

Ordinary Irish Life: Music, Sport and Culture. Edited by Méabh Ní Fhuartháin and David M. Doyle. Pp x, 222. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2013. Hardback €58.50, Paperback €22.45.

This collection of nine essays, edited under the auspices of the Centre for Irish Studies at NUI Galway, seeks to broaden further the remit of Irish Studies by arguing for the place of sport, music and culture as central planks in that arena. Chapters 2, 3, 6 and 8 deal with music, chapters 4 and 7 with sport, while chapters 5, 9 and 10 range from explorations of ‘corner boys’, to radio talk shows, to Irish migrant workers in Cuba respectively. While the majority of the essays are concerned with 20th-century Ireland, the volume as a whole ranges from the late 18th century up to the present time. Some essays deal with specific centres (Belfast, Dublin, Lahinch, Miltown Malbay, Cuba, Massachusetts) while others are not geographically specific (corner boys were found in most Irish towns, radio talk shows tend to transcend the regional, while the peripatetic showbands were a national phenomenon). A casual glance at the chapter headings suggests that a broad purview and a broad definition of culture are at hand. But what about the ‘ordinary’? What does that mean for Irish Studies in general and for this volume in particular?

One could argue that a book that goes by the title *Ordinary Irish Life* might not need a definition of something so seemingly obvious as the ‘ordinary’. The Preface (curiously placed as Chapter 1) states that ‘This collection offers new insights into the process of being Irish and its quotidian manifestations.’ (p.2). If all the chapters were rooted in everyday ordinary life, then that casual statement of intent might give the reader no reason to pause, but many of the chapters deal with the ‘ordinary’ in an indirect way only. When the editors directed the reader to recent relevant literature (p.2), I regretted not having their own understanding laid bare in the Preface. While this does not take from the contribution of the individual chapters to the field of Irish Studies, it does cast a shadow over the book itself.

It is clear, from a sociological point of view at least, that scholars have to be careful about what they might regard as ordinary. The words of two sociologists should set the compass reading for any exploration of this topic: 'in order to describe just what constitutes the ordinary, the ordinary itself is theorized. In this respect, the ordinary is as much a philosophical invention as is the extraordinary' (J.F. Gubrium & J.A. Holstein, 'Individual Agency, the Ordinary, and Postmodern Life' *The Sociological Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 3, Summer, 1995, pp. 555-570, p.556.) Only two of the chapters in this volume make explicit the power of the ordinary as an interpretative category, namely Leo Keohane's and Finola Doyle O'Neill's. It is with Keohane's excellent chapter, 'Corner Boys in Small Town Ireland, 1922-1970', that 'ordinary Irish life' comes into focus most clearly. It is perhaps not surprising that the wonderful image on the book's cover relates to this chapter. (Sadly, it is the only image in the entire book.) Keohane's statement that his chapter 'is a discourse on the manifestation of corner boys in Ireland and as such is concerned with what the corner boys represented rather than any indisputable analysis of what they were composed' (p.69) makes it clear that the 'ordinary' should be carefully constructed so as to liberate its hermeneutic power. Similarly, Doyle O'Neill's 'Life on Air: Talk Radio and Popular Culture in Ireland' demonstrates that the 'ordinary' can sometimes act as a radical agent and not just an inanity: 'The Gay Byrne Show aired at a time in Ireland's cultural history when simply airing social and personal relationship problems was in itself a socially revolutionary activity.' (pp.143-4).

The title of Guy Beiner's chapter, 'Recycling Irish Popular Culture', gives no clue as to its main concern which is an encyclopaedic chronicle of the sources of the enduring ballad 'The Night before Larry was stretched'. As Beiner states, the ballad itself is a literary artefact that exists at some remove from the 'ordinary' life which it re-presents.

Rebecca S. Miller's chapter gives a fascinating and chilling insight into the showband era from the perspective of its female performers, and in so doing it discloses something

extraordinary in Irish life: the title of the chapter says as much “We were so different!”. Moreover, Miller illustrates the almost feudal attitude to women that was once a normal part of the music business in Ireland, and the reader will be alarmed at her (casual) reference to the sexual assaults that many of the female performers endured in the dance halls and backstage (p.34).

Margaret Brehony’s detailed chapter on the dismal fate of the migrant railroad workers in 1830’s Cuba supplies much archival context for an understanding of the day-to-day experience of the Irish workers/para-slaves who toiled alongside those from Africa and the Canary Islands.

Lauren Weintraub Stoebel’s chapter on Irish traditional music in Dublin, has, like Keohane’s, strong theoretical underpinnings that move the discussion of the ordinary beyond the merely descriptive. Verena Commins’s essay on the Willie Clancy Summer School provides another strong contribution, and is an interesting counterpart to Stoebel’s. However, I wonder how we can reconcile Commins’s statement that ‘Privileging “the local” is a constitutive feature of the Willie Clancy Week and an alternative to the nationalising narratives attributed to Comhaltas’ (p.126) with Stoebel’s more nuanced finding that ‘many, if not most [Comhaltas] members think of themselves first and foremost as members of their local branch’ (p.92).

Both of the chapters dealing with sport, while rich in detail and narrative flow, seem at the furthest remove from the touchstone of the ‘ordinary’. Jim Shanahan’s fascinating chapter, ‘Séan Burke, Lion of Lahinch: An IRA man at the Walker Cup’, is essentially about Burke’s extraordinary presence at the 1932 Walker Cup, and, indeed in Ireland’s golfing community at the time. Vic Rigby and Liam O’Callaghan show how music, sport and politics

can coincide/collide at particular defining moments, in this case at the extraordinary 1954 Irish rugby international in Belfast.

It is clear from this volume alone, that the lens of the 'ordinary' is a useful one for Irish Studies in its scrutiny of what it means to be Irish in Ireland and abroad. While Irish Studies seeks new objects of study and new methodologies, and while the prospect of mining 'ordinary Irish life' for new insights is exciting indeed, it needs to be done with careful attention to the various terms and conditions that must be applied. Finally, I must mention that the Index falls short of normal formatting conventions.

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