

The Literary London Journal



Review

Tony Murray, *London Irish Fictions: Narrative, Diaspora and Identity*, Hardback. 222 pages. Liverpool University Press, 2012. ISBN: 978-1-84631-831-3. £66.50.

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<1>As Tony Murray notes in the introduction to *London Irish Fictions: Narrative, Diaspora and Identity*, 'the experience of the London Irish is not as immediately evident in contemporary literature as, for instance, that of the Afro-Caribbean and South Asian communities' (2). Why this should be is not immediately answerable. Murray alludes to the dominance of the Celtic Revival writers and the cultural weight that Joyce and *Ulysses* in particular have over the Anglo-Saxon critical faculty. We have certain culturally determined ideas of what Irishness means and, post-1945, The Troubles has been the most immediate. To some extent the development of Irish writing about London has been ignored until fairly recently when writers such as Colm Tóibín, Anne Enright, Patrick McCabe and John Banville gained a higher public profile on this side of St Stephen's Channel. Yet, as Murray's book demonstrates, this is merely a fraction of Irish writing; there is a distinct tradition of Irish writing about London, a kind of London Irish identity manifested through a series of writers active for the last fifty years yet passing by the mainstream critical consciousness.

<2>London, as Murray makes clear, was not always the intended destination or even a desired one: it was merely the most obvious. The book's subtitle – 'Narrative, Diaspora and Identity' – reflects the London Irish experience primarily through the prism of the diasporic experience. Murray's selection of writers includes the well known: Edna O'Brien, Emma Donoghue, John Lydon and Joseph O'Connor, along with the lesser known, such as Donall MacAmlaigh, Margaret Mulvihill and John Healy. In the case of Donoghue and O'Connor, Murray focusses on their often overlooked works. The selection includes autobiography as well as fiction. As Murray notes 'autobiographical texts [...] employ the aesthetic markers of fiction, both in terms of their narrative drive and with regard to the ways in which the identities of their subjects are revealed' (9).

<3>With its focus on the experience of a diasporic community, Murray's theoretical approach is a combination of two concepts: 'diaspora space' and 'narrative identity' (13, 16). The book seeks to re-establish the presence of the Irish in London, to redress the 'deficit in research on post-war London literature' and to offer an 'important counter-discourse to the proliferation of often negative media portrayals of the Irish in Britain since the war' (9). As Murray makes clear, antipathy and hatred towards the Irish started before 1969 and has carried on since 1998 (and the signing of The Good Friday Agreement).

<4>Murray divides his book into three parts representing distinct strands of post-1945 London Irish writing. The Mail Boat Generation covers the period of the late 1950s and early 1960s, the end of the de Valera era and the rise of the Seán Lemass when it seemed that Ireland would become a modern industrialised society. It was not to be, as the 1968 documentary *The Rocky Road to Dublin* shows. The figure of the Irishman as both labourer and poet was embodied by Behan in real life and by Anthony Cronin fictively in *The Life of Riley*: these images of the Irish navvy would serve a purpose but also become a burden. In the work of Edna O'Brien the themes of storytelling and identity creation are shown by Murray to be intrinsic to the notion of Irish identity in the city.

<5>Murray's second section considers the so-called 'Ryanair Generation'. In the 1970s the population of Ireland under twenty-five was the majority for the first time since the early nineteenth century. This generation was better educated than its predecessors and consequently had greater expectations for the future, expectations that Ireland in this period could not meet. Murray notes how, with the help of Ken Livingstone and the GLC in the early 1980s, a stronger Irish identity was established through community ventures. With the increase in education came a development of women writers, and it is worth noting how in the first part of the book there is only one (Edna O'Brien) whereas the period of the 'Ryanair Generation' sees three considered: Margaret Mulvihill, Emma Donoghue and Sarah Berkeley. Questions of sexuality are also raised, with Donoghue addressing homosexuality and Berkeley incest. Murray places these within the context of contemporary Irish political discourse and shows how London can offer a refuge, although not always.

<6>For this group of writers London is not invariably a city of opportunity. The idea of diaspora as exile is reflected in Joseph O'Connor's character Eddie Virago and Robert McLiam Wilson's Ripley Bogle. They also reflect the problems inherent in any new arrival to a country; the art of fitting in depends on many things but both the IRA mainland bombing campaign and the continuation of that old Irish trope the navvy made life particularly difficult for the Irish in London. Virago ends up flipping burgers outside Euston Station, the most common entry point to the city for the Irish migrant.

<7>The final section looks at works written by second-generation writers and of the five texts discussed only one is fiction, the rest memoir. The subjectivity of the memoir as something discursively produced is both a post-structuralist notion and also key to the theoretical underpinning of the book as a whole. Murray employs Paul Ricoeur's idea that 'continual re-reading, reinterpretation and reinscribing of our lives (whether consigned to paper or not), in itself, creates meaning' to show how the biographical works of John Healy (*The Grass Arena*) and John Lydon (*No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs*) develop this idea with their themes of cultural disjunction and the porous border between fact and

fiction (155-163). In all of these texts there is a conflict of identity, between being Irish, British or even London Irish. Greta Mulrooney's novel *Araby* is particularly reflective of the conflicts between the various identities and its inclusion within the book serves as a useful reminder of the depth and quality of Irish writing over the last twenty years.

<8>There are exclusions: the book does not cover drama or poetry and omits such novels as Patrick McCabe's *Breakfast on Pluto*. Whether excluding McCabe derives from thematic concerns or reflects the ambivalent and sometimes hostile reception he has within Irish writing is unclear. The elephant in the room for Murray is the whole question of Irish identity in London during the period of The Troubles, which he avoids. On the other hand, it is perfectly correct to focus on the creative impulse of the London Irish writers of the period outside of any discussion of the post-1969 political situation. They were able to create an aesthetic during a period of political and emotional turbulence and produce an image for themselves that ran counter to dominant British political discourse of the time, as Murray notes.

<9>After ten years of the Literary London Conference and Journal, most of the ethnic groups within the city have been considered and discussed. Some writers from ethnic minority backgrounds have been offered more conference time and publication space than others because they have a larger critical presence, such as Zadie Smith. Yet, as Murray notes, the Irish have been in London much longer than most, Jews and Huguenots excepted. They have their own well-established cultural traditions, and yet for the most part they are ignored unless they have a guitar.

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