The Belfast Group

In 1963 Philip Hobsbaum, a recently-arrived lecturer in English at Queen's University, Belfast, organized a writing workshop made up of students, faculty, and a number of writers from the local community. The group was patterned after a similar workshop that Hobsbaum had organized first in Cambridge, then in London, between 1955 and 1962. The Group, as it has come to be known, met regularly during term at No. 4 Fitzwilliam Street, Philip and Hannah Hobsbaum's home near the university. Three years later, when Hobsbaum left Belfast for the University of Glasgow, Seamus Heaney assumed responsibility for organizing the meetings, which moved to his and Marie Heaney's home on Ashley Avenue. Later Michael Allen and Arthur Terry, both lecturers at Queen's, played organizational roles as well. The Belfast Group lasted, with occasional interruptions, for nine years. It finally ceased altogether in 1972 at a time of political upheaval in Northern Ireland and at a time when a remarkable number of the participants had published their first collections and launched promising literary careers.

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| four poets |
| ***Two Group members, Michael Longley (far left) and Seamus Heaney (far right), with poets Derek Mahon and John Hewitt.*** |

In the early years, the Group was directly shaped by Hobsbaum. Writers were invited—and, on occasion, uninvited—by him, and the sessions followed a format that he put in place. Typically the featured writer would give him a selection of new work, and Hobsbaum would then make a further selection for presentation at the Group meeting. He would then pass the poems, short stories, or other work on to either Cilla Craig, the Secretary in the English Department, or to his wife, Hannah, who would type and make copies on the department's Roneo duplicator. These Group sheets, as they have come to be known, would be distributed to the members, and the following Tuesday (later Monday) the Group would meet at 8:00 in the evening to hear the featured writer read his or her work. While the emphasis was on new poetry, short stories and other prose work was also welcome. Arthur Terry, Professor of Spanish at Queen's, presented verse translations from the Catalán, and Stewart Parker read from his experimental prose.

Hobsbaum reports that the first half of the Group meetings was always devoted to the work of a single writer, and that those present would discuss each piece immediately after it was read. Hobsbaum set an example for text-based, close reading that some found intimidating. Jack Pakenham, a school teacher at the time, has written "woe to any unsuspecting poet who could not stand over every single word written."[1](http://beck.library.emory.edu/BelfastGroup/web/html/overview.html#1) Michael Longley recalls that while he expected sharp criticism, he was "surprised by the ferocity of Hobsbaum's attack."[2](http://beck.library.emory.edu/BelfastGroup/web/html/overview.html#1) At the close of the reading and discussion, there would be a brief break for coffee and biscuits, before reconvening for an open session where anyone could read work they wished to share. Philip Hobsbaum recalls Arthur Terry reading Robert Lowell in the second half of a Group meeting, and Michael Allen remembers Marie Devlin (later Heaney) reading her own poems.

After Hobsbaum's departure for Glasgow in 1966, the Group continued to meet under the direction of Seamus Heaney. Later Arthur Terry and Michael Allen shared this organizational role with Heaney, and the Group moved variously between the Heaney's home on Ashley Avenue to a nearby pub on the Lisburn Road, the Four in Hand. The format of the meetings remained unchanged, though at some point coffee was replaced by pints. Among the new writers who joined the Group meetings in these later years were Paul Muldoon and Ciaran Carson.

There has been much disagreement about the importance of these Group meetings and the role they played in the emergence of a new generation of poets from Northern Ireland. Derek Mahon has insisted he was not a Group member at all and that he only attended one meeting when he happened to be in Belfast visiting Michael and Edna Longley. For his part, Michael Longley has written that he never altered even one semi-colon as a result of Group discussion (though Longley Group sheets show that he revised a number of poems—among them "Christopher at Birth," "Elegy for Fats Waller," and "Gathering Mushrooms"—and presented them more than once). What is not in dispute, however, is that a remarkable number of the participants went on to become highly accomplished writers. Many of the poems collected in Seamus Heaney's first published collection, *Death of a Naturalist,* were first read aloud in Group meetings, among them "Digging," "Personal Helicon," and "Blackberry-Picking." Similarly the Belfast Group provided a forum for early work by James Simmons, Michael Longley, Paul Muldoon, and Ciaran Carson. For each of these writers, the Group provided an early audience, for some their very first. As Seamus Heaney has put it, "What happened Monday night after Monday night in the Hobsbaum's flat in Fitzwilliam Street somehow ratified the activity of writing for all of us who shared it."[3](http://beck.library.emory.edu/BelfastGroup/web/html/overview.html#1)

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The Group published no magazine and produced no anthology of the kind the London Group did, but it was always closely allied with the Belfast-based literary magazines of the time. Seamus Heaney and Michael Longley edited the *Northern Review* from 1965-1969 and, as a result, they were well-positioned to solicit new work of other Group members. The contributors notes to the early issues of the magazine read like a roll call of Group members; present are John Bond, Philip Hobsbaum, Stewart Parker, Paul Smyth, Arthur Terry, and Joan Watton (later Newmann), in addition to Heaney and Longley themselves. Similarly the inaugural issue of Harry Chambers' *Phoenix* magazine contains poems by three Group members: Heaney, Longley, and Iris Bull. Even after Chambers took the magazine with him to Manchester, he continued to publish a generous sampling of new work by Group poets. In 1968 James Simmons founded the *Honest Ulsterman,* the longest running literary magazine to come out of the North, and he too turned often to Group members to fill the new magazine. While there was no formal linkage between the Group and these publishing ventures, the Group certainly contributed to the new sense that there was enough literary activity in the North to justify such efforts.

The participation of so many talented writers ensures that the Group will remain of lasting interest to scholars and literary historians. These pages collect a substantial amount of documentary information on the history of the Belfast Group, including biographical notes on the participants (well-known and obscure), a catalog of all known Group sheets, and fully searchable electronic texts of Group sheets by Seamus Heaney, Philip Hobsbaum, Michael Longley, Paul Muldoon, and James Simmons.