



Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Irish Pages: A Journal of Contemporary Writing: Volume 3, Number 1, Spring/Summer, 2005* by Chris Agee, Cathal Ó Searcaigh and Sean Mac Aindrea

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This is a fascinating book on the last twenty years of Irish political life and not merely an account of the PDs. It illustrates two well-known adages: "a week is a long time in politics" and "one of the most important factors for success in politics is good luck." The main protagonists in the saga exhibit a common determination to achieve political power at almost any price. Regrettably, the bitterness, the triumph of expediency over principle and the ruthless ambition, which underlie Collins' benign narrative, are such as would hardly commend a career in Irish politics.

J. Anthony Gaughan

***Irish Pages – A Journal of Contemporary Writing – Volume 3, Number 1, Spring/Summer, 2005*, edited by Chris Agee, Cathal Ó Searcaigh and Sean Mac Aindrea: Belfast, The Linen Hall Library, 2005**

The two essays that kick off the latest edition of *Irish Pages* certainly pack an intellectual punch. Chris Agee's essay, *On the Sociology of Reputation*, puts one in mind of a heavyweight boxer swinging huge, arced punches at a variety of hapless opponents, from literary critics to publishers to celebrity writers, all of whom stagger on the ropes when struck by one of Agee's haymakers. He lambasts what he calls the Dan Brown future, where literary styles and publications are driven more by the accountant than any objective criteria of literary worth. By placing this essay at the start of the journal, Agee is clearly indicating that *Irish Pages* is driven by purer, non-commercial concerns and the eclectic and fascinating range of material that follows bears witness to this. Tim Robinson's spatial awareness is highlighted in his essay *In Praise of Space*, a modern revisiting of Synge's *Aran Islands*, in which he celebrates the concept of space and the cautions against the perceived restrictions of location. The essay is wonderful mix of the metaphysical and the scientific, framed by Robinson's intimate knowledge of Árainn (Inishmore) based on his cartographical experiences there over a number of years. This essay is nicely balanced by the photographs of Mélina Gacoin in her portfolio entitled *Kilometre 28*, a series of photographs taken over the course of a two month, 4,000 kilometre journey around the coastline of Ireland. Gacoin took a photograph every 28 kilometres for no better reason than she was 28 years old at the time, and the result is a curious mixture of the traditional and the modern, velcro-footed mountain sheep juxtaposed with images of recently built imitation thatched cottages that are blighting so many parts of rural Ireland. The inclusion of a portfolio of beautifully reproduced photographs again

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emphasises the eclectic nature of *Irish Pages* and signals the clearly stated remit to extend beyond the literary.

One only has to look at the table of contents to see that *Irish Pages* mixes contributions from some established heavy hitters with some emerging voices, as well as dipping into an extensive archive of previously published material. For example: *Five Poems*, by Seamus Heaney, are somewhat playfully followed by *Cúig Dánta* by the brilliant Cathal Ó Searcaigh; Heaney's rich and powerful verse perfectly counterpoised by Ó Searcaigh's exuberance and quirkiness. What is equally refreshing is that Ó Searcaigh's poems are published both in the original Irish and then translated into English, allowing the different languages to be enjoyed simultaneously, whilst equally hinting that these are not competing languages in the race for the soul of Irish authenticity, but rather complementary vehicles in which the complexities of identity can be more fully expressed and explored. This occurs again with the translation by Seán Mac Aindreasa of Liam Ó Muirthile's long Irish poem *ÁÉÍÓÚ* in which the poet's difficult school days are recalled. There are also poetry translations from the Russian of Inna Lisnianskaya and from the Dutch of Esther Jansma, which reflect the outward-looking perspective of the editors. Indeed, this is further emphasised by the inclusion of Daniel Weissbort's interesting essay on the translation work of Ted Hughes, taken from a forthcoming book outlining the genesis and achievements of their journal, *Modern Poetry in Translation*, which they co-founded in 1965. Weissbort's essay charts the choppy waters of translation in great detail, outlining the lengths to which both he and Hughes would go to produce as faithful a translation as possible. Given the general current popularity of translation studies, the essay sheds fascinating on the practical and intellectual complexities involved in the translation of texts by people who do not have a command of the source language.

Irish Pages clearly sets out its stall as a diverse journal that draws from a variety of literary wells. The balance between the more weighty academic pieces and the creative writing is, overall, well struck and there is certainly a range of genres on offer, from letters to photographs to traditional critical essays. However, merely stating that the intention of a journal is to be as eclectic as possible does not mean that this should become an end in itself. The principal difficulty with any journal is

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establishing a niche in the market and to subsequently feed the target audience with relative material. It is not easy to see exactly what the target audience for *Irish Pages* is. Its clarion call to those 'outside the ghetto of the literati' sounds laudable enough but this, ironically, is perhaps precisely the audience that will find what it is looking for in the journal. The snippets of writing are sufficiently tasty to encourage the reader to seek out more, but is principally within the ranks of those the journal somewhat hastily dismisses that *Irish Pages* will find its most receptive readers.

John McDonagh

***A Social History of Women in Ireland: 1870-1970*, by Rosemary Cullen Owens, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2005, pp.401**

What is a "social history"? It seems to me that it is history with a special emphasis on human society. That is to say, activities involving the social and public realm. To write a social history is a challenge with a broad and inclusive remit.

A "social history" of women in Ireland, for me, would include - besides the darker statistics about female oppression, low wages, domestic violence, the stigma of illegitimacy, the trade union struggle, the limits of education, "confinement" as our author puts it, to the home, and being "channelled" into humble female jobs with a wifely dimension – a lot more about many other aspects of women's lives over the span of a century.

It would involve, for example, a rewarding trawl through magazines such as *Irish Tatler and Sketch*, which, in the 1930s and 40s, is awash with spler did female Masters of Fox Hounds, brilliant lady show jumpers and spirited women golfers, in chequered trousers, wielding a formidable iron. It would include that wonderful portrait at the entrance to Mary Immaculate College in Limerick, of young women undergraduates around 1900, setting out on their chosen path of life – and, if the archives permit it, following up what course each life took. It would consider the unusual number of women who were studying medicine in Dublin from the later 1920s onwards.

It would look at the role of such institutions as the ballroom and the dance-floor: I remember my sister's generation (born 1930s) talking a great deal about "dress dances", which occurred with a great flurry in January and February (leading up to Lent), and around which there was