

*NATION STATES: THE CULTURES OF IRISH NATIONALISM*, by Michael Mays. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2007. 225 pp. \$29.95.

Michael Mays begins his consideration of nationalism in Ireland over the last two centuries by citing George Bernard Shaw: “A healthy nation is as unconscious of its nationality as a healthy man of his bones” (1).<sup>1</sup> He continues quoting Shaw, who noted that if “you break a nation’s nationality, it will think of nothing else but getting it set again. It will listen to no reformer, to no philosopher, to no preacher, until the demand of the Nationalist is granted. It will attend to no business, however vital, except the business of unification and liberation” (1). Just as nationalism subordinates “other commitments

to itself" (6), this interesting study uses nationalism as a main frame to determine the texts considered but also ambitiously considers, in subtext, other ideas that intersect and overlap with the central one: postcolonialism, literary history, and theories of modernity, for instance. Like many of the more readable academic texts that have been published in recent decades, *Nation States* takes a multi-theoretical and interdisciplinary approach that might be said better to reflect that elusive thing, an historical reality.

Committed to this type of representation, the author notes that "[a] cultural history of Irish nationalism since the Act of Union of 1801 cannot escape, even if it wished to, considerations of memory and its various histories" (7). Mays argues that academia's surging interest in memory suggests the need for

not "harder" history, but rather a cultural history attentive to the manifold forms of memory, both critical of those forms yet cognizant of their potency; a cultural history genuinely complementary to archival history, and not merely a history of cultural forms, not a subspecies or branch of history proper, but a field of inquiry in its own right; a cultural history whose realm is the archive, not of objective documentary evidence, but of subjective affect and emotion; in short, a cultural history capable of studying the effects of affect. (8-9)

Mays here lands himself in the middle of a complex and ongoing debate about the role of memory in historical studies (as well as the role of history in memory studies). While memory is secondary to his considerations of Irish nationalism, this text does add to the growing body of work that considers cultural memory generally and cultural memory and Irishness particularly. That he acknowledges the claims—and emotional impact—of memory on nationalism is important.

Following this setting of the boundaries, Mays leaps into *Finnegans Wake*, which he argues is a "model for a critical postcolonial history that dissects those processes through which 'fuzzy' memory instantiates itself as 'concrete' history" (9). Early Irish nationalists, Mays suggests, were in the position of having to create and/or authenticate an Irish history that was glorious and far from the suffering and defeat that frequently marked the present. The result was often the invented tradition and the appearance of a return to origins, encapsulated clearly, for instance, in "Mother Ireland." Early Revivalists' reliance on an exalted feminine form of the Irish nation—seen most obviously in W. B. Yeats and Lady Gregory's *Kathleen Ni Houlihan*<sup>2</sup>—and the simultaneous remasculinization of the nation promised a kind of restoration of some "true" history and lost Irish identity. The *Wake* offers, by contrast, an uncertain confrontation between history and memory.

Mays argues that

[w]hat Joyce dramatizes in *Finnegans Wake* is the relentless effort, incited by need and desire, to discover that [lost] identity by reconstructing it in monumental detail with the aid of identity-confirming facts, documents, stories, and archives. Juxtaposed against the solidity of these forms of "history," however, are the vagaries of "memory," the identity-shattering melange of gossip, rumor, innuendo, and of *faux pas*, Freudian slips, and indiscretions. (10)

If the nationalist impulse is to employ "sense-making strategies," the impulse governing the *Wake* is a celebration of "magisterial strangeness" (26). It is unfortunate that Mays turns only briefly to Joyce and to *Finnegans Wake*, since any such brief treatment of the *Wake* is bound to seem superficial. He lacks space and time to explore how his theory holds up and is forced to limit his discussion of textual specifics to one passage. The result is that the argument remains rather unconvincing here, despite the promise of the idea, which could serve as the topic for a book-length study.

Mays's approach is more successful, though, in other chapters that deal with figures and texts that do not devour attention in the way that the *Wake* does. Analyses of the shift in Irish nationalism from a focus on independence to the establishment of a distinct nation-state are very interesting: Mays looks, for instance, at Brian Friel's *Translations* within a chapter whose larger conceit is the notion of cultural translation by a series of nationalist figures (Wolfe Tone, Thomas Davis, Samuel Ferguson, Patrick Pearse) and the necessity of writing "forgetting" into nationalist-created creeds. A.E. and Yeats receive considered attention as iconic and independent figures within the realms of Irish nationalism; Yeats's poetry is set against the backdrop of an analysis of Douglas Hyde's brand of assimilation against D. P. Moran's exclusionist Irish nationalism. Another chapter usefully considers the tension between the conservative De Valeran ideal of Irishness and the fact that the post-independence period used modern developments like the radio to disseminate the pre-modern ideal: Mays suggests that if conservatism was the dominant tune of the period, it was not the only one.

Mays also considers more recent nationalisms, situating the force of remembrance in Northern Ireland in an historical context: the representation of the idea of Ulster in Frank McGuinness's *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* is coupled with an exploration of the idea of Ulster in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Northern communities.<sup>3</sup> As part of this exploration, Mays considers, for instance, how William of Orange functioned in the cultural memories of different communities and served multiple, even contra-

dictory, purposes; he also looks at the defining moment of Carson's Covenant.

A consideration of contemporary nationalist developments is less subtle, as is a very brief afterword that considers Celtic-Tiger Irishness. Up to this point, the book, while following a roughly chronological line, reads as a series of distinct essays: the addition of the afterword, in particular, seems to attempt to shape a coherent-over-time narrative. This impulse was, for this reader at least, misguided, for what the text at its best reveals is that such studies can abandon the linear time-frame successfully, engaging with "history" and "memory" and producing, as a result, a curious amalgamation of literary and cultural history that reminds us just how complex nationalism continues to be. If this thought-provoking book is taken as an indication of the new type of history that Mays outlines in his introduction, then that new history is certainly worth consideration.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> George Bernard Shaw, "Preface for Politicians," *John Bull's Other Island, The Bodley Head Bernard Shaw: Collected Plays and Their Prefaces* (London: Bodley Head, 1970-1974), 2:842.

<sup>2</sup> W. B. Yeats, with Lady Gregory, *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* (London: Macmillan Publishers, 1937). The one-act play was performed for the first time in Dublin on 2 April 1902 with Maud Gonne in the title role.

<sup>3</sup> Frank McGuinness, *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986).