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## IRISH STUDIES ROUND THE WORLD - 2008

David Pierce (ed.)

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## Reflections on Irish Writing in 2008

David Pierce

If anyone needed evidence that the Celtic Tiger was in terminal decline, 2008 was the year that proved conclusively that we are at the end of something – though, in truth, any year in the last five or so gave good indications. Yet, equally it is the case that we are at the start of something both inside and outside Ireland. In terms of banking and the economy 2008 was the end; the new beginning might be heralded by the election of the first African American to the White House. So, while the focus of the discussion here in this journal is quite properly ‘Ireland’, we find ourselves almost immediately talking this year about the global situation. How could it be otherwise when, as I write this in January 2009, the American computer company Dell, which is among the biggest employers in Ireland, has just announced the loss of 1900 jobs at its plant in Limerick?

At the cultural level, however, the downturn is being played out in ways that require patient observation and hard thinking, much of it outside the box. Writers and film-makers might feel compelled to jump in and give us the world as it is, but often contemporary reality eludes them. It is as if there needs to be a passage of time before a story can be adequately told or indeed discerned. Equally, critics in the field of cultural analysis will need to do more with the traditional concept of determination than simply suggesting that X caused Y or that in a time of recession people turn to fantasy to fill the void within or without. All around us, therefore, at every level there is a rewriting going on, and this makes for a certain excitement as new configurations or possibilities forge themselves.

In terms of the wider historical picture, among the first things to be distinguished are the overlaps from the preceding period and a sense of continuity therefore. In Irish culture, to take a recent example from the field of drama, the emptiness on display in Edna Walsh’s plays, such as *The Walworth Farce* (2007), and *The*

*New Electric Ballroom* (2008), suddenly seems not so much prescient as immediate and descriptive of the world surrounding the theatre. At the beginning of *The Walworth Farce*, as we listen to a tape-recording of ‘An Irish Lullaby’ and ‘A Nation Once Again’, the message insists on itself: this is a play about post-romantic Ireland, where rituals serve as a distressing and unsentimental reminder of both what was lost and what cannot now be recuperated. ‘Shite’ says Dinny as, without more ado, he switches off the tape-recorder to begin the farce (p. 7). In history, as Thomas Davis’s unofficial anthem from the nineteenth century attests, there could once be heard the optimistic strains of a future, of a clear national identity, a nation once again as the rallying call of the song has it, but by the end of this play we cannot escape the conclusion that we have been witnessing not a farce but an excursion into a modern tragedy and an exploration, inside a council flat in South London where everything is ‘worn and colourless and stuck in the 1970s’ (p. 5), of the Irish dark.

With its echoes of William Trevor’s short story ‘The Ballroom of Romance’ (1972), Walsh’s next play, *The New Electric Ballroom*, evokes a different sense of loss. The play begins with talk and with the desultory observation that ‘[b]y their nature people are talkers’ (p. 5), but it ends more dramatically with ‘Blackout. Silence. The End.’ (p 46). Hanging on a wall on the stage three sets of retro clothes stare out at us: a cashmere jumper and rara skirt, a 1950s red blouse and pleated skirt, and a glitzy show-business man’s suit. Punctuating the play are memories of possible romance enjoyed by the three sisters at the Electric Ballroom in rural Ireland and other dreams of unfulfilment. In this play, unlike Trevor’s story, we imagine at first that it is we who are looking on but in fact it is the other way round, for with its mixture of claustrophobia and dreadful provincialism this is

a cruel world that stares at us. On the other hand, with 2008 in mind, another complicating thought prompts itself, and it has to do as much with the power of context in our reading and re-reading as with any sense of the discontinuous present. For while the credit crunch across the globe has ironically thrown us all together, Walsh reminds us not only of personal alienation but also of a particular Irish history which seems destined at this juncture to play itself out inside a wider recessionary context.

Loss and struggle, as I explore elsewhere in my own work, have accompanied modern Irish history since its inception, and perhaps it is for this reason that an Irish writer living largely in the diaspora should give us one of the most engaging and intelligent novels about American loss after 9/11. *Netherland* by Joseph O'Neill has received widespread acclaim on both sides of the Atlantic. The novel supplies its own contexts, both fictional and documentary: the (once Dutch) city of New York after 9/11, a childhood in The Netherlands, an epigraph from Walt Whitman (and the theme of male friendship therefore), perhaps echoes from the Great American Novel such as Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) (as in the figure of Mehmet Taspinar, the Turkish angel, in one and Ras the Exhorter in the other), and so on. But, even as we find ourselves having to supply such a context (and we might now add to the list the credit crunch, for it is more than a post-9/11 novel as it was initially marketed), O'Neill's Irishness shouldn't be overlooked. For this is a novel about loss and struggle, loss of a friend, loss of the past, loss of direction, a marriage in dissolution, and then the struggle for meaning, for a narrative that would make sense beyond simply the world of gangsterism and intrigue, a novel about the struggle for family life amid separation, above all a struggle for friendship. Like the pervasive imagery of water in a novel about submersion, loss and struggle go hand in hand suggesting that the exiled writer was being driven by even stronger currents or by a more inclusive and older structure of feeling.

At one point in the novel, Hans, the protagonist, explains he is 'given to self-estrangement' (p. 46). It is a slightly old-fashioned way of putting it, as if he was in the

same creative writing class as the young boy in Joyce's first story 'The Sisters'. He's thinking about the game of cricket and how his new-found team-mates from the West Indies and the Indian sub-continent have no difficulty adapting themselves to the new environment and to a less than hospitable field on Staten Island that they claim for cricket. Chuck Ramkissoon, the Gatsby figure, has dreams of creating a New York Cricket Club and making lots of money in the process. As the novel constantly reminds us, it is an impossible dream, and yet, as O'Neill also reminds us, there is something in it. Cricket after all was widely played in nineteenth-century North America and, with the huge numbers of immigrants from countries where the game is pre-eminent, it could be revived again. Hans even insists, at least to himself, that cricket is a civilising game – and this in spite of disputes about umpiring decisions, one of which comes to overshadow the novel as it unfolds.

The idea of using cricket as a structuring device in the novel is such a daring move on O'Neill's part. Indeed, although he is, like his character, given to self-estrangement, O'Neill still manages to get inside American culture through this alien corridor. With some justification, we might see it as *Netherland's* answer to *Underworld* (1997) and a riposte therefore to Don DeLillo's trumpeting of baseball in the famous opening to that novel. As if he were consciously writing back, there is something playful about O'Neill getting one of his characters to spend time surveying New York's boroughs for a piece of land to purchase and build post-colonial dreams on. I am reminded of American readers' objections to my chapter on Joyce and cricket in *Light, Freedom and Song* (2005) when it was still being considered by Yale University Press, and how, if it wasn't taken out, the book would never produce any sales in the States. My response was to add a long footnote (see p. 289) detailing the nineteenth-century American interest in the game and quoting from Jones Wister's *A 'Bawl' for American Cricket* (1893), an early account explaining why the game of 'base ball', played by professionals, won out over the 'amateur' game of cricket. O'Neill, whose Irish grandfather, as we learn from his investigations

in *Blood Dark Track* (2000), was imprisoned in the Curragh during the Second World War for IRA activities, is more daring and confrontational for, while I was interested in ‘beyond a boundary’ and the colonial encounter between Britain and Ireland, his focus is inside the boundary and how cricket abroad serves as a home for exiles, a place of longing, and even ‘an environment of justice’ (p. 116).

Sebastian Barry’s new novel, *The Secret Scripture* (2008), which was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2008 and which won the Costa Prize in 2009, returns us more surely to an Irish context. The territory is familiar to those who know Barry’s work, only now it is fiction and not drama that is the form. The setting is a mental hospital in County Roscommon where Roseanne McNulty (née Clear), a patient perhaps nearing her centenary, has a series of meetings with her psychiatrist Dr Grene, himself grieving over the death of his wife. Roseanne recalls, not always accurately, growing up in Sligo, memories of her own family and relationships. The narrative or course of her life, we surmise early on, is shaped, overshadowed or silenced by trauma. Throughout, the mood music of loss is heard in the two alternating centres of consciousness, where monologues never quite manage to become dialogues.

As in his earlier plays such as *The Steward of Christendom* (1995) and *Our Lady of Sligo* (1998), there is an often exquisite lyricism in Barry’s writing about loss and, for those who have not encountered his previous work, *The Secret Scripture* must be a genuine pleasure. The achievement, though, is perhaps less impressive on second reading. You never know with Barry if he is giving us his point of view or that of his characters. For example I assume this sequence of reflections expressed by Dr Grene is related to the overall theme of the novel: ‘The fact is, we are missing so many threads in our story that the tapestry of Irish life cannot but fall apart. There is nothing to hold it together. The first breath of wind, the next huge war that touches us, will blow us to the Azores’ (p. 183). Barry’s long-standing, self-appointed task has been to recuperate voices of those who lost out in the the emergence of modern Ireland, such as those like the protagonist in *The Whereabouts of Eneas*

*McNulty* (1998) who had fought for the Crown and who had worked for the Royal Irish Constabulary before Independence in the 1920s, or those who, for most of the duration of the new State, had been locked away in asylums as happened to Eneas’s sister-in-law Roseanne in this novel. But, to broaden the discussion away from the issue of families in this particular novel and their hidden skeletons, I am not sure if this is the secret scripture that contemporary Ireland has lost. The Yeatsian vocabulary and imagery that Dr Grene deploys, especially evident in phrases from his poem ‘The Second Coming’, has its power, but whether it persuades is another matter.

The sympathetic imagination works differently with me. Some things cannot be retrieved without doing injustice to other struggles in history, and, even if they could be recuperated, we would still have other losses to prick our consciences. Ruins of the Big House are today dotted all over the Irish countryside; 40 years after Ireland’s entry into the European Union, the creamery as an institution has virtually disappeared. So to live in the present is to live with a sense of loss, some of which is worth lamenting, some not. In spite of Barry’s at times searing indictment of Roseanne’s treatment by Church and State in the new Ireland that emerged after Independence, the point is worth making: all those hidden from history in Ireland share something of the history of loss but the missing-from-history idea can take us only so far. In this regard there is something telling about one of Roseanne’s last entries in her jotter: ‘I once lived among humankind, and found them in their generality to be cruel and cold’ (p. 268). The note is not so much plangent as tinny or slightly false, either on Roseanne’s part or on Barry’s, and the effect is to distance the reader from her plight and diminish her representative or tragic status.

*The Secret Scripture*, then, constitutes a study not only in alienation but also in the relationship between politics and style, a relationship which seems to me more rewarding to investigate than the frequently noticed twist at the end of the novel. Also central to the novel is an exploration of the Irish dark, which to Barry is close to mystery or silence or deceit or concealment or

‘something deep in the water’ as the black-listed Sligoman Eneas McNulty affirms on discovering his brother Tom and his wife Roseanne have separated (*The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty*, p. 187). However, although families may indeed conceal their histories from themselves and others, I do not believe the Irish dark is irrational or that dark. What holds the tapestry of Irish life together is the complex interlocking of loss and struggle, a necessary tension or over-layering and, at the same time, a refusal to buy into Yeats’s Second Coming in 1919 or end-of-world despair in 2008. Barry’s beautifully crafted prose invites assent, but somehow my mind continues to resist the secret scripture it embodies and I find myself, almost perversely, searching for the light.

Among the critics there have been several ambitious attempts at reconfiguring conventional ideas about the course of Irish letters. Let me touch on two here. John Kerrigan’s *Archipelagic English: Literature, History and Politics 1603-1707* (2008) is part of a wider devolutionary concern to detach Eng.Lit. from its more conventional Anglo-centric moorings. His title derives from the phrase ‘the Atlantic archipelago’, which appeared in an article written by J.A.G. Pocock in 1974 and entitled ‘British History: A Plea for a New Subject’. Kerrigan’s focus is Anglophone literature written in Britain and Ireland between the accession of James VI of Scotland to the English throne in 1603 and the 1707 Anglo-Scottish Treaty of 1707. His concern is to ‘recover the ethnic affiliations, the pride in ancient institutions...and the growing confidence in vernacular literary achievements that contributed to the configuration of early modern Englishness’ (p. 12).

*Archipelagic English* is an ambitious project and in its own way constitutes a plea for a new subject. His discussion of Irish authors is limited but everywhere the presence of Ireland can be felt. In a chapter on the ‘Derry School of Drama’, he considers such plays as John Michelburne’s *Ireland Preserv’d: Or the Siege of London-Derry* (1705) and William Philips’s *Hibernia Freed: A Tragedy* (1722), and Kerrigan writes well about ‘the dynamic ambiguity of patriot drama’ (p. 323). All this is the necessary work of adjustment, which we might see as

‘clearing work’ to create a space for others. In systematically attending to the suffix ‘ness’ that we attach to words such as Scottish, Irish, British, or English, and in tackling issues of nationality head-on, the study is more sophisticated than many efforts made in the past. Not for nothing did the word ‘hybrid’ as applied to affiliation and a person’s identity come into the language in the period covered by Kerrigan’s study. I suspect, however, that the awkward phrase ‘archipelagic English’ will never appear on an undergraduate list as the title of a course.

John Wilson Foster’s *Irish Novels 1890-1940: New Bearings in Culture and Fiction* (2008) affords ‘a portrait of Ireland in fiction [which] departs from the story we have told ourselves under the auspices of the Irish Literary Revival’ (p. 4). Katharine Tynan, George A. Birmingham, Shan F. Bullock, Kathleen Coyle are the names of some of Foster’s chosen novelists, while his organising topics include religion, family and marriage, science and the supernatural, the New Woman, the Big House, and the Great War. Q.D. Leavis in *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932) took her cue from what people were reading; in the same year, in *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932), her husband, F.R. Leavis, outlined what he saw as the significant changes in the modern movement of verse from Gerard Manley Hopkins to T.S. Eliot. In spite of its Leavisite title, Foster is concerned not with significance *per se* but with the variety and scope of popular fiction and with the omissions, therefore, from the conventional highbrow story of Irish writing. His reading is formidable so that by the end of the book we feel inclined to be persuaded or at least hear him out when he insists that popular fiction embodies Irish conversation in history.

In an appendix, Foster includes a piece on Joyce and popular fiction. It is perhaps a little too short to do justice to the topic but let me just correct a small detail. When discussing what Bloom and Molly read, Foster writes: ‘Bloom reads *Tit-Bits* and picks up soft pornographic romances for his wife Molly, on this occasion *The Sweets of Sin*’ (p. 494). It is one of the few occasions in this valuable study where Foster slips up, for he must have been thinking about the more salacious, modern-day version of *Titbits*. When Bloom would have been reading it

in 1904, *Tit-Bits* was not in the least pornographic. It was simply a collection of short pieces about everything under the sun including short stories by P. Beaufoy, and it was read in the 1880s and 1890s by the Joyce household in Dublin and Virginia Woolf's family in London, families that is whose offspring, a generation later, went on to give us some of the best highbrow modernist fiction. There are occasions, we might add, when too much can be made of the gulf between the popular and the highbrow imagination.

Speaking of errors and with glass houses in mind, I must correct something that appears in two of my own books. In *Irish Writing in the Twentieth Century: A Reader* (2001), I inadvertently inserted Derek Mahon's poem 'A Disused Shed in Co Wexford' into the decade of the 1960s (under *Night Crossing*, 1968). It should be in the 1970s for the poem is from Mahon's collection *The Snow Party* (1975); it appeared in *The Listener* in 1973. *Light, Freedom and Song* (2005) perpetuates the error and in a footnote I take Tom Paulin to task for reading the poem in the light of the Troubles (p. 318). I stand by my general remarks about the poem, that it should be read in broader terms than the Troubles, but I readily admit my double error. What drew my attention to all this was reading Hugh Haughton's *The Poetry of Derek Mahon* (2007), a careful and authoritative study which follows the course of the poet's publishing career volume by volume.

Haughton's study ends fittingly on home, home being the location around which Mahon's poetry has characteristically circled. As Haughton indicates, Mahon and Peter Fallon in their introduction to *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry* (1990) identify 'home' as the word most frequently dwelt on in their selection, 'as if an uncertainty existed as to where that actually is' (cited on p. 368). Mahon is in this sense a typical Irish poet, one who shares a home with other Irish poets, a home to dwell in and to dwell on, as Haughton neatly puts it. Just how big is the size of Mahon's achievement as a poet is still not clear, but I was slightly taken aback reading *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (2008) to see Heaney in the 1960s bristling when told that Mahon was the better poet (p. 77).

Which brings us to Heaney himself and the page-turner that Dennis O'Driscoll has compiled of interviews with Ireland's leading poet. Setting your house in order before you retire from the scene is no bad thing and there is no-one better at doing this than Heaney. I recall a public spat I had with him at the Lancaster Literature Festival in the late 1970s. The altercation seemed to be about the terms in which critics should describe Irish experience. I cannot remember the details, but I think he took umbrage when I began referring to Georg Lukács and talking about class consciousness. On reflection I am sure he was right about the *sui generis* nature of Irish experience and yet I suspected at the time something else lay behind it such as the protection of homeland against theory and comer-inners like myself. Anyway, I didn't concede defeat and the following day, as if nothing had happened, I drove him to the airport in Manchester to catch his plane back to Dublin.

Protectiveness is no bad quality and I felt something similar towards him when Sean O'Hagan, in reviewing *Stepping Stones* in the *Observer* on 16 November 2008, zeroed in on Heaney's politics and on his effectively saying nothing. According to O'Hagan, 'What Heaney did not do, of course, was take sides, either as a poet, or, as his fame increased, a reluctant statesman.' I've no brief to speak on Heaney's behalf but such a statement or charge, which is frequently made, is to my mind debatable. 'Whatever You Say Say Nothing', to take a pointed example, was first published in *The Listener* in October 1971, two months after the introduction of Internment, and it was accompanied by a photo of Catholics fleeing their burnt-out homes in Belfast (reproduced in *Light, Freedom and Song*, p. 245). So, in one important respect, Heaney is not saying what the poem's title says. The side the utopian Heaney has characteristically sought is 'the far side of revenge', a position which is beyond but not above the sectarian politics of his native province. However, we should be in no doubt of his nationalist sympathies, nor indeed that he is himself, as he once wrote about John Hume in 1969 before the Troubles began in earnest, like a 'questing compass-needle of another hidden Ireland' (cited on p. 766 of my *Irish Writing in the Twentieth Century: A Reader*). At the time of

the Hunger Strikes in 1981, Heaney's own mantra, as he reveals in *Stepping Stones*, was a remark by Czeslaw Milosz that he quotes in 'Away From It All': 'I was stretched between contemplation of a motionless point and the command to participate actively in history' (p. 260). Such a position we may well agree might be precious, but it should not be confused with not taking sides. [For more on this book of interviews, see <http://www.dannymorrison.com/index.php?s=heaney>].

Reading this collection of interviews reminds us of a poet on a journey south through his native province and how he came to shake himself free of the nets which might have held him back. Heaney is a child of his time and, as the list of names in the Index suggests, he seems incapable of escaping a male-dominated world, but for all that the collection is as I say a page-turner and will enhance his reputation. Whether it will enhance his achievement as a poet is another matter. That distinction, between reputation and achievement, is one that is drawn by Heaney in remarks about Yeats. 'There will always be attacks on the reputation, but the achievement is rock-sure' (p. 466). Heaney, the fine critic that he is, must have also been thinking about his own achievement when making such an observation, but I cannot help wondering what his one-time rivals in the Belfast Group such as Derek Mahon or Michael Longley would make of such a comment. Or, indeed, what history will make of Heaney's reputation and achievement.

2008 was, then, a memorable year. It also saw the passing of Conor Cruise O'Brien (1917-2008), one of the outstanding Irish intellectuals of the last century, who, among other things, made us all think very seriously about Yeats's pro-fascist tendencies, about states of Ireland and Northern republicanism, and indeed about the nature of intellectuals in Ireland. On a lighter note, in reviews of the year published on 29 November 2008, the *Irish Times* carried this from the former Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, about his daughter: 'I make no apologies for saying the best work of fiction I read this year is *The Gift*, by Cecelia Ahern (HarperCollins, £14.99). It has a seasonal theme and is a very clever story from a brilliant young writer.' I make no apologies for offering no comment.

Let me end on a browsing note. I particularly enjoyed perusing the 'Printed Books, Manuscripts and Artwork from the Collections of Cecil & Desmond Harmsworth', which came up for auction in London in December 2008 [see <http://www.bloomsburyauctions.com/auction/672>]. What caught my eye were a number of items about the 'daintical pair', as they are called on page 295 of *Finnegans Wake* (1939), of Yeats and Joyce. One was a letter Yeats sent to Cecil Harmsworth in June 1927 in which he sought help in furthering a union between Southern and Northern Ireland, 'for Ireland will never be a perfectly cordial partner in the British Commonwealth while North & South are playing up to one another'. In the accompanying photocopied manuscript, 'cordial' is spelt 'cordeal' by the would-be statesman Yeats! Another item contained a moving tribute to Yeats by his sisters after his death, a death which came as a shock to them, for they had always 'trusted to his fine vitality that had triumphed so often'. Elsewhere, in a letter by Desmond to Cecil Harmsworth in June 1934, we learn that Joyce wanted to include material about the Harmsworth family in what was to become *Finnegans Wake* (1939). Joyce expressed interest in other Dublin notables such as the Guinness family, Dunlop, and 'the man who started the tramways'. After accompanying Harmsworth to the Russian ballet in Paris and after two carafes of wine in an adjourning café, Joyce was in convivial mood and performed his own daintical ballet steps on the pavement outside. And as you might expect, a copy of Harmsworth's famous sketch of Joyce kicking was also in the collection. Needless to say this browser could not afford any of the items.

Below are the reviews I have commissioned for this issue. As in previous years, they are by established and by less-well-known critics and they cover a wide range of material including fiction, poetry, and criticism. They will, I hope, interest a similarly wide range of people across the world who are interested in the continuing development of Irish Studies. This is my opportunity to thank all the reviewers for their contribution to fostering that development and for giving of their services so generously.

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**David Pierce**, now retired, lives in York. He has written books on Yeats and Joyce and on fiction and social class. He has also edited a four-volume edition of Yeats criticism for Helm Information as well as a Reader in modern Irish writing for Cork University Press. His most recent books are *Light, Freedom and Song: A Cultural History of Modern Irish Writing* (Yale University Press, 2005), *Joyce and Company* (Continuum, 2006; Paperback 2008) and *Reading Joyce* (Pearson Longman, 2008).

*The Fifty Minute Mermaid*

by Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill

Translations by Paul Muldoon.

Loughcrew, Co Meath: The Gallery Press, 2007

Reviewer: **Luz Mar González Arias****‘from a bottomless well’<sup>1</sup>**

*The Fifty Minute Mermaid*, with poetry written in Irish and with translations into English by Paul Muldoon, continues Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill’s fruitful bilingual project first seen in *The Astrakhan Cloak* published by The Gallery Press in 1992.<sup>2</sup> At a recent seminar held in Dublin College University on the issue of translation, Ní Dhomhnaill stated that she understands translation as an act of artistic creativity, by this intimating that both fidelity and infidelity to the original source will necessarily be part and parcel of the process of rendering her texts into a new language. As is the case with so many other readers of Ní Dhomhnaill’s work, my access to her poetry is mediated by that creative act that inevitably transforms the original Irish version – adding nuances to it in order to help it into the transition towards a different language, while at the same time making it lose some of its initial connotations somewhere along the way. Our awareness of reading a parallel text, versus an existing original, thus acquires an added dimension when it comes to Ní Dhomhnaill.

1. The author of this review wants to acknowledge her participation in the Research Project “Poesía y género: Poetas irlandesas y gallegas contemporáneas (1980-2004)”, Plan Nacional I+D: HUM2005-04897/FILO.

2. My review of *The Fifty Minute Mermaid* will be based on Muldoon’s renderings into English, rather than on Ní Dhomhnaill’s original texts. However, all the quotes from the book will include the original as well as the translation.

The book is divided into two distinct sections, the first of which contains only three poems, the second comprised of a long sequence of thirty-seven texts that focus on the figures of the Mermaid and Merfolk and their fate on “dry land”. Although apparently disconnected with the second section, the first part of the book, whether intentionally or unintentionally on the part of Ní Dhomhnaill, prepares us for what is to come and directs us towards a particular reading of the biography of the Mermaid. It is not Andersen’s fairy tale we are about to encounter but a much harsher and more realistic – also highly mythical and unconscious at the same time – confrontation with loss, the mental and bodily consequences of that loss and the possibilities of healing.

Death and human suffering acquire the thematic weight of “Mo Mháistir Dorcha leathanach”/“My Dark Master”, “Dubh”/“Black” and “An Obair”/“The Task”. While at times engaging with the specificities of real and/or imaginary Irish landscapes, this first sequence is best read in an international context of war, misunderstandings between cultures and atrocities. “Dubh”/“Black”, for instance, is written as a protest against the fall of Srebrenica and the ethnic cleansing that triggered the massacre of 8000 women, children and men of Bosnian origin in July 1995. Relying on the strategy of repetition, the poem is an intelligent deconstruction of the absurd binary opposites that have pervaded Western thought and

provides an egalitarian status for all peoples of the globe through the metaphor of blackness. Roddy Doyle's famous racialization of Irish ethnicity is here elevated to an international level that colours all earthly communities and leaves no one immune to the tragedy of genocide: "The Catholics are black. / The Protestants are black. / The Serbs and the Croatians are black. / Every tribe on the face of the earth this blackest of black / mornings black" ["Tá na Caitlicigh dubh. / Tá na Protastúnaigh dubh. / Tá na Seirbigh is na Crótaigh dubh. / Tá gach uile chine a shiúlann ar dhromchla na cruinne / an mhaidin dhubh seo samhraidh, dubh"] (18-19).

Ní Dhomhnaill frequently draws on the realm of myths and folklore in her poetry, using them as signifiers to be decoded by means of the cultural references of contemporary Ireland. At one level, the long Mermaid sequence can be read as an artistic articulation of what it means for these sea-people to leave their element and come to live above the water, in the Irish "dry" landscape. In this sense, the texts become a powerful tool to inscribe the cultural trauma that the Irish went through when the English language superseded their previous mode of communication and skillfully address the stagnation and anti-creative implications of such a transition. In many of the poems, both the written word and music are left behind by the Mermaid, confused as she is by the new order of things and the new linguistic codes she must abide by. Her rejection of getting involved with her previous tongue can be interpreted as the schizophrenia faced by communities where bilingual situations result from a colonial past. In "Na Murúcha agus Ceol"/"The Merfolk and Music" the speaking voice describes how the sea-people turned their backs on music and concludes that "[w]hat lies at the bottom of all this, of course, is the trauma / of their being left high and dry" ["Sé bunús an scéil go léir, ar ndóigh, ná tráma a dtriomaithe"] (106-107).

The poems offer an in-depth analysis of the struggle of both adapting to and being accepted by a new environment. One of the most attractive aspects of this transition is the involvement of both body and mind. As it is only to be expected in Ní Dhomhnaill's work, far from an exclusive interrogation of the psychological consequences

of cultural clashes, the poet analyses the challenges of difference in terms of physicality too. And so, in "An Mhurúch san Ospidéal"/"The Mermaid in the Hospital" the mythic figure "awoke / to find her fishtail / clean gone / but in the bed with her / were two long, cold thingammies" ["Dhúisigh sí / agus ní raibh a heireaball éisc ann / níos mó / ach istigh sa leaba léi /bhí an dá rud fada fuar sea"] (34-35). The poetic voice wonders if in the long months that followed, during which the mermaid had to learn what those new legs could do, "her heart fell / the way her arches fell, / her instep arches" ["Ins na míosa fada / a lean / n'fheadar ar thit a croí / de réir mar a thit / trácht na coise uirthi, / a háirsi?"] (36-37).

The "Lack of Sympathy" the newcomers feel in the new land (59) and the admission that they had been the victims of some sort of "ethnic cleansing" (87) turns them into the representatives of oppressed peoples everywhere. It certainly connects them to the massacred Bosnians referred to in "Dubh"/"Black". A clear-cut contextualization for the poems is problematised as all through the book there is a sense of fluidity, not only implied by the symbol of water but also by the body and language of the mermaids, both escaping fixed definitions and stable categorization. In "Teoranna"/"Boundaries" (128-131) the poetic voice contends that the language of the merfolk is "pelagic" ["peiligeach"], since "it covers the seven seas". This fluidity is further emphasized by the statement that "everything in the language runs into everything else, / [...] there are no strict boundaries between one thing and / another". However, and despite this poststructuralist sense of free-floating (perhaps we should say "free-swimming") signifiers, the constant references to the Irish countryside and to the gender-specific experience of the Mermaid also trigger a more parochial postcolonial and feminist reading of Ní Dhomhnaill's texts. Her mermaids can thus be perceived as standing for the doubly marginalized subjects of Irish society, namely the historically oppressed colonial and female selves.

For the reader interested in the identitarian debates of present-day Ireland, there is perhaps something missing in *The Fifty Minute Mermaid*:

a more engaged interrogation of the label “margin” to make it overtly inclusive of the “new” discriminated-against subjects of the nation, that is, the many different ethnic communities in today’s Ireland. However, and despite the absence of specific references to the minorities that have arrived in Ireland as a direct consequence of the Celtic Tiger phenomenon, this level of interpretation can also be there. The date of publication of the collection coincides with debates on the issue of Irishness and on the processes of othering the newcomers have been experiencing. In this respect, *The Fifty Minute Mermaid* invokes the history of the Irish as a colonized people (an archetypal Other for British imperialism) and contributes to creating an atmosphere of understanding and welcoming of difference for those who are now, in the wake of the Tiger, occupying marginal positions previously assigned to Irish speakers.

*The Fifty Minute Mermaid* uses myths and fairy tales as visible surfaces through which to approach everyday societal problems: mother-daughter relationships (“An Mhurúch is a hIníon”/“The Mermaid and Her Daughter”: 132-135), domesticity (“An Mhurúch is a Tigh”/“The Mermaid and Her House”: 124-127), sexual abuses and religious institutions (“An Mhurúch agus an Sagart Paróiste”/“Mermaid with Parish Priest”: 108-113) are interrogated and problematised. But in spite of the recognizable issues of “reality”, Ní Dhohmnaill’s collection is rich in references to the magical world of superstition, unconsciousness and dreams. This is probably what makes the book a fascinating piece of poetry, where the author delves into areas of the mind we are not fully aware of. Her

“pre-colonial” language may be lost, but the Mermaid retains some sense of “the old order of things” (29) that will guarantee its preservation and survival in whatever new shape it may acquire with the passage of time. And whereas she may be talking to us from the “bottomless well” (141) of her confusing, new post-structural fluid identity, she is still powerful in her magic, other-worldly dimension. At the end of the book, the reader is left with a feeling of having experienced a journey through the lands of conscious and unconscious landscapes, not knowing for certain where the boundary between the real and the imaginary lies, no doubt one of the greatest achievements of good poetry. As the poetic voice of “Bunmhiotas na Murúch”/“Founding Myth” (44-47) admits, when it comes to superstition having to do with the mermaids, we do not believe it but we “don’t not believe it” either.

**Luz Mar González-Arias** is a Senior Lecturer at the English Department, University of Oviedo. Her main field of research is contemporary Irish women poets. She is the author of *Otra Irlanda. La estética postnacionalista de poetas y artistas irlandesas contemporáneas* (U. de Oviedo, 2000) and *Cuerpo, mito y teorías feminista. Revisiones de Eva en autoras irlandesas contemporáneas* (KRR ediciones, 1998). She has recently contributed to *The Routledge Companion to Postcolonial Studies* (ed. John McLeod), to the volume *Opening the Field: Irish Women, Texts and Contexts* (eds. Christine St Peter and Patricia Haberstroh), and to the special issue on Paula Meehan in *An Sionnach* (ed. Jody Allen-Randolph), forthcoming, Spring 2009.

*Fox, Swallow, Scarecrow*  
by Eilís Ní Dhuibhne  
Blackstaff Press, 2007

Reviewer: **Pauline Hall**

### **Anna K and Anna KS**

In works by Henrik Ibsen, Leo Tolstoy and Gustave Flaubert, a young wife (Nora, Anna or Emma) frets in a marriage of entrapment, indulges in wishful thinking, makes reckless choices born of naïveté, and pays a terrible price. Eilís Ní Dhuibhne's *Fox, Swallow Scarecrow* places Anna Kelly Sweeny in a tepid marriage. Her name, the arc of her story and many details explicitly reference Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. But unlike Anna K, Anna KS lives in the permissive, newly prosperous Ireland of the 1990s. Anna KS is not driven to leave her home, to consume arsenic, or to throw herself under a train. Her worst ordeal is to face the bitchy comments of her sister-in-law, in a well-realised scene over breakfast in a country hotel.

Ní Dhuibhne follows Tolstoy by introducing Anna KS at the start of a journey, as she boards a Luas tram. Sleek, domesticated, it contrasts with the "noisy movements and heavy mass" of Tolstoy's menacing steam train. Ní Dhuibhne establishes an unheroic world where the dominant mode is comic. The passengers "were in love with the tram", because it is "fashionable." As opposed to the "terrible death" of the workman, which Anna K feels is a "bad omen," Anna KS witnesses nothing more upsetting than an altercation about queue-jumping, mildly coloured with class friction. In *Fox, Swallow Scarecrow*, a tram, as in *Anna Karenina*, a train, are not only the start-up engines of the adultery plot, but ultimately provide an exit, (one attuned to the distinct register of each novel), from the emotional and economic impasse where their adultery has led both of the Annas.

Comic characters often inhabit a chilly world, preoccupied with upward mobility. Here, in the social rituals of literary Dublin, desultory chatter barely cloaks a Darwinian scramble for status. This Ireland, Ní Dhuibhne suggests, has left behind idealism. A frantic pursuit of commercial success is thinly overlaid with reference to personal or communal fulfilment: and that's to speak only of the creative types. Anna KS writes children's fantasy stories, and, unlike his counterpart, Tolstoy's Stiva, her brother Gerry is not an amiable, adulterous, unsuccessful businessman but rather an amiable, adulterous, unsuccessful painter. Anna KS is more hard-boiled than Gerry: her appeal to the reader depends on her nimble adaptation to her milieu, an adaptation that ultimately stems from her husband Alex's economic power. The shift to a comic mode puts few emotional and social obstacles in the way of her adulterous affair with Vincey.

Her world is at once tamer and more governed by randomness than Anna K's. The scene where a protest march grows as a result of drift and accretion, to the extent that calls for the resignation of the Taoiseach "could be heard everywhere within a radius of half a mile or so," ends with a reductive comment: "But the Taoiseach did not hear them, because he was away at a conference in Europe."

The entrapped wife could stand for other thwarted ill-starred individuals within nineteenth-century society. "Madame Bovary, c'est moi," Flaubert announced. For Anna KS, the denouement of the novel is partly about her becoming a real, a grown-up artist. Henceforth

her writing will ring with greater authenticity, will achieve personal fulfilment. Henceforth “No talk of advances, bestsellers, pricing your book”. Such talk runs through *Fox Swallow Scarecrow*. In a shift to the first person, Anna resolves: “Myself, I want to write. Real, I want to write, and unreal.” The reader may feel as much relief as she does at the abandonment of her desultory efforts at children’s fantasy, and may hope that she begin instead to work the rich seam of comedy presented by Irish bourgeois hypocrisy, exemplified by the reaction of her (apparently decent, thoughtful) husband, Alex to her affair.

The middle section of *Fox, Swallow Scarecrow*, the narrative of her clandestine affair, contains much successful plotting, as with the device of a crucial call to Anna’s mobile phone. Few of the supporting cast are as entertaining as the Latvian cleaning lady, Ludmilla, who immediately sees through Anna’s subterfuge. In a particularly apt phrase, she is described as an “expert grunter”, and her grunts cause Anna more disquiet than the reaction of anyone else in the novel. It would have been good to see more of Ludmilla.

Ni Dhuibhne has used the device of parallel characters in her earlier bildungsroman, *The Dancers Dancing*, and here she again follows Tolstoy in contrasting the social round of the capital (sleek), with a supposedly more authentic life in the country (shaggy). The life (especially the love-life) of Leo, wistful idealistic Irish speaker and road safety advocate, contrasts and intersects with Anna’s. When first introduced, the concerned (and therefore uncool) Leo exemplifies Auden’s lines: “Oh silly and unhappy are the brave who tilt against the

world’s enormous wrong.” But Ni Dhuibhne follows Tolstoy in giving her shaggy hero Leo, a love that brings him to robust engagement with everyday experience. He becomes less silly and much less unhappy. Unlike Levin, however, at the end of the book, Leo is affected by tragedy, as randomness intrudes, to produce a somewhat scrambled ending. Ni Dhuibhne’s intriguing title glances at organic forces that lie beneath and around both city and country. Unsuspected equally by sleek and shaggy, these forces abruptly jolt the lives of all the characters.

Ni Dhuibhne makes clever use of the plot of *Anna Karenina* by casting it in a very different emotional and aesthetic register. Just as Tolstoy was concerned to portray individual destinies as driven by forces operating in the society at a particular historic moment, so she offers much commentary on the Celtic Tiger milieu in which Anna’s romantic and sexual imbroglio occurs, but which has little influence on Leo. The novel is rich in social observation, which is carried off more effectively through the accumulation of well-judged details than through the author’s (sometimes too insistent) commentary.

**Pauline Hall** is a graduate of University College Dublin, and has an M.A. from Yale University. Her novel *Grounds* was published by Brandon Books in 1983, she has just completed another novel and she is preparing a volume of poems for publication. Her articles have appeared in *The Dubliner* magazine, *Cyphers*, as well as the *Irish Times*. One of her poems was short-listed on the RTE *Rattlebag* poetry slam in 2004.

*Folk Women and Indirection in Morrison, Ní Dhuibhne, Hurston, and Lavin*

by Jacqueline Fulmer

Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007

ISBN: 978-0-7546-5537-4, 207 pages.

Reviewer: **M<sup>a</sup> Elena Jaime de Pablos**

In the very first line of the first chapter of the book: “Impossible Stories for Impossible Conversations”, readers are told that the work “is concerned with the propulsion of story [...] towards new ideas, even ideas we resist” (1). In it, Jacqueline Fulmer analyses the way prestigious African American and Irish women writers have presented volatile subjects to “unwilling audiences” in their countries of origin by means of indirection, a term employed “when rhetors [orators or teachers] wish to delay or obstruct their audience’s comprehension of their position on a subject, which may contradict that of the audience” (12).

In order to examine the short stories and novels of Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, Mary Lavin and Éilís Ní Dhuibhne in the context of rhetoric and indirection, Fulmer resorts to theories put forward by standing-out figures in the fields of African American feminist and womanist criticism, postcolonial criticism, and folklore studies, such as Barbara Christian, Katherine Clay Bassard, Alice Walker, David Lloyd, Sarah Briggs, Derek Hand, Homi K. Bhabha, Andrea O’Reilly, Alan Dundes, Angela Bourke or Cristina Bacchilega, to mention but a few.

The basis for tracing the line of descent from Hurston to Morrison and from Lavin to Ní Dhuibhne lies precisely in the strategies of indirection they use to break down patriarchal discriminating assumptions, among them, the dichotomy of woman as either the “angel in the house” or the “monster”, a binary that dehumanizes her by placing her at the margins.

The four writers consider references to folk traditions essential “to push the image of woman away from the edges, and into the center of human activity” (10). They draw on folklore to create “vivid, complicated, humorous, imperfect, self-aware female characters whose actions carry the stories and whose inner thoughts capture the readers’ sympathies” (10).

Fulmer distinguishes two categories of folkloric female characters: “the magical characters”, women who share features with non-human figures from the Otherworld: the *sí*, mermaids, selkies, witches, hags, or ghosts; and “the wise women”, who share features with more human-like folk figures from legends, folk tales, or religious oral traditions. These possess healing powers and privileged knowledge either mystical or magisterial.

Whether magical or magisterial, the folkloric female characters that the four authors depict in their short stories and novels insert controversy aimed at subverting some extreme of Otherness in ways that appeal to rather than ways that alienate readers through forms of rhetorical indirection that, Fulmer illustrates, were employed thousands of years ago by Jesus or Aristotle.

In chapter two, “Rhetorical Indirection: Roots and Routes”, Fulmer defines and gives examples of strategies of indirection (ambiguity, metaphor, signifying, masking, sly civility, mimicry, exaggeration, double-voiced dialogue, and the use of the grotesque or bizarre, among others) as used by Hurston, Lavin, Morrison, and Ní Dhuibhne to tackle problematic issues such as

colonialism, racism, sexism, religious prejudice, taboos, etc.

Their folkloric approach to indirection let them explore these unpopular topics by referring to proverbs, legends, tales, or other folk references. In subsequent chapters, Fulmer demonstrates how strategies with folkloric elements provide these four female authors cover from audience rejection while enabling them to communicate with audience members ready to receive new ideas. Thus, in chapter 3, “Folk Women versus the Authorities”, Fulmer presents folk-women characters by these authors who advocate civil rights and women’s rights by reworking binaries, reversing the western hero patterns, or disrupting stereotypes: Nanny and Janie (in Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God, Eyes*), Mary O’Grady (in Lavin’s *Mary O’Grady*), Circe (in Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*), Jenny and Maggie (in Ní Dhuibhne’s *The Bray House*), etc. They all “offer model stories of women freeing themselves from the extremes of othering, binary images set upon them by dominant Anglo culture and sometimes by the men in their own culture” (53).

In the following chapter, “Otherworldly folk-women characters”, Fulmer examines the ways these writers employ indirection to avoid censorship when dealing with assumptions regarding marriage, sex, reproduction, abortion, infanticide and religious prejudices and practices. Special attention is devoted to Hurston’s, Lavin’s, Morrison’s and Ní Dhuibhne’s figuring of the mermaid, an otherworldly female character often appearing in folklore doing things forbidden for human women, for instance, seducing men at will. The sex goddess Erzulie in Hurston’s *Tell My Horse* or the mermaid in Ní Dhuibhne’s “The mermaid legend” constitute two of the most representative cases.

Chapter five, “Reproducing Wise Women”, gathers instances where folk women in these four authors’ works function mostly as “wise women” who force readers into thinking about the discriminating sexual stereotypes associated with the passive and desexualised Virgin Mary. Marys, “anti-Marys” and folk culture midwives

appear in their short stories and novels to dismantle the “virgin” versus “whore”, “flesh” versus “spirit”, “men” versus “women”, or “mother” versus “child” binaries: Lavin’s Mary O’Grady (from *Mary O’Grady*) and Onny (from *The House in Clewe Street*), Ní Dhuibhne’s Jenny (from *The Bray House*), Hurston’s Erzulie (from *Tell My Horse*), Morrison’s Consolata (from *Paradise*), etc.

The last chapter, “Final Indirections”, offers some conclusions after having analysed the multilayered narratives of the African American and Irish female authors who seem to work in parallel to demolish the above/below binary of women in western literature. This is followed by an “Appendix: Correspondence with Éilís Ní Dhuibhne”, which brings together Ní Dhuibhne’s opinions about some of the topics dealt with in the book.

Without doubt, *Folk Women and Indirection in Morrison, Ní Dhuibhne, Hurston, and Lavin* accomplishes Fulmer’s goal of allowing readers to observe the effectiveness of folklore and indirection in helping these authors express their subaltern voices. Apart from being an enlightening work on feminist fiction, rhetoric, folklore, otherness and censorship, this book also stands as a significant contribution to the study of African American women writers and Irish women writers on the basis of comparative literature.

**M<sup>a</sup> Elena Jaime de Pablos** is Senior Lecturer in British Literature at the Department of English and German Philology of Almería University. Her research centres on contemporary Irish fiction and gender studies. She has published several books on these subjects. She is the author of *La visión de la mujer irlandesa de finales del siglo XIX y principios del siglo XX en la narrativa de George Moore: una perspectiva feminista* (2000), *Mujeres y religión en la narrativa de George Moore* (2000); editor of *Análisis de género en los estudios irlandeses* (2007); and co-editor of *Irish Landscapes* (2003), *Joyceana: Literaria hibernica* (2005) and *Análisis de género en los estudios irlandeses* (2007).

*Dublin Noir: the Celtic Tiger vs. the Ugly American*  
ed. by Ken Bruen  
(Dingle and London: Brandon, 2006)

Reviewer: **Dermot Kelly**

In *Dublin Noir* Ken Bruen has assembled a formidable posse of crime writers. Eoin Colfer leads off with “Taking on PJ” and, even though he’s from Wexford and only lived in the capital city for three years, he sounds like Roddy Doyle’s anarchic younger cousin from the tower blocks. Listen to his two young hoodlums bracing themselves for their encounter with the enforcer sent by a gangster called Warren:

Little Mike was sucked in by his friend’s enthusiasm. “And just how am I supposed to distract him?”

“You know how,” said Christy meaningfully, nodding in a respectful and non-homosexual way at Little Mike’s bollock area (p. 19).

The hilarious yarn ends with Christy telling Little Mike they’ll spend the loot “like Bono and the Edge” down in Waterford (p. 30).

Next up is the editor of the volume himself with “Black Stuff”, a story of art theft featuring a black Dubliner named for Phil Lynott who drinks in the snug in Mulligan’s. The real subject of the book, the love affair between Ireland and America, comes to the fore in this hardboiled piece. The narrative voice is as clipped and slangy as Elmore Leonard’s, but Ken Bruen can’t hide his mastery of the native lexicon: “But you use fierce in both senses, like terrific, and like woesome – gotta be Irish to instinctively get that. You can learn the sense of it, but never the full usage” (p. 42).

Pat Mullan’s “Tribunal” could hardly be more timely, all about the price of affluence: “If you’re telling me the truth, then you were the bagman for these bastards for years. Selling your own people down the drain” (p. 51). The corrupt political territory will be familiar to fans of Jimmy Breslin and George V. Higgins.

Bruen has divided his book into four parts with himself, Colfer and Mullan making up “Part I: The Inside Job”. Reed Farrell Coleman kicks off “Part II: The Manhattan Connection” with “Portrait of the Killer as a Young Man”, an all too believable tale of revenge involving a Dublin taxi driver and his American fares. The lurid authenticity is maintained in Peter Spiegelman’s “The Best Part”, which includes Ken Bruen’s favourite line of dialogue – “Yer pretty feckin’ Irish for a New York Jew, Jimmy – you’ll fit right in in Dublin” – delivered by a truly chilling femme fatale called Kathryn Margot Flynn (p. 72).

“The Ghost of Rory Gallagher” by Jim Fusilli will remind readers that squalor can still be found in Celtic Tigerland as a disgraced financial trader emerges from an English jail to buy himself a pub in the Hibernian metropolis:

A dump over on the north side of the Liffey, off the Royal Canal, a regular shitehole it was, a right kip. Entrance in a stone alley beyond mounds of rubbish, and you couldn’t stumble upon it without a map. Celtic Tiger my arse, it seemed to say. Two steps down and the rainwater flooded the drain, and that was all right too. Mold and rotten wood, the floorboards sagging (p. 78).

Fusilli is a wonderful writer who manages to jam in references to Yeats (born in Sligo, the disgraced trader briefly considers calling his pub the Rag and Bone, thinking of the bard of his home county) and Beckett (he describes the denizens of his joint as “a motley bunch straight out of Beckett, and moths flew up from under their tattered greatcoats.”) without sounding pretentious (p. 80). As well as the uncanny presence heralded by the story’s title, Fusilli’s contribution offers the book’s most resonant

justification for vengeance, as far as this reviewer is concerned: “We’re from Limerick , and we don’t forget” (p. 90).

Following the Donegal blues played by “The Ghost of Rory Gallagher” Jason Starr’s “Lost in Dublin” comes off as a slight showing by a writer of real ability. Its treatment of twenty-first-century Dublin crime has the ring of truth but nevertheless fails to sustain the fever pitch of the pieces before and after it. Maybe Starr saves his best material for his novels. The last of the Manhattan dispatches, Charlie Stella’s “Tainted Goods”, opens with a foulmouthed, politically incorrect monologue from one Jack Dugan that recalls George V. Higgins from around the time of *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* (1972): “A broad tells you you’re a comfortable fit, what it means, make no mistake about it, boyos, it means you have a small dick, she’s trying not to hurt your feelings” (p. 104).

“Part III: Heart of the Old Country” contains a quartet of writers from elsewhere in Europe (Scotland, Hungary and England, to be precise). Ray Banks takes his title, “Wrong ‘Em, Boyo”, from a vintage track by the Clash and spits out Caledonian wisecracks at the velocity of early Irvine Welsh. The coarseness is an appropriate vehicle for exploring the great sibling rivalry of those islands, the one between the Scots and the Irish, as an Edinburgh thug crosses the sea to settle a score in Dublin. Banks even uses the Ulster Scots verb ‘greet’, recorded by P. W. Joyce in *English As We Speak It In Ireland* (1910): “Cunts didn’t cry at the funeral, but stick on Patsy Cline and they greeted like bairns” (p. 126).

From Budapest, Olen Steinhauer opens “The Piss-Stained Czech” with what sounds like the book’s most sincere homage to Joyce: “The door Toman knocked on was opened by a skinny Irishman with a beard that made me think of drunks lingering in the corners of pubs in *Ulysses* – everything I knew about Dublin came from that book” (p. 129). Of course this foreign Joycean ends up talking to a Garda who, upon learning that the narrator, who coincidentally has the same name as the author, wants to be a writer, quips, “Don’t get much better than McBain” (p. 133).

“Wish” by John Rickards captures the menace of Dublin at its noir best: “It’s a shithole of a flat, though, overlooking the railway tracks not far from where they cross the Tolka, north of Dublin’s city center. Building that smells of boiled vegetables and cat piss” (p. 137). Rickards conjures the spectre of neo-Nazis terrorizing the city’s waifs and strays and, amazingly, he pulls it off with creepy aplomb.

Kevin Wignall’s “The Death of Jeffers” throws us into a bewildering world of what just might be Anglo-Irish intrigue as an Englishman of Irish descent pays an unexpected visit to a lecturer at Trinity College. A recognizable setting that includes Wynn’s Hotel is evoked in convincing detail, but, even after four readings, the significance of the ending still eludes this reviewer. Maybe another four readings will unravel the beguiling puzzle.

“Part Four: New World Noir” starts with a very entertaining story called “The Honor Bar” by the Baltimore writer Laura Lippman, author of the P. I. Tess Monaghan series. Among other jokes, Lippman deploys the most suggestive Joycean allusion in *Dublin Noir*. It happens when an American with the unlikely name of Bliss Dewitt queries her Irish partner who has the altogether more likely name of Rory Malone about a name (not hers) he breathed into the nape of her neck during coitus:

“Whose name are you saying?”

“Why, Millie. Like in the novel, Ulysses. I was pretending you were Millie and I was Bloom.”

“It’s Molly, you idiot. Even I know that.” (pp. 168-9)

In “Tourist Trade” James O. Born’s career in law enforcement helps him create a taut conversation between a perpetrator and a cop, but for this reviewer the story’s final twist was excessive, although that is undoubtedly the whole point. Sarah Weinman’s “Hen Night” makes a poignant stopover at the Irish-Jewish Museum off the South Circular Road before embarking on a suitably rancid night in Temple Bar. Zelmont Raines, the tough-talking hero of Gary Phillips’s “The Man for the Job”, an American football player dropped from the NFL

and searching for a crack fix after an exhibition game at Lansdowne Road, recounts a story that more than lives up to its sordid premise. Patrick J. Lambe has done an impressive job imagining the racial repertoire of what he calls “The New Prosperity.” With “Lonely and Gone” Duane Swierczynski achieves an unnerving effect by transcribing just one voice in a scary barroom dialogue that leads to a surprising reversal. Finally, the title of Craig McDonald’s “Rope-A-Dope” refers to the one-two punch of Ecstasy and Rohypnol one George Lipsanos is planning to administer to a woman he meets in a Harcourt

Street downstairs bar – that is, until he gets the shock of his life. So Ken Bruen should be applauded for getting all these talents together to share their gripping and amusing tales of setups, pickups, stickups and shagups.

**Dermot Kelly** lectures at the College of the North Atlantic, Newfoundland, Canada. He is the author of *Narrative Strategies in Joyce’s ‘Ulysses’* (Edwin Mellen, 1988) and *The Palace in Fleet Street*, a novel published in 1995 by Breakwater.

*For All We Know* by Ciaran Carson

Loughcrew, Co Meath: The Gallery Press, 2008, 113 pp.

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Reviewer: **Kevin Kiely**

A strange departure for Carson who chose a somewhat old-fashioned form: this is a long narrative poem; a hail and robust tradition more ancient than the sonnet. For instance, the unrhymed dactylic hexameters of Longfellow's *Evangeline* reads better than *For All We Know*; it springs to mind as both have a Gabriel 'character'. Carson's sequence falls down on many fronts: the grasp of postmodernist narrative is not well handled; the overall impression is that the form is ill fitting: the entire impetus may have come from the few good poems—

blue, you said. It puts me in mind of winters in  
Paris.  
It is frosty, and if you stand in Montmartre you  
can

see for miles. I'm looking at the patchwork quilt  
of Paris:  
parks, avenues, cemeteries, temples, impasses,  
arcades.

I can see the house where I was raised, and my  
mother's house.

I am in her boudoir looking at her in the mirror

as she, pouting, not looking, puts on L'Air du  
Temps, a spurt  
of perfume on each wrist before she puts her  
wristwatch on.

L'Air du Temps (pp. 36-37)

This is early on in the sequence but these high points dizzily topple, so it is a choppy terrain to traverse and when other peaks are reached as in

the following (quoted below) there is a double nostalgia more for the better verse than for the 'story' of the poem. Sustained performance is not the hallmark here but the perennial problem with poetry is the good, the bad and the indifferent. T.S. Eliot wrote of a preordained hierarchy of poetry and *ipso facto* of poets: hence, a corollary that long poems have high and low pressure, so to speak, despite and according to T.S.E. that there is a corresponding high and low in performance. Carson may be implying that to turn off the poetry is in itself artistic, somewhat like a painter who leaves deliberate incompleteness of form proving that what has been well done need not be re-achieved, what has been a pinnacle must not be re-iterated; still, one looks for more of what one likes. There has always been the presumption of a reader for poetry, the imposition of a critic, as well as the longing beyond the longing for oblivion that is the assumed reward for the poet's implicit melancholy as opposed to the gladness and madness. There is the useful Wallace Stevens prescription for evaluation within his own long poem 'Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction' about the necessity of change within the composition, but equally there is the demand for pleasure. The harshest critics of poets are other poets who never have the village schoolteacher's encouraging, 'could do better' rather 'must do better, must do the uttermost.' So, when the lines of ore run out towards workable lines there is the longing that is only resolved and healed in the better stuff, such as

I'm the lady in charge of the airport lingerie store  
who asks you if there is anything she can help  
with.

I'm the lady in question whose dimensions you  
reveal  
To the lady in charge of the airport lingerie store.

I'm the lady you bump into unwittingly before  
you know her name or age or what she does for a  
living.

I'm the lady propped up at the bar beside you,  
who puts  
words into your mouth before you even know  
what they are.

I'm the lady who sleeps in you until death do you  
part.  
I'm the lady you see in your dreams though she be  
long dead

'Filling the Blank' (p. 104)

There is a hint of French modernism, since the poem titles are duplicated between 'part one' and 'part two'. However, this merely results in some spinning out of the text and displays major slack and slippage as to what it is all meant to be: Poetry.

What Carson has managed, if nothing else, is to get out of Belfast metaphorically speaking, still the Northern city intrudes as in 'Revolution' with the Remote Bomb Disposal Unit. 'The helicopter hovering on its down-swash of noise.' (p. 73). Otherwise in 'L'Air du Temps' (in part two) the narrator (of which more later) notes: 'They were showing the latest news from my native city./It looked like a Sixties newsreel where it always drizzled,' (p.87) Drizzle was the only benevolence in Ulster during the Troubles. Central to the 'story' is a bomb-blast while Gabriel and Nina (Miranda) are in the Crown pub. Otherwise, they are not 'framed' particularly well within their largely continental setting, which is non-exotic, seeing as this is a tale of romance but lacks 'Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance.' The erotic is non-existent also. Any lovemaking by our two lovers, as 'depicted' by the hesitant narrator is quickly brushed aside, as if this were a tale only fit for Sunday school. Carson is not to be blamed if he

comes from the screwed-up-about-sex writers' club of Ireland but it certainly shows in 'For All We Know'. The wit is also thin being NI, as in the long awaited introduction to our unfleshy pair via his contorted postmodernist Belfastianisms: 'I'm Miranda, you said, though some people call me Nina./Gabriel, I said, though some people call me Gabriel.' (p.85)

While the immaculate Gabriel and immaculate Nina cavort covertly in Germany, somewhere in the Dresden region, their location is mainly Paris and beyond, 'Remember those radiating pathways of Versailles where/you confessed yourself happy to be known to me?' "Treaty" (p. 19). The latter is not even good Margaret Mitchell. 'Treaty' in part two is a particularly weak poem. Gabriel is too much centre stage, and feminists who read this (?) will cavil at Nina's walk-on-part and over-glorification by the narrator. The narrative comes unstuck also with the intellectual overlay, and the use of Bach, Beethoven, and Hermann Hesse. If this material was blended in artistically, it might have marginal validity but still is top-heavy and pedantic by his treatment. In addition, there were never such twentieth-century lovers in Northern Europe solely discussing B, B, and HH in such superficial banalities. Not even Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir ever spoke like this even with hangovers; had they ever done so, they would have been removed by the *gendarmarie* for lowering cultural standards on the Left Bank. Similarly, his use of *bierkeller* and 'Vous êtes étranger?' does not exactly authenticate the scenery or set one dreaming, it all comes across as inept use of a Rough Guide Book appendix.

The treatment of Hesse's *Das Glasperlenspiel* or The Glass Bead Game, an indisputable masterpiece of vast polemics with implications that reach as far as Gallery Press: its actions and drawbacks, is far too awkward and nervously pasted into the narrative. Nina is the Hesse expert apparently, and Gabriel the doddering disciple in a cruel echo of Joseph Knecht, Magister Ludi of the Glass Bead Game from the novel. 'I gather the glass beads became metaphorical beads,/not to be fingered by hand but tuned to some other sense.' "The Shadow" (p. 80). Jesus wept, and by God no wonder. Is the Mona Lisa a woman? No, she's a box of

chocolates. Carson's intellectualism gets the better of him. Cue Bach and Beethoven. Of Johann Sebastian B it is queried, 'I've often wondered/how many quills Bach went through over those twenty-two/years.' "Le Mot Juste" (p.28) (Count the geese that Bach cooked over a lifetime: is that the answer you are looking for?) Beethoven's deafness is remarked on, as you might expect while Van Gogh's ear does not get a mention but you feel it might easily have entered the soporific conversation of these lovers. Also unfortunately, in "Le Mot Juste" Eliot's oft-quoted lines from *East Coker* are misquoted: '...the intolerable wrestle/With words and meanings'. Even after getting one of the words 'wrestle' right, he changes it to 'struggle' twelve lines on: the unforgiveable, is misquoting 'intolerable' as 'interminable'. Eliot is Eliot primarily because of his original mellifluous language: *vers libre* for a poet requires the same artistry as for composers such as Chopin, John Field or Liszt, to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase. Carson royally screws it up with 'interminable'. It is surprising that as a teacher of 'fledging poets', he clunked on this one: the fact that Fallon and Gallery did not catch it in the proofs, might actually be poetic justice, or perhaps, Eliot has not yet permeated the consciousness of Loughcrew?

The biggest 'no-no' is that having botched 'the plot', Carson unravels the denouement early on in 'Second Hand' ('part two'), 'You drove too fast. I'd wonder how long it would be before/they'd pull you from the wreck of the immobilized Déesse,/and know by its sweeping hand that your watch was still working.' (p. 76). Before this, crucially, the watch is 'placed' in some present that implies the death of Nina. In "The Anniversary" near the end of the sequence (in every respect it is a sequence) much is made of her death in a car accident in the Citroën: this had already been set up pages back as 'a midnight blue vintage Déesse' (p. 76). One does not expect strict adherence to a linear narrative, however, the often clumsy and implicit spooling out of details brings too much attention to the flow and makes the denouement inconsequential when it belatedly arrives.

To their detriment, the poems are littered with materials that generate banalities, resulting in a sequence that never lifts into orbit about the travail of these nebulous lovers. However much this may be confessional or based on experience, there is the mawkish stemming of a thumb wound accidentally caused with an oyster knife by Nina, 'When you raised your head I kissed my blood on your open lips.' 'Anniversary' (p. 103). This out-Stokers Stoker's *Dracula* for repression but could not create a moment of the Gothic masterpiece. Prior to this in the sequence one reads, 'The Oyster is synonymous with its watertight case,/ you explained./' (p. 102). The Marine Biology is also banal. Carson gives a jerky performance: the blurb states 10 collections, proving that over-production does not mean you can label each according to the manufacturer's seal of approval and worst of all, foreigners are noticing this; we would want to watch it: people are liable to quote Bono, Van Morrison, The Pogues, and Paul Brady instead of some of our homemade-reputation-poets who like Guinness do not travel very well. Brady is another nervous performer when it comes to writing about the birds and the bees, as in the chorus of 'The Island', 'We'll make love to the sound of the ocean.' That is about as horny as a picnic in the Gaeltacht in the rain. The same lack of an artful core of erotica makes Carson's efforts desultory. What is it about Belfast and sex? It is another unmentionable.

**Kevin Kiely** is Fulbright Scholar in Literature and Visiting Professor at the University of Idaho. His publications include *Mere Mortals* (Dublin: Poolbeg, 1989), which was short-listed for the Hughes & Hughes Fiction Prize in 1990; *Breakfast with Sylvia* (Belfast: Lagan Press, 2005/US Edition 2007); and *A Horse Called El Dorado* (Dublin: O'Brien Press 2005), which won the Bisto Award in 2006.

*Scottish and Irish Romanticism*

by Murray Pittock

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, 292pp.

ISBN 978-0-19-923279-6. £53.00.

Reviewer: **Jane Moore**

Recent years have seen much work in Romantic studies on Irish, Scottish and, it is worth saying in the context of this review – albeit to a lesser extent – Welsh poets of the late and early nineteenth centuries. This body of scholarship, to which *Scottish and Irish Romanticism* belongs, has been accompanied by the rise of ‘archipelagic’ theory – to use John Kerrigan’s influential term – a critical position which stresses that ‘British’ culture is comprised of ‘four nations’, rather than one. In the same manner in which feminist scholarship argued against the traditional model of Romanticism, with its emphasis upon the voices of the ‘Big Six’ canonical male poets, and the New Historicism politicised what was seen as the internalisation of high Romantic concepts such as the ‘creative imagination’, arguing for a more historically and culturally inflected understanding of the period, so advocates of what has been labelled ‘Celtic’ poetry have argued for the centrality of what was once patronisingly dismissed as ‘regional’ voices in the mainstream of Romantic-era poetry.

Murray Pittock’s detailed analysis of the field investigates what a ‘national literature’ might actually mean during the Romantic period in the wake of Scotland’s annexing to England post 1707 and at a time when British culture in its nineteenth-century sense includes Irish literature. What he discovers in Irish and Scottish writers is what he calls a ‘social romanticism’ that can be seen to pre-empt the communitarian aims of the first generation of English Romantic poets (the early Wordsworth for example) but which has receded from view in the midst of the long prevailing post-war consensus on British

Romanticism as an inward and imaginative cultural form. Pittock maintains that the work of Scottish writers (Scotland is where the weight of his study falls as the inversion of alphabetical order in his title suggests) retains a vivid emphasis upon the relationship of the individual to society and what Wordsworth famously labelled the ‘real language of men’, which, in the case of Burns for example, is socially negotiated between Scots and English, more ‘hybridity’ than unity or ‘esemplasy’, to use Pittock’s borrowing of a Coleridgean term.

A similar hybridity or doubleness characterises Pittock’s own methodology. On the one hand, he wishes to reinstate Scottish and Romantic writers into the canon of high Romanticism ambushed by partisans of the aforesaid Six from the first half of the twentieth century onwards. He argues for the inclusion of Burns and (rightly, in my view) the poet’s status as a precursor of Wordsworth. Printed in the provinces, composed in a vivid straightforward and poetic idiom, simultaneously experimental and looking back to the medieval age in a manner foreign to the Augustan literary tradition that had appealed for its authority to the age of Greece and Rome, *Poems, Written Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (1786), no less than Wordsworth and Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads*, published a decade later, similarly valorised the experience of the rural poor. To a certain extent, mid- to late eighteenth-century Scottish poetry, not just Burns but also the slightly earlier tradition of James Beattie, ‘Ossian’ (James Macpherson) and Allan Ramsay, was a bedrock of early Romantic poetry, in its fascination with the experience of the peasantry and indebtedness to the ballad

tradition, and in its emphasis upon the local, the traditional, the superstitious and the folkloric, and, simultaneously, upon the national. Scotland has a strong claim to be seen as the cradle of Romantic poetry in Britain and Ireland. Or so we might argue.

On the other hand (and tendentiously) Pittock argues that Scottish and Irish Romanticism emerged in opposition to Englishness. Taking Mikhail Bakhtin and Frantz Fanon as his theoretical touchstones, he represents Scottish and Irish writing as carnivalesque and combative, simultaneously. Freed from (English-dominated) orthodoxies, this is the 'literature of combat', to use Fanon's term, a literature that is stubbornly resistant to the accepted conventions of Englishness. 'Altermentality', which is a mode of perception that embraces irony and double meaning, is the name Pittock uses to encapsulate the process of play and resistance and the kind of doubleness he detects in Scottish and Irish writing. Burns is put to the test and comes out with flying colours. Pittock's splendid analysis of 'Tam O'Shanter' concludes thus: 'Burns reinscribes the denominating force of music, dance and song in Scottish nationhood, hidden, repressed, but there to be discovered by the quest of the drunken Tam' (p. 163).

It is difficult to do justice in a short review to a work of the depth and complexity of *Scottish and Irish Romanticism*, and chapter summaries are a poor substitute but they do at least convey the range of concerns covered. Chapter one offers a critical survey of the field from the perspective of 'four nations' theory, which is closely related to the thesis of 'fratritism' advanced in the final chapter of the book. Fratritism is the notion that Scotland and Ireland share an historical experience that binds the two nations in sympathy with the victims of British imperialism. The lines of Scots and Irish Gaelic

are channelled away from England towards Europe, and Pittock's book, it should be noted, gives an excellent account of the wider reception of Scottish writing, notably Scott's, in non-English speaking regions or countries, Catalonia and Hungary for example, and of Scott's influence, despite his support for the 'Union', on the formation of nationalist movements. Chapter two, 'Allan Ramsay and the Decolonisation of Genre' deals with 'altermentality', while the third chapter, 'Romance, the Aeolian Harp, and the Theft of History', addresses issues raised for literary Romanticism by the influence of a 'unitary British historiography and standard of polite language' (p. 31). The winningly titled chapter four, 'Strumming and Being Hanged: The Irish Bard and History Regained' examines the situation in Ireland regarding bard poetry, minstrelsy, and the formation of a national literature. Four author-based chapters follow, namely: 'Robert Fergusson and his Scottish and Irish Contemporaries', 'Robert Burns', 'Maria Edgeworth: Language, Culture and the Irish Sphere', 'Scott and the European Nationalities Question', and, 'Hogg, Maturin and the Gothic National Tale'. The final chapter, 'Fratritism: Sisters, Brothers, Empire, and its Limits in the Scottish and Irish Imagination, c. 1746-1837' brings to a close this magisterial, intricate book. Pittock does not write in a style meant for beginners, perhaps, but his work is an important and nuanced challenge to the post-war version of literary Romanticism.

**Jane Moore** is Reader in English Literature at Cardiff University. She is editor of *The Satires of Thomas Moore*, Vol. 5, *British Satire 1785-1840* (Pickering & Chatto, 2003) and is currently working on a monograph, entitled *Thomas Moore, Satirist*.

The Truth Commissioner  
 by David Park  
 London: Bloomsbury, 2008) 372 pp.  
 Hb ISBN: 9780747591290 £11.24  
 Pb ISBN: 9780747596332 £5.99

Reviewer: **Danny Morrison**

Last January the Consultative Group on the Past (a British-appointed body) published its report into how to deal with the legacy of the 3,000 people who died in our conflict. It proposed the creation of a five-year legacy commission to conduct a final, comprehensive review and that, when its remit ends, the door would finally be closed on the past.

David Park's new novel is thus timely although it examines the possible major repercussions an *actual* South African-type Truth Commission could have on a power-sharing administration which includes former leading members of the IRA, something similar to the one created by the 1998 Belfast Agreement.

I was very impressed by two of Park's previous novels – *Stone Kingdoms* (1996), a brilliant and original work set in Africa and *The Big Snow* (2001): the former a paean to the innocent dead of Sabra and Chatila, Africa and Ireland; the latter set in the mean Belfast of 1963 involving a murder inquiry and dealing with the issues of love, loss, obsession, morals, propriety and madness.

David Park is from a Belfast Protestant working-class background and lives and teaches in a small town outside the city. He has been the quiet man of northern Irish writers, was rarely interviewed or seen on the literary circuit. But he is now receiving wide recognition as a major writer, particularly on the back of his new novel.

During the conflict the IRA killed many suspected informers of whom there were about a dozen the organisation abducted and secretly buried. After the 1994 ceasefire it admitted to these killings and is cooperating with the authorities in locating their remains.

In Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* (2000) a forensic anthropologist returns to Sri Lanka as a UN investigator to disinter the bodies of anonymous victims (in this case, of suspected government killings) and attempts to bring about justice for the nameless dead.

The subject of Park's novel is the case of 'disappeared' teenager Connor Walshe, Number 107, before Commissioner Henry Stanfield, a middle-aged roué and widower, the son of an Irish Catholic mother and English Protestant father, who allegedly has "no personal or political baggage" - but this is patently untrue. He describes the ANC, with whom he had to deal, as "smugly condescending" and comically/cynically refers to Ireland as "a godforsaken land ... where a ship that sank and an alcoholic footballer are considered holy icons". He views the community's obsession with its past as "an old manged, flea-infested dog returning to inspect its own sick".

We met Stanfield's self-righteous personality before in the character of Michael Dillon in Brian Moore's lauded, yet execrable, *Lies of Silence* (1990).

Stanfield's jaundiced view of public opinion is hypocritical, given his own increasing immunity to the suffering that has taken place, but it is also misrepresentative. For in the narrative the vast majority of the community (apart from the relatives of the victims) are growing tired of the Commission's daily work and the nightly broadcasting of its proceedings. One who shares this distaste is former IRA leader Francis Gilroy, Minister with responsibility for Children and Culture, who realises that signing up to the Commission "was always a bloody stupid idea".

Whereas Stanfield can quote Macbeth, was university-educated and has literary aspirations, Gilroy, the son of a sign-painter, is gauche, gave up on Joyce after the third page, tries to read and understand Heaney and resents the superior airs and graces of his senior civil servant advisors (who, in turn, resent this arriviste). At his daughter's 'shotgun' wedding, even after long practice, he ineffectually quotes and mishandles a Philip Larkin poem. Even his IRA comrades who provide his security can't take him seriously as a minister.

One of those Stanfield summons to his commission is retired RUC officer, James Fenton. Fenton had recruited 15-year-old Connor Walshe as an informer, he and his colleagues threatening the youth that if he didn't collaborate they would tell the IRA anyway that he was working for them. Though pensioned off with a generous settlement Fenton is angry that the RUC was disbanded and replaced by the Police Service for Northern Ireland, because "it was considered part of the corporate embarrassment, part of a past that had to be quietly replaced".

For its part in the sham Truth process the IRA goes to America and blackmails 'Danny', a former member (who is in the country illegally), to return to Belfast, appear before Stanfield's Kangaroo Commission and give a version of what happened at the time of young Walshe's death, which tidies matters up in a way that suits and protects the new political status quo. In turn, MI5 is blackmailing Stanfield with pictures of him with a prostitute in order to get him to produce the same result. The reluctant Fenton is also ordered to appear and is bribed with the possibility of government finance for a Romanian orphanage project he helps organise and which is a lifeline to his sanity.

As usual Park writes with a visual eye: "the bacon hisses and spits like a cornered cat" when layered into the pan; the grey sky was "strewn with wind-blown clouds streaming like shredded shards of last year's flags" (particularly

apposite); the partner of a pregnant woman reacting to a scan "stares at the swirl of what looks like a satellite weather map and listens to her excitement as he points out the hazy continent of their child slowly emerging from the clouds".

But there is a bit too much symmetry, resonances and stereotyping in the plotting. The main protagonists, all sullied, are in middle age all having their doubts about their past lives and current places. Fenton reflects on 'dirty police work' that can gradually coarsen and degrade one. Gilroy is growing weary, wonders if perhaps "Ireland does not exist", while his wife, like Lady Macbeth, reminds him of the sacrifices they had to make and the rewards they deserve. One IRA man's view of the conflict is exactly mirrored by Fenton's RUC view: "We were in a war, things change in a war. Things happen that shouldn't happen."

There are side-swipes at priests, mention of possible child sexual abuse, IRA men who look like gangsters out of London's East End, and an awful made-for-Hollywood denouement as 'Danny' (angry that he has once again been 'used' by the IRA) breaks free with a girl in tow. 'Danny' is 35, James is married 35 years but has no children, Francis is married 35 years and his daughter is pregnant, and Henry is alienated from his daughter who is also pregnant!

And yet, despite these flaws, Park does leave the reader feeling overwhelmingly sad, as the Commission and Connor Walshe's family listen to the tape-recorded voice of a terrified, 15-year-old petty criminal, whose information was so low-grade as to be pretty useless to the police, the victim of a conflict, asking his captors: "Can I go home now? Can I go home now?".

[*The Truth Commissioner* has been awarded the Ewart-Biggs Memorial Award, which recognises works that promote peace and reconciliation in Ireland]

**Danny Morrison** is a Belfast-based writer, author of six books, former IRA prisoner. See [www.dannymorrison.com](http://www.dannymorrison.com) for more details.

*Northern Irish Literature, 1956-2006. The Imprint of History.* (Volume 1) 357 pp. + xx  
*Northern Irish Literature, 1975-2006. The Imprint of History.* (Volume 2) 334 pp. + xix  
 by Michael Parker (Basingstoke, Hampshire & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

Reviewer: **John L. Murphy**

“Each gives the other’s lines a twist,” claimed Michael Longley about his fellow poets in their northern statelet who conversed and contended with each other (1: xviii). The twists, and the contortions, of Northern Ireland entangled themselves into its intricate poetry, drama, fiction, and criticism over the past fifty years. Michael Parker straightens out their creators’ mutual connections, and tracks their deviations from each other’s lines. Parker’s narrative of the long escalation and gradual easing of the Troubles, historically analysed and politically amplified, accompanies his two-volume critique of selected literary productions from the province.

Parker, professor at the University of Central Lancashire, compiled *The Hurt World* (1995), an anthology of short stories about the Troubles, along with an examination of Heaney; he has co-edited essay collections, one on postcolonialism, and another on contemporary Irish fiction. His qualifications show his familiarity with an abundance of authors, famous and otherwise, worthy of inclusion. Nearly free of jargon – although “*verfremdungseffekt*” leaps out of a Mahon critique – and accessible to those outside the academy, these paired volumes were eleven years in preparation. They combine close readings – from lesser known and more familiar poets, playwrights, and short story writers, and novelists – with a detailed history of political conflicts in the province from the implementation of both British decolonisation and IRA’s Operation Harvest through the decommissioning of the IRA and the recent institution of power sharing.

Rather than endlessly reciting texts and dates, Parker analyses fewer authors. He selects

representative works from men and women, unionists and nationalists. By a chronological presentation, he tallies a half-century’s responses to violence and its cessation. Exploring instability, he addresses the “twist” of “the other’s lines” drawn on paper – or sketched as boundaries sundered by invasion, subversion, or imposition. Each chapter opens with an historical description, interspersed with microscopically close readings of one text. Literary criticism, journalism (both contemporary and retrospective reports), and interviews enrich contexts within which writers respond to escalating disruptions.

Addressing Sam Thompson’s *Over the Bridge*, Parker reveals his strategy. First performed in 1960, this play “anticipates the apprehensiveness of many subsequent ‘Troubles’ writers over *direct* representations of violence” (1:7). The oblique, or detached, preference that Ronan Bennett has argued dominates many Northern Irish writers’ responses does not jibe with Parker’s alignment of those who may hesitate, but who do not beg off their engagement with the tensions that trap them alongside their neighbours. Sifting through material that has been refined by previous investigators, Parker’s careful recovery of artifacts may overwhelm a casual observer. For example, volume one lists over 1250 notes for about 260 pages of text. Maps, timelines, and bibliographies follow. Yet, Parker’s diligence reveals determination to present honestly actions blurred by revision.

Summarising NICRA’s August 1968 march takes a long paragraph. Six citations move from Communist organiser Betty Sinclair to Marxist Anthony Coughlan’s clash with NICRA back to Sinclair before quoting Gerry Fitt, Bernadette

Devlin, and an historian on the IRA. In one endnote, Parker substantiates Coughlan's claim with a paper now in Roy Johnston's collection; Parker locates an error from a leader interviewed by historians in their Dungannon account which relied upon this reference. Parker then quotes from Johnston's letter to him in support of his own correction.

These superscripted numbers add up to hundreds per chapter, but by this diligence Parker accumulates a comprehensive evaluation of primary and secondary sources from participants as well as commentators or critics. Furthermore, Parker remembers the telling detail. At the much-mythologised Dungannon where NICRA faced an RUC police cordon and "1500 counter-demonstrators from Paisley's UPV," that NICRA contingent heard Sinclair, perhaps cannily given the media's presence, exhort two-and-a-half thousand marchers to join her in "We Shall Overcome" (1: 75). Most had never heard of it. They reverted soon to "A Nation Once Again."

Reacting to the August 1969 riots that overcame such civil rights protests, John Hewitt struggled with what many of his peers would face: how to transfer words and thoughts from the private domain into a larger political narrative that demanded articulation? Parker recovers Hewitt's *An Ulster Reckoning* (1971) along with works such as Heaney's "The Tollund Man" or "Punishment" which cloaked Irish struggles within earlier sacrifices. Parker quotes Heaney's self-scrutiny regarding linguistic failure to do justice to local atrocities. "Now there is of course something terrible in that, but somehow language, words didn't live in the way I think they have to live in a poem when they were hovering over that kind of horror and pity. They became, they just became inert, strangely, for me anyway" (1: 176). Heaney's own hesitation emerges in his stumbling account of his own contortions which would be preserved by his bog-buried victims from Iron Age Scandinavia in *Wintering Out* (1972) and *North* (1975).

Yet, Parker reminds how poets could overreach. Auschwitz cannot be compared with Belfast. The lingering gaze of Heaney over the body of the young girl condemned for her

dalliance unsettles Parker. When authors succeed in capturing the difficulties of poetically conveying their responses to their provincial horror, Parker acknowledges their triumph. If they stumble, he proportionately corrects their fall.

"Punishment," as Parker limns Heaney's attempt to "understand the exact / and tribal, intimate revenge," integrates Heaney's expression of nationalist fears in the early 1970s that Catholics faced assault from both loyalists and "security forces." Parker warns, however: "yet to comprehend the motives of others is not necessarily to endorse their actions, or to be free of one's own conflicting allegiances" (1: 245). The voyeurism, the lingering scrutiny, the helplessness of the aroused but impotent onlooker dramatised by Heaney, Parker explains, remains unsettling. It implicates "all those reading the poem" and reminds them of the Northern predicament, and its inextricable complexity for those witnessing the Troubles – as spectators.

The second volume, after the murders and attacks by 1975 appeared to have perhaps reached that infamously assessed level of "acceptable violence," looks beyond verse and drama. As the conflict protracted, novelists and story creators entered the fray. They tended towards more nuance through sympathetic characters as flummoxed as their creators in attempting to understand what they told – perhaps to an international audience. Heaney's success spurred Muldoon; Montague sparked Medbh McGuckian. For fiction, fewer predecessors guided. Volume one dissects no fiction; Volume two examines eight novels or stories out of thirty-four exemplary texts.

Benedict Kiely's novella *Proxopera* (1977), Jennifer Johnston's *Shadows on Our Skin* (1977), or Bernard MacLaverty's *Cal* (1983), all of which gained an international readership, nevertheless betray how the Troubles defied complete success in narratives as well as in many staged or versified versions. Parker accurately pinpoints the failures in this trio to avoid stereotyping, simplification, caricature, or sentiment. By comparison, Parker's enthusiastic introductions to writers left out of the canon invite readers to rescue abandoned texts. Una

Woods' *The Dark Hole Days* (1984), judging from his praise, deserves much more elaboration; Anne Devlin's "Naming the Names" (1983) benefits from its shorter length, for Parker can better interpret its intricacies within the chapter's limits allotted to early 1980's fiction.

Similarly, as with volume one's unfortunate lack of space devoted to Pádraic Fiacc's marginalised, markedly angrier verse, and his once critically castigated "Troubles poetry" anthology *The Wearing of the Black* (1974), certain texts promoted for display languish too shadowed. Sineád Morrissey's verse earns its showcase; Eilish Martin's poetry collected as "slitting the tongues of jackdaws" merited a longer run. Gary Mitchell's play *The Force of Change* (2000) with its look into UDA interrogations by the police at Castlereagh prison gains welcome elaboration; Michael Longley's sensitive verse in *The Echo Gate* (1979) also deserved sustained accompaniment.

Such compression may prove a slight weakness inherent in any editorial construction, joining a detailed provincial history with textual analyses, within so few pages. Parker deserves not blame but praise for alerting audiences to many of the forgotten selections he recovers. With care and precision, he directs the reader towards in-depth encounters with poetics, symbolism, and dramaturgy; simultaneously he balances his examinations with wide-ranging perspectives on an immense amount of interviews in print, on television, or the radio, blended with political and social events throughout the North over five decades.

Despite his ambitious project, Parker never loses sight of the reader unfamiliar with this genre. Readers studying these two books will find fresh texts to pursue. Those familiar with politics may be less so with lesser-known poets; those expert on drama may encounter a novel previously ignored. Parker, steadily arranging a well-ordered sample of reactions to unrest, keeps his prose direct, intelligent, and respectful of the human costs involved – rather than a routine slog through statistics, acronyms, or slogans.

Muldoon's sequence concluding *Quoof* (1983) sums up 1980s despair at hatred's routine. Parker proposes "The More a Man Has, the More a man

Wants" registers "the near-complete desensitisation of a culture and a people. Its narrator's deadpan delivery is symptomatic of this virulent condition, which at times seems to number compassion, art and meaning alongside its many individual casualties" (2: 97).

As the survey nears the millennium, the outlook brightens. A "postmodernist distrust of grand narratives" as attention shifts from an insular redoubt to global geopolitical change encourages Northern Irish writers to examine domestic and family concerns (2: 225). National identity retreats as a preoccupation of poet, playwright, or storyteller; the Good Friday Agreement offers them and their fellow residents a chance to tick "both/and" and not "either/or."

However, intimate dimensions of identity, Parker corrects, emerged earlier. Nick Laird's nimble, clipped, and quirky verse captures the Northern demotic. Often warped into exaggeration or derision, Laird's charged syntax speaks for many of his counterparts as he restores a visual, raw, and daringly compassionate delivery into figures consigned to cartoonish roles as thugs, terrorists, or tramps. Those men assembled in *To a Fault* (2005), Parker reflects, exemplify "Edna Longley's contention that 'the speech or eloquent silence of the father' is one of the most important, recurring motifs in Northern Irish poetry" (2: 230). Their shared experience of enduring the Troubles, Parker continues, "intensified solidarity between generations, as well as within communities." Today's churches, paramilitaries, and police have all been reduced. They dominate fewer enclaves of sectarian adherents. Laird, and many of his peers, turn now away from these superstructures. They portray rather those who lived under them, within the rubble, who rebuild, resist, and revive.

Alan Gillis' "Progress" from *Somebody, Somewhere* (2004) ends Parker's second volume. Gillis shares Laird's conversational and lyrical shifts. Gillis shapes an image that in clumsier hands "so easily might have descended into embarrassing and tasteless whimsy" (2: 238). "Progress" deserves citing in full as an expression of an aspiration Parker brings his study towards.

They say that for years Belfast was backwards  
 and it's great now to see some progress.  
 So I guess we can look forward to taking boxes  
 from the earth. I guess that ambulances  
 will leave the dying back amidst the rubble  
 to be explosively healed. Given time,  
 one hundred thousand particles of glass  
 will create impossible patterns in the air  
 before coalescing into the clarity  
 of a window. Through which, a reassembled head  
 will look out and admire the shy young man  
 taking his bomb from the building and driving home.

Among younger generations of Northern  
 poets, literature may provide – after long agony  
 from many of its creators at its passivity amidst  
 destructive acts – a source of healing now in its

lineaments. Parker's coupled volumes  
 thoroughly excavate literature from the six  
 counties' political ruins. Writers refill the social  
 gaps with home-grown speech. "Progress"  
 arranges a young Belfast poet-critic's final  
 "twist" of lines into a municipally healing shape,  
 after fifty years of provincial contortion.

**John L. Murphy** coordinates the Humanities  
 sequence at DeVry University in Long Beach,  
 California. He reviews widely in print and on  
 line. His research interests include republicanism  
 in Irish literary culture, and the representation of  
 the Irish language in English-language texts.

*The Cambridge Introduction to Modern Irish Poetry, 1800-2000*

by Justin Quinn

Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008, 246 pp.

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Reviewer: **Vanessa Silva Fernández**

Ever since its launch in 2002, the series of Cambridge Introductions to Literature has released over 50 titles on a wide range of literary topics. One of the last additions to the series has been a volume dedicated to modern Irish poetry, written by Justin Quinn, an Irish critic and poet himself. Given the aim of the series, which is primarily to provide a work of reference for students, we should not expect beforehand to find in-depth essays on the topic. Nevertheless, Quinn succeeds in providing a refreshing overview of the authors and themes of modern Irish poetry, by abandoning the usual homage to well-established canonical figures and focusing rather on the contradictions and intersections featuring in this literary moment. Since the work is organized taking into account its prospective readership, every chapter is divided into subsections dealing with specific authors. However, in spite of these clear divisions, the volume reads well as a whole, thanks to an informed and well-chosen series of quotations, an original analysis of representative poems and a preservation of thematic unity throughout.

Curiously enough, the work starts with the question “What is Irish poetry?” (1) and with Quinn’s acknowledgement that he can only provide provisional and contradictory answers to that question. For the purposes of his account, modern Irish poetry will be Anglophone, produced between the Act of Union and 2000, and characterised mainly by a variable attitude towards the concept of nation.

The first chapter, dedicated to ‘The Appearance of Ireland’, can be summarized as a chapter on intersections. Quinn focuses on the adoption of the English language and the loss of Gaelic and on the ambiguous attitude towards the Empire. As the author reminds us, despite their interest in Ireland and all things Irish, the poets of this era were actually writing for a British audience. Quinn gathers together the ambivalent views of Thomas Moore, J.J. Callanan and J.C. Mangan, authors who would excel, as Quinn puts it, “in keeping the pot warm, and never bringing it to the boil” (11). The ambiguity present here goes a step further in the times of ‘Tennyson’s Ireland’ with the creation of apparent contradictions such as the ‘Victorian Gael’ or the Gaelisation of Anglophone poetry. Quinn presents authors, such as Samuel Ferguson or William Allingham, who swung between their connection to the Victorian Empire and their self-identification with the Irish National sentiment.

The following three chapters, ‘Revival’, ‘W.B. Yeats’ and ‘Wild earth’ deal with the Irish Literary Revival. Especially relevant to chapter 3 is the connection between the Revival and Modernism, clearly seen in coinciding concerns such as the revision of tradition, the importance of indigenous culture, the inadequacy of language and the limits of the Victorian poetic mode. Having dealt with the confluence with modernity, Quinn focuses on the confrontation of modernity in the chapter dedicated to Yeats,

which emphasizes the role of Irish culture as refuge and describes the new relations between literature and nation. Successively, chapter 5 deals with the generation that followed Yeats chronologically and with the different reactions towards the legacy of the Revival. Always interested in the numerous contrasts and contradictions present in the history of Irish poetry writing, Quinn includes in this section very different responses, such as Patrick Kavanagh's or Louis McNeice's. The cluster of chapters then receives a closure in Chapter 6, 'The ends of Modernism: Kinsella and Irish experiment', where Quinn discusses the mid-century born experimentalist generation which created a poetic of chaos and conflict and subverted the Irish nationalist ideology.

Subsequent chapters account individually for other great concerns of Irish modern poetry. 'Ireland's Empire' stresses the situation of poets of Protestant background who both feel the need to claim their Irishness and the unease of being identified with the colonizing Empire. This section discusses the work of Belfast-born Derek Mahon and Michael Longley, and Quinn remains focused on the North of Ireland by dedicating chapter 8 exclusively to Seamus Heaney. Quinn pays special attention to Heaney's moments of crossing, be it between Catholicism and Protestantism, Irish and English language or politics and literature (conflicts which are enacted in the extensively commented poem 'Act of Union').

In 'Irsko po Polsku: poetry and translation' Quinn deals with the negotiations between Anglophone poetry and the Irish language. He looks at the ways in which Gaelic and the community of Irish speakers have become a theme, and gives voice to the controversy arising from the translations of contemporary poetry written in Irish. Chapter 10 is in turn dedicated to the effects of the relation between 'Feminism and Irish poetry' – especially its impact on the work of male poets and its achievement of a re-evaluation and revalorisation of those women poets who featured prominently in the feminist debate of the 1970s and 1980s, poets such as Eavan Boland, Medbh McGuckian or Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin. In a following chapter, 'Out of

Ireland: Muldoon and other émigrés', there is a discussion of the expectations Irish exiles meet out of the Irish borders (specially in America) and how these expectations are subverted. There is also a space in this chapter for hybridity and for the experience of inner émigrés who cross the invisible borders within Ireland.

Finally, chapter 12 witnesses 'The disappearance of Ireland' after the profound transformations taking place from the 70s onwards and up to the roar of the Celtic Tiger. Quinn presents the reader with a nation which has reacted to the impact of feminism, a nation where the Irish language has become independent of nationalism and the sense of place is no longer pervasive. The nationalist agenda long forgotten, Quinn's impression is that the disappearance of the old Ireland of rigid borders should be seen as a liberating experience for the poets. Paralleling this experience, in *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern Irish Poetry* we can witness the disappearance of the rigid borders of traditional scholarship. The selection of material presents some debatable choices, such as the predominance of twentieth-century authors or the exclusion of Irish poetry written in Gaelic. These choices and absences are nonetheless explained by Quinn's initial definition of the Irish poem and to be expected in an *Introduction* which has to deal with such an extensive scope. Quinn's main achievement will not reside in his ability to cover the ground of Irish poetry from 1800 to 2000, but rather in his enlightening approach to the ground he does cover. There is no doubt that the future scholars for whom this volume is produced will benefit greatly from Quinn's multiple perspective, which focuses on subversion, intersection, contradiction and boundary-crossings. After all, that is what really lies at the core of modern Irish poetry.

**Vanessa Silva Fernández** is a predoctoral researcher at the University of Vigo (Spain) where she is currently working on a dissertation entitled "Contemporary Women's Poetry in Ireland and Galicia". She has contributed book reviews to journals such as *Viceversa* and *Papers on Joyce*

*The Irish Celebrating: Festive and Tragic Overtones*  
 ed. by Marie-Claire Considère-Charon, Philippe Laplace, Michel Savaric  
 Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008) xv + 323 pages.  
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Reviewer: **Patricia Trainor**

*The Irish Celebrating: Festive and Tragic Overtones* comprises a number of carefully selected papers which were presented at the 25<sup>th</sup> International Annual Conference of the French Society of Irish Studies at the University of Franche-Comté in Besançon, 24<sup>th</sup>-25<sup>th</sup> March 2006. The theme of the conference was “Ireland: the festive and the tragic.” The book has a total of twenty-five chapters and is divided into four main sections: (1) Historical and Popular Manifestations (2) Literary Illustrations (3) Social and Institutional Issues (4) Northern Perspectives. In an insightful Foreword Roy Foster sets the mood by making reference to a passage in William Carleton’s *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry* in which he states “that in Irish life occasions of celebration — a fair, a dance, funeral or wedding — coincide with the chance of getting one’s head or bones broken, and much stranger, he declares that these events are warmly and sentimentally remembered.”

Foster notes that for social and cultural historians, the idea of celebration is hard to detach from that of memory and it is fitting therefore that Section 1 of the book begins with Veronique Guibert de la Vaissière’s inquiry into four pre-Christian festivals, Imbolc, Bealtaine, Lughnasa and Samhain, which celebrated the turning of the wheel of time and acted as arks of alliance between men and the Invisible. Ludivine Bouhelier then reminds us that, after Ireland gained its independence, the new nation state recognised the need to preserve these traditional festivals and customs as a link to the past for future generations. Another way of remembering

is by erecting monuments to historical figures and heroes and Paula Murphy’s article concentrates on the imperial and nationalist public monuments erected in Dublin in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century where she contrasts among others, the statues put up almost side by side of Admiral Nelson and Charles Stewart Parnell. The former was attended by an official military display of British power and authority while the latter was an outpouring of Irish triumphalism, attracting huge crowds from the whole of the country both North and South. In turn, Peter Cassells focuses on the statue to the Trade Union leader James Larkin and the role of son Jim Larkin in developing a progressive movement in Ireland. In “Paddy Sad and Paddy Mad, Music and the Condition of Irishness” Gerry Smyth notices how Irish music tends to reflect the two extremes of tragedy and festivity, and, with reference to the French political philosopher Jacques Attali, he considers the provenance of the musical sounds which give Ireland its identity.

Section II: Literary Illustrations begins with “Sorrow and Celebration in the Paris Diary of Theobald Wolfe Tone (1796-1798)”, where Sylvie Kleinman links Wolfe Tone’s experience with that of other great Irish émigrés such as Samuel Beckett and James Joyce. The influence of Yeats’ *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* outside Ireland is the subject of Phyllis Gaffney’s article “Dramatising the Myth and Mythologising the Drama: *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* and Roger Chauviré’s *L’Incantation*.” In “Merriment and Celebration in Sean O’Casey’s Plays”, Émile-Jean Dumay defends O’Casey’s decision to write

political and social drama that could be understood by the ordinary person, while his brilliant use of language constantly invokes dreams of better days to come. “The Festive and the Tragic: Brian Friel’s *Dancing at Lughnasa* and *Wonderful Tennessee*” is the title of Martine Pelletier’s article which shows how rituals play an important part in Ireland’s relationship with the sacred, through its pagan and Christian past. In “Christ’s Kirk on the Green Isle: Tragedy Commemorated in Comic Form”, Carol Baraniuk considers the poetry of the eighteenth-century Ulster-Scots poet James Orr. Seamus Heaney and Bernard O’Donoghue are the subject of José Miguel Alonso Giráldez’s “The Festive and the Tragic in Poetry.” Giráldez recalls that poets in the past were viewed as shamans who could invoke the spirit of a place or an object and transform that energy into words. For Heaney poems contribute to the transformation of reality and have a healing effect. They convert obscurity into clarity and darkness into light. O’Donoghue, also digs into his past and from the shadows of his childhood in Knockduff, he too recovers moments of tragedy and moments of joy.

Shannon Wells-Lassagne’s article on Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Last September* and Fabienne Garcier’s article on Frank O’ Connor’s *Guests of the Nation* (1931) show how both authors turned to humour as a way of dealing with the Anglo-Irish war. In “Bloomsday as Carnival”, Declan Kiberd suggests that *Ulysses* was different from the traditional Irish stories which were recited in public to an audience by ‘professional’ storytellers in that it was “to be a realistic account of everyday life, to be read in sceptical silence by the solitary consumer.” Kiberd argues that *Ulysses* has been misread and misunderstood in that it has been seen as a product of that specialist bohemia against which it is in fact in open revolt.

Section III: Social and Institutional Issues begins with two articles looking at how *Irishness* has become more acceptable in Britain although Grainne O’Keefe-Vigneron asks herself if perhaps this is a clichéd commercialized form in order to fit into a multicultural Britain. Bronwen Walter, on the other hand, concludes that although the Peace Agreement and the Celtic

Tiger have both helped to provoke a more positive reaction in England, the same cannot be said of Scotland where the Scottish state refuses to acknowledge the distinctive ethnicity of one third of its inhabitants.

“From an American Wake to a Nigerian Homecoming” is the intriguing title of Bairbre Ní Chiosáin article. In it she deals with a new phenomenon in Ireland, that of deporting immigrants back to their countries of origin. She reminds the reader of past times when friends and family would celebrate an *American Wake* to say goodbye to some family member who was going to leave Ireland to find a better life in America and who would probably never be seen again. But all this has changed and now Irish people think nothing of flying back and forth to the New World. Bairbre Ní Chiosáin urges the Irish authorities to think again about the need to take a more sympathetic view of people, like the Nigerian boy who had come to Ireland looking for a better life and who was deported just three months before he was to sit the Leaving Certificate.

“Drinking and Celebrating: A Tragic Alliance?” is the title of Philippe Brillet’s article which deals the dangers to health caused by an excessive consumption of alcohol. He claims that Irish people are not aware of this and says that responsibility to take action lies with the government who still tend to look on drinking as part of the culture of Ireland.

William Crotty looks at the Role of the Catholic Church in Ireland in “The Catholic Church in Ireland: Triumph and Tragedy”. Although 91% of the population in Ireland still claim to be Catholic, the fact is that Ireland has undergone a profound change from being a small, rural, traditional, isolated country with an almost mystical relationship between the Catholic Church and the country’s national identity to being a modern, developed country which has one of the fastest growing economies in the whole of Europe. However, while undoubtedly the recent sexual abuse scandals by the clergy have served to accelerate the transformation and redefinition of attitudes towards the Church, Crotty still thinks it has an important role to play in Irish life.

In “The European Destiny of Ireland from Dust to Glory”, Stefano Martinelli looks at what joining the European Union has meant for Ireland. Undoubtedly the EU was the detonator for the remarkable economic growth – the famous *Celtic Tiger* converting Ireland into a wealthy country whose influence is not only confined to the economic sphere but also to literature, music and cinema. The extraordinary ‘rebirth’ of Ireland is an indicator of the success of the EU.

Section IV: Northern Perspectives begins with Martin Mansergh’s “Celebrations in Northern Ireland: Rising above Rituals,” where he emphasises the need for both communities to show mutual respect for historical memories if true reconciliation is to come about. This call for mutual respect is also echoed in Linda Hagan’s article where she calls on the descendants of Gaels and Planters alike to come together and to learn from the voices of the dead in their resting places. Malachi O’Doherty recounts, with a certain degree of scepticism, the events which took place during the IRA negotiations with the British in 1972, where he says it was clear that the IRA had not wanted a long ceasefire. Carol Le Mouël’s article, “The Good Friday Agreement: An Extended Celebration or an Ongoing Tragedy?” has been overtaken by events by the setting up of the Northern Ireland Assembly on 8<sup>th</sup> May 2007 and Agnès Maillot

considers the future of Sinn Féin both North and South of the border. Although they gained second place in the elections in the North they had very disappointing results in the South, where they lost one of their five TDs. So, where do they go from here?

The editors Marie-Claire Considère-Charon, Philippe Laplace and Michel Savaric are to be congratulated on this excellent collection of articles. Far from being a disjointed collection of essays, it is coherently structured beginning with ancient legends, pre-Christian celebrations and historical events and then leading on to articles on Literature, including novels, drama and poetry. The *Celtic Tiger*, the Catholic Church, immigration rather than emigration, the EU, all get a look in and of course the more recent developments in Northern Ireland and reasons to hope for an even better future are also included. Rather than describing this work as a patchwork of essays, I would describe it as a carefully woven tapestry where the articles blend smoothly together. It is a book in which there is something for everyone!

**Patricia Trainor de la Cruz** is a graduate from Queen’s University, Belfast. She is a lecturer in the English Department of the University of Málaga where she teaches a course on Irish Studies.