

Britta Olinder, Werner Huber (eds.)

PLACE AND MEMORY IN THE NEW IRELAND

Irish Studies in Europe

Edited by

Michael Böss, Werner Huber, Catherine Maignant, Hedwig Schwall

Volume

2

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**PLACE AND MEMORY
IN THE NEW IRELAND**

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CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	7
<i>Britta Olinder (Göteborg)</i> INTRODUCTION	9
<i>Kerby A. Miller (Columbus, MO)</i> RE-IMAGINING THE IMAGINARY: A CHALLENGE TO REVISIONIST MYTHOLOGY	13
<i>Graham Davis (Bath)</i> RECONSTRUCTED MEMORY: IRISH EMIGRANT LETTERS FROM THE AMERICAS	27
<i>Valérie Peyronel (Paris)</i> URBAN REGENERATION IN BELFAST: LANDSCAPE AND MEMORY	37
<i>Yann Bévant (Rennes)</i> ANTICIPATING THE PEACE PROCESS: <i>IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER</i> AS A MYTH-BREAKING MESSAGE	47
<i>Thomas Walsh (Loughborough)</i> IRISH ANIMATION AND RADICAL MEMORY	57
<i>Harry Clifton (Dublin)</i> TWO POEMS	67
<i>Patricia Coughlan (Cork)</i> "CHIPPED AND TILTED MARYS": TWO IRISH POETS AND THEIR CONTEMPORARY CONTEXTS	71
<i>Borbála Faragó (Dublin)</i> "WATCH ME WHEREVER I GO": AMBIVALENCE AND MISDIRECTION IN EILÉAN NÍ CHUILLEANÁIN'S POETRY	101
<i>Mary Pierse (Cork)</i> "OUT-AND-OUT WEARY OF EXCAVATING IN THE PAST": THE NEW IRELANDS OF CATHAL Ó SEARCAIGH AND DENNIS O'DRISCOLL	111

<i>Deirdre Madden (Dublin)</i> FROM AUTHENTICITY, CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE	123
<i>Martin Ryle (Brighton)</i> PLACE, TIME, AND PERSPECTIVE IN JOHN MCGAHERN'S FICTION	127
<i>David Clark (A Coruña)</i> MAMMIES, TROLLOPS, AND RE-CLAIMERS OF THE NIGHT: WOMEN IN PATRICK MCCABE'S FICTION	137
<i>Giovanna Tallone (Milan)</i> HERE AND THEN, THERE AND NOW: PLACE AND MEMORY IN ÉILÍS NÍ DHUIBHNE'S FICTION	147
<i>Joseph Long (Dublin)</i> FRANK MCGUINNESS AND ARMAND GATTI: PLAYS OF MEMORY AND SURVIVAL	157
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS	165

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B.O., W.H.

INTRODUCTION

Britta Olinder

"Place and Memory in the New Ireland" was the theme of the Fifth EFACIS conference held in Gothenburg, Sweden, in December of 2005. The topic was related to the ongoing 'Memory Project' of the Nordic Irish Studies Network (NISN), which has since resulted in *Recovering Memory: Irish Representations of Past and Present*, edited by Hedda Friberg, Irene Gilsenan Nordin, and Lene Yding Pedersen (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007). One of the five sections therein explicitly deals with "Memory and Place," a nexus that seems quite natural, since these two concepts have to do with belonging and rootedness, both geographically and historically, representing two different dimensions. The question is what they mean today, in the new prosperous conditions of Ireland.

Beginning in the past, Kerby Miller's "Re-Imagining the Imaginary: A Challenge to Revisionist Mythology" explores different interpretations of Irish history including separate Protestant identities, causes, and consequences of Irish emigration, and Irish relationships, past and present, to empire and imperialism. His main argument is that Revisionist mythology has simplified and distorted the facts and that the Two Traditions paradigm does not promote full understanding, neither of the Irish past nor of its present situation. Hence, he claims that the long-suppressed voices of the Ulster Protestant victims of the Famine must be recovered and "in the process we may learn that the Two Traditions paradigm offers no more infallible guide to Ireland's future than it does to Ulster's past."

Continuing on an historical note in "Reconstructed Memory: Irish Emigrant Letters from the Americas," Graham Davis examines Irish emigrant letters to find how a culture of exile and individual development in the new-found context contribute to keeping the memory of Ireland "in aspic," while Irishness is being invented and reconstructed.

In her account of urban regeneration in Belfast since the late 1980s ("Urban Regeneration in Belfast: Landscape and Memory"), Valérie Peyronel points to the sectarian conflict between the two groups of inhabitants. The rebuilding of the city after the Troubles led to a rediscovery of the significance of place and its relation to a history of industrial distinction and memories of prosperity as well as of violence. The Victorian heritage as a non-divisive or neutral memory of place is promoted to make traces of more recent sectarian divisions disappear.

Another way of handling the memory of the conflict is seen in Jim Sheridan's film *In the Name of the Father*. In Yann Bévant's analysis ("Anticipating the Peace Process: *In the Name of the Father* as a Myth-Breaking Message"), it becomes a presage of the peace process as the main character learns to handle his memories by express-

ing them in words and committing them to a tape recorder, thereby freeing his own history, as he remembers it, from the interpretation by others. The historical myth of the Other – as seen both from an Irish and an English point of view – is shattered when prejudice, fed on memories of conflict in the colonial history of Ireland, is defeated by the correction of false representations or myths concerning both the past and the present.

The importance of demythologising tradition and nation is further emphasised in "Irish Animation and Radical Memory" by Thomas Walsh who also takes up the dialectic of old rural Ireland in contrast to its modern urban counterpart. His focus is on the independent Irish animation industry emerging in the 1990s along with the Celtic Tiger economy; his prime example is the animated short film *Give up Yer Aul Sins*, which splits the narrative between place and memory by making a child in urban Dublin re-tell a Biblical story in imaginary rural terms. This lack of connection is interpreted as a sign of globalisation and of a new Irish identity.

The literature section is opened by Harry Clifton, who read some of his poetry (including "Dag Hammarskjöld") at the conference reception in Gothenburg's City Hall. Later he sent us his memory poem of travelling through Sweden after the conference. We are happy and grateful to be allowed to print these poems here.

In "'Chipped and tilted Marys': Two Irish Poets and Their Contemporary Contexts," Patricia Coughlan sets the scene for poetry criticism by opening up the poetic worlds of two women poets, Moya Cannon and Vona Groarke, whose work, while not yet among the best known, marks "the development of a feminine aesthetic in Irish poetry." The "chipped and tilted Marys" of her title, sharing "a vital role with Mother Ireland in *her* various manifestations," become reference points for an ambiguous tradition. As far as memory is concerned, Coughlan particularly notes Groarke's sense of history, her "searching historical reflexivity" but also glimpses of haymaking as an individual memory and a thing of the past for the whole community.

While many Irish writers face the themes of place and memory head-on, setting their work in recognisably Irish places and memories, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, as Borbála Faragó shows in "'Watch me wherever I go': Ambivalence and Misdirection in Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's Poetry," circumnavigates these themes by talking about their opposites: hidden spaces and subdued, silent memories, bringing the reader's attention to the liminal and the tacit. Her poetry creates a space for the expression of the unsaid, unearthing not only concealed memories, but also the double bind of remembering and forgetting within the psychic landscape of contemporary Ireland. Her liminal spaces and silent narratives stimulate a reading strategy which looks for interpretation within the context of both spatial and communicative latency.

In "'Out-and-out weary of excavating in the past': The New Irelands of Cathal Ó Searcaigh and Dennis O'Driscoll," Mary Pierse contrasts the "memorable images

of Ireland" we are used to from classical writers like Yeats and Joyce with the excavated memories of place in O'Driscoll and Ó Searcaigh. She finds "surprise vistas" in "patterns of recollection that are true to urban and rural experiences of the twenty-first century in Ireland while yet connecting it with the mythical and historical pasts." She comments on the function of memory and how it becomes mixed with modern international influences.

Before moving on to prose fiction we remember how the tone of the conference was set by Deirdre Madden reading from her novel *Authenticity* on the opening night. Ms. Madden has graciously permitted us to reprint the chapter recording, in my interpretation, the meeting during a walk in the Wicklow hills of two characters who are already dead when the action of the novel sets in. The two main characters have no idea that the mother of one ever met the father of the other, but here it is marked as a memory by the use of italics throughout the chapter. For the reader of the novel the characters are recognised by the walking outfit of one and the wristwatch of the other. Madden's intricate web of past and present combined with graphic descriptions of place would have been the perfect subject for a critical study in the context of this conference.

In "Place, Time, and Perspective in John McGahern's Fiction," Martin Ryle focuses on the change of perspective, when, after a career in the metropolis, the native insider returns as an urban outsider but still remembering the landscape before him as a functional site for rural work or play, while the tourist would regard the same landscape merely in aesthetic terms. The power of native memories of a rural childhood is set against the power of metropolitan culture.

Memory in Patrick McCabe's fictional world of male protagonists is always related to place and to a dominant female character, as David Clark maintains in "Mammies, Trollops, and Re-Claimers of the Night: Women in Patrick McCabe's Fiction." There is a difference between what might be called the subjective memory of the main character and the more objective one presented to the reader. The confusion between reality and fantasy leads to invented memories of mother figures. As far as place is concerned, the invented locations of small Irish towns avoid both the traditionally romantic countryside and modern urban development to represent a "claustrophobic memory of the stifling mid-sized communities."

In "Here and Then, There and Now: Place and Memory in Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's Fiction" Giovanna Tallone demonstrates how Ní Dhuibhne intertwines past and present, time and place, not least in childhood memories. Place becomes a catalyst for time: "In memory the past that is remembered and the present of the act of remembering co-exist and Ní Dhuibhne's use of place and memory reproduce this effect."

Finally, in "Frank McGuinness and Armand Gatti: Plays of Memory and Survival," Joseph Long examines McGuinness's treatment of history, memory, identity, and

sense of place in his two Ulster plays *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching towards the Somme* and *Carthaginians*. Long primarily demonstrates how the Irish playwright transforms the influence of French dramatist Armand Gatti in the embodiment of memory and representations of utopian space and time-out-of-time.

As this collection hopefully shows, place and memory, especially in Irish terms, are categories opening up historical developments, social and political issues and a rich field in film and literature. Turning our minds to the place of the conference, however, there is one memory that participants keep referring to: the Lucia procession of young girls, all in white and carrying candles, singing Christmas carols in Latin, English, and Swedish.

Britta Olinder, December 2008