Nicholas Grene, *Farming in Modern Irish Literature*

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at a point 270 kilometres from Lviv. Sylvie Mossay relates the horrors of work and the ordeal of the subsequent negotiation of asylum in Belgium by her grandparents; they were among the “lucky” ones who avoided being returned to Ukraine to face Soviet persecution as collaborators. But they paid a heavy price. Their granddaughter, a Germanist, found in creative literature an understanding of the depths of human depravity. She has visited Ukraine with her family and tells her grandparents’ story of despair and hope gleaned by means of archival research amid wartime records in several countries in central Europe which testify to the careful recording of cruelty by bureaucrats during the war. The banal normality of Adolf Eichmann, which struck Hannah Arendt, sitting in the glass cage at his trial, springs to mind: he was “just doing his job”.

It may be hoped that this wide-ranging, highly personalised and useful compilation, which missed by only six months the 75th anniversary of the ending of World War II, will find its way into the bookshops and onto the coffee tables of English-speaking households in continental Europe. The choice of topics is designed to contribute to a memory-scape of World War II and as such it takes its place constructively within the growing body of European studies that has interrogated the experience of the war from a similar perspective.

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The colourful painting by Jack Butler Yeats which is reproduced as book cover for Nicholas Grene’s *Farming in Modern Irish Literature* published in 2021 emphasises the warm and picturesque representation of life on a farm, as most readers coming from a (post)modern, urban and globalised world like to imagine it. The farmer is leaning on the fence of his enclosed farmyard in a dreamy posture of reflection. Yet, most of the painting is covered in a dark-brown bog-like hue with straight monotonous lines stretching towards the horizon, which seem to contradict the red, blue and yellow patches that are first so attractive to the eye.¹ Nicholas Grene’s book is built on such a fault line between the pastoral vision which remains attached to life on family-run farms in rural Ireland in the post-1922, the new Irish Republic period, and the structurally complicated heritage of farm-holdings in the period immediately following the many conflicts provoked by the Irish land question.

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¹ The artwork by Jack Butler Yeats used for the cover of the book can be seen on the website of Oxford University Press: https://global.oup.com/academic/product/farming-in-modern-irish-literature-9780198861294?cc=ie&lang=en&.
Family-run small farms and the generation of writers working since 1922: such is the object of Nicholas Grene’s book. It is not a book on the representation of peasantry, or country gentlemen. Nor is it a book about rural life or landscape and the environment. It is a book on farming in the context of the massive transfer of land in the early 20th century. Nicholas Grene’s hypothesis is that the look back on the land is imaginatively formative and his book delves into the diverse forms of such imaginary creations.

_Farming in Modern Irish Literature_ takes readers along various paths across agrarian Ireland, as even in the contemporary period, when a majority of the population of the Republic lives in towns and cities, memories of that period continue to be represented. The book itself is dense and richly documented with several illustrations, including one featuring the author himself as a child, since Nicholas Grene grew up on an Irish farm in the late 1950s. It is divided into eight chapters, opening with five generic and thematic chapters anchoring the analyses in the Irish society of the time: “Family and inheritance”, “Life on the margins”, “Childhood memories”, “Community relations”, “Reactions to modernity”. The last three chapters are devoted to three writers whose entire works mostly deal with family-run farms: “Patrick Kavanagh: farmer poet”, “John McGahern and the alternative life of the farm”, “Seamus Heaney: world into word”.

While the introduction clearly maps Nicholas Grene’s aim in writing _Farming in Modern Irish Literature_, it also questions the urban situations of most writers and readers, as well as the distance in the writers’ memories, whose childhoods go back to the 1950s or 1960s. The book is also definitely, albeit implicitly, a nostalgic autobiography in a pastoral mode of the author’s own imaginative formation. The book concludes on “Land and landscape” and the conclusion is followed by an eight-page bibliography and a seven-page index, scanning in great details the names of authors, themes and book titles or references to poems. The index encourages a very thorough reading experience. Indeed, the book allows for a diachronic and thematic reading of farming in modern Irish literature, but the index offers the possibility of a synchronic and more material approach of farming with index entries such as “cows”, “farm size”, “poverty” or “sexuality”.

Yet material and eco-critical approaches of farming in modern Irish literature are not the object of the book, contrary to what might have been expected. But readers will find in this book a very complete set of references to representations of farm-life in Ireland in the past century, under the pen of writers who, for the most part, experienced this kind of life first-hand. To readers for whom the experience of farm-life is only literary, Nicholas Grene’s book offers a wonderful journey in time, in words and in the world of small family-run farms of early 20th-century Ireland, bridging time-wise the congested districts of the Famine and the globalised urban lifestyle of post Celtic-Tiger Ireland.

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