

## **Shades of Green: Recent Ecocritical Studies of Irish Literature**

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Tim Wenzell, *Emerald Green: An Ecocritical Study of Irish Literature* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 175 pp.

Christine Cusick, editor, *Out of the Earth: Ecocritical Readings of Irish Texts* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2010), xv +269pp.

First a source of rich identification by the Irish Diaspora, when it became a means to connect emotionally with Ireland, Irish literature, in Irish and English, was looked upon by the reading public as an exotic bloom on the periphery of the Anglo-phone world. In the last half-century the literature of Ireland has become the focus of a post-modern, critical analysis, giving one of the first examples of the historic tensions embedded in the colonized experience and culture. The unspoiled countryside of Ireland has also served as a paradigm of the pre-industrial age, giving impetus to romantic exiles but also serving as a template for the new discipline of ecocriticism.

In broad outline, these books under review encapsulate these different ways of perceiving the Irish experience of landscape and attachments to it through a series of gifted writers and poets, who have now taken on a central place in the on-going dialogue between nature and culture, between history and the understanding of that history.

Wenzell's book will appeal to the Diaspora readers. It is a cultural-geographical overview as to how Ireland and its natural resources are reflected in its literature, its topography and its history: it is not a book of criticism of literary texts separate from nature, or a book with a project of a particular cultural theory with reference to academic sources, but rather a comprehensive account as to why the author feels that nature has been ignored in Irish writing of recent decades, with a few exceptions.

Tim Wenzell wishes to put at the centre a more direct literary engagement with the landscape of Ireland – which he feels is now essential – while he would place at the periphery the post-modern, textual critical analysis which has been up to recently the focus of Irish studies: that said, Wenzell pays due attention to those Irish ecocritics who have published in recent years, for example, Oona Frawley, whose *Irish Pastoral: Nostalgia and Twentieth Century Irish Literature* is drawn on to good effect here, and which will send scholars to this seminal work in Irish ecocriticism.

*Emerald Green* is essentially a broad thematic study, divided into six chapters, the first chapter on Ireland as a source of inspiration because of its forested landscape, the second on deforestation and how nature became forgotten, and the third concerned with the Irish Literary Revival and how it tried to reclaim the past through a mysterious landscape of a lost land.

The fourth chapter concerns islands, while in the fifth chapter an assessment of nature writing by northern Irish poets in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is attempted. The final chapter, and in my view, the best one, is a summary of how nature is important, and of those Irish writers who have drawn attention to the present crisis in the environment, now global, and how these writers can contribute to our understanding as to how to meet the challenge of that crisis.

The introduction to the book is excellent, the places named after trees and woods are given prominence, and rightly so. However, I was surprised to find no mention of the poet Robert Graves, who in his important work *The White Goddess* showed that the Irish language has an alphabet whose letters are named after trees. In Wenzell's first chapter, there is, as to be expected, some mystification about Druidic Ireland, such as divination from the songs of birds (13-15) and mention of course of Heaney/Sweeney (16), with its rich vein of translating from an old Irish text *Buile Shuibhne* seen to such sparkle in *Sweeney Astray* and which contains some lyrical passages among the finest written about nature in modern times.

Wenzell's insights are often perspicuous and arresting: for example when he discusses, in the chapter "Architects of the Unbeautiful," Heaney's poem where an unbaptised child is thrown back into the waters, where "limbo will be / A cold glitter of souls/ Through some far briny zone." To quote Wenzell:

Nature, from both Heaney's and Robinson's perspectives, becomes a non-human repository for evil, or at least a bottomless well of guilt. [The] infant abandoned in nature becomes, in effect, nature abandoned, where man has banished self from a place with which he was once familiar, and to which he now relegates the unborn dead out of human society that disintegrates the union between man and nature. (150)

This may be the effect of a guilt-ridden Christianised ethos: earlier in the book, in addition to translations of Irish texts in chapter one, Wenzell gives us a useful overview of Christianity and its relationship to the cutting down of forests, which were considered idolatrous by some writers, such views being important in considering Irish writing from its earlier springs to nature-writing at the present time.

This first chapter is a treasury of the wealth of such writing in early Irish, and will entrance new readers, while the second, more sobering one charts the destruction of forests, and the barren, desolate landscape which resulted from it, with literary references which will be familiar, I suspect, only to scholars specialising in this area.

Wenzell's third chapter, on the Irish literary revival, is very important, and places the poetry of the Celtic mystic A.E. alongside that of Yeats; attention is also drawn to the work of Lady Gregory and her conviction that the speech of the Irish peasantry in Connaught is an integral part of nature, which was a very direct and discernible influence on Yeats. The connection between Irish landscape and language and its influence on the Celtic Literary Revival is charted, although in my view, Wenzell's analysis of the "Song of Wandering Aengus" (59-60), when he describes the poem as "a literary version of the oral tradition, exploring now the power of the unconscious" does not entirely hold up, the unconscious being a largely undecipherable mode and too vaguely symbolic to be of use as critical analysis. I cannot help but feel that Yeats intended vagueness, as a form of incantatory worship in this and other poems.

In Chapter 5 of Wenzell's book "Poets of the North, Nature of the West" some of the names invoked will probably be known to most readers of Irish writing and there is no doubt that the news focus on Northern Ireland has helped to bring these poets into prominence. Some may feel that the work of Heaney, McNeice or Longley (Mahon's work is not featured) does not need much more attention. However, in this chapter the poetry of Kavanagh (110-116) is treated as important, summing up neatly some of the main avenues of criticism which have attended his work, such as nature not being a source of spiritual refreshment in the hard life of the small farmer (a typical feature of the anti-pastoral as conceptualized by Terry Gifford in his book *Pastoral*, which is not referenced in Wenzell's book). Kavanagh's account of being spiritually renewed in the city by echoes of the countryside, such as the canal in Dublin, site of his best sonnets – as littered suburban lanes bring him to an ecstatic and humble appreciation which amounts to a religious epiphany in his poem *Common Beauty* – while touched on in Wenzell's book, is deserving of further exegesis. Kavanagh's work is not even mentioned in Cusick's collection of essays.

The particular value of an ecocritical scrutiny is succinctly delineated in Cusick's book by Joy Kennedy-O'Neill in her essay on Synge's *Riders to the Sea*. Synge was the Irish playwright at the turn of the last century, who, on Yeats's advice, went to the Aran Islands, on the western shores of the Atlantic, and transcribed their speech into something of a heroic encounter with pre-Christian elements. Joy Kennedy-O'Neill finds that an ecocritical approach is essential in order to analyse the tragic force in the play. She also finds that, while most criticism is focused on Synge's use of language and folklore, there is something unique in his work that is neither nature from the British Romantic nor sterile Victorian point of view, and concludes that Synge may have very likely intended the ocean to present an indifferent, Darwinian landscape which creates a deeper duality than the Christian/Pagan antinomies, which means that the heroine, Maurya, can be seen more as a victim of nature than a heroine (44-45).

According to Wenzell, writers such as Synge became great by focussing on the elemental dramas of islanders, such as in *Riders to the Sea*, where Maurya, the protagonist, pits her strength against the losses – five sons – that the sea has inflicted on her, and Wenzell takes the opportunity in this reading of Synge to outline his theory as to how island populations differ in language and culture from the mainland. In the case of Synge, where language is often a direct transcript from Irish, and which is presumably not a language known by these critics, nevertheless they have managed to capture well the importance of his work, which combines pagan, Christian, and post-Darwinian perspectives, in a universal and global scenario which sets out the complexities of the human relation to the sea.

*Emerald Green's* sixth and final chapter, “Architects of the Unbeautiful: Nature as a Necessary Force in a changing Ireland,” is perhaps Wenzell at his most original and persuasive, as he quotes from poetry sources, such as the important poem by Eavan Boland “Ode to Suburbia”, and from journalist gurus, like Michael Viney, whose book *A Year's Turning* is a crucial piece of environmental writing. Viney and the poet Michael Longley emphasise how urgent is the plight facing Ireland in the wake of tourism and modern depredations of the landscape. In Cusick's book, Michael Longley's work is given an appreciation of its unique aspects by the critic Donna Potts. While rejoicing in the nomenclature of wild flowers, this poet does not abandon himself to Romantic ecstasy or a kind of pantheism; rather, in the naming he treads a path of civilised discourse, almost a homily, which illustrates how keenly he is aware of the need to discipline the recklessness of emotional nationalism which have led to war in his own province. Because romantic identification has given way to tropes of rationality, his work, despite the beauty of its particulars, can seem prosaic at times.

Sean Lysaght, who is consciously and consummately a Nature poet, is extensively interviewed in Wenzell's book, and also provides an opportunity to Wenzell to reference those works which are particularly valuable for his enterprise, such as Praeger's *The Way that I Went*, which – along with other literary works of environmental concern – were omitted from the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, which was meant to be inclusive but left some writers like Praeger to the margins.

Both books under review are rich in insights when it comes to discussion of authors not so widely known outside Ireland. Ecocriticism is at the heart of *Out of the Earth*, edited by Christine Cusick of Seton Hill University in the USA, an exiguously edited book of essays by contemporary scholars in the field. Overall it is a laudatory attempt to put such scholars on the map, so sometimes it can be a matter of discussion how the work of certain writers fits in with the theory - with the valuable gaze of hindsight and the critical tools of post-structuralism, post-Marxism and post-feminism, or with the latter's critical offshoot, ecofeminism. Maureen O Connor's essay on Edna O'Brien probes the

extremities of the ecofeminist genre, finding parallels between O'Brien's relations to the physical world of animals and compassionate encounters which offer redemption for the woman's seemingly, at times, abject animal state which is also a comment on the Irish, repressed culture which silenced women and attempted to silence O'Brien. It is good to see Edna O'Brien's work evaluated away from the sensationalist and superficial criticism that she has encountered since the beginning of her career. Her importance as a writer, in my opinion, does indeed rest in her encounters with nature and her lyrical evocations of the beauty of the countryside, which is often contrasted with the venal and limited life of her characters.

In Cusick's book, there are engaging essays by Eamonn Wall on the poet Richard Murphy which opens the ecocritical discourse and indicates that the highest demands of clarity and scholarship are paramount in this book, while Kathryn Kirkpatrick outlines the ecofeminist concerns behind the poet Paula Meehan's books in a clear exposition that is indeed the hallmark of Cusick's whole collection of essays.

This book contains superb readings of the work of individual authors. Where it falls down is the unevenness of its scope - for example, the highly influential Yeats and his imagined literary landscape of Ireland receives no attention. Neither is there any regard paid to the work of Kavanagh or Heaney or Derek Mahon, which would have been welcome given their huge contribution to Irish literature in modern times. Is it possible to have a book of Irish ecocriticism which neglects these major figures? No doubt the editor will argue that these Irish poets have received ample attention elsewhere. However, it would have been useful to have an ecocritical re-evaluation of their work.

Cusick's book of essays offers close-ups of scholarly encounters with some Irish writers and their preoccupations, and, as indicated, is centred more on an academic focus with recent ecocritical theory as a tool. Many of the essays in Cusick's book are devoted to separate and discrete subjects within the framework of Irish writing, and will expand specialist knowledge of writers not at the forefront of Irish studies, but who are nevertheless important from an ecocritical perspective. To take two examples, the work of Elizabeth Bowen and George Moore, two figures in the Anglo-Irish tradition which flourished around the beginning of the last century, are accorded fresh insights. Bowen's take on the Big House, once the seat of the ruling Anglo-Irish class of wealth, privilege, and power is elegiac, as the critic Joanna Tapp Pierce explores the connection between people and place, quoting Cheryll Glotfelty's useful definition of ecocriticism as a theoretical approach that "takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artefacts of language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on the land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the non-human." (51) As Pierce emphasises: "Connection to

landscape, wherever that landscape might be, is a fundamental and necessary part of the human experience” (58).

Then there is the other side of the coin of colonisation: the short stories collected under the title *The Untilled Field* by the Anglo-Irish writer George Moore of the once stately, now decayed, Moore Hall, are seen by Professor Greg Winston as an opportunity to view the agrarian situation, with its social and ethical lessons, as it reflects on our own era. Winston gives us a fresh focus in ecocritical readings, more usually preoccupied with wilderness or with urban landscapes.

The two main strands of the Irish cultural experience, the colonialist Anglo Irish, and the native, Gaelic speaking Irish, were seen as an important pivot of the nature/culture opposition in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century when the union between Ireland and England was looked upon as a gross fornication rather than a constitutional marriage. Jefferson Holdridge’s essay in *Out of the Earth* shows how in Sydney Owensen Lady Morgan’s novel the latent crime of the oppressor seeks redemption in the figure of the eponymous *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806) as a marriage between nature and culture, but, there is silence on the girl’s part, where the question is left hanging, and the image of the castle and its conflation of the sublime and the beautiful in the hero’s mind show how unresolved these issues were as the 19<sup>th</sup> century progressed. The divisions in Irish experience are further amplified by Holdridge in a contrasting study of Morgan’s novel with William Carleton’s *The Black Prophet* (1847) showing Holdridge’s fluency and imaginative flair.

In Cusick’s book also, there is a perceptive piece by Eoin Flannery, titled “Colonialism, tourism and the Irish landscape”, which highlights what is of current cultural interest, and which juxtaposes the banalities of the touristic world against the historical facts, for example how the “Irish ruin” has been embraced by the macro-economic procedures of capitalist tourism, where such ruins in disrupting “the seamless linearity of integrated national histories alert us to the ravages of physical violence, territorial usurpation and memorial elision”, and shows how the culture of tourism eases the conscience of modernity, and that such a false quietist conscience “disabuses history of its trauma and complexity, furnishing a therapeutic historical panacea”(107).

This sets the theme for two essays in *Out of the Earth* - Karen O’Brien on the Martin McDonagh play *The Cripple of Inishmaan* – perhaps the most insightful piece of the whole collection – which examines the ecological implications of the effects of trauma on the individual and the culture. Basing her observations on the work of Cathy Caruth, (who has written extensively of trauma in a book edited by her: *Trauma – Explorations in Memory*, O’Brien examines the fissures and the absences in the story/movie of the islander “Man of Aran” and sets up a rich critical framework for viewing a work in which the native is seen as “other.”

And in “Reading the landscape for clues: Environment in *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*,” Miriam O’Kane Mara focuses on the writer Roddy Doyle who is considered to be the archetypal urban Irish writer. O’Kane Mara delineates the connection between psychological degeneration and urban environmental degradation; making it clear “that nature does not necessarily threaten humans, but that the separation from nature is the threat,” she concludes that where “‘unpolluted land’ symbolises both the spirit of the people and their freedom from oppression, damage to land becomes damage to the people.” It is a remarkably informed and intuitive reading of Doyle’s work. Thanks to her sparing use of academic jargon, her thesis becomes crystal-clear both to an academic audience and to the general reader and enthusiast of Irish literature. Given the popularity of Roddy Doyle’s work, her essay is a very important one in terms of its possible influence.

The final piece in Cusick’s *Out of the Earth*, an interview of the editor with the environmental writer Tim Robinson, offers more valuable insights to today’s students of ecocriticism. Robinson points out, for example, how being labelled as an environmentalist might hamper the literary reception of a writer’s work, and yet how activism, which he calls “ecocriticism with mud on its books”, is of urgent necessity. If some readers feel that there is little earthiness in *Out of the Earth*, nevertheless they will find that the questions which have beleaguered Irish studies are summed up neatly by Tim Robinson. He regards nationality as a set of limitations to be jumped over or wriggled through. The preoccupation with colonialist and post-colonialist studies can be an example of how language short-circuits reality, creating a moment in which one feels the world supersaturated with meaning, with self-reference (207).

All in all, both books have their strengths, and while there is some overlap, I hope I have pointed out their particular scope: *Emerald Green* is particularly good in filling in the background to Irish nature writing, as well as helping to draw attention those global environmental concerns which have become paramount to human survival and natural balance.

Wenzell’s book shows originality and integrity, and is an important contribution to the field of Irish ecocriticism, if at times the reader’s patience is tested by typographical errors which could easily have been set aright by an exiguous proof-reading (Schama is spelled Shama, and at times, delightfully, Schaman) while the Works Cited pages, although valuable for reference, could have done with a more rigorous scrutiny. For example, the Kerry Gaelic male Writer Maurice O Sullivan – the author of the important island book *Twenty Years A-Growing-* is transposed and transgendered into Maureen O Sullivan, which is actually the name of a famous Irish Hollywood female movie star.

Christine Cusick has done a fine job as editor of *Out of the Earth*. One looks forward to a similar collection – perhaps on the magisterial figures of Irish literature such as Yeats and Kavanagh – of ecocritical scholarship as presented

here by the learned contributors with its fine-tuned acuity of perception and intelligence, its forensic and yet fruitful analysis. This book comes with full notes on the various chapters, a comprehensive index, and a useful, though not exhaustive, bibliography. In the notes on contributors (under Jefferson Holdridge) there is a misprint in the title of Paula Meehan's latest book which should read *Painting Rain*. There is reference in the interview with Tim Robinson to the work of the poet Moya Cannon (205, 208), whose books are not listed in the bibliography although she is cited in the index.

I extend a welcome to both books in the new field of ecocritical studies of Irish literature.

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