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Ireland in the European Eye: at home in the heart of Europe : Book review: an Excellent Analysis of Ireland's Interactions with its European Allies

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Ireland in the European Eye, edited by Bettina Migge and Gisela Holfter.

Royal Irish Academy, 2019.

Paperback, 518 pp. €25.

This essay collection provides an excellent analysis of Ireland's various interactions with its European allies, from the early medieval period up to the present moment. The essays cover things as diverse as history, religion, literature, tourism, politics, trade, journalism, architecture, music and film in twenty-two chapters by experts from various disciplines, who serve up an informative and welcome survey that emphasises the historical ties that bind the Emerald Isle to its largest neighbour and the Continent. With the shadow of Brexit casting a dark cloud over the entire European project, what emerges from these essays is how essential it is for Ireland to stay at the heart of Europe. When considering the Brexit conundrum, it is important to recall, as Mervyn O'Driscoll points out, that in the 1920s, 90% of Ireland's merchandise exports were destined for the UK, a situation that persisted up until the 1950s. However, since Ireland was accepted into the EEC (subsequently the EU), this dependence on Britain has been greatly diminished, particularly after the advent of the Single Market in 1992. According to Brian Lucey, writing in this newspaper on August 1, 2019, whereas Irish live animal and meat exports still exhibit a pronounced reliance on the British market, these now constitute less than 1 per cent of total exports, goods and services, which shows a real evolution in Ireland's overseas trading.

Although it will not be possible to treat of each individual chapter, I want to say that they are all scholarly, yet accessible, which says a lot about the skill and hard work of the 2 editors, Bettina Migge and Gisela Holfter, who obviously knew the type of contributor they wanted and the areas that would need to be covered. Clearly, some readers will have quibbles about topics which are absent, but that is inevitable when tackling a topic as wide-ranging as this one is.

The historical context provided by Thomas O'Connor in the opening chapter traces the Irish European diaspora and shows how "peripatetic Irish missionaries" had a big influence on the spread of Christianity throughout Europe, establishing monasteries and engaging in scholarship. O'Connor makes particular mention of the Irish Colleges that were established across Europe, mainly as a means of training Irish priests during the Penal Laws, and notes: "For those Irish students who did go abroad and eventually returned home as serving clergy, their time away could be a life-changing experience, conferring domestic status and a directive role, often as bishops and senior clergy, in the illegal Irish Catholic Church". (10) Reading these lines, one immediately thinks of the thousands of Irish Erasmus students who have benefited both culturally and linguistically from their stays in European universities over the past few decades.

Brigid Laffan describes the Irish colleges as "not just religious institutions but sites of diplomacy". She highlights the importance of our belonging to the European family in the torturous road to securing peace on the island of Ireland. She quotes from John Hume's acceptance speech when he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1998: "[The] European Union is the best example in the history of the world of conflict resolution and it is the duty of everyone, particularly those who live in areas of conflict to study how it was done and to apply its principles to their own conflict resolution". In addition, Laffan points out how *The Economist* newspaper predicted in 1988 that Ireland was heading for financial melt-down, only to reverse its opinion completely some nine years

later when it proclaimed Ireland as “Europe’s shining light”. European investment undoubtedly made a significant contribution to Ireland’s improved economic performance, but the loss of Irish sovereignty after the infamous bail-out in 2010 made many Irish people sceptical about the degree of solidarity displayed by the EU to countries like Greece, Spain, Portugal and Ireland. However, as a small English-speaking island located on the periphery of Europe, Ireland would appear to have far more to lose than gain from leaving the EU, regardless of the inevitable short-term pain that will result from the Brexit crisis.

In tracing representations of Ireland in modern French literature, Anne Gallagher starts with an observation from the well-known French writer, Michel Déon, who spent the majority of his later life in Galway: “To speak correctly of Ireland, it is preferable not to know what one is speaking about”. This rather enigmatic comment was the fruit of Déon’s view that the Irish are in the main dreamers who live like “holidaymakers in their own country”. His novel, *Le Taxi mauve*, based in Ireland, was made into a successful film and evoked a country “bathed in mystery and mythology, where rationalism has no place and the life of the imagination reigns supreme”. Gallagher feels that such a picture mirrors closely the recurrent images of Ireland in French literature. She examines works by French novelists Michel Mohrt, Xavier Grall, Raymond Queneau, Sorj Chalandon (author of the award-winning *My Traitor*, which is a barely fictionalised account of the author’s close friendship with the IRA activist turned informer, Denis Donaldson), along with Déon, to show the degree to which this is the case. It is worth noting the continued fascination with Ireland in France, where Irish writers enjoy huge popularity and whose works are available in translation from many of the leading French publishers, a trend that has been wonderfully illustrated in recent research by Professor Grace Neville.

David Clark’s chapter illustrates the prevalence of Ireland in the literatures of Spain. An obvious link between the two countries, as is the case with France, is “the country’s perceived role as bulwark of Catholic views and practices in opposition to the Protestantism of England”. This positive view of Irish culture and society has survived the ructions of the Spanish Civil War (1936-9), with each side of that bitter conflict adopting a positive interpretation of Ireland’s position: “the Francoist right-wing regarded Éire as a staunch defender of Catholic values of family and tradition, while the republican left, especially its supporters from the ‘historical’ regions of Spain, praises Ireland’s revolutionary escape from the yoke of colonialism”. Dealing with travel writing and the contemporary Spanish novel, Clark shows that Ireland is a really fertile subject for writers from Spain and notes that poetry and drama on Irish topics, or influenced by Irish models, have been of particular importance, and that translations of the great Irish poets and dramatists exist in all official languages of Spain. Given the degree to which the discipline of Irish Studies has flourished in Spain recently, this should not come as a total surprise.

It is intriguing to discover the prevalence of Irish subject matter in Polish and Dutch literature. In the case of the former, the close friendship between the Nobel laureates Czeslaw Milosz and Seamus Heaney was a contributory factor, along with the role played by the eminent literary critic and translator, Jerzy Jarniewicz, who has worked tirelessly to heighten Heaney’s popularity in Poland. In Dutch literature, Ireland tends to be portrayed as strange and exotic, a green land of fairy-tales and adventure. Recently, however, there has been a falling off of literary Dutch fiction located in Ireland, which Marieke Krajenbrink attributes to increased secularisation and the emergence of a society that appears to be moving away from a traditional Irish identity towards a more European one.

The comparative studies undertaken by various authors track Irish literature in Italy, German-speaking and the Nordic countries. In Italy, Seamus Heaney looms large once more, as do Joyce, Synge, Yeats and Beckett. Also, the intense friendship between Claudio Maigris and John Banville, which resulted initially from a shared interest in German studies, led to the writers gaining a closer understanding of each other's work. Heinrich Böll's 1957 *Irishes Tagebuch*, the Irish journal he wrote about his stay in Achill and which aroused massive enthusiasm among his German compatriots, is a key text when it comes to assessing the image of Ireland in post-war Germany. The well-known German scholar Eda Sagarra described Böll as "a long-serving if unofficial adviser to Bord Fáilte". It is noted that outside of Ireland and Great Britain, Germany is the nation with the highest number of Irish Studies specialists, a fact that is not that well known because of the lack of recognition paid to that particular discipline in German universities.

When it comes to Irish-language literature in Europe, Joachim Fischer and Éamon Ó Ciosáin remark that a number of these texts are adapted versions of English translations. The majority of texts available in translation are of poetry, which is attributed to the promotion of Irish-language poets to the detriment of their prose writer equivalents. This is viewed as unfortunate, poetry being a more élite preoccupation which will not have the same impact as creative prose. English-language fiction by Irish writers in French translation, as already mentioned, has consolidated a loyal readership in France. Some optimism can be seen in the English language translations of Ó Cadhain's subversive modernist text *Cré na cille*, which, it is hoped, may attract translators and readers to other works in Irish fiction in the future.

Architecture and art are treated in a few chapters, suitably adorned with impressive images and paintings. Fergal Lenehan's illuminating chapter on depictions of Ireland in British, German and French cinema from 1938-2014 covers a lot of ground in a short number of pages. Of particular interest is the French film version of Liam O'Flaherty's novel, *Le puritain*, which describes how a troubled journalist Ferriter murders a prostitute as a result of his overwhelming Catholic beliefs. Filmed in black and white, *Le puritain* presents a disturbing image of unhealthy Irish responses to sex, alcohol and religion. Lenehan reveals that the images of Dublin owe more to the aesthetics of French urban living than of 1930s Dublin, which may have something to do with the fact that the film adopts a non-realist mode of representation of Ireland.

In terms of British film, Peter Mullan's *The Magdalene Sisters* is unsparing in its exposure of the humiliation and maltreatment of those women who were incarcerated in laundries run by female religious orders. Similarly, Stephen Frears's *Philomena* shone more light on Ireland's traumatic past and the harsh treatment of women found pregnant outside of wedlock and committed to mother and child homes. Ken Loach's *Jimmy's Hall* treats of the Leitrim socialist Jimmy Gralton, who set up a dance hall against the wishes of the Catholic Church in post-independence Ireland and ended up being deported to America – he had taken out American citizenship. Lenehan notes that the filmic text constitutes its own world and its own reality and that scholars should not become overly concerned with "cultural verisimilitude". The emphasis on repressive Catholicism, pastoralism, alcohol abuse and violence in filmic depictions of Ireland has given way in recent times to a more realistic portrayal of a changed Irish landscape that embraces multi-culturalism and emerging secularism.

Dealing with perceptions of Irish music in the European ear, Harry White cites the huge popularity of Thomas Moore's *Irish Melodies* on the continent. Moore's achievement in White's view was largely attributable to the quality of his words, or verse, which inspired the likes of Hector Berlioz, Robert Schumann and Frederic Chopin. In Germany, the reception of Moore was primarily a literary one, the musical dimension not being considered to be of the same quality. White argues subtly that throughout Europe the Irish musical soundscape remains a traditional soundscape because of the unique reception-history that he charts in this hugely revealing chapter.

Linda King tracks the evolution of *cara* magazine, which anyone who has travelled on an Aer Lingus flights will be acquainted with, between 1997 and 2017. She argues that the establishment of a national airline in the 1960s was an extremely ambitious project for an economically impoverished state. Over the decades, *cara* has evolved in a similar way to Irish society and its contents reflect things like the late embrace of modernity, increased secularism and the celebration of Irish successes in the realms of sport, music, film and literature. Ultimately, King argues, the magazine worked at promoting Irish culture and attracting more tourists to travel to the country. She concludes that *cara's* extremely effective marketing strategy managed to transcend specific demographics and to offer something of interest to all its readers.

The final article in the collection by Paul Gillespie deals with Irish media discourse on Europe and shows how in their treatment of the Spanish Civil War, Ireland's two mainstream newspapers, the *Irish Independent* and *The Irish Times*, displayed widely divergent views. The former hailed the war as "a struggle to the death between Christianity and Communism", whereas the latter chose to view it as pitting against each other "a Fascist junta ... and a population which has tasted, for the first time, some of the sweets of democracy". The difference of interpretation reflects the traditional bias of the two broadsheets, with the *Irish Independent* being seen as more conservative and *The Irish Times* often being viewed as the liberal mouthpiece of the Protestant minority.

Gillespie shows how budgetary constraints often dictate where foreign media commentators are sent. Clearly within the European context, places like London, Paris, Brussels, Rome (which would in addition cover the Vatican) and Madrid are generally prioritised and served by some of the elite journalists and broadcasters. In terms of important events like membership of the EEC, the Peace Process, the various European treaties that had to be put to a referendum in Ireland, the collapse of the Celtic Tiger, the migrant crisis, it is important that those covering them have a good grasp of all the ramifications of what is involved. Gillespie argues that the manner in which Ireland negotiated its way out of the financial process was partly due to the quality of reportage and an acute awareness of the perceptions in relation to our plight among our European partners and beyond provided by its media representatives. Gillespie posits that the first phase of the Brexit negotiations shows an equally adroit understanding of how to navigate choppy political waters and how to argue what the essential issues are for Ireland.

This rapid overview of *Ireland in the European Eye* could never do a book of this length and importance justice. It is a highly attractive tome which does credit to its subject matter, to the indefatigable work of its editors and to the Royal Irish Academy, who published it. Retailing at €25, it is an absolute steal and I warmly urge readers to get themselves a copy without delay.

Eamon Maher is Director of the National Centre for Franco-Irish Studies in TU Dublin – Tallaght Campus. His latest book, co-edited with Brian Lucey and Eugene O'Brien, *Recalling the Celtic Tiger*, will be published in October of this year by Peter Lang.