

if it has been able to absorb its peripheries, as the incorporation of Williams and Orwell suggests, it is extremely difficult to find a way to begin to dismantle an ideology which is universalist in theory but nationalist in practice; second, Williams is such an important figure within contemporary critical circles that capable but voluntary iconoclasts are few and far between. Cairns Craig calls for a radical

re-orientation of literary studies based on a far more coherent use of historiography and the inclusion of geographical paradigms in critical models. This is clearly an enormous challenge, and one looks forward to the continuation of the exciting debate that *Out of History* has started.

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Declan KIBERD, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1995. 719 pages.

*whatever is given  
Can always be reimagined, however four-square,  
Plank-thick, hull-stupid and out of its time  
It happens to be.*

(Seamus Heaney, 'The Settle Bed', *Seeing Things*)

«If God invented whiskey to prevent the Irish from ruling the world, then who invented Ireland?» Kiberd's answer to that initial question is to be found in his new book, which may be labelled as the first critical history of modern Irish literature written within a postcolonial framework. As such, it fills a large gap in literary studies and will soon become an absolute *must* for those interested in modern Irish writing. Apart from a few helpful 'inter-chapters' that give an overview of the sociopolitical context, the bulk of the book consists of thirty-five chapters in which Kiberd alternates literary-historical analysis centred on a topic (childhood and Ireland, mothers and daughters, deanglicisation, nationality and cosmopolitanism, the Great War and Irish memory, Ireland and the end of the British empire, etc.) with an analysis of the literature and political ideas of the main Irish writers of the 20th century (Wilde, Shaw, Somerville and Ross, Lady Gregory, O'Casey, Synge, Yeats, Joyce, Bowen, Beckett, Flann O'Brien, Seamus Heaney, Brian Friel, etc.). Throughout the book Kiberd makes intelligent connections between past and present and

between Ireland and other postcolonial literatures and countries; the breadth of his scholarship is extraordinary, and his readings of particular texts and periods are often brilliant and innovative. In Edward W. Said's terms (reproduced on the back jacket of the book), Kiberd's is a «dazzling, bravura performance».

According to Kiberd, the postcolonial history of Ireland is a succession of plays in which writers perform different versions of Englishness and Irishness to one another. From the time of the conquest of Ireland by England in the 16th and early 17th centuries, English and Irish authors sought national identity by means of differentiation: while contesting each other's invented images, they created their own national image. The process was reciprocal and went on and on in a vicious circle: in the period of national building each of them (like Caliban and Prospero) badly needed the other in order to assert their own identity. But in fact, at the beginning both English and Irish were more or less alike.

For Kiberd, then, Ireland (and it could be argued that *any* modern nation) is a forged, 'imagined community'

(to use a phrase from Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*). As such, and in order to justify its existence, its present situation and its future ideals, Ireland constructed its own symbols (a flag, an anthem) and created its national images, myths and heroes (Cathleen ní Houlihan, Cuchulain, Wolfe Tone) in an attempt to forge a distinct Irish culture – Gaelic football, for instance, was a game with no historical roots which was created *ex nihilo* in opposition to English soccer.

Following Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, Kiberd believes that print language is what invents nationalism, and so he regards the history of Ireland as the history of a textual nation-building, of forging (Pygmalion-like) a nation by imagining things as they might be, by displacing reality with alter-native, decolonising versions. In other words, texts (and this, although not acknowledged by Kiberd, is something inherited from the Romantics) can modify and create reality, and artists and intellectuals are more important than politicians in the shaping of nationhood: «The historians, with the best intentions of the world, rarely acknowledge that they write at the mercy of literature», claims Kiberd (p. 646). Thus, for him the Irish nation started as a textual, invented ideological script written by Wilde, Yeats, Joyce and many others, who paved the way for the declaration of political independence and for the invention of the Irish Republic. The process of invention through literature continues even nowadays: for Kiberd, Ireland's past, present and future is still being (re)written, articulated, reshaped, remembered, negotiated, and reinvented in the works of Brian Friel and Seamus Heaney – a process that Kiberd relates to the task first undertaken by the 17th century writer Seathrún Céitinn and later on continued by Wilde and Shaw.

Céitinn initiated Irish postcolonial writing in so far as he was the first to an-

swer back England's (Spenser's textual) misrepresentation of Ireland as a land of fairies inhabited by wild people: he offered in his writings an alter-native, invented image of the Irish as civilised and disciplined. After Céitinn, Kiberd skips two centuries and focuses on Oscar Wilde, who continued the ongoing process of decolonisation: Kiberd argues that Wilde mockingly wore the mask of an Englishman in order to forge an Irish identity for himself, and so he paradoxically became more Irish in England than he could have possibly been in Ireland. And, as in the case of Wilde, Kiberd regards the England of Shaw's plays as a 'laboratory' in which Shaw redefined the meaning of Irishness. For, as Kiberd points out, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the stage where many of the elements which helped to define and differentiate modern Ireland from England was London rather than Dublin: thus, London saw the creation of the Gaelic Athletic Association in 1884, the Irish Literary Society in 1891, and the Gaelic League in 1893.

The cultural resistance, however, soon shifted towards Dublin. For Kiberd, one of the major events as regards the invention of Irish identity is the 1916 Easter Rising: when Pearse read the Proclamation of Independence to a small number of passers-by before the Dublin Post Office, he theatrically summoned Cuchulain to his side, receiving just a few cheers. Being an improvised and revivalist revolution, Pearse's insurrection was doomed to failure from the start. The force that the Rising would later have on the Irish was due, according to Kiberd, to the fact that intellectuals like Yeats, Joyce and de Valera did something that the Easter rebels (and in fact, all previous uprisings) had not done: instead of regarding the insurrection as a revival, they presented the Rising (and Ireland in general) as a future national project – as the invention of a new, un-

precedented self. Joyce, for example, imagined a new community, forging (as Stephen Dedalus puts it at the end of *A Portrait*) 'the uncreated conscience of the race': in his works Joyce condemned colonialism, but at the same time he mocked the revivalists' anchoring in the past, their failure to imagine a genuine future elsewhere. And like Joyce, Yeats evolved what Kiberd calls a 'third way', that is, a fusion and transcendence of the dual inheritance English versus Celtic. Apart from that, Yeats also reread Shakespeare, and this was the spark that led to the decolonisation of the masses' minds and to the creation of a newly imagined Irish identity: Kiberd argues that, after Yeats' translation of Caliban into Irish terms (Caliban was imagined as an Irish slave in search of freedom from an English imperial ruler), a consciousness arose first in the newspapers and then among the social masses that the Irish were being misrepresented by English actors performing Shakespeare's works, and this soon extended not only to Shakespeare's plays but to many English literary texts. As a consequence, the English canon was revised and reread, and alter-native interpretations of it replaced the English ones; but, most importantly, history and national identities were reinvented and subverted. To recall Rushdie's phrase, the empire was writing back to the centre. The result was a truly Irish Renaissance, a literary reinvention of identity with important social consequences: the intellectuals' ideological 'manipulation' (Kiberd does not use the term; he uses 'play' instead) aimed at a large social audience proved to be persuasive – the masses believed in the writers' invention of the 1916 Rising as a national project, and the enterprise ran and ran until the creation of the Irish Free State in 1921 and the proclamation of the Republic of Ireland in 1949. For Kiberd, it did not (and it does not) matter if the Easter Rising as a project for a

new Ireland was an invented myth. In fact, it does not matter even if the myth is a terribly false one, like that of Holy Ireland versus Perfidious Albion. What really matters is that huge numbers of people believed in those myths and so they became decisive agents of history.

Yeats and Joyce are just two of the many writers analysed by Kiberd: his book studies in detail the works of the major 20th century writers in relation to their textual contribution to the process of national (re)invention of Ireland. The reader interested in any of those authors is strongly recommended to read the appropriate pages of Kiberd's volume. But for now, let us end with a theory that may enrage more than one (Irish) nationalist: Kiberd believes that the famines of the 1840s did not destroy the Irish language. What happened was that by the 1790s the Irish were ready to adopt English as the language of commerce and prestige; therefore, parents saw to it that English alone was spoken by their children, and then a process of denying of the Irish language followed. Shocked by the gravity of what they had done, in the first half of the 20th century the Irish reinvented the facts: they rewrote history as a Manichaean tale of famines and English oppression. Another myth was born.

All in all, contentious as it often is, Kiberd's is a superb book, and a pleasure to read – here is one of the many anecdotes related by Kiberd: when Yeats was notified by an editor of the *Irish Times* that he had just been awarded the Nobel Prize, he interrupted the editor's verbose speech of tribute with the words «How much is it, man, how much is it worth?». A further proof that the Celts' dreamy, impractical personality is just an invented image.

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