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Place and Memory in the New Ireland : Review

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O'Connor, Frank. *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story*. Hoboken, NJ: Melville House, 2004.
 ———. *An Only Child*. Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1993.

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Place and memory in the New Ireland, edited by Britta Olinder and Werner Huber, Trier, Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2009, 167 pp., €20, ISBN 978-3-86821-146-7

This is the second volume in the Irish Studies in Europe series which publishes a selection of the papers given at the biannual EFACIS (European Federation of Associations and Centres of Irish Studies) conferences. EFACIS rightly prides itself on the multi-disciplinary and international character of its approach and the book under review, emanating from the 2007 conference held in Gothenburg, Sweden, has contributions from scholars from the USA, France, Sweden, Great Britain, Italy, Spain and Ireland. The theme of place and memory in the New Ireland attracted a stimulating array of chapters from historians, literary critics and sociologists. The chapters on literature are far more numerous than the others, but the collection has a coherence and a quality that are not always evident in edited tomes, which is a tribute to Britta Olinder and Werner Huber, two EFACIS stalwarts. There is no division of articles into discrete sections, which is slightly unusual, but it is clear that serious thought was given to the order in which they appear in the book.

Thus, the opening chapter by Kerby Miller offers a 'challenge to revisionist mythology'. Miller quotes Fintan O'Toole's regret that in the wake of Ireland gaining independence the Irish state failed 'to co-opt most of Ireland's young intellectuals into the state's "founding" Nationalist and Catholic mythologies', which resulted in said intellectuals becoming contemptuous of these mythologies and/or of the new state itself (13–14). The analysis of the impact of Irish migration is particularly rich, in light of the country now having to come to terms once more with a massive exodus of its youngest and brightest due to the downturn. Miller argues that when emigration soared in the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s, 'Dublin's political establishment hastened to excuse and even encourage the new exodus, both to reduce welfare costs and to protect their new economic order from social and political upheaval' (20). This is a major claim, which is justified later on in the discussion of how the Irish emigrant was portrayed as

either a fortunate escapee from a repressively 'traditional' Catholic Ireland . . . , or, more commonly, as a confident, ambitious, adaptable individual who – after a few years of certain success abroad – . . . would return to help indoctrinate Irish society and culture in the techniques and outlooks of global capitalism. (20)

In Miller's estimation, in propounding such theories, 'Revisionists merely substituted one monolithic explanation ('opportunity') for another ('exile')' (20). Such lively views open the debate in a stimulating and challenging manner.

Northern Ireland is dealt with in two chapters. Valérie Peyronel discusses urban regeneration in Belfast and its link to economic recovery. The mural paintings that adorn many Belfast streets, which Peyronel describes as 'visual markers of segregation', are 'the symbols of resistance to neutrality' (43). They offer a warning to the 'other' and impose a virtual boundary or territorial marker that seeks to preserve a certain cultural heritage. But even if Belfast city centre becomes cleaner and more attractive by providing space for a

common cultural heritage, this will not eradicate difference unless there is ‘an appropriation by all across the political, economic, and social spectrum of that “neutral” part of town as a piece of evidence that the city can become what people make of it and not what they remember of it’ (44).

Yann Bévant’s discussion of Jim Sheridan’s film *In the Name of the Father* raises the issue of how the tale of how six young Irish men were unjustly imprisoned in England for allegedly planting bombs in two pubs in Birmingham led indirectly to the articulation of a myth-breaking, postcolonial discourse. The main character, Gerry Conlon, is transformed by his experience of imprisonment and the story is recounted largely through his eyes: ‘By telling his story in his own words, Gerry will free his individual history from external interpretation and from appropriation by others. It is a double act of liberation’ (53). Gerry can never forget what the British authorities did to him and his family: ‘I am an innocent man. I spent fifteen years in prison for something I didn’t do. I watched my father die in a British prison for something he didn’t do.’ In spite of this angry first-person narrative, the film manages to avoid being one-dimensional in its depiction of the Irish and the British by demonstrating ‘that Irish nationalist violence is counterproductive and as Manichean as British prejudices and only serves to reinforce and legitimise the oppressive character of British–Irish relations, at least as far as the North is concerned’ (55).

Thomas Walsh has a fascinating chapter on Irish animation and radical memory. He quotes Luke Gibbons’ expression of ‘the transformative potentials of modern media and technologies such as television and how they have acted upon expressions of indigenous Irish culture’ (57). Animation is an area that has become synonymous with Ireland in recent times, boosted by the phenomenal success of some of the talented practitioners in this country. According to Walsh: ‘Irish animation ... might signify an Irish culture negotiating a path between a homogenising American globalism and a heterogeneous European socio-cultural individualism, resulting in what might indeed be a “new” Ireland’ (58–9). The emergence of an independent Irish animation industry in the 1990s coincided with the emergence of the beginning of the Celtic Tiger phenomenon. It was thus ideally placed to assert its difference with regard to the ‘old’ Ireland that was dominated ‘by a conservative cultural nationalism, with the media falling under the influence of Anglo-American models of modernity’ (63). Animation was a modernist and potentially radical form of representation, a fact that becomes clear from the close textual reading Walsh offers of Brown Bags Films’ *Give Up Yer Aul Sins* (2001), which

questions the role of Catholic teaching in a modern, albeit romanticised urban Ireland. It does this by splitting the narrative between place and memory; the place is urban Dublin, and the memory is a child’s retelling of a Biblical story in fantastical terms which are not culturally identifiable with modern Irish space. (63)

The huge success enjoyed by this animated film illustrates how this art form is ‘now seeking to re-assert itself as the subject of its own discourse’ (65).

The chapters devoted to Irish literature discuss the poetry of Moya Cannon and Vona Groarke (Patricia Coughlan), Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin (Borbála Faragó), Cathal Ó Searcaigh and Dennis O’Driscoll (Mary Pierse) and the playwright Frank McGuinness (Joseph Long). Each one of these contributions is admirable, in particular Patricia Coughlan’s, but I have decided due to lack of space to concentrate on two essays dealing with the fiction of John McGahern and Patrick McCabe.

Martin Ryle’s essay on place, time and perspective in McGahern’s fiction demonstrates a deep understanding of one of Ireland’s most significant prose writers of the latter half of the twentieth century. He takes issue with this reviewer among others for

reading McGahern in the context of a rapidly changing Ireland and states: ‘Too much emphasis on the elegiac aspect of McGahern’s oeuvre and on its evocations of nature and landscape risks allotting it to the genre of comforting pastoral nostalgia’ (127). With the publication of *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2002) and *Memoir* (2005), such a treatment is undeniably tempting, but Ryle argues that McGahern ‘avoids idealised retrospect and he is not in any simple sense the representative of the world about which he writes’ (127) – he was far too cautious an artist to fall into that particular trap. In the latter part of his career, McGahern undoubtedly began to describe the landscape of Leitrim and Roscommon where he had spent the vast majority of his life with a wistfulness that is absent from the earlier works. Notwithstanding that, Ryle posits the view that ‘the writer’s concern is not only with a particular landscape, but with the power of nature to provoke reflection on mutability and to offer aesthetic pleasure and a sense of cyclical renewal’ (128). At the end of *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, the telegraph poles that are being erected on the idyllic landscape, obscuring the view of the lake, are an indication that modernity is making its presence felt. Ryle asks: ‘How long will it take before intensive rural development alters irreversibly even places like Leitrim which have so far been relatively unaffected?’ (134) Leitrim has, in fact, one of the largest number of unoccupied houses in Ireland as a result of a mad construction frenzy at the beginning of the new millennium, so it was far from ‘unaffected’ by what was happening in the rest of the country. McGahern’s work demonstrates that change is afoot and that nothing is safe from the onslaught of modernity. The ‘aesthetic delight in nature and landscape’ (133) by the characters of McGahern’s last novel demonstrates that such pleasures are not confined to visitors, as had often appeared to be the case. However, the movement from the metropolis to peripheral locations like Leitrim demonstrates that the attraction persists among ‘outsiders’ also.

David Clark provides an elegant exploration of women in Patrick McCabe’s fiction, a fiction that is located in ‘a series of non-existent small towns in the Irish heartland’ that are immediately recognisable to anyone with a knowledge of the writer’s native Monaghan. In Clark’s view: ‘McCabe steers clear of the romanticism of the traditional ideal of rural Ireland, but also of the urban vision of the modern Republic. His, rather, is the claustrophobic memory of the stifling mid-sized communities with their prejudices, entrapment, and hypocrisy’ (137). McCabe’s characters ‘are continually in search of a surrogate “mammy” and in the case where the mother is still alive, ‘she tends to discourage her son’s attempts to form a “normal” relationship with another woman’ (142). Any female who intervenes between mother and son is viewed by the former as being a ‘trollop’. The negative treatment of women in McCabe’s fiction results from the writer’s particular conception of the human condition:

Mother Erin is not a viable concept for this writer, his Cathleen Ní Houlihan would force her children to wear scratchy balaclavas and grey tasselled scarves – in the classroom. Through comic stereotypes, however, I would suggest that McCabe reflects, hyperbolically, the prejudices, shortcomings, maliciousness, and frustration of ordinary Irish men and women in a way few contemporary writers would dare. (144)

If *Place and Memory in the New Ireland* is a fair reflection of the Irish Studies in Europe series, we should look forward in anticipation to the publication of volume 3.

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