

*Britta Olinder and Werner Huber (eds.). Place and Memory in the New Ireland. WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2009*

*New Ireland* is not an entirely new concept. Paradoxically, the idea of a new Ireland is an historically recurring phenomenon, often propelled by an admixture of politics, economics, ideology, and culture. During the Celtic Revival at the turn of the Twentieth century, a faction of Ireland's cultural movers and shakers famously sought to re-imagine the Irish past. At least since then, re-imagination has long characterised the psychic blueprint for defining a 'new' Ireland against more tangible changes in society. The 1930s saw the valorisation of a pastoral image of Ireland as a reaction to a perceived corruption of nationalistic ideals in the previous decades. In the 1960s 'new Ireland' took shape as a progressive place where industrial developments prompted a turn away from insularism and conservatism. In the 1990s, an influx of foreign investment and political influence heralded a new global identity for Ireland, culminating in 1995 – 2007 when the Republic of Ireland enjoyed a significant period of economic growth known colloquially as the Celtic Tiger. In Northern Ireland it was arguably the Peace-Process that prompted the urge to realise new political, social and cultural alignments at the turn of the twenty-first century.

The peculiar genealogy of the concept 'New Ireland' is, perforce, encrypted in the title *Place and Memory in the New Ireland*, the second volume in the Irish Studies in Europe series, produced under the aegis of *EFACIS: The European Federation of Associations and Centres of Irish Studies*. Inspired by an interdisciplinary conference of the same title held in Gothenburg in 2005, *Place and Memory in the New Ireland* is an engaging collection of twelve essays by scholars of Irish studies, tackling such diverse topics as emigration, urban regeneration, film, animation, poetry, prose fiction, and drama. The volume is loosely divided into two parts, but clearly weighted on Irish literature. As if to unabashedly flaunt this bias, the volume also contains two poems by the contemporary Irish poet, Harry Clifton, as well as an excerpt from a novel by the prominent Irish novelist, Deirdre Madden.

Britta Olinder's light and informal introduction gives a helpful and concise précis to each chapter of the volume alongside a very brief background to the 2005 conference. While the introduction seems to deliberately avoid mentioning a shared theoretical drive to the volume (perhaps to reflect the comprehensive and plethoric nature of interdisciplinary conferences), the thematic emphasis clearly falls on place and memory and their offshoot concepts belonging and rootedness. The effect of this is that the compelling *New Ireland* of the title is deployed as a framework for consideration of place and memory and "what they mean today, in the *new prosperous conditions of Ireland*" (emphasis added). Here, through no fault of the authors, is the would-be flaw that threatens to stalk the volume. In only a few short years – in the time lag between conference, composition and publication – the condition of Ireland as 'new and prosperous' has been thrown

into sharp relief following the announcement in September 2008 that Ireland, like much of the rest of the world, was officially in financial crisis.

With the Celtic Tiger currently licking its wounds in the den of economic recession, one might then ask whether the 'New Ireland' under which this volume was conceived still has relevance? In short, it does. Far be it from undermining the foundational drive of the volume, the premise of a 'new and prosperous Ireland' signals a particular historical moment that opens up a rich vein of enquiry into Irish representations at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Borne on the tailwinds of postmodern ambiguity and the revisionist critique of Irish texts, *Place and Memory in the New Ireland* illuminates the notion that (re)defining Ireland is a continuing process of discovery. As such, the now moribund conception of a 'new and prosperous' Ireland also points to a general tendency which has preoccupied Irish studies over the past few decades, as Kerby Miller reminds the reader in the opening lines of the first chapter, "Re-imagining Ireland is nothing new".

Miller's incisive and perspicuously reasoned essay "Re-Imagining the Imaginary: A Challenge to Revisionist Mythology" is a version of the keynote lecture he delivered at the 2005 conference and it appears to function in lieu of an extensive introduction to *Place and Memory in the New Ireland*. In its astute interrogation of three great myths surrounding Irish experience (the two-traditions paradigm, Irish emigration, and Irish relationships with empire and imperialism), Miller's essay cautions against the pitfalls of simplistic and limited approaches to historical revisionism that risk reinstating a Manichean view of Irish experience. In this way, Miller's contribution convoys as it discreetly enriches the remaining essays of the first part.

The volume continues with an essay on the textual analysis of Irish emigrant letters (Graham Davis) and an essay on the regeneration of urban communal spaces in post-Peace Process Belfast (Valérie Peyronel), both of which accent Miller's critique on persisting mythologies. Davis and Peyronel's essays also introduce an interesting counterpoint to Miller with the idea of enabling myths as a panacea for past aches of poverty or sectarianism, while at the same time questioning the efficacy of such notions. Following this, Yann Bévant's essay on Jim Sheridan's *In the Name of The Father* offers an insightful re-reading of a commercially and critically successful film whose main detractors had panned as Republican propaganda. Picking apart the 'ideological contamination' that invariably surrounds calamitous events in Ireland's history, Bévant fortuitously illustrates some of Miller's main points, using Sheridan's film to highlight Ireland's complex relationship to England and the English.

The concurrency of the essays in the first part points to a trend in contemporary Irish studies that questions the prevalence of mythic structures, always with one eye on the economic and social realities that impact on Irish experience. Thomas Walsh's essay, in particular, captures the zeitgeist of the Celtic Tiger 'New Ireland' through analysis of an underestimated and lively subject matter, that is, the little-known genre of Irish animation. Walsh describes

how tax incentives in the 1990s convinced the ex-Disney producer Don Bluth to relocate his production studio to Ireland, thereby spawning the fledgling genre of Irish animation. Walsh's essay makes an important intimation about intercultural influences on traditional forms and genres, suggesting that the appropriation of an American modernist art form indicates, "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".

Following Walsh's analysis of an unconventional form, the volume undergoes a generic shift of its own with two poems by Harry Clifton. "Dag Hammarskjöld" charts the feelings of ambivalence that accompany a nation's new identity on an international level and "Crossing Sweden" draws attention to the history of Swedish emigration and ties to the land. Taken together, both poems hint that the tensions shaping Irish consciousness are in fact features shared with other Europeans. If initially the placement of the poems seems slightly incongruous with the pace and direction of the volume heretofore, it soon becomes apparent that Clifton's poems point back to many of the issues raised in the first set of essays. In shifting the emphasis away from a specifically Irish setting, Clifton's poems add nicely to the volume's intercultural overtones and have the added function of indicating the beginning of the literary section (specifically, the poetry section), making them a pertinent, if somewhat offbeat, pivot point to the volume.

The poetry section displays a recurring concern with Irish poetic tradition as it figures in the work of unrepresentative, or peripheral, contemporary Irish poets. Unsurprisingly, women's poetry receives special attention with essays on the development of a distinctly feminine aesthetic in Irish poetry (Patricia Coughlan) and the condition of liminality and silent spaces in the mind of the Irish female poet (Borbála Faragó). Mary Pierson's essay continues to probe the new alignments of Irish society by tracing motifs of telecommunication technology and a homosexual aesthetic in the works of two contemporary poets who simultaneously grapple with the well-worn images of Yeats and Joyce.

An excerpt from Deirdre Madden's novel *Authenticity* marks the beginning of the section on literary prose. Like Clifton's poems in the previous section, Madden's work orientates the thematic direction of the essays that follow. Through its imagery, *Authenticity* ploughs the ground of the rural-urban dichotomy to draw attention to the complexities of modern Ireland and the ties of land and memory. In a similar vein, Martin Ryle re-reads the putative pastoral nostalgia in John McGahern's fiction to suggest how particular social movements between rural and urban environments necessarily colour an individual's appreciation of the landscape. The thematic thread of landscape and memory juxtaposed with factitious nostalgia is continued in David Clarke's lively and lucid reading of female characters in Patrick McCabe's fiction, followed by Giovanna Tallone's sometimes meandering but highly evocative voyage through the intertwining pasts and presents of Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's fiction.

The volume closes with a dutiful nod to the genre of Irish drama with Joseph Long's impression of how European theatre steered the dramaturgical choices of

the Northern Irish playwright Frank McGuinness. From this stance, Long makes the enticing suggestion for a canonical re-shifting of Irish drama away from the island-based and parochial into a wider European mode of expression.

As a whole, the literature section of *Place and Memory in the New Ireland* illuminates interesting nuances in literary content and form that reflect the changing social patterns of contemporary Ireland. This makes the volume an invaluable source for the study of Irish literary texts from the turn of the twenty-first century. Potentially, the volume may appeal to the general study of literature, particularly in relation to the tandem themes of place and memory and, to a lesser extent, intertextuality, poetic tradition, and literary responses to globalisation. Outside the obvious field of Irish studies, *Place and Memory in the New Ireland* would appeal to those with an interest in historicism and the wider implications of historical revisionism. The first part of the volume, in particular, illustrates an interesting dialectic of national mythology and would provide useful source material to specific areas of research, namely, the historical study of emigration, cultural narrative and visual rhetoric in (former) conflict zones or (former) tiger economies, as well as the impact of globalisation on a sense of national belonging.

Undoubtedly it is the first section that holds the greatest appeal outside of literary studies. In many ways, this split in readership potential also reveals a split in the way 'New Ireland' is interpreted. Where the first set of essays explore 'New Ireland' through the lens of tangible economic and historical realities, the literary section deals primarily in metaphor, presenting an altogether more cogitative quizzing of traditional themes and mythologies. In retrospect therefore, the introductory rubric of a 'new and prosperous Ireland' inadvertently invests the volume with a concordant thesis that does not really extend beyond the first part.

There is a gathering feeling that *Place and Memory in the New Ireland* may have worked better as two volumes, one on the socio-cultural and historical dimensions and one devoted to literature. Perhaps a more extensive introduction giving background to Ireland's roaring tiger economy against the historically recurrent drive towards re-imagining, would have served to bring better cohesion to the volume. As it is, much of the theoretical and historical impetus for the entire volume seems to rest on the burly shoulders of Miller's opening essay, from which the reader must also infer a working definition of the highly loaded and historically heavy term, New Ireland.

The introduction does intimate that the volume is divided into different parts, and the thematic concordance of the essays in each section suggests conscientious editing, but the contents page gives no indication of these structural efforts. This means that another unnecessary task placed on the reader is in establishing format. The volume might have benefited from extra titling to indicate the various sections and subsections which in turn would more readily signpost the volume's potential appeal to a wider field of subjects outside of Irish studies.

There is also an issue of balance with regards to the various sections. Because Long's essay is the sole contribution on Irish drama, the discussion of the genre in

the context of 'New Ireland' seems relatively underrepresented. A solitary piece on Irish drama risks looking like a perfunctory afterthought and fails to present Long's insightful analysis within a wider discussion of contemporary currents in Irish theatre and drama.

It needs to be said that none of these shortcomings detract from the wealth of genuinely absorbing contributions in *Place and Memory in the New Ireland*. As a whole, the volume makes a relevant and engaging contribution to contemporary scholarship in Irish studies and offers a sagacious critique of an array of Irish representations at the turn of the twenty-first century. There is little doubt that an injection of investment in the last decades of the twentieth century irrevocably changed the physical and psychological contours of Ireland. By addressing these changes, *Place and Memory in the New Ireland* should prove an invaluable source to the comparative study of Irish representations in a less than 'prosperous' present and future. Crucially, *Place and Memory in the New Ireland* not only reflects a particular moment of Irish history, but also transcends historical specificity in its collective thesis that "re-imagining Ireland is nothing new".

*Place and Memory in the New Ireland* shows that defining a 'New Ireland' is forever marked by a constant struggle to scrub myths of their nostalgic or corruptive patinas, but at the same time the rebuffering of myths sometimes runs the risk of historical glossing. Ironically, just a bit more editorial elbow grease would have made *Place and Memory in the New Ireland* gleam brighter as the illustrious exploration of re-imagining Ireland that it truly is.

*Róisín Keys*