

*Farmers Cross*  
Bernard O'Donoghue  
pp.55  
Faber  
£9.99

By Paul Batchelor

A shorter version of this review appeared in the *Guardian* on 23.7.11.

The opening poem in Bernard O'Donoghue's beguiling new collection *Farmers Cross* tells us that "In the real world, of course, there's no such person / as a Bona-Fide traveller." This is a reference to an old Irish licensing law, which ruled that "Bona-Fide travellers" could be served outside of normal trading hours. The law prompted a notable increase in the number of self-declared travellers, and raised the question of how to spot a false one. Not that anyone would question O'Donoghue's credentials: an Irish émigré, he was born in Cullen, Co. Cork in 1946, but has lived in England since the early 60s. Displacement is an abiding theme in his work, and *Farmers Cross* is peopled with tinkers, immigrants, refugees and exiles.

One of the collection's highlights is O'Donoghue's masterful translation of the Old English lyric "The Wanderer". The poem is updated (the speaker listens to the radio and worries about oil shortages) but the stoic wisdom comes through intact: "When you start holding forth, be sure you know / exactly what your drift is, and where it will end". Such a solitary, melancholy figure might seem far removed from the sociable, courteous O'Donoghue; but we should remember that to be reclusive is a luxury no wanderer can afford: he must be charming and he must have tales to tell. "Emigration" makes this clear:

Unhappy the man who has lacked the occasion  
to return to the village on a sun-struck May morning,  
to shake the hands of the neighbours he'd left  
a lifetime ago and tell the world's wonders,  
before settling down by his hearth once again.

O'Donoghue's unusual claim on the reader is that he is always excellent company. Where another poet might impress with imagery or verbal music, O'Donoghue stakes everything on voice, or more specifically tone, achieving a soft-spoken intimacy with the reader. His tact and scrupulous restraint are matched by his artistry, which is especially evident in his explorations of the workings of memory. "In Bavaria" contrasts two kinds of memorialising. It begins with the poet holidaying in Germany, where he experiences a Proustian moment of recollection:

I was pulled up short by a sudden smell  
I hadn't breathed for years. Chaff: those mounds  
that formed beneath the thresher...

We might expect a childhood vignette to follow, but instead the chaff is described as "worthless, stifling quicksand" that can contain unexpected dangers: there is no way of knowing "what your foot might strike against / after its short plunge through the yielding oat-floss". At first glance, the Heaneyesque compound "yielding oat-floss" looks like a rare descriptive flourish, but it serves a deeper purpose, raising the tone in order to make the plunge into the plain-spoken idiom of what follows all the more unexpected:

On the way back to Munich, we stopped at Dachau.  
It was closed on Monday, so we couldn't see  
the full display of the commemorative centre...

The official commemorative centre may be closed, but the involuntary workings of our individual memories continually accrue associations. The visit to Dachau will remain fixed in the poet's remembrance alongside the smell of chaff, a painful memory hidden just below the surface.

Memory's appeal is never simply nostalgic in O'Donoghue's work: it is frequently a source of discomfort, complicating if not prohibiting any attempt to return home. His *Selected Poems* opened with a haunting persona poem "A Nun Takes the Veil", spoken by a young woman raised in rural Ireland who sees her first motorcar whilst on her way to the convent where she will spend the next forty years. The poem ends: "I couldn't forget / The morning's vision, and I fell asleep / With the engine humming through the open window". *Farmers Cross* describes another young woman who faces a lifetime of troubled sleep, the speaker of "Crumpsall". Newly arrived in Manchester, she looks forward to returning home to Ireland, but knows that the experience of having left will prove indelible: "So when could she go home, and lie in her own bed / thinking back to work-sirens and trains". The absence of a question mark implies the lack of an easy answer.

Occasionally, the need to memorialise elicits a wry, comic side in O'Donoghue, as when he recalls an old woman telling him, when he was ten years old, that she had attended Abraham Lincoln's funeral. He decides to continue the chain, addressing the reader:

never forget  
that you once read something by someone  
who said they had known when they were young  
someone who said their father told them  
they had been to Abraham Lincoln's funeral.

The poem is perfectly balanced, making its assertion while gently mocking itself.

In "The Canon", O'Donoghue describes an ascetic violinist who takes more pleasure in playing the slow movement than "the rondo / that the rest of us had been waiting to jig along to". We infer the poet's admiration for such unshowy art. In an earlier poem, "Nel Mezzo del Cammin", O'Donoghue admitted that he once entertained more grandiose aspirations, but "the odd poem (two in a good year) / Won't do to make the kind of edifice / I'd hoped to leave". Fortunately, he allowed the poems to follow their own ambitions and in doing so discovered a unique gift for honouring the moments other poets overlook.