

Reading Contemporary Irish Literature

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Christina Hunt Mahony, *Contemporary Irish Literature: Transforming Tradition*
(New York: St Martin's Press, 1998).

Where do you start? Who to include? Who to leave out? These must have been the difficult questions confronting Christina Hunt Mahony faced with the task of writing a book on contemporary Irish literature. The questions are so difficult because there is so much to cover, so many writers to choose from. Mahony has sensibly decided to restrict herself to living authors — Stewart Parker the Belfast playwright who died prematurely of cancer in his 40s is the only exception allowed — rather than taking a necessarily arbitrary start-date for the 'contemporary' period. The matter of selection is, as always in such cases, a delicate one. Mahony tactfully contrives to mention a considerable number of writers in her Introduction whom she did not find room for in the body of the book. And still her subject required her to deal in more or less detail with 15 poets, 18 playwrights, 23 fiction writers in the three chapters on 'Irish Poetry for Our Age', 'New Ireland on Stage', and 'Modern Irish Fiction — Art and Reality'. It was a formidable task, and the strength of the book is the sustained critical attention given to each of the writers in turn, the scrupulous fairness with which the writing is treated, the judicious discrimination between styles, themes and techniques across this huge range of material. Mahony has given us a map of the territory, showing how Irish writing has grown and developed in the period since the first half of the century, how the literary and cultural traditions of that earlier time (deftly sketched in the book's introduction) have been transformed into the wealth of writing talent that has emerged over the last 50 years. *Contemporary Irish Literature* is an extremely valuable introduction to the subject for anyone coming to it for the first time and an illuminating study for all of us who care about Irish writing.

Mahony makes it clear that her book was conceived primarily, though by no means exclusively, for readers outside Ireland itself. She does not give extended treatment to writers whose 'work is available outside Ireland only irregularly or in limited anthology selections'; she usefully glosses Irish phrases or cultural references that might not be familiar to non-Irish readers; she comments frequently on the extent or limits to the reputation of individual writers in North America. Her book as a whole provokes speculation as to why this reputation should be so much greater in some cases than in others. There has been in recent years a tremendous appetite for things Irish overseas, a market for everything from *Riverdance* to the ubiquitous exported Irish pub. Irish writing too has benefited from this world-wide Hibernophilia, but to very varying degrees in relation to individual writers. Mahony's scrupulous and informed assessment of the range of contemporary Irish authors, with her remarks on their reception outside Ireland, might prompt an attempt to define what makes for the greater success of some over others.

The phenomenal fame of Seamus Heaney is the most obvious case in point. No-one would attempt to deny Heaney's outstanding talent. As Mahony quite rightly sums up her extended analysis of his work: 'Seamus Heaney's corpus is an impressive one for any poet in any age, and his personal accomplishment has earned him his international reputation'. Within Ireland his position as our leading poet would be generally granted. But that position in Ireland would be seen as *primus inter pares*, first among equals; internationally he is considered completely unrivalled, and many of his Irish poetic contemporaries would not even be known. A review by Adrian Frazier of Derek Mahon's *The Yellow Book* in the *Irish Literary Supplement* raised the issue provocatively. He opened the review by imagining clusters of conspiratorial poetry-lovers dotted round the world getting together to whisper their heretical belief that Mahon was better than Heaney. It is at least an arguable case. Although Mahon has been a less prolific poet than Heaney, he is hardly less skilled, with a dazzling lyric gift that has produced some of the finest poems to come out of Ireland in our time. His own carefully edited and revised *Collected Poems*, just published by Gallery Press (December 1999), constitutes a monumental achievement. His work is highly valued, as Frazier's witty vignette suggests, outside as well as inside Ireland. But in terms of international celebrity there can be no comparison with Heaney.

Seamus Heaney's fame was well established long before he won the Nobel Prize in 1995, reflected in his teaching positions at Harvard and as Professor of Poetry at Oxford. From early in his career, when saluted by Robert Lowell as Irish heir to Yeats, he has had a standing beyond that of his contemporaries. His poetry has had powerful advocates in the academy, including the influential Helen Vendler, whose recent book on Heaney is only one of many critical monographs on his work now available. The inherent worth of Heaney's poetry, one might conjecture, has been enhanced by a number of factors. He is, to begin with, a very fine public reader of his own poetry and a brilliant interpreter of other poets. The sense of human warmth, the special quality of the voice, the illuminating commentary that accompanies a Heaney reading, have undoubtedly helped to give an added dimension to his poems for the many audiences round the world who have listened to him read. (Mahon, by contrast, has now renounced giving public readings altogether). Equally Heaney's collections of essays and lectures, *Preoccupations*, *The Government of the Tongue*, *The Redress of Poetry* have shown a luminous critical intelligence and authority that reflects back on his own work. Most crucially, though, if Heaney has come to be seen by many as the Irish poet, it may be because his themes and forms fit so well with what is expected of poetry in general and Irish poetry in particular. The rural Derry childhood experience, mined in his first book *Death of a Naturalist* and since, provides the basis of natural observation and imagery established as normative in the romantic tradition from Wordsworth to Hardy. There is a special dimension to this tradition in Ireland, however, as represented in the poetry of Patrick Kavanagh, an acknowledged influence on Heaney. Ireland in its rural otherness is placed as a site of origin, of pristine or mythic beginnings. But it is also a country renowned for its troubled history, a history which the prolonged violence in the North has kept constantly before the world's eyes. Heaney in his inventive interplay between history, myth and contemporary politics in *North*, in his troubled personal meditations on the Northern crisis in *Station Island*, has been seen to speak resonantly for his country and his people. Earthed in the natural and the ordinary, yet moving at his ease in the world of literature and culture, this is an Irish poet for all seasons. By contrast, the Belfast-born Mahon, urban and urbane, ironical in style and eclectic in subject matter, who follows his imagination where it takes him, be it to a painting by Uccello or a disused shed in

County Wexford, does not in the same way conform to the categories of Irishness or poetry.

In the drama Mahony comments on the international reputation of John B. Keane and Hugh Leonard, Keane largely for the film adaptation of his play *The Field*, Leonard for his Broadway success *Da* which was also subsequently filmed. However neither of these writers have been particularly highly valued within the academy. It is Brian Friel's work which, as Mahony rightly points out, 'becomes canonical as it is written, an achievement that has the distinction of having both popular and professional approval'. Friel, whose 70th birthday was celebrated in 1999 in Ireland with the unique tribute of a nationwide festival, involving the production of eight of his plays besides an exhibition, a symposium, and a volume of essays, has a standing among Irish dramatists almost equivalent to that of Heaney among poets. With *Philadelphia Here I Come!* (1964) and *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990) Friel had two major international successes, both of them often revived; with *Translations*, the inaugural production of the Field Day Theatre company in 1980 he created a play of absorbing interest to all those concerned with issues of language and colonisation in whatever country. Yet with Friel, also, as with Heaney and Mahon, there is a striking comparison to be made with a near contemporary who has not achieved a comparable international reputation. In introducing the work of Tom Murphy, Mahony asserts that 'he can rival any of Ireland's playwrights for the title of finest living dramatist'. This is a judgement with which I would agree, and so would many critics and scholars working on Irish drama inside and outside Ireland. But as Mahony goes on to point out: 'Less performed and read outside Ireland than some of his contemporaries, Murphy has has a history of considerable success in Britain, but has been considered not to "translate" well to North American stages, expect for specialist Irish audiences'.

The comparison with Friel here is a piquant one because the careers of the two playwrights started so much in parallel. Murphy came to prominence with his first full-length play, *A Whistle in the Dark*, produced in London in 1961, where it played in the West End for several months. Friel's *Philadelphia*, staged first at the 1964 Dublin Theatre Festival, went on to a record-breaking run on Broadway. (Oddly enough it was not a success in London.) Since then, although both Murphy and Friel have continued to produce imaginative and innovative work for the theatre, the one has far outdistanced the other in terms of international reception. After the success of *Whistle in the Dark* it was to be seven years before Murphy saw another of his plays staged in or outside Ireland. By contrast, Friel followed up *Philadelphia* with *The Loves of Cass Maguire* which opened on Broadway and *Lovers* which transferred there from Dublin again to a highly successful run. Friel has combined real popular success in the theatre with solid cultural and intellectual credit. In London his plays have regularly transferred to the Royal Court and the National Theatre, when they have not made it to the West End. His work has long been the subject of respectful attention in academic criticism: the first monograph on him appeared as early as 1973; there have been no less than six books devoted to him since 1988.

All these indices of Friel's international reputation are the more striking in comparison with those for Murphy. Murphy's work has been staged in Britain and America — in the summer of 1999 the Abbey production of his most recent play *The Wake* sold out at the Edinburgh Festival — but he has never, since *Whistle in the Dark*, been produced in the West End or on Broadway. *Bailegangaire*, played to enormous acclaim in Ireland by the Druid Theatre Company in 1985, widely recognized as one of the great modern Irish plays, with an outstanding performance by Siobhán McKenna in her last stage role, did not do well when it transferred to the Donmar Warehouse in London. In fact, paradoxically, it was a

London revival of *Whistle in the Dark*, twenty-eight years on in 1989, that kickstarted Murphy's reputation again at a time when his finest current work, *Conversations on a Homecoming*, *The Gigli Concert*, *Bailegangaire*, could get no more than fringe productions at best outside Ireland. Where Friel's plays have been published by Faber since 1965, it was not until 1988 that Murphy was published by an established house outside Ireland and not until the 1990s that he was given the canonical treatment of publication in Methuen's Contemporary Dramatists series. By contrast with the wealth of scholarly study of Friel, there is so far only one full-length book on Murphy.

Why this disproportion? Is it because Murphy's work is more difficult of access, his language more idiosyncratically Irish than the beautiful finished style of Friel? Or because his theatrical experimentation has been more extreme than Friel's, taking him in plays such as *The Sanctuary Lamp* (well discussed by Mahony) outside the recognizable turf of the Irish playwright? Has diasporic nostalgia for Ireland been an important part of the attractiveness of emigrant plays such as *Philadelphia* and *Lughnasa*? Is Friel's *Ballybeg* (setting for so many of his plays) a kind of version of Irish pastoral? These are questions to which I have no definitive answers but which the Murphy/Friel comparison seems to me to throw up.

In fiction there has been no single figure of comparable dominance to that of Heaney in poetry and Friel in the drama. By now Roddy Doyle is almost certainly the most successful Irish fiction writer, a success that took off from the film made of his first novel *The Commitments*, and was further enhanced when he won the Booker Prize with his fourth novel *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha!* Since then the popularity of Doyle's work has never been in doubt, but his reputation among intellectuals and academics has continued to be controversial. In the last issue of *ABEI* Rudiger Imhof strongly contested the claims made for Doyle by Gerry Smyth in *The Novel and the Nation: Studies in the New Irish Fiction*. Doyle's latest novel, the instant best-seller *A Star Called Henry*, received an immensely enthusiastic review from Roy Foster in the *Observer* and an equally destructive notice from Seamus Deane in the *Guardian*. It is easy to see the reasons for the popular appeal of Doyle's work; the dust has yet to settle on the question of his canonical standing. The situation is exactly the opposite with four other leading Irish fiction writers. William Trevor, Jennifer Johnston, John McGahern and John Banville would be almost universally respected, their work known internationally and the subject of widespread academic study. But there are curious limits to their reputation. Mahony comments, for instance, that 'although Banville made an early reputation in Britain and Canada, it has been slow to spread to the United States. His work is translated into a range of European languages, but it attracts only a select, loyal readership outside Ireland'. John McGahern, long regarded within Ireland as one of our leading writers of fiction, had to wait until *Amongst Women* (1990) for a real international success. Trevor and Johnston again have long been well-established as novelists and short-story writers; their books sell steadily but never on the scale of a Roddy Doyle.

The appetite for Irish writing continues unabated. Mahony comments, for example, on the meteoric rise to prominence of playwrights Conor McPherson and Martin McDonagh, each with international successes while still in their 20s. Publishers pay large advances for first novels by Irish writers such as Antonia Logue's prizewinning *Shadowbox* (1999). And Paul Muldoon is now installed, like Heaney before him, as Oxford Professor of Poetry. The phenomenon of contemporary Irish literature and its reception at home and abroad is an enormously complex one that is unlikely to yield to any instant analysis. It is

certainly no criticism of Christina Hunt Mahony's book that it does not address this issue directly. It is rather because of the even-handed judiciousness of her evaluation of the range of modern Irish writers that the disparity between their international reputations emerges so dramatically. What makes an Irish author marketable, accessible, potentially canonical beyond Ireland? What part does Irishness as such play in that international reception? Mahony comments interestingly on the case of Paul Muldoon and his 'crossover' reputation in the United States where he is valued, quite unusually among Irish poets, not specifically as an Irish poet. What is the relation between popular success — the success of a Roddy Doyle — and academic standing, and how does it come about that some writers such as Friel can combine the two? A book such as John Harrington's *The Irish Play on the New York Stage 1874-1966* (University Press of Kentucky, 1997) is suggestive of the sort of work that would need to be done to answer these questions. In the meantime, those of us in Irish studies have every reason to be pleased that such an astonishing range of imaginative writing continues to flow from Ireland, that some at least of these writers have achieved international recognition, and that in Christina Hunt Mahony's book the area of contemporary Irish literature has been given such an informed and authoritative introduction.