
IRISH STUDIES ROUND THE WORLD - 2015

Patricia A. Lynch (ed.)

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Reflections on Irish Writing in 2015

Irish Studies has continued to flourish in 2015 through to 2016, a time when the economic recession in Ireland has abated slightly, while in common with the preceding years cultural productions have remained indomitable and true. "Yeats 150" celebrated a series of productions and events based on the works of W. B. Yeats a

century and a half after the birth of the poet. At Duchas.ie, the Irish Schools' Folklore Collection of 1938 is beginning to be made available online. More material on the Famine of the 1840s is coming through continually, while modern famines and hardship such as that in Syria have received worldwide attention; ships

of the Irish Navy are among those rescuing migrants from overcrowded boats and the sea. Prominent authors have won honours, for example Anne Enright being the first Irish Laureate for Fiction. Irish Book Awards 2015 have honoured authors such as Donal Ryan for a book of short stories, *A Slanting of the Sun*, as well as Anne Enright's novel *The Green Road*, and newer writers for both fiction and non-fiction. At the age of 84 Edna O'Brien has published her most recent novel *The Little Red Chairs*, discussed in the reviews below. Colm Tóibín's novel *Brooklyn* has been screened as a film with young Irish star Saoirse Ronan in the leading role, and at the present moment has been nominated for three Oscars, while Emma Donoghue's novel *Room* with screenplay by the author herself, is nominated for no less than four. This helps to compensate in part for the loss of Maureen O'Hara, star of the film classic *The Quiet Man*, who has died in recent months. In the field of theatre we have lost a master, the incomparable Brian Friel, who together with Seamus Heaney formed two giants of contemporary Irish literature. Just this morning, January 31, has come the news of the death of Terry Wogan, the famous Irish-born British-based broadcasting presenter, whose voice and personality has brought such distinction to all things Irish at home and abroad. These are our losses.

This period has been designated the decade of centenaries of events in Ireland and the wider world, and 2016 especially will commemorate the events which led to Ireland achieving independence. In this regard, let me quote from John O'Callaghan writing below about Irish literature of the First World War but which is also applicable to literature about the Easter Rising: "A tension emerges between the will to deny distress and the will to confront it openly. The private and public spheres of memory are also often disconnected and fragmented – memory can be personal as well as political. For every officially sanctioned state commemoration, there will be an enduring dissident version". Examples of these statements can be seen in the works named below.

As part of this commemoration many books have been published in recent years, for example, there is a series of titles based on each of the 16 leaders executed in 1916. George Morrison's *Mise Éire*, a film history of the events to the music of Seán Ó Riada, first made in 1959, is to be remade this year, and the new musical version was premiered this month at the National Concert Hall in Dublin. Other less prominent facets have been covered, for example the deaths of young people that Easter in Joe Duffy's factual book *Children of the Rising*. The Abbey Theatre in Dublin announced last November its programme of plays for 2016, "Waking the Rising"; of the ten plays to be staged, only one was by a female writer. This led to an outcry by female authors; the series of protests had as their title "Waking the Feminists", the first word of which has the sense not so much of an awakening as the mourning vigil before a funeral. These Sunday nights of January have also seen us glued to the screen as we watch the TV drama *Rebellion*. This is a creative interpretation of the events of the Rising which form the background for a new drama in which young people, especially women, respond to the events individually.

Of the reviews in this 11th issue of *Estudios Irlandeses*, two have to do with events of the centenaries, two are assessments of contemporary Irishwomen's writing, and one looks at a work of fiction by a twenty-first century novelist who is radical and innovative. In this vein, I include here my review of *The Mark and the Void* by Paul Murray, also a young twenty-first century novelist.

The title of this novel is composed of a type of binary; the front cover too depicts a series of coloured marks against a blank white background, in a way reminiscent of the lethal crayoning of the child Remington onto surfaces allowed and definitely prohibited! The concept is used cleverly in other ways: the narrator Claude is the mark through which other characters hope to rob the bank; it is the title of a very expensive and obscure painting composed of words put onto a blank canvas, it represents the hurricane expansion of banking into a void,

at the eye of which stand the main characters, the marks (2015: 85). One could continue in this vein but the general idea is sufficient here. This is a very funny novel but the humour is at times so bleak that it seems weighed down by the overwhelming voids and the powerlessness of the marks. As in his previous novel *Skippy Dies* (2010), Murray uses as geographic area a microscopic part of Dublin, and in both novels this mini-Dublin is a world in itself to its denizens. It is not surprising that the population of two adjoining schools and their immediate environs (*Skippy*) should be so limited, but the world of Irish banking is more surprising, given its international ramifications and the fact that the bankers are composed of many different nationalities. However the nature of their work and its twenty-four-seven demands have turned these individuals into ciphers with shared opinions and actions; they are always dressed the same, even on so-called Casual Days, and they spend all of their free waking time together in a limited set of hostelrys close by. Satire of Irish banks and international banking in general is profound, and real-life characters and institutions can easily be discerned. There is an undertone of violence which finds its vents in the expressed sentiments of the traders, the minor devils of this piece, and it finds an outlet occasionally in physical form in the nightclub. These establishments corrupt the minor characters who happen to be poor women from developing countries. Banking itself forces characters like Claude who are basically people of good intent into ruthless employees of the main devil, which is the banking system. Into this almost medieval morality play, Claude is represented as Everyman subject to pressures both good and bad. Moments of farce occur often however to lift the mood as Claude in particular does so many foolish things, resulting in scenarios which seem to demand a film starring Adam Sandler to do the comedy justice. These usually involve the novelist character, interestingly called Paul, his Russian henchman and his little son.

To a large extent, this is a work of metafiction.

All through, the novel is life while life itself is seen as a novel. Paul's supposed novel is to feature Claude as a banking Everyman, and the bankers are excited at the prospect of being immortalised in fiction; Paul's handwritten notes prompt Claude to think: "For the first time it strikes me: we are being *narrated*" (48). The bankers themselves undertake a critique of Paul's previous novel: "I suppose the thing to remember is that it is only a book. Not real life" (2015: 103). The author's idea that as Everyman Claude might fall in love with an exotic waitress actually comes to pass as the result of his suggestion, and Claude wants Paul to help him "plot that story" (163); Claude also believes that Paul's activity in doing this will steer the author back to writing a novel. Paul however believes that his website of attractive waitresses is the natural replacement for fiction: "It's like your own personalized, never-ending novel" (295). The book deals also with tropes such as writers' block, authorial jealousy, literary patrons and harsh reviewers. At the end, Claude narrates the events which have happened to him as the plot of a potential novel.

A case could also be made for seeing this as a love story or stories, that of Paul and his wife Clizia, and Claude with the exotic Greek waitress Ariadne. It is clear that his Australian colleague Ish has feelings for Claude, but he is too blind to see it. He sees her in a brotherly light and looks after her welfare, while in turn she sacrifices her career to save that of Claude. In the end the lovers are all reconciled except Ish, who will leave banking and return to its antithesis, the Pacific islanders who live by a system of gifts and common ownership. Meanwhile the banking machine grinds on, carrying with it its complicit employees.

To conclude, this is my sixth and last year as reviews editor for "Irish Studies Round the World", a task that was very congenial, and for which I am so grateful to the General Editor Rosa Gonzalez, to the editorial committee and also to the wider membership of AEDEI. It would not have been possible without the work of so many reviewers not only in Ireland and

Spain but all over the world. Let me end by thanking most sincerely those academics who contributed their assessments of one or more books to “Irish Studies Round the World” in *Estudios Irlandeses*. Their names, in alphabetical order, are: Malcolm W. Ballin, Brian G. Caraher, Viviane Carvalho da Anunciação, Tim Conley, Mairéad Conneely, Eilís Ní Dhuibhne, John Eastlake, Eoin Flannery, Gisele Giandoni Wolkoff, Irene Gilsenan Nordin, Luz Mar González-Arias, Maureen Hawkins, Colin Ireland, William A.

Johnsen, Sean Kennedy, Declan Kiberd, Beatriz Kopschitz Bastos, Eamon Maher, Alfred Markey, Karen Marguerite Moloney, Marisol Morales-Ladrón, Edward Moxon-Browne, Tony Murray, John L. Murphy, John O’Callaghan, Patrick J. O’Connor, Riana O’Dwyer, Tina O’Toole, Jonathan Owen, Manuela Palacios, Keith Payne, Martine Pelletier, Louise Sheridan, Gerry Smyth, and Meg Tyler. Your work endures so long as *Estudios Irlandeses* will continue to be read, into the indefinite future.

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Míorúilt an Pharóiste: Aistí ar fhilíocht Mháire Mhac an tSaoi

Louis de Paor (ed.)

Connemara: Cló Iar-Chonnacht (CIC), 2014

ISBN: 978-1-78444-103-6

246 pages. €12. Paperback

Reviewer: **Mairéad Conneely**

Máire Mhac an tSaoi is Ireland's greatest living Irish-language poet. Now in her 93rd year, she is, as she makes clear in her autobiography, "The Same Age as the State" (O'Brien Press, 2003), her gift for capturing the vitality of everyday life remains potent. In 2011 Cló Iar-Chonnacht issued a beautiful collection of Máire Mhac an tSaoi's poetry, in both original Irish and with translations from Biddy Jenkinson, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, Louis de Paor and others: in the collection's foreword, the poet thanks her translators, her "hoped-for readership" and also "the wonderful medium I was privileged as a child to absorb, the Irish language of Corca Dhuibhne" (*An Paróiste Míorúlteach*, 2011: 13). She goes on to make clear that her "poetry is a journal [...] [and that] writing verse is an addiction, a rewarding one" (2011: *ibid.*). We should be grateful also: we are privileged to gain insights into her life and her loves. She helps us to better understand ourselves and each other. She has long been credited with a mastery of both form and language, but it is her handling of the ordinary that makes her work extraordinary. She is a powerfully emotional and emotive poet; Máire Mhac an tSaoi's poetry matters. She is one of the most sustaining voices for the female experience in Irish poetry and, in clearing a path for others, could be said to be the foremother of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Eavan Boland, Dairena Ní Chinnéide and Eithne Strong, amongst others.

It is often a great pleasure to read a collection of essays: so many perspectives to unearth, so many ideas to reflect on. Bilingual collections, though few and far between, can challenge the reader, refresh the discourse around the subject

matter and provoke ample discussion. *Míorúilt an Pharóiste* is that rare thing: a bilingual collection of essays on Máire Mhac an tSaoi's poetry, beautifully presented, with contributions from scholars and poetry critics alike. I might mention the cover art, a copy of a painting by Anne Yeats, entitled "One Room". It subtly resonates what Máire Mhac an tSaoi writes about: finding inspiration in the everyday. It could speak to Woolf's "a room of one's own", perhaps, and springs forward to Máire's "Cré na mná tí/The housewife's credo" (*An Paróiste Míorúlteach*, 2011: 130-1) where she urges the good housewife to keep the home neat and tidy, well-stocked and prepared, but not to forget her duty to, and need for, poetry.

There is, however, nothing mundane about her work, and this is quite clear from the range of essays presented in this fine volume. Máirín Nic Eoin's insightful essay examines the honesty of the poetry and the relationships characterised therein. Nic Eoin looks at the poetic wealth of Máire's relationships with her adoptive children and her step-daughters, and teases out the role of the mother and the grandmother in the poetic tradition. Giving a voice to women who were not biological mothers was revolutionary in its day, while step-mothers were seen but not heard. Nic Eoin deftly demonstrates the transformative impact of Máire Mhac an tSaoi's acceptance – "Féach, a Chonchúir, ár mac/Look, Conor, our son" ("Codladh an ghaiscígh/Hero sleeps") – of her evolving role as mother and stepmother. Nic Eoin further examines Máire Mhac an tSaoi's approach to the roles of mother-as-housewife and housewife-as-poet: her respect for both roles

underpins much of what Máire Mhac an tSaoi espouses in her writing. For Máire, to neglect one would be to neglect both.

If motherhood can be a transformative experience, time and memory can be transformative forces also. Ríona Ní Fhrighil's essay looks at the many ways in which the past has influenced Máire's poetry and prose, and analyses the poet's insistence that we learn from the past. In Máire Mhac an tSaoi's recent poem "Ceann bliana / one year after", which commemorates the first anniversary of her husband's death, she speaks of arranging her memories in order to prepare for her own passing. Her sense of duty to history and her personal resilience is a rich literary source. Ní Fhrighil's conception of memory as both personal and public provides a valuable framework for reading Máire Mhac an tSaoi. Her tracing of Máire's memories, and the poet's concern with memory itself, is comprehensive and thoughtfully presented: it reminds the reader of the scope of the poet's work and of the importance of the poet's presentation and commemoration of Irish life and her place in Irish society.

What makes this collection even richer is that it publishes, alongside the essays, contemporaneous reviews of Máire Mhac an tSaoi's poetry, from John Jordan's *Irish Times* piece (1957),

and Seán Ó Tuama's review of the same year, as *Gaeilge* [in Irish], back to Dónall Ó Corcora's work from 1953. It is remarkable to see them thus presented – they captured so much of what was originally fresh and challenging about Máire Mhac an tSaoi's poetry. Time has not dulled their impact. Words like "exciting", "personal", 'luachmhar / valuable' spring up throughout and mirror so much of what is put forth in the collection's other contributions. Mícheál Mac Craith's essay on Máire Mhac an tSaoi's autobiography brings the collection together by using the poet's own words and thoughts to illuminate some of her lesser-read poetry. Mac Craith makes the point that because Máire Mhac an tSaoi's autobiography was written in English, English-language reviewers paid little or no heed to the poet's literary life or contribution, concentrating instead on political personalities and the events which history surveyed. This and other essays go a long way towards righting that wrong, and this collection gives us new, exciting and challenging ways in which to think about Máire Mhac an tSaoi's poetry and in which to view her contribution to poetry and the Irish language. This book makes for an excellent teaching and research resource, but it is primarily a book for anyone who loves Máire Mhac an tSaoi's poetry.

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

The Little Red Chairs

Edna O'Brien

London: Faber & Faber, 2015

ISBN 978-0-571-31629-8

299 pages. €14.99. Paperback

Reviewer: **Irene Gilsenan Nordin**

Edna O'Brien's latest book, her first novel in a decade, is a compelling account of love, intrigue, evil and violence. It tells the story of what happens in a rural Irish setting, the village of Cloonoila, when a fascinating stranger, charismatic and charming, who turns out to be a fugitive war criminal from the Balkans masquerading as a faith healer, arrives on the scene. In the very first lines of the novel, the reader is introduced to the mood of dark foreboding that gives the novel its intriguing momentum with the description of the river that flows through the quiet hamlet, a recurrent metaphor of the force of nature that runs throughout the novel: "the current, swift and dangerous, surges with a manic glee, chunks of wood and logs of ice borne along in its trail." It is a cold winter's evening, with the melting ice drips, icicles, "bluish in that frosted night" (3), and the stranger, "bearded and in a long dark coat and white gloves," stands mesmerised looking down into the roaring current. He subsequently enters the village pub, where he introduces himself as Dr Vladimir Dragan, "Healer and Sex Therapist" from Montenegro, and tells the barman, "A woman brought me here." Word soon spreads of the mysterious newcomer who arouses great interest, and many of the inhabitants fall under his spell: Dara, the young barman with "the hair spiked and plastered with gel" (4); Mona, the owner of the pub, longing for a bit of romance (13); Dante, the bodhran player; and Fifi, the lonely widow, "'a dried-up old bird' from all that sunshine in Australia" (15). The young priest, Fr Damien, in brown sandals and cassock, new to the parish, having been recalled home suddenly from his work in the slums of Leeds and Manchester, to

minister to the spiritual needs of the inhabitants of Cloonoila, expresses the existential longing on the part of his new parishioners: "many feel a vacuum in their lives . . . marriages losing their mojo . . . internet dating . . . nudity . . . hedonism . . ." (25). This is a longing that the stranger soon sets about fulfilling.

The character of "Dr Vlad," or Vlad, as he is later called, has close parallels with the story of the "Butcher of Bosnia", Radovan Karadzic, who in 2008 was finally arrested for his war crimes, having been hiding in Belgrade and Vienna, specialising in alternative medicine and psychology. Transported into an Irish – very typical O'Brien – landscape, "Dr Vlad" opens his clinic, "Holistic Healing in Eastern and Western Disciplines," without fanfare, and certainly no photographs, since – as he explains – a person's soul is stolen by the influence of a camera. His first client is the charity-worker, Sister Bonaventure, brave enough to be his guinea pig, since she is a sixty year-old nun and "has no fear of the doctor and his Latin charm." But, on leaving his treatment room, her energy has become "prodigal," and she is overcome by "a wildness such as she had not known since her youth" (37). "Dr Vlad's" name is soon on everybody's lips, with wonders being worked, and "women claiming to be rejuvenated, just after two treatments" (75). But the character most profoundly affected by him is the draper's wife, the beautiful Fidelma McBride, just turned forty, with a husband now in his sixties, who no longer is the "'Brooding Heathcliff' that used to sign birthday cards to her" (41). Fidelma is a typical O'Brien protagonist, dreaming of horizons beyond reach, and having been pregnant twice in her married life and "lost it

both times,” she is childless and bored with the tedium of her existence – “the same routine, the same longing, and the same loneliness” (42). In powerful and evocative prose, O’Brien recounts the tragic outcome of the relationship between Vlad and Fidelma, who falls in love with the healer and persuades him to father a child with her, the consequences of which force her to leave Cloonoila and head as an immigrant for London.

The setting of the novel is contemporary, with a multitude of migrant voices, first in Cloonoila, from the kitchen staff at the Castle Hotel – Burmese, Italian, Spanish, Czech, Slovakian, Polish and Lithuanian – as they gather on the veranda for a beer and a smoke after their day’s work, telling each other stories in halting English of their fractured and transitory lives. Migrant voices abound also in London, in Part Two of the novel, where Fidelma finds herself homeless and without work. Through a charity organisation she finds a place to live with Jasmeen, an African migrant, who has a soft spot for the Irish since she was once helped by an Irish woman on her arrival in a cold and lonely London. Fidelma finds work as a cleaner, working with other migrants, many of whom have fled horror, “countries they could never go back to, while still others yearned for home” (176), all with memories carried with them from the places they have been forced to leave for various reasons. Fidelma’s consoling memory from her homeland is of “young grass with the morning sun on it and the night’s dew, so that light and water interplayed as in a prism and the top leaves of an ash tree had a halo of diamond from the rain, the surrounding green so safe, so ample, so all-encompassing” (176).

Landscape plays an important part in the novel, and O’Brien’s powerful and evocative prose convincingly links her characters with their surroundings, both urban and rural.

Intriguingly interwoven into the narrative are sharp and astonishing moments of contrast, from flashes of humour in the dialogue exchanges between the characters, to evocations of innocence and beauty in the lush poetic descriptions of nature, as in the image of the white mist, which, “like a winding muslin, enfolds our part of the world from time to time” (76), or of the mist lifting, “bits of it flying around in shreds, and the rest vanishing, as if one of those big forks, that they lift earth with, was gobbling it up” (78). Contrasted with the peaceful scenes of harmony and plenitude are some shocking passages of cruelty and violence; not the least of these is the horrific scene where Fidelma has been badly beaten and left to die. This is done by the “blood brothers,” who come looking for Vlad in Part One of the novel, before she is forced to leave her husband and her home; she “hears the car drive away and all is quiet for a short time and then the scurries, rats come to sup and she can hear their tongues lapping up the pools of warm blood” (146).

The title of the novel refers to the 11,541 red chairs erected in the city of Sarajevo in 2012, twenty years after the outbreak of the Bosnian war, in honour of the people killed during the bloody conflict. *The Little Red Chairs* takes its name from the six hundred and forty-three little red chairs representing the children slain in the conflict. The novel is a stark testament to the need for accountability and the telling of a story, but it also pays homage to those resilient and courageous characters, who in spite of all the odds manage to survive. Fidelma is a survivor, and in following her odyssey the reader is swept forward in a powerful narrative that suggests that amidst all the fragmentation and loss, suffering and evils of existence, forgiveness, reconciliation and hope can somehow be found.

Irene Gilsenan Nordin is Professor Emerita of English at Dalarna University, Sweden. Her scholarly work is mainly concerned with contemporary culture – especially Irish poetry – with a focus on representations of place and belonging. Recent publications include *Transcultural Identity Constructions in a Changing World* (Peter Lang, 2016), *Transcultural Identities in Contemporary Literature* (Rodopi, 2013), and *Urban and Rural Landscapes: Language, Literature and Culture in Modern Ireland* (Peter Lang, 2012). She is currently president of SWESSE (Swedish Society for the Study of English).

Irish Literature and the First World War. Culture, Identity and Memory

Terry Phillips

Oxford: Peter Lang, 2015

ISBN 9783034319690 292pp. €55.60. Paperback

Reviewer: **John O'Callaghan**

In any place, at any time, remembering war is a capricious exercise. In the context of Ireland's relationship with the First World War over the last century, the particularities of the island's history and politics have dictated what is celebrated and what is repressed at various points. Memory is not transmitted in a straight line through time. Rather, it is a malleable mediator between then and now, yesterday and today, past and present. Old fears and pain are stored differently than happiness in the mind. They are secreted away so time cannot work its healing powers. A tension emerges between the will to deny distress and the will to confront it openly. The private and public spheres of memory are also often disconnected and fragmented – memory can be personal as well as political. For every officially sanctioned state commemoration, there will be an enduring dissident version. Culture, identity and memory are inextricably intertwined and are informed not only by what is remembered but also by what is forgotten. In an instinctive reaction to trauma, certain elements are occluded, banished to a kind of no man's land by deliberate but inevitably incomplete acts of deliberate forgetting. Terry Phillips' anatomy of Irish writing on the 1914-1918 war does full justice to the complexities of this phenomenon, to the construction, evolution and reinvention of culture, identity and memory, and to the contradictions inherent therein.

Phillips emphasises the intricate positions adopted by writers in relation to the international conflict and to Irish debates about nationhood, which resist reduction to the simple binaries of unionist/pro-war and nationalist/anti-war. This is not a radical position but it is a fundamental starting point. Studies of the literature of the war are no longer restricted to the battlefield verses

of "soldier-poets", and there is a broad and generous medley of authors and genres throughout here. The question of selection for inclusion must have been influenced by Ireland's fluid status within and outside the Empire, and by its own mutation into two distinct but closely related entities. Phillips' subjects represent a variety of social, political, religious and cultural backgrounds, all with nuanced interpretations of the war. The sheer density of interconnections between Ireland and Britain (including some shared literary inheritances) was most powerfully expressed in the mass volunteering of Irishmen for service in the British army (a majority of whom were Catholic), for a variety of reasons. One link in the British-Irish chain was then further cemented on the western front, while another was simultaneously being sundered by the republican campaign for independence at home. Just as Irish identity and self-definition have never been fixed or one-dimensional issues, Irish writing about the war has never been not one-dimensional. Phillips points out, for instance, that "[t]he influence of a revived interest in Celtic mythology may, paradoxically, be seen in both radical nationalist writing and writing about the First World War" (4).

Phillips initially analyses poetry and prose written by combatant and non-combatant Irish writers during the conflict. He goes on to discuss the literature of the following decades, looking at how the conflict was remembered in the two parts of post-partition Ireland, both by individuals and collectively, and investigating the dynamic interrelationship between personal recollection and public memory. In conclusion, the author discusses contemporary literature about the war, which often examines family memory as well as collective memory, and explores its role in the

chronicle of nationhood, both north and south of the border.

The extent of what the historian F.X. Martin originally termed the “national amnesia”[1] that southern Ireland experienced in the decades after the war may have been exaggerated but the fog did not truly lift until near the end of the century. To suggest that memory of the conflict was suppressed in the south but embraced or even usurped by northern unionists, aided and abetted by a complicit nationalist minority, is to overstate the case, however. In fact, Phillips demonstrates that what Irish writing generally, as well as British and American writing, increasingly expressed was disillusion. Early signals of discontent are present, for instance, in some of Patrick MacGill’s trench prose. A decade later, there was no ambiguity in Liam O’Flaherty’s confronting and dark *Return of the Brute*. Irish disenchantment was at least partly a product of the hangover from a revolution which failed to fulfil the hope that many held for it. The volume of literature produced was not extensive, including among unionists, even if the official memory of that tradition portrays the war as its finest hour. Not writing about the war is taken as another manifestation of war-weariness. A chapter is devoted to “Challenging Memory in Northern Ireland”. The Northern Irish poet who has grappled most extensively with the war is Michael Longley. His compositions reassert the centrality of family memory in the northern narrative and give voice to concerns which go unheeded in official Ulster memory and Irish collective memory in a wider sense. Frank McGuinness’s play, *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*, reveals the effects of a dominant collective memory on the individual, whereby heroism is trumpeted but horror goes unheeded. The final chapter, “Recovering Forgotten Memory”, features Jennifer Johnston, Sebastian Barry and Dermot Bolger. They too are

concerned with the individual experience and suffering, and argue that this should take precedence over any ideological “ism” or national flag.

As a heavy burden of caution and nervousness now weighs on the shoulders of Irish government-sponsored “Decade of Centenaries” events, it is important to highlight the body of academic, literary and popular opinion that interprets the war, and Irish participation as absurd and futile, more a blood sacrifice than a noble sacrifice. While contemporary advocacy of pluralism is commendable, if the search for inclusivity revolves around the espousal of one-dimensional dichotomies or the elision of complex patterns of change in favour of unifying narratives and seamless storylines, scholars have a duty to refuse alignment and reject collusion with orthodoxies and rigidities, and to express and reflect the realities of ambiguity and ambivalence – in short, to complicate things. There has always been a cohort of Irish writers, from Eva Gore-Booth and George Bernard Shaw, to Harry Midgley, Eimar O’Duffy and Liam O’Flaherty, up to the latest generation, however self-conscious they have been about memory, who have asked the necessary awkward questions. Phillips’ convincing conclusion is that it is the avoidance of simplification in the most meaningful literary responses to the war which accounts for our enduring interest in such writing.

A word also on Peter Lang’s *Reimagining Ireland* project – remarkably, *Irish Literature and the First World War* is volume 72 of this series. *Reimagining Ireland* sets itself the lofty goal of reappraising the notions of Ireland and “Irishness”. It “interrogates Ireland’s past and present and suggests possibilities for the future by looking at Ireland’s literature, culture and history and subjecting them to the most up-to-date critical appraisals”. Phillips’ work certainly lives up to this billing.

Dr John O’Callaghan lectures in History and Heritage at St. Angela’s College, Sligo (NUI Galway). Among his publications are *Revolutionary Limerick: The Republican Campaign for Independence in Limerick, 1913-21* (Irish Academic Press, 2010), *The Battle for Kilmallock* (Mercier Press, 2011), *Subversive Voices: Narratives of the Occluded Irish Diaspora* (Peter Lang, 2012). O’Callaghan’s book, *The Irish Revolution, 1912-23: Limerick*, will be published by Four Courts Press. His most recent book is *Con Colbert*, a biography of the rebel executed for his role in the 1916 Easter Rising (O’Brien Press, 2015).

Beatlebone

Kevin Barry

Edinburgh and London: Canongate, 2015

ISBN 978-1782116134

299 pp. £12.99. Hardcover

Reviewer: **John L. Murphy**

In 1967, John Lennon bought the island of Dorinish in Clew Bay, off the coast of County Mayo. Although he and Yoko Ono planned to build a holiday retreat there, he only visited once. Instead, in 1970 he put Dorinish under the care of “King of the Hippies” Sid Rawle. A hippie commune lasted two years. Ono after Lennon’s death sold the island and donated the proceeds to an Irish orphanage.

These facts inspire the setting for Kevin Barry’s *Beatlebone*. Unlike his experimental first novel *City of Bohane* (see my review in *Estudios Irlandeses* 7 [2011]), this narrative follows a calmer style and reflective pace, akin to his short stories collected in *There Are Little Kingdoms* and *Dark Lies the Island*. Yet the quirks remain. Barry resists a straightforward account of Lennon’s imaginary 1978 stay on Dorinish. Instead, the author enters the tale in its midst, interjecting the feelings of loss and loneliness which Lennon in this telling is shown to have endured, in the doldrums during his career.

Whether *Beatlebone* needs this authorial intervention is a question sure to linger for many readers. Barry introduces a John Lennon compelling enough to carry the plot along. Nearing forty, uneasy with settling down as a family man, blocked in his creativity, haunted by his parents’ infidelities, Lennon gives over his fate, temporarily, to an unpredictable driver, Cornelius, his guide to Dorinish.

The island holds few charms. “It is attended by ghosts but they are his own and not sombre. There are a few habitations about like misplaced teeth but they invite no questions.” Barry’s spare prose mirrors Lennon’s weary and wary detach-

ment. In the Amethyst Hotel, taken over by the remnants of a commune, the “carpets squelch underfoot and give off the stale aniseed waft of seawater”. Barry’s phrasing testifies to his protagonist’s finicky, wry reactions to his West of Ireland immersion. The former Beatle expects no magical mystery tour: “Zola wrote that the road from Lourdes is littered with crutches but not a single wooden leg”. Lennon and Barry seek together the “as yet unwritten radical history of the west of Ireland”. But the storyteller prefers to withdraw from channelling this quest through Lennon. Instead, Barry scoffs to himself as if he “would return to report my findings in a mature, formed prose, as clear as glass, this from a man who had never knowingly underfed an adjective”. Perhaps Barry and Lennon indeed merge in this meticulous, fussy attitude. But Barry struggles to “get the voices right” so “the fiction might hold for a while at least”. He interrupts himself.

Later in the novel, resonances of Joyce and Beckett swirl: “the years are peeling off and time is shifting”. Lennon hears: “We’re getting closer, John. Despite ourselves.” Lennon himself diminishes, seen through another’s perspective on his legendary status. “The leader was a beautiful looking boy, she says. The big eyes like saucers and the song about the blackbird.” Barry’s matter-of-fact prose conveys a fan’s everyday response, spare but poetic. *Beatlebone* delicately touches upon the costs of celebrity and the desire to flee fame for the simple life, even if this cannot satisfy this subject, a man who must return to the studio, return to the city, and resolve to pursue his muse

far from Dorinish.

Barry presents a proud, sometimes self-deprecating, but determined Lennon. The impact of the Irish location, as Barry's phrasing about what stays "as yet unwritten" hints at the lacunae within this meandering novel. Barry plays down the island's power, defying a reader's and Lennon's expectations. Cornelius and other local characters are played off Lennon's attempts at anonymity, but he cannot be cowed. The figure of John Lennon, his intelligence, his hatreds, and his talent, cannot hide. Out of this predicament, *Beatlebone* attempts with mixed success to convey the struggles within Lennon. For we know that he will not stay on Dorinish, and that his drive to make music and revel in the life of family and friends drew him soon away again,

back to New York City and back to Yoko Ono.

Barry's work to date demonstrates his knack for off-beat situations and troubled seekers. The isolation Lennon both seeks and shrinks from on Dorinish, doubled by the author's similar confessions of despair and desire for renewal, resonate through-out *Beatlebone*. Despite underdeveloped passages, and Barry's stubborn determination to step into his fictional re-creation of Lennon's wishes for an Irish hideaway, this novel invites contemplation. In one of the very few chapters in this Beatle's life so far left to the imagination more than fanatical documentation, Kevin Barry draws out the tenuous Irish threads, loosely scattered, within John Lennon's past to unreel rather than weave this storyline.

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AEDEI*The Great Reimagining: Public Art, Urban Space and the Symbolic Landscapes of a 'New' Northern Ireland*

Bree T. Hocking

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Reviewer: **Bill Rolston**

I will give you my punch-line first: this book has a lot to offer which is insightful and original. Any criticisms I have about it relate to form, not substance, so I will leave them until much later. So, first, the author's argument.

Many have written about public space in Northern Ireland, whether it be in relation to parades, the flying of flags or the painting of murals. Although much of what is involved in disputes over these issues relates to relationships between citizens and the state, it is too often – and too glibly – represented as a conflict between citizens and citizens, ie, that the disputes are solely sectarian at root. The value of the approach of this book is for the most part to move away from those confrontations which are well known to another arena of public space which of itself appears beyond contestation, at least in the terms which are said to be most common in Northern Ireland. There has been a sustained state policy of transforming public space in the name of “shared space” – creating shopping malls, peace bridges and so-called peace walls, public art in prominent places and so on. The purpose of all of this is not simply material or architectural; it is, as Hocking documents, highly ideological. The local is said to be bad – insular, introverted, locked in paranoia and trauma – and these factors find their voice in representation in local areas, for example, children's play parks named after “terrorists”, and murals displaying hooded gunmen. If this is the problem, then the solution is obvious: suppress the local and bring on the international. The latter is said to be inclusive, welcoming, inspiring. In fact, in Belfast and

Derry the rationalisation of shared space sounds almost religious; public art, for example, is claimed to have the power to effect civic pride, cohesion and economic regeneration. If the local is the site of confrontation, then the little bits of the global dropped into urban space are islands of harmony and normality whose influence will hopefully ripple out.

Now, like many millenarian dreams there is nothing wrong in itself with hoping or wishing. But that should not preclude interrogating the claims of the evangelical prophet. This is what the author does meticulously and brilliantly in this book. There are many levels of critique possible. First, what is there to be shared in this shared space? All too often it is nothing more or less than shopping. Consumerism is the most facile of interactions and yet it is at the core of the rebranding of the city centres of Belfast and Derry as well as a number of out-of-town malls. The difference between this and, say, the equivalent in the mid-West United States is that, if the argument is to be believed, for Northern Ireland these places become temples not simply of consumerism but of social transformation. The least that can be concluded is that accepting this involves a giant leap of faith.

And if the claims for consumerism are fragile, those for a lot of public art are threadbare. In the centre of Belfast there is a public art exhibit involving in effect two twisted girders. Approaching Belfast on the motorway from the west is a large structure of two geodesic domes, one inside the other. The latter artwork is called “Rise” and the former “The Spirit of Belfast”. The claims for “Rise” are particularly grand. It

stands in a large area of empty space where motorway and roads converge. On one side is a Catholic working class area and on the other a Protestant working class area; it is what is known in Belfast as an interface zone where stone-throwing between teenagers is not uncommon. So, what is the point of "Rise"? According to the promotional literature, "it says confidence, it says outward-looking, it says international". The hidden message is more definitive: the sculpture says: don't look at the local economic and social conditions either side of the roundabout, don't look at the political tensions between communities, don't look at massive youth unemployment and high youth suicide rates nearby, don't mention the war and don't dwell on the past. "Rise" is supposed to aid reconciliation by looking to the future and seeking to bring about local economic transformation through tourism. But the tourists don't come to this spot; the most they see is a brief glimpse of the sculpture as their bus passes. More to the point, the tourists will never spend any money in these adjoining communities which might be a vehicle for some sort of economic transformation, however slight. And as for reconciliation: there is no evidence that the sculpture speaks to local people. This alienation is evident in this and other public art in the most fundamental of ways; the artists are not local, the forms are generic with the slight gloss of a name which seems to speak to local history and concerns but could quite easily exist elsewhere under a different name. They are part of what the author tellingly refers to as "civic identikit". They are supposed to be unique to the place but are in fact global, an exercise in "staged authenticity" where all the complexity, ambiguity and contradiction of the local has been removed.

There are some spaces where this distance from local people is even more pronounced. One such is the so-called "peace wall" between the nationalist and unionist working class areas of West Belfast. Nine metres high and 800 metres long, the construction is an eyesore. It symbolises the level of fear in this segregated

part of Belfast where the walls are intended as and supported by locals as protection against attacks. While the government has set a target of two decades for removing this and the dozens of other "peace walls" in Belfast, recent surveys show that the majority of locals regard even that deadline as too soon. The West Belfast wall is covered with paintings and artworks. The former are mostly spraycan, done by local and foreign artists, while the latter are often sponsored by state and official organisations. Again, great claims are made for this elongated display. The author quotes one artist as saying that painting on the wall is part of "the big picture of moving forward". But no locals walk by this wall. The only people to be seen are the tourists who are handed markers by tour guides to write sentiments which they regard as profound but are mostly inane over the completed art works. The author's conversations with locals reveal that they relate to the wall solely as a material structure; its art work for the most part is meaningless to them. Which raises the question: how can a visually oppressive wall covered with art works which do not speak to locals lead to local conflict transformation and reconciliation? Again, faith seems to be for the public art's supporters the most significant factor.

There is little evidence of any popular local organising to remove or transform these alien art forms. Yet local people do reject the ideology inherent in the structures in different ways. They continue to use the open space for confrontation rather than reconciliation. Teenagers utilise the artwork as a place to gather and hang out, oblivious to its supposed uplifting potential. Or people simply ignore the displays altogether while they go about their everyday local and presumably benighted business. Hocking covers these forms of resistance in her final chapter. But more could be done to examine the ways in which the local expressions of such communities, rejected out of hand by the urban planners as being parochial and backward-looking, in themselves contain a critique of and challenge to the state, however crudely or partially articulated. So the progressive task for

this society is surely not simply to bemoan the supposed narrowness of many of its citizens but to find ways in which to encourage authentic resistance and a genuine reclamation of space.

Although she does not do so directly, Hocking has done an excellent job in laying part of the groundwork on which an alternative vision could be constructed. That said, I have a few criticisms of the book. The main one is that it could have cut back on the jargon to present a more reader-friendly approach. This is a general problem for those authors who turn their doctoral theses into books. What works for one scenario is not necessarily the best approach for the other. Thus, drawing on Manuel Castells, the author repeatedly talks about “the space of flows” and “the space of places”. The former relates to power, information and production and ultimately to contemporary capitalism while the latter refers to the physical communities in which people live. I know it is important to be precise

in defining one’s concepts, but after a while I found these phrases annoying and as such counterproductive; they did less to explain the lived reality of people’s lives than less esoteric words could have done.

Belfast and Derry are certainly transformed places. The Peace Bridge linking Derry city centre to the former Ebrington Barracks is undoubtedly attractive. And when the sun hits “Rise” in Belfast late in the evening it is certainly a spectacular sight. But beyond the material reality one has to consider the ideological battle going on between capital and state on the one hand and citizens on the other hand, especially those citizens at the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum. Despite my few criticisms, this book pulls away the curtain to reveal the battlefield itself and the struggle for control of public space in one contemporary post-conflict society.

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