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The Great War in Irish Poetry: W. B. Yeats to Michael Longley
Fran Brearton, 2000
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Fran Brearton's *The Great War in Irish Poetry*, traces the influences of World War I in W. B. Yeats, Robert Graves, Louis MacNeice, Derek Mahon, Seamus Heaney and Michael Longley. This is a well-written book supported by an excellent bibliography. Brearton challenges the 'dominance of English understanding and mythologies' of the Great War. She asserts that in Paul Fussell's influential, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), 'Ireland falls outside the scope of his analysis' because of the privileged notion in English cultural memory of 'war writing' as primarily an experiential record of a 'unique and aberrant event' (p. vi).

The book's first section deals with Yeats, Graves, and MacNeice. An introductory chapter outlines the political fallout of the Great War in Ireland and the partisan mythologies that emerged from the coincidence, in 1916, of the Somme and the Easier Rising. Republican mythology repressed the stories of Irish Great War veterans until, as Myles Dungan has observed, the 'era of revisionist history'. In Ulster, the 'absence of a literature about the Great War' reflects the trauma of futile sacrifice complicated by domestic politics that dictated Ulster 'could not afford artistic mutiny', and a cultural ethos not 'generally associated with imagination and poetry'. Much of this has previously been dealt with by, for example, Myles Dungan (*They Shall grow not old*, 1997), Terence Denman (*Ireland's Unknown Soldiers*, 1992), Declan Kiberd (*The Great War and Irish Memory*, 1995; and Edna Longley ('The Rising, the Somme and Irish Memory', 1994). Brearton, however, seeks to explore within a literary framework the centrality of the Great War in twentieth-century Irish

poetry that has previously been 'misrepresented or underestimated'.

Chapter two on Yeats is a wide-ranging discussion on the influence of competing Great War 'English and Irish cultural memories' on the 'formation of his aesthetic', and on his 'refusal to privilege' soldier poetry. Chapter three, on Graves, is weak in terms of the book's overall scope, despite some interesting discussion of his *Poetic Unreason* and the 'Yeatsian principle that "all creation is from conflict"'. Graves' inclusion is merited because, as 'a poet born and reared in England, it is the Great War which necessitates a reevaluation of his "soul-landscape', a process which his Irish descent complicates as much as it assists' (p. 98). Chapter four demonstrates how in MacNeice. 'English cultural history is always qualified by the experience of Ireland', and by his 'endeavour to point to the limitations of the English and Irish literary canons which were, in part, constructed in response to the traumatic upheaval of the Great War' (p. 147). Here, Brearton argues from within a specifically northern school as she develops Edna Longley's placing of MacNeice in a continuum between Yeats and the post-1968 northern poets who 'have brought MacNeice's reputation to rest in Ireland'.

In the book's second section, Brearton narrows her perspective, for 'pragmatic reasons', to the contemporary Northern Irish poets, Mahon, Heaney, and Longley. An introductory chapter foregrounds the added dimension of the Ulster Troubles that forged an 'irresistible' imperative to revisit the Great War to translate present experience. Brearton persuasively links Mahon to MacNeice in his 'approach to the [Great War] as a means of understanding Ulster Protestantism, Ulster's relations with England, and his own place within the "community"' (p. 186). She offers less supporting evidence that Mahon's understanding and regard for the 'simple historical needs' of his own community incorporates an abundance of 'ironic self-awareness'. As with her treatment of Graves, Brearton's treatment of Heaney seems an unsatisfactory interruption of what begins to emerge as a Protestant, imperiously

male poetic succession: 'the lack of historical imagination in Heaney's treatment of the Great War means that, on the whole, it resonates in his Northern Ireland only as a metaphor for finding an "apology for poetry"' (p. 242). It might have been useful to look at Heaney more closely within the book's primary theme. That is, outside the realms of 'England's difficulty' and in relation to the silenced Great War Irish soldiers who fought not for Empire but for a free citizenship within a new European state of small nations.

Brearton's last chapter considers the symbolic resonance of the "Great War in Michael Longley's work: a 'psychic landscape that, Yeatsian-style, is always characterized by awareness of its dual possibilities' (p. 250) in the chosen no man's land of Longley's imagination. There are interesting links between Keith Douglas and Longley's supposed 'cerebral detachment' and between Douglas's rejection of the 'poet's duty' and Longley's interaction with the Troubles: 'every word has to earn its place'.

An intrusive metanarrative intermittently fragments Brearton's discussion. She claims, for example, that compared with Heaney and Mahon, Longley has been critically neglected, largely because Edna Longley, 'a formidable critical presence' does not write about him. Michael Longley's stature and his importance to the 'local scene' do not require such representation. A less reverential discussion might have considered his controversial attack on the 'mean-looking obelisk' erected among the 'immaculately mown lawns and dainty flowerbeds' of memorial graveyards by Orange veterans of the Somme (*Belfast Telegraph*, 16 July 1997). It may be that Longley's backward, lyric focus on the cathartic, 'terrible beauty' of no man's land needs more examining, considering that the book's remit is to challenge the exclusivity of Fussell's peculiarly 'literary' war. This, however, is a small criticism of a skilful, illuminating writer on the influence of the Great War in Irish poetry.

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