

## Book Reviews

Margaret Scanlan. *Traces of Another Time: History and Politics in Postwar British Fiction*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990. pp. xiv, 211. \$27.50

What do the Irish Rebellion, Kim Philby's defection, and the end of the world all have in common? According to Margaret Scanlan, each of these events has engaged the new historical consciousness that is currently impelling British novelists far beyond the romantic nationalism and progressive optimism that characterized such nineteenth-century predecessors as Sir Walter Scott, Rudyard Kipling, and even Leo Tolstoy.

Like spy novels or horror stories, historical fiction has always evoked disreputable connotations of self-indulgent escape. Associated with whispered intrigues, carefully costumed dalliances, and "great events" backdrops, these are the books that the "politically correct" reader guiltily and greedily devours in private. It is just this "bad press" that Scanlan sets out to correct in *Traces of Another Time*. Her study, however, is more than a revisionist's (or enthusiast's) attempt to ease readers' consciences by legitimizing the genre with such serious, "mainstream" authors as Iris Murdoch, Anthony Burgess, and Doris Lessing. Scanlan also explores the literary and political paradoxes facing all historical narratives in an age that repeatedly confronts the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of knowing anything about the past, whether that past be one's own memories glimpsed in the depths of Proustian teacups or the distorted, rewritten texts of a colonial culture. Finally, like her chosen authors, she also exposes the dangers inherent in victor-centred/centric histories that glamorize violence, glorify the oppressor, and mythologize brutality, ignorance, and arrogance as honour and patriotic fervor.

In response to these postmodern concerns, Scanlan analyzes her texts from the same "skeptical, ironic, and discontinuous" (3) perspective that informs her otherwise disparate examples. As her section headings indicate, her examination ranges from the "Troubles in Ireland," to "Spies and Other Aliens," to conclude forbiddingly and forebodingly with three apocalyptic variations. In fact, the range of Scanlan's critical concern is both her study's greatest strength and its

greatest weakness, for, in less than 200 pages, she examines more than a dozen, often obscure, novels, including Doris Lessing's multi-volume "Children of Violence" and Paul Scott's "Raj Quartet." In addition, she summarizes current literary/historical theories, focussing on the demanding ideas of Lévi-Strauss, Derrida, Jameson, and Foucault. Given the scope of her texts and contexts, it is inevitable that some of her ideas will remain suggestive sketches rather than fully explicated arguments.

These strengths and weaknesses appear most clearly in her challenging readings of Iris Murdoch and Doris Lessing, authors noted, if not notorious, for the intellectual and ideological rigour of their own very different narratives. Undaunted, Scanlan plunges into the complexities of *The Red and the Green*, Murdoch's revisionist examination of the 1916 Irish Rebellion, describing this 1965 novel as a paradigm of "all past events . . . that give rise to the imagination," as well as "the outcome of such imagining, and the standard against which to measure those literary characters who are portrayed as bringing it into being" (25). It is at this point that Scanlan's combined historical-literary approach itself falls victim to spatial and temporal limitations. As she compares traditional glamorizing accounts of Easter Week with Murdoch's deconstructive version, she mines *The Red and the Green* for echoes of Joyce and Yeats, a detailed search for verbal *minutiae* that includes the colour symbolism in *Dubliners* and Yeats's shifting political theory. At times, Scanlan's prose and her argument both fragment into lists of "allusive" words and phrases which deflect her important thematic and stylistic comparisons into a reductive search for sources. Fortunately, Scanlan also recognizes the difficulties inherent in her own "bifocal" approach, and she frequently and lucidly summarizes her historical and literary arguments in clear, jargon-free prose.

Scanlan, however, does not merely return historical fiction generally and generically to the ranks of literary respectability; she also defends a number of contemporary novelists who are either unknown or tainted by such reductive adjectives as "civilized," "genteel," and "limited." Just as *The Red and the Green* provides a postmodern reconsideration of the Irish Rebellion and its glamorizing narratives, so, too, do Elizabeth Bowen and J. G. Farrell offer further variations on the same Irish theme. In *The Last September*, Bowen describes "the troubles of 1919-21" through the determinedly ignorant eyes of Anglo-Irish landowners, while Farrell's *Troubles* dislocates both form and content to distance its readers from any "facile identification with people and events of the past" (52). By the end of this chapter, Scanlan has neatly accomplished a double critical feat; while clearly advancing her own claim that historical fiction has shifted attention from centre to margin, from oppressor to oppressed, she has also rehabilitated both Bowen and Farrell, bringing them from the critical or popular periphery to deserved prominence. Finally, the Irish section concludes with four novels in which Maurice Leitch, Benedict Kiely, Bernard MacLaverty, and Thomas Kilroy vari-

ously "rewrite" what is euphemistically referred to as Ireland's "current troubles." These experimental texts not only elicit some of Scanlan's most perceptive literary analysis, but also evoke her most explicitly scathing arguments concerning the dangers of a glorified past uncritically enshrined in historical fiction.

Ironically, what is perhaps her weakest chapter, "Philby and His Fictions," immediately follows. Positioned between the perceptive discussions of Ireland's ambiguously complex relationship to its historical and literary past and the cosmic concerns of Lessing and Burgess, Harold Adrian Philby's history of deception and intrigue seems as "lightweight" as the narratives that have tried to tell his shoddy, shabby story. Even Scanlan's attempt to invest her subject with symbolic status ("Philby seems to embody and explain the changed social order of postwar England, the loss of her Empire, prestige, and influence" [87]) fails to accord him or his tales political, historical, or literary significance. In fact, at this point, Scanlan's own analysis becomes uncharacteristically imprecise, slipping into evasive generalizations and summarizing clichés ("the Philby myth threatens to leave the man safe behind the mask" [114] and "the spy's life still remains a story in search of an author" [115]) that form a marked and perhaps indicative contrast to the critical and verbal precision of the rest of the book. The chapter is interesting—Scanlan reviews "Philby fiction" by Greene, le Carré, Joseph Home, and the protagonist himself quickly and evocatively—but it would perhaps be more convincing as a separate article unaffected by (and, in turn, not affecting) its more scholarly neighbours.

Three apocalyptic variations make up Scanlan's most interesting and most disparate section. Included under the single, albeit multi-dimensional, rubric "Apocalypse," Paul Scott's "Raj Quartet," Doris Lessing's "The Children of Violence," and Anthony Burgess's *The End of the World News* make unlikely but provocative bedmates. Again, the section's weaknesses result more from a wealth than a paucity of material and ideas, for Scanlan interprets these (in total) ten texts not only as conventional histories of East and West, of India, South Africa, and England, but also as tales of social, political, and sexual oppression that "read against" the validity of both official and popular history. Although *The End of the World News*, in which Burgess explores an imagined and imaginative future where all records of the past have been destroyed, is the most extreme rejection of the comforts and abuses of traditional history, both Scott and Lessing also conclude their realistic, multi-volume tales with revisionary modulations. In Scott's case, he simultaneously transforms both the end of his tale and "the end of British, Hindu, and Muslim illusions about public life" (17) by concluding with a poem's "timeless images of mutability" (156), a generic shift that Scanlan sensitively reads as a final, ambiguous escape from the involutive paradoxes of history and its fictional representations. In Lessing's

*The Four-Gated City*, the shift is also generic, but far less ambiguous, as her hitherto determinedly realistic *Bildungsroman* explodes into a post-holocaust future. Once again, Scanlan perceptively relates history's real and figurative dimensions by interpreting the nuclear accident that turns England into a glowing wasteland as a symbolic figure for "the anger of women who have been excluded from participation in public history and ignored by history texts" (17-18).

Although Scanlan is often suggestive rather than definitive, and although she errs occasionally on the side of critical and rhetorical excess, her enthusiastic and intelligent study presents a new and valorizing approach to the complex, ambiguous, often dangerous interrelationship between history and its narratives. Far from following contemporary critical trends which dismiss Britain's postwar historical fiction as a tired, anachronistic remnant of its former "colonial" self, Scanlan uncovers more than enough evidence to support her closing assertion that the British novel "still responds to the living world of social experience" (196). As for the critic herself, she leaves the reader not only reaching for the original texts with renewed appreciation, but also eagerly anticipating her next provocatively synthesizing thesis.

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Ralph J. Crane. *Inventing India: A History of India in English-Language Fiction*. London: Macmillan, 1992. pp. 212. \$35.00.

Sneja Gunew and Kateryna O. Longley, eds. *Striking Chords: Multicultural Literary Interpretations*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1992. pp. xxiv, 256. \$22.95 pb.

Although at first consideration these two books appear to lack much common ground, they do share the idea of invention and immigration. The first, *Inventing India*, takes up the way British and Indian writers have since 1857 constructed a fictional India in the English language, which is itself a kind of linguistic immigrant whether used by outsiders or natives. The second book, *Striking Chords*, examines the state of non-Aboriginal and non-Anglo-Celtic literature in Australia, and argues that such writing, whether in English or a foreign language, has generally been excluded from Australia's literary invention or marginalized as "migrant" writing.

In the introduction to *Inventing India*, Ralph J. Crane cites earlier critical works that have addressed the immense body of historical fiction about India's long relationship with England, beginning with the Indian Mutiny of 1857 (more recently called "the First War of Independence," Crane adds). Rather than repeating what has already been done, Crane approaches selected works "which manifest a sense of