alibis bookstore](#) on Thursday 5th March at 6.30pm. Copies are available to buy from No Alibis, or from [the publisher's website](#).



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