

*Undercurrents* is a collection of haiku and haiku prose, woven around Irish rivers and interspersed with flashes of personal and regional history. Inspired by a lifetime of local exploration, much of this work has been published in journals at home and abroad, and is brought together here as a psychogeography of Irish rivers. It is Amanda Bell's first solo collection.

'A book that courses gently as the rivers it describes, startling us at times with various historical snippets from the pages and footnotes of history: Domenico Garibaldi, an Italian organ grinder – murdered, poor fellow! This is a compelling and unusual narrative, arresting us with its tenderness. You will find haiku in this book that could grace any anthology, national or international. Teeming with life and shot through with death, *Undercurrents* is a very welcome addition to *haikai* literature.'

—Gabriel Rosenstock

'*Undercurrents* celebrates a plethora of connections between nature and humans and as such can be described as deeply ecological literature. Every page of these exquisite haiku and haibun enchants.'

—Maeve O'Sullivan, haiku poet and founding member of Haiku Ireland

'Haibun in Ireland is in good hands'

—Mike Montreuil, haibun editor, *A Hundred Gourds*

*Undercurrents*

# Undercurrents

Amanda Bell

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## **Dedication**

For P.G.

## **Author's Preface**

In many of their attributes rivers – particularly those whose courses dip underground – parallel family history: sometimes too convoluted to trace back to the source, mostly forgotten, surprising us occasionally by unexpected appearances and connections.

These river haibun combine stories of Irish rivers with fragments of personal recollection – the embedded haiku crystallizing moments remembered, droplets retrieved from the relentless advance of time and moving water. Woven between the haibun are haiku sequences, variations on a theme, responses to some aspect of the preceding text.

Amanda Bell, Dublin, 2016

## Introduction

*Undercurrents* is an engaging interweaving of local and family history, childhood reminiscences, and keen observation of nature. The unifying riverine theme binds these diverse threads into a very satisfying whole.

I was vividly brought back to the local river of my own childhood, with its pinkeens, eels, swans, excitement and danger. And as increasing numbers of us come to appreciate our local rivers as linear parks, we may be thankful to Amanda Bell for telling their stories, and for reminding us, through the many layers of her narrative, that rivers convey a deep and abiding metaphoric resonance, as the waters of life and death, the flow of time from origin to end.

Our towns and cities often owe their foundation to being on a river. We still depend heavily on rivers for our water supply, and as a power source. In flood they remind us of our vulnerable place in the natural order. They bring the wild life of that natural order into the very centre of our city and suburban lives. Culverted and concealed from view under our neighbourhoods, they might remind us of the deeper levels of the human experience if approached imaginatively, as is done with poetic insight and truthfulness here.

This is linked together with a clear and uncluttered prose which brings us into the places and events described so vividly, in a style which combines the scientist's cool observation with a warmth which draws us into the heart of the matter.

Prose and poetry play off each other delightfully here. The aptness with which they are combined is deeply satisfying to both fact and felt imagination. Flow on.

James Norton, Dublin, 2016

*Undercurrents*

### **What Lies Beneath**

Since the medieval period, rivers in counties Dublin and Wicklow have been diverted to feed the city's ever-growing needs. Between 1937 and 1947, the Poulaphouca reservoir was created by damming the River Liffey and flooding the valley of the King's River, its small, acid-water tributary. Farms, woods and Ballinahown village were all submerged. Freed from the confines of the riverbed to range over fields and woods, small trout gorged themselves till they grew bloated and diseased. In 1978, when the water levels dropped to an all-time low, submerged rooftops appeared above the surface of the lake.

greylag geese graze  
as the bog road reappears –  
floating thatch reeds

a sapwood dugout –  
oars poised  
on the lake bottom

treetops reaching  
from deepening turloughs –  
rooks take flight

the river rises  
above field level –  
old well brimming

shaded river bend –  
brown trout shimmy  
over gravel beds



tree roots  
snake through rivermud –  
abating flood

goldcrest bathing  
in shafts of sunlight –  
water over stone

### Undercurrents

The Little Dargle is a rivulet rising above Ticknock at Fairy Castle. It ducks into a culvert near Loreto Park and continues unseen towards Póg valley, where it meets a small branch course and runs briefly overground in the Badger's Glen beside Landscape Road.

awake  
beneath the cooling earth –  
dusk on the river

The stream runs the length of this small park, then flows underground once more, converging with the Castle Stream and joining the Dodder River by Lord Ely's Gate, an imposing arch which was one of the entrances to Rathfarnham Castle during the eighteenth century. In 1841 the body of a murdered Italian organ-grinder, Domenico Garibaldi, was found in front of the gate. No one was ever convicted of the killing.

A stone's throw uphill is Orwell Park where, in the late 1950s, a young man arrived from Burma. He came to find the father of his father, an employee of the Indian Civil Service who had lost his life during the Japanese advance in 1942. How he found his Irish family was never known. My great-grandfather turned him from the door.

bursting upwards  
from Victorian culverts –  
murky water

empty park –  
an angler practise-casting  
on the grass

two ducks and a tern –  
a shopping trolley  
sinks in the floodpond

a stranger  
paces the bandstand –  
grey crow hopping

winter pond –  
mallards tracing  
herringbones

## Sound Wall

The Dargle rises on Djouce Mountain and makes a thunderous 400-foot descent at Ireland's highest waterfall, six kilometres from the main Powerscourt estate. In 1821, for the visit of King George IV, Richard Wingfield, 5th Viscount Powerscourt, dammed the waterfall so as to release a torrent while he and the king watched from a bridge below. Fortuitously, the king was unable to leave a banquet at Powerscourt House; when the water was released it washed the bridge clean away.

harbouring  
splintered matchwood –  
river bend

In the early 1960s the Slazenger family took over the estate from the Wingfields. They brought with them their farm manager, my paternal grandfather. By the time I was born he had retired, but because of his long association with the estate, on Sunday visits we were given a dispensation from buying tickets to visit the waterfall. There were few visitors in those days, and we were often alone in the wooded parkland.

forest stillness –  
the creak of green antlers  
against tree trunks

My grandfather had lost an arm in a farming accident. He wore the empty sleeve of his jacket pinned up neatly, and a good tweed coat draped over his shoulders. While he and my father watched on, my brother and I would edge as close to the river as we dared, engulfed in the cloud of mist rising from the rocks where the tumbling water broke its fall.

at the foot of  
a silver curtain –  
silence

evenings drawing in –  
father mows the lawn  
for the last time

a shower of lime-seeds  
pirouette from the tree –  
autumn thunder

hillwalkers –  
laughter cushioned  
in pine needles

creaking stairs –  
the cat on my pillow  
stops purring

### Between the Weirs

My family moved to Limerick in 1976. During the first cold winter, while still finding my feet, I discovered the Mulcair River. On that first visit, the path to the weir at Ballyclough was frozen into ridges, the cut-away bank dangled icicles, and branches were weighed down by clustering ice-globes. The white water of the weir was shot through with silver bars of leaping salmon.

scales flash  
in the fish steps –  
a glimpse of home

Due to the awkward access, Ballyclough weir was less popular with anglers than the weir at Annacotty; but frequented by poachers, and by local kids who spent lazy summer days swimming in the still, brackish pool behind the salmon steps.

dredging silt  
along the weir steps –  
this stiffening denim

Between the weirs, Limerick Horse Packers Ltd, a slaughterhouse from the holding bays of which we once managed to release distressed ponies, discharged its factory sluicings, sending plumes of bloody water downstream.

lost spinners  
glint in the river mud –  
sundown

Downriver, under the bridge at Annacotty, lampreys held themselves still in the moving water by sucking onto rocks, before transferring to passing salmon, using their discs of sharp teeth to saw through scales and skin, then feast on the host's blood and body fluids.

in the shadow  
of abandoned mills –  
Nosferatu

After school, my brother and I spent hours standing in the water under the bridge, dragging spinners over the lampreys in hope of foul-hooking them. Some would coil around our wellingtons in protest before escaping downstream, others we hauled on to the shaley riverbank, and prodded at their improbable mouths until we lost interest.

stone arches –  
waters parting  
around our legs

fledgelings gone –  
a scatter of grey down  
beneath the nest

not yet midsummer –  
a dead leaf on the skylight  
reminding me

another birthday –  
September's full moon fading  
into sunrise

cutting this year's wood  
for next year's fires –  
who will feel its warmth?

### Swiftly Flowing Water

The Clare River runs through a red sandstone gorge between counties Limerick and Tipperary. A forest walk loops around either side of the river, rising and falling steeply among pine trees. The forest floor is softly cushioned by pine needles, in contrast to the sheets of rock pavement at the water's edge.

Shortly after the sudden death of my grandfather, we brought my grandmother there for a Sunday walk. Her springer spaniel ran to the water's edge to pick up a throwing stick, got caught by the rapids, and within seconds was swept out of sight.

high water –  
at the corner of my eye  
the dipper's white bib

willow baskets  
creak by the fireside –  
scent of aspirin

deathbed –  
her hands reaching  
across the years

spider silk  
strung across the vault  
catching light

names long-forgotten –  
azalea buds bursting  
above the lake

## Preserved

Largan Hill, on the south side of Lough Conn, looks down to the east at Attiappleton lake, and to the west at Lake Levally. The foot of the hill is in commonage, grazed by sheep and goats. The lane leading up to Terryduff tapers off here, diverging into sheep tracks which gradually merge with the bog, and the walker is faced with heather tufts, drifts of dancing cotton, and tracts of bog which betray themselves only by the shiver extending out from beneath the weight of your tread. Spongy hummocks of red and green sphagnum moss promise a firm foothold, but often deceive. Flat to the ground, star-shaped sundews lure flies with droplets of clear, gluey nectar.

stuck fast  
beneath a starry sky –  
night falling

Ascending the hill, the terrain becomes drier. Bog gives way to stone, moss to gorse, cotton to thorn. By ear, I locate a mountain stream. It is almost hidden in the scrubby undergrowth, except where it forms a short waterfall, landing on a large smooth stone at the head of a quartz-lined pool. I strip to my skin and slip through the scratchy heather. Crossing the pool my bones ache with cold. I pull myself up to lean on the stone shelf, and watch my legs beneath the surface.

limbs glowing amber  
through ferrous water –  
evening stillness

green hazel leaves  
unfold their pleats –  
a moth stretches

a new-hatched mayfly  
climbs towards sunlight –  
summer solstice



wren baby  
flushed from the ditch  
by midges

fraughan seedlings  
in the moss –  
their first season

midsummer –  
faded gorse flowers  
fatten into seed

## Between the Bridges

Passing under the Foxford road at Cloongullaun Bridge, the River Moy proceeds in a series of loops towards the bridge at Ballylahan. In between the bridges lie the ruins of Oldcastle House, a once-fine Georgian farmhouse with a cut-stone barn. Around the house is a stand of post-mature beech trees, their grey trunks spiralling upwards towards the canopy.

empty window frames –  
water current  
carving out tree-roots

When the present owners bought Oldcastle, the house, though dilapidated, was roofed, and held the potential for restoration. In the hall, suspended from a doorframe, was a wasps' nest the size of a beer keg. Attempts to smoke out the insects caused the house to catch fire. Word spread rapidly and the parishioners of Meelick rushed to form a chain, passing buckets of water from the river to the house. All but the stone was consumed by flames.

fleeing  
their paper home –  
spark shower

August meteors –  
bumblebees repair their nest  
after the badger

late summer bee plunging into buddleia

weeding –  
nothing too small  
for the garden robin

blue heart  
of the artichoke flower –  
bees kneading

sunwarmed path –  
such a fat bumblebee  
burrowing

### *Cill Aodáin*

The Glore is a small trout stream in County Mayo. It converges with the deliciously named Pollagh to form the Gweestion, before entering the River Moy. The three rivers loop the town of Kiltimagh, where the Glore runs through a wetlands sculpture park. Close by is the townland of Killeadan, immortalized by Antoine Ó Raifteirí in a paean to his lost home:

‘Were I to be standing in the centre of my people,  
age would depart from me  
and I would be again young...’ \*

Exploring the Glore River Valley last summer we came across a renovated three-storey mill, conceivably on the site of the one mentioned by Raifteirí, and now housing the Labyrinth Center for Peace and Reconciliation.

The courtyard is decorated with a fine collection of mill furniture, and the mill turbine and millrace have been excavated of years of detritus. The river water runs gin-clear over pebble beds where brown trout spawn. The gardens of the restored mill contain an artificial lake stocked with goldfish, and, on a field raised above the river, an ‘archetypal energies quadruple labyrinth’. The labyrinth, laid out in pink quartz shipped from the Arizona desert, was created to ‘serve the highest spiritual purpose’ of all that walk it. At the centre of each spiral is a standing stone.

in wet grass  
looking towards the stars –  
far from home

\* *‘Is dá mbeinnse im’ sheasamh i gceartlár mo dhaoine / D’imeodh an aois díom is bheinn arís óg..’*

finger tracing  
flaws in spalted beechwood –  
an old man

limbless ogham stones in rows

on the hill  
a Roman fort –  
then as now

white stars sparking –  
a ring of anemones  
around the fruit tree

### Grazing

There is a photograph of me and my two-year-old daughter outside a fisherman's shelter on the banks of the Slaney River. Two fly rods lean against the wall of the hut. My daughter is wearing wellington boots and a small orange life jacket. She has a cooked sausage clasped in one hand. I am leaning back against the bench, my languor suggestive of the early stirrings of a new baby, whose gravitational pull had already fastened onto my energy.

It is St Patrick's Day. The fishing season has just opened, and the spring sun diffuses through mist onto the river. It is a day full of possibility.

We had parked in a gateway, and as my husband and I took our picnic lunch and fishing-tackle from the car, Elizabeth clambered the gate bars and stared down across the expanse of pasture stretching towards the river. She pointed to a herd of grazing cattle. 'Look,' she shouted, 'elephants.'

picnic table –  
watching cattle  
ruminant

green tea steams up  
the sushi bar window –  
watching hailstones

bluetit  
chipping at the nut holder –  
snow flurry

tea break  
on the garden bench –  
feasting ants

the bounce of raindrops  
riddling my reflection  
in the birdbath

## Gravel Beds

My second daughter was expected on 29 September, her grandfather's birthday. By 25 October, there had been a birthing pool in the dining room for a month. Each evening, by candlelight, I lowered myself into it, held garden herbs in the warm, ozone-treated water, and listened to cello suites. The idea of a baby arriving grew evermore abstract until, on the morning of the Dublin City Marathon, the visiting midwife confirmed a show and I was advised to start walking. Like salmon going home to spawn, my daughters' father and I walked the Dodder bank where, forty years earlier, he had rafted down the millstream below his home. In the shade of tall trees, we watched a shaggy heron among the tattered plastic bags. We didn't see a kingfisher.

footbridge –  
braced against railings  
over breaking water

loosened  
by spring sunshine –  
magnolia buds

nesting time –  
blackbird searching for a mate,  
gold rings in his eyes

late harvest –  
these rosy pippins  
sticky to the touch

slack-skinned figs  
passed from the ladder top –  
my raised hand

golden quinces  
split from inside out –  
late bees

almonds swell  
beneath the waxing moon –  
summer's end



October dawn –  
red apples  
in the dew

the green smiles of  
almonds splitting on the tree –  
October heat

October dusk –  
the silhouette of almonds  
clustered on the branch

## Seawards

My neighbourhood is suspended like a hammock over the River Swan, all seventeen kilometers of whose convoluted course have been culverted and converted into storm drains and sewers. Walking past the Swan Centre, Swan Leisure, Swan Cinema, Swanville Place, it is possible to remain completely unaware of the river network weaving its way mere feet beneath us. But sometimes the river will reveal itself, by sudden subsidence, or geysers of drain water erupting up through shores.

home from work –  
a welcoming committee  
of floating chairs

The main branch of the Swan rises near Kimmage Manor, and flows past Hazelbrook Farm, site of the original HB Ice-cream, and the former home of Miss North, the well-known water-diviner.

twitching branches –  
the weight of catkins  
in the breeze

As it makes its way towards the sea, the Swan is joined by four contributing branches whose names are redolent of local history: the Roundtown Stream, the Blackberry Brook, Bloody Fields Water, and Baggotrath Brook. All five branches discharge into the Dodder Estuary near Ringsend. It may be that the river was named for swans nesting along the sloblands here before the land was reclaimed from the sea.

tidal water  
feathered with grey light –  
cygnets hatching

waves lap cut stone –  
ships waiting  
for a full tide

keep-box at low tide –  
hauling up the deadweight  
of live lobsters

seashore foraging –  
our plastic bag of shrimp  
locked in combat

winter morning –  
low sun on Sandymount  
casts cockle shadows

fishermen  
below the lighthouse –  
shags resurfacing

rainswept beach –  
the jellyfish and I  
find the sea warm

this balmy evening  
even the seagulls  
stretch their legs

### The Return

Before it joins the Owendoher, the Whitechurch Stream weaves through woodland paths in St Enda's Park, its pools lined with yellow sand irresistible to bare feet. I spent many afternoons paddling there with my brother and boy cousins. Armed with green-mesh nets on bamboo poles, we filled old marmalade jars with *pinkeens*, minnows which, like the globs of frogspawn we collected, were so much more interesting than goldfish. I'm not sure how long any of them survived on our suburban windowsills: perhaps our mothers brought them back to release them when we were safely in school.

these golden sand grains –  
where does the water bear them  
from the riverbed?

Twenty years on, my young cousin's ashes were interred in the cemetery a little further upstream.

sunlight refracts  
as it enters the water –  
small fish shimmer

scent falls sweetly  
from greying wisteria –  
mauve a memory

fruit trees heavy  
with frothing blossom –  
still no bees

peony buds  
too swollen to bloom –  
May rain

peony blossoms  
fall in unison –  
this polar wind

buddleia fills  
the cracks in concrete –  
old ice-cream factory

unpicked strawberries  
slip from the calyx –  
patient frog

the soft earth  
darkened by summer rain –  
white cosmos

## Flotsam

The Poddle is the best-known of Dublin's hidden rivers. It flows beneath Tallaght, Kimmage, Harold's Cross and Blackpitts before entering the River Liffey close to Dublin City Centre. On its way, the river emerges from culverts to flow overground at Mount Argus, where the waters are split by a piece of masonry known as the Stone Boat or Tongue, built in the thirteenth century to divert a water supply for the Mayor's citizens.

this stone tongue  
splicing the water course –  
river maw

The park at Mount Argus includes a flood storage pond to help reduce the risk of downstream flooding when the river has resumed its underground route. The grounds have an air of neglect; the water is littered and noisome in warm weather. The drive up to the church is lined by copper beeches, which cast deep shadows; and overlooked by the imposing Lourdes Grotto. The presiding spirit is that of St Charles, who joined the Passionist monastery there in 1847. He is remembered for his gift of healing the sick.

Last year a homeless man was found dead in the undergrowth. Rumour had it that the deceased was a character well-known locally for his foul-mouthed verbal assaults and early morning arson attacks. Reaction to his death was muted. When the arson resumed, it was assumed to have been a case of mistaken identity.

wakened  
by crackling skip-fires –  
hydrants gush

From late medieval times, the Patrick Street area was regularly flooded by disease-carrying water from the Poddle, damaging the vaults of St Patrick's Cathedral and prompting Dean Jonathan Swift to take remedial action. In 1835, during the course of further flood repairs to the vaults, the Dean's coffin was opened. His skull was removed

for examination by the British Association for the Advancement of Science. Details of the examination were recorded by Sir William Wilde, in an effort to determine the cause of the deafness and vertigo suffered by the Dean throughout his life.

water courses  
roaring underground –  
below hearing

The periodic flooding of the Poddle continued throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In late October 2011, the equivalent of one month's rain fell in twenty-four hours. A malfunction at the tidal floodgates meant that the floodwater could not escape out to sea, and erupted upwards through drains. The Poddle burst its banks and cascaded downhill from Harold's Cross onto Parnell Road, while the canal in front spilled over its containing wall. Hospice nurse Cecilia de Jesus, unable to force open the door of her apartment against the rising water, was drowned.

swelling brown water  
inundates basements –  
rags snag on branches

darting bird's foot –  
the green clawed grapevine  
grapples the trellis

hiding in the vine –  
grape-green eyes  
of the white cat

curled  
by the cat's hideout –  
robin feather

goldfinches winnow  
anemone seedheads –  
chaff drifting



## Reflection

Watercourses flowing down to the city from the Dublin mountains were once a valuable energy source, harnessed by weirs and millraces, and stored in millponds. The mills thus powered served many purposes, including the weaving of silk. In the 1600s Ireland welcomed a wave of experienced weavers from silk-producing regions in France. Two traditions married to produce Irish poplin, a silk-faced fabric with a weft of fine worsted, woven from an equal weight of French silk and Irish wool. Though the Irish silk industry was doomed, a silk mill continued to operate on the River Glin, a branch of the Whitechurch Stream which flows through Tibbradden, up to the 1840s. Today the millstreams of south county Dublin are clogged up and overgrown, the mills have disappeared or lie ruined, but intimations of this industrial heritage are evident in place-names such as Milltown, Mill Street, Windmill Hill, Mill Lane, and Swiftbrook. The silk mill on the River Glin has become a footnote to a tour of Tibbradden House.

light glints on water  
through the ivy –  
moiré silk

solstice morning –  
a raven's silhouette  
framed by the moon

vixens screech –  
clouds on an east wind  
obscure the moon

full moon –  
the singers' faces  
turned skywards

I move rooms –  
the moon hides  
behind a different tree

silver water  
ribboning the gutters –  
low-slung moon

drawing the tide  
over the footpath –  
Christmas moon

low moon  
camouflaged in street lights –  
river glimmering

silvering  
frost-sweetened leeks –  
moonlight

### **Casting Off**

The Callow Water Scheme in East Mayo frequently issues boil-orders. As a result, local shops do good business selling large, square two-litre bottles of potable water. These accumulate quickly. When my daughters were four and seven we built a raft by cramming the space in the middle of a wooden pallet with empty water bottles, and launched it in the Spaddagh River, a small spawning stream running into the Moy.

It was late August; the air was thick with seeds and midges and the smell of cattle. The raft soon ran aground on a muddy bank where livestock came to drink. In their matching floral bathing suits, the girls daubed one another with fresh green dung, and draped riverweed about their heads and shoulders, transforming themselves into naiads.

scent of meadowsweet –  
swallows readying themselves  
for flight

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## About the Author

Amanda Bell is a freelance editor. Publications include *Maurice Craig: Photographs* (Lilliput, 2011) and *The Lion Tamer Dreams of Office Work: An Anthology of Poetry by the Hibernian Writers* (Alba Publishing, 2015). In 2016 she was selected for Poetry Ireland's Introductions Series, and the Munster Literature Centre's Prebooked Readings for Emerging Writers.

