In the early autumn of 1957, eighteen-year-old Seamus Heaney arrived in Belfast from the County Derry village of Bellaghy to study for a degree in English at Queen’s University. Eight years later he published a pamphlet called simply *Eleven Poems* under the auspices of the nascent Queen’s Festival, a matter of months before the publication, by Faber & Faber, of his first full-length collection, *Death of a Naturalist*. As his daughter Catherine Heaney has said, Bellaghy might have been where he was born, but Queen’s was where Seamus Heaney became a poet.He had begun to become, as it were, while an undergraduate, publishing poems in student magazines, like *Gorgon*, under the penname of Incertus, and carried on, after graduation, but still living close to the university, attending a writing group – styled simply ‘The Group’ (capital T, capital G) – which had started to meet in the Fitzwilliam Street home of a recently arrived English lecturer – that is, lecturer in English and lecturer from England – Philip Hobsbaum. Though primarily associated with poetry, the Group included members who went on to make a name for themselves in other forms – playwright Stewart Parker, was one, the critic Edna Longley was another, as was novelist and short story writer Bernard MacLaverty, novelist, short-story writer *and* film director: he would win a BAFTA for a short film based on and named after Seamus Heaney’s ‘Bye Child’.

Heaney returned to Queen’s as a lecturer in 1966, when Philip Hobsbaum eventually moved on, and took over convening The Group, welcoming into it younger writers who had also been students of his at Queen’s, writers, like Paul Muldoon, Medbh McGuckian, and Ciaran Carson.

And though that particular incarnation of the (capital T, capital G) Group ended with Seamus Heaney’s departure from Belfast in the early 1970s, the creation of a Queen’s Writer-in-Residence attached to the School of English ensured that there was always *a* writing group of some sort meeting beyond that period. I ran it myself when in the early 1990s I took over the writer-in-residence role from poet Carol Rumens. I remember shortly after the start of one the first meetings I hosted the door opening and a student coming in, who introduced herself as Leontia Flynn, and who read a poem called ‘Minesweeping in Autumn’, which made me think I should vacate the chair and leave the running of the workshop over to her.

Leontia left Queen’s for a time to study for a Master’s at Edinburgh University. She returned, though, two years later to start a PhD on the poetry of Medbh McGuckian, who was by this time teaching on the newly created MA in Creative Writing.

In 2004 the Creative Writing crew, who until then had more or less lived in the wonderful late-lamented Bookfinders café on University Road, moved into the new Seamus Heaney Centre – opened by Seamus Heaney – under the directorship of another his former students, Ciaran Carson.

Leontia Flynn became in time a Research Fellow within the Centre, following on from the poet Alan Gillis, and completing her monograph on Medbh McGuckian while publishing her own first volume of poetry, *These Days*. Soon she too was teaching on the poetry side of the Creative Writing MA, along with Sinead Morrissey, who had arrived at Queen’s in early 2000s after a spell teaching in Japan. Leontia and Sinead both taught a student called Stephen Sexton, who progressed from undergraduate, to Master’s, to PhD and eventually, in 2018, joined the teaching staff of the School of Arts, English and Languages, attached to the Seamus Heaney Centre. In 2019, he published his first collection *If All the World and Love Were Young*, one of the most critically acclaimed poetry debuts of recent years.

But, again, it is not only poetry. The Seamus Heaney Centre that includes Leontia Flynn and Stephen Sexton, Gail McConnell and Nick Laird, is also home to prose writers like – well, Nick Laird again – Sam Thompson, Garrett Carr and writers for stage, cinema and television – Michael West, Aislinn Clarke, Tim Loane, Jimmy McAleavey. On top of that it welcomes each year three Seamus Heaney Centre Fellows – writers of renown in whatever form who spend time each spring semester inspiring and engaging with students and aspiring writers: this coming year Oliver Jeffers, Marian Keyes, Enda Walsh, last year Belfast’s first Booker Prize winner, Anna Burns, alongside Jed Mercurio and Vahni Capildeo, the year before that double-Ivor-Novello winning songwriter Iain Archer, Lucy Caldwell, and, Lisa McGee a former Queen’s drama student and creator of the C4 TV series *Derry Girls*.

From Derry Boy to Derry Girls… I would say there was a beautiful circularity about that, but I think the geometric shape I should be invoking is the spiral – upwards and outwards.

As Seamus Heaney said in *Stepping Stones*, a book of interviews with fellow poet Dennis O’Driscoll, the presence of published writers contributed around the university in his own days as a lecturer contributed to a sense of greater access, of more energy flowing.

Keep that energy flowing, I say, and keep that writing going..for another 60 years at least.