

## IRISH STUDIES ROUND THE WORLD - 2007

David Pierce (ed.)

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## Introduction

David Pierce, 1 February 2008

This issue sees ten literature book reviews. They include a new novel by Roddy Doyle where he updates us on the protagonist we first encountered in *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* (1996); Anne Enright's *The Gathering*, which won the Man Booker prize for fiction in 2007; the *Collected Poems* of Michael Longley, the poet who has recently been appointed Professor of Poetry for Ireland; William Trevor's new book of stories; a collection of contemporary Irish short stories edited by David Marcus; a cultural history of Ireland during the Second World War; Eavan Boland's thoughtful collection of comments on writing by Irish writers; essays on Irish women writers from an American perspective; a series of new essays on George Moore; a companion to the Irish novel in the Cambridge series; and a book of essays mapping Irish studies in the new century. As ever, I wanted to include reviewers who were experts in their fields as well as those less well-known or relative newcomers to seeing their names in print. I would like to take this opportunity of thanking all the reviewers for providing something to awaken interest or to stimulate discussion for those of you reading this.

2007 was the year of Louis MacNeice, being the centenary of his birth. There was a symbolic moment in September during the conference dedicated to him at Queen's University Belfast when the leading Northern Irish poets gathered at his graveside in the grounds of the Church of Ireland Church at Carrowdore in County Antrim. Even though he has been dead for some forty-five years, MacNeice's presence continues to be felt strongly. 2007 also witnessed a new Faber edition of his poetry edited by Peter McDonald, an edition which prints MacNeice's poetry in groupings corresponding closely to the collections published by Faber between 1935 and 1963 (see Louis MacNeice, *Collected Poems* ed. Peter McDonald). Faber also reprinted an edition

of MacNeice's autobiography *The Strings Are False*, with an introduction by Derek Mahon, and, forthcoming in 2008, there is to be an edition of *Autumn Journal*, the poem MacNeice wrote on the eve of the Second World War and which continues to be of interest especially to Irish and Spanish readers. In another edition, *Selected Poems*, also by Faber, Michael Longley makes a strong case for reading MacNeice as our contemporary. Perhaps for the next issue someone will submit an essay on MacNeice to our journal.

One of the novels I have been re-reading these last few months has a title taken from a MacNeice poem: *Where They Were Missed* (Penguin, 2007). The author is the Belfast-born writer Lucy Caldwell, whose play *Leaves* received plaudits when it was staged at the National Theatre in London in March 2007. I can think of few novels written by an author in her early twenties which are as accomplished as this one. Like MacNeice, Caldwell has a keen eye for hauntings, for what's been lost, for false strings, only now the loss is wrapped in the continuing trauma of sectarianism and the Troubles. I say I have been re-reading this novel because its full effect only comes with a second reading. In attending to the great Irish theme of loss, Caldwell reminds us that families carry not only their own history inside them but also a wider history that accords with but is not identical to what happens there. As she quite properly remarks in a short interview about the novel: "[I]t has a rawness and an energy and innocence that I'll never be able to capture again." And, equally properly, she then quickly adds: "But then again in a funny sort of way every single thing that you write feels as if it's the first thing you've ever written." Her protagonist's name, Saoirse [pronounced seersha], is Irish for freedom or liberty, and Caldwell opens her account as a novelist with the old Irish cry even as she attends to the loss that accompanied such a

cry in history.

The sense of loss in *The Pride of Parnell Street*, a new play by Sebastian Barry which was staged by the Tricycle Theatre in London and at the Dublin Theatre Festival in autumn 2007, is filtered through monologues that work their cumulative magic in characteristic Barry style. Unlike other plays, the loss now is more contemporary and for the most part circumscribed by northside, working-class Dublin. In some ways the play, published in 2007 by Faber, is close to Roddy Doyle's world, and we can't help being reminded of him. Joe, deflated after Ireland's exit from Italia '90, returns home to beat his wife and, from then on, life on the streets, outside the family that is, beckons, a life of bitterness and drugs and knives and prison. Ugly, but, as the 'pride' in the title reminds us, Barry is ever alert to the possibility of redemption whether that is through an intense love of landscape, the use of a lyrical phrase, moments of tenderness or reconciliation at the end. *The Pride of Parnell Street* lacks the tragic reach of his earlier plays but for all that there is a canvas being erected here for what feels like a larger retrospective exhibition.

Bridget O'Connor's play *The Flags* (Faber and Faber, 2006), which was revived at the Royal Exchange in Manchester in autumn 2007, tells the story of two life guards, JJ and Howie, who find themselves on duty on the 'second worst beach in Ireland'. As such a phrase suggests, there is nothing romantic here – unless it's the humour which is everywhere possible. The play's best moments recall the work of Martin McDonagh but it has its own qualities as if a new voice was seeking to be heard amid the larger symbols of life. After all, they work on the second worst beach in Ireland, not the worst.

A book of short stories that has stayed with me is *Walk the Blue Fields* by Claire Keegan and also published by Faber. Keegan possesses a beguiling new voice that commands attention. In some stories she recalls John McGahern. Indeed, as if she knew where she was going to be positioned by her critics, one of her stories 'Surrender' carries the bracket '(after McGahern)'. But in a story such as 'Night of the Quicken Trees', which is set in the turf bogs of

Dunagore near Doolin in County Clare, bogs incidentally worked for generations by my own family, we might find ourselves thinking of Benedict Kiely's story 'Homes on the Mountain' and how utterly strange some country people can seem as if ancient Ireland was still alive and well. For there is a Southern gothic seam in Irish culture, and it is especially evident among those who live in remote parts. In turn, the grotesque can attract imaginative writers and commentators alike. Kiely manages to avoid the gothic potential in his story but Keegan cannot resist the temptation, at least here. Her best stories, however, are the two at the beginning of this collection – 'The Parting Gift', an understated story of emigration, and 'Walk the Blue Fields', a story about another ritual. This time it is a wedding but it is a wedding stoy with a difference, for the story focuses as much on the priest conducting the service as on the bride and groom. When one of the guests refers to the priest's 'cock' as an 'ornament', we know we are in the presence of a storyteller with a way with words.

It has been a good year for Irish writing and let me end with two more examples. Tim Robinson's *Connemara: Listening to the Wind* was published by Penguin in 2007. Those who haven't come across Robinson's prose style have a real joy in store. This study is closer to home for Robinson, with Roundstone in Connemara at its centre. There is no-one better at capturing the landscape of the West. His favoured mode of walking, he tells us, is not "a single-minded goal-bound linear advance but a cross-questioning of an area". Lying on the terrace of his house overlooking the bay, the summer sunset in full swing, he notices how Connemara "tends to undefine itself from minute to minute". It is in keeping that the writer who has helped define a whole landscape for us should deploy the word 'undefine' to describe such a moment. If the word stands out, it does so because we are observing the naturalist at home in his habitat and surroundings, listening to the wind. It is also in keeping that Robinson, who understands the concept of legacy more than anyone, has left his house and books to the University of Galway for future use by students researching the natural

history of this part of the world.

The other book I have particularly enjoyed reading is Paul Durcan's new collection *The Laughter of Mothers*, published by Harvill Secker in 2007. In one sense it is a book about golf, but in another sense it is about his mother. 'The Story of Ireland' opens with this dramatic statement: "The single most crucial factor in twentieth-century Irish history was golf." And Durcan continues, ex-cathedra-like, with: "Had it not been for golf, the country would have lapsed into barbarism." There is something unalloyed about such laughter as if the satire knows no bounds. Inevitably, though, a darker side accompanies this volume, and, as we turn the pages, we see it gathering force, for this is a remarkably frank and tragic reading by Durcan

of his own life and, more especially, that of his mother's life, a woman who qualified as a lawyer but who ended up the wife of a judge. So much pain is on display here that we might wonder how much fun can be had reading it. As ever with Durcan, there is nothing heavy about the style: "Instead of being famous / For her brilliance as a lawyer / She became famous / For making cakes and ice cream." But underneath it all there is a painful drama being enacted, and we realise that, like his mother, Durcan is an acute observer of the scene, for both of them are or were outsiders whose position and family history have given them a privileged access to the great theme of loss in modern Ireland. As I say, it's been a good year for readers of Irish writing.

*Cheating at Canasta*

By William Trevor

London: Viking, 2007

232pp. ISBN: 978-0-670-91726-6, £ 16.99

Reviewer: Constanza del R o

Re-entering William Trevor's imaginative universe is like visiting a territory whose contour is all too familiar and at the same time slightly altered: a new shade of colour here, a displaced angle there or an arresting lighting effect that in turn lend distinction and freshness to Trevor's customary exploration of the human condition. The regular Trevor reader knows that in this new collection, *Cheating at Canasta*, there will be the expected series of twelve short stories, set in either Ireland or England, with the occasional foray to Italy or France. He or she can also predict an assorted array of fictional characters: children, teen-agers, middle-aged and old people, both male and female, Irish and English, Catholic and Protestant, of dissimilar social and living conditions, yet all of them carrying their particular burden: secrets and silence, lies and deceit, guilt and shame, loneliness and disaffection, but also tenderness, endurance and courage, together with a readiness to forgive and a desire to be forgiven.

As if responding to charges of anachronisms in his view of contemporary life, Trevor now incorporates mobile phones, cyber caf es, chat lines and word-processors. Yet, these are all accessories; certainly helpful to flesh out Trevor's raw material and render it more credible, though peripheral to the core anxieties that beset his characters. In this sense, it matters little whether, in "An Afternoon", Jasmin/Angie has met the middle-aged paedophile on a chat line or while shopping in the supermarket. The

story does not concern the risks of new communication technologies for inexperienced teen-agers. Its emotional centre rather lies with Jasmin, a sixteen-year-old forlorn girl – not particularly pretty, not particularly smart – driven to dangerous romantic infatuations by her mother's lack of care, sexual promiscuity and relentless undermining of Jasmin's self-esteem.

One of Trevor's assets as a writer is his ability to discover the ineffable in the ordinary, to transmute commonplace experiences into uncanny or mysterious occasions. Unexpected or contrasted reactions to similar events are usual in his fiction and the reader is made aware of the depths of human behaviour. Why do we act the way we act? Trevor answers this question by offering a wide range of motives, and it is in this variety that he continues both to surprise and engage the reader. "Bravado", like "An Afternoon", chooses adolescence as its focus of interest. The story, set in contemporary Dublin, presents a group of three teen-age boys and two girls walking back home in the early morning hours after an evening out in the Star nightclub. In a macho display meant to show off his "bravado" in front of the girls, Manning, the leader of the bunch, beats another boy to death. Aisling, Manning's girlfriend, tries to convince herself that there was a reason for such brutality, not so much to exculpate Manning as to exonerate her own guilt for her silent complicity. As an adult, Aisling finally comes to accept her responsibility and takes to visiting the deceased

boy's grave: "In a bleak cemetery Aisling begged forgiveness of the dead for the falsity she had embraced when what there was had been too ugly to accept. Silent, she had watched an act committed to impress her, to deserve her love, as other acts had been. And watching, there was pleasure. If only for a moment, but still there had been" (88).

"The Children" opens with a funeral. The death of Connie's mother draws her, an eleven-year-old Irish girl, even closer to her father, Robert, while they both come to terms with their loss and share "the awareness of a ghost that fleetingly demanded no more than to be remembered" (155). Two years go by and Robert announces his intention to marry Teresa. Connie's tacit though obstinate disapproval of this decision finally compels Robert to forego the engagement. Out of love for his daughter, he understands Connie's hostility to Teresa as her dutiful honouring of her mother's memory. Yet, Connie's motives are not so plain for the reader. Her stubborn resistance may also come from her jealousy – her desire to preserve the intimacy she has gained with her father – or from a malicious wish to harm the intrusive Teresa.

The cruelty of childhood acts is also one of the themes of "Folie à Deux", the last piece in the collection. Wilby's chance meeting in Paris with his childhood friend, Anthony, whom he thought dead, triggers memories of their friendship in rural Ireland and of the secrets they shared. One such secret, never spoken about after its occurrence, concerns a nasty and shameful act committed by both: out of reckless curiosity, they provoked the drowning of an old lame dog. Like Aisling in "Bravado", they just watched and listened to the poor creature's barking and wailing. Whereas Wilby has "lived easily with an aberration, then shaken it off" (227), Anthony has been unable to forgive their own foolish wickedness and has opted for withdrawal, severing all connections with his previous life.

In Trevor's fiction, the past usually takes its toll on the present, a theme that appears as well in "The Room". Here, Trevor is at his best in his mastery of suspense and piecemeal delivery of information. The story shows how Phair's adultery and suspected murder of a prostitute

nine years before have led to his wife's present infidelity and to a broken marriage. For Katherine, the middle-aged adulterous wife, not even her deep love for Phair can keep their marriage alive. Her husband's betrayal opened a rift in their relationship that nothing can patch up. She does not blame him, though the story ends with Katherine's epiphanic determination to leave him: "[...] she would choose her moment to say that she must go. He would understand; she would not have to tell him. The best that love could do was not enough, and he would know that also" (41).

The Trevor reader is, however, more used to stories that end in resignation, endurance or brooding moods, as in "The Dressmaker's Child", a story set in small town Ireland. Nineteen-year-old Cahal offers to drive two Spanish tourists to a nearby place where they want to visit the statue of a weeping Virgin. Although it was discovered, and is now common knowledge, that there is nothing miraculous about this statue – the teardrops proved to be just raindrops – the prospect of earning 50 euros seals Cahal's lips. On their way back home, he runs over and kills the retarded daughter of an unmarried dressmaker. The incident haunts Cahal, and, in his mind, fear at being discovered combines with religious feelings of guilt for his dishonesty with the tourists and his sexual fantasies with the Spanish girl. He escapes the law but not the child's mother. The dressmaker knows the truth and wants Cahal as reward for her silence. Cahal visits the Virgin, offers reparation for his sins and promises to accept his fate. The story ends in an ominous tone: "Driving back, when he went by the dressmaker's blue cottage she was there in the front garden, weeding her flowerbeds. Even though she didn't look up, he wanted to go to her and knew that one day he would" (23).

In "A Perfect Relationship", a rewriting of the Pygmalion myth, Trevor's indirection is perhaps excessive. In an unequal relationship, Prosper loves Chloë while she just considers him a friend and is grateful for everything he has taught her. She abandons Prosper but then one day returns to their flat with the excuse of handing in the key she had taken away by mistake. In the final

scene, Prosper and Chloë recall and celebrate their time together but the story ends without any clear indication of whether their reconciliation is definitive. Prosper's final musings increase the reader's perplexity even further. "Men of Ireland" fails to provide convincing motives for Father Meade's behaviour. Donal Prunty may blackmail him with lies about the Father's abuses when Prunty was an altar boy. This fits his character. However, Father Meade's reasons for handing Prunty all the money in the house – a guilty conscience for the misdeeds of the Irish Catholic Church and of Ireland's priesthood – sounds untrue. It is as if Trevor himself had wanted to bring up the theme without finding a suitable fictional channel.

"Cheating at Canasta", the title story, is a moving study of tenderness and loyalty in marriage. Mallory, a middle-aged Englishman, has travelled to Venice alone to fulfil the promise made to his wife Julia, even though she has now lost her memory and does not remember exacting such promise. While having dinner alone, Mallory observes an American couple – she looking sad and discontented, both quarrelling – that provide a contrast to his and Julia's marriage. Fond of speculating about strangers, and tenderly recalling Julia's excitement at this pastime, Mallory sees the couple as "what he'd heard called Scott Fitzgerald people [...] a surface held in spite of unhappiness" (65). Mingled with his present observations, come memories of his life with Julia. He imagines what she will be doing in her confinement and evokes their games of Canasta in his visits to Julia: "'No matter what', Julia had said, aware then of what was coming, 'let's always play cards': And they did; for even with her memory gone, a little more of it each day [...] their games in the communal drawing room

were a reality her affliction still allowed. Not that there was order in their games, not that they were games at all; but still her face lit up when she found a joker or a two among her cards [...] He cheated at Canasta and she won" (62). Mallory cheats for Julia's glimpses of happiness and it is for her that he will fulfil his promise – to return to Venice and go to see again all the places they had enjoyed together. This is his way of restoring her memories to Julia.

"Cheating at Canasta" announces the thematic thread that runs through many of the stories in the collection: our endless propensity to deceive others and to deceive ourselves, for honourable reasons, for spurious ones or because that seems to be our only escape route. In this new work, some of Trevor's Irish stories – "The Dressmaker's Child", "Men of Ireland", "At Olivehill" and "Faith" – retain their unmistakably Irish flavour. Nevertheless, the reader can appreciate that, overall, Trevor has moved towards further abstraction and universality. This does not mean that he has abandoned his precise, sharp and frequently symbolic characterisations and descriptions. What it means is that, in *Cheating at Canasta*, nationality, social class or any kind of contextual factor seem to matter less. The plight of Aisling in "Bravado" or of Connie in "The Children", the feelings of Jasmin in "An Afternoon" or of Katherine in "The Room" belong to all of us. Perhaps now age has become the determining issue, with Trevor's distinctive attention to childhood and adolescence. Nevertheless, the reader will still find Trevor's recurrent preoccupation: How can we judge the ethical dimension of human behaviour when there is so much that eludes us, so much we are also guilty about?

*The Faber Book of Best New Irish Short Stories 2006-7*

ed. by David Marcus

London: Faber, 2007

312 pp. ISBN 978-0-571-23045-7

Reviewer: Elke D'hoker

## New Writing by Old(er) Writers

Ireland has always been proud of its short story tradition – and quite rightly so. If in England the big, looming presence of the novel traditionally outclassed shorter forms, in Ireland the short story has been able to flourish as a separate artistic genre. Writers as diverse as Frank O'Connor, Mary Lavin, Liam O'Flaherty and Sean O'Faolain published their best work in this form and many other great Irish writers have contributed significantly to the genre. And even though Irish writers in general seem more committed now to the form of the novel, the short story has certainly participated in Ireland's literary boom of the last two or three decades. The literary editor who played a major role in promoting this renewed attention for the short story is David Marcus. Since the 1980s he has edited and issued a steady stream of anthologies, dedicated to "new Irish writing" or "best Irish short stories" in one form or another. The latest product of his seemingly tireless zeal is *The Faber Book of Best New Irish Short Stories 2006-7*, the follow-up of a similar volume published in 2005.

Although the title promises the "new", Marcus returns in his introduction to the glorious past: from the ancient Irish tradition of *seanchai* to "some of the great Irish women writers of the past", who – in a gesture towards redressing the gender bias – receive special attention. Apart from a vague reference to the "Irish women writers of today who also write stories and novels", Marcus has nothing to say about the writings he has collected in his new anthology. If this odd silence in the introduction can still be

explained in terms of the marketability of Ireland's glorious literary past, it is far worse that this orientation towards the past also seems to have determined the selection of the short stories itself.

It is true of course that the "new" in the title does not necessarily refer to new writers. But surely, the greatest joy of reading anthologies such as this is the discovery of new voices among the more established ones? In fact it was this book's predecessor which led me to the discovery of such marvellous new Irish writers as Molly McCloskey, Claire Keegan, and Sophia Hillan and I have sought out and enjoyed all their work that came out. Sadly, however, this book has yielded no new discoveries for me. The great majority of the 24 writers published here are (more or less) well-established old hands in their fifties and sixties and only one, Emma Donoghue, is under 40 (39 to be precise). I am quite sure there is more "new" literary talent to be found in Ireland, but perhaps David Marcus is – after publishing over 30 anthologies – no longer the person best placed to find it?

As for the quality of the stories that have made their way to this collection, it is fair to say that there are a few gems, a fair number of good stories but also quite a few who fail to pass the mark. Moreover, there are some stories which do not really qualify as short stories, such as John Banville's "First Light", which turns out to be the first chapter of a new novel he is writing, and Eilis Ni Dhuihne's entertaining sketch of the Dublin art milieu in "A Literary Lunch", which reads like a try-out for the novel she has just published.

One of the true gems in this collection is Carlo Gebler's "Room 303", which describes a divorced couple's slow rapprochement as they come to grips with the death of their only son some years ago. Equally breathtaking is Joseph O'Connor's rendering of the last thoughts and conversations of a middle-aged Dubliner, whose wife has left him. The man's depression is spelled out in touchingly understated prose as he takes leave of his father and prepares for his suicide. A quite different approach towards 'the end' can be found in Mary Dorcey's "Another glorious day". It is the first-person account of a demented old lady, whose short-time memory is totally gone. At first, the reader struggles together with the narrator to make sense of her surroundings – "When I wake in the morning, if it is the morning, I don't know where I am or who I am". Yet when the situation becomes clearer – through rather absurd conversations with nurse and daughter – one comes to marvel at the spirits of the old lady whose limited life is cheered up by her remaining knowledge of poetry and songs and by her quiet enjoyment of every 'glorious day'. The great sensitivity and artistic exactness of Dorcey's story becomes all the more pronounced when it is compared with a similar first-person account of an equally disoriented woman who wakes up in a mental institution. Yet this monologue – in Mary Leland's "Waking in a Strange Place" – is more angry and artificial and somehow fails to convince. Another story I was pleased to discover here was Anne Enright's "Yesterday's Weather". It admirably captures that curious compound of tiredness and love, of tenderness and indignation of a young mother who finds her world – and relationship – turned upside down by the arrival of a new baby.

Confronted with an anthology of new writing, a reviewer is always tempted to try and trace patterns or discern new trends. However, there is little to be gained from this collection. There are some striking similarities, such as the first-person monologue in Leland's and Dorcey's stories or the melancholy tone in the stories by Anthony Glavin and Joseph O'Neill, which both feature middle-aged men looking back on their lost youth. There is also a group of stories about writing or the writing life itself: Michael Farrell's "The Written Word", Aidan Matthews' "In the Form of Fiction", Harry Clifton's "A visitor from the Future" and Eilis Ni Dhuibhne's "A Literary Lunch". Yet with the exception of the last story, these are all rather boring stories, too much enclosed within the writer's own world.

The other stories, luckily, roam more widely: from Wexford to California and from Dublin to the Baltic states. The topics addressed are of a startling variety too: from gold-digging in Yukon over dark deeds in the Dublin underworld to a struggle with dementia in Bray. It is true, there are few 'familiar' stories of sexually repressed priests (Patrick McCabe) or the tragedies of nationalism (Dermot Bolger), but on the whole this collection provides ample proof of the fact that the Irish short story has gained considerably in scope, if not always in quality, since the heydays of the 'three O's' so glorified by David Marcus.

*Ireland Beyond Boundaries: Mapping Irish Studies in the Twenty-First Century*

ed. by Liam Harte and Yvonne Whelan

London: Pluto, 2007

288 pp., ISBN 0-7453-2185-2

Reviewer: Colin Graham

When I was a first year undergraduate I took a course in anthropology which had the title ‘What is Anthropology?’ Twenty-four lectures later I knew more about Papua New Guinea than I did at the start of the year, but I was no nearer being able to answer the question of what anthropology was. And my lecturers seemed quite happy to go on asking the question in perpetuity. It took a long time to realise that this kind of meta-critical, disciplinary self-reflection is healthy, maybe even necessary to the humanities, rather than a symptom of a ponderous hesitancy. Liam Harte begins his ‘Introduction’ to *Ireland Beyond Boundaries* by suggesting that the book is an attempt at ‘meta-discursive reflection’, and he notes that it is some time now since any such institutionally-conscious, multi-disciplinary summary of Irish Studies has appeared (the 1988 book *Irish Studies: A General Introduction*, edited by Bartlett, Curtin, O’Dwyer and Ó Tuathaigh). It is hardly the case, of course, that the critical discourses by which Irish Studies functions have been blithely unexamined in that period – its major disciplinary components, literary studies and history, have both been intense in their ideological self-examinations in the intervening period. Harte’s argument is more that the nature of what Irish studies is, and, subsequently, its institutional and intellectual future, are currently open questions.

The contributors to *Ireland Beyond Boundaries* each have their own notions of what falls under the rubric of Irish studies and hence what could or should be done with it. To the editors’ credit they have collected contributions which examine the teaching and practice of Irish Studies in the US, Canada, Australia, Britain and

Ireland. It might have been interesting too to get a perspective from north, south or east continental Europe, where various concentrations of Irish studies have developed, or even South America, and in particular Brazil. The inadvertent Anglophone skewing of the academic distribution of Irish studies, which is implied by focusing on these geographical regions, is a little unfortunate. Each case study of the development of Irish Studies (Christina Hunt Mahony on the US, Michael Kenneally on Canada, Elizabeth Malcolm on Australia, Shaun Richards on Britain and Michael Brown on Ireland) sees similar patterns repeated – each note an initial flurry of activity which then begins to become reliant on the dedication of individual teachers and scholars, particularly where large endowment funding is absent. Christina Hunt Mahony’s account of Irish studies in the States is thoughtful and thought-provoking. She details the ways in which donations have flowed into a kind of ‘nostalgia gap’ in Irish-America, producing some very well-funded programmes (Boston and Notre Dame), while others have risen and then tottered with the passing of those individuals who kept them going. However, Christina Hunt Mahony’s most pressing point is the identification of a pressure in North American universities to collapse Irish studies into a more generic, global ‘diaspora studies’, a kind of minority studies-plus-mobility, and she suggests that, while such a move makes financial sense (in terms of the economies of scale) for US institutions, this would be an intellectual mistake. Certainly it would seem to have the potential effect of further re-orientating the research and teaching of Irish

Studies in the US towards something more likely to be properly labelled Irish-American Studies. Elizabeth Malcolm's account of nascent Irish Studies in Australia echoes with Michael Kenneally's discussion of the longer-established position in Canada, and both seem to parallel to an extent what Hunt Mahony sees happening in the US. In the essays by both Malcolm and Kenneally it is clear that the real vibrancy within Irish Studies in Australia and in Canada respectively has been exactly in a localised, Irish-inflected version of diaspora or migration history. While this makes sense for the institutions and scholars involved, it opens a gap between the research and teaching that is discussed in the first section of this book and the more manifesto-like essays of the second half, most of which assume a model of Irish Studies which is centred on what has and is happening on the island itself. The two parts of this book might suggest that making contemporary Ireland relevant to the diaspora and making the diaspora reconnect with contemporary Ireland will be a difficulty in the future development of Irish Studies, whatever that future may be.

A subtext to the essays in Part One, those which discuss the 'rise' of Irish Studies, is the sudden burgeoning of the discipline during the 1980s and 1990s. While in the US and Canada Irish Studies was already existent in various forms, it is not surprising, in retrospect, that interest, academic structures and finance began to appear, after a time-lag, from the beginning of the Troubles – the real time-lag was a projection forward to the end of the Troubles. It may be that in years to come it will be possible to chart a clearer line of progression which sees some of the efforts at reconciliation, or at least accommodation, in Northern Ireland as being directed, through governments and philanthropy, at the persuasive abilities of universities. Explaining the expansion of Irish Studies in the UK in the 1980s, Shaun Richards notes how slow the British academic left was to engage with the 'revolution' within their own jurisdiction, and his title, 'Our Revels Now are Ended', referring to the recent decline in Irish Studies in British universities, suggests that it may be that, in some ways, the work of Irish Studies in the UK is largely done. The

announcement in June 2007 by the British government that they were to give extra funding to Islamic studies in the UK replicates the situation which Richards describes in the 1980s and 1990s in Britain. (The British government in particular wants the money to be used to train Imams in the UK rather than, for example, Pakistan, in a twenty-first century replaying of the controversy over the Maynooth Grant in the 1840s – see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maynooth\\_Grant](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maynooth_Grant)).

If the 'end' of the Troubles, in a circuitous and unquantifiable way, might be a shadow over the future direction of Irish Studies within the structure of university programmes across the globe, it is also surely the historical moment which will question how the subject is conceived in the future. It is a common enough gesture to attribute the hoary old revisionism/nationalism debates, and their post-colonial off-shoots, to the Troubles and, from there, to arguments that taper back through history, but if these certainties are fading, what defines the future conceptual directions of Irish Studies? In his essay Conor McCarthy retraces one aspect of these critical debates, suggesting that the 'pervasive idealism' of literary and cultural criticism in Irish Studies leads to our unhappy present moment at which 'intellectual production has become more imbricated with capital than ever'. McCarthy's essay ends with a series of questions intended to redirect cultural criticism towards a new materialist critique which pays attention to economy, filiation and affiliation, and which redefines the postcolonial on these grounds. McCarthy's essay is typical of those in the second part of *Ireland Beyond Boundaries*, in that they share a general belief in the tiredness of the concepts and methods which Irish Studies has developed up to the present – naturally, the contributors offer diverse means out of this potential stasis. So Mary E. Daly offers the 'multidisciplinary', perhaps wisely eschewing the more difficult interdisciplinary, though Louise Ryan's very specific essay on 'Women, Migration and Unwanted Pregnancy' offers itself as a model for such research. Other contributors make the case for disciplines which are under-represented in Irish Studies, yet all of which would arguably put Irish Studies more in touch

with the fabric of lived society in Ireland, past and present – Mike Cronin makes an even-handed and intelligent argument for the role of sport in Irish society, never overstating its importance; Tom Inglis's essay on religion in Irish society deals with a black hole in Irish Studies, which, to its embarrassment, and particularly in its cultural criticism, has rarely understood religious identity, or indeed religious faith, as anything more than a 'theme' or marker of cultural background. Lance Pettitt's essay on 'mediascapes' moves towards a global sense of Ireland in a media marketplace, surely an inevitable development in the future of Irish Studies, given the directions which Ireland, North and South, are currently heading in. Gerry Smyth's essay on music, with its reliance on Jacques Attali's prophetic belief that the world is primarily audible rather than legible, could be said to overstate its case a little. A fine model of true inter-disciplinarity is found in the editors' own essay which interweaves geography, cultural history, literary criticism and material culture in discussing landscapes of memory in Ireland and the diaspora.

*Ireland Beyond Boundaries* suggests that, whatever Irish Studies is, it will soon not be that. What it will become will depend partly on the institutions in which it flourishes or declines, and the testing of the waters which is carried out in these essays does not entirely augur well for the relative status Irish Studies in the global university system. If that is the case, and Irish Studies has lost its sheen, then the essays here will provide useful, intelligent and lasting provocations for the new versions of Irish Studies which will emerge in the post-Troubles, post-Tiger Ireland, in which a new, sometimes enforced internationalism will also mean a renegotiation of old diasporic relationships.

*Paula Spencer*

by Roddy Doyle

London: Jonathan Cape, 2007

277 pp., ISBN: 978-0224078665, £16.99

By Pauline Hall

## Mother Courage

In one of the houses she cleans, Roddy Doyle's heroine, Paula Spencer, sees three plunger coffee pots (small, medium and large). She decides she'll get one herself, as coffee is a new and delightful sensation. In those two details, Doyle deftly establishes the setting of a newly embourgeoised Ireland, and the character, the "she" through whose eyes we see it.

Her son Jack taps her name into Google. Paula Spencer gets more hits than Thin Lizzy. Our Paula (and readers do feel close to her) has a namesake, who is, of all things, an expert on child rearing. The internet and its random immediacy brings out Paula's refreshing take on the world, at once innocent and street-smart.

Her newly constructed identity as a non-drinker is shadowed by her inescapable identity as an alcoholic and a mother with much ground, (and much guilt), to make up. Her job gives her an atypical identity: one Irish cleaner amongst the blacks and Eastern Europeans. She buys a stereo, she drinks cappuccino. Each day she struggles valiantly and humorously with new roles as a capable provider, as a free agent. "You choose" Jack tells her, as they sit at the computer she bought for him. Looking at election posters, she thinks she should be able to put up one of herself. She is emerging into a world where self-publicising is the norm.

Early 21<sup>st</sup> century Ireland is in some ways rougher, in some ways smoother, than it used to be, when Paula last looked. Doyle uses the device of a returned local, someone both bemused and in the know. We observe her as she observes the changes. Her tone conveys a wry

awareness that she is late to join the race (or is it a parade?). When did she last learn something, she wonders.

"You can't leave things behind you: they come with you." For the duration of her forty-ninth year, the timespan of the novel, a nemesis hovers, and occasionally swoops low. Like Paula herself, we can never be sure that she'll maintain her wavering hold on her job, her kids. Doyle portrays how alcoholism thickens a family atmosphere with mistrust and guilt, an atmosphere where "there's no such thing as a casual remark". She hates the hall of her house, the scene of Charlo's assaults. These have left her with ill-set bones and hopping pain. Whilst Doyle captures our sympathy for Paula, he lets us see how her emotions, too, have been warped. She is needy for the approval of those of her kids who are most wary of her, yet resents prosperous Nicola, who tries to mother her back, who alone remembers when it's her birthday. Violence, and apologies for violence, are still a pattern with Leanne, herself also an alcoholic. Both she and Paula attack each other. Braced to expect blows, Paula automatically lifts her hands to ward them off. Hard learning is still embedded in her body.

Paula's small victories are connected to becoming a consumer, a user of technology. She is starting to catch up on music that she missed the first time around, like U2. "She wants it loud." "It's Paula Spencer looking ahead". Earning her own money enlarges the permitted boundaries of her life. Yet every day brings moments of doubt and panic.

Paula, the addict, persists in judging and feeling judged, especially by her children. “They were forced to grow up”. “Mothers can’t have problems.” Yet, more deeply, she knows also that she can’t blame herself for saying yes when her husband Charlo asked her to dance the first time. He beat her, he neglected his children, and he was shot by the police after a bungled kidnapping ended in murder. She hates him, yet she still loves him, precisely for his feral power: “If he came in people would get out of his way.”

I was reminded of Coleridge’s comment that Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner*, far from having no moral (as alleged by an elderly female novelist who complained to him), actually had too much. He argued that the poem should have been altogether without moral, like the *Arabian Nights* story of the merchant who threw a date stone down a well, putting out, by ill-luck, the eye of a genie’s son. The genie rose from the well and claimed the merchant’s life. Paula’s story, too, illustrates the impossibility of knowing what chain of consequence we loosen in a moment: tossing away a date stone, firing a crossbow, or, as Paula did, stepping onto the dance floor with a sexually attractive man.

We hear and see from within Paula’s consciousness. The book’s success stems from how credibly that consciousness is rendered. At times, her actions are narrated in minute naturalistic detail. We see Paula on her own, stripping a bed, filling a kettle, walking up Grafton Street. It seems she is watching herself coping, doing skilled, confident things. Occasionally, this observation lacks sufficient distance. Indeed, to my mind, fewer name-checks on aspects of the Celtic Tiger zeitgeist would carry more impact.

The steady beat of short sentences and dialogue exchanges is punctuated by set pieces, when Paula is with others. Here Doyle shows perfect pitch: Paula in the Italian coffee shop, Paula in the van going to the rock concert, Paula and Leanne watching the televised vigil for the dying Pope John Paul II. The visit to her two sisters is particularly hilarious. Though, like them, she is a hard chew, Paula is more reflective, a witness of their raucous talk about affairs and buying overseas property. With her, we experience the irony. They are entitled to do, unthinkingly, what she may not: drink lots of wine and spend lots of money. Yet it is she who is most discounted as it were.

As for the coffee pot, the reader believes that Paula will certainly acquire one, but with her angular honesty, she’s not likely to buy into the whole bourgeois piece. In her take on men, Paula shares the earthiness of Joyce’s Molly Bloom and the bravery of O’Casey’s Juno, though she is less cynical than the one and more cynical than the other.

The question arises: What will happen? What won’t happen? Paula and the reader can’t say, and Doyle won’t. But at the end of the novel, she is moving towards autonomy, going for walks with a man she met at the bottle bank, a retired civil servant, knowledgeable about the birds of Dublin Bay. In his difference from Paula, (he belongs to an older, modest and more settled Ireland) and his resemblance, (his wife left him for another woman), lies a possibility that they can help each other to happiness.

*George Moore. Artistic Visions and Literary Worlds*

Mary Pierse (ed)

UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005

246 pp. ISBN: 978-1847180292

Reviewer William A. Johnsen

Fifteen of the eighteen chapters of this book are drawn from papers given at a conference on George Moore in March 2005 at Cork University, a very quick turnaround for revision, proofreading and book production.

Authors are both well-known and emergent Moore scholars. Adrian Frazier, author of the remarkable *George Moore 1852-1933*, begins the series by addressing the problems in the status of George Moore's work [which inevitably affects the status of those who write about him and where their work appears]. Frazier tracks the reviews of his biography, beginning with Donald Davie, which repeatedly take sides, Yeats's side of Moore, by quoting Yeats against Moore. Frazier's biography is monumental in its scholarship; he is justified in asking why it is so easy for reviewers to ignore the Moore he painstakingly recovered, for the Moore they have in their pockets.

Subsequent essays attempt to gain a proper place for Moore in the genres of fiction he practiced, the national and local cultures he fictionalized, the social issues dominant in his time, especially gender, often presenting close textual, genetic readings to trace his movements into and out of these fields.

Pierse introduces the group as beneficially international, and Munira Mutran's essay nicely marks the way Moore acts out a new world fantasy of living in London and Paris, making *Confessions of a Young Man* "a valuable document of a cultural moment," an effective basis for comparative analysis of world writers drawn to the European capitals of modernism, whether or not they knew Moore. Alberto Lázaro

reviews the history of Moore's reception in Spain during censorship, a welcome partner to customary reflections on Irish censorship of Irish writers of the same period.

Peter Christensen's *The Brook Kerith* and the Search for the Historical Jesus' is well-researched and -documented. Lucy McDiarmid amalgamates Erving Goffman, Emmanuel Levinas, and Mary Louise Pratt's 'contact zones' to set up study of face-to-face, 'small behaviors' studied in Moore's fiction, an issue which touches on Moore's own character-relations with other writers as well as his fine lifelong reflection on his fictional characters. It is here perhaps that one would think back to the origin of Moore's embattled status but also the surprising affection and respect extended to him by Manet and Zola in Paris, and Woolf in London, artists notoriously difficult to please in their companionships.

M<sup>a</sup> Elena Jaime de Pablos and Catherine Smith focus on gender, Michael O'Sullivan and Mark Llewellyn on celibacy. Ann Heilmann shows Moore's 'conceptual alignment' of the artist manqué and the female hysteric, a connection which encourages us to place Moore next to other European writers on hysteria not usually seen as kindred spirits (Strindberg's *Fadren* was completed in 1887).

There are fine genetic studies by Brendan Fleming on 'Mildred Lawson' and Christine Huguet on *Esther Waters*. Fabienne Garcier and Pádraigín Riggs write on the short story. One could hope that Toibín's recent *Mothers and Sons* will inaugurate a return to the short story and allow us to return to Moore's role in its

development. In her introduction Mary Pierse repeats Fabienne Garcier's claim that Moore was "the first Irish writer to use the signifier short story in his correspondence." (41) Neither Pierse nor Garcier date this event, contextualize it or suggest its significance. In the biographical entry at the end of the volume, we learn that Garcier's doctoral thesis was on the history of the Irish short story 1880-1960 – perhaps we will hear more from her.

Mary Pierse pulls double duty as editor and author, arguing for the political Moore on the strength of his immersion in social reality and the strength of the Deleuze/Guattari elaboration of a *littérature mineure*. Her first endnote promising to reference D/G is misplaced to the last endnote, showing the editor is also victimized by the weak copyediting found throughout the volume: typos, dropped prepositions, and missing information.

Did no one at the conference or in reading Sullivan's 'Singular Celibates: Narrative Seduction in Moore and Joyce' insist that he discuss *Dubliners*, where Joyce recognizes in Bob Doran of 'The Boarding House' "the curious

patient memory of the celibate"? Couldn't anyone along the way, beginning with the author, have edited out such sentences as "It is often said that, no matter how competent and knowledgeable the translator might be, something is always lost in translation"? Could no one find a page number in Woolf's published diaries for her persuasive and sympathetic characterization of Moore to replace 'n.p.'?

In *George Moore 1852-1933* Frazier says that R.F. Foster encouraged him to write it, but to cut no corners, leave no stone unturned. Amen. This is especially true if we need to win back attention to Moore and his work.

Get your library to buy this book; if it is not beautiful, it is sturdy, and will survive much handling. Read it. Go to the conferences. Ask strong questions. Work on Moore. Write as if you will be read minutely. Never pass a copy on with mistakes or omissions in it; don't leave it up to the editor or the press. If the deadline is tomorrow, get it done.

*Opening the Field: Irish Women, Texts and Contexts*,  
ed. Patricia Boyle Haberstroh and Christine St. Peter  
Cork: Cork University Press, 2007  
181 pp., ISBN: 978-1859184103, \$39.00; 39 euros (hb).

Reviewer: José Lanthers

Two defining moments in late twentieth-century Irish publishing history serve as springboards for the ten essays in this excellent collection: the publication of Eavan Boland's 1989 pamphlet *A Kind of Scar*, and the 1991 launch of the first three volumes of the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*. The former articulated the necessity for women to move from being the objects of poems by male writers to becoming the creators of their own representations, while the all-male editorial team of the latter notoriously underscored the urgency of the problem by largely excluding women writers, necessitating the addition of two subsequent volumes to correct the 'oversight.' Since then, developments within feminism and women's studies both in Ireland and internationally have moved the debate far beyond the issues of nation and gender raised by the Field Day controversy, and have pushed traditional binary thinking about (Irish) identity towards notions of greater multiplicity that also take into consideration class, ethnicity, etc., from different theoretical perspectives. The purpose of the editors of *Opening the Field* was to illustrate this variety of approaches within the complexity of the feminist debate. The book's title suggests both this broadening of theoretical diversity (the contributing approaches encompass psychoanalysis, lesbian studies, queer theory, materialist feminism, postmodernism, post-colonialism, and body theory), and the unearthing and reassessment of work by previously ignored women writers.

The contributors to the volume were asked to explain the value of their chosen approach and to

apply it to a text of their choice. Fittingly, given the centrality of the Field Day debacle, Gerardine Meaney's opening essay addresses her involvement in editing volumes 4 and 5 of the anthology, with emphasis on questions surrounding canon formation and change and the necessity for generating new critical paradigms. Like several of the other contributors, she begins with a personal note by sketching the scene at UCD in the early 1980s, where literature by predominantly male writers was taught by predominantly male lecturers to predominantly male graduate students. For Meaney, the discovery of French feminist theory opened an avenue to function within and against this academic structure, but also led her to recognize the need to focus the theoretical perspective according to the particularities of Irish history, and to interrogate the ways in which national Irish identity has traditionally been gendered.

The two essays that immediately follow Meaney's suggest that nineteenth-century women writers were, in their own way, questioning expectations of gender in literature and society. Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin argues that Maria Edgeworth's *Ormond* consciously echoes and challenges novels by her English predecessors Fielding and Richardson in dealing with themes of masculinity and patriarchy. By altering the standard plot surrounding the male hero in subtle but significant ways, Edgeworth situates *Ormond* within a dialogue between male and female novelists about the purpose of novel reading and writing. Heidi Hansson's article on Harriet Martin's *Canvassing* (1832) both recovers this once popular novel and reads it from the perspective of "locational feminism" as

negotiating the specific expectations placed on women by place and time. Depicting femininity as performance, Martin exposes both Irish election practices and the marriage market as equally corrupt systems, thereby making her own act of writing a form of ‘canvassing.’

Patricia Coughlan’s article on Peig Sayers’ autobiographies, and Katherine O’Donnell’s queer reading of Kate O’Brien’s *Mary Lavelle* (in which, interestingly, she takes Coughlan to task for her 1993 feminist critique of O’Brien’s novel) recover their subjects from previous, less favourable criticism. Coughlan argues against masculinist readings of Sayers that deny her full authorship and question her artistry, not only through careful assessment of the material, but by addressing and exposing traditional male-oriented expectations about genre and gender. She sees the debate about who ‘owns’ Peig and what she “means” as a reflection of the roles women are/not allowed to occupy in Ireland. O’Donnell’s argument shows that feminist readings of texts can have a heterosexist or heterocentrist bias, and focuses on the need to include lesbian and queer perspectives within feminist analysis.

The remaining articles of the collection focus on contemporary women artists. Cathy Leeney’s approach to Marina Carr’s play *Portia Coughlan* foregrounds the importance of physical performance within neorealist drama, and suggests that Carr’s manipulation of expectations about realist forms of theatre opens up a space for an examination of Portia’s pain – which Leeney reads as an articulation of the female rage of the nation – and pushes audiences towards their own act of interrogation and imagination. In her essay on contemporary interpretations of the sheela-na-gig figure by female poets and visual artists, Luz Mar González-Arias suggests the image is used to represent the embodied, speaking subject evoked by Boland in *A Kind of Scar*: a powerful sexual body that opens her lips in more ways than one. Rebecca Pelan addresses the particular way Northern Irish women have been trapped – more so even than their Southern counterparts – by the binary identity markers generated by the

‘Troubles,’ and makes the case that Northern women poets in particular have used gender as a ‘third position’ from which to interrogate existing divisions in Northern Irish society.

The collection’s concluding essays consider two different novels by Mary Morrissy. Ann Owens Weekes reads *Mother of Pearl*, published in 1996 but set in the 1950s, as a fable that warns against the dangers of denying women’s history and unquestioningly accepting gendered myths. Weekes sees the narrative as a presentation of the reality of mothering rather than the fiction of maternal desire, and hence as ultimately empowering. Anne Fogarty reflects her discussion of *The Pretender* through the ethical and aesthetic dilemmas that arise in the wake of woman’s shift from object to subject, *pace* Boland’s pamphlet: how may the female self be adequately portrayed? She shows Morrissy’s postmodernist fictionalization of the life of the Polish woman who claimed to be Anastasia, the youngest Romanov daughter, to be driven by a quest for a narrativity that can both expose and question the ways women’s lives are shaped, and an art that can override history and supplement its omissions and suppressions.

At the end of each essay, the contributors offer information about the biographical and critical contexts of each author. These sections are brief and often repeat material already introduced in the body of the essay, or else exclude artists who are not the article’s primary focus: the entry at the end of the sheela-na-gig article, for instance, focuses on Susan Connolly to the exclusion of Carmel Benson, whose painting ‘Crouching Sheela’ is used as an illustration, while the entry concluding Pelan’s essay features Ruth Carr, the editor of the *Word of Mouth Anthology*, but does not mention Medbh McGuckian, among others, whose poetry is also discussed. What was probably meant as an additional means of highlighting and discovering thus becomes itself a selective exercise. That said, *Opening the Field* is a strong collection that does important work in showing the extent to which “the field” has already been opened in fruitful ways, and pointing to places where the plough still has to go.

*Irish Writers on Writing*

ed. by Eavan Boland

San Antonio, Texas, Trinity University Press, 2007

327 pp., ISBN 978-159534032-0

Reviewer: John McDonagh

The first page of Eavan Boland's fascinating collection *Irish Writers on Writing* is a list of contributors, and it is a veritable B to Y (no As or Zs, I'm afraid!) of the great and the good of Irish writing over the past century. The list includes all of the major poets, playwrights and novelists from Yeats to Banville and Boland has to be commended for the breadth of writers included, from the canonical to the marginal, whose reflections on the process of writing vary from the self-indulgent to the comical. Boland's generous and self-effacing preface identifies what many of the contributors hint at, that Irish writing is not 'a closed canon but a living tradition' and the impression that emerges from the brief essays and excerpts is just how important writers and writing are to the Irish psyche. She notes that many of the pieces are 'quirky' and 'off the beaten track' but this only adds to the attraction of this cornucopia of passionate beliefs on the vitality and importance of writing in Ireland.

What is particularly interesting about *Irish Writers on Writing* is the sheer variety and range of opinions expressed. The collection opens, almost inevitably, with William Butler Yeats's "The Galway Plains", one of the early treatises on the nature of the development of modern Irish literature. Yeats's exhortation is the familiar call for Irish literature to be redolent more of the people than of literary pretensions and it is a call that was to be found amongst many of those involved in the literary revival of the late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and it echoes in the pieces from George Russell, Lady Gregory and John Millington Synge.

As the authors are listed chronologically by birth, a subtle change can be detected as the Free State emerges from the tumult of the War of Independence into the almost inevitable disenchantment that follows in the wake of such a crisis. For example, Brendan Behan's acerbic reminiscences of a meeting he had with Robert Smiley, the all-powerful editor of *The Irish Times*, are recalled in an excerpt from *Confessions of an Irish Rebel* and in it Behan rails against the pretentiousness and small-minded nature of the literary scene in Dublin. This resentment over the legacy of the literary revival is echoed in hilarious pieces from Myles na gCopaleen and Patrick Kavanagh in which they attack those who set themselves up as the guardians of Ireland's literary heritage. These pieces clearly highlight the fact that at all times in Ireland's literary development the dominant figures are challenged by a new generation of writers not prepared to accept either reputation or status as the sole basis for respect. Indeed, the somewhat lofty aspirations of the essays early in the book stand in contrast to the anger and sense of disenchantment that emerges in the 1950s.

The more contemporary writers in the book certainly focus on an eclectic range of topics, all loosely held together under the twin umbrellas of writing and the changing nature of contemporary Ireland. Paula Meehan, for example in a powerful poem entitled 'The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks', recalls the tragic death of Ann Lovett in Granard, Co. Longford, in 1984, after giving birth to a baby in a grotto outside the town on a cold, wintry morning in January. Lovett was only 15 and her death and the death

of her baby appeared to epitomise a society utterly ill at ease with those who stand outside the accepted social and moral order. The poem is wonderfully evocative and it highlights the crucial role played by literature in the examination of Irish society, a searing eye trained constantly at a culture imploding under the weight of its manifest inconsistencies. This is arguably the greatest legacy of Irish literature and *Irish Writers on Writing* brings this social reformation to the fore. While the aesthetic is, of course, vital in the understanding of literature, so too is the social, cultural and political context from which it emerges. The pieces by Paul Durcan and, unsurprisingly, John McGahern, re-emphasise the shifting paradigms of Irish identity as the twentieth century drew to a close.

The inclusion of Colum McCann's interview with Kate Bolick as the penultimate essay in the book appears to copper fasten the change in focus apparent in Irish literature over the decades covered by the book. McCann's perspective as a writer is certainly what one could call international, and the concerns raised by Behan and Kavanagh seem to be a world away from McCann's desire to locate a new literature

beyond the intellectual and geographical borders of Ireland. During the course of the interview McCann asks himself an interesting and salient question related to his novel set in a working-class neighbourhood of New York City: "Can you morally step into someone else's world and attempt to recreate it?" His answer is revealing; "Fuck it, I stand where I stand, I write what I write". This somewhat brash self-confidence in both self as writer and a temporal setting outside of the traditional would appear to be trademarks of contemporary Irish writers and can also be seen in the pieces from Micheal O'Siadhail and Brendan Kennelly. McCann is advocating a borderless future for Irish writing, no longer consumed by apparent hierarchies nor obsessed by what Kavanagh castigated as a frenzied parochialism. It is to Eavan Boland's great credit that her book charts the choppy seas that Irish literature has negotiated over the past 100 years in short pieces that are accessible, funny, self-effacing and enlightening. The book itself is a welcome addition to the very tradition it seeks to disentangle.

*The Gathering*

by Anne Enright

London: Jonathan Cape, 2007

272 pp. ISBN: 978-0224078733

Reviewer: Eileen O'Carroll

Members of large families scarcely recognize the story of their lives as told individually by their siblings: each family member will have lived a life entirely different except for maybe a brother or sister very close in age. Veronica Hegarty and her brother Liam were born only eleven months apart. "Sometimes I think we overlapped in there, he just left early, to wait outside." This closeness (in what is assumed to be a 'close' family), along with a genealogy of sex and emotion, is at the kernel of *The Gathering*.

The pain of the loss of her brother and her boiling rage at what led to his suicide drive Veronica a little mad herself. She lives oppositely to her husband and children, sleeping by day and doing her actual living at night. Her 'vague' mother is blamed for much, but Veronica's descent into her own kind of vagueness is almost like a genetic imprint. Anne Enright's main character mirrors much of what is distasteful about the newly rich Irish and is not very likeable when ruminating on property or the trappings of the beneficiaries of economic boom. Sometimes you feel like shouting "Cop on to yourself woman, yourself and your Saab!", much as one of her less loving siblings might, but Enright's bleak humour lets Veronica off the hook. Veronica is too canny and possesses too great a sense of the ridiculous to fully endorse her own lifestyle, and Enright manages to express what a great many of her generation feel about having struck their own seam of gold: this too will pass.

Behind the story of a sister dealing with a beloved brother's suicide is a conjectured version of what led to that final act. This story is

imagined by Veronica to begin with her maternal grandmother, Ada, and the connections she made in her voluptuous youth. The Dublin of the 1920s is wonderfully imagined, and is depicted through silences and inevitable interruptions. Imagine a time when a man could recognize the sound of a friend's approaching car in the centre of Dublin city, only to have it driven away in the opposite direction: "Nugent cocks an ear after the escaping motor. There is a pause as the engine fades, and then the silence starts to spread. It seeps into the foyer of the Belvedere; the distant rustle of streets turning over from day into evening, as the night deepens and the drinking begins – elsewhere." Reading the account of Ada's first meeting with Nugent is like being one of a group held hostage: tension and fear stalk you, and every tick of the clock seems to hasten an inevitable tragedy, the victim of which is as yet unknown.

Anne Enright's descriptions of happenings from childhood are translations of child-life, both funny and intensely scary. When Liam, Kitty and Veronica trespass in the bus station Veronica is caught by a busman on top of a double decker: "... inside there was the sound of a man on the stairs, and the sight of his hand on the chrome rail as he hauled himself up, step by step, his torso finally rising out of the stairwell like an expanding balloon. ... He walked this stomach down the aisle at me, as I backed away, until I was tripped into sitting by the back seat of the bus. Then he pushed it at me – and even though I doubt all this can be strictly true, I do remember the surprising tautness and bounce of it, as he jabbed at my face with its leading white

button...” Such episodes recall her 2004 work of non-fiction, *Making Babies*; Enright’s meditations on children and their particular logics have added hugely to her portrayal of the child mind in *The Gathering*. These are some of the most amazingly written parts of the book, the whole of which is an exercise in the catching of thoughts before they recede to unconsciousness.

As an entity the Hegartys are a durable, stout-hearted lot (“The Hegartys didn’t start kissing until the late eighties and even then we stuck to Christmas.”), as fine an Irish family as you will get, but they are of course soaked with individual failings and petty competitiveness. The ‘gathering’ is Liam’s wake, a set-piece with its

list of types (another alcoholic, the sane one, a lapsed priest etc), bitchiness, the need for drink and the unavoidable merriment. ‘Truth’ is in the air, but is sidestepped where possible. Veronica still connects with Liam and adopts his mannerisms and partly fulfils his role, while his body lies in the other room. Sex and death commingle but at the funeral a surprise redemption is issued forth.

A deserving winner of the 2007 Man Booker Prize, Anne Enright has gone to the dark core of the family and has revelled in it.

*That Neutral Island: A Cultural History of Ireland During the Second World War*

by Claire Wills

London: Faber and Faber, 2007

496 pp. ISBN: 978-0571221066

Reviewer: Emilie Pine

To read Clair Wills's cultural history of Ireland during the Second World War, *That Neutral Island*, is a rare pleasure. With a depth of research and understanding and a lightness of touch, Wills creates a multi-layered picture of the realities of living in a neutral country that was "both in and not in the war".

What is clear from the outset is that neutrality is not a simple term with a single meaning. Though the decision to keep Ireland neutral was primarily a pragmatic one, the interpretation of, and attitude towards, neutrality shifted over the course of the war, both within Ireland and outside it. At the opening of the war, both Britain and the United States were sympathetic to the Irish decision to pledge neutrality, considering the weakness of the Irish army and the general sense, in the media at least, that Ireland was "backing Britain to the best of her ability". Yet as the war progressed and the Irish ports became vital to the war at sea, British attitudes changed until, at the end of the war, Churchill implicitly cast Ireland in a collaborationist role. The same pattern is traced by Wills in terms of US attitudes. At first, of course, the US itself was also out of the war but as it too entered the war, post Pearl Harbour, enormous pressure came to bear on the Irish government to give up its neutrality. Yet, while there were plenty of demurring voices, what did not shift over the course of six years was the support of Irish neutrality by the majority of Irish adults, reflected in De Valera's huge electoral win in 1944.

Neutrality certainly did not mean that Ireland was immune to the effects of war. As Wills

points out, there were many Irish volunteers in the British army, in addition to the thousands of Irish workers in British factories and cities. Indeed, though the figures are difficult to interpret, Wills estimates that one sixth of the Irish workforce was employed in Britain during the war. At home, though the emphasis on self-sufficiency in the 1930s had in some ways prepared the country for the depleted circumstances it found itself in from 1940 on, the severe shortages of food, coal, batteries, rubber and, perhaps most importantly, of tea, meant that in many ways Ireland was suffering the same, if not worse, material deprivations as Britain. While many contemporary visitors' accounts conjure up the banquets and blazing lights of Dublin, Wills tempers these with accounts of the poverty and hardship of the majority, revealing the nineteenth-century standards of living that many Irish were reduced to. Though the government might counsel frugality and *Ireland's Own* publish imaginative recipes for countering the shortages of flour with Indian meal (associated, of course, with the Famine), there was no way round the fact that many people in rural areas were close to starvation.

The balance of Wills's account is due to the inclusive nature of her source material, from official reports and archives to local and national media; many of the illustrations are adverts or cartoons from Irish and British papers, lending each chapter a real sense of the texture of the time. In addition, Wills accesses the subjective side of history with not only personal letters and diaries, but also by including the creative writing and art of the period. Through drama, poetry and

fiction Wills attempts to “give word to the silent majority”. This strategy pays off not merely in terms of referencing well-known works such as Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Heat of the Day*, but also by giving these works a new and broader context, and this comes through particularly strongly in her readings of Patrick Kavanagh’s epic poem ‘The Great Hunger’ and Máirtín Ó Cadhain’s novel *Cré na Cille* as works expressing a country deeply inflected by war and entrenched in neutrality.

It is through the wide-ranging consideration of the role of imaginative literature that Wills brings into focus the debate over Ireland’s intellectual stasis – or paralysis – during the war. For here lies a crucial paradox; while on the one hand, Ireland was cut off from the rest of Europe and writers suffered under the tyranny of war-time censorship, at the same time there was a vibrant internal dialogue about literature and art going on in the country, not least because of the influx of writers and artists from Ireland and elsewhere, fleeing the war. This intellectual and artistic debate was also far from monolithic, varying from the liberal, Euro-centric *The Bell* edited by Sean O’Faolain to the

Catholic philosophy of *The Capuchin Annual* discussion group which, as Wills tells us, met in the Ritz Café. It is this level of detail that makes this book exceptional and gives the reader both an engaging and a learned view of the period. Wills is also determined to be as true to the specifics as possible, from pointing out anomalies in contemporary accounts, to giving the reader an insight into the range of interpretations of different versions. In this, Wills exposes the process of history making itself.

Perhaps the most notorious image of Ireland’s neutrality is of De Valera visiting the German embassy to deliver his condolences on the death of Hitler. As Wills states “Allied attempts to discredit de Valera paled in comparison to this.” Yet this is far from being the central image of the book; instead readers are given a nuanced reading of a period in which the meanings of neutrality veered from nobility to insularity and, overall, were based on practicality. This is a brilliant and erudite study, yet also a human one, as Wills weaves a complex history of the “edgy experience” of Ireland during the ‘Emergency’.

*The Cambridge Companion to the Irish Novel*

ed. by John Wilson Foster

Cambridge University Press, 2006, 286pp

ISBN: 9780521679961 (paperback) £17.99

ISBN: 9780521861915 (hardback), £45.00

Reviewer: Gerry Smyth

The latest volume in an Irish strand of the extensive 'Cambridge Companions' series follows fairly predictable titles on Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, W.B. Yeats, George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, twentieth-century Irish drama, contemporary Irish poetry, and modern Irish culture - all beautifully produced by one of the world's leading university presses and all edited to a high standard by a variety of the great and the good. The volume represents a welcome recognition that the novel - once the poor relation amongst Irish literary genres - has arrived (although it remains the case that poetry and drama continue to rule the roost - in view of which it might not be long before we see dedicated *Companions* to the likes of Heaney, Friel and Muldoon).

The 'Companion' is a strange critical beast. The commendable intention would appear to be to delineate a certain field or subject for student use and to introduce the principal debates attending that field or subject. The guiding criterion informing this scholarly mode seems to be non-evaluative coverage rather than thesis-led intervention, in which sense the 'Companion' contribution differs markedly from the monograph, the journal article and the essay collection. Of course, no intervention can eschew 'interest' entirely, and therein lies a general issue concerning the nature of criticism as well as a specific editorial dilemma.

After a useful Chronology, this volume commences with a sympathetic introduction by John Wilson Foster who discusses the evolution of the novel within an Irish cultural framework. In a gesture that will recur throughout the volume, the editor immediately remarks the influence of the British tradition. The constant presence of the larger island to the east was once an influence upon more or less everything in Irish life, including literary as well as political representation. It has not proved possible to say whether a change in perspective lessened that influence, or whether waning influence occasioned a change in perspective. Most commentators are content with noting that change occurred, and that this change enabled new forms of Irish literature (including fiction) to emerge.

The volume does not exactly conform to the familiar pre- / post-Joyce structure which has tended to dominate accounts of the Irish novel since the mid-twentieth century. Chapters on the Big House, the Catholic novel, modernism, regionalism, the novel in Irish, and women novelists actually straddle Joyce's active career. Nevertheless, the presence of the great man remains difficult to avoid. Bruce Stewart's astute chapter on Joyce is number seven of fourteen here, and this (approximate) numerical centrality is indicative not only of the critical temporality connoted by the Irish novel, but of Joyce's continuing impact upon both the formal and the conceptual development of this particular tradition.

The latter part of the collection features a star turn by Terence Brown on Samuel Beckett and Flann O'Brien, and a consideration of 'the Northern Troubles' by Elmer Kennedy-Andrews with particular emphasis on the period since 1969. There is also a welcome chapter on 'Life-writing in the twentieth century' by Elizabeth Grubgeld which acknowledges the constant and ineluctable interaction between biography, autobiography and the novel in Irish literary history (to which list some might like to add historiography). The novel's function as a literary form specifically equipped to register change is revealed in Eve Patten's final chapter on 'Contemporary Irish fiction'.

There are no great surprises in the contents list, then. The volume fulfils its aims (stated on the back cover) to provide "the perfect overview for students of the Irish novel from the romances of the seventeenth century to the present day". As the term suggests, however, any 'overview' is going to reflect the perspective of the viewing subject(s), and more particularly of the editor who recruits the contributors and is responsible for the overall ideological slant of the volume.

In this respect it is interesting to note both the frequency and the context of references to certain concepts and persons, as well as (and perhaps more revealingly) the absence of any extended engagement with certain other concepts and persons. For example, besides one reference in the introduction, the term 'colonialism (colonisation)' features in the main body of five of the fourteen essays and in a footnote in one other. One of the leading contemporary theorists of colonialism's impact upon the evolution of the Irish novel, David Lloyd, merits three mentions. Some of the other figures whose work was implicated in the theory wars of the immediately preceding generation (Deane, Eagleton, Gibbons,

Kiberd, for example) are invoked, although not in any extended or systematic way. There is no mention in any of the contributions of leading postcolonial critics such as Edward W. Said or Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, nor of the post-structuralist theorists (such as Derrida and Foucault) who inspired them. Most tellingly, there is no mention of influential figures such as Mikhail Bakhtin, Fredric Jameson and Wolfgang Iser who between them have provided much of the scholarly framework within which modern criticism of the novel has developed.

It is always annoying when people overlook what you *did* say in order to point out what you didn't. That is the respondent's stock in trade, of course, and it applies to critical endeavours ranging from the most modest undergraduate essay to the most ambitious scholarly publication. Obviously, *The Cambridge Companion to the Irish Novel* is located towards the latter end of that continuum, and just as obviously it is a successful and coherent volume when considered in terms of the criteria by which scholarly work in the humanities is valued. It is always worth remembering, however, that the 'coherence' of any text is always achieved at the expense of other ways of seeing, and that the 'success' of any text is always dependent in large part upon a range of non-textual criteria. In this instance, it is particularly important to point out that the seemingly neutral designation 'companion' belies this volume's status as an intervention in ongoing debates - the nuances and implications of which not all of the target audience may be fully aware.

*The Cambridge Companion to the Irish Novel* includes a typically brilliant intervention entitled 'The Gothic novel' by the late Siobhán Kilfeather who died on 7 April 2007 in Belfast after a short illness.

*Collected Poems*

by Michael Longley

North Carolina, U.S.A./London: Wake Forest University Press/ Cape, 2007

368 pp. ISBN: 978-1-930630-31-4 paperback \$18.95/ £15.00

Reviewer: Meg Tyler

What T.S. Eliot said in defense of how few poems he wrote each year is relevant when thinking about Michael Longley's versions of poems and passages from antiquity: "They should be perfect in their kind and each should be an event." Instead of seeming remote, Longley's free translations offer lines that are strikingly pertinent today: "Who was responsible for the very first arms deal – /The man of iron who thought of marketing the sword?" (from "Peace," 1979). "Peace" is a rendering of poem ten from "Liber I" by Tibullus, a first-century B.C. Roman poet and elegist. And the question he poses at the poem's outset reverberates darkly two millennia later. The Latin original stands as a rejection of war and a diatribe against the misuse of the power. Longley's translation, which contains no ornamental exposition and no moralizing additives, is faithful to Tibullus' intent and impulses. His decision to stay as close to the original as possible epitomizes the kind of selective, subtle and significant work he does. Bringing past insights to bear on present circumstance, one cannot help but conclude how little we have evolved, in human terms. In an era of the ubiquitous screen, symbol of the media's invasion of our lives, the words of "Peace" hit a nerve: "I would like to have been alive in the good old days/ Before the horrors of modern warfare and warcries/ Stepping up my pulse rate." Through his revisiting of ancient texts, Longley has found an emphatic if oblique voice to speak to twenty-first century tragedy. His *Collected Poems*, for this reason if no other, will make a mark on the landscape of contemporary verse.

The rendering of passages from Greek and Roman poems are not solely responsible for making this collection stand out. His early volumes – *No Continuing City* (1969), *An Exploded View* (1973) – reveal the poet taking pleasure in matching sounds, in experimenting formally with rhyme, enjambment and stanza shape. In "Letters," we see a harmonious depiction of elements of the Irish landscape that finds complement in end-rhyme pairs: "Now that the distant islands rise/ Out of the corners of my eyes/ And the imagination fills/ Bog-meadow and surrounding hills." His use of rhyme is less pronounced in later books, but, as Fran Brearton claims, "Longley has said he would 'like every line in the last book to rhyme, as in [his first book] *No Continuing City*,' thus bringing him full circle." More recent volumes – *Gorse Fires* (1991), *The Ghost Orchid* (1996), *The Weather in Japan* (2000) and *Snow Water* (2004) – illustrate an increasing interest in a haiku-like utterance, the impact of a symbol or two, less exposition, and more taut meditative verse. Not uncommon are four-line poems, such as the 1991 "Insomnia":

I could find my way to either lake at this late hour  
Sleepwalking after the night-alarms of whooper  
swans.

If I get to sleep, the otter I have been waiting for  
Will surface in the estuary near the stepping stones.

This short poem typifies the way Longley's imagination works over and finds sustenance in images from the natural world. Note how his rhymes have softened ('hour' and 'for,' 'swans' and 'stones'). While his lyrics become increasingly suggestive as the years pass, his

allegiance to the works of antiquity does not diminish. A third of *The Ghost Orchid* contains versions or free translations of passages from Homer and sections of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

His almost always brief lyrics gather force when we can trace the development of certain themes – the flora and fauna of Ireland, stories and scenes from antiquity, World War One soldiers and their poetry – over forty years. Arranged chronologically, *Collected Poems* contains all but nine poems from Longley's eight volumes (and includes a selection of sixteen poems from 1985). His work has deservedly garnered the T.S. Eliot and Hawthornden Prizes, among others. Longley claims that his study of ancient Greek and Latin verse taught him about "the power of the sentence: how you can release energy by measuring the sentence against the metrical unit and that you can build up enormous pressure if you keep the sentence going on for some time." "Ceasefire," which was published in the *Irish Times* around the time of the first IRA ceasefire in Northern Ireland in 1994, illustrates how Longley thinks about syntax and the pressure it exerts against the measured poetic line. The poem is more or less a Shakespearean sonnet divided into four parts, each separated by a Roman numeral. The lines, however, are not pentameters but are twelve syllables long (approximating Homer's hexameters) and contain iambic cadences. This Homeric passage condensed into a sonnet closes with an unrelenting downward pull of rhyme that mimics the action described: "I get down on my knees and do what must be done/ And kiss Achilles' hand, the killer of my son."

"War and Peace" from the 2004 *Snow Water* renders a dramatic scene from Book 22 of *The Iliad*, in which Achilles hunts down Hector, chasing him three times around the walls of the city; the sonnet's sestet imagines what the same path was used for in peaceful times, "before the Greek soldiers came to Troy." Longley condenses eighteen lines of the original into fourteen; the poem begins:

Achilles hunts down Hector like a Sparrow-  
hawk  
Screeching after a horror-struck collared-dove

That flails just in front of her executioner, so  
Hector strains under the walls of Troy to stay alive.

In this first complete sentence, Longley eschews any overt rhyming patterns, although there is an off-rhyme link in '-dove' and 'alive.' He relies instead upon occult rhyme to stitch the lines together. Note the repeated vowel pattern in 'horror-struck collard dove,' and the use of consonance (for example, the 'h' sound in 'hunts,' 'Hector,' 'hawk,' 'screeching,' and 'horror,') followed by the alliterative 'flails in front.' In this two-sentence-long sonnet, the lines extend to hexameters and half of them begin with strong stresses; trochees seem appropriate for a poem about chase, as trochaic ('running') meter lends itself to rapid movement. Longley builds on the momentum of compounding subordinate clauses, one on top of the other, for mimetic effect – a movement as relentless and undisturbed as Achilles' hunting of Hector. After describing Hector's struggle to stay alive, Longley punctuates the close of the first quatrain with a full-stop, which spells out the warrior's fate.

In *Reading Michael Longley*, Fran Brearton remarks that "darkness is embedded in [*Snow Water's*] return to that most traditional of forms, the sonnet," and quotes Robert Bly who suggested that 'the sonnet is where old professors go to die,' as if use of the form signals enervation, a lack of interest in experimentation. Longley's use of the sonnet is similar to his use of Homeric and other ancient tales. Clearly, by bringing a Homeric tale into a twenty-first century book of poetry, Longley wants to emphasize the immediacy of the seemingly remote literary past. By blatantly avoiding end rhyme, Longley may want to accentuate the ways the formal properties of a poem like a sonnet might "strain under the walls of Troy to stay alive." His *Collected Poems*, connected as they are to the poetry of the past, illustrate his consciousness not of what is dead but what is still living, and the lessons that, as urgently as in Homer's time, have yet to be learned.

#### Work Cited

Brearton, Fran. 2006. *Reading Michael Longley*. Bloodaxe Books