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Book Review

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Book Reviews

The Irish landscape: an all-Ireland exploration through science and literature, by Peadar McArdle, Dublin, The Liffey Press, 2015, 360 pp., €22.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-908308-69-6

Apart from a brief engagement with poetry in a humanistic turn in geography in the seventies, few geographers, or geologists, have much time for creative/imaginative literature, particularly poetry. *The Irish landscape: an all-Ireland exploration* attempts to combine geology's science of facts and precision with the art of poetry and impression. As a geologist and former director of the Geological Survey, Peadar McArdle embarks on a roaming mission through Ireland's counties, searching for poetic responses to the landscape's geology and geomorphology. Principally, he summarises the distinctive characteristics of each county's physical landscape and then relates it to the works of a poet/writer in the same area. He is not trying to match the two but to highlight or seek out the manner in which the writer may have encapsulated aspects of the same landscape. The assumption is that writers or poets are influenced, informed or inspired to some extent by the landscapes in which they have lived or have experienced, that our perceptions are shaped by our emotional response to our environments. McArdle is courageous enough also to disagree with many poetic assessments – for instance, he does not accept Patrick Kavanagh's depiction of his Monaghan county as poor, stony land. Based on McArdle's own field work in the area he suggests that the land is quite good, and that Kavanagh was simply a 'reluctant' farmer in any environment. In relation to the drumlin landscape, the author invokes geographer Estyn Evans's suggestion that 'drumlins made the finest farmland provided it was worked by diligent Protestant farmers'! (p. 62)

Sometimes, there is a forced and formulaic linkage of the scientific realities and the artistic representations. In Derry, one of Seamus Heaney's poems may have 'derived from the Dalradian rocks that underlie Inishowen Peninsula, rocks more than half a billion years old...' (p.12) and another poem 'hints at bogland connections with coal and also refers to basalt lava'. In Antrim, Louis MacNeice is characterised as the 'Bard of Basalt'. John Hewitt's Armagh appropriately marked his poetry which like the county straddled the landscapes of planter and Gael and his metaphor for Ulster as a 'faulted ledge' appeals to McArdle as a (highly unlikely) reference to Ireland's position at a 'plate edge ... long before the birth of plate tectonics'! (p.50)

Longford's landscapes of lakes, river meadows and bogs was shaped by ice sheets in recent millennia and the Shannon, which was born when the North American and European continents separated 60 million years ago: jumping to the poetry of Padraic Colum and his 'swan in the evening moves over the lake' seems a bridge too far. Other associations are proffered: Westmeath's rich rolling pastures strongly influenced Oliver Goldsmith's memory of the 'Deserted Village' as he wrote about it in England; Gerard Manley Hopkins (Kildare); Gerald Griffin and Brendan Kennelly (Limerick); Kickham (and his iconic 'Slievenamon') in Tipperary; Sligo and Yeats, the 'Lyricist of Limestone'; Ledwidge and Meath. Eamonn Wall is invoked for his paeans to his remembered Wexford landscape while his other writing on the American mid-west, and the Rocky Mountains is thrown in for good measure. Paul Durcan's Mayo is combined with his assorted responses to a variety of landscape paintings in the National Gallery of Ireland.

In this county tour of Ireland, the author's intimate scientific knowledge of limestones, shales and greywackes, continental collisions and tectonic subductions, is married with sometimes insightful, sometimes implausible comments on their poetic associations.

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