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A REVIEW OF *IRISH LITERATURE AND THE FIRST WORLD WAR*

Terry Phillips, *Irish Literature and the First World War: Culture, Identity and Memory* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2015), paperback and ebook, pp. 292, ISBN 978-3-03539-575-4

Reviewed by Jane Potter

William Butler Yeats infamously deemed Wilfred Owen “unworthy of the poet’s corner of a country newspaper” and excluded him from the 1936 edition of the *Oxford Book of English Verse*. Just why the older poet, “celebrant of conflict and heroism,” should have detested the younger so much has been explained by Jon Stallworthy: “they represented competing value-systems—Ancient and Modern, Homeric and humane—and the 1930s [...] there could be no competition.”¹ Yeats’s own attitude to the war, articulated in “On Being Asked for a War Poem,” is perhaps as well known—and as critically discussed—as his judgment of Owen:

I think it better that in times like these
A poet’s mouth be silent, for in truth
We have no gift to set a statesman right [...] (VP 359)

Indeed, Yeats does not feature largely in Terry Phillips’s book; as she asserts, “Subsequently, of course, the war was a significant influence on his development as a writer, but that is beyond the scope of this study” (86). His Irish countrymen and women, who *are* the focus of this study, were not silent, although their contributions to the literature of 1914–1918 have been largely overlooked, caught up in what has commonly been considered a cultural amnesia about and antipathy towards Irish participation in the First World War.

Such amnesia and antipathy are challenged by Phillips throughout *Irish Literature and the First World War: Culture, Identity and Memory*. For while historians such as Adrian Gregory and Keith Jeffrey have also called the “Irish amnesia” into question, less work has been done by literary scholars, and generally the focus has tended to be on poetry, either in critical studies (such as Fran Brearton’s *The Great War in Irish Poetry* [2000]) or anthologies (like Gerald Dawe’s *Earth Voices Whispering* [2008]). Phillips works on a broader canvas, which includes fiction, non-fiction, and drama as well as poetry.

Phillips’s study is divided into two sections. The first, “War and Nation,” focuses on writing produced during the war from both soldiers and civilians,

1. Jon Stallworthy, *Survivors’ Songs: From Maldon to the Somme* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 87.

while the second, “Remembering War,” turns attention to work ranging from the 1920s and 1930s (the years of the “War Books Boom”) to the early twenty-first century. Eight main chapters thus cover a broad spectrum of writing by men and women, combatants and non-combatants, war-time contemporaries and post-war generations. Thus this is a longitudinal study that is necessarily selective, but one which manages to incorporate close readings alongside larger themes surrounding culture, identity and memory.

As their literary accounts reveal, Irishmen enlisted to fight in the Great War for a range of motives, informed by different social, political, religious, and cultural backgrounds, ones in which “the cultural influences of Britishness, Irishness and Englishness fluctuate[d] and relate[d] dynamically to one another, recognizing no impermeable boundaries” (20). For many, there was no incompatibility between “a self-conscious Irish identity” and “a civic patriotism towards Great Britain” (93). This is particularly exemplified by the poets considered in Chapter 1, especially Thomas Kettle and Francis Ledwidge. Although “the Irish political context” (22) was significant for both, for Ledwidge in particular; his “profound love of landscape,” “his love of the countryside is a key factor in his love for Ireland,” much like the English landscape was for Edward Thomas, Ivor Gurney, and Edmund Blunden. His “deepest loyalty was consistently to Ireland,” yet he “believed that the war was just, that the German enemy was a threat to people in Ireland and elsewhere” (37). Whilst he was deeply affected by the 1916 Rising, Phillips argues that the “efforts to present Francis Ledwidge as a nationalist poet, a pro-war poet, or an anti-war poet are inevitably reductive and limiting, as are efforts to trace a steady movement of his opinions and concerns in one direction or another” (37). Kettle shared Ledwidge’s “nationalist sympathies” and like him “saw no contradiction as a nationalist fighting in the army of Great Britain for a cause he perceived to be just, but saw himself first and foremost as an Irishman” (46).

The prose writings of Patrick MacGill (*The Amateur Army* [1915], *The Red Horizon* [1916], *The Great Push* [1916]) and St John Ervine (*Changing Winds* [1917]), which are the focus of Chapter 2, “Debating the Nation,” combine often harrowing portrayals of actual war experience with reflections on the role as well as the motivation, despite horrific conditions, of the average soldier in the international conflict. In MacGill’s *The Red Horizon* and *The Great Push*, in particular, the sustaining force is comradeship, “born of shared experience through suffering and deprivation, and most certainly not nationalism or even civic patriotism” (55).

From combatant writing, Phillips turns in Chapter 3 to the poetry of women, namely Katharine Tynan, Winifred Letts, and Eva-Gore Booth, in which the theme of “Nation and Religion” is particularly resonant, but which was interpreted in vastly different ways by each. Again, Tynan and Letts felt no

contradiction between their civic patriotism towards Britain in the war effort and their Irish nationalism, but Gore-Booth's resolute opposition to the war "was based on convinced pacifism not, as might be expected, on Irish nationalism" (88). For her, religious belief was "a powerful motivator for resistance" (116).

Patriotism comes under both subtle and explicit scrutiny in works considered in Chapter 4, in particular the novels of Mrs Victor Rickard (Jessica Louisa Moore) and the play *O'Flaherty, V.C.* by George Bernard Shaw. In Rickard's three novels set during the war, *The Light above the Crossroads* (1916), *The Fire of Green Boughs* (1918) and *The House of Courage* (1919), "obligation to one's nation is expressed in quasi-religious language, with references to martyrdom and self-sacrifice" and "an almost mystical attachment to the land" (122), but is nevertheless subtly subversive of too-easy patriotic platitudes. A much more explicit critique is apparent in Shaw's play, *O'Flaherty V.C.* (1915), which "set out to question the real weight" of various motives for enlistment, ranging from "a conviction of the justice of the cause, Irish nationalism, or loyalty to Britain," but which suggests that "the war, evil though it is, must be fought to prevent a greater triumph of militarism" (143). Such motivations and justifications were to ring hollow for Irish survivors in the inter-war period in the same way they did for those of other combatant nations.

Phillips's scrutiny of post-war writing is thus dominated by attention to "the mediated quality of memory and the variety of cultural forms such mediation might take" (145). Memory of the First World War is characterized by the individual/personal and the social/familial, with "collective memory" emerging from them, and beyond which exists official or public memory represented by national commemorations or institutions such as museums. In the Irish context, particularly after 1921, such shifting aspects of First World War memory take on more complexity, which the final four chapters of the book view through various lenses.

In Chapter 5, "Disenchanted Memory," Phillips reiterates one of her key arguments about Irish "amnesia" about the war: that the desire to forget was motivated more by emotion than politics. Literature of this period—including MacGill's *Fear!* (1921) and Liam O'Flaherty's *Return of the Brute* (1929), and Pamela Hinkson's *The Ladies' Road* (1932)—evinces "a range of responses from disillusion about the conflict to a more profound, and more all-embracing disillusion with human experience" (163). Of these, the most powerful is Sean O'Casey's *The Silver Tassie* (1927), which was rejected by Yeats for performance at the Abbey in 1928, a decision that Phillips suggests was partly "deliberate politically motivated amnesia" (152). The disillusion of these prose works is also characteristic of the poetry produced in the post-war decades both in the Free State and in Northern Ireland, and is analyzed in Chapter 6, "Constructing

Memory, North and South,” through the work of Thomas MacGreevy, Stephen Gwynne, Samuel McCurry, Thomas Carnduff, and Harry Midgley. How the artist plays a role in the formation of more current First World War collective memory is the subject of Chapter Seven, “Challenging Memory in Northern Ireland,” through exploration of the poetry of Michael Longley and the plays of Christina Reid and Frank McGuinness. Chapter Eight investigates “Recovering Forgotten Memory” in the work of Jennifer Johnston, Sebastian Barry and Dermot Bolger, in which the divisions between the memory of the two Irelands is negotiated. Such recent works illuminate, in Phillips’s view,

a crucial difference between Northern Ireland, where remembrance as performance retains importance because of its inevitable political significance, and the Republic, where an absence of continuing political division means that remembering is much more a personal and family activity, which nevertheless requires accommodation in the collective memory. (240)

Phillips’s Afterword, entitled “The Significance of Irish First World War Writing,” is less successful than the preceding main chapters, being more of a summary than an “afterword” that pushes her arguments further or presents some new insights. It is rather repetitive of what has come before and misses an opportunity to summarize succinctly and forcefully the significance of the literature that has been highlighted, particularly in relation to the larger canon of First World War Literature. The centenary of 1914–18 has been an opportunity for historians and literary scholars alike to reassess long-held assumptions and well-worn interpretations about the war and the generation that experienced it. Phillips contributes to the project both of re-definition and rediscovery as she identifies and engages with the complexities and competing narratives that characterize Irish literature of the First World War, but I would have liked the Afterword to reflect more upon what Irish writing in particular adds to the larger global narrative.

That being said, this is a welcome overview of many neglected literary texts that challenges dominant assumptions about Irish participation in and memory of the First World War. Each chapter can be read separately, which is useful for teaching purposes, but taken together they represent a coherent and scholarly whole. Close readings illuminate larger themes, whilst paying particular attention to the nuances of individual texts and writers, and the chapters and sections are woven together well. Phillips persuasively demonstrates that Irish war literature, like the war literature of other nations, resists too-easy categorization and is a complex and fluid canon, where “dominant memory [...] is only a memory in process” (255).