



Sebastian Barry and Norman Porter share a laugh at the Ewart Biggs award. Photograph: Moya Nolan

# PRIZE NIGHT

by Louise East

**T**HURSDAY night's Ewart Biggs award ceremony at the Mansion House was a night for fathers. The Tánaiste Dick Spring, in presenting the prize, which is awarded to work which prompts communication and reconciliation, commented that he and a recipient of the prize, Norman Porter, had more in common than the fact they had both been singled out in unionist speeches; both Spring and Porter were also sons of politicians.

Spring also commented on how difficult he found it to call someone who was several years behind him in Trinity, Professor. He was referring of course to Roy Foster who, as chairman of the judging panel, introduced the short-listed works, including some by Seamus Deane, Robert McLiam Wilson, David Hempton, A.D.Q. Stuart and Michael Longley. After a week in which his biography of Yeats was the talk of the town, Foster was congratulated quite as much as the winners, Porter and Sebastian Barry.

Barry, who won the award for *The Steward of Christendom*, illustrated the second "father connection" by pointing to the McCann coat of arms that decorated the Mansion House wall. The star of his play, Donal McCann, whose father John McCann was a former Lord Mayor of Dublin, was welcomed so fulsomely by both Spring and Foster that one almost thought he was the prize-winner.

McCann's loud Donald Duck tie was one of the few splashes of colour amid the sombre suits of the academics and ambassadors. Jean Kennedy Smith was there as was the Danish ambassador, Ulrik Federspiel. Also there were Thomas and Valerie Pakenham, UCD president Art Cosgrove and a great gathering of women academics: Mary Daly, Attracta Ingram and Jerusha McCormack.

As always at literary prizes, publishers put in an appearance. Anne Tannahill of Blackstaff Press was there, as were Antony Farrell and Viv Guinness of Lilliput Press. News has escaped to England of Arbour Hill's new role as a literary haven; not only has Penguin's Paul Keegan decided to settle there, joining the Lilliput Press team, author

John McGahern and poet and academic Bill McCormack, but the *Observer* plans to write about it.

## Opening the book

**F**ROM literary prizes to literary débuts and the launch of Eamonn Sweeney's book, *Waiting For The Healer*, in Waterstones. Pat McCabe, obviously a fan and friend of Sweeney's, sent the book thunderously on its way in his own inimitable way with a special piece written for the occasion. Fittingly for a book which features a larger-than-life-size pint of Guinness plunging out of its front cover, the large crowd — including many of Sweeney's extended family from both Spiddal and Sligo — adjourned to The Duke pub.

Crowded into the upstairs bar, McCabe and fellow author Anne Enright held court while the Celtic vs Rangers match raged above them. There was a large RTE posse among the other fans and friends: Mike Murphy and Seamus Hoseney, with whom Eamonn worked on the *Arts Show* until September and the arrival of his novel deal; Ray D'Arcy and Jacquie Corcoran, presenter and producer of *Fandango* and Jonathan Philbin-Bowman. *Morning Ireland's* Patricia Dannagher was combining work with pleasure as Monday's show will feature a piece recorded at the launch.

Dublin's literary "brat pack" was out in force as well; if Irvine Welsh's publisher, Robin Robertson, was present for business reasons, he must have had a field day. Eamonn Sweeney was not alone among first time novelists but was joined by Antonia Logue, who helped organise the party.

Twenty-one-year-old novelist Lara Harte was at the launch along with her father Jack Harte and mother Celia de Feine, as well as novelists Mike McCormack and Eamonn Delaney, though the latter should really have been at the Ewart-Biggs ceremony to hear Roy Foster's glowing praise of his book.

Irish film producer Ed Guiney, who attended the launch with actress Dawn Bradfield, has already bought an option on Sweeney's novel.