

Literary Reviews - 2005

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Introduction

By David Pierce, 31 January 2006

For Issue 1 of *Estudios Irlandeses* we have kept the number of reviews limited to a half-dozen. In future issues we hope to expand this number and provide more substantial space in keeping with the ambitions of an internet journal for the contemporary world. Input and feedback would be much appreciated at this stage, and let me say we have begun receiving books from authors and publishers.

My primary concern for this issue was to ensure that reviewers were a mix of the acknowledged scholars drawn from across Europe and the wider world as well as younger scholars learning the trade. The titles chosen for review also reflect what one expects to be reviewed as well as less familiar works. In this way, readers can deepen or extend their understanding of what is currently being written in a context that resists too much stress on hierarchies or established order. Irish studies is a growing field and something of its dynamism and scope is a challenge for those seeking to reflect it. Needless to say, with a restricted number of reviews here, there is no attempt at comprehensiveness. If one title stands out in 2005 it would have to be John Banville's *The Sea*, but I didn't know when I asked Laura Izarra to review it in September that it would win the Man Booker Prize two

months later. Any book by John McGahern is also worth noticing and I am pleased to see Brian Cosgrove's review of his memoirs in this issue. Less obvious are some of the other choices. Next year I will include more poetry and drama.

2005 witnessed a continuing expansion of the Irish list of publications from the usual publishing houses with new work by leading writers as well as less familiar names. In terms of poetry, there were new volumes by Derek Mahon (*Harbour Lights*) and Rita Ann Higgins (*Throw in the Vowels*), and a new translation of Brian Merriman's *The Midnight Court* by Ciaran Carson. Also of note here was *Padraic Fallon: A Poet's Journal*, edited by Brian Fallon. In terms of fiction, 2005 also gave us Jennifer Johnston's *Grace and Truth*, Sebastian Barry's *A Long Long Way*, and *Murphy's Revenge*, another novel by Colin Bateman and a sequel to *Murphy's Law*. Autobiographies were in plentiful supply including one by James Liddy and another by Thomas Lynch entitled *Booking Passage: We Irish and Americans*. There were new biographies of the Gore-Booths of Lissadell by Dermot James, of James Connolly by Donal Nevin, and Edward Carson by Geoffrey Lewis. The Troubles rightly continue to exercise writers, critics, and historians. In *Bloody Sunday*, Patrick Hayes and Jim Campbell return to an event which won't lie down.

Geoffrey Beattie's autobiography draws on his Northern Protestant background. In *A Special Kind of Courage*, Chris Ryan provides an account of the British Army bomb disposal squadron. More upbeat, in London, the National Portrait Gallery mounted an exhibition on Ireland in Victorian London with an accompanying brochure written by Fintan Cullen and Roy Foster entitled *Conquering England*. Elsewhere, Bob Quinn produced a book with the intriguing title *The Atlantean Irish: Ireland's Oriental and Maritime Heritage*. For bibliophiles, Clare Hutton edited a collection of essays on *The Irish Book in the Twentieth Century*. Also useful for those of us in the academic community were *Dictionary of Munster Women Writers*, edited by Tina

O'Toole, and *Dialogues: Interviews with Contemporary Women Artists* by Katy Deepwell. Two books also caught my eye this year: *The Disappearing Irish Cottage* by Clive Simmons and Seamus Harkin, and Gerry Smyth's *The Noisy Island: A Short History of Irish Popular Music*. Perhaps the most spectacular event in drama was the Druid Theatre's staging of the six plays of John Millington Synge in Galway in July and then at the Edinburgh Festival. Elsewhere, the productions of Irish drama in 2005 I particularly enjoyed were the Hull Truck production of Martin McDonagh's *The Lonesome West* and Adrian Noble's production in London of Brian Friel's *The Home Place*.

***Irish Haiku* by Chris Arthur (illustrated by Jeff Hall III). (The Davies Group, Publishers, 2005) pp.234 + xxiv
Reviewer: James McGrath**

In his third book of prose reflections, Chris Arthur reminds us that “essay derives from *essai*, to experiment”, and uses the term ‘Irish haiku’ to define his distinctive approach to ‘creative non-fiction’. Strongly influenced by Zen Buddhism, he cites haiku as the supreme verbal testimony to “seeing what’s here, right now”. Yet though this poet’s prose is frequently epiphanic in haiku-like moments, he does more than see (and show): he philosophizes. Thought is the natural consequence of perception in these ten subtly interrelating essays; they adopt gradually Joycean structures in their shifts of focus, but represent less streams of consciousness, being more like meditations.

For Arthur, an important aspect of the present is memory, and though he now resides on the British mainland, his Protestant upbringing in Antrim forms the background of *Irish Haiku*. However, he appears more interested in how individuals form rather than are formed by cultures. Arthur chronicles formative events in Ulster’s history (particularly his hometown, Lisburn), but considers the Presbyterian Northern psyche primarily by “concentrating on the margins”, invoking a fascinating cast of outsiders.

The marginalised figure who (in ‘Miracles’) most illuminates the religious attitudes that dominated late twentieth-century Ulster is Brother Erskine, Arthur’s former school chaplain. Brother Erskine had served as a commander in the Sahara desert and would tell his pupils: “Go there before you die, brothers, stand in its vastness at night”. Perhaps significantly, Erskine “taught English as well as scripture”; he sparked controversy in 1970 when, preaching in Belfast, he suggested that the miracles were not to be understood as literal events, which elicited vehement objection from the Presbyterian Church and local media. Arthur intuitively feels that Erskine, like himself, could not believe in “violation[s] of the laws of nature”, but instead saw miracles in “nature and its laws themselves”. Arthur’s exposition of this marks the only compromise of his otherwise unobtrusive narrative style; his defence of Erskine’s liberalist stance is expressed with dogmatism almost reflecting

that of the literalist opposers. Yet, Arthur writes that “Within the literal, another voice is always singing”, and this essay’s beautifully subtle imagery redeems the harshness of its scepticism. To begin unpacking the metaphorical implications of ‘Miracles’ and other essays is for the reader, not the reviewer; it is enough here to point to Arthur’s implicit depiction of the war-weary, ever-questioning Erskine as one crying in the wilderness to exemplify the symbolic resonances of this book.

Arthur asserts that “Imagination and empathy, as much as anything inquiry yields, are what we rely on to make history”, and in ‘Obelisk’, illustrates how. He writes of his great-uncle, whose brief existence was seldom mentioned by the family, due to his apparent suicide. Arthur’s archival investigations provide much insight into attitudes to this subject (and to police and clergy) in nineteenth-century Antrim, and his gradual disclosure of pivotal details in his search to understand this man’s death is immaculately judged. The tragedy is not diminished by his ‘plotting’ of the information, but enhanced by it; profoundly so when he acknowledges that the mystery may never be resolved. This signifies a fundamental quality of *Irish Haiku*: it offers no clean conclusions, but re-introductions to the familiar: “the real is also remarkably elusive”.

The margins of personal memory are also explored. In ‘What Did You Say?’, Arthur struggles to recall fragments of conversation with his late father, but identifies an intriguing aspect of how language is preserved when he recollects little more than the Ulster dialect terms he used. In evoking his local habitation within an intellectual narrative, Arthur honours Antrim much as Richard Hoggart does Leeds.

One of Arthur’s most appealing strengths is his ability to create atmospheres which, though gentle, are tacitly dark, as he shifts between remote cottages, graveyards, canals, shops, gardens, and streets. *Irish Haiku* is manifest with a sense of stillness; partly because the setting is essentially the past. Yet, Arthur’s Ulster remains unsentimentalized. His uncompromising honesty and recognition of present concerns reflect the Zen-like clarity of his outlook, as well as that of his style.

In ‘How to See a Horse’, a consideration of the image, signifier and even biological

consistency of this mammal, Arthur succeeds in the challenging practice of *writing* about a *painting* before encouraging us to see through modes of communication by seeing the modes themselves. “Media tend to be rendered invisible.” Here, he exposes language as much as he rejoices in it: “‘Horse’ can of course be harnessed and made to pace and prance in simple sentences.” His critique of the illusions of media suggests a further significance of the tranquillity with which he evokes Antrim. According to Arthur, “the sheer pervasiveness of modern media often confers on symbols the semblance of reality”, and cautions that “visitors to Northern Ireland in the 1970s, when terrorism was at its worst [...], thought Ulster would be a war-zone.”

Conflict is a prominent concern in these essays, but Arthur addresses it with wisdom and lucidity. In ‘Witness’, language, memory and reality are (as throughout the book) fundamental concerns. Each is considered in the context of the author’s “encountering a terrorist in a second-hand bookshop”. Arthur asks: “Did I see a terrorist? Or did I see a lost and miserable boy?”, before lamenting: “Perhaps one of the tragedies of modern Ireland is our resolute staying at the surface”. This marks the greatest pertinence of Arthur’s

meditative style; to return, with emphasis, to his earlier comment: “imagination and empathy” are “what we rely on to *make* history”. Arthur is a writer who demonstrates and promotes these virtues; he is also charismatically knowledgeable on an eclectic range of subjects, artistic, historical, philosophical and spiritual. His quotations mark his influences: Voltaire, Adorno, R.S. Thomas and Buddhist scriptures.

Arthur evokes second-hand bookshops as places where “you’ll pick up something unanticipated and suddenly find doors opening into other worlds”; the same is true of *Irish Haiku*. This book is highly recommended to anyone interested in the essay as a form, and essential for readers wishing to follow developments in Anglo-Irish writing at the start of the twenty-first century.

***The Sea* by John Banville (London: Picador, 2005)**

Reviewer: Laura P.Z. Izarra

John Banville is unquestionably one of the great contemporary Irish masters of language. His fiction is closer to poetry than prose. Throughout his writing career he has received important awards that has rightly brought him international recognition, and his thirteenth novel *The Sea*, which won the Man Booker Prize in 2005, is further confirmation of his status. His fiction is “infected with ideas” and radically differs from the great Victorian tradition, which deals with direct representations of society, politics and morals. Banville creates fictional worlds that represent the effects of those systems in the mind of a subject. His main concern is with the individual consciousness, the revelation of the ‘inauthentic’ self, facing outward and inward changes.

While the narratives are structured around different stories, though not always different characters, his recurrent themes are developed in logical progression from one book to the other. The presence of the double, the multiple masks for self-protection, the idea of the lost *home*, the relationship between the self and the outside world and the self and otherness are also themes that sum up the experience of exiles everywhere. Many Irish writers claim being exiles within their own country, and Banville joins them going into internal exile. Declan Kiberd in the introduction to *Reading the Future* (2000) says “Irish writers have long taken the view that only in art could a truly desirable state of things be sketched. (...) In so far as an ideal Ireland existed for them, its existence had the quality of a virtual reality, to be found only in their imaginations.” (10) Banville’s writings represent that state of things of a country, and more specifically, the state of mind of its subjects, diving deeply into human consciousness to bring together the world of ideals and the actual world.

Although critics say he is a post-modernist writer, he affirms he has become a post-humanist because he believes that the human being is not the absolute centre of the universe, is not God. His interest in the life of Copernicus and Kepler and their decentering theories inspires him to explore new ways of writing and breaking current paradigms of form. In a lecture delivered at the University of

Philadelphia in September 2005, “Fiction and the Dream”, Banville admits that at the beginning he was a rationalist and had complete control of what he wrote. He saw himself as “the scientist-like manipulator” of his material. However, in the mid-1980s, with *Mefisto*, he began to “let things happen on the page.” This new way of working was as if it was dreamlike “not only in its content and the mode of its narration, but in the manner in which it was written.”

Banville’s narratives have the effect of a dream within a dream in his endless questionings of the self in order to understand the mystery of existence in life and death. *The Sea* is a successful novel exploring memories and thoughts towards that understanding. Its highly poetic narrative describes the states of mind of a subject in an act of recapitulation of his life after suffering the loss of his wife. Consciousness of existence is achieved through the recognition of change until the last major one – ‘unnamed’ death.

The book is divided in two parts, nearly equal in length, but the division blurs in relation to content. The narrator, Max Morden, meditates upon the process of mortality in three levels – the self, memory and body. Recollections of a “mythic past” – a summer holiday in a seaside village in Ballymore where he met the Graces – get mixed with memories of the past year of his wife’s illness and the present, when he is renting a room in the Cedars, the house on the beach where the Graces lived that summer. Past, cold present and colder future are brought together while memories overlap without order in his mind. Max thought of the Graces mainly at night: the first time he saw the family – the father with his stylish car, the attractive mother, the children on the beach (Chloe and her mute twin brother Myles) and their au-pair Rose, his awareness of sexuality with his first love for Connie, and then Chloe, the idyllic afternoon picnic. But these memories become confused with recollections of Anna’s illness, his relationship with his daughter Claire, the trip they did together to Ballyless for the first time after Anna’s death, and his present in the Cedars whose landlady Miss Vavasour was also part of his past. The apparently meaningless dream he had of walking homeward in the snow, narrated at the beginning of the novel, haunts the whole narrative enlightening him with the perception

of himself as a survivor. This unfamiliar state of the mind, of feeling as if he inhabited a twilight netherworld “in which it was scarcely possible to distinguish dream from waking, since both waking and dreaming had the same penetrable, darkly velutinous texture” (96-7), provokes a state of feverish lethargy as if he and not Anna were the one destined to die. The first part ends with a reflection upon the decay of the body, when he sees his reflection on a mirror. The narrator paints his self-portrait with a tragicomic description of the physical marks of senescence. A parallel offers itself with the last studies that the post-impressionist painter Pierre Bonnard made of himself in the bathroom mirror. This constitutes a trigger in the second part of the book to dive into the deep waters of his consciousness in order to unveil the question of knowing through all the coincidences of mortality.

The development of the plot accumulates a passionate rhythm which in turn reveals the mysteries of the characters' interrelationships where thoughts are aligned according to the specific state of the mind that is recalled. For example, Max remembers intensely Chloe's colours, “apple smell” and “fawnish odour”, her hands, her eyes, her bitten fingernails but he “cannot assemble [them] into a unity”, he cannot see her with his “memory's eye” (139). It is as if everything were a dream; she becomes “pure figment, a memory of [his], a dream of [his]” (140). The process of vanishing memories of Chloe recalls Max's impatient feelings of loss in relation to himself and to Anna. The same state of mind triggers a series of thoughts on death:

And yet people do go, do vanish. That is the greater mystery; the greatest. I too could go, oh, yes, at a moment's notice I could go and be as though I had not been, except that the long habit of living indisposeth me for dying, as Doctor Browne has it.

‘Patient,’ Anna said to me one day towards the end, ‘that is an odd word. I must say, I don't feel patient at all.’ (140)

This strategy of simultaneity erases time and space in the narrative and keeps its continuum with mixed insights of death at the moment the narrator is diving deeper and deeper in his unconscious in a paradoxical attempt to defeat forgetfulness of the other while trying to know his own self. He must keep Chloe's memory

inviolable, unpolluted by too much self-knowledge or, indeed, too sharp a knowledge of me. This was her *difference*. In her I had my first experience of the absolute otherness of other people. ... in Chloe the world was first manifest for me as an objective entity. ... And if she was real, so, suddenly, was I. She was I believe the true origin in me of self-consciousness. (167-8)

This relationship between self and other, and self and world, is “transubstantiated” at the disturbed look of the other behind a camera. Max is upset at playing the game of the observer and the observed, at the state of being ‘exposed’, of being known at the blind shot of a camera. He dislikes being photographed by Anna because “she seemed not to be looking through the lens, at her subject, but rather to be peering inward, into herself, in search of some defining perspective, some essential point of view.” (173) He becomes aware of this process when he sees the colour photographs she took of her fellow patients in hospital, of those who were seriously ill “in the corridor of death”. The photographs are metaphors of her search for the meaning of existence in death, or better saying, the meaning of death in the last breath of existence. But true knowledge is a delusion and the process of forgetting, of not-having known, of change, continues without end.

While the dreamlike state of mind of going home creates an atmosphere of the struggle of the self towards knowing, of being through others, Bonnard's picture “The Sea” with a black seagull flying over a rough dark sea towards the light coming out on the horizon through a cloudy sky is a metaphor of that struggle and its possible redemption through art. The representation of this state of the mind is Banville's challenge. He says in an interview with Ron Hogan: “I do believe that art is a special way to achieve redemption.” (<http://www.beatrice.com/interviews/banville/-03-08-2005>). Recapitulation is the only way towards self-awareness. Memories fade in dreamlike distortions, so nothing pleases Banville better than to play with mind, dreams, space and time to be carried back ‘home’ and achieve self-consciousness.

Banville believes that in dreams the mind speaks its truths through the medium of a fabulous nonsense and so does the novel. His aim is to “make the reader *have the dream* – not just to read about it, but actually to

experience it; to have the dream, to write the novel.” (“Fiction and the Dream”). *The Sea* is a metaphorical novel of having the experience of that dream, of submerging into the unconscious. The crashing waves of memories against the shore mould the state of mind of a subject that is struggling against being dragged under the current of forgetfulness while he is trying to understand his present, his own existence.

I would like to end this review recalling Octavio Paz’s belief that the present is “the meeting place for the three directions of time” (“In Search of the Present”, Nobel Prize lecture of 1990). The Mexican contemporary poet says that modernity is pursued “in her incessant metamorphoses. ... It is the instant, that bird that is everywhere and nowhere ... it vanishes ... we are left empty-handed.” But then “the doors of perception open slightly and the other time appears”, the real time, the present.

This protean modernity concurs with Banville’s concept of a confluence of time and endless transformation of the self. *The Sea* is a transfiguration of “the passion of art into the passion of emotions” awakening an over-conscious perception of the state of the mind of a subjectivity at a “momentous nothing, just another of the great world’s shrugs of indifference. ... and it was as if [he] were walking into the sea” (264), but the crashing waves of hopelessness and oblivion will carry him back endlessly to the shore with insights of the self at a simultaneous past, present and future.

***Sheela-na-gigs. Unravelling an Enigma* by
Barbara Freitag (London: Routledge, 2004)**

Reviewer: Luz Mar González Arias

Caught in stone
I celebrate
all who tell the truth
over centuries
of darkness

These are the closing lines in Susan Connolly's poem "Female Figure" (1992), where the protagonist – an Irish Sheela-na-gig – denounces the puritanical ideologies which considered her repulsive, to be hidden or destroyed. In the poem the Sheela's powerful voice is determined to produce her own interpretation of her female corporeality by rejecting all that came before, a project we might add fraught with difficulties. However, these problems are not exclusively confined to the world of the poetic imagination and finding out the ultimate meaning of these stone images has proved to be a curious enigma for archaeologists and historians.

The stone carvings known as Sheela-na-gigs are naked female figures characterised by their display of female genitalia, usually quite exaggerated in size. Most of these icons can be found on the walls of medieval churches and castles, though some have appeared in isolation, detached from their original location. There are examples of medieval Sheelas in different parts of the Continent, but the Irish countryside is particularly rich in them. An air of mystery has surrounded the so-called "exhibitionist" figures since they began to attract serious scientific attention more than a hundred and sixty years ago. Although theories have not been scant, there is still disagreement on their origins and functions, so that the figures have remained – and will probably do so for a long time – controversial.

Given the elusive nature of Sheela-na-gigs any publication that casts new light on the topic is most welcome to the scientific community and cultural historian alike. And this is the case with *Sheela-na-gigs: Unravelling an Enigma*, Barbara Freitag's most recent academic answer to the many questions that surround the name, dating, origins and functions of Sheela-na-gigs. The book offers a comprehensive catalogue of the Sheela-na-gigs of Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales, including references to earlier classifications of the carvings – such as

those by Guest (1936), Andersen (1977) and McMahon & Roberts (2001) – together with descriptions of previously unrecorded figures, so that the reader can have access to a complete and up-to-date listing of Sheelas. The visual plays a major role in the perception and understanding of these icons and in order to help the reader get a sense of their meanings, past and present, Freitag's study also includes excellent images of some of the most striking stones.

In *Sheela-na-gigs: Unravelling an Enigma* Freitag goes over the main interpretative frameworks that have been used so far to "unravel" the enigma posed by the intriguing medieval stones and expands on them with a lot of detail. Some of the most committed studies on the subject, she reminds us, link the Sheela-na-gigs to the developments of Romanesque art on the Continent and consider them as examples of the negative attitude towards the female body as articulated by early Irish Christianity. On the other hand, the exposure of the vagina has also been perceived as a sign that these figures were used as apotropaic or protective icons against evil. The, too, a number of researchers (mostly women) have related the Sheelas to pagan fertility rites in which female corporeality was seen as reminiscent of Goddess imagery. While examining all previous literature on the subject, Freitag also offers her own interpretation: her belief that the "Sheela-na-gig belongs to the realm of folk deities and as such is associated with life-giving powers, birth and death and the renewal of life" (2). She offers a detailed description of the hazards of motherhood in medieval times (68-118) and inserts the Sheelas into this particular social context. According to this investigation, Sheela-na-gigs were primarily used as major divine assistants at childbirth, following the theory that from medieval times women from all over Europe are known to have sought the help of magic icons in their hour of need. The exposed vagina, Freitag contends, would show "the desirable degree of dilation of the cervix immediately before, during or after childbirth" (88). Her study is supported by ample bibliographical sources on medieval childbearing that confer scientific accuracy to this interesting new view.

Apart from Freitag's own vision of the Sheela question, one of the most interesting aspects of

this book lies in its rejection of previously accepted interpretations on the basis of what the author considers archaeological, historical or terminological inconsistencies. One of the most reputed theories on the origins and functions of Sheela-na-gigs is developed in Jorgen Andersen's acclaimed study, *The Witch on the Wall*, for some a book that still has not been bettered. Andersen's contention is that the carvings were warnings of lust and sin that eventually took the shape of the apotropaic power of the nude. However, this theory, which has found its way into museum guides and dictionaries of art, is discarded by Freitag because of the weak grounds on which, she maintains, such argument lies. Her statement that this generally accepted interpretation is based on unconvincing reasons that actually contradict folk tradition will no doubt be thought-provoking for anyone researching into this fascinating topic. Therefore, *Sheela-na-gigs: Unravelling an Enigma* casts new light on a subject that continues to promote the interest of artists and academics.

The merits of Freitag's study are various. However, the dismissal of previous research – intimated through expressions such as “weak grounds”, “harboured doubts”, “incongruous” or “it defies all logic” – is perhaps too rigid in the interpretation of an icon whose very strength may dwell precisely in the various functions it has fulfilled over the centuries and until the present. Although Freitag supports her views with excellent bibliographical evidence, a pluralistic methodological approach that takes more into account the various theories would probably offer a more comprehensive view of the problem. The icon known as Sheela-na-gig is a symbol upon which different meanings have been imposed and superimposed and, perhaps, it is not always clear where to draw the line between the different interpretations. Claiming that the Sheelas were invoked as magic assistants of childbirth is not so different from stating that they were used as protective icons against evil. Are not assistance and protection equivalent terms in the context of childbirth? The different interpretations could be seen as new layers of analysis to disentangle or, to use Freitag's expression, to unravel the enigma, and it would be interesting to devote further research to the combination of pagan and Christian meanings in the study of the many Sheela-na-gigs that flood the Irish countryside.

Barbara Freitag's book is a valuable source of information for anyone interested in this important part of the Irish archaeological heritage. In the last few decades there has been a growing interest in these icons on the part of academics from different areas, as well as poets and visual artists. The women's movement in Ireland, together with recent theoretical developments on the body on both sides of the Atlantic, has triggered new (artistic) interpretations of the Sheela-na-gigs, which are now used to illustrate the articulatory possibilities of female corporeality, previously despised and hidden by the religious ideologies of the Christian west. Irish poets and visual artists have cast new light on the stone images and have seen in the Sheelas an appropriate icon to pose their feminist and/or postcolonial vindications. The contemporary Sheela-na-gigs are given a voice of their own in poems and lithographs, sometimes reclaiming the power of female corporeality, sometimes bringing to the forefront the female dimension of pre-Christian cults. The puzzle formed by these medieval stones has now gained a new and rigorous piece that will no doubt contribute to our understanding of the Sheelas.

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***The Irish Writer and the World* by Declan Kiberd (Cambridge: C.U.P., 2005) 331 pp.**

Reviewer: Wolfgang Wicht

In two previous books on Irish culture and literature, *Inventing Ireland* (1996) and *Irish Classics* (2002), Kiberd assesses the complex emergence of a synthetic Irish national culture since the seventeenth century. The new collection of essays, written between 1978 and 2003, further explains how Kiberd, always receptive to the larger political and social issues, has developed his critical conceptions over the past 25 years. It surpasses, however, this reader's expectations of a handy compilation of texts that were first published in various books and periodicals. *The Irish Writer and the World* is distinctive in its claim to a politically oriented examination of cultural processes and to the strengthening of "the integrity of the Irish experiment" (15), which is emancipating the country from colonial history and post-colonial 'pathology'. The title pertinently indicates the book's thesis and the author's hopes. Moreover, Kiberd's "Introduction" provides us with a highly informative and closely argued synopsis of his major propositions and methodology.

In a most remarkable fashion, Kiberd distinguishes his authorial position from both recent revisionist readings of Irish history and older, or newer, essentialist concoctions of anti-British Irish identity. He blames revisionism for denying the colonial aspect of the past and obliterating native Irish history and culture. On the other hand, he is convinced that "narrow-gauge nationalism" and "theocratic Catholicism" (7) have established simplified and arbitrary ideological patterns of Irishness. Intellectually, politically and stylistically, through his Irish wit, figurative thought and aphoristic conciseness, Kiberd stands for the assertive confidence of a modern Western republic, which has "unleash(ed) the creativity and self-confidence of (its) people" (271) and is by now an acknowledged member of the European Community, economically, culturally and socially. (In ch. 17, "The Celtic Tiger: a cultural history", 2003, he suggests that this modern condition is rooted in and has been gaining momentum since Parnell and the revival movements of the 1890s.) Kiberd's self-assured, cogent literary and cultural criticism is authoritative; it is no longer shaped by the dominant discourse of the British and it

is not anti-British in a sectarian nationalist manner. It makes a case for what he calls "a national critical methodology" (243) and "a plural, multi-disciplinary Irish Studies" (5) whose subject is national and whose viewpoint, methods and theoretical implications are international (see ch. 4, "Writers in quarantine? The case for Irish Studies"). For this reason, it would be ill-considered and even misleading to pigeonhole Kiberd modishly under the label 'postcolonial' (though he draws on Said, Fanon, Spivak and others for the purpose of analysis and is particularly concerned with post-colonial liberation processes (see chs. 8, 9 and 10, "On national culture", "White skins, black masks: Celticism and *Négritude*", "From nationalism to liberation"). There are more reasons to call it post-national(istic). This new intellectual approach is internationally oriented, as ch. 16, "Multiculturalism and artistic freedom: the strange death of liberal Europe", and ch. 19, "Strangers in their own country: multiculturalism in Ireland", brilliantly demonstrate.

Biographically, Kiberd's family background (Catholic patriots and supporters of constitutional nationalism) was initially influential. (For *Ulysses* readers: he was born in Eccles Street, Dublin, in 1951.) It was, however, the "appalling intensity of the violence in Northern Ireland" (6) in the seventies that gave particular direction to his analytical perspectives. First, in contrast to F. S. L. Lyons's gloomy view of Irish political antagonisms that were reinforced by culture itself, he came to believe that culture might be instrumental in reconciling oppositions and disparities. Encouraged by Ireland's actual transition from a former colony to the present status of a "consumer democracy" (18) he became convinced that "a plural vision of culture might help to heal those wounds" that divided the Irish people "into warring camps" (7). Kiberd knows that his visionary optimism is intrinsically idealistic. It seems, in fact, reasonable to suspect that Kiberd nourishes a metaphysical desire which conceptualizes a determining influence of the cultural superstructure on basic economic, social and political processes. However, Kiberd's practical messianism is personally backed up by the success of his teaching and objectively legitimized by actual tendencies in culture and politics. From this perspective, he does not

hesitate to ascribe a progressive role to Ireland in the global context, even seeing the Irish "in a pivotal position to mediate between First and Third Worlds, between North and South, in a new emerging order" (15).

Kiberd writes against the grain, disrupting the notion of essential Irishness which has been dominating national aspirations since the late nineteenth century. He focusses instead on the historically open distinguishing feature of colonial subjection ("being defined, derided and decided by others", 1), recognizing the idea of Irish national identity as "an English invention" (1). This methodological maxim synthesizes Kiberd's practical critical explorations of particular cultural phenomena. The first essay selected for the present book, published as early as 1979, is a case in point. Kiberd examines the stock type of the "Stage Irishman", describing the historically changing use, misuse and rejection of the cliché in its political, ideological, psychological and even economic contexts. He reveals through the various forms of representation and appropriation that the caricature of the Stage Irishman served the reciprocal function of establishing both English and Irish views of the Other and of helping to define English and Irish self-portraits.

The essays that follow paradigmatically trace Irish culture and literature at work. In "Storytelling: the Gaelic tradition" (1978) Kiberd focuses attention on how "a vibrant oral culture" (42) of Gaelic storytelling is transformed by twentieth-century short story writers into a sophisticated modern representation of subjectivity and the social world. A somewhat different form of appropriating the Gaelic tradition is the conspicuous revitalization of bardic modes and technical devices which Kiberd notices in the poetry of Synge (whose literary rank he emphasizes) and Yeats (ch. 5, "Synge, Yeats and bardic poetry", 2002). In "George Moore's Gaelic lawn party" (1979), he combines a slightly ironic sketch of Moore's brief career as a Gaelic revivalist with the serious conclusion that "the policy of selective bilingualism" (102) is a seminal legacy of Moore's, which Kiberd himself is inclined to support, at least in 1979. Ten years later, he notices the "apparent weakness of the Irish language" (106), which, however, paradoxically nourished "The (new, not-modernist, powerful)

flowering tree: modern poetry in Irish" (ch. 7, 1989). In "The war against the past" (ch. 11, 1988), he offers a stupendous discussion of a largely disputed issue in Irish politics and culture, analysing both the "tragedy of mistaken identity" (169) and its critique. A particular field of conflict is the Easter Rising of 1916, which Kiberd defends against its distorting representation in topical commemorations (ch. 12, "The Elephant of Revolutionary Forgetfulness"). The fierce, and often sarcastic, rejection of "the dreary polarities of all binary thought" (204) is counterbalanced, however, by a still unquestioned heroic understanding of the event itself. In "Reinventing England" (ch. 13, 1999), Kiberd argues that the presence of Ireland allows the English to see their own national question in a new light. In "Joyce's Ellmann, Ellmann's Joyce" (1999), he qualifies his fine tribute to the eminent Joyce scholar by adding that Ellmann failed to restore to Joyce "the integrity of his local movement" (248). Finally, the 2002 article "The city in Irish culture" highlights the global dimension of Kiberd's loyal devotion to Ireland, tracing the transitions from rural to city life and from the national to the multi-ethnic and multicultural.

What the present book shows is that Kiberd can consistently splice together magisterial literary/cultural criticism and political thinking. As a self-conscious Irish scholar and patriot, he, above all, never tires of rebelling against "a partitionist mentality (which) has divided north from south, unionist from nationalist, Anglo-Irish from Gael" (68). For some, this "auto-criticism" (243) might go too far. But the book's main thesis and the practical arguments are all in all highly convincing.

Memoir by John McGahern (London: Faber and Faber, 2005) 272 pp.

Reviewer: Brian Cosgrove



Photographer: Dan Harper

From David Pierce, *Light, Freedom and Song* (Yale University Press, 2005)

What emerges most strikingly from John McGahern's autobiographical record is the extent of his mother's contribution to his early development, and her influence on his life as a whole. McGahern can still re-live, with a Wordsworthian vividness, the "intense" happiness he felt when walking the lane with her to school as a child. There are, he observes, "many such lanes" all around where he now lives (and the fact that he returned to live in the landscape of his childhood – near Keshkerrigan, County Leitrim – is in itself deeply revealing). In "certain rare moments over the years while walking in these lanes I have come into an extraordinary sense of security, a deep peace, in which I feel that I can live forever" (4). His memoir comes full circle at the close when, reflecting on these "rare moments", the writer fantasises about taking his long-dead mother down the lanes he now walks as an adult. "I know", he states explicitly, "that consciously and unconsciously she has been with me all my life" (272).

McGahern's mother was, on the evidence here, gentle, educated and (like many Irish women of her generation) religious to the point of saintliness. As a primary teacher, she was unusual for the time she lived in for abjuring all forms of physical punishment. She and her brother Jimmy, both "exceptionally bright", won the King's Scholarship prior to Irish independence, which allowed her to attend the Marist Convent school in Carrick-on-Shannon (45-46). She subsequently won a scholarship to Trinity College Dublin. Deeply religious, she apparently submitted to the will of God when struggling with the cancer that took her life (at the early age of forty-two) when McGahern was still a child. Her death devastated him (the only male in a sizeable family apart from his father): it ushered in a "terrible new life ... a life without her, this evening and tomorrow and the next day and the next" (135). The pages recounting the final moments of mother and child together are both painful and deeply moving.

One reviewer in *The Guardian* newspaper was reminded by the *Memoir of Proust*; but in the matter of the relationship of the writer-to-be with his parents a closer parallel will be found in D.H. Lawrence. On more than one occasion McGahern refers to his mother as his "one beloved" whom God is taking from him in death. This, we should acknowledge, is the thought of the child he then was; but it still recalls the behaviour of the young man Paul Morel (a fictional version of the author himself) towards his mother in Lawrence's autobiographical *Sons and Lovers*. In both Lawrence and McGahern there appears to have been a conflict with a brutish father (like McGahern, Lawrence too regarded his mother as "a superior soul") – one to which we are inevitably tempted to apply the obvious (if somewhat banal) term "oedipal". McGahern, indeed, hints at this kind of relationship when he notes: "That I have not a single memory of my father in the house and that the lane to Lisacarn was walked alone with my mother conforms to a certain primal pattern of the father and the son" (9). He later refers to "that open or latent sense of conflict that always lay between us" (10).

The major irony in McGahern's *Memoir* is easily stated: if it was his admirable mother who was the supreme influence in his life, it is nonetheless his repellent father who dominates his record of that life (and in fact likewise

dominates his fiction, in various guises from Mahoney in *The Dark* to Moran in *Amongst Women*). The father remained (and probably still remains) a conundrum that the son could not resolve ("I had never felt I understood him": 226). Capable of a tyrannical brutality (including beatings for the children), the father still retained, for example, the loyal affection of one of McGahern's younger sisters, Breedge, who frankly "adored him" (160). And a curious episode in which the hypochondriac father makes provisions for what he wrongly takes to be his imminent death culminates in this reaction on the part of the son: "Life without him suddenly seemed worse than the life we had in the barracks, and I broke down and begged him not to die" (184).

Such ambivalence towards the father is on the whole less marked in this memoir than in the treatment of the fictional fathers in the novels; and, unlike Lawrence, McGahern seems not to have felt the need for a radical re-appraisal of the male parent (one that, for Lawrence, entailed a corresponding re-evaluation of the mother). Yet the ambiguity of the father-figure, and the challenge he poses for interpretation, come across nonetheless. One of the virtues of McGahern's honest account is that the reader is provided with essential information which can be pieced together to yield a partial explanation of the father's nature. An only child, he was reared, in the absence of a truant father, by a harsh and perhaps vindictive mother (McGahern's grandmother). We are told that, according to McGahern's sisters, their father, after his son John's birth, "felt displaced" in his wife's affections (10). One can imagine how galling it might have been for the father to feel that he, who had been denied as a child real maternal affection, had lost out a second time as his son became a successful rival for his wife's loving attention, the son winning that maternal affection of which he himself had been deprived. Yet in this case *tout comprendre* would not in any case mean *tout pardonner*; there are aspects of the father that remain intolerable, even if a sympathetic reader can see him as a tragic figure.

McGahern's Memoir is indispensable reading for those who wish to trace the parallels between the life and the work (and to decide the extent to which the work is a therapeutic undertaking - as well as the extent to which it is, richly, something more). But in its own right it is a compelling piece, dense and evocative in spite of a refusal of over-elaborate or melodramatic statement. Among other things, it is a splendid evocation of a landscape, a way of life and a culture that may or may not survive into the coming decades.

***In the Shadow of the Ombú Tree* by
Hugh Fitzgerald Ryan (Enniscorthy:
Chaos Press, 2005) 329 pp.
Reviewer: Edmundo Murray**



An Old Wexford Farm House from a sketch by the author

Perhaps one of the most frequent wishes of the Irish gauchos and their cousins in Ireland and other countries is to write the fictionalised memoirs of their ancestors, trying to imagine their nineteenth-century settlement in both sides of the River Plate. The stories of these sturdy young men and women who left their homes in Westmeath, Longford, Wexford and other counties in Ireland and settled in the wide flat pampas are invariably fascinating and this is no exception.

Even if there are problems in moving between languages and cultures, Ryan's beautifully simple story deserves to be translated into Spanish.

Author of *The Kybe* (1983), *Reprisal* (1989), *On Borrowed Ground* (1991), and *Ancestral Voices* (1995), Hugh F. Ryan of Skerries, Co. Dublin is a veteran novelist and landscape artist (see <http://homepage.tinet.ie/~hfryan>) *In the Shadow of the Ombú Tree* is "the story of my great-grandparents, John and Catherine [Cardiff], and their dramatic elopement from their native Wexford to Uruguay, that has been told in my family for generations.... The story, surviving in the oral tradition, had taken on the patina of legend, but research revealed that the legend was borne out by empirical facts".

The story provides a sharp insight into how people in Ireland think about the pampas, the gauchos and the Indians, their governing elites and labourers, their customs and traditions, and their relations with nineteenth-century Irish settlers. Here is Latin America through their eyes, including the darker history of the

genocide of indigenous people and the roles Irish estancieros (farmers) may have played in the appropriation of Indian land.

Overhanging the narrative is the ombú, which is not a tree but a gigantic bush (*Phytolacca dioica*) with multiple trunks that grows in the grasslands of Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay. Its sap is poisonous, therefore the bush is not browsed by cattle. Its fire-resistant wood is soft and spongy, soft enough to be cut with a regular knife, and for this reason it is unsuitable for construction. Why a pseudo-tree with worthless wood and fruits would become the recognised emblem of the pampas? Myths are rarely logical! Conceivably, it was William H. Hudson (1841-1922), the great novelist of "Southamericana" literature, who handed the ombú myth on to the English-speaking culture, yet with a nostalgic nuance: "They say that sorrow and at last ruin comes upon the house on whose roof the shadow of the ombú tree falls" (*South American Romances*, London 1930). Carried by cargo and passenger ships, ombú seeds germinated in Cape Verde, Canary Islands, Portugal and Spain, and are today a living testimony of the migrant mobility of our ancestors through the Atlantic world.

In Ryan's story, John and Catherine leave Wexford for Liverpool (where they decently procured a priest's bless to their union), and then board the steamer that will take them to the River Plate. They learn from fellow passengers José Luis and María Jesús about Uruguay and the possibilities in the pampas, and John and Catherine decide to settle in an estancia in Soriano. They struggle for years and have children in this place, which then becomes home for them. But John's intense nature leads them to split up and Catherine goes back to Wexford. It is a simple story told with skill and expertise.

In real life, the Cardiff estancia Santa Catalina became a village with 1,000 population in Soriano department, 197 kilometres from Montevideo. In this region and neighbouring department Rio Negro, several estancias were owned or managed by British and Irish settlers, especially in the area between Fray Bentos and Young. "Barrio Anglo" near Fray Bentos is a striking example of integration of English and Latin American cultures, and a few Irish surnames are still present in the telephone books of the region.

Apart from Hudson's *South American Romances*, there are at least two direct predecessors of *In the Shadow of the Ombú Tree*, the celebrated *You'll Never Go Back* by Kathleen Nevin (1946), and Susan Wilkinson's *Sebastian's Pride* (1988), which has been published in Spanish as *Don Sebastián* (1996). In *You'll Never Go Back* Kate Connolly and other characters are unmistakably Irish. They are born in Ireland and they do not dispute their origins. But they are *geographically* Irish, and their differences with the English are derived mainly from the place of birth. The identities in *Sebastian's Pride* play an interesting role in the novel. Wilkinson's characters are *ingleses*, an ambiguous label that was, and sometimes is, used to accommodate the uncertain idiosyncrasies of English-speaking settlers and their families in Argentina and Uruguay. Perhaps the characters in *Sebastian's Pride* are *ingleses* because of their perceived social identity of landlords, which in the pampas linked English-speaking immigrants from diverse places and with different cultures and religions.

The Cardiffs and other characters in *In the Shadow of the Ombú Tree* are proud of being Irish. They make toasts in Irish: "Sláinte" says John Cardiff to his ranch foreman Fierro (p. 58). They are not only born in Ireland but continually have a recourse to their identity. "You are inglés?" asks Fierro when he meets John. "No, Irish ... We come from Ireland" (58). John insists in later chapters, when a military officer is checking the estancia for hidden horses: "Is this the way of the Inglés?" and John replies "We are not Inglés as a matter of fact. ... We are Irish, Irlandés" (144). The native people perceive the difference between *inglés* and Irish. The proprietor of a *pulpería* (public house) seems to be well-informed about the distinctions: "We say inglés but he is not inglés. He is something else. He does not like to be called inglés. But letters come with the stamp of the queen of the inglés" (199). Both the Irish and the native people retain their customs and traditions, and thus relate with their *otherness* in a way that allows them to adjust their beliefs. In one sense it does not matter if this type of relationship is historical fact or a need of the plot in a fictional work. What pleases the reader is the ability of the narrator to provide insight into complex and intricate value structures.

Often in *In the Shadow of the Ombú Tree* the focus is on the relations between Irish and other ethnic groups, including among others African slaves and their descendants, Charrúa and Guaraní Amerindians, gauchos with mestizo pedigree, and Spanish-Creole members of the powerful local elites. Indians seem to be wise, sharp, gentle (albeit being brave warriors), and mysteriously insightful. They show a natural capacity to adapt to the new rules of the game in the republic: "We are all Uruguayans now. No longer Charrúa or Irish or Inglés or Spanish" (157) says Guidai, the Indian wife of the foreman. In spite of the social divide between the Irish landowners and their Indian or gaucho labourers, their relations are generally advantageous for both parties and a new cultural transfer is established. John learns everything about cattle ranching from Fierro and his men. Catherine learns from and gradually admires the Indian women.

Stereotypes about Latin Americans are frequently incorporated in the European ethos, and are not absent in the vigorous dialogues among the characters of this novel. Innate violence, chaos and never-ending revolutions, erotic dances and alluring rhythms, indolence and idleness, and corruption seem to be day-to-day life in Uruguay. These prejudices are balanced by the reaction of European visitors when confronted with the untamed natural scenery of Latin American pampas, glaciers, and jungles. "They came out into open, undulating grassland. Cattle coughed in the darkness. Birds whirred away at their approach. Waterfowl slapped and splashed as the horses forded a small river and climbed a long grassy slope" (56). This is Ryan on the Uruguayan landscape and carries in its folds the freedom to believe that any dream may come true. It is also connected of course with the economic possibility of a rise to landownership in South America.

Even if there are problems in moving between languages and cultures, Ryan's beautifully simple story deserves to be translated into Spanish.