

Christopher MORASH. *Dublin: A Writer's City*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023, 332 pp. ISBN 9781108917810
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You know where you are with a literary history: you are here, in the present, with the pages of the book all heading in your direction. The gift of hindsight makes you lord of all you survey, from the hesitant beginnings of this writer to the maturity of that; from a salon to a movement; from avant-garde to epigonism, from modernism to post-postmodernism, all culminating in the here and now.

But this book aims to be more literary geography than history. The front matter says: “Step by step, *Dublin: A Writer's City* unfolds a book-lover's map of this unique city, full of beautiful illustrations, inviting us to experience what it means to live in a great city of literature.” The book is divided into chapters named not by age or period but by Dublin district: “Around the Liberties,” “The South Coast” and so on. It tracks writers and their creations across the city, from Richmond Street to Brighton Square (James Joyce) and from Sandymount Avenue to Dundrum (W. B. Yeats). This approach throws up interesting facts about Dublin's social geography. “When they were first built,” Morash writes, “the buildings around Merrion Square were single-family houses on the very edge of the city.” But he cannot escape history: “By the middle decades of the nineteenth century, Merrion Square had become one of the most desirable addresses in the city.” The changing fortunes of different Dublin districts, from fashionable addresses, to slum to gentrification, are quite well-known, at least to Dubliners, but there is much else of interest: one of the first plays set in Dublin (in Saint Stephen's Green, to be precise) premiered in the Smock Alley Theatre in 1700. More interesting still, to this reader, is Morash's observation that Conor McPherson's play *The Weir* “reverses [the] imaginary geography” that in “Irish theatre tradition ... has long located the pure wellspring of folklore and of the supernatural in the rural West of Ireland.”

Some of the best parts of the book are where Morash gives close readings of literature itself, rather than its “places of writing” (Seamus Heaney's term): “If in *The Ginger Man* plot is less important than the texture of experience and the result is a twitchy, exuberant prose that is one of the novel's continuing

attractions, in *At Swim-Two-Birds* the writing is like a parodic version of the civil service documents that O'Brien was producing in his day job. By contrast, the plot is like some unruly weed, multiplying and spreading." He turns his attentions to Sally Rooney's *Normal People*, gives an explication of a Heaney poem, and takes a close look at the stage directions in Sean O'Casey's Dublin trilogy, pointing out that the action does not simply take place in "tenement houses," but in return rooms, front and back drawing rooms, kitchens and attics. "Each room tells a story," he writes. "Donal Davoren's 'return room' at the back of the house is a mark of his real inconsequentiality, while Bessie Burgess's rooms at the top of the house are a sign of her ability to rise above political differences."

Morash's erudition is impressive. He traces the influence of and references to James Clarence Mangan through Yeats, Thomas Kinsella, Brian Moore, Michael Smith, and Joyce, and introduces readers to Matilda Fitz John's 1796 play *Joan!!!*, Charles Lever's novel, *The Confessions of Harry Lorrequer*, and Seán Ó Neachtain's *Stair Éamoinn Uí Chléirigh*. However, he does not ignore more accessible writers. He argues that Marian Keyes, who is popular far beyond Ireland, needs "a fictional world that will be familiar to a global readership, even if comments about Donnybrook estate agents are very much aimed at a local reader." Here again, history intrudes: "That kind of balancing act is much easier to manage on streets with a shallow historical memory." Morash also deals with crime novels, spy novels, detective fiction, thrillers and "popular fiction aimed at female readers" by the likes of Joe Joyce, Neil Belton, Maeve Binchy and Declan Hughes.

At times, however, one wonders if Dublin's literature is best presented spatially. The book can descend into what Victor Erlich once called "sterile 'biographism'," as in the following passage about Elizabeth Bowen: "her almost direct contemporary, Kate O'Brien (born in 1897, two years earlier than Bowen) knew this same Baggot Street area as a child, and records a memory of staying with an aunt on Mespil Road in 1907." One passage begins, "Blessington Street [Iris Murdoch's birthplace] runs parallel to Eccles Street. Only a few years after Murdoch was born, with the publication of Joyce's *Ulysses*, Eccles Street would become one of the most recognized addresses in modern fiction..." and extends for about a page and a half. When Morash turns his attention to Dalkey on the south coast, it turns out that George Bernard Shaw lived there from 1866 to 1874. All kinds of connections can be found if you take into account every address every writer ever lived at.

Morash knows the dangers of the approach he has chosen: “From his writing alone, it would be easy to imagine Synge growing up in a cabin in the Wicklow hills or on the Aran Islands, reared on potatoes and seaweed.” Synge was in fact born in Dublin’s suburbs. Myth-making is a constant danger in any undertaking such as Morash’s and a fair amount of it can be seen here, especially in chapters two and three, “Baggotonia” and “Around St. Stephen’s Green.” Quoting John Ryan’s memoir, Morash writes of “a fight over the use of spondees” in McDaid’s pub and of Patrick Kavanagh’s room “ankle-deep in papers and typescript.” In chapter three it becomes clear just how often this kind of story (yarn?) has been told, in books such as Oliver St. John Gogarty’s *As I Was Going Down Sackville Street* (erroneously called *As I Was Going Down Grafton Street* on p. 70), Elizabeth Bowen’s memoirs, Anthony Cronin’s *Dead as Doornails* and John Ryan’s *Remembering How We Stood*, among others. It is no surprise that some stories suffer from over-familiarity, for example, the “You have disgraced yourselves again” incident. Morash is on his guard, though. He points out that Yeats’s speech to the Abbey theatre rioters in which he said, “You have disgraced yourselves again,” was “carefully prepared.” In other places too, he avoids myth-making: “And yet, while there was real poverty and real addiction in Mangan’s life, there was also myth, much of it of Mangan’s own making, and an element of game-playing with reality.”

Morash occasionally stretches to make a point, as when he connects Friel’s *Volunteers* and French’s *Faithful Place* to the Latin *Visitatio Sepulcri* in order to raise the prospect “that in certain places, the dead can rise” but he is a self-aware writer: he warns against “falling prey to a kind of competitive Irishness (or, indeed, Dublin-ness); is Beckett more Irish than Wilde because he wrote about the city, while Wilde was only born and educated here, and his sensibility has certain qualities that we can ascribe to Dublin?” This self-awareness saves the book from pitfalls not all others have avoided. In a discussion of a poem by Seamus Heaney he writes: “As is so often the case in Dublin writing, while the presence of sea mists and receding horizons might suggest epiphanies and revelations, it also produces the countertendency to mock any such notions.”

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