

'Contemporary ecopoetries of Britain and Ireland'

Emily Critchley

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Abstract

This chapter will draw on Lynn Keller's useful term 'Poetry of the self-conscious Anthropocene' to discuss the growing number of poetries we could fruitfully term 'ecopoetries' that have appeared in Britain and Ireland in the late C20 and early C21. This period is marked by increased understanding and alarm about humans' exponential degradation of our living planet. It is when the term 'Anthropocene', coined by biologist E.F. Stoermer in the early 1980s and popularized by atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen in 2000, came into widespread circulation to denote the influence of human behaviour on the Earth's atmosphere and ecosystems as having become so significant as to constitute a new geological epoch.

The chapter will trace the work of those poets who attempt, critically and self-consciously, to respond to awareness of the large-scale damage being done to the Earth that sustains us. It will argue, along with Lynn Keller, Joan Retallack, Harriet Tarlo, Forrest Gander and others, that what distinguishes ecopoetry from traditional nature or pastoral poetry is its self-conscious activism: that it is a poetry set to 'the task of repairing divisions between humanity and the ecosystems that constitute and support us.' (Samantha Walton, 'Ecopoetry')

In this sense, ecopoetry is always a political poetry, just as environmental devastation can never be separate from the politics of the systems that sustain and benefit from it.