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Title: Kevin Ireland

Creators: Wilson, J. M. Poetry Archive (UK)

Example citation: Wilson, J. M. (2012) *Kevin Ireland*. London: Poetry Archive (UK). [Online]

Version: Submitted version

Official URL: <http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/singlePoet.do?poetId=16218>

<http://nectar.northampton.ac.uk/3694/>



KEVIN IRELAND b.1933

If death still comes/we'll strike a pose/and hold our breath/until he goes

Kevin Ireland was born Kevin Jowsey in Auckland and now lives just across the harbour in Devonport. A protégé of Frank Sargeson, he established a local literary presence as co-founder of *Mate* before leaving New Zealand for London in 1959. During the next twenty-five years he continued to identify himself as a New Zealand poet, publishing there all his work written in the 1960s and 70s. His return to New Zealand showed a flowering of talent, with the publication of *Selected Poems* (1987), and new collections including a sonnet sequence, *The Year of the Comet* (1986), and political satire, *Tiberius at the Beehive* (1990). In the 1990s he turned to prose, writing a short story collection, six novels, and two volumes of memoirs. An opera libretto, an edited book on the New Zealand novel and two volumes of non fiction, *On Getting Old* and *How to Catch a Fish* have also appeared. To date Ireland has published 18 volumes of poetry.

Ireland has affinities with the previous generation of poets, and combines the spareness of Mason with the lyricism of Fairburn. In his early work he wears poetry as a cloak, and his playful self-fashioning as a literary man through the use of poetic conceit imparts a mocking self awareness, as in *Literary Cartoons*. A poised observer who can 'strike a pose', he registers love, death, and the flux of time through the everyday, but with a serious intent beneath the comic, ironic surface. Life's unpredictability provokes a jesting shrug, which yields to celebration of the moment's passing in love poetry or somber recognition of death as in 'Villanelle for Daisy'. In other poems it is the world's

disorder and nature's evanescence, when 'Time scratches the gold foil/from the sun', that catch his sceptical eye.

A taut, pared-down style is Ireland's trademark, but he also writes longer, reflective poems which encompass different emotional tones and linguistic registers. A fondness for reminiscence underpins his epistolary art with its convivial, conversational mode, while in poems which scrutinize history and the failures of the past, satire and wit are reined in with narrative sequencing and a collective voice of lament, as in 'Anzac Day Devonport'. Although he writes eloquently of friends, family and lovers, such affectionate gestures are often extended by questions about mortality and survival. The precision and formal control of Ireland's verse make it well-suited to articulating an acceptance of inescapable truths. Yet he also relishes the absurdity of life, and in responding to its illusions and surprises with metaphor, wit and elaborate conceit, he foregrounds the paradoxes of art.

The poet's reading is sonorous and weighty. He respects cadence, while using pauses to indicate space or stress a rhyme structure. His voice is often uninflected yet a distinctive intonation pattern expresses a range of moods, registers and tones. The melody of individual words and phrases extends to larger units of syntax and stanza.

| 503-500 words inc title and quote

