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Tyler Farrell

Marquette University, tyler.farrell@marquette.edu

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Review of Anglo-Irish Autobiography: Class, Gender, and the Forms of Narrative, by Elizabeth Grubgeld

Tyler Farrell
Marquette University

Elizabeth Grubgeld | *Anglo-Irish Autobiography: Class, Gender, and the Forms of Narrative* | Syracuse: Syracuse University | 2004 | 216 pp. | ISBN 0815630417 | \$19.95

The recent interest in Irish and Anglo-Irish autobiography of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has spawned a number of works addressing the importance of life-writing to the Irish literary tradition. The formation of a national identity shows cultural and historical insight to the reader of Irish literature and creates a simple necessity in the understanding of the development of Irish writing in general. Elizabeth Grubgeld's book, *Anglo-Irish Autobiography: Class, Gender, and the Forms of Narrative* tackles many of these complex issues and explores the fecundity of

authors who not only engage in fiction or poetry, but also explore the self and the creation of realism, perception, and influence in autobiography. No doubt this book will entice readers to explore Irish life-writing further and show the vital impact that memoir has had on not only Irish writers, but Ireland herself.

Immediately Grubgeld admits to the problematic nature of the term “Anglo-Irish” and explains early in the text that such a designation can create questions of race, religion, and class that are often quite difficult to delineate. She attempts to clarify the term and quickly admits that “As members of a depleted colonial class, Anglo-Irish autobiographers draw from their family histories a sense of continuity and dissolution, influence and irrelevance, identity and nothingness. They rail against their own class, and they defend its attitudes and actions; they assert their place within an Irish nation, and they question its legitimacy” (xi). The construction of identity begins with a voyage into the personal and societal while Grubgeld shares with us an enthusiasm for the necessity of the Anglo-Irish writer in the pantheon of world literature. She feels that in a way they become architects of biography in a place where religion and history can often jump between

English, Anglo-Irish and native Irish to include perceptions that come from upbringing, bias, religion and self-preservation. The struggles that Anglo-Irish autobiographers have to endure include “genealogical preoccupation, loss of property, a vanished utopian childhood, and a degenerative view of history” (xi). This all seems to add up to a new culture within the tall walls of Irish history.

Grubgeld, whose work has included other issues of Anglo-Irish culture and literature (including a book on George Moore’s fiction and autobiography), jumps headlong into the last 125 years of Irish autobiography. She pays specific attention to works that have been produced between World War I and present day. Grubgeld is extremely thorough in her research looking at life-writing from authors like: Elizabeth Bowen, W.B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, George Bernard Shaw, Louis MacNiece, Oliver St. John Gogarty, and George Moore. She also looks at authors and memoirs that have had little written about them such as: Somerville and Ross, Katherine Everett, Mary Pakenham, Violet Powell, and others. There is a specific interest in female writers and a compelling emphasis on the struggle for identity under the problems of class and social restrictions. Many of these writers saw their lives torn apart by famine and civil and world wars only to escape through reflection and a deep panorama of life and personality. Grubgeld strives to show the struggle and tension that writers had to endure in order to create an identity in the face of change and a significant transformation of their complex worlds.

Anglo-Irish Autobiography is somewhat of a conventional study of its subject, but it also includes information and themes that have rarely been examined. The background of certain writers is filled with accessible and esoteric insight and relays the capacity for critical understanding and valuable theoretical ideas. Specifically the sections on Elizabeth Bowen are interesting and highly complex holding thoughts on her style of writing, her extensive family history, and her impact on the subject of autobiography. Grubgeld writes, “If there is a central character in the tradition I have proposed, it is Elizabeth Bowen. An autobiographer of unusual skill and subtlety, she

manages the most astute negotiations between inherited identity and her life as a woman, and between her story as the failed heir of Bowen's Court and the arena of concern that must go beyond that narrow world" (xix). Arguably, Bowen is a writer that has not had much attention placed on her non-fiction, but deserves the accolades that Grubgeld thrusts upon her. There are treasures and distinguished relationships between Bowen and the future of Irish autobiography.

Another aspect of note in her book is how Grubgeld borrows from many sources in order to convey her thoughts. She uses many opportunities to explain her reasoning and backs them with wonderful insight and sources. Some examples of this include Grubgeld's strong feelings on the mother and father figures in Anglo-Irish autobiography, the impact of religion and history on life and relations, how memoirs are often guided by perception and patterns of interpretation as well as the psychology of "why" authors are driven to remember, why they feel compelled to tell us of certain experiences. Grubgeld uses terms like "narrative models" and "the course of a life" to help the reader see the connections between these writers and the works that tend to hold more than just simple stories and humorous anecdotes. These works make up a history, and while many of the involved authors are from different backgrounds, they all seem grounded in the shaping of a personal and yet, societal myth.

Two specific conclusions that Grubgeld attempts to reach involve the story of culture among the Anglo-Irish and the mutual influence that went into the shaping of that culture. There are issues of gender and genre, allegiance to the Church of Ireland, and matriarchal powerlessness or what Grubgeld calls "matrophobia." She looks specifically at the female position in Ireland and also the comic and cultural patterns that represent "narrative structure and rhetorical aims" (xix). There are many negotiations in the work about these issues, but they are told in a fluid and reasonable manner. They become quite thought provoking and add to the ever widening discussion on the subject of memoir while also enlightening our expressions.

Grubgeld also writes about how autobiography is universal to even the novice critic. Memoirs often include a great deal of satire, spirituality, place, the literary, and most importantly, a future. Not so ironically is the fact that the future study of memoir is necessary to our understanding of the past. Autobiography continues to create, form and record history as it is seen through the eyes of the noble and perceptive watcher. Grubgeld writes, "these autobiographers attempt not only to memorialize but also reconsider and reshape their lives. The autobiographies of Anglo-Ireland present more than a previously undocumented fragment of a literary mosaic, more than an obscure field of interest for the specialist" (xxi). In Grubgeld's view, we can learn from memoir. We are able to piece together a certain time with the help of the puzzle shapes that become our notion of autobiography. Even though memoir sometimes struggles with legitimacy in certain circles there is an importance to its intimacy, a new and insightful style of self representation.

With Grubgeld's work we see a new understanding of some of these neglected texts and carry a fresh thought into our knowledge of the lesser known works of these central figures of Irish literary history. The identity that appears in *Anglo-Irish Autobiography* is one filled with a vivid future, an examination of the blessings of place, history and identity. It is an invaluable work that contributes to a new understanding of life-writing and its impact on how we perceive Ireland

within ourselves and ourselves within Ireland. Hopefully this study will lead to more critical writing on Irish autobiography as its importance seems to grow at an exponential rate.