

Eve Patten, *Samuel Ferguson and the Culture of Nineteenth-Century Ireland*.
Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004. 208 pages. EUR 55.00.

Samuel Ferguson and the Culture of Nineteenth-Century Ireland opens with an account of a paper read by Samuel Ferguson to the Royal Irish Academy in the 1880s, in which he argued that it would be both preferable and possible to construct a railway tunnel under the Liffey, rather than to build a bridge over it. Although Ferguson marshalled examples and engineering calculations in support of his proposal, Dublin is still without its tunnel under the river, and for the past century the supports and girders of the Loop Line railway bridge have interposed themselves between a gazer downstream from O'Connell Bridge and the splendours of Gandon's Custom House alongside the lower reaches of the waterway. Patten cites this enthusiasm for a tunnel as a reminder of the cultural and intellectual mobility of Ferguson. The obscuring of the Custom House is emblematic of one of the aspects of this study, a central chapter of which valuably demonstrates how his concern with 'our architecture' is consonant with his larger project to engender a sense of civic assurance and pride in Ireland's developing sense of itself during the mid-nineteenth century. It also foreshadows her eventual conclusion, which is that ultimately the vigour of Ferguson's interventions in various domains proved ineffectual and that they were bypassed. The civic ideals advanced by Ferguson were destined to be

BOOK REVIEWS

occluded by a more forceful nationalist discourse. Nevertheless, Patten shines a valuable light on the thought and impulses that animated a significant strand of Irish history in the nineteenth century.

The title of Patten's book is slightly misleading, as the focus of her attention is very much on the culture of nineteenth-century Dublin rather than of Ireland as a whole. She offers a scrupulous and revealing insight into the concerns of the intellectual life of the city during its Victorian decades. An evident but largely unstated thread running through her treatment is the progressive emergence of a culturally aware and educated middle-class cadre based largely in the professions. This sector, active through bodies and organs such as the Royal Irish Academy, Trinity College, political groupings, and the periodical publications, was bidding to take over from the enlightened ascendancy as the pace-setting element in Irish intellectual life. Patten traces how Ferguson intersected with a number of these spheres: as a magazinist, principally in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* and the *Dublin University Magazine*, as a member — and eventually president — of the RIA, as a political activist for a brief period, and as a lawyer who had attended Trinity. There are other aspects of Ferguson's career about which Patten has less to say, such as his poetry and — perhaps more relevant here — his work as an archivist, and his archaeological explorations that combined summer excursions with field-trips to megalithic and ecclesiastical sites. These activities have been written about already: Gréagóir O Dúill has written on Ferguson's concerns and professional responsibilities as Deputy Keeper of the Public Records in Ireland, and R.A.S. MacAllister and Proinseas Ni Catháin on his work on ogham inscriptions, although without integrating these areas of concern into the more general stream of cultural history in the way that Patten's approach does.

Patten sees Ferguson as a central figure in the attempt to establish the city as a viable and autonomous cultural entity. She identifies a particular thread of cultural nationalism, and follows it through his early contributions to the *Dublin University Magazine* in the 1830s, his brief engagement with the politics of the repeal movement in the 1840s, his subsequent writings on architecture, and his enduring involvement with the Royal Irish Academy. Fully three of the six chapters concentrate on Ferguson in the 1830s, the first decade of a career that lasted right into the middle of the 1880s. The length as well as the energy of his engagement with Dublin's cultural life is what makes Ferguson such a usefully representative figure. As it turns out, the emphasis on the 1830s does not unduly skew Patten's treatment. The early material sets a useful context, while her later chapters dealing with his involvement in the Protestant Repeal Association and with his views on architecture are particularly illuminating in that they reveal the sustained diversity of his interests governed by a tradition of civic sensibility. The

architectural writings are treated here as a specific response to the ideas of Ruskin, ideas that Ferguson finds aesthetically rebarbative in themselves but also a disturbing assertion of Catholicism which might entrain particular risks for his nineteenth-century Ireland. While the work of Pugin and his follower, J.J. McCarthy, left its mark on public buildings in Ireland, Ferguson inveighed against the ideas of Pugin's supporter Ruskin in reviews, articles, and lectures. Patten sees this animus not as an aesthetic dispute or as a protest against debased values in Great Britain, but rather as springing from Protestant insecurity in the changing society of Victorian Ireland. It is another aspect of Ferguson's thought that has not been sufficiently explored before, and she is good on J.J. McCarthy busily building away throughout Ireland while Ferguson frets at a writing desk in Dublin. However, her description of Ferguson's engagement with Ruskin as a 'confrontation' rather overstates the case — Ferguson reviewed and wrote about him negatively, but Ruskin scarcely noticed. There was no prospect of a duel at dawn between the two.

In fact Ferguson's general concern with architecture and building was a long-lived one, extending from at least his 1845 review of George Petrie's *Ecclesiastical Architecture in Ireland* (which provided him with a source for one of his poems, 'The Healing of Conall Carnach') through to the tunnelling proposal at the end of his life. His engagement with the Protestant Repeal Association was more short-lived but intense. It belongs to a period in the late 1840s, sandwiched between his return from several months spent touring the continent after a health breakdown, and his marriage to Mary Guinness in 1848. Events that may have impelled his move into political agitation were his distress at the effects of the famine, and reaction to the death of Thomas Davis in 1845. Furthermore, one suspects that there may also have been some hint of a slight opportunism in that his poems had been given a prominent place in Gavan Duffy's 1845 anthology *The Ballad Poetry of Ireland*, and Ferguson may have seen his literary career and reputation being advanced by a greater degree of alignment with the emergent nationalist spirit. Whatever about the internal politics of the PRA itself, it is quite clear that, on his becoming engaged to Mary Guinness, his prospective in-laws discouraged any repeal activity. This pressure brought an end to Ferguson's involvement with the association. His wife's biography is a major source for details of Ferguson's life, and given that his PRA work dates from a period before their marriage and was perhaps a subject she felt had to be treated with some circumspection (although she does give the text of his speech to the opening meeting of the association), it is valuable to have Patten's much more comprehensive account here of the details and context of the initiative. We have not hitherto had a full discussion of this period

BOOK REVIEWS

of Ferguson's life, which is significant if for nothing else in that it produced his notable poem in memory of Davis. Patten traces the brief flame of the movement, and sets out its importance for Ferguson's relationships with his contemporaries and for his literary career: at this time he also produced two longer discursive poems commenting on the state of Ireland: 'Dublin' and 'Inheritor and Economist'. Ultimately, Ferguson turned from the PRA to other methods of achieving his ends, working thereafter through cultural unity rather than political agitation, and, as Patten says, 'the remainder of his career was dominated by his continued recourse to the social bonding agents which he identified in history, antiquity and literature'.

The book is well presented. One or two footnotes have slipped across to the wrong page, *ad hominum* appears for *ad hominem*, and the opening paragraph of Chapter Three suggests that the author believes that the 1830s constituted the third decade of the century. But these are minimal cavils, offered by a reviewer as an indication that the book has indeed been read with attention. It is noticeable that the most recent book-length study of Ferguson, Gréagóir O Dúill's *Samuel Ferguson: Beatha agus Saothar* (1993) is not cited; O Dúill's work, in contrast to the Dublin-centred approach of Patten, presents us with a Ferguson who is seen very much as an Ulster poet, rooted in the particular concerns and sensibilities of his northern origins. Patten sidesteps any close engagement with the boreal foundations of Ferguson's sensibility as traced by O Duill, and by Terence Brown in *Northern Voices: Poets from Ulster* long before, and instead links Ferguson directly into the values of Edinburgh and the Scottish enlightenment.

Samuel Ferguson and the Culture of Nineteenth-Century Ireland is a scrupulous account of a strand of nineteenth-century Irish cultural history. It does not offer just another treatment of Ferguson's writing, and its reach extends well beyond that of a single-author study. The book draws effectively on a broad range of recent historical and cultural studies together with a careful use of manuscript and printed sources to fill in the background against which the writers and shapers of nineteenth-century Ireland defined themselves.

PETER DENMAN

Matthew Campbell (editor), *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. xv + 294 pages. GBP 15.95.

The would-be editor of a *Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry* confronts a number of nettles that require to be grasped. Indeed,