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IRISH STUDIES  
ROUND THE WORLD - 2012

Patricia A. Lynch (ed.)

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## Reflections on Irish Writing in 2012

Patricia A. Lynch

In the Ireland emerging into 2013, some important facts of Irish life are still similar to the preceding years. The severe recession is still there, and in some ways has tightened its grip on the population, but there are green shoots to be seen in the form of slightly increased employment, a deal on the national debt which will save the country some billions of euro, and a manifest improvement in the performance of the United States; as an American friend said to me many years ago: "Whatever happens in America will appear in Ireland three-quarters of an hour later!" So there is some reason to hope.

In this recession, literature and critical writing still flourish, book launches take place almost as often as before, associations continue to hold their annual conferences, and journals make their regular yearly appearances. An example of this was the Dublin Book Festival in November, the fifth in succession, therefore coterminous with the recession, a fact that speaks for itself. I had the great pleasure of attending the annual conference of IASIL (International Association for the Study of Irish Literatures), taking place for the first time in Concordia University, Montréal, another achievement for the burgeoning Irish Studies programme in this University. Edna O'Brien finally brought out her memoir, aptly *Country Girl*, with Faber and Faber. Of the newer faces on the scene, Kevin Barry brought out his second short-story collection *Dark Lies the Island*.

Of course there have been losses too. Many academics took the option of early retirement just a year ago, leaving departments of Irish Studies often with depleted staff and resources. The death took place of the greatly loved author and doyenne of Irish popular literature, Maeve Binchy, but nonetheless her latest and last book came out this year. Another great loss was that

of the late Caroline Walsh, literary editor of the *Irish Times*, who was commemorated on many occasions, including in two of the books which I am reviewing below.

Some other positive upcoming events include what is called The Gathering. Taking its inspiration from a similar Scottish event, members of the Irish diaspora are invited to visit Ireland in 2013, and there are many events and functions planned for this purpose. While some people, notably Irish actor Gabriel Byrne (cultural ambassador for Ireland in the US 2010-2011), are rather cynical about the financial expectations of the organisers, others perceive it to be mutually beneficial to both the Irish at home and to the Irish visitors to the home of their ancestors. Let us look forward to all who choose to come back, let us make them truly welcome, and join with them in commemorating the great events which brought about our nation's independence. This year sees the centenary of the lockout of the workers by the employers in 1913, leading to many recruitments to the British Army in the First World War, and the formation of the Socialist movement that culminated in The Irish Citizen Army, which was to play a significant part in the Easter Rising of 1916. All of these events led to rich literature output which we will also commemorate.

The first recent work which I read in 2012 was Maurice O'Callaghan's novel *In Their Dreams of Fire*. This fiction is set in West Cork, home of the author, who is a lawyer, novelist, and both writer and director of a movie. The chronology of the book is the Irish War of Independence and the subsequent civil war, covering the period 1919 to 1923, the same period which featured in his earlier movie. The novel opens with a detailed description of an Anglo-Irish gentleman walking in a beautiful landscape which is far older than his family's possession of the estate.

Sights and sounds of the countryside are lovingly depicted:

The trees were very old. Their branches spread outwards and up as if they would embrace and shelter all living things. In the wood there was birdsong, the pop of ladyfingers in the heat, dogs' distant barking across the river, a fringe of ghosts in Jasper's old walled estate and manor house. There was the shimmer of leaves and a fluttering downwards of white and pink-petalled flowers. Twigs crackled under the feet of squirrels and rabbits (O'Callaghan 2011: 3).

The style is slow, luxuriantly descriptive, and reminiscent of late nineteenth-century fiction, particularly that of Thomas Hardy. There is the appearance of action with the meeting of Jasper with a gentleman friend, then later with two workers picturesque as any of Wordsworth's peasants. However the mood and style change rapidly with the appearance of the next actors on the scene, British soldiers known familiarly as 'Black and Tans', drunk on whiskey and spoiling for a fight. Their journey in an army vehicle from the town of Bandon into the countryside is described with a wealth of local detail which gradually gives way to a sense of menace. A young woman named Elizabeth coming with food to the two workers becomes a target for the soldiers, and in the ensuing struggle the older worker is killed for coming to her defense.

With this incident, the action of the novel takes off. An idyll has been shattered. The younger worker, brother to Elizabeth, is set in train to become the hero of the novel, as soldier of the Irish resistance and as lover. This beautiful countryside, seen at first as the rolling acres of the aristocracy, is now to become the setting for guerrilla warfare, ambushes, marathon treks across rugged ground, and fear in all homes, great and small, as old divisions of planter and planted, old and new religions, are re-opened. The more lyric descriptive style still appears from time to time, but fields and roads are now mainly described from a military tactical point of view. Ambushes in particular are narrated with an almost topographical detail, to the extent that the reader feels as if he/she is there and can envisage it all; it would be possible to draw or sketch the scenes at a pinch. It is a historical novel, then,

and this is clearly indicated by the two lists set out at the end, those characters who are fictional and the vastly greater number which are historical. The author's research is thorough; he uses as background not only formal histories but also autobiographical works such as Ernie O'Malley's *On Another Man's Wound* (1936). The immediacy that characterises O'Malley's account is also found in O'Callaghan's work, but the latter is neither history nor autobiography; it is fiction. After the initial ponderousness of the work, I was held by the story and my interest was riveted until the end.

The second and third novels which I read with great pleasure have quite a number of themes in common, as will become apparent in the following paragraphs. First of these is John Banville's novel *Ancient Light*. It has many echoes of an earlier Banville fiction, the Booker-winning *The Sea* (2005): a boy becomes friendly with a family who are of a higher social status; in both, the boy falls in love with his friends' mother; in both, some or all of the family die prematurely. The actual parents of the two narrators are rather obscure figures in the background, and the narrators as adults recalling their youth have troubled, insomniac daughters in their twenties. The sea in both is associated with tragedy. The Grace family in the earlier novel are seen as "divinities" (Banville 2005: 107). The father in particular seems to have the cruel sardonic regard of gods as he watches the interplay of relationships in his family (121). This was to be fully developed in *Infinitives* (2009) where Greek gods play havoc with the lives of people, but in *Ancient Light*, while the author still uses many classical references, he is more concerned with human psychology and loves.

A very different take on the past from O'Callaghan's novel is found in this latest Banville fiction. There is no intention to use history here, apart from a re-creation of the scenario and feelings of 1950s Ireland. Descriptions of small towns, household furniture, clothes, beach holiday places and transport are all lovingly sketched. However, this is not 1950s Ireland as many people know it. It begins with the stark sentence, a real attention-grabber: "Billy

Gray was my best friend, and I fell in love with his mother". This becomes even more riveting when it is made apparent that the boys were fifteen years old, and the mother is thirty-five. The close moral scrutiny of lives and mores in general by mid-twentieth Irish society is not evident here; even though the boy thinks that his secret affair is known about and condemned, this proves not to be the case, as evident late in the novel. What would nowadays be regarded as paedophilia, the seduction of a 15 year old boy by a woman in her 30s, mother of his best friend of same age, has little or no moral relevance in this book.

While the boy lover adores Mrs Grace from a distance in *The Sea*, and later transfers his attention to her young daughter, there is a distinctly Freudian character to the full-blown sexual relationship in *Ancient Light*. The boy in love-making sometimes calls his lover "Mother"; the woman at times adopts the indulgent amused tone of a mother soothing her baby, especially when the boy sulks because she will not accede to his demands. This is complicated by the fact that he admits to being a little in love with Billy, and at times notes the disconcerting resemblance between mother and son. When his love affair comes to an end, the boy seeks physical comfort from his own mother, holding on to her finger as he lies beside her bed, as he formerly did when he had childhood nightmares.

Where O'Callaghan calls on the facts of history in the early part of the twentieth century, Banville's past is a very fluid concept, as the narrator repeatedly reminds us: "Images from the past crowd in my head and half the time I cannot tell whether they are memories or inventions. Not that there is much difference between the two, if indeed there is any difference at all" (Banville 2012: 3). He repeatedly confuses the seasons, relying more on pathetic fallacy and his own feelings about the episodes by which to situate them in time; he reminds us that biographies are fiction (54), and in the end stars in a film entitled *The Invention of the Past*.

There is a repeated preoccupation with deaths: those of the narrator's father, Mrs Gray's last baby, her eventual death, his daughter Cass's death by suicide, the attempt at suicide by the

young movie star who is his love interest in the movie they are making together. Dawn Davenport becomes for Alex a representation of his daughter, especially as she often evokes her own dead father, and he attempts to save and heal this girl and himself too, by bringing her to the area where Cass drowned herself. Later his wife takes the girl under her wing, and they attempt to do for her what they could not do for their own daughter – with success, it seems.

There is a lurking sense of immortality and transcendence underlying all of the transience, however. Some haunting experiences are lightly touched on, of Cass while she was still living, in the troubled months before her suicide, "a sort of ghost-in-waiting" (143), the shade of Alex's dead father glimpsed in the attic (153), Dawn's perception of a nameless something when she is technically dead after her suicide attempt (158). Alex and his wife are atheists but these experiences and the belief of others in immortality open new possibilities to him. He ponders the nature of coincidence, which might suggest a transcendent process at work "above, or behind, or within commonplace reality. And yet I ask myself, why not?" (151). On meeting again with Kitty, Mrs Gray's daughter, who has spent her life as a nun, he ruminates: "If so, in her version of things, Cass is eternally alive, Cass and Mrs Gray, and Mr Gray, and Billy, and my mother and my father, ..". But that is not the only or possible heaven which he encounters: there is also the theory of the many worlds as propounded to him by a mysterious South American man in the bar of an Italian hotel, which leads him to think that "somewhere in this infinitely layered, infinitely ramifying reality Cass did not die, her baby was born, ... somewhere too Mrs Gray survived" (241). There are a number of transforming experiences of light, as the title indicates, especially that described at the very end of the novel, when the bereft and terrified boy experiences a type of transcendence in the approaching dawn, and "it was as if some radiant being were advancing towards the house ... great trembling wings spread wide" (255) which soothes him and gives him back his sleep.

So too, there is a great deal of irony in this

novel, another factor implying a causality outside of human control. Mrs Gray's husband is an optician, but in life is manifestly myopic in relation to his wife's affair. Cass, in getting her father to walk with her at a dangerously narrow ledge over a sheer cliff is acting out the circumstances of her future suicide. The identity of the mystery lover of the narrator's daughter's may possibly be the character called Axel Vander whose life Alex Cleave acts in the movie; there is an acute similarity in these names, especially in the first names. Dawn in the movie acts as Cora, the wronged young lover of Axel Vander, whose death by drowning he causes. As Alex looks at Dawn in the hospital after her failed suicide attempt, he wonders: "What turbulent depths had she leaned out over, what windy abyss had called to her?" (134) Overall, acting is seen as a parallel for real life.

In this incredibly rich novel, there are many lovingly recreated sensuous descriptions of certain nature scenes, which are scattered throughout. The theme of light and vision is often associated with mirror images, for example when the boy first beholds Mrs Gray's body in a reflection of a reflection, but these topics are so wide that if I were to detail them in full, this review would never end.

The third novel which I have read from last year's new fiction is Kathleen MacMahon's *This Is How It Ends*. Like the Banville fiction, this is preoccupied with death, too, which is also closely associated with the sea. Both writers commemorate the late Caroline Walsh, literary editor of the *Irish Times*; Banville's novel is dedicated to her and she is also warmly remembered in her niece Kathleen MacMahon's "Acknowledgements". Both also use the terminology of painting to describe colours.

Like many Irish works of fiction, *This is How it Ends* is also a novel about a family. They comprise a father in his sixties, two adult daughters and the husband and children of the elder one, and even the love interest for the unmarried daughter is a distant cousin who comes from America. It is in many ways a novel about contemporary life, too, based in 2008 around the first election of Barack Obama as

President of the United States, and accompanied throughout by the music of Bruce Springsteen. Even though the family belongs to the middle class in Southside Dublin, there are frequent reminders of Ireland's recession, and also farther afield; cousin Bruno has lost his job in Lehman's Bank before coming to Ireland. The father, Professor Murphy, is a doctor, and has made many enemies for himself in the hospital, but the daughters, while acknowledging his difficult character, also see how he tried to love and take care of them when their mother dies young.

More than anything, however, this novel is about death. It carries a strong sense of fatality. Firstly, the death of the mother has left the daughters damaged even into adulthood; Addie has also suffered from the effects of an ectopic pregnancy, her probable last chance to have a baby. The coming of their cousin Bruno is a catalyst for her, leading to the first true love of her life; she meets him near the beach where she loves to swim with her dog: "And that was how it started" (MacMahon 2012: 53). He makes her want to live a more full life, opens her eyes to factors hitherto neglected by her, such as the beauty of various parts of Ireland and the neglected relatives who live in more modest circumstances than them. However, there are various intimations that Addie will suffer from cancer as her mother did. While the news of her impending death brings consternation to all the family, in some ways she almost seems to welcome it; "It seemed to her in that moment that she had always known" (333). For the first time in her life she is the leader and has to be strong. She feels calm, even elation, and happiness for the good things that have come to her; she regrets only the things which she could have done with her life. Her approaching death has a redemptive power over her father, as well as Bruno, and she dies while her family experience the joy of seeing the Northern Lights from the balcony just off her room, while she is conscious of the fact: "This is how it ends" (p. 400).

There are some distinct resemblances here to the short story "Happiness," written by Mary Lavin, grandmother to Kathleen MacMahon. The mother in this story is preoccupied with the

idea of happiness being a value that one works for, that sorrow is not a substitute for happiness. This was the motto of her own father on his deathbed and she clings to it, in spite of the pain of losing her young husband at a tragically early age. At the moment of her own death, her

daughter reassures her that she does not have to face her troubles any more, and she relaxes into death as she has never been able to do in life, just like Addie in the novel above. So the mix of death and transcendent experience is hardly new in 2012.

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***The Bell Magazine and the Representation of Irish Identity: Opening Windows***

by Kelly Mathews

Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2012

ISBN -10- 1846823234

218 pp. £65.00

Reviewer: **Malcolm W. Ballin**

In Anthony Cronin's Foreword to Kelly Mathews's excellent account of *The Bell* (1940-54) – edited by Sean O'Faoláin and later by Peadar O'Donnell – he says

It was part of *The Bell's* implicit assumptions that the Ireland its readers lived in had not been described and that too much of Irish life had been seen through the haze of nostalgia for an invented past or idealism about a projected future (2012: ix).

A little later, in her own Introduction, Mathews suggests that

*The Bell* proposed for Ireland a multi-faceted identity, a multiplicity of voices that had been interwoven throughout history and carried into the present day. As such, the magazine represents a break with the narrow forms of nationalist discourse which predominated in the 1930s ... (2012: 26).

Mathews identifies a creative tension between “representation” *The Bell's* original documentary objective – to describe and analyse the conditions of Irish life during the post-revolutionary era under de Valera's government – and “transformation”, the creative act of influencing the future of Irish society and culture along more liberal lines.

The Introduction outlines *The Bell's* distinctive character, including its focus on literary realism, efforts to establish an active dialogue with its readers, its relations with contemporary journals (such as *Studies* and *Christus Rex*) and with predecessors (including *The Irish Statesman* and *Ireland To-Day*). Mathews defines *The Bell's* “inclusive” approach, avoiding an over-emphasis

on Dublin's role but also resisting the eternal verities of rural Ireland invoked in de Valera's iconic St. Patrick's Day broadcast. *The Bell's* global perspective, registered through “International Numbers” and O'Faoláin's “One World” editorials, established “a post-colonial context” (23). Post-colonial theorists such as Fanon and Bhabha are cited as relevant to *The Bell's* twin missions while work by Luke Gibbons on culture as a transformative force supports her contention that “*The Bell* consciously tried to create a more complex and inclusive version of Irish identity” (25).

Mathews ends the introduction by reviewing earlier critical work on *The Bell* (28-34). She suggests that some commentators, over-influenced by “O'Faoláin's powerful personality” have underrated the contributions of others, such as Frank O'Connor and Geoffrey Taylor, and that they have given “comparatively little attention” to the eight years of O'Donnell's editorship. She accepts, however, that O'Donnell was not highly effective, and in practice, something of an absentee editor.

The next chapter, about the perceived tensions between “representation” and “transformation”, gives close attention to O'Connor's series, “The Belfry”, describing his reluctant acquiescence in O'Faolain's project of encouraging new poets to submit work. His “bluntly critical commentary” on submissions by Hewitt and Greacen discouraged neo-romanticism and underlined his preference for “the reality of everyday life” (48). This approach, together with O'Faolain's “New Writers” series (focused on short fiction) and Michael Farrell's articles on “The Country

Theatre”, “aimed to transform the arts in Ireland” (51). Placement of articles in the magazine was carefully structured “to provoke the reader to reflect on the multifariousness of life in contemporary Ireland” (58). Special issues, such as the “Ulster” and “International” numbers developed *The Bell’s* emphasis on “the more direct forms of commentary on Irish literature, politics and culture” (64).

These themes are developed in detail in Chapter 3 (“The Evolution of *The Bell*”) and, most significantly, in Chapter 4: “Representations of Irish Identity in *The Bell*” – which lies at the core of the book. Attention is paid to circulation levels within Ireland, Britain and America (69), and to the review section’s project of “national education” in literary matters (85). A discussion of O’Donnell’s “under-debated” editorship confirms some falling-off of quality and a shift towards more literary material (93). Matthews emphasises *The Bell’s* material on slum-dwelling and town planning, the constructive debate about the Gaelic question and the sympathetic discussion of the problems of Northern Ireland.

Matthews turns in Chapter 5 to discussion of “*The Bell* and transformations of Irish identity”. She initially gives priority to wartime neutrality and the accompanying censorship, drawing on the work of Clair Wills. O’Faoláin’s view that “Irish moral judgement and intellectual engagement had been ‘starved’ by the censorship” was reinforced in his ten outward-looking editorials on the “One World” theme (144-45). Matthews goes on to praise the modernising debate in the magazine about radio, press and cinema (158). Considerable space (166-70) is given to James Plunkett’s realist fiction concentrating on Irish urban experience, and associated “isolation and frustration”. The book is rounded off by a brief Conclusion (171-78) – “The legacy of *The Bell*” – looking “unflinchingly on the realities of contemporary Irish life”, offering “a forum for both the representation of new realities as well as considerations of how they would impact Irish identity.” It is “a story of editorial doggedness

and perseverance”, aiming at what Luke Gibbons describes (173) as “transformation from within.” Its successors, magazines like *Envoy*, *Threshold* or *Rann* were short-lived. Longer term inheritors of *The Bell’s* tradition are *Atlantis* and the Field Day movement – both seeking to unite a divided society and see Ireland in an international context.

Kelly Mathews has produced what is likely to be the fullest and most authoritative text on *The Bell* for some time to come. I have very few cavils. It seems a pity that she does not acknowledge contemporaries such as David Marcus’s *Irish Writing* (1946-57) – which also published seminal work by James Plunkett and Sean O’Faoláin. *The Bell* inherited a tradition of Irish miscellanies, such as Standish O’Grady’s *All Ireland Review*, which invoke a carnivalesque opposition to established opinion. Even today, Chris Agee invokes *The Bell* as a model for his Belfast-based *Irish Pages*. The structured opposition Matthews proposes between “representation” and “transformation” is somewhat complicated by *The Bell’s* practice of advocating change (or “transformation”) precisely *through* its realist representation of the nature of existing Irish society. In my view, *The Bell* helped to prepare the way for eventual public acceptance of the radical reforms associated with T.K. Whitaker and Sean Lemass, leading up to Ireland’s entry into the European Community.

**Dr Malcolm Ballin** is an Independent Researcher, based at Cardiff University. After taking his first degree in English at Selwyn College Cambridge in 1957, he began a career in the steel industry. Following retirement in 1996 as Director of Human Resources for British Steel plc, he returned to academic life in Cardiff, proceeding to a PhD in 2002. His book, *Irish Periodical Culture: 1937-1972*, was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2008. His new book *Welsh Periodicals in English* is due for publication by University of Wales Press in July 2013 as part of its ‘Writers of Wales’ series.

*Writing the Irish West: Ecologies and Traditions* by Eamonn Wall  
 Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press 2011,  
 ISBN 978-0-268-04423-7  
 210 pp. \$27.00 paper

Reviewer: **Mairéad Conneely**

This book is both a fitting and wonderful amalgam of criticism and close reading of the literature of the Irish West, often through the lens of the less encumbered literature of the American West. Eamonn Wall's love for and understanding of the American West inspires his desire to untangle the much-romanticised Irish West, and both countries and their attendant bibliographies support his journey, while also enriching, and at times problematising his perspectives. It is striking, nonetheless, that Wall's emigrant eyes fix on a point of his maternal homeland with which he has only become familiar having gained a sense of place in the American West. This study could have fallen victim to its author's romantic re-embracing of Ireland's most romanticised landscape; thankfully, and perhaps as a result of distance and time, it stands outside of the rose-tinted arena and reaches a new and exciting note within critical discourse on the Irish West. Many have sought to classify the influence of the imagined and the actual West on artistic ideologies, but Wall's imperative is to step outside the somewhat jaded forum of definition into the more fruitful terrain of depiction and description. Wall is primarily concerned with the territory of the West, and how this is set out by seven Irish writers and cartographers. The ecology and tradition of place is at the heart of this work and Wall demonstrates that it is a local activity which has international resonances.

The global and the personal or local attributes of the cartographical work of Tim Robinson, the drama of Martin McDonagh, the poetry of Richard Murphy, Mary O'Malley, Seán Lysaght

and Moya Cannon and the writing of John McGahern sit comfortably in the territory of the West but appear as refreshing new ideas within the ecological framework set out by Wall. It is not the author's intention, however, to destabilise the Revivalist dream of an uncontaminated idea of Western purity, but rather to secure these contemporary contributions within the historically and eco-critically sound timeline within which they appeared. Though his subjects are concerned with the past, and are actively engaged in "intense dialogues with Revival writers" (Wall 2011: xvi), Wall also considers them as contemporary documents. This is a very welcome departure, one which points favourably to a new way of looking at and critically assessing a literature, a geography and an ideologically-consumed area of Ireland. Irish language texts could benefit from the same type of treatment.

Much has been written about Martin McDonagh's western credentials, and those of Tim Robinson have been inscribed from an early stage into the rocks he so loves. The inclusion of Mary O'Malley's, Moya Cannon's and Seán Lysaght's voices in the ecological and literary chronology of the West is timely. Their thematically-diverse treatments of verse speak to the private or local and the communal and/or universal in the natural world around them. Wall, perhaps unwittingly, throws off the shackles of the criteria previously applied to Western authors and develops a new taxonomy. He casts his net more pointedly at writers engaged in portraying their own sense of the West. What Wall articulates most succinctly is what that West

means to them and what their Wests look and feel like.

The beauty of this book is that it brings together authors who have not been considered collectively as West of Ireland authors, until now. Yet it has much to offer to both student and teacher, novice and expert. It is a resounding restatement of the value of comparative approaches to literature but Wall carefully avoids comparison for comparison's sake and instead suggests a shared ecology and a sharing of influences amongst Western writers. His readings on eco-feminism in Irish and American poetry, for instance, highlight why the West is still such a pulsating presence in literature and why there is much still to be captured, poeticised and dramatised within the ecological framework of our most imaginative and real cartographical asset. Walls' passion is almost tangible and I

would have liked to hear his over-arching conclusion on the works outlined and evaluated. His open ending may be the most apt, however. Like the themes he presents, it is suggestive of the possibility and promise of what is to come.

**Dr. Mairéad Conneely** lectures in Irish at St. Angela's College, Sligo. Her areas of research include Irish language literature and contemporary Irish language drama, the works of Tom Murphy and Brian Friel, Irish studies, Island studies and Comparative Literature. Her book, *Between Two Shores / Idir Dhá Chladach: Writing the Aran Islands, 1890-1980 (Reimagining Ireland)*, Peter Lang) was published in 2011, and she is currently researching Irish island poetry in both Irish and English.

*Stewart Parker, A Life* by Marilyn Richtarik  
 Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.  
 ISBN 978-0-19-969503-4  
 419 pages. £30.00.

Reviewer: **Maureen Hawkins**

Meticulously researched and engagingly written, Richtarik's biography of the stellar Northern Irish playwright, Stewart Parker, does an excellent job of cementing the reputation of a writer who died too young (Richtarik 2012: 47), at the height of his powers, just as the full quality of his work was being properly recognized. She draws on his diaries, an autobiographical novel he never published but kept returning to, and other private writings as well as extensive contacts with his friends and associates and a thorough knowledge of everything he ever staged, broadcast, and/or published. The author paints a picture of a Protestant working-class Belfast youth who overcame obstacles, including the amputation of his leg for cancer at age 19, and disappointments that would have felled most people, in order to create a body of work that has led many to compare him favourably to Brian Friel.

Born in 1941, he was fortunate enough to begin his secondary education after the British government's educational reforms had established a route to university for promising working-class students. Bright and gregarious, he took to university like a duck to water and soon became the centre of numerous creative groups at Queen's University, where fellow students included Seamus Heaney and Michael Longley. Partway through a Master's thesis on poetic drama (which he later finished and submitted), he took the opportunity to broaden his horizons further by teaching at a university in the United States. After three years, he decided it took too much time from his creative work and returned to Belfast. There, often in penury but always surrounded by friends (he had a gift for

friendship), he wrote for radio, television, and the stage as well as a column on pop music for the *Irish Times* against the backdrop of "the Troubles" in the North. Later he moved to Edinburgh and, finally, London.

Like most writers, he received his share of rejections, but his being a playwright made it worse; much of his story is one of repeated disappointment as production after production—even of commissioned work—is cancelled, usually due to lack of money, change of producers, or unavailability of actors, directors, or venues. The only major plays that actually debuted as scheduled with the groups that commissioned them were *Northern Star* (Belfast's Lyric Players) and *Pentecost* (Field Day). Despite all this and family problems to boot, he kept up a staggering writing schedule, revising constantly, and keeping a cheerful demeanour, though bad reviews wounded him deeply. His focus and his ideal audience, even after he moved to Britain, was Belfast, though until *Northern Star* and *Pentecost*, he had to rely on Dublin and London for premieres. Influenced by Sam Thompson's *Over the Bridge*, he worked to give voice to his people and the agony caused by sectarianism while, at the same time, attempting to ameliorate it, in works ranging from early BBC Schools Department broadcasts like *The Bus Stories* (1972-3) to late plays like *Northern Star* and *Pentecost*. Richtarik points out that even plays like *The Kamikaze Ground Staff Reunion Dinner*, "a send-up of British films of the immediate post-war period," have their Northern Irish dimension; she says: "its real targets were fanatical nationalism, hero worship, and the cult of blood

sacrifice, all of which sustained the Troubles.” This is not to say that Parker is a dull, humourless propagandist; one of the striking features of his work is its humour, indeed its “light-heartedness”; even his darkest play, *Nightshade*, a “meditation on how people confront – or fail to confront – loss and the fact of mortality,” incorporates magic tricks and music.

Richtarik seamlessly interweaves the events of Parker’s personal and professional life, his reading, the public events that he lived through in the North that affected his work, and the intellectual currents of the time with critical discussion of his works in ways that illuminate not only the significance of their context but also draw attention to their artistic quality and major themes. The result is to make the reader want to rush to read or reread every one of them (which, thanks to the publication of his collected *Plays* in 2000 and the publications of his television plays and selected non-dramatic writings and music reviews in 2008, is now possible for his major work). She also creates a portrait of a man whose death was a human as well as artistic loss to the world. When one reads of his personal happiness and professional success in the last few years of his life, it is with the pleasure that one would feel for a dear friend.

Richtarik has accomplished the very difficult task of writing a biography that will appeal equally to the scholar and the general reader. Its great, well-documented detail will make it an invaluable tool for the specialist, while its general readability and feeling for the subject will recommend it to a larger audience. For the benefit especially of the latter, she provides generous plot summaries not only of Parker’s

work but also of other works referred to from the Deirdre legend to Behan’s *The Hostage*, as well as detailed accounts of important events in Northern Ireland during Parker’s life that are reflected in his work. This breadth of audience, however, leads to one disturbing quasi-omission. She completes her account of Bloody Sunday without mentioning the results of the Saville Inquiry, saying only that “The soldiers claimed to have been fired on first, but those on the march had a starkly different perspective.” Although she corrects that omission in an endnote, the general reader is unlikely to read them because most of the endnotes are source notes only, and one may come away with the impression that what happened is still in dispute and that the marchers may have fired on the troops.

That minor quibble aside, this is a welcome and exemplary critical biography of a playwright who clearly deserves the love, skill, and effort she has put into it. She dedicates it to “the friends of Stewart Parker, old and new,” and I predict that it will make many new friends as well as rewarding the old ones.

**Maureen S. G. Hawkins** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English of the University of Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada. She has written extensively on eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and twentieth-century Irish drama, on British, European, Canadian, and American drama, and on intertextuality. She has also co-edited a book on *Global Perspectives on Teaching Literature*.

*Jailtacht: The Irish Language, Symbolic Power, and Political Violence in Northern Ireland, 1972-2008* by Diarmait Mac Giolla Chríost  
 Cardiff: U. of Wales Press, 2012  
 ISBN 978-0708324967  
 288 pp. £19.99 (Paperback)

Reviewer: **John L. Murphy**

“Jailic” developed among political prisoners in the North; on their release, a “Jailtacht” radicalised community groups in the 1980s, shifted republicans towards political accommodation in the 1990s, and commodified a stretch of today’s West Belfast for “struggle tourism”. Dr. Mac Giolla Chríost grew up in Derry City. He acquired Irish during the 1980s at QUB – followed by a “self-exile” into the Welsh-speaking heartland that earned him a Readership in that language at the University of Wales. He knows intimately that “symbolic terrain” where Celtic cultural claims to political independence reverberate as personal recovery of native tongues.

He combines engagement with distance. The combination of the two standpoints leads him to analyse Irish as “the defining symbolic element of the political violence that has shaped the history of Northern Ireland and, to a great extent, the relationship between the UK and the Republic of Ireland”. By interviews with ex-prisoners, he explains Jailic’s acquisition, its use as formulaic “language strings”, and its sociological impacts. Graffiti and mural depictions, along with archival and online research, demonstrate his diligence. (I appear among those “ordinary cybercitizens” documented who address Jailic in a “public space”.)

Historical contexts precede chapters respectively on close readings for stylistics; the “performativity” of managing incarceration, creating social identities, and building a “sense of place”; signs and murals as “visual grammar”; and ideology in the “grey literature” produced by republicans – and loyalists.

He locates the emergence of “Jailtacht” not in Long Kesh’s cages of the early 1970s but in the mid-1980s, after the 1976 reversal of political to criminal status among republicans incarcerated — when “Jailic” itself was coined. After the hunger strikes, prisoners circumvented an Irish ban. Blanket protesters on a wing shouted out phrases at set times of day, with varying levels of fluency. Gearóid Mac Siacais recalls: “Thosaigh an Ghaeilge ar bhonn slándála agus chríochnaigh sé mar theanga labharta na blocanna.” (“The Irish language started as a basis for security but ended up as the spoken language of the Blocks.”) This transformation in the late 1970s, over eighteen months, enabled Irish to be spoken by three hundred rather than the seven or eight inmates who had carried the language into the H-Blocks from the Cages.

Some cellmates may have been less eager, but spoken (or shouted) Irish dominated. Texts were smuggled in (and out); nails scraped lessons into concrete. Prisoners deployed Irish against “criminalization”. A post-strike lull in fluency was countered by an intensive six-week course smuggled in by Máirtín Ó Muilleoir. By the late 1980s, constant Irish infiltrated his dreams, Séanna Walsh confides.

Mac Giolla Chríost delineates usage. As argot, tokens as catch phrases peppered English speech. As a medium for deeper communication, Jailic’s divergence from Gaelic norms – given limited or no opportunities for formal education – evolved into “rough, natural accents” and rote idioms acquired by repetition rather than effort. The “comms” shared in the blanket protests and hunger strikes, as well as texts by Bobby Sands,

Gerry Adams and comrades, display orthographic and articulated distinctions from, or similarities to, Irish outside prison. By the mid-1990s, the imprisonment of republicans schooled in Irish, as well as access to external materials, signaled a “fossilization” of Jailic as markers of its diction and pronunciation persisted among its freed inmates. This spread into poetry, plays, and films about the Gaeltacht na Fuiseoige, the Irish-speaking community of the Lark, in honor of Bobby Sands’ pen-name.

Performance of Irish forced a congenial space within prison. Filthy walls filled with scrawled vocabulary, while the Jailtacht encouraged collegial teaching of the language, rather than student-pupil hierarchies. The Gaelicisation of given names (as with Sands) proves an intriguing case study in how diligently and imaginatively prisoners and activists adopted or adapted identities to further ideological commitments.

These, in turn, gained proclamation, frequently in the Gaelic font, on murals, as street names, and in signs. These appeared within the Shaw’s Road Belfast emerging Gaeltacht, and as daubed slogans or graffiti elsewhere in that city or Derry. Monuments to the fallen, banners in demonstrations, and paintings asserting solidarity by the incorporation of Basque, Arabic, or Catalan content show the wider cultural components associated by Irish-language leftists with nationalist or radical insurgencies abroad.

“Fianna Fáil Gaelic and Sinn Féin Irish” sums up ideological squabbles and linguistic shibboleths amidst political deviations from conventional Irish conceptions of language: in its teaching, its form, and in its public role as the “first official language” of the Republic. Not only loyalists but nationalists debate its state-sponsored funding or subversively anti-establishment presence. Within the Jailtacht,

Irish became a living language once again, while the Gaeltachtaí struggled to sustain Gaeilge as a communal channel of exchange and a personally chosen signifier. Additionally, claims of Irish-language acquisition linked (arguably in fetishised or tokenistic manner) rebellious republicans from the old IRA with those who swelled its Provisional ranks five decades later. This origin myth generated an “invented tradition” of an iconic, subversive Irish passed down decades behind bars.

This book concludes: “language is too powerful a tool not to be political”. Despite the cross-border and post-GFA efforts to ease Irish out of its Northern and republican contexts, this study argues for the potency of Jailic. For, spawned under repression, it reclaims and appropriates by “strength, power, and dominance”. Language endures against oppression and occupation. Symbolically, Jailic stands for Irish resistance.

**Prof. John L. Murphy** coordinates the Humanities sequence at DeVry University’s Long Beach, California campus. His Ph.D. is from UCLA in medieval English literature. Irish language reception by English-language culture, Irish republicanism, Beckett’s purgatorial concepts, Jews in medieval Ireland, the reception of Buddhism by Irish intellectuals, folk-rock in Irish counterculture, and the presentation of otherworldly, liminal states in medieval and modern literature illustrate his published research. He reviews books and music over a broad range of topics in print and online, and he contributes to *PBio*.

*The Atlas of the Great Irish Famine*

Edited by John Crowley, William J Smyth and Mike Murphy

Cork: Cork University Press, 2012

ISBN 978-185918-479-0, Hardback, 299 x 237mm, 728pp., 200 maps and 400 illustrations. €59

Reviewer: **John O'Callaghan**

*The Atlas of the Great Irish Famine* does not claim to speak for the one million men, women, and children who starved or succumbed to related diseases in Ireland between 1845 and 1852. It begins with Eavan Boland's poem, "That the Silence of Cartography is Limited". This seems to represent an acknowledgement of the near-futility of attempting to represent the reality of the Famine, of hunger, pain, fear, and death experienced in cabins and huts, in bogs and ditches, in workhouses and fever hospitals, and by roadsides. Many of the victims remain anonymous, hidden from history by mass graves. Yet this sophisticated volume does as much as any history can and deserves the highest praise. It is a worthy treatment of its monumental subject, and offers a tour de force synthesis of interdisciplinary scholarship from the fields of art, geography, literature, and indeed cartography, as well as from diaspora, Irish, memory, and migration studies. No fewer than fifty essays from sixty contributors provide a vast body of local, provincial, national and international analysis on pre-famine society, contemporary relief efforts, and the legacy of the haemorrhaging of the Irish people through emigration. This latter phenomenon has been central to Irish self-understanding and to how others have perceived the island. At least those who survived, whether they went or stayed, could tell their tales, as long as guilt or trauma did not prevent them. The book is beautifully produced and visually striking. Computer-generated parish maps of population decline blend seamlessly with contemporary paintings and illustrations, as well as with more recent photographs.

Irish population expansion from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth-century, in the face of agricultural depression and the de-industrialisation of the island outside of the north-east, was overwhelmingly reliant on the cultivation of potatoes on increasingly marginal land. The destruction of successive crops by blight meant that the food supply was abruptly and drastically reduced. Famines, however, can result from an inability to access available food as opposed to an outright scarcity of all types of food. The Great Famine was distinguished by its longevity and the associated scale of its mass excess mortality, but also by the location of its occurrence. Appallingly, this was at a time when Britain boasted the leading empire in the world, and the United Kingdom of Britain and Ireland was the richest and most powerful state yet known. There is no fudging. Dogmatic administrators and economically-motivated evicting landlords are not absolved of responsibility, but as in all good history, misperceptions are challenged where they may exist. Death did not discriminate on the basis of religion. Often, Irish Catholic professionals and tenant farmers benefitted at the expense of those less fortunate. The catastrophe was exacerbated by the undaunted adherence to laissez-faire economics of the British political elite. Doctrinaires even withheld food supplies from Ireland at critical junctures. The intellectual position of Charles Edward Trevelyan, the Treasury official leading the state's response, was that humanity should be left to the mercy of the free market. According to his thinking, government intervention was not warranted or

desirable. His cohort anticipated a highway to modernity through the famine roads. Their inhuman policies of wilful neglect failed the Irish people. The result was the worst humanitarian catastrophe in nineteenth-century Europe and perhaps the defining development in national history. Its impact was not confined to Ireland and its shadow looms large, home and away. Within a decade, two million people had fled to destinations around the globe in pursuit of something that was not available to them in Ireland, whether that was simply enough to eat, or something more abstract, like happiness.

The mapping of the Famine at parish level allows for new interpretations of traditional perspectives and folk-memory. The identification of intricate and interlinked local and regional dynamics raises questions about the social conditions which prevailed around the country and the diverse responses in terms of relief efforts. In tandem with the provincial case studies, they demonstrate clearly the variety of causes and effects at play. Also traced are the routes followed by those who had to undertake a journey of the heart and mind as part of their physical travel, to learn a new tongue and forge a new identity in an attempt to make a new home. It is the stories of the fates of individuals and their communities that are the most affecting, and which for many readers will be the most interesting.

Of particular appeal to me was John O'Connell's short piece on Donoughmore, Co. Cork, the home place of my father. Reliant in some parts on "spent bog in a state of tillage", as many as 1,400 people died in Donoughmore between November 1846 and September 1847. Valuation Office records suggest the suffering of the entire population of the townlands of Bunkilla

and Monavanshire, twenty families all told, who had been evicted by 1851. One of the landlords was John O'Callaghan, with whom my father and I share a name but, I feel compelled to add 160 years after the fact, to whom we are not related. By the 1860s one of the Bunakilla families had made their way to Minnesota, where they purchased Winnebago Indian Reservation land from which the native people had themselves been removed.

In contrast to the Great Irish Famine, most modern famines occur in marginal economies. The concluding section of the Atlas devotes weighty consideration to the historical resonances between the Irish and contemporary famines. The most pressing question it raises is not a new one, but it is one of only a few to which it can provide a definitive answer: why are famines still happening? This is the authoritative reference work on the Famine. It will serve Irish people and all others well, wherever they may be. It will be a powerful teaching resource and will no doubt inspire future research.

**Dr John O'Callaghan** has published widely on modern Irish history. Among his books are *Revolutionary Limerick: The Republican Campaign for Independence in Limerick, 1913-21* (Irish Academic Press, 2010), *The Battle for Kilmallock* (Mercier Press, 2011), and *Narratives of the Occluded Irish Diaspora: Subversive Voices* (co-editor, Peter Lang, 2012). His next book, *Plassey's Gaels: A History of the GAA at the University of Limerick, 1972-2012*, is due out with Collins Press in May 2013.

*London Irish Fictions: Narrative, Diaspora and Identity*

By Tony Murray

Liverpool: Liverpool University Press (2012)

ISBN 9781846318313

224 pp. £65.00 (Hardback)

Reviewer: **Louise Sheridan**

In today's global economic crisis, and with the collapse of Ireland's Celtic Tiger economy, emigration has once more become a major part of Irish daily life. This is reflected in public, social, and cultural discourses that abound about Ireland's exiles. Works that explore Irish diasporic experiences have become a familiar feature of contemporary Irish literature, with recent publications from authors such as Edna O'Brien, Sebastian Barry, Colum McCann and Colm Tóibín. Interestingly, while public discourse focuses on today's migration, much of the literary work produced in the last decade has taken twentieth-century migration as its subject; arguably because post-war migration remains largely under-explored in literature, and under-researched in academic circles. While excellent work on Irish migration has been carried out both in the humanities and social sciences, most notably by Mary J. Hickman, Bronwen Walter, Breda Gray, Liam Harte, and Shaun Richards, there remains a lacuna of knowledge about the lives of Irish men and women who migrated to Britain in the post-war years. Tony Murray addresses this absence of scholarly work on the Irish in Britain, specifically on the Irish in London, in his nuanced and insightful work: *London Irish Fictions*.

*London Irish Fictions* explores a range of autobiographical and fictional works to consider some of the ways in which the post-war London Irish have represented their own subject-positions and experiences as Irish people in London. An aim of the work is not only to address a deficit of knowledge on such experiences, but also to reveal alternative

discourses from negative portrayals of the Irish that appeared in British media since the war. Murray has undertaken a depth of research to complete this work, and his analysis of the twenty-eight texts explored is nuanced and insightful. The reader may experience a slight disappointment in that the sheer number of texts covered does not allow for a deeper exploration of them; however, that was not the author's aim in creating the collection.

Murray uses Avtar Brah's trope of "diaspora space": a space "inhabited" not only by those who have migrated and their descendants but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous (Murray 2012: 181), to explore the ways in which the chosen authors compare migrant experiences formed by interactions or "entanglement" of genealogies of dispersion with those of "staying put" (Brah 1996: 181242?). He refigures Brah's concept to explore how migrant identities are configured within and across what he coins as the "narrative diaspora space" (Murray 2012: 189). In these narratives, we learn, the Irish diasporic experience is shaped by interactions between the migrant and those who are considered indigenous to Britain, but also, crucially, by interactions with those who stay behind in Ireland. Irish interactions with diasporants of other ethnicities is also a formative part of life in diaspora.

Part 1 of the book considers representations of Irish migration to London in the 1940s and 1950s; a key subject explored is that of the tension between migration as escape, and as exile for the Irish migrant. Here Murray

acknowledges the implications of gender, class and subject positioning in both the old and new country, that results in a heterogeneous, rather than fixed, experience for Irish migrants. “Navy Narratives” looks at two novels: John B. Keane’s *The Contractor* (1994) and Timothy O’Grady and Steve Pyke’s *I Could Read the Sky* (1997) as examples of exile narratives and stories of social isolation and destitution. A discussion of the influence of Celtic mythology on migrant literature is a particularly enlightening focus of this chapter. The work of well-known authors Edna O’Brien and John McGahern are also covered in part 1. In an analysis of *Girls in their Married Bliss* (1964) and *Casualties of Peace* (1966) Murray suggests that while much scholarly work on O’Brien’s writing has been carried out, the diasporic dimension of her work has been neglected. While this may be true, it is worth noting that in recent years some scholarly work on O’Brien as a diasporic writer has certainly begun.

Part 2 looks at narratives of the “Ryanair Generation”; those who left Ireland in the severe recession of the 1970s and 1980s. The term “Ryanair Generation” alludes to the fact that Irish migrants to Britain could travel by air at discount prices which brought about, for some, a new ease of access between Ireland and England. However, as Murray goes on to show, while travel between Ireland and Britain may have been easier, literary texts by authors such as Joseph O’Connor and Sara Berkeley demonstrate that the psychological consequences of migration are no less complex for these migrants than for the generation gone before.

The experiences of the second generation, those children born in England to Irish parents, is

the study of the final part of *London Irish Fictions*. As a second-generation Irishman himself, Murray demonstrates a keen empathy with the experiences narrated here, whilst also recognising the many differences in experience. He identifies the common ethnic background that is made apparent in these tales of growing up in an Irish family in London, revealed in similar experiences of school, holidays, religious ritual and family traditions, and the ambivalence, or feeling of in-betweenness revealed by second generation authors such as John Walsh and John Bird.

*London Irish Fictions* is the first book that looks at literature of the Irish in London, and makes a valuable contribution to Irish diaspora studies more generally. Murray’s analysis of the role of narrative in shaping diasporic identities is masterly, and sheds new light on representations of exile, escape and belonging in the diasporic experience. A highly enjoyable and recommended read.

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**Dr. Louise Sheridan** completed a PhD on Irish diasporic oral and literary narratives at the University of Northampton in 2011. Currently working at the University of Limerick, her research interests lie in Irish diaspora studies, memory studies in literature, and contemporary Irish literature.