

Modern Irish and Scottish Literature, by Richard Alan Barlow, Oxford, UK (Oxford University Press), 2023, xi + 176 pp., £71.00 (hardcover), ISBN 978-0-19-285918-1.

In the conclusion to *Modern Irish and Scottish Literature*, Barlow offers a helpful summary of the endeavours of his book: '[t]his study has carried out a comparative analysis of modern Irish and Scottish writing through an examination of textual, historical, thematic, and personal links between Irish and Scottish literature, with a focus on the development of literary Celticism' (p.144). This overview nods to the strengths, and to the possible limitations, of the study. In *Modern Irish and Scottish Literature*, Barlow does much to explore the rich potential of 'literary Celticism' in both Ireland and Scotland, and draws some tantalising comparisons between works written in these countries. However, the sustained emphasis on 'Celticism' is potentially narrowing, as it refers to a peculiar version of Irishness and Scottishness that can't contain all the varieties of both literatures; meanwhile, the straightforward approach cannot account for accidental, occasional, or even unconscious overlaps between texts.

This is not to say, however, that the study is not wide-ranging: authors discussed include Sydney Owenson, W. B. Yeats, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Lady Gregory, Fiona Macleod, Hugh MacDiarmid, Sorley MacLean, and Seamus Heaney. And while relatively recent publications such as Edna Longley and Fran Brearton's *Modern Scottish and Irish Poetry* (2011) and Ray Ryan's *Ireland and Scotland: Literature and Culture, State and Nation, 1966–2000* (2000) have done much to further the critical arguments for comparative readings of Irish and Scottish literature, the emphasis that Barlow places on close attention to primary texts is welcome. The introduction does careful work in establishing a critical backdrop for the study, making use of Ryan's claims but going

further to establish parallel moments in the histories of Ireland and Scotland. Barlow notes that 'literary links' in Irish-Scottish studies 'are too numerous to be mentioned extensively', and therefore narrows his scope to 'study[ing] modern Irish and Scottish literature within the context of Celticism', as: '[o]ne of the most important and long-standing interfaces between the literary cultures of Ireland and Scotland is the discourse of Celticism' (5). Though the focus of the study is therefore given a critical defence, it is perhaps a missed opportunity that Barlow tends to take the term 'Celtic' at face value, and that he does not particularly question or scrutinise it.

For example, although the introduction offers an extensive and compelling history of Celtic culture, and though this history is fraught with ambiguities of meaning and application of the term 'Celtic', Barlow does not really explain why he chooses to adopt this term despite its slipperiness, and despite its problematic associations, particularly when related to race and gender. For instance, he notes that '[t]he use of this term ['Celtic'] as a way to draw Ireland, Scotland, and Wales together happens despite a lack of evidence to suggest a racial link between the modern "Celtic" nations' (p.5). Yet the study continues to follow the trend by unearthing instances of 'Celtic' connection between Scottish and Irish texts, not because Barlow is not sceptical about the term but because he wishes to draw upon Celticism's historical and cultural sources.

Modern Irish and Scottish Literature is replete with references to secondary and critical literature, giving a rich sense of the field of Celtic criticism within Irish and Scottish literary studies. At times, this leads to a quieting of the author's critical voice, as he often gives us extensive quotations without commenting directly upon them. This means that Barlow leaves us to work out what to glean from the quotation, as when in Chapter 1

(‘*Ossian* and Irish literature’) on just one page he uses the phrase ‘as James Pethica has discussed’ and ‘[a]s Stafford has discussed’, both preceding long quotations (p.23). This is not to say that the material itself is irrelevant – indeed, the arguments of Pethica and Stafford seem to be essential to Barlow’s reading of *Ossian* and Macpherson – but rather that we are given little guidance on how to receive their arguments. A similar issue arises with the length of the footnotes at the bottom of each page, as they often quote more critical arguments and suggest even more directions for investigation. On one page, for example, just four footnotes take up half of the text (p.100). Are we supposed to read these footnotes as we read the book, or should we return to them later, or not at all? The 17-page Bibliography, likewise, is extraordinarily detailed; while both footnotes and Bibliography might be aiming to serve students and researchers by offering multiple lines of investigation, the footnotes are likely to distract.

The study is very ambitious in its approach: the first chapter alone references James Macpherson’s *The Poems of Ossian* in relation to Owenson’s *The Wild Irish Girl* and Yeats’s ‘The Wanderings of Oisín’; discusses Matthew Arnold’s lectures *On the Study of Celtic Literature*; and describes the reactions of Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* and Beckett’s *Murphy* to Macpherson’s text. This rich, bold approach is sustained throughout the study. Perhaps the most unusual and surprising chapter discusses ‘Gender, nationality, and Celticism in [Lady] Gregory and [Fiona] Macleod’ (Chapter 2). Macleod was the female identity of Scottish author William Sharp, and therefore there is much space to consider gender in relation to questions of Celticism and nation here. Barlow contends, quoting Mark Williams, that “[i]n using the name Macleod, Sharp was also tapping into “the contemporary fashion for seeing the ‘Celt’ as intuitive, visionary, and feminine”” (p.47 and n.26). This raises some interesting questions concerning whether a feminine,

Celtic essence can be accessed through 'transgender self-fashioning' (p.46). The chapter also contains some lovely comparative close readings of poetry.

The ambition of Chapter 2 is sustained into Chapter 3, an extended discussion of the influence of Walter Scott on Joyce that also charts the rise and fall of the popularity of Scott's writings within Ireland. Most boldly, Barlow connects the two writers in terms of sexual activity; for example, he argues that 'incest is a form of paralysis in Joyce's work since it leads to stasis or decline', while 'Scott's conception of history ends with a form of stasis (or resolution)' (p.79). Though some of the readings seem a little stretched – for instance, when 'the masturbatory connotations' of Joyce's captain in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* are seen as gesturing back to Scott by way of a 'fitting onanistic impulse' (p.79) – the bold comparisons do show us in the ways in which Joyce might play with the language and works of his Scottish forebear. Even bolder, perhaps, is Chapter 4 – 'Scottish Modernism and the Celtic World' – which demonstrates the influence of Celtic culture on Scottish modernist writers such as Hugh MacDiarmid and Sorley MacLean, despite more established views of Celticism being far removed from modernism, thanks to Celticism's nostalgia, narrow-mindedness and retrospection.

The final chapter discussed Heaney in relation to the North and to Scotland. In so doing, it chooses to focus on Heaney's *Sweeney Astray* (1983) as an example of Heaney's complex associations with Celticism. This text is well chosen to demonstrate how Heaney often grapples with Englishness, Irishness and Celticism all at the same time. Barlow notes in particular how 'the topography of *Sweeney Astray* extends beyond Ireland and into Scotland', with Heaney 'generally opt[ing] for modern Irish and Scottish

placenames', an act which 'creates a sense of grounded familiarity and immediacy for the reader' (p.127). Of course, this modernising also helps re-frame the Celtic mode.

It is perhaps a shame that more women are not discussed in this book – for instance Katharine Tynan is given a tantalisingly brief mention when Barlow notes that her work was published in 'Patrick Geddes' Edinburgh-based journal *The Evergreen*' (p.140). But, slight caveats aside, this is a rich and generative study which is sure to do much to highlight the manifold ways in which Irish and Scottish literatures interact.

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