

# Stratigraphies: Forms of Excavation in Contemporary British and Irish Poetry

Submitted by Niamh Catherine Downing to the University of Exeter as  
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## **Abstract**

This thesis intervenes in current critical debates about space, place and landscape in late-twentieth and twenty-first century British and Irish poetry, by examining models of excavation in selected work by Geoffrey Hill, Ciaran Carson, Geraldine Monk and Alice Oswald. It argues that the influence of the spatial turn on literary criticism over the last thirty years has led to the deployment of a limited set of spatial tropes as analytical tools for interpreting the spaces and places of poetry. By deploying excavation as a critical method it seeks to challenge existing approaches that tend to privilege ideas of space over time, and socio-spatial practices over literary traditions of writing place. In doing so it develops a new model for reading contemporary poetics of place that asserts the importance of locating spatial criticism within temporal and literary-historical frameworks. The four poets examined in the thesis exhibit a common concern with unearthing the strata of language as well as material space. Starting from a premise that excavation always works over the ground of language as well as landscape it investigates the literary traditions of landscape writing in which each of these poets might be said to be embedded. After surveying the critical field the thesis sets out four principles of excavation that it argues are transformed and renewed by each of these poets: the relationship between past and present; recovery and interpretation of finds; processes of unearthing; exhumation of the dead. The subsequent chapters contend that these conventions are put into question by Geoffrey Hill's sedimentary poetics, Ciaran Carson's parodic stratigraphy, Geraldine Monk's collaborations with the dead, and Alice Oswald's geomorphology of a self-excavating earth. The critical method that underpins the discussion in each of the chapters is also excavatory in that it unearths both the historical and literary strata of specific sites (the Midlands, Belfast, East Lancashire, Dartmoor and the Severn estuary) and resonances in the work of earlier poetic excavators (Paul Celan, Edward Thomas, Gerard Manley Hopkins, William Wordsworth, Dante Alighieri and Homer). Through careful exegesis of these poets and their precursors this thesis demonstrates that by transforming

existing forms of excavation, contemporary poetry is able to renew its deep dialogue with place and literary history.

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