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Franco-Irish Connections: Essays, Memoirs and Poems in Honour of Pierre Joannon : Review

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By virtue of its unconventional juxtaposition of philosophies (Plato, Derrida, Whitehead and Blanchot are embraced in equal measure), *Beckett and Death* troubles the conceptual boundaries within which Beckett's writing is commonly received and gives rise to myriad possibilities for further investigation. However, this kaleidoscopic approach (which is further affected by some odd copy-editing decisions relating to punctuation and referencing) situates itself under the umbrella of a pessimistic humanism that does not necessarily speak its name, and the collection's handling of death as a culturally and historically intransitive category in signalling a terminal condition is troubling. Despite the problems arising from this universalising impulse, the sheer breadth of material and approaches identifies this collection as a useful resource for Beckettians of all critical persuasions.

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Franco-Irish connections: essays, memoirs and poems in honour of Pierre Joannon, edited by Jane Conroy, Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2009, 364 pp., €49.50 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-84682-212-4

The name Pierre Joannon is synonymous with Irish studies and with Franco-Irish relations. I can think of few, if any, people who are more worthy recipients of this beautifully presented Festschrift than the Honorary French Irish Consul, scholar and former President of the Ireland Fund de France. You get some idea of his stature from the list of contributors to this book: two former Taoisigh, Garret FitzGerald and John Bruton, two Nobel Laureates, John Hume and Seamus Heaney, poets Brendan Kennelly and John Montague, a host of historians including Dermot Keogh, Joe Lee, Eunan O'Halpin and Kevin Whelan, distinguished intellectuals like Maurice Hayes and Richard Kearney, as well as other luminaries too numerous to mention.

In the Avant-Propos, another loyal friend to Ireland, Michel Déon, admits that Joannon is something of a '*workalcoolique*', a necessary trait if one has a mind to complete a fraction of the tasks this man achieves. His *Histoire de l'Irlande et des irlandais* is a magisterial study of some 800 pages and is mandatory reading for any French person wishing to get some understanding of his or her Celtic cousins. But that is only one of many scholarly books and articles that are cited in an eight-page bibliography of Joannon's publications. The editor of the Festschrift, Jane Conroy, in an illuminating Introduction, describes her subject as 'an emblematic intercultural voyager, whose work moves through different periods and different perspectives'. This accomplished scholar and diplomat has also been an indefatigable advocate of Ireland in Europe and beyond, cajoling people to support his many funding schemes, making them aware of the many strengths of Irish literature and culture, or, in the past, the need for international aid to bring about an improvement in the situation in Northern Ireland during 'The Troubles'. He has also been known to extol the virtues of the Emerald Isle as a site for industrial investment or cultural tourism. The former diplomat Seán Donlon tells of how Pierre Joannon was responsible for getting Graham Greene to come to Ireland to present the first £50,000 GPA-sponsored Book Award in 1988. There are

several other examples of this type of intervention by a man whose energy and connections have become the stuff of legend.

The relationship between France and Ireland is a deep one. This is imputable to a shared Catholic heritage and a centuries-held enmity towards a common foe, England. David Norris points out the unique nature of the links between the two countries when stating that ‘love of France is an Irish characteristic’, but it is a characteristic that is totally reciprocated. Garret FitzGerald observes: ‘During my time as Foreign Minister and later as Taoiseach, I was struck by the warmth of the attitude of many members of the French government to Ireland’. This ‘special relationship’ is due to a multiplicity of factors such as the education of generations of Irish priests in France during the Penal Laws, the arrival of the Wild Geese at the end of the seventeenth century and the subsequent strong presence of Irish soldiers in the French armies from that point onwards, and the haven that Paris represented for our two most celebrated writers, James Joyce and Samuel Beckett. France has been viewed as a cultural icon by Irish people for centuries, so much so that we conveniently forget their colonial history – we even blame the Norman invasion on the English! In fact, Ireland shares with Denmark the distinction of being the only European country against whom France has never gone to war. Dermot Keogh offers the following assessment:

The historical relationship between Ireland and France is a rich tapestry of interwoven threads and themes. Historically, France was a rival power to Britain, an ally of the Irish in time of great need, and a place of refuge in recurring periods of religious persecution and political intolerance. Of all the countries in Western Europe, France and its diverse intellectual – particularly Catholic – culture helped influence and form generations of Irish who attended schools run by religious orders, male and female, with close links to that country.

Frédéric Grasset, who served as ambassador to Ireland for a number of years, says that being sent to Dublin is viewed as a plumb appointment by French diplomats. The strong ties of friendship that unite the two countries even survived the infamous ‘main de Dieu’ incident by the footballer Thierry Henry during the 2009 World Cup qualifier. It is a wonder that Pierre Joannon was not called upon to smooth the waters after that potentially disastrous interlude. What is remarkable is the amount of hostility towards the French team among the home supporters as a result of what they viewed as an act of treachery against a small nation with whom they enjoyed cordial relations. One wonders what the reaction would have been in Ireland if the shoe had been on the other foot.

De Gaulle’s visit to Ireland after his resignation as president is referred to in a number of chapters and forms the main thrust of the contributions by Joe Lee and Grace Neville. The latter explores the coverage of the visit in the Irish print media of the time. She remarks that ‘the perceived closeness of France to Ireland, relative to all other overseas locations, is striking in these newspapers’. The general’s reputation preceded him and he was portrayed as ‘the last of a race of political giants’. *The Irish Times* described him as ‘one of the greatest men of our age – some would say the greatest, and certainly the most engaging [...] the most civilized, the most historically minded, man to have held great power on the continent of Europe for decades’. The choice of Ireland as his preferred destination at such a time was treated as a logical extension of the fondness he had for this island, a fondness that undoubtedly owed something to the general’s great-grandmother being a McCartan from Co. Down. Pictures of de Gaulle walking across beautiful deserted Kerry beaches undoubtedly had a positive impact on Irish tourism, especially among the French. His six-week stay got massive coverage and much of it concentrated on the peaceful tranquillity of the Irish landscape, a setting that lent itself to contemplation of

the mysteries of life. Neville quotes brilliantly from various newspaper articles to bring alive again an event that took place over four decades ago and she argues that de Gaulle's visit ranks alongside other high-profile visits by Irish icons such as Princess Grace of Monaco in 1961 and John Fitzgerald Kennedy in 1963.

This book traces a rich tapestry of mutually beneficial intersections between two Celtic/Gallic cultures. Clearly, in a short review like this it is impossible to do justice to what is an indispensable reference for anyone with even the slightest interest in Franco-Irish connections. Chapters dealing with how the Irish College in Paris went from being a seminary to become the Irish Cultural Centre, by Patrick O'Connor, and the involvement of the Irish in the Cannes Film Festival, by Sheamus Smith, are particularly noteworthy. So too is Kevin Whelan's magisterial contribution on the Irish in France during the eighteenth century in which he notes that in 1789 almost three-quarters of Irish clerical students educated abroad were in France. Thus it was that the French Revolution led to the establishment of the national seminary at Maynooth in 1795.

Jane Conroy deserves much praise in assembling such a stellar cast to do homage to a man whose contribution to the promotion of Irish culture is outstanding. The highest compliment I can pay this Festschrift is to say that it goes some way towards acknowledging the debt owed by Ireland to the exceptional ambassador that is Pierre Joannon.

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Modern Irish theatre, by Mary Trotter, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2008, 233 pp., £55.00 (hardback), ISBN 9780745633428

In *Modern Irish Theatre*, Mary Trotter accomplishes something unique in her historiography by offering a complete rendering of the corpus of Irish drama from the formation of the Gaelic League to the present. Unlike other examinations of Ireland and drama that tend to focus on *either* modern Irish drama *or* contemporary works, Trotter provides an analysis of *each* major theatrical epoch. As Trotter posits in her introduction, 'By focusing on the institutional role of theatre, rather than on theatre texts, I hope to reveal the dynamic, even symbiotic, relationship between Irish theatre and Irish culture' (2). In order to truly comprehend the underpinnings of the dramatic genre in twentieth-century Ireland (and beyond), Trotter's treatment of the theatre as Subject is essential and timely as we look ahead to create a space for twenty-first-century plays.

Importantly, Trotter's text begins with a well-documented 'Timeline of Significant Events in Irish Arts and Politics' that chronicles key performances and historical events from the 1890s to the 2000s. What is especially helpful here is the inclusion of events and theatrical movements that are often marginalised or even neglected in much of the scholarly discourse, such as the formation of the Charabanc Theatre, for example.

Modern Irish Theatre consists of four major parts: 'Performing the Nation, 1891–1916'; 'War and After, 1916–1948'; 'Rewriting Tradition, 1948–1980'; and 'Re-imagining Ireland, 1980–2007'. In Part I, Trotter provides a solid background of the issues

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