

August 2023

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Recommended Citation

Byrne, Sandie (2023) "A Review of *The Modern Irish Sonnet: Revision and Rebellion*, by Tara Guissin-Stubbs," *International Yeats Studies*: Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 15.

Available at: <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/iys/vol7/iss1/15>

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A REVIEW OF *THE MODERN IRISH SONNET: REVISION AND REBELLION*, BY TARA GUISSIN-STUBBS

Tara Guissin-Stubbs, *The Modern Irish Sonnet: Revision and Rebellion*, New Directions in Irish and Irish American Literature. Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. ISBN: 978-3-030-53241-3 £89.99

Reviewed by Sandie Byrne

The *Modern Irish Sonnet: Revision and Rebellion* provides the kind of short history offered by most anthologies and studies of the sonnet, but further develops this to consider the variations, applications, complexities, and contrarities of this form that has become almost synecdochic of poetry as a whole and whose hegemony, as well as Eavon Boland's characterising of it as "a side-show of Empire," may have daunted many aspiring sonneteers.¹ It is those complexities and contrarities, Guissin-Stubbs argues, that appeal to Irish poets, who manipulate the possibilities of the sonnet to consider and challenge what constitutes Irishness and to make sometimes surprising claims about modern poetry and modernity. "Irish" is sensibly used to refer to those poets born in Ireland or making Ireland their main domicile, without further qualification or problematising.

Though no collection or study of the sonnet will be comprehensive, *The Modern Irish Sonnet* is more inclusive than most for the period which it defines as from 1900 to the present day and which it describes as book-ended by Yeats, MacNeice and Kavanagh, and Muldoon, Richard Murphy, and David Wheatley. Women poets are well represented by, among others, Eavon Boland, Leontia Flynn, Paula Meehan, Vona Groarke, Eiléan Ni Chuilleanáin, and Mary O'Malley. As well as the traditional forms, the study considers sonnets embedded in longer poems, poems that contain only "the whisper of the tradition," and poems self-titled as sonnets "despite sharing few visual similarities" with the Petrarchan or English variety. The organisation is thematic rather than chronological or by poet, the sections are entitled Introduction; the Modern Irish Sonnet; Art and Artifice; Sonnet Sequences; Conversation; The Domestic; The Amatory Sonnet; and Conclusion, and further subdivided, which produces some overlapping but makes the work a more interesting and fluent read than many textbooks.

Before turning to readings of specific examples of specifically Irish sonnets, the study considers ideas about the effect of the sonnet's structure, in particular the traditional iambic pentameter and quatrains and couplet or octet and

sestet rhyme-schemes, and its foregrounding of form. Guissin-Stubbs deftly deploys critical opinion and creative practice across centuries and continents, considering, for example, Joseph Phelan (on the nineteenth-century sonnet) asserting that if form is privileged over content the imagined organic connection between the two in lyric poetry is lost; Don Paterson warning of the syllogistic structure of the sonnet: “[r]hyme always unifies sense, and can make sense out of nonsense,” tricking out a logic “from the shadows where one would not have otherwise have existed” and offering a spurious sense of unity of meaning; Burt and Mikics’s assertion that the closed quatrains and sestet of the Petrarchan sonnet give a sensation of openness “so that lyric verse has become a way of talking to oneself”; Seamus Heaney half-celebrating, half-mocking a particularly British sonnet tradition; and Phillis Levin highlighting the paradox of the sonnet: “here formal structures elicit spontaneous gestures, artifice produces colloquial rhythm, and inherited patterns summon idiomatic speech.”

In terms of the assumed relationship between form and content, the choice of the sonnet as the appropriate medium for particular subjects is clearly significant, but so also is the choice not to write a sonnet. This is illustrated in the discussion of Paula Meehan’s moving “Child Burial,” a work by a poet who elsewhere makes extensive use of the sonnet form. Guissin-Stubbs finds that the poem’s unrhymed couplet structure represents the “fits and starts” of pained articulation, and suggests that “14 lines can’t contain all of its emotion.” Referring to a statement of Meehan’s about the urge through poetry to reconnect to the “safe and complex templates laid down before we even emerged onto the planet,” Guissin-Stubbs adds that “the ‘safe’ but perhaps too written and mannered “template” of the sonnet isn’t quite sufficient.”

Each of Guissin-Stubbs’s accomplished close readings aims to show the ways in which the modern Irish sonnet engages with sonnets of the past but also fashions and refashions our understanding of what the sonnet, and the Irish sonnet, can be. This revising and rebelling within and against an already conflicted form, Guissin-Stubbs argues, provides a way to think about identity and expression in personal, poetic, national, and transnational terms. The phrase “think about” is important; the study does not look for answers and conclusions found or posed by the sonneteers or their sonnets. It emphasises that while the sonnet “appears to offer a ‘problem-solving function’ through its internal structure of octet and sestet, or three quatrains and a couplet, this does not necessarily mean a working-out to conclusion. Though a sonnet, or a sonnet sequence, literally ends at the close of the fourteenth line, or a multiple thereof, the questions raised within the sonnet often linger far longer”; the sonnet is the perfectly imperfect form for poets to work through

ideas, questions, complexities, and contrariedades, but not necessarily to work them out.

Sonneteers examined in the study such as Merrill Moore, Iggy McGovern, and Paul Muldoon rebel against and revise the traditional sonnet form until it is almost but not quite unrecognizable, others reject and reshape their own additions to the canon, as is the case of Antony Cronin's *The End of the Modern World*, whose revisions the study traces. A section on "Conversations" provides some of the highlights of the study and clearly illustrates that the form known for its conveyed impression of the lyric I can be ventriloquial, dialogical, or even polyphonic.

The Modern Irish Sonnet: Revision and Rebellion brings to light a number of less well-known sonnets and sonneteers and is studded with insights into many that are more familiar. It is a very welcome addition to the New Directions in Irish and Irish American Literature series, whose published volumes include Christopher Lavery's *Seamus Heaney and American Poetry*, Daniela Theinová's *Limits and Languages in Contemporary Irish Women's Poetry*, Ailbhe McDaid's *The Poetics of Migration in Contemporary Irish Poetry* and Kenneth Keating's *Contemporary Irish Poetry and the Canon*.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Although Tara Guissin-Stubbs is the book reviews editor for *International Yeats Studies*, she played no role in and had no influence on the evaluation, editing, and publication of this review.