

Faculty Member and Poet Ben Howard Mulls Mutual Irish-American Attraction

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Alfred, NY -- Midcentury, the most recent book by poet and Alfred University English professor Ben Howard, begins: I can't begin to say what brought me here, Unless it be the Irish predilections For whiskey and horses, both of which entail A certain risk and a less-than-certain gain. The narrator of *Midcentury*, a verse novella set in Ireland in the 1940s, is not Ben Howard himself but a persona, an American lexicographer seeking a private peace in Ireland. And yet Howard might have written the first line about himself. He's an American whose forebears are not Irish, so why does Ireland draw him? The pull is so strong that some readers even assume he's an Irish poet. Howard's quest in recent years is to figure out "what brought me here," and much of his work attests to the search. Why Ireland? Why not Wales, France, or Greece? "There's a body of work by Irish poets writing about the United States, and American poets writing about Ireland," Howard said. "Irish poets seem to be attracted by the American sense of openness and size ... the lure of a new culture, a new world." "The Irish are also drawn by the myth of the American West, by images that never existed except in the movies," he said. The same, in part, holds true in reverse. Howard is one of many American poets who have made Ireland a temporary home, lured by a quality the Irish take for granted: a sense of place. The main stream of American poetry, he says, revolves around the personal, the psychological, the philosophical, and the mobile, and lacks the rootedness of a society where one's ancestors may have lived 500 years on the same land. Howard doesn't think his own attraction to Ireland is based on the sense of place. "My own involvement has been more spiritual -- or at least emotional. I feel an affinity," he said. *Midcentury* was published in 1997 by Salmon Publishing, an Irish firm that publishes both Irish and American poets. Howard's published work since then includes the essays "Irish Voices," a review-essay on three Irish poets in the February 1998 *Poetry*; "Humane Letters," a discussion of the art of letter-writing in the spring 1998 *Iowa Review*; an essay about the Irish poet Derek Mahon in the spring 1998 *Sewanee Review*; an essay about the artists' retreat at Yaddo in the winter 1998 *Yaddo News*; and a review essay on Maxine Kumin and R.T. Smith in the June 1998 *Poetry*. He also published an article, "The Evolving Art of Ciaran Carson," in the spring 1998 *Shenandoah*; and poetry in *The Formalist*, *The Iowa Review*, *Sewanee Review*, *Chelsea*, and *Shenandoah*, along with a poetic sequence, "Lines for the Makers," published as a limited edition by Tangram Editions. His next poetry collection, *The Holy Alls: Poems 1994-1997*, is due out in 2000 from Salmon Publishing. In addition to teaching at Alfred University, where he has held the Gertz Chair in Writing since 1996, Howard has spent time in Ireland every summer since 1985. He also lectures and teaches at the Kerry International Summer School in Tralee, Ireland.