Gerald Dawe, *The Wrong Country: Essays on Modern Irish Writing*

Florence Schneider

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/etudesirlandaises/8962>

DOI: 10.4000/etudesirlandaises.8962

ISSN: 2259-8863

Publisher

Presses universitaires de Caen

Printed version

Date of publication: 24 September 2020

Number of pages: 119-120

ISSN: 0183-973X

Electronic reference

Florence Schneider, "Gerald Dawe, *The Wrong Country: Essays on Modern Irish Writing*", *Études irlandaises* [Online], 45-1 | 2020, Online since 24 September 2020, connection on 19 November 2022.

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesirlandaises/8962> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesirlandaises.8962>

Creative Commons - Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International - CC BY-NC-SA 4.0
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>

COMPTES RENDUS

BOOK REVIEWS

Gerald Dawe, *The Wrong Country: Essays on Modern Irish Writing*, Newbridge, Irish Academic Press, 2018, 294 p.

The title of Gerald Dawe's new collection of essays on modern Irish writing is taken from Hugo Hamilton's famous novel, *The Speckled People*. Dawe opens his book by quoting "You can't be afraid of saying the opposite, even if you look like a fool and everybody thinks you're in the wrong country, speaking the wrong language" (p. vi). This opening sentence is a relevant guide to Dawe's essays, in which the TCD professor Emeritus tries to lead a quiet combat to conjure up forgotten authors (such as Joseph Campbell, George Reavey, or Ethna Carbery) and bring a diversity of perspectives on more renowned Irish writers of the last two centuries.

Dawe's personal position is often liminal, bringing a singular and learned point of view on literature and its anchorage in history and geography: both a poet and a critic, he is inside and outside the academic world. Moreover, born in Belfast in 1952, but with a long-time residence in the Republic, he constantly tackles the questions of inclusion, of imaginary and real borders, in both a personal voice and a critical one. Indeed, the fourteen chapters and the epilogue – a very engaging essay on Oliver Goldsmith's sense of not totally belonging to his British host society – focus on the sense of place, on the geographical and cultural contexts. The essays seem, as a whole, to be haunted by Dawe's literary and political vision of the North. Literature as a means to deal and come to terms with "the wrong country", "the wrong language", is closely examined. His very interesting analysis of Stewart Parker's plays and recollections (especially in *The Green Light*, a radio broadcast he did in 1971) is a good example of Dawe's successful attempt at providing a convincing literary analysis and a detailed historical background, about the Troubles for instance in this case. He sheds light on the importance of Belfast in Stewart's *Pentecost* for example, providing details and figures about the physical and psychological casualties caused by "the tribal, sectarian malevolence in this society" (chap. 8, p. 125)¹, regretting that the playwright's abilities and courage have remained unnoticed by a critic like Declan Kiberd for example.

These analyses and critical perspectives are always grounded in multiple quotations and summaries of the works mentioned. And one of the pleasures when reading these essays is the attention paid to language: multiple and long

1. The original quote comes from Stewart Parker, "Signposts", *Theatre Ireland*, no. 11, autumn 1985, p. 28: "I take it as given that the tribal, sectarian malevolence in this society is the deepest, most enduring and least tractable evil in our inheritance".

quotations are a means to get into the various works. Detailed passages also focus on Irish literary networks and on the wide intertextualities that are at stake in those works. For instance, the opening chapter tackles W. B. Yeats's major influence on Samuel Beckett, and the second one sheds light on his influence on Plunkett's *Strumpet City*, while chapter three is the occasion to see how close and entangled the Irish literary world was in 1948, when authors like Austin Clarke, Louis MacNeice, Father O'Connor, John Hewitt organised or attended to Yeats's burial in Ireland. This historical episode is also a good occasion for Dawe to give the larger historical and religious backgrounds of that time, when everyone seemed happy to have Yeats back again in Ireland.

This personal and critical approach provides entertainment and insight but sometimes lacks a unified approach: the chapters were often first academic lectures or chapters in various books and there is no clear definite argument. The place dedicated to women's voices is another complex component of the book. Dawe focuses on Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin or Eavan Boland, or devotes a whole compelling chapter to Dorothy Molloy, Michael O'Sullivan or Leontia Flynn in "Bashō, the River Moy and the Superser" (p. 206-216). He also sheds light on Bobby Sands's interest in Ethna Carbery's nationalist poems, criticising the leader of the IRA for his romantic reveries and the "grotesque parallels" (p. 186) he drew between Long Kesh prisoners and the Jews perishing in the gas chambers. Yet, we can feel his greater ease when writing about generations of fellow poets and teachers in Dublin, in a chapter about John Berryman and his friends, or about the poems and relationships of Derek Mahon and Seamus Deane.

An important element of these essays is also Dawe's advice about new academic ground and research, or possible publications. His personal voice as publisher of *The Younger Irish Poets* blends with proposals about new possible studies on Ulster Scots for example or about the necessity to work on an edition of all Deane's poems in order to have a global view of his poetic achievement... There is no gratuitous esotericism or jargon in these entertaining essays, but personal scholarly advice and perspectives on Irish writers whose fame is already established or will be so very soon according to Dawe, who manages to bring together a wide variety of Irish poets, playwrights and novelists.

Florence SCHNEIDER

Graham Price, *Oscar Wilde and Contemporary Irish Drama: Learning to Be Oscar's Contemporary*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, 249 p.

Oscar Wilde and Contemporary Irish Drama: Learning to Be Oscar's Contemporary is a valuable book for anyone who wants to have a broad view of the ways in which contemporary Irish drama (defined here as post 1964 *Philadelphia Here I Come!*)