

**Speech by Clare Daly, Socialist Party & United Left Alliance T.D., on Wednesday June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2012 at Dublin launch of *Mentioning the War: Essays & Reviews (1999-2011)* by Kevin Higgins**  
(to buy the book <http://www.salmonpoetry.com/details.php?ID=255&a=108>)

‘I have to say I am absolutely delighted to be here and sincere thanks to Kevin for inviting me. It is very much an honour. It is an unusual gathering for me. I’m not used to moving in such cultural circles and that, in and of itself, is a great testament to Kevin’s boldness and his courage. A boldness and courage which comes out in his writing. He has no idea what I’m going to say here. I have no real marker; I don’t normally attend such events. So, who knows what could happen here. That said, it is true, I should be in the Dáil at the moment, where we are moving a bill on building regulations, which is a hugely important issue to tens of thousands of people and I do have to rush off afterwards but that is no reflection on Kevin; this event was hugely important to me as well and I’m very glad to be here.

I have known Kevin since the 1980s, when he was politically active, alongside myself. A period some of you may have been through; a period of “dole queues, moving statues” and Minister Ruari Quinn who is beautifully remembered in one of Kevin’s pieces in the book. It was a time obviously of sharp, class battles with the miners’ strike and The Smiths and so on. Probably, over the intervening years, I haven’t had as much contact with Kevin. I was very appreciative when, ten years ago, I was in prison – not for tax evasion on corporate profits like many of the gangsters who should be – but over the bin tax protest, when Kevin sent me one of his poems, a poem which was one of the most popular poems, I believe, in Ireland in 2005 ‘A Brief History of Those Who Made Their Point Politely And Then Went Home’. He sent that poem to me in prison and it certainly stayed with me.

And while we are here to launch the book, I think it would be remiss of me not to recognise Kevin’s role in terms of the development of poetry in Ireland. From the introductions to the book by Darrell Kavanagh and John Goodby and from Kevin’s regular emails about the Over The Edge weekly activities and the work himself and Susan have done, it’s clear that they have been instrumental in bringing creative writing to a whole layer of new people who wouldn’t otherwise be involved in poetry and creative writing through the poetry slams and so on. It is a phenomenal achievement really which should be recognised and long may it continue. Because to not only lead when it comes to the printed word but also to play a role in developing the creative potential of others, whatever that may be, really is a huge contribution for anyone to make and I think we should recognise that.

But we're not just here to praise Kevin but to critically examine the work before us. He is well known for his poetry in particular, which is outstanding. You'd have to say that he is one of the lead poets of his generation in Ireland at this stage. And maybe in some ways this book is a little bit different. It's a collection of essays, covering really the first decade of this century. I think it's a really good and provocative read. It will jolt you; it will certainly touch you; make you laugh; maybe make you snarl a little bit as well, depending on where you come from or what your background is. A reader can learn a huge amount about culture; about poetry; about the politics of the Left in particular, internationally, in Ireland and indeed in Galway during the period from the 1980s if you read this book. From the time of the collapse of Stalinism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe to the perceived triumph of neo-liberal capitalism in the years after that, right up to 2007-2008 when we saw the beginning of the end of that model, a point that's understood by everyone at this stage, except probably Eamonn Gilmore and the Labour Party who are doing their best to revive its position.

I do think in some ways there's an irony that the book finishes at the time of the end of the so-called triumph of capitalism, when maybe that vain hope still existed that the crisis was just a blip and that they'd be able to get a way out. Now that hope is firmly dashed and I think we have the beginning of the sequel, Mentioning the War part 2, when Kevin's creative talents can turn to the present period of crisis. Of course we're not here to deal with the book of the future but the book of today which is a great read and one that I would strongly recommend. It has been skilfully crafted and does give you a very good insight into the times and from a very personal perspective. And while it is important to acknowledge Kevin's skills; he'd be very disappointed if we were to just leave it at that. You didn't come tonight just to be part of a backslappers convention, attractive and all as that might be. Given that some of the themes in Kevin's book relate to the less than democratic practices in some of the small groups on the left in Ireland and also the points around imperialist intervention in the name of humanitarianism or to use the glib terminology: the responsibility to protect and be justified. Then obviously when you have essays on topics like that someone like me is going to have to make a few points about those.

I suppose the first point I would make is that it is a profound compliment to the quality of Kevin's writing that you can disagree with the content and yet find yourself still reading on and appreciating the style. That's a trend I think that you'll find in the reviews of the book so far. It's a point that I think Kevin himself has made that some of the pieces in the book contradict each other, because what you're getting is an insight into the mind of someone whose ideas are evolving. You're not talking about someone who's dealing in absolutes but somebody whose views are changing, somebody who's challenging themselves. For somebody like me who is involved in one of the groups that Kevin has chosen to call the far left in Ireland - in an Irish context we really are talking

about the Socialist Workers Party and my own party, the Socialist Party – I have to say that it is in places a very sobering and provocative read. And that can only be a good thing, because anybody who thinks that they are perfect, or that the groups that they associate with or the organisations they are involved in are perfect and that they have nothing to learn, well really those people are never going to go forward. And I think in this sense Kevin’s book is hugely constructive.

Now, Kevin in one of the pieces – an interview with Red Banner magazine titled ‘Poetry, Politics and the Left’ – states, and I quote: “It seems to me obvious that Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Labour Party are infinitely more democratic than any of the organisations on the far left; they can tolerate internal dissent in a way that the far left cannot.” Now, I have to take issue with that statement! I might be okay with the part of it that says that what Kevin calls far left organisations are less than perfect. But to then go from that to take the leap to put the Labour Party up there; I’d have to challenge that somewhat. That is an overstatement. I have no problem putting on the record that, as part of his evolution, that Kevin was very shabbily treated in my opinion by some of these left groups. But that said, I don’t generalise from that. I think that was completely wrong. I think some of the practices that Kevin outlines in his writing about how some of these groups operate will really ring true with anybody who is a member of those organisations, or has had contact with them. And if they say that they don’t, well then they are not being entirely honest with themselves.

It is clear that the practices of some of the left groups, probably because – or largely because – they are struggling to survive and build in a hostile environment, have not been ideal. That is putting it, probably, mildly. I’d go even further and say that these practices won’t be adequate for the period ahead and that unless these groups learn some of the lessons and change their practices then they will be bypassed by history, because I don’t think that ordinary people will tolerate some of the undemocratic practices outlined in some of the pieces in Kevin’s book. But to go from that to elevating the Labour Party as a vehicle for dealing with dissent, I wouldn’t accept that. That is a leap too far. The reality is that the Labour Party just ignore dissent and Kevin will know that from his own time in the Labour Party when motions would be passed by the membership and then just ignored by the ministers in the various governments. It’s hardly democratic, let alone “infinitely more democratic” for the Labour leader to announce publicly that he is opposed to Nice 2 and then to slither off into the U.S. embassy and tell the U.S. ambassador that he’s only really saying that for show. We could go on all night: a party to get elected on a pro-choice platform and then get to power where you can do something, and do nothing. That type of toleration of dissent, we can certainly do without. That said, I think the sections of the book that deal with this are really insightful, they’re very personal, and they do give a very good critique of the operation of politics in

Ireland from the perspective of someone who was there. And I would strongly encourage people to view it in that way.

In relation to the other issue that I'd have to go on the record as opposing, but just very briefly, that part of the book that deals with so-called humanitarian intervention to prevent genocide in Bosnia and Kosovo or Libya and Syria and so on. I think I really would maybe make the point from the *Politics of Genocide* by Chomsky for he said that "during the past decades the word genocide has increased in frequency of use and recklessness of application. So much so that the crime of the twentieth century, for which the term was originally coined, often appears debased." We have a scenario now where the International Criminal Court can only find black African leaders to indict for genocide while the guardians of international justice have yet to find a single crime committed by a great white northern power against people of colour.

I think Kevin knows that truth is the first casualty of war and we can't really depend on the evidence of embedded journalists such as Samantha Powers or Ed Vulliamy. And Kevin, in one of the pieces here, writes "it, Ramsay Clark's witness statement in the trial of Slobodan Milosevic for genocide, made me reconsider my own absolute in all circumstances opposition to U.S. military intervention. I too opposed the NATO bombing of Serbia. I was clearly wrong. Perle, Wolfowitz and Kirkpatrick were correct. The Left is more often than not the enemy of truth, the bully's friend. That has been my experience."

I don't know if that is Kevin's view now. In another piece he refers to Lorna Siggins, the *Irish Times* reporter, as a "different kind of journalist working with the facts rather than bar-stool opinion of either variety" in a piece titled 'the Ballad of Shell and Rosport'. And I do think that facts are important. We are here to celebrate a book and a style of creative writing, which I think is hugely insightful and important. But facts are important. And in relation to the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999 and so on, it is a fact that more people were killed in Kosovo by the KLA [Kosovo Liberation Army] from the beginning of 1998 to the launching of the NATO war in March 1999 than were killed by Serb armies. I could go on about the point and this is maybe not the forum, but I think it's important to register. Facts are indeed important and, in my opinion, Kevin was right to oppose the bombing of Serbia. But that is the joy of writing in some ways, isn't it, that we can express different views but express them well and engage in a dialogue.

Darrell Kavanagh writes in his foreword to the book that "Kevin, disillusioned with the far Left, has avoided all three of the sad ends to which ex-revolutionaries could come: religion, postmodernism and rabid neoliberalism. And maybe he has, maybe he has! I do think it probably gives Kevin a certain uniqueness and pride of place, because I think he has escaped those traps. But posing it like that really misses the key question, which is: is the journey over? This is something that would affect all writers. I think writing in the manner that

Kevin does, with the insightfulness that he brings to his writing, you could never believe that this journey is over. There are too many contradictions even within it to think that the process has been fully worked out.

In his review of Douglas Murray's *Neoconservatism: Why We Need It* Kevin writes that "Murray was in every sense pushing an open-door where I was concerned", which might sound strange; he goes on in parts of that essay to accept the good intentions of the likes of Bush and Wolfowitz and so on in relation to revenge for 9/11 and the so-called war on terror. Now, obviously this piece was written in 2007 and Bush has been replaced by a new commander-in-chief, and really the interventions go on just the same under Obama as they did under Bush himself. The point is, I suppose, that it doesn't really matter whether it's Douglas Murray's favourite or Obama's men who are in charge: imperialism is real; it's identifiable and it's ruthless. And really what it comes down to at the end of the day is: which side are you on? For me, having known Kevin for decades now, when it comes down to it, I'm quite sure I know what side Kevin will be on.

I think the pieces are beautifully written. There are hugely personal pieces in the book, which I haven't dealt with, and I know Kevin is going to read some of those now. The book is politically challenging; it's thought provoking and gives you an insight into a new decade, the first decade at the start of this century. A really insightful, personalised view into that time. As I said at the start, I think it's screaming out for Kevin to analyse the period post 2007/2008. But that's a matter for another day. Those of you who haven't bought the book, I hope you do. You'll enjoy it. You won't regret it. Thank you very much for inviting me.'

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