

## Book Reviews

Declan Kiberd. *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995. Pp. xi, 719. \$35.00.

In this imaginative, quirky, wide-ranging, and often brilliant study, Declan Kiberd attempts to understand and explain the making of modern Irish literature as, what it doubtlessly is in many prominent ways, a key postcolonial literature. In fact, at several points in this very large book the author appears to claim for his national literature a senior, even precursor, status in the galaxy of postcolonial literatures. At the same time, Kiberd does not hesitate to point out that on a number of occasions Irish writers (and others in Irish society) have failed to see clearly the implications of this anterior position, or to respond adequately (and with appropriate sympathy) to newly emerging national literary, cultural, and political movements in other similarly colonized (or postcolonial) locations.

In a prominently displayed commendation on the dust-jacket, Edward Said calls *Inventing Ireland*, a "completely unusual thing; . . . a book [that] lifts Ireland out of ethnic studies and lore, and places it in the post-colonial world." This remark causes me to wonder how oddly the world must appear to folks living in the US, even when they happen to be leading postcolonialist critics. It is rather unclear to me why this supposed elevation ("lifts") should mean that Kiberd has now placed Irish Studies in a *higher* category of critical practice than has been the case so far. I am well aware that in the current professional climate this sort of sentiment is widely privileged; still, professional predilection should not distort one's critical perception to this extent. The fear of Other loudly manifests itself in the postcolonialist academic's debunking of "ethnic" or "area" studies, as if these fields are somehow fey or, worse still, not sufficiently committed to the supposedly heroic task of reading for resistance. Is it possible that First World postcolonial theorists and their co-opted "diasporic" graduate students are too little interested in investing in strenuous language studies and in learning the particular cultural or political shapes of the diverse or specific postcolonial peoples about whom they indolently theorize?

Happily, however, not just enough but a very large measure of ethnic-studies expertise remains evident in Kiberd's *Inventing Ireland*. As I see it, this particularized knowledge gives the book its significant merit, and makes its study worthwhile for the reader. What is truly distressing is the transparently thin connections Kiberd feels compelled to make from time to time between his Irish material and tagged post-colonial matter—say, a casual mention of V. S. Naipaul or of Igbo people. At the same time, it is also evident that the author has deep sympathy for, and an honest intellectual commitment to, other post-colonial literatures (at least ones that are written in English) and to nationalist movements elsewhere. At such moments in his discussion, the connections he makes and the contrasts he highlights are neither incidental nor far-fetched.

But why should this be as unexpected as Said makes it out to be? Is it possible for students of Irish literature to overlook the fact that Ireland has been—and in some sense still is—a particularly exemplary territory for examining the inevitably slippery contest between the colonizer and the colonized? Its iterative value in the discourse of post-coloniality may not always have been loudly broadcast or vigorously claimed, but neither has it been seriously challenged or denied. Therefore, it is gratuitous to advance the special claim that post-colonial theory or methodology is uniquely appropriate for the study of Irish history and culture. At any rate, this supposedly enabling “theory” seems to be especially odd in that it is informed by a persistently *negative* orientation—one that relies on a default position in which the colonizer is willy-nilly the prime mover behind the multiple colonized peoples' multifaceted activities. For the most part, Kiberd does well to attend to the centrality of Irish specificities in his discussion of modern Irish literature. And in this he is exceptionally knowledgeable; moreover, he displays his learning without self-consciousness. He can, however, be intriguing in his analyses.

Take, for example, Kiberd's confident remark, “The Rising [1916] was, among other things, a systematic attempt to restore Dublin's metropolitan status, lost since the Act of Union” (364). Here is an observation that will surely leave us wondering if we have read him right. Indeed, Dublin was not a world centre in 1916, and that fact may have rankled the small Anglo-Irish gentry as it looked out of the windows of the Big Houses. But the systematics of a procedure that can enact a bloody rebellion for the sake of civic aggrandizement is hard to comprehend. However, Kiberd's comment has exactly the kind of unpleasant “historicist” ring to it that will, ironically, please many contemporary scholars. Should this happen, the author might well be left feeling like Heaney's poet-protagonist: “incredible to myself / among people far too eager to believe me / and my story.”

A less original, but more reasonable, interpretation might be that for some people in Ireland, especially those who were only dimly

aware of the nationalist movement—Protestant writers like Elizabeth Bowen, for example—the historic Rising brought the shocking realization that even Dublin could be the setting of momentous happenings that call into question London's assumed right to dictate to the world. Certainly, something of this surprised feeling of being simultaneously aghast and gratified got inscribed into the literature of the land. For some Irish people this was a definite moment of self-recognition; presumably, for many others it was not so. The cultural narrative that is the "history" of modern Irish literature records these various responses in a variety of modes. That composite narrative is, in turn, the one Kiberd seeks to re-narrativize. Indeed, this re-visiting must continue as long as the literature that is at the base of it all retains its power to compel. It is merely a contemporary prejudice that the unearthing of bits of "real" historical context—recorded in supposed foundationally solid sources such as private journals, newspaper cuttings, tax returns, and so on—will reveal the *real* story.

On the whole Kiberd's book is concerned with the major figures of Irish literary modernism. The revaluations are consistent with current opinion of these writers—although given the neglect of Modernism in recent post-Modern times, that revaluation is not widely known. There is still too much easy talk about fascist and illiberal attitudes of the major Modernists for us to appreciate readily the revolutionary and progressive side of, say, Yeats's works—including its strong pro-feminist tendencies recently highlighted in Elizabeth Cullingford's works, and echoed by Kiberd. For him, however, the key figure is James Joyce, "[the first?] among the great postcolonialist writers" of the world (327). This, too, is in keeping with the recent privileging of Joyce as the first major artist of our postmodern age. So, while Kiberd's valuation of Joyce is not unique, his postcolonial angle probably is. Frankly, when Kiberd does not seek to be novel, he manages to make highly valuable analyses. For example, he refuses to accept a simplistic connection between post-Enlightenment modernity of the Eurocentric world and Modernist experimental writing—a false equation that so prominently manifests itself in the confused thinking of many recent proponents of postmodernism.

In his conclusion, Kiberd points out that but for the works of these major modernist writers, these great innovators in twentieth-century literature, Ireland produced little else that was of value during the early decades following its independence. In a manner that sounds distinctly odd—and refreshing—in the present climate of scepticism about imagination, and in the context of rampant credulity about the "objectivity" of historicism, Kiberd asserts that "during the earlier decades of the independent state, [Ireland] often seemed to stagnate through lost self-belief." The major writers, however, "produced a great experimental literature, which . . . has coded into its texts many elements which might be helpful in redesigning an Ireland of the fu-

ture. If other, less original groups in that society were to look to artists for inspiration . . . much could be learned from the scrutiny" (652). These are fighting words, especially from one who claims to don a postcolonial mantle. Scandalous too, if one considers how distrustful we have become of canons and canonical authors, and how scientized our anatomizing of "canon formation" is today. Our eagerness to believe that "great" writers are merely those who have been privileged by the institutions and professionals of "Eng.Lit," makes Kiberd's position seem quaint indeed.

Still, Kiberd's pen falters at places. For example, he details for us—in a fashion familiar to us from similar postcolonial accounts emanating from other former colonies—how the study of English literature had been imposed on hapless Irish students merely as preparation for writing "examinations." But, typically, his account fails to distinguish between the institutions of power and the literary texts themselves. Nevertheless, Kiberd admits that "[h]idden in the classic writings of England . . . lay many subversive potentials, awaiting their moment like unexploded bombs" (268). There is nothing surprising about the "subversive power" of great literature, unless one treats co-ally—as Kiberd does here—a play by Shakespeare and "English" verse of the following order: "I thank the goodness and the grace / That on my birth have smiled; / And made me in these Christian days / A happy English child." Works of imagination, what Kiberd elsewhere in the book calls "high art" (3), may be produced in history, but they are seldom produced *for* official history, and often *against* it.

Read the book. A big book, but a novel it is not. Perhaps a long series of stories like *Dubliners*, which is for Kiberd the proto-text of postcolonial beginnings: "Such a collection of prentice stories would be written in later decades by many another member of an emerging national élite" (330). "[M]any another," "prentice," writes Kiberd, and he accents "élite." The style is just that little slightly off, a tad fussy and colonial, a bit gratuitously formal. Not always so, however. Kiberd can pun with the best of them—Walter Benjamin included, that, too, on the topic of "translation"—say, on "re-membering" what was never whole, what literally was always dis-membered (629). So, one wonders—well, one quickly finds out that this author is cool and that he likes it that way. Even if it doesn't show as clearly, I do too.

While the author of this delightfully odd and often entirely sensible book seeks to provide a fully "postcolonial" reading of the Irish literary scene of the last 100 years or so, his performance is at least as prominently "postmodern" as it is post-anything else. The seemingly reckless copiousness of his canvas is matched by a stylistic panache that can be at once beguiling and impressive. There is much that glitters here, much wit, much more "awesome" generalizing, and a good deal that is new as well as valuable. Still, in this book "the empire writes back" via Brendan Behan, and Synge "remember[s] the future." As anyone who

is familiar with the Republic knows, the island can be the closest place to the US outside the star-spangled land. Typically, then, the author of *Inventing Ireland* has created a repeatedly-ruptured narrative that deliberately moves in more directions than one, yet Hollywood-wise ends as a happy tale. Kiberd cultivates, when he needs it, a glitzy style that flattens distinctions of register. Still, the author manages to tell a number of good stories, and leaves us with a distinctly un-modern epic of literary historical revaluation.

SYHAMAL BAGCHEE



Stella Algoo-Baksh. *Austin C. Clarke: A Biography*. Toronto: ECW Press, 1994. Pp.234. \$19.95 pb.

Growing up poor, black and illegitimate in Barbados, Austin Clarke was destined to discover early in life that the black person "has to be ready to do almost anything just to exist" (45). His sensibilities were nurtured in a class-conscious society dominated by well-to-do whites, and his education at Barbados's prestigious schools was designed to transform him into a black Englishman. One is not surprised to learn therefore that having grown up in such a narrow society Clarke played the role of the black Englishman on the University of Toronto campus when he arrived there as a student in the 1950s. But it did not take him long to discover that it was his blackness that mattered, and his experiences convinced him that "Canada was fundamentally racist" (37). This conviction is crucial, for it is at the heart of his writings. For instance, his obsession to prove his value in a racist society has always been the source of his creative energy. The theme of racism pervades Clarke's writing. Two examples are worth noting: the early *The Meeting Point* (1967), in which Bernice, his biographer contends, "reflects the author's own perpetual insecurities" as a black individual in a white society (104); and the later *Nine Men Who Laughed* (1986), in which Canadian society is depicted as a force engendering in black immigrants "a sense of dislocation . . . and a loss of identity" (166).

However distinctive Clarke's experiences in Barbados and Canada may have been, he is the typically disaffected colonial who, given the valuable perspective of distance and much self-examination, comes to understand the extent to which his colonial education reinforced his sense of inferiority even as it taught him to regard Mother England as the source of all things true and good and beautiful. Clarke, Algoo-Baksh shows, has undertaken a long and sometimes traumatic voyage of self-discovery which climaxed in his realization that while his colonial education offered him an escape from poverty, it also deprived him of his own black culture and heritage. This discovery is a central theme in *Amongst Thistles and Thorns* (1965) and *Growing Up Stupid Under the Union Jack* (1980).