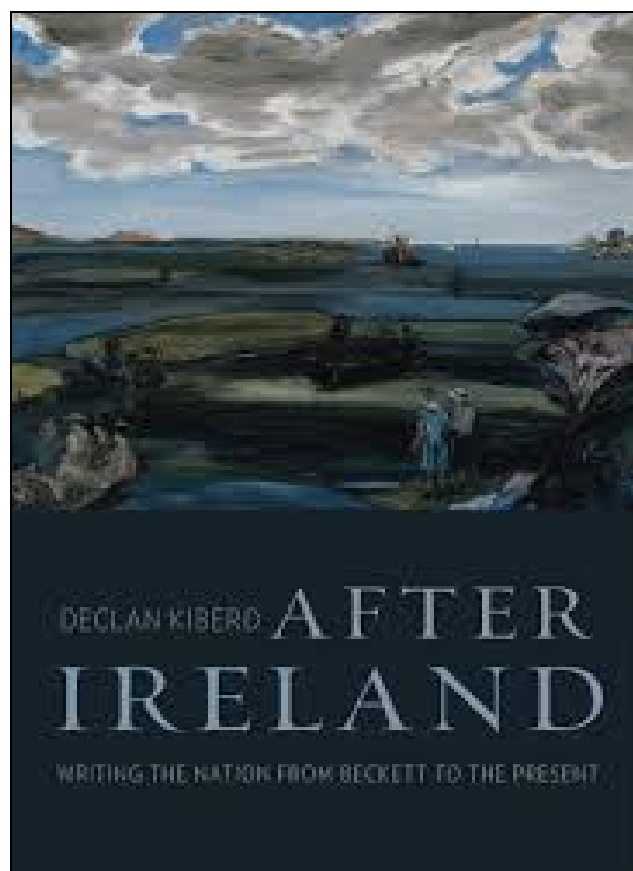


BOOKS

Declan Kiberd, *After Ireland: Writing the Nation from Beckett to Present*, Harvard University Press, 2018, 540 p.



Since the publication of *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* in 1995, Declan Kiberd's distinction as a critic and scholar in the field of (Anglo-)Irish Studies has grown substantially, not in the least because of the prestigious literary awards bestowed upon his work. In fact, following the publication of the sequel

Irish Classics in 2000, Kiberd's relevance to the field of Irish studies, as well as cultural studies as a whole, stems from his straightforward engagement with the archetype of the Irish "national project." Indeed, the kernel contention of *After Ireland* is that the "birth of the new state signalled the slow end of the national project," an enfee-

blement which became, in his own words, “conclusive in the years following the economic crash of 2008” (ix). The distinctiveness and allure of Kiberd’s perspective is precisely its compatibility with other national blueprints, or the idea of nationhood itself. His research propositions aim to identify the way in which “the state proved unable to contain or embody (...) the ambitions of the nation” (ix), while also recounting the spirit of emergency that seemed to define the condition of postcolonialism.

Currently the Donald and Marilyn Keough Professor of Irish Studies at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana, Declan Kiberd is rightly identified as *the* authority in the literature of Ireland, whether in Gaelic or English. His contributions to both cultural studies and literary theory have earned him numerous critical awards and the distinction of being addressed as one of the most important three hundred “political figures leading the cultural discourse”¹ by *The Observer* in 2011. Moreover, alongside P. J. Mathews, Kiberd received an outstanding acknowledgement from President Michael Higgins for his achievements in terms of recognising the most important discourses that have shaped 21st century Ireland and the Irish national identity.²

In this regard, *After Ireland* first identifies an indisputable tendency of the Irish to place their faith in a monoculture after the 1801 Act of Union. Following 1922, this “reality” (6) was represented by the nation state and, later, by the Catholic Church, thus rendering the juxtaposition between colonisation and native struc-

tures of low diversity almost palpable. Such continuous cropping was fuelled by a culture of “control and interdiction” (7), practiced in a bottom-up manner, from a social level to education, political life and, to be sure, within the administration. Starting with Samuel Beckett’s 1953 *Waiting for Godot*, Declan Kiberd registers the way in which Ireland’s isolationist, subsistence economy retarded the development of new generations, while censorship prevented them from asserting their status as individuals. Certainly, growing the same cultural crop during the better part of the 20th century fostered a repression of instinctual life among the citizens of the Free State, but also an almost unbridgeable distance between their inner selves and two central aspects of their identities, their language and their landscape. The process had widespread reverberations on the Irish, who, albeit politically united, had no sense of an integrated, collective culture. This is underlined by Kiberd with the help of Sean O’Faoláin’s tremendous work through *The Bell* magazine, Máire Mhac an tSaoi’s poetry of emotional destitution, Edna O’Brien’s *The Country Girls*, Seamus Heaney’s *North*, Seamus Deane’s *Reading in the Dark*, and John McGahern’s *Among Women*. The latter works are especially poignant in illustrating the paradox of an Irish Bildungsroman. Adults were commonly trapped in a state of perpetual adolescence akin to Mr. Gentleman, a pattern of lack of self-familiarity that is also present in Brian Friel’s “Philadelphia,” while children too often had to live in self-enclosed worlds such as that of Great Meadow, or Deane’s Bogside Derry.

Thus, the major strength of Kiberd’s investigation is that it identifies several vestige themes that seem to have re-occurred in Irish culture since the 1950s,

¹ See <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2011/may/08/top-300-british-intellectuals>

² See <https://www.president.ie/en/media-library/speeches/handbook-of-the-irish-revival-an-abundance-of-riches-and-some-lessons-for-o>

BOOKS

some of them in continuity with much older tendencies, as the nation experienced gradual secularisation, constant emigration, the Troubles, as well as globalisation. O'Connor's biography, for instance, obviates that the methods of colonial education, which had been an important mechanism of instilling young children with an artificial opposition between intellect and emotion, continued to be applied within the Free State, though with a different purpose. Richard Power's protagonist in *The Hungry Grass* becomes an exemplar of the Irish fear of "committing oneself to the here and the now" (100), a foregrounded *distensio animi* which can only stem from a theocratic view that places emphasis on a transcendent phase existence. In addition, despite it being an important part of their identity, the Irish have used language (both Hiberno-English and Gaelic) not to express and connect, but to suppress and estrange people from themselves and one another, as Friel's Gar does in *Philadelphia*, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's Orla in *The Dancers Dancing* or Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's lyrical subjects. For this reason, Kiberd suggests that Claire Keegan's "Foster" may be an illustration of the way in which a "traumatic experience can be best reported, if it is inferred more than fully described" (465) for those who are not familiarised with using language to tell the entire truth. Yet, as Kiberd notes, the

title of his latest book "may represent an opportunity to move forward rather than the utterance of an adverse judgement" (495). Furthermore, in reading the society, the politics, the economy, and the art of Ireland from the second half of the 20th century to the present, Kiberd describes the wider problem of an absent "liberal humanist code" (491) in the wake of secularisation, a void which has since been filled by the dominant global religion of capitalism. The latter discourse, although widely adopted in Ireland during the Celtic Tiger era, imploded when the financial crisis hit the country.

Written in language accessible to a wide audience, the book effectively comprises an entertaining, intelligent and comprehensive series of observations on Irish culture, comments that are meant to familiarise readers with some of the most important Irish writings from the second half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st. Tremendously useful for both academic and non-academic readers, *After Ireland* has no claim of establishing a canon, but functions rather as a manifesto of self-questioning Irish culture. The project's overarching aim seems to signal that Irish culture is undergoing a "near-death experience" (481), and yet it remains "open to injections of life from without" (492), a new beginning maybe at hand to the extent the Irish assume their sense of becoming.

VLAD MELNIC

Email: vlad.melnic8@yahoo.com