

FIONNTÁN DE BRÚN Walls with No Pictures:
The Alternative Interiority
of Séamas Mac Annaidh's
Short Stories

AT FIRST GLANCE Séamas Mac Annaidh's first collection of short stories, *Féirín, Scéalta agus Eile* (A Gift, Stories and Other; 1992)—beginning with the subverted syntax of the title and ending with the author's ironic review of his own book—may seem to be no more than a metafictional experiment, best described as “of its time.”¹ If we look beyond its many self-referential addresses to the reader and its playful allusivity, however, Mac Annaidh's work repays the reader's attention to a unique configuration of influences and intentions that transcend the postmodern labeling. Seen thirty years on, it is almost as though Mac Annaidh has inadvertently hidden his book in the “postmodern fiction” section to disguise its true value. Precisely what that value may entail is the concern of this essay, but we may say briefly that, besides a peculiar refraction of the Troubles and postmodernity, Mac Annaidh's short stories tend toward an almost transcendental reflection on provincial life in Ireland. The omphalos is Mac Annaidh's hometown, Enniskillen, Co. Fermanagh, and rural Ulster more generally, but Dublin is also the setting of one of his most influential stories, “Misteach Bhaile Átha Cliath” (The Mystic of Dublin), the subject of a short film of the same name released in 1994.²

1. An example of Mac Annaidh's metafictional stories is “Na Trí Cliché,” of which an English translation “by the other” is included in Brian Ó Conchubhair, ed., *Twisted Truths: Stories from the Irish* (Indreabhán, Co. na Gaillimhe: Cló Iar-Chonnacht, 2011), 205–10.

2. Dublin is also the setting for what might be loosely called the “trilogy” of stories in *Féirín, Scéalta agus Eile* entitled “Ocras I,” “Ocras II,” and “Ocras III,” the last of these consisting simply of three letters: “BRP.” See Séamas Mac Annaidh, *Féirín, Scéalta, agus Eile* (Dublin: Coiscéim, 1992).

Mac Annaidh's short stories are usually seen as lesser offshoots of his "cult novel" *Cuaifeach Mo Londubh Bui* (The Brainstorm of My Yellow Blackbird), written at the age of twenty-one and published in 1983.³ *Cuaifeach* was the first of a trilogy completed by *Mo Dhá Mhici* (My Two Mickies; 1986) and *Rubble na Mickies* (The Tail of the Mickies; 1990). Other novels followed—*An Deireadh* (The End; 1996), *Dioscó Dé* (God's Disco; 2006) and *Ar ais go Keriolet* (Back to Keriolet; 2011)—but have been less successful, indicating that the youthful brilliance of *Cuaifeach* was difficult to sustain. His second collection of short stories, *Mr. Lisa agus an Gramafón* (Mr. Lisa and the Gramophone; 2005), marks a move away from the metafictional but retains the eccentricity of his other work within a conventional narrative. This eccentricity, genuine rather than contrived, is a good starting point from which to consider how postmodernity and an awareness of the Troubles is reflected in Mac Annaidh's first collection of short stories, the collection with which this essay is chiefly concerned.

In a controversial article written for the *Guardian* in 1994, Ronan Bennett made a scathing assessment of the contemporary arts scene in Northern Ireland in which he characterized the novelist Robert McLiam Wilson as "part of the self-conscious postmodernist generation that finds any strongly held belief inherently ridiculous."⁴ By Bennett's reckoning, McLiam Wilson plied "a tabloid version of the more nuanced arguments of 'revisionist historians'" and typified the default position of many artists for whom the northern conflict was to be presented as mindless slaughter. This uncritical, supercilious detachment, Bennett argued, was the orthodoxy maintained by the state-funded arts scene and played out in numerous clichéd "Troubles novels." The coupling of postmodernism and Irish historical revisionism is unsurprising, given the postmodernist's eschewal of metanarratives and the revisionist's aversion to the grand narrative of Irish nationalism. In this context the decidedly postmodern, metafictional novels and short stories of Séamas Mac Annaidh, most of which are set in the north of Ireland during the Troubles, might be

expected to take up a position of ironic detachment from the conflict in Ireland. There are many reasons why this is not the case. While the Troubles feature obliquely in his work, they are never explained, reduced to absurdity, or even regretted. With no didactic agenda to advance, Mac Annaidh realizes a much more authentic negotiation of the conflict than the authors of legions of Troubles novels. Moreover, Mac Annaidh's use of Irish as his medium allowed him a certain freedom not available to those writing in the congested space of English-language fiction. It also placed him in dialogue with a very distinct tradition of writing through which his engagement with postmodern metafiction could take on a significance very different from that of his English-language peers.

To understand how Mac Annaidh entered into a creative dialogue with the Irish-language tradition and developed his own particular response to the northern Troubles, we need to go back to his undergraduate years (1978–82) at the New University of Ulster, Coleraine. Now known as one of the campuses of Ulster University, from its inception the Coleraine campus was itself a site of controversy and its location one of the issues taken up in the peaceful civil-rights campaign of the late 1960s. Nationalists objected to the decision of the unionist government of Northern Ireland in 1968 to build the new university on the outskirts of the predominately unionist town of Coleraine, Co. Derry, rather than in Northern Ireland's second-biggest city, the majority-nationalist city of Derry. This decision was resented at the time as another example of the denial of equal rights to nationalists—the jobs would go to unionist Coleraine rather than nationalist Derry, and so too would the long-term prestige, economic advantage, and potential civic influence of a university town. While this view is still maintained by many—as instanced in the current campaign for a new independent university for Derry in spite of Ulster University's expansion of its "Magee Campus" there—the accidental creation of a vibrant Irish-language community within the Coleraine campus was very far from the original intentions of the unionist establishment.

The unionist government's antipathy toward the Irish language is well documented.⁵ The Government of Ireland Act (1920) created

3. See Cathal Ó Searcaigh, "Survivors," *Irish Pages* 8:1 (2014): 174. Mac Annaidh has explained "cuaifeach" as meaning "brainstorm." It is normally rendered as "whirlwind," "squall." See Séamas Mac Annaidh, "My Life and Work," *American Journal of Irish Studies* 9 (2012): 101.

4. Ronan Bennett, "An Irish Answer," *Guardian*, 16 July 1994 (Weekend), 1, 46, 95.

5. See Liam Andrews, "The Very Dogs in Belfast Will Bark in Irish: The Unionist Government and the Irish Language, 1921–43," in *The Irish Language in Northern Ireland*, ed. Aodán Mac Póilin (Belfast: Ultach Trust, 1997), 74; Fionntán de Brún,

two deeply estranged states in Ireland, with the Irish language being the most prominent badge of identity espoused by the Irish Free State. With one eye south of the border, the new unionist regime asserted its difference by curtailing what modest provisions existed for the teaching of Irish. As the parliamentary secretary to the minister of education explained in a letter to unionist MP William Grant in 1928, “We found Irish teaching in being when we took over and so far from encouraging it, we have been reducing facilities, and as a result Irish is taught in only 149 schools as against 242 in 1922.”⁶ Until its dissolution in 1972 with the reintroduction of direct rule from Westminster, the unionist government successfully confined the Irish language to the margins of society, tolerating Irish as a school subject in Catholic schools but ensuring that the language was essentially neither seen nor heard wherever government influence extended. Direct rule from Westminster made scarcely any difference, and it was not until the 1990s that any modest change was felt by Irish speakers. There were no television programs in Irish broadcast until 1991, the first being a BBC documentary on the writer Seosamh Mac Grianna, for which Mac Annaidh was interviewed, and in the intervening years the state broadcaster’s Irish-language output has been strictly minimal.⁷ At the time of writing, spring 2022, the Westminster Conservative government has been criticized by Conradh na Gaeilge (the Gaelic League) for not introducing legislation giving greater recognition to the language and rights to its speakers as part of commitments made but as yet unfulfilled stretching back to the 2006 St. Andrews Agreement. Given both the history of state hostility toward the Irish language and the controversy surrounding the founding of the new University of Coleraine, it is no small irony to find that the campus became something of an Irish-language utopia for generations of students of the language.

The particular ethos that sprung up around the Coleraine campus is something which can only be dealt with briefly here. Mac Annaidh

“Ulsteria’: The Fortunes of the Irish Language under Stormont, 1921–72,” in *Conflicts in the North of Ireland, 1900–2000: Flashpoints and Fracture Zones*, ed. Éamonn Phoenix and Alan F. Parkinson (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2010), 202–22.

6. Andrews, “Very Dogs,” 74.

7. This documentary, entitled *Dá mBíodh Ruball ar an Éan/If the Bird Had a Tail*, was presented by Fr. Oilibhéar Ó Croiligh.

has written about this in a semi-autobiographical essay in which he recalls the generous dispensation that allowed him to submit a portfolio of creative writing for a unit of studies called “Topics in Irish Studies.”⁸ Of the six or seven pieces of writing submitted, “one or two pieces were later published as short stories and three others in *Cuairfeach Mo Londubh Bui*.”⁹ He goes on to recount how most of the students were from places within fifty miles of the campus, but that a bus journey from Coleraine to his own native Enniskillen took four-and-a-half hours. The result was that he did not go home so often, spending the weekends instead in the halls of residence with “the other foreigners from Fermanagh and Irian.”¹⁰ One of these, or perhaps *the* Iranian student—a madman who wore military fatigues and delighted in the downfall of the Shah—was a particular influence, introducing Mac Annaidh to international politics and cultures other than his own. Through this influence he soon discovered the ancient Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh* that was to be a central motif in his first novel.

Where the Irish language was concerned, a community of idealistic speakers coalesced around the small department of modern Irish with its teaching staff of three. One of those teaching there in the 1970s recalled how the utopian escapism of Seosamh Mac Grianna’s autobiography *Mo Bhealach Féin* (1940)—set in 1930s Free State Ireland and recently translated as *This Road of Mine* (2020)—gave students an alternative to the ubiquitous path of paramilitary violence.¹¹ Mac Grianna’s work and its ideals found a ready audience among those for whom liberation from British rule required a profound cultural shift that transcended the immediate political conflict. Moreover, Mac Grianna’s autobiography deals with the disillusionment felt by an artist initially drawn to politics only to find that his sole

8. Translation of original Irish material here and in subsequent quotation is my own except where otherwise indicated. Séamas Mac Annaidh, *Mr. Lisa agus an Gramafón* (Dublin: Coiscéim, 2005), 12. This essay was published previously under the same title, “Aiste(ar) Nár Críochnaíodh go Fóill,” in *Aimsir Óg* (Dublin: Coiscéim, 2000), 185–98. See page 193. See also Mac Annaidh, “My Life and Work,” 97–121.

9. Séamas Mac Annaidh, *Mr. Lisa agus an Gramafón* (Dublin: Coiscéim, 2005), 14.

10. *Ibid.*, 14–15.

11. Seosamh Mac Grianna, *Mo Bhealach Féin* (Dublin: An Gúm, 1940); Seosamh Mac Grianna, *This Road of Mine*, trans. Mícheál Ó hAodha (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2020).

chance of fulfillment is through a relentless rejection of orthodoxy. It is perhaps unsurprising to find that Mac Annaidh regarded Seosamh Mac Grianna to be his greatest literary influence, seeking him out in person in 1982 at St. Conal's Hospital in Letterkenny, Co. Donegal, the institution to which Mac Grianna had been confined, having been diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia in the late 1950s.¹²

Mac Annaidh has given an account of this visit, painful in its fraught expectation, as the young enthusiast assails his hero with questions and small talk only to be answered in monosyllables. The visit was mercifully brief, yet it is the type of encounter that Mac Annaidh seems to relish, and indeed in his short story "Féirín" (A Gift), to which we shall return, the distended awkwardness is pursued in great depth. Mac Annaidh's visit, apart from providing material for explorations of anticlimactic encounters, sprang from a certain devotion to the elder writer's work. This devotion inspired Mac Annaidh to write to Mac Grianna asking for his advice or endorsement as he set out to become a writer. The reply was reprinted at the beginning of Mac Annaidh's debut novel:

2nd September 1982

Dear Séamas Mac Annaidh,

I understand that you wish to make a start as a writer and that you are educated to that end; therefore if you are serious about writing you must look at life. There is plenty there to help you to write. I do hope you succeed in the task. The life of a writer is a wonderful life indeed.

With very best wishes, yours respectfully, Seosamh Mac Grianna.¹³

On face value it may not seem like a ringing endorsement, but coming from the famously laconic Mac Grianna, whose life as a writer had come to a tragically abrupt end, it was deeply significant.¹⁴ As Mac Annaidh comments:

12. Séamas Mac Annaidh, *Rubble na Mickies* (Dublin: Coiscéim, 1990), 20–25.

13. Mac Annaidh, "My Life and Work," 100.

14. Mac Grianna ceased writing in the summer of 1935, having failed to finish his final novel. The unfinished novel was published as an appendix to his *Mo Bhealach Féin*, entitled *Dá mBíodh Ruball ar an Éan*, and with the following postscript: "Thráigh an tobar sa tsamhradh, 1935. Ní scriobhfaidh mé níos mó. Rinne mé mo dhícheall agus is cuma liom." (The well dried in the summer of 1935. I will write no more. I did my best and I don't care). See Seosamh Mac Grianna, *Dá mBíodh Ruball ar an Éan* (Baile Átha Cliath: An Gúm, 1992), 89.

Possibly the most extraordinary part of the letter is, "Tá súil agam go n-éireochadh do ghnaithe leat. Is breá an saoghal saoghal an sgríbeora." ("I do hope you succeed in the task, the writer's life is a wonderful life.") That a man of Seosamh Mac Grianna's experience, a man who had suffered so much at the end of his life, could still write that really hit me to the core.¹⁵

Considering the utopian strands of his undergraduate years, in which the influence of Seosamh Mac Grianna figures prominently, Mac Annaidh's tendency toward a subversive self-consciousness vis-à-vis literary conventions cannot be neatly explained as part of the prevailing postmodern self-reflexivity. In Mac Annaidh's work the Irish language is of itself subversive, being the language that was consciously occluded from the public sphere. The very need to ask for the endorsement of another writer, one whose career had been tragically short-lived, is a reflection of the precarious marginality of Irish. When Mac Annaidh took up his writing vocation, he encountered this marginality directly, having left university and returned to his native Enniskillen, a town where the language had virtually no presence.¹⁶ Although he feels that he has yet to write the Enniskillen novel, the town surfaces in his short stories in a subverted form—Venicekillen—and its inner life is memorably presented in his homage to one of its most marginal characters, the alcoholic vagrant Kipperlugs, the subject of one short story and a semi-autobiographical essay.¹⁷

The first of these, "Bás Kipperlugs" (The Death of Kipperlugs), is marked by a formal tension between the self-referential, metafictional voice and what the narrator calls a "dark realism" that asserts itself as the story tries to progress. The disrupted storyline is itself presented

15. Mac Annaidh, "My Life and Work," 100.

16. Mac Annaidh, *Mr. Lisa agus an Gramafón*, 17.

17. On having yet to write the Enniskillen novel, see Mac Annaidh, *Mr. Lisa agus an Gramafón*, 20. The two Kipperlugs pieces are "Bás Kipperlugs" (The Death of Kipperlugs) in *Féirín, Scéalta agus Eile* (1992) and "Bás Kipperlugs 2" (The Death of Kipperlugs 2) in *Mr. Lisa agus an Gramafón* (2005). Regarding the publication history of "Bás Kipperlugs 2," Mac Annaidh explains that the first iteration was a talk given to students of Trinity College Dublin, and that first published version appeared as "Bás Kipperlugs 2." See *Oghma* 5 (1994): 51–59. The third version is the one referred to here and was published in 2005 in *Mr. Lisa agus an Gramafón*. For Mac Annaidh's discussion of this version, see *Mr. Lisa agus an Gramafón*, 1. The nickname Kipperlugs is based on the similarity of the subject's ears (lugs) to kippers (smoked herring).

as a record that can skip tracks, as when the reader is asked to lift the needle and put it down a couple of tracks further on so that the narrator can tell us about “Viv-de-Spiv,” a potential subplot to the Kipperlugs story. The ending repeats the opening line—“Venicekillen is a little rural town in Northern Ireland, a venerable, historic town,” and is followed by “clic . . . clic . . . clic . . . clic . . .” (over four lines), representing the sound of a needle at the end of a record or perhaps the sound of static as the record is replayed from the start.¹⁸ The fractured narrative that plays out between this deceptively reassuring beginning and end line is framed by a series of records that the narrator keeps changing in an effort to reflect the correct mood as he writes, thus moving through Mendelssohn, Judas Priest, The Dubliners, and Jerry Lee Lewis. The constantly shifting narrative placed in between the staid certainty of “Venicekillen is a little rural town in Northern Ireland, a venerable, historic town” speaks to the difficulty of writing about something that cannot be easily represented, whether this be Enniskillen, the Troubles or the eponymous Kipperlugs. Thus the many overlapping threads of narrative—the Venicekillen that tourists photograph and the one they do not see, a summer of excesses that points to some form of imminent implosion, Kipperlugs’s comic escapades, and the narrator’s unlikely friendship with him—all of these are what *might* be told. Above all, this story is an homage to the overlooked inner life of Enniskillen epitomized in the narrator’s friendship with Kipperlugs.

Kipperlugs is one of the town’s three “sages,” the narrator being another and the third being Mick Softley, who plays his guitar outside the town hall as bellicose council meetings take place within.¹⁹ While the story is a form of requiem for the hapless, anarchic Kipperlugs, his death is figurative—although the alcoholic’s lifestyle brings him perilously close to actual death, Kipperlugs’s demise is in his eventual turn to religion. The story is equally about the death of the narrator himself, an event that we are told was reported in the previous November in the local newspaper (Enniskillen’s *The Impartial*

18. Mac Annaidh, *Féirín, Scéalta agus Eile*, 82, 89–90.

19. *Ibid.*, 85. Many local council meetings were noted for fractious exchanges along sectarian lines. For an insight into the bearpit of Belfast City Council, see Máirtín Ó Muilleoir’s *Comhad Comhairleora* (Dublin: Coiscéim, 1990) and *Belfast’s Dome of Delight: City Hall Politics, 1981–2000* (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1999).

Reporter). What has died is one of the narrator’s public personae, “the blackbird,” as youthful rebellion gives way to the adult responsibility of parenthood.²⁰ This is hinted at early on when he tells us that he cannot develop the “Viv-de-Spiv subplot” too much as the child’s nappy/diaper may have to be changed. Later on, we are told that when he saw “Joanne in the hospital when the child was born,” he recalled the prophetic words of Simeon to Mary on seeing the child Jesus in the temple, that her soul would be pierced.²¹ It is at this point that the narrator remarks, “Damn this dark realism.” This note of prophetic inevitability points to a deeper tragedy underpinning the figurative death of Kipperlugs and of the narrator’s own youth. In telling the story of both, he attempts to tell something of the greater and much more complex inner story of Enniskillen before its inevitable loss occurs.

To the outsider Enniskillen is a rural town synonymous with one of the most notorious events of the Northern Troubles, the IRA’s Remembrance Sunday bombing that claimed twelve lives on 8 November 1987. Ironically, Mac Annaidh’s story was first published in the November edition of *An tUltach* and so preceded the bombing.²² Just as the Enniskillen bomb was an event that threatened to bury the town under the weight of its brutality, Mac Annaidh’s story is about rescuing the town from the assumptions thrust upon it. In this way the story that sets out to tell us about Enniskillen becomes the story of Kipperlugs. Repeating the opening line of the story (“Venicekillen is a little rural town in Northern Ireland . . .”) on the second page, the narrator tells us that “the setting being thus, one can assume that

20. Mac Annaidh was a member of the band the Fermanagh Blackbirds, and the blackbird is Mac Annaidh’s most frequently used moniker. The use of aliases is immediately reminiscent of Brian Ó Nualláin/Flann O’Brien, with whom Mac Annaidh shares many similarities, not least Ó Nualláin’s comical and metafictional proclivities.

21. Mac Annaidh, *Féirín, Scéalta agus Eile*, 88–89.

22. Some revisions were made in the version that appeared five years later in *Féirín, Scéalta agus Eile* but these are generally minor changes. See Séamas Mac Annaidh, “Bás Kipperlugs,” in *An tUltach*, Samhain 1987, 10–13. *An tUltach* was a monthly magazine produced by Comhaltas Uladh (The Ulster Fellowship), the Gaelic League’s northern organization in the nine Ulster counties and County Louth. Founded in 1924, *An tUltach* ceased to be published after 2018. Some editions have been digitized and can be accessed at *Stair faoi Cheilt/Hidden Histories*, <https://stairfaoicheilt.antultach.com>.

this whole construction must involve matters of religion, God help us.”²³ It is soon clear, however, that this assumption will be swiftly challenged by Kipperlugs’s transcendence:

And then there was Kipperlugs. In the beginning there was Kipperlugs and Kipperlugs had always existed. He had his own resolution of the story because he himself was the story and it was so long since he had been to mass that the sectarian experts of the younger generation thought that he was a Protestant. But Kipperlugs existed before they were born, before there was any such thing as the Troubles.²⁴

At a time when religion was the chief identifier, Kipperlugs defies the assumptions of orthodoxy, an attitude that might be described as his vocation. This is part of his attraction for the narrator, who explains how he developed a friendship with Kipperlugs to the point where the latter stopped asking him for money. The narrator recalls scandalizing those for whom his position as the local librarian was incompatible with any friendship with the egregious Kipperlugs. When Kipperlugs finally succumbs to the quest for salvation and attends daily Mass, this decision coincides with the narrator’s child’s christening, thus marking his own retirement as one of the town’s three nonconformists. There is, however, one last hint of the subversion of sectarian assumptions when it transpires that throughout their friendship Kipperlugs had mistaken the narrator for a Protestant, a mistake that the narrator does nothing to correct since he had always fancied himself as a Presbyterian. In the end the narrator admits that the story is actually about religion, just as was assumed at the beginning. Despite this inevitability, what we have witnessed in between has revealed the complex interiority that a small town has nurtured in defiance of the overpowering narrative of the Troubles. That is to say, the many overlapping threads of narrative point toward an unfathomable interiority beyond the touristic or Troubles-defined version of Enniskillen.

This revealed interiority is the key to Mac Annaidh’s subversion of the Troubles cliché. Similarly, his constant recourse to metafiction and other postmodern preoccupations is not about a disdain for

23. Mac Annaidh, *Féirín, Scéalta agus Éile*, 83.

24. *Ibid.*, 84.

strongly held beliefs but a response to the absence of any solid foundation for the world that he inhabits as an Irish-language author in the Northern Ireland of the 1980s and 1990s. Returning to Coleraine and the New University of Ulster, we can see that the Irish-language community that developed there among the students was in some ways similar to the type of “intentional community” formed in the Shaw’s Road in Belfast as an urban Gaeltacht. Both were radical new beginnings on green-field sites, creating a new community of language idealists. Part of the legacy of the Coleraine “community” was the rediscovery of the network of Ulster Irish texts and scribal traditions from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. This was a particular specialty of the late Dr. Diarmaid Ó Doibhlin, whose influence is detected in the story “Sic Transit Gloria Mundi,” much of which centers on *Tóruidheacht na bhFíreun air Lorg Chríosa*, the Ulster Irish translation of *De Imitatione Christi* by the Christian mystic Thomas à Kempis.²⁵

“Sic Transit Gloria Mundi” is set in rural Ulster, where the main character is a youth who inhabits a bizarre, self-destructive inner world, guided by maxims from Thomas à Kempis. As he moves gradually to a position of social isolation and paranoid delusion, at each stage prompted by his reading of *Tóruidheacht na bhFíreun air Lorg Chríosa*, the interior world deepens to the point where it engulfs him. The potential dangers of an isolating idealism are reminiscent of those in Seosamh Mac Grianna’s *Mo Bhealach Féin*. While a well-spring of idealism, Mac Grianna’s autobiographical work also contains indications of his journey into schizophrenia. In some ways “Sic Transit Gloria Mundi” could be read as a metaphor for the potential challenge faced by Mac Annaidh as an Ulster Irish writer, taking up the torch of a great literary tradition only to find, perhaps, isolation and eventual despair.

The same study of interiority appears in different ways in “Crann Aonair” (Single Tree), “Fuath” (Hate), “Féirín” (A Gift), and “Misteach Bhaile Átha Cliath” (The Mystic of Dublin). In the first

25. This particular text was the subject of Dr. Ó Doibhlin’s doctoral thesis. The Ulster Gaelic literary tradition was taken as the theme for his festschrift. See Nioclás Mac Cathmhaoil, Máire Nic Cathmhaoil, and Conal Mac Seáin, eds., *Súgán an Dúchais: Aistí ar Ghnéithe de Thraidisiún Liteartha Chúige Uladh i gCuimhne ar Dhíarmaid Ó Doibhlin* (Derry: Guildhall Press/Éigse Cholm Cille, 2018).

of these the single tree is a “fairy tree” on the land of the main character, an unmarried farmer. It is also the totem that becomes his instrument of suicide. The cycle of futility depicted here in many ways resembles that in John McGahern’s *Leitrim*, as an ethic of self-reliance brings the male protagonist into a spiral of self-destruction. Not surprisingly, gender roles are heavily accentuated, circumscribed by lines that are never blurred, let alone crossed. Women in the story bear a particular attachment to local superstition, as when the main character’s imminent death is predicted by a widow whom all the local women believe implicitly—she predicts that he will die within the year after the sudden death of his bachelor brother. While both men and women have limited agency in “Crann Aonair,” their attachment to superstition allows women a small, if illusory advantage seen against the lack of any insight afforded to men.

A similarly pervasive isolation is repeated in “Fuath,” which centers on the sectarian murder of a battery-hen farmer in rural Ulster that is being covered by a Jewish journalist from New York. The suffocating atmosphere of battery-hens’ cages sets the scene for the murder—the action of an anonymous assassin whose anonymity is reflected in the journalist Zach’s resolute detachment from the story and the people he has come to investigate. He has been sent from Washington, DC, to cover a murder that has yet to happen, having been assured that he will scarcely need to leave Belfast to do so. Initially, he leaves the hotel only for cigarettes and to be searched. As he drinks whiskey in his hotel room with a youth whom he has invited there for dubious reasons, he replays the tape of the victim’s brother’s interview for the ninth time. Doing so, he reflects on the deficiency of his own lifestyle and the manner in which his entrenched emotional detachment has come about. As an instance of resolution (generally rare in Mac Annaidh’s short stories), the dignity of the brother’s appeal for no retaliation allows Zach to remember a time when he felt healthy and ennobled by a sense of community with his own people. The irony is that his nostalgia for communal belonging should be revealed in this “fractured island” where communal belonging leads to murder.²⁶

Interiority is given a different shade in “Féirín,” specifically, a

26. Mac Annaidh, *Féirín, Scéalta agus Éile*, 46.

tangerine ceiling and rose walls with no pictures on them. This is the description of the provincial house in which the “action” takes place. Just as in Beckett’s famous study of waiting, nothing happens. An awkward wait for the return of a friend/former student from yesterday is punctuated by biscuits and tea served by the host, the friend’s mother. The visitor Eric Galway’s comical deliberations on which biscuit to eat next are ultimately more important than anything else that can possibly happen. Interiority here is literally visualized in the tangerine ceiling and rose walls with no pictures on them and in the sweet stagnant passage of time in a provincial town. While nothing actually happens, the garish and specifically denuded walls point again toward the problem of representation—what might happen and how might it be pictured? Held in suspense in a sort of waiting room, “Féirín” indicates the profundity of the unspoken, unrealized interior life.

This combination of profound interiority and aspiration toward unrealized and unknown truth finds comic expression in Mac Annaidh’s “Misteach Bhaile Átha Cliath,” one of his finest stories. The hero is a civil servant who had a mystical experience on the upper deck of a Dublin bus when returning home from a pub. The fact that the conductor did not ask him to pay on this occasion or on every one of the same bus journeys that he takes over the next twenty-three years convinces him that he has a divine mission. He immerses himself in the mystic tradition, Christian and then Eastern, gradually absorbing their teachings and affirming his own vocation. All is seemingly well until the fateful night when he is approached by a diabolic conductor, on a now empty top deck, whose ticket machine prints out twenty-three years’ worth of unpaid tickets while the bus becomes a ship in a stormy sea. The conductor explains that this is the last bus and its terminus is hell.

If this story outline and other aspects of Mac Annaidh’s work are reminiscent of the writings of Brian Ó Nualláin/Flann O’Brien/Myles na gCopaleen, the debt is acknowledged from the outset in Mac Annaidh’s frequent allusions to Myles na gCopaleen’s *An Béal Bocht* (1941) in his debut novel.²⁷ The metafictional tendencies and

27. See Thaddeus Ó Buachalla, *Clocháin sa Scoilt: An tÚrscéal Iar-Nua-Aoiseach sa Ghaeilge* (Dublin: Coiscéim, 2019), 88–90.

ludic self-reflexivity are not, however, a simple imitation of the elder author or of the postmodernity that prevailed when Mac Annaidh was most prolific in the 1980s and 1990s. Mac Annaidh's eccentricity is never feigned, as is made very clear in the way in which he accepts the waning of his creative powers in "Bás Kipperlugs" and in its sequel, "Bás Kipperlugs 2." More postscript than sequel, "Bás Kipperlugs 2" is told in a conventional, autobiographical voice, giving further insight into Kipperlugs and his actual death, which occurred sometime after the death of the author's father, with whom Kipperlugs had had a somewhat comical confrontation when the author was a child. We are told that the author is now a historian who spends his time perusing graveyard inscriptions, while "Kipperlugs and my father belong to an era now gone, before I married, before my daughter was born."²⁸

Of course, the first Kipperlugs story is about the death of a certain attitude to life, the subversion of orthodoxy epitomized by Kipperlugs and sought out by the narrator until the realization that his rebelliousness was a youthful vocation now nearing its end. It is also crucially an expression of the profound interiority of a small town, one that challenges the official narrative of the tourism board, the Troubles, and some of its own residents. Part of Mac Annaidh's focus is revealed in the tension that develops from the beginning of "Bás Kipperlugs," pointing to the imminent implosion referred to earlier. The "piazza" of Venicekillen is pictured in the most recent summer, with policemen eating ice cream and tourists taking photographs. The tourists think that the townspeople are merely "characters," but they do not notice the townsfolk's inner world—how the barking of dogs throughout the night unnerves them, or the fact that couples have broken up and heads have been split and that it has been a great summer. The local "pub experts" have worried about these "wonders," interpreting each as part of a larger, malign configuration comprising the recent Chernobyl disaster (April 1986), the reelection of Margaret Thatcher (June 1987), and some cosmic conflict. However, to ascribe the imminent implosion to external forces is a profound misunderstanding, as the narrator concludes: "All of which, in my own lowly opinion, is *a load of balls* for a little town like this would not

28. Mac Annaidh, *Mr. Lisa agus an Gramafón*, 70.

go mad outright *wham-a-lam* without a reason that is . . . *what's the word . . . internal, wow!*"²⁹

The corollary of postmodernism's eschewal of grand narratives is its embrace of *petite histoires*. In this regard Séamas Mac Annaidh's tendency toward disrupted, unconventional narratives is of its time, but also part of his response to being a minority-language writer. In the case of the Irish language in Northern Ireland, where the state strove to marginalize the Irish-language community, literature in Irish was subversive by default. Yet equally important was Mac Annaidh's desire to overturn the orthodoxy of Irish-language tradition:

When I was writing, I said to myself, "What sort of a book would I like to read?" Often in university I did read some exciting things in Irish, but an awful lot of it was fairly staid. We were reading a lot of the texts for their linguistic rather than for their literary value, so I said, "Come on, let's blow this away. Let's have a bit of fun with this, let's think of a book my contemporaries would like to read." That's the way *Cuairfeach Mo Londubh Bui* came about.³⁰

Cuairfeach was hugely successful in this regard and was the standard to which Mac Annaidh's subsequent work aspired. The same iconoclasm frames his short stories, the first collection beginning as it does with a pastiche of Seán Ó Riordáin's famous introduction to *Eireaball Spideoige* (A Robin's Tail; 1952).³¹ The use of pastiche and acrobatic wordplay, as well as protean authorial identities, recalls a debt to Brian Ó Nualláin/Flann O'Brien, but Mac Annaidh is no less original if we accept that aspects of Ó Nualláin's subversive wordplay are as old as the eighth-century manuscript *Cin Dromma Snechtai*.³² What sets Mac Annaidh apart is the constant turning away from the obvious and the prescribed toward the alternative interiority of

29. Mac Annaidh, *Féirín, Scéalta agus Eile*, 82–83. Italics are given where the original word or phrase is in English.

30. Mac Annaidh, "My Life and Work," 101.

31. "Rave-Rá—Ruball na Muice" (Rave-word—the Tail of the Pig) in Mac Annaidh, *Féirín, Scéalta agus Eile*, 1–3.

32. See, for example, David Stifter's discussion of the poem *Fil and Grian Glinne Aí* in David Stifter, "Ulster Connections of *Cin Dromma Snechtai*," *Ulidia 4: Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales*, ed. Mícheál Ó Mainnín and Gregory Toner (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2017), 23–37. See pages 32–36.

utopian idealism, comical and tragic mysticism, and the heroic egregiousness of Kipperlugs, among other things. In a society that had become saturated by representations of itself—more often than not by the Troubles cliché—this alternative interiority was a corrective to the assumption of the ready-made image. In Mac Annaidh's short stories we cannot assume that we know anyone or any place, and quite appropriately the walls have no pictures.