

## A Shimmering Social Tapestry of Corkonia

*The Cork Anthology*, edited by Seán Dunne, Cork University Press, 1993. ISBN 0-902561-88-X. RRP €9 (hardback, a bargain at time of going to press); pb €29

Reviewed by Frances Devlin-Glass

This anthology is one I'd strongly recommend to anyone with Cork connections, to travelers to Ireland, and indeed to any Hibernophile. It fairly scintillates with contrasting colours and textures, periods and personalities, landscapes and mindscapes. It is a mix of genres and timeframes, with an emphasis on social history, and a fair piling up in the final section of history (which seems to end with the Civil War, with Michael Collins and Terence MacSwiney). Has history not happened in Cork since 1921?

Although women are not richly represented (15% of the writers are women), many of the pieces concern themselves with powerful wives, mothers, and mothers of the nation. The Hag of Beare is there, as she must be, Earth-Mother of west Cork, one-eyed and storm-tossed, but rich with memories of the times she seduced princes before taking the veil. She sits not far from Spenser's bride for whose safety the settler was prepared to overlook (and demean) the existence of many a Corkman. The woods might have answered 'Hymen, hymen' on her wedding day, but they were not native voices. Such Anglo gentry were excluded from the lives of such as Patrick Galvin's Aunt Bridget 'who had faith in children', and Frank O'Connor's mother who survived a series of exploitative foster-carers and a Catholic orphanage (with nuns kind and cruel) without being traumatized by the trauma. Her large family was farmed out after the death of a loving father and a mother's consignment to the workhouse.

Cork County boasted the richest soil in Europe, and became a paradisaal home to generations of settlers along the Bride, Blackwater and the Lee from the sixteenth century. There are plenty of accounts of the gentrified world of the Big Houses, and an amazing account from two perspectives of Elizabeth Bowen's friendship with her housekeeper, a remarkable serving woman 'Sarah', whom Molly Keane knew well by the name Molly O'Brien, undoubtedly the same woman. The appreciativeness of these accounts of an ordinary lower-class woman by two of the gentry are stunning, and they help this reader to unpack the often complex interdependencies of rich and poor, Catholic and Protestant, upper class and their servants. Molly Keane makes a strange statement about Elizabeth Bowen's recreation of her family over four centuries:

There is an eerie shiver in Elizabeth's absolute acceptance and understanding of the lives of her Bowen predecessors. ...it is as though she laughed with them, wore their clothes, ate such food as they did, same the same sunshine and belting rain through the same high-paned windows. She was possessed. How she rid herself of the possessive power of this house is an even stranger mystery than the strength of that possession. (p.313)

Some works of literature are so precious one hardly dares revisit them for fear they may seem less so on subsequent encounters, and one of these was for me Eibhlin Dhubh Ni Chonail's lament for her husband, Airt O'Laoghaire, assassinated in 1773 for refusing to sell his horse for five pounds. Under the Penal Laws, as a Catholic, he was obliged to sell for that price to a Protestant. He had just beaten the High Sheriff of Cork in a race. I memorably heard it first intoned soulfully by that consummate thespian, Professor John A. Murphy, over Art's grave on a dusk evening in June 1983. It sent a shiver down my spine because it was such an erotic poem, and it still is, I'm pleased to report. What astonishes me about Eilís Dillon's translation is how domestic a poem it is, or is that the sympathy of a womanly translator? A superb elegy that should sit alongside the best of elegies of any age.

There are lots of surprises in this volume – the account, for example, by Arthur Young who toured Ireland in 1780 of systematic tree-planting in Mitchelstown to replace those stripped out by Henry Tudor for his navy. The peasantry (who emerge from this narrative as only a little removed from barbarity) and tenantry were given thousands of trees *gratis* and those who planted and tended them were paid extra for their pains. Father Prout's (undistinguished) jolly verses about Cork as a centre of trade allow one to revel with him in Cork's links (via the sea) with places as exotic as Cadiz and Bot'ny Bay. Eilís Dillon's glimpse into life as a Catholic professor's wife/warden in the Honan Hostel at what is now University College Cork in the 1940s is quirky: her principles of house-keeping would have thrilled the best quantity surveyor and restaurateur equally; how she ran a hostel for 50 and a rich life for her three progeny (there was also a nurse), and kept the house-staff in order, and restored the Gothic vestments designed by the Dun Emer Guild, and negotiated the prurient interest of the President, Alfred O'Rahilly, in the 'morals' of his female charges, commands respect. And she foiled his murderous intentions against her beloved cat, Tadhg: it was O'Rahilly's monstrous revenge on her husband's resistance in Academic Council. Her comment that 'University College, Cork was like a convent run by a mad reverend mother' (p.112) seems an apt summary of that weird, ceremonial, cloistered lifestyle, where terrorism of a banal kind walked hand-in-glove with string quartets and gorgeous vestments and incense under the leadlight windows. The superb poem in which Derek Mahon sacralises an abandoned humble 'Garage in Co.Cork' does its social history lightly as it transforms petrol pumps into an old man and his wife, while 'the virgin who escaped his dark design/Sanctions the townland from her prickly shrine'.

I really enjoyed how often anthologized extract was placed alongside another that spoke to it, usually dialogically. Academic middle-class Eilís Dillon's piece sits alongside Seán O'Faoláin's shabby genteel bobby family, and that alongside Isabel Healey's reminiscences about being a farmer's daughter three miles from Cork in the 1950s, and reading Eilís Dillon's books for kids (written presumably when she was warden's wife at Honan Hostel). Her memories of Christmases in Cork's Munster Arcade, and of festivals like St Pat's Parade, and visiting musicians at the Cork Opera, is much amplified by David Marcus's fictionalization of a visit by the Carl Rosa Opera Company during the Civil War. The practice, apparently, was for the town to meet them at the Railway station and escort them to their hotel, and for this they were rewarded with songs from the shows the company was mounting. It sounds in this version to have been pure magic. Marcus dramatizes what it was like in the 1920s not to know if your celebrities were

likely to arrive or not, because of the uncertainty of communications. This company brought a much relished taste of Europe to Cork, and Marcus's viewpoint is that of a Jewish Corkman. The contrasts set up in this anthology between wealthy and impoverished make the extracts that deal with the Famine, which come late in the collection, excoriating. The scale of devastation in Cork is made to seem overwhelming by such fine chroniclers as N. Marshall Cummins and An tAthair Peadar Ó Laoghaire (translated by Ó Céirín).

I'd suggest you snap up the remaining cheap hardbacks. You won't regret it. A must for anyone drawn to Cork city or county.