
Maureen E. Ruprecht Fadem. *The Literature of Northern Ireland: Spectral Borderlands*. New York: Palgrave, 2015. Pp.ix–218. US\$85.50.

In Northern Ireland, literature, geopolitics, and history have been inextricably entwined, creating extraordinary tensions that Seamus Heaney characterizes as an irresolvable family conflict between “Song and Suffering,” with the poet caught in the middle (xii). Heaney claims that extreme political turmoil challenges poets to “survive amphibiously, in the realm of ‘the times’ and the realm of their moral and artistic self respect, a challenge immediately recognizable to anyone who has lived with the awful and demeaning facts of Northern Ireland’s history” (xx). While several internationally renowned writers emerged during the Troubles, focusing on what Heaney calls “the social and political exacerbations of place” (qtd. in Fadem 4), Maureen E. Ruprecht Fadem argues that, in the wake of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, Irish studies suffers from a “generalized forgetting” (4), and the particular trials faced by Northern Irish artists and citizens alike are in danger of being obscured by the more generalized, cross-border scope of Irish studies. Her survey confronts this tendency to submerge Northern Irish works within wider discussions of Irish writing. Fadem addresses Heaney’s recognition of the poet’s challenge to be relevant in the face of oppression and suffering and argues that Northern Irish literary production “is a key modality through which . . . politics of the location, as well as the history of the statelet and the crisis of Northern Irish identity, are refracted and clarified” (1). She speculates that postmodernism, for instance, is a “condition of place” for many Northern Irish writers rather than a particular aesthetic choice (20). The crisis produced by partition, namely the “concomitant fractures of place, self and society,” as well as the region’s entrapment in a “state of political suspension,” led its poets, dramatists, and novelists to develop “particular tropes and styles” to capture the unsettled politics, attendant existential crises, and intense suffering and literal displacement experienced at all levels of Northern Irish society (1).

While postcolonial and postmodern theories offer some insight into the particular Northern Irish condition, Fadem argues that they alone are insuffi-

cient to explore the literature, since Ireland presents an “anomalous condition” through its “undertheorized border” (50). The challenge lies in “rethinking postcolonial concepts through the frame of division” to allow “for keener understanding of the connections, such as the ‘claustrophobic intensity of the relationship between Ireland and Britain’ as well as between the communities within Northern Irish society” (51). She offers a cross-disciplinary approach that includes Irish partition studies and trauma theory as well as literary theory, poetics, and historiography employed by writers including Toni Morrison, Salman Rushdie, and Seamus Deane. Fadem’s book articulates her particular theory through a cross-genre study of three representative writers: dramatist Anne Devlin, poet Medbh McGuckian, and lesser-known novelist Anna Burns. Her book’s approach is unique (and slightly problematic) in formulating a theory of Northern Irish literature illustrated exclusively through women writers. While the unstated aim may be to redress the now-infamous bias toward male writers in the original *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (1991), Fadem’s work eschews theories exclusively related to women’s studies, which she argues “often fails to unpack” political or historical issues, causing the geopolitical lens through which she wishes to review the representative literature to be “occluded within an otherwise feminist analysis” (2). While addressing the limits of conventional feminist readings, Fadem nevertheless argues that the role of Northern Irish women as “both the carriers and narrators of historical persecution” and “key witnesses to the workings of suffering and survival” is “unquestionable” (2).

Yet Fadem’s choice of writers provides a multi-genre perspective supplemented by allusions to other writers so that significant voices such as Brian Friel, Paul Muldoon, Robert MacLiam Wilson, and others are not ignored. In providing close readings of representative texts by Devlin, McGuckian, and Burns, she perceives a pattern of tropes and metaphors from ancient myths and traditional stories that recur in modernist and postmodernist Northern Irish writing. A prominent Irish source of several of these tropes is Samuel Beckett, rather than James Joyce or W. B. Yeats. Beckett, Fadem argues, devised “spatiotemporal structures [in] plays like *Endgame* where character and world are compressed into the suffocating coffin-prison” (55). She views this as an apt metaphor for the Northern Irish statelet, which, like Peter Boxall’s description of Beckett’s characters, is “stranded in a time that refuses to pass, and impossible to avoid” (qtd. in Fadem 55). Fadem characterizes this condition as a “spectral borderland” that describes the “strange quarantine” in which Northern Irish citizens find themselves as a result of both the externally imposed border and internal borders between communities within the state (18). She notes that, “[r]eminiscent of Beckett, recent work coming

out of the North is defined by a peculiarly ghostly disposition of metaphor, figure, and image, along with provocative deployments of border areas and concomitant situations of incarceration or exile. Discernible in this body of writing is a spectrality of content, tone, and metaphor, with mourning as its most obvious mood" (19). She also borrows the concept of the "world scrim" from Muldoon, a postmodernist poet. Normally used to describe the painted backdrop that can transport actors onstage to different places and/or times, Muldoon's "scrim" in Northern Irish writing represents the liminal and unstable sense of place, time, and identity experienced by writers and their characters, as their "settings . . . convey the dissonance of Northern Irish identity and the peculiar 'time' of daily life" (Fadem 21).

Some of the writers Fadem discusses (like Burns) have received little scholarly attention, and some Fadem believes have been unjustly neglected or denigrated as deliberately obscure. (To me, her list of negative reviews of postmodern poets recalls a cover of the *Honest Ulsterman* proclaiming "At Last! The Key to Medbh McGuckian.") Fadem's chapter-length discussion of the "enigmatic character" of McGuckian's poetics reflects McGuckian's alienation from an English language that has relegated her to a marginal borderland. Fadem also argues that Burns' fragmented narrative in *No Bones*, at once "bizarrely hilarious" and "grotesquely frightening" (157), rejects the limitations of the so-called historical and fact-based approach of conventional thrillers about Northern Ireland by using unreliable personal memory to depict the forgetting caused by trauma and recover both the suffering of the living and the lives of the dead who have been "criminally removed" from the present by history (144).

This work is valuable in encouraging a reassessment of where Northern Ireland and Ireland fit into postcolonial theory. For readers and teachers less familiar with the politics and history of Northern Ireland, it offers context and overview from partition to the start of the Troubles, the Peace process, and the continuing fractures and tensions within Northern Irish communities. While more limited in scope than its title suggests, it offers in-depth studies of three current Northern Irish women writers who have found new ways to articulate the challenges of representation that Heaney recognized.

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Works Cited

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