
LITERARY AND CULTURAL EVENTS IN IRELAND

ANNUAL REPORT – 2020

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As this is the year remarkable for all the things that did *not* happen, it is important to remember, and to prize, all those literary, artistic and cultural events which *did* happen – often against great odds. And, just as there was stark inequity in the fortunes of different kinds of businesses during the pandemic, some areas of cultural activity fared far better than others. Publishing and book selling has had to adjust to our new reality, and although the cherished Irish tradition of the book launch has gone the way of live theatre, cinema-going and indoor concerts, the book trade flourishes. As do the prize giving processes.

Recent major publications in Irish Studies include a flurry of new collections of short stories, most notably Kevin Barry's, *That Old Country Music*. Sinead Gleeson has also produced yet another impressive anthology, a whacking great collection of 100 Irish short stories, weighing in at 1200 grams, and containing more than 800 pages of stories by classic writers and newcomers alike – *The Art of the Glimpse* – perfect for a Covid winter. A volume that will fit much more snugly in the hand or the pocket is Roy Foster's *On Seamus Heaney*, the latest in the excellent Princeton University Press series of *Writers on Writers*. This publication deserves notice here because it is not widely distributed in Europe. It is not a specialist's volume, but, and in keeping with the Princeton brief, an excellent *vade mecum* for students.

In a year that has claimed two major Irish poets, Eavan Boland and Derek Mahon, we are fortunate to have both posthumous new collections by both. Mahon's, *Washing Up*, is witty, erudite and elegiac and takes full advantage of all interpretations of the titular phrase, while Boland's, *The Historians*, seeks, as did all her work, to correct the official record of history to include a feminist version. Michael Longley, who survives his two lifelong friends, has also given us *The Candlelight Master*, which nourishes the flame of his recurring inspirations, while also maintaining an elegiac tone.

Staying within Northern Ireland, but dropping down a generation, Booker Prize winner Anna Burns has now garnered two additional major awards for her 2018 novel, *Milkman*, collecting both the lucrative Impac Dublin award, and the revered Ewart-Biggs Prize. In the former case she was the first writer from Northern Ireland to win Impac, and the latter prize is chosen from a shortlist of books in very different genres, being awarded to "work that promotes and encourages peace and reconciliation in Ireland".

This year's Irish Book Awards ceremony, much anticipated within the industry and among booksellers and the reading public, was deprived of its festive annual gala, but among the winners were Donal Ryan's *Strange Flowers*, which won Irish Novel of the Year and Doireen Ní Gríofa's *A Ghost in the Throat*, an artful literary entwining of the author's biography and an exploration of the great 18th century poem by Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill, *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire*. Meanwhile another end-of-year prize, The Rooney Prize, awarded to an emerging writer under 40, was awarded to Stephen Sexton of Derry, who teaches in the Seamus Heaney Centre at Queens University in Belfast.

Live theatre struggled this past year, but in many cases the show really did still go on, in one manifestation or other. The Abbey provided a long-term online presence with its Dear Ireland series – 50 short works which paired writers and performers. Participating were some of the country's theatrical luminaries, like Enda Walsh, Owen Roe and Marie Mullen, but also including a host of young talented professionals who have been so aversely affected by the prohibition on live performances. The truncated Dublin Theatre Festival had been pared down initially and then was badly affected by additional restrictions imposed even after the festival had opened. Among the shows that carried on was a promenade performance of a dramatization of Patrick Kavanagh's *The Great Hunger*, which used the impressive grounds of IMMA, the erstwhile Kilmainham Hospital, to great advantage, undeterred by Irish weather. Small groups of audience members were escorted to various performance sites by "travelling" musicians, with the starring roles of Paddy Maguire and his mother being played by Liam Carney and Bríd Ní Neachtain, respectively, with long recitations from the text by actor Derbhla Crotty. The autumn also brought outdoor offerings from the never-daunted Druid Theatre company who took to the roads of Galway bringing the rarely staged early Tom Murphy play, *On the Outside*, to six Galway towns, while also making excellent use of core Druid players Marie Mullen, Rory Nolan and Marty Rea, in several roles. A selection of Lady Gregory's plays were played in an even greater number of Galway venues including the magnificent Kylemore Abbey and the disused railway station in Ballyglunin, famed for being the locus of the filming of *The Quiet Man*. Meanwhile, within the profession, apart from the obvious financial perils facing theatre worldwide, there is the reluctant acceptance that, at least in the short term, outdoor performance, and one-man shows, or productions with severely restricted casts and crews, will likely be much more the norm.

Like theatre, live musical performance fell victim to present restrictions, but with many offerings available online. In a first the Wexford Opera Festival mounted several offerings for free online, including a new opera, *What Happened to Lucrece*, by Irish composer Andrew Synnott, based on Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece*, while the innovative Wexford Factory, an academy for the development of young Irish opera singers, offered *The Falstaff Chronicles*, excerpts from Verdi's *Falstaff*. We here in Ireland have been forced to seek out online resources which probably have been more readily mined by those involved in Irish Studies who live elsewhere, but to highlight a few which have upped their game this past year The RIA site has much to recommend it to historians and others. As part of the annual Dublin Festival of History, sponsored jointly by the Dublin City Council and Dublin City Libraries (also the sponsoring body of the Impac awards), the RIA produced illustrated online lectures including a fascinating history of St James Gate (as it says in the publicity material – the actual gate, not the gates made famous by Guinness' brewery!) by Dr Bernadette Cunningham, the Deputy Librarian. Another timely offering was part of the Grangegorman Histories (Grangegorman, a mental hospital, is now the site of the new Dublin Institute of Technology campus). "The 'Spanish' flu of 1918 in Ireland" is a round table discussion by archivist Catriona Crowe, Irish Times journalist Fintan O'Toole and several prominent epidemiologists and immunologists. These talks are among those that continue to be available to the public.

In media online offerings and archives can be invaluable resources for researchers, and the number of freely available works has proliferated during lockdown months. The Irish Film Institute offers membership for a nominal fee and film material is available to download for free, to rent, or to buy from their online shop. The Irish award-winning short *Rialto*, written by Mark O’Rowe, is only one such work, and one not to be missed. The story of a middle-aged Dublin dockworker who feels he has lost everything, the film featured actor Tom Vaughan-Lawlor against type in a decidedly low-key study of despair and longing.

Over in Dublin 4 RTE wisely decided that since most of the nation has been at home much more than usual, it would rerun its *Reeling in the Years* series that highlights a decade each. For access to recent cultural history and social development, these programmes cannot be beat. Through the RTE player many recent programmes, archived selections, and radio broadcasts are available. It is worthwhile to check if the country where you live enjoys a licensing agreement with Ireland, but within the EU these are readily accessed.

At The National Library, apart from their full catalogue being available to all online for some time, there are now revolving online offerings – a recent one being a tour of *Listen Back, Again*, their permanent Seamus Heaney exhibit. It is worthwhile to check in to the website now and again in order to keep abreast of what’s on month to month. Similarly, the National Museum, which has several venues around the country, has risen to the occasion in recent times by offering a much broader selection online. One stunning example, available as this essay was submitted, is artist Alison Lowry’s response to Ireland’s historic scandal of its Mother and Baby homes. And, while The National Gallery offers virtual video tours of its collection on its YouTube channel, the Hugh Lane Gallery on the other side of town has generously made available for free its beloved Sundays at Noon concerts (usually much coveted tickets for many a rainy Sunday afternoon). For those who have not yet had the pleasure, MOLI (Museum of Literature Ireland) on Stephen’s Green is now showing a film documentary of abolitionist Frederick Douglass’ time in Ireland; and Radio MOLI has both live and on demand services for listeners. Last in what should probably be a longer list, Limerick’s Hunt Museum has an excellent and diverse selection of online offerings including videos on painters John Lavery and Walter Osborne and their *plein-air* work and on the Irish Contemporary Ceramics Collection.

Finally, a note on the sad passing of revered Irish historian Margaret MacCurtain, known to generations of students at UCD as Sister Benvenuta, or less formally, Sister Ben. Margaret was a tireless campaigner for human, and especially feminist, rights. An excellent contributor and companion at conferences, she will be well remembered by many among her Spanish and international colleagues.

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