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The Poet's Hymn

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JAMES LIDDY
The Doctor’s House: An Autobiography
Salmon Press, 2004, €15

Reviewed by TYLER FARRELL

A THE MILWAUKEE BOOK LAUNCH FOR James Liddy’s new memoir, The Doctor’s House, the author stood before friends and colleagues at a local and frequented Irish pub to proclaim, “Autobiography is a way of going home. And tonight I am not homeless.” With such a sentiment the writer announces his entrance into a new world of Irish literary elite by finally gracing his readers with his account of his Irish upbringing, his Dublin education, his American journeys, and his poetic sensibility. Straight from the mouth of the poet we see Liddy’s sense of fun, development, and intellect spill onto the page through small vignettes and quick anecdotes that share in the petting with people and places, pubs and writers, reflections and recordings.

The Doctor’s House is a poetic autobiography, (somewhat unconventional) but not unlike Austin Clarke’s or George Moore’s autobiographical writings of autobiographical, formation, and memorizing description. Liddy’s historical placement falls in with the new generation of Irish writers, poets of gathering and gossip, poets influenced by previous generations, but poets who also wanted their own time and voice. Both Clarke and Moore tend to poke drowned with people and places, pubs and writers, reflections and recordings.

The description that begins the book is of Liddy’s childhood home in Coolgreany Co. Wexford. It is a youthful tale told with innocence. There are visions of the surrounding Bay, the seas, flowering plants, trees and a tennis court. It seems rather magical, somewhat epopoeia, in a simple light colored by the author’s hand. There are blissful, small tales of his mother in the kitchen, his father and mother at a world’s fair, echoes of religion, childhood, upbringing. These are told with stories and thoughts of friends, relatives, neighbors. It reads as a bygone era of gatherings placed in a historical context. Liddy is never too far from letting his reader know the time frame, the implications of the memories he is providing. His statements to Ireland during World War II or even the celebration at O’Raferty’s pub on the feast of SS. Peter and Paul. Liddy is exalted by history and religion, an inquisitive mind even as a child that leads him to his next stop. Local, regional, and global.

The mid-century Dublin are Liddy’s evocation of the everyday, the writers, sights and sounds of a time that defined a second literary Ireland. His personal style is honest and funny, a reminiscence dotted with dialogue and poetry, names and tales. Dublin represents the middle and formative years that seem necessary for the formation of the poet’s work in that role, alert to themes that recur across Shining Brown, Verb of Las Vegas, and Bandanna, delinates and clarifies the several themes that operate on multiple levels in these works, from borders crossing to cross dressing. As is typically the case in his work, Redmond’sclampdown on the wide familiarity with cultures high and low in European and American as well as Irish sources provides a helpful, contratapuntal bass, in his references here to Lorca and Mayde Daley, Stravinsky and Parcell, Blind Lemon Jefferson and Popeye. Winingly, the editors chose to end this fine collection with Matthew Campbell’s “Muldoon’s Remains,” an extended missing on how nothing is ever quite buried in Muldoon, how grief never really gets worked through it is a proper elegy. As Campbell cogently defined an irascible stable between loss and surrender, between the conditional and the indicative statement, “such memorial verse is at one and the same time literal and figurative, the referent and the referred” (176). The dismembered parts that are the forgotten errata or slips of everyday life, lying with the “memory of bodily remnant” whose very multiplicity “postpone the inevitability of the elegist’s resolution of grief” (181). Attentive to Muldoon’s own circulations, gettings round, and other forms of embracing the elusive referent, Campbell concludes that “the condition of Muldoon’s recursion of this immortality as a recycling, a coming round again” (180), a trope that is of course particularly inviting for scholars who hope there remains more to say on a poet given, as he writes in a recent and passing essay on Misericante Moore, to “more.”

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country of Ireland. He turns more reflective and inward in this last section still making quips about the very notion of the wandering and exiled poet. "The spirit wanders whence it is employed or patroned. The artist type is outside the first social force of Mammy and friends; distance beckons new interruptions, and maybe memory spins into backlass" (133). There are many things that remind the poet of home, including Wisconsin poet Lorrie Niedecker, whose notion of the sacred Liddy compares to Yeats. He writes of taverns and etiquette, nightlife, friends and findings all within Milwaukee, a town filled with a surprising amount of poets and artists. The writer is happy. The mood is respectful.

Then the memoir closes its once opened doors. The journey culminates on a favorite street corner in Milwaukee and we are left wanting more. More of Liddy's stories and memories. More of the poet traveling physically and mentally. More descriptive times written for all to hear. Hopefully this will not be the only installment of Liddy-smas.

There is also room for another poetic memoir, especially one with this much history and joy.

The Golden Age of Irish-American Teachers

Janet Nolan

Servants of the Poor, Teachers and Mobility in Ireland and Irish America (O'Brien University of Notre Dame Press, 2004, $45.00, $19.95), reviews the first social force of Irish-American women. Nolan includes a number of examples of Irish-American teachers who worked for equity. Her most memorable was Margaret Haley of Chicago, the woman Nolan has called "the Patrick Henry of the classroom teacher movement" for her leadership of the Chicago Teachers' Federation. While Battleground: The Autobiography of Margaret A. Haley was published in 1982, one hopes that Nolan might be tempted to further study this urban educator whose ideas about social justice were shaped by her Irish heritage, her Catholic education and contact with Irish-American Dominican sisters in Chicago. She might also consider taking on a biography of another Irish-American Chicagiana, Amelia Dunne Hoekwy sister of "Mr. Dooley." Peter Finley Dunne. Nolan has written the Margaret Haley entry for Women Building Chicago 1790-1990: A Bibliographical Dictionary, the Hookway Reading (1887) lessons in kitchen fire-safety, a sobering reminder of the dangers of the kitchen.

Nolan's study on Irish-American teachers focuses on three cities which had high concentrations of Irish-Americans at the turn of the century and where teachers with Irish surname in large numbers founded and led a force: Boston, San Francisco and Chicago. By 1910, Irish-American teachers were one of the largest ethnic groups in Boston (twenty-five percent); they accounted for one-third of the teachers in Chicago public schools and forty-nine percent of San Francisco teachers. Nolan finds that while Irish-American teachers found some discrimination in terms of ethnicity and religion, they challenged those barriers armed with their education, the normal school training and their success in passing the examinations introduced to limit their access into the public school system.

Servants of the Poor also traces the role of Irish-American teachers in the campaign for job security, pensions, better teaching conditions and the rights of women teachers in matters of gender equality in pay and opportunity. Here again there was an Irish model, the Irish National Teachers Organization founded in 1868. Despite the attempt to exclude the Irish from this body, additional training and/or professional examinations, Irish-American teachers were prepared to make the sacrifices to stay in the classroom. Still, the opportunities for teacher mobility became limited by the policy of hiring male "experts," administrators who controlled curriculum and instruction.

Nolan's study adds a new perspective to the oral history that she includes: detailed life histories from her collection of thirty-six retired Chicago teacher who had Irish mothers or grandmothers. The collection is part of Nolan's larger project Life Histories: Mothers and Daughters in Ireland's National and American public schools which involved interviews with informants in Boston and in San Francisco.

Nolan has promised a further study of Irish-American teachers that will follow their history for another generation. Minds to Hands: Teachers at the End of a Golden Age, 1920-1935. Then, she can consider the legacy of the Irish-American teacher: their students whose education prepared them to take advantage of the G.I. Bill after the second World War.

Under the Radar

Northern Ireland

Joe Cobill, A Life in the IRA, by Brendan Anderson (O'Brien Press; University of Wisconsin Press, 2005, $45.00, $19.95), sheds light on his sixty year life with the IRA. Most interesting is his account of the rift between the Provisionals and Official IRA. Janet Nolan, St. Patrick's and the Chicago Irish (1997), her pioneering study of Irish public education starting with the Dublin Society for Promotion of the Irish Language. Nolan, the first Irish teacher of the Irish National School, the first British experiment with state funded schools. The curriculum emphasized literacy, numeracy and the calculation of time and work disciplines. Nolan considers the pedagogy and the curriculum of the system as it evolved into the state-supported, denominational National Schools. (They were de jure and de facto non-denominational and sectarian). Nolan pays particular attention to the content of National School textbooks, the readings that prepared schoolgirls for domestic life or domestic service. To Nolan's survey, one might add The Girls' Reading Book (1887) lessons in kitchen fire-safety, a sobering reminder of the American newspaper accounts of Irish domestic servants injured or killed in fire-related accidents.

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