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Book Review

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Unfolding Irish Landscapes: Tim Robinson, Culture and Environment, edited by Derek Gladwin and Christine Cusick, Manchester University Press, 2016, 304 pp., £75.00 (hbk), ISBN 978-1-7849-9278-1.

There has been a steady growth of interest over the last decade in the author, artist, and maker of maps, Tim Robinson. His life's work shows a singular commitment to landscape writing and apt comparisons have begun to be made to Gilbert White and Henry David Thoreau. (Elder 2014: 1) *Unfolding Irish Landscapes: Tim Robinson, Culture and Environment* is the first book published on this remarkable man. It collects together diverse essays that show very well the breadth of ways of thinking about his work. It comes five years after Robinson's completion of his Connemara trilogy which followed his two volume study of the Aran Islands (the first of which was published in 1986). Though there are rumours (alluded to by Robert Macfarlane in the Foreword) of new essays, the main body of his thirty years' work is complete and, as such, these essays offer a timely reflection.

The book is divided into three sections, which explore how Robinson might be read: from a geographical perspective; from a literary perspective; and from an Irish Studies perspective. As we might expect, in work on an author whose disciplinary boundary-crossing has been called 'gloriously promiscuous', there is resonance and cross-pollination between all the parts here. (Curry 1995: 13) Nonetheless, distinct themes do emerge, showing how thoughtfully the editors, Derek Gladwin and Christine Cusick, have put this book together. All essays offer genuine insight into what, no doubt, one day will be known as 'Robinson Studies' but I would like to pick out some of those that foreground these distinct themes. After a comprehensive introduction by the editors surveying the published research on Robinson to date, Patrick Duffy examines the maps and accompanying gazetteers to show how Robinson's work can help elucidate the shifting trends of geographical thinking about landscape over the last half-century. These are shifts from 'landscape-as-object', to landscape as 'perceived and represented', to landscape as 'a space for the imagination and senses'. (21)

Duffy gives the most richly detailed account of the maps yet, showing the extraordinary work of recovery they perform with respect to place names in the wake of the Ordnance Survey. But he is alert to the ways in which Robinson's writing gets under the maps as well and concludes with some 'reflections on slow landscapes'. (35) Here he argues that Robinson's work stands as an 'extreme opposite' to the contemporary 'collapse of distance' in our 'GPS-coded' modern experience. (35) In the end, Duffy shows that Robinson's corrective to the Ordnance Survey remains as instructive today in a period when much of the fineness of things recedes into a 'largely unknown blur' beyond the car window. (35)

This theme of 'slow landscapes' is picked up by Nessa Cronin again in her superb chapter tracing the 'pre-history' of Robinson maps in his earlier career as an artist going by the name of Timothy Drever. (54) Cronin (drawing on work by

Michael Cronin) sees in the maps and the painstaking documentation of place, an attempt to 'counter' this same 'perceived collapse of space and the fetishisation of speed'. (56) This leads her to read, in his movement from visual art to map-making, a form of 'deep mapping', a wonderfully heterogeneous and pluriform practice theorised by, most notably, Ian Biggs, that tends to 'encompass a variety of media; require an engagement of the 'insider and the outsider'' and that 'brings together the amateur and the professional'. (58) 'Deep mapping' seems a very insightful way of understanding Robinson's particular intertwining of creative practice, forensic attention to detail, and neighbourly community activity.

If slowness and a sense of 'deep' locality are themes foregrounded in the first section on geographical readings of Robinson's work, then the themes of uncertainty and negativity emerge from the section on literary readings. Christine Cusick probes into Robinson's written art as a form of 'narrative scholarship' in which critical distance is forfeited in favour of a form of critical inquiry embedded within personal experience. This is something picked up in Karen Babine's fascinating examination of Robinson's (and Chris Arthur's) work in relation to the non-fiction essay as a form that has been neglected in Irish literature.

Distinguishing the essay from a narrative form, Babine follows the Australian critic Mark Tredinnick, who reads the essay as an 'essentially lyric' form: 'Uttered in the first person, [...] its success depends not upon the tale so much as the telling.' (128) She looks back to Montaigne, who began the tradition of the 'essai' (literally, a try or an attempt) in France in the sixteenth century, foregrounding its experimental nature, the fact that it 'requires uncertainty' for its exploratory art. (136)

Kelly Sullivan's chapter on 'not knowing as aesthetic imperative' in Robinson's work takes the question of uncertainty to perhaps its boldest extreme. She examines the role of 'ignorance', 'failure' and 'stupidity' in Robinson's Aran writings. This is much smarter, and not at all as derogatory, as it sounds. 'Stupidity', she describes intriguingly, for example (in a phrase that goes to the heart of Robinson's literary aesthetic) as 'the desire to know coupled with the literally physical arrest in the face of infinite ways of knowing' that 'calls for a creative reaction'. (105) This is a thoughtful and brave investigation of Robinson's negative philosophy that chimes with Cusick's and Babine's readings of the essay form.

The chapters in the third part, on Robinson's contribution to Irish Studies, share a theme of the outsider scholar working alone on the periphery. Eamon Wall aligns Robinson with Coleridge and the Wordsworths as independent scholars, roaming (on foot and intellectually) unbound by disciplinary or institutional constriction. We might wonder whether this independence contributed to the interest in slowness and uncertainty, qualities that seem at odds with contemporary institutional thought.

Jerry White makes a fascinating case for Robinson as contributing (quite unwittingly, he concedes) to the rise of the Gaeltacht Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s and 70s. In a chapter that seems particularly alert to the progressive nature of this movement and to its connections with the wider civil rights movement

internationally, White argues that Robinson qualifies by being among a generation of ‘articulate young radicals’ who left the city and moved to ‘marginal areas as part of a widespread rejection of materialism and careerism.’ (159-60) Though Robinson denies any formal connection, White points out that his cultural work has nonetheless brought about results that speak to the goals of this movement. It is a chapter that is as interesting with respect to the Gaeltacht Civil Rights Movement as it is with respect to Robinson.

In fact, it ought to be said that, though there are excellent readings that bring many different fields to bear on Robinson here, some of the best, rather, bring Robinson to bear on their respective different fields. Derek Gladwin uses Robinson to reflect on the possibilities of documentary film work; Gerry Smyth explores the phenomenology of hearing and listening through Robinson’s Connemara writings; and Catherine Marshall discusses the Irish landscape in visual culture with Robinson’s unusual career in mind.

Unfolding Irish Landscapes: Tim Robinson, Culture and Environment is a tremendous success of a book. It draws out common themes in different forms of Robinson scholarship (slowness, depth, locality, uncertainty, negativity, peripherality). As it does so, it manages to gesture to the rich potential of other possible themes as well: other ways in which we might read Robinson, but also other ways in which Robinson might help us to read literature, history, art, folklore... (the list goes on), and of course landscape itself.

References

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