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Frank Sewell, *Modern Irish Poetry: A New Alhambra*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. x + 234 pages. No price given.

Ray Ryan (editor), *Writing in the Irish Republic: Literature, Culture, Politics 1949-1999*. London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 2000. x + 290 pages. No price given.

Frank Sewell's book offers an informed and discursive introduction to four twentieth-century poets who wrote in Irish. He chooses to concentrate on Seán Ó Riordáin and Máirtín Ó Direáin from the nineteen fifties and nineteen sixties, and Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill and Cathal Ó Searcaigh from the later decades. The appendix gives English versions of the principal poems discussed. The four poets chosen cover a geographical spread within Ireland. Ó Searcaigh is from Donegal, and the Ulster Gaelatacht; Ó Direáin was from the Aran Islands, and used Connemara Irish. Both Ó Riordáin and Ni Dhomhnaill are associated with Munster Irish. Sewell concedes at the outset that he has omitted a

number of poets — he mentions Maire Mhac an tSaoi, Eoghan Ó Tuaraisc, Michael Davitt, Biddy Jenkinson, and Liam Ó Muirthile. His concentration on just four figures is a critical decision that enables him to give a considered appraisal of each. But what is lost as a consequence is not just a roll-call of other poets who might have been discussed; lost also is the full sense of the context in which the poets were writing. One might get the impression that Ó Direáin and Ó Riordáin were solitary voices, writing out of the poetic silence that Thomas Kinsella has identified as the condition of the latter-day Irish writer. Historically, they had a difficult national and social context which must have informed their writings, and their work offered astringent commentaries on the culture in which they lived. The notion that they were poets in a vacuum is signally countered by Seán Ó Tuama's ground-breaking anthology *Nuabhéarsaíocht* in 1950. Sewell mentions this anthology as giving a platform to three individual voices: to Ó Riordáin and Ó Direáin as well as to Maire Mhac an tSaoi. But the existence of the anthology indicates that there were other poets whose work provided some sort of milieu for these egregious voices, poets such as Liam Gogan, Seamus Ó Néill, and Séamas Ó hAodha. The contemporary poets considered here, Ó Searcaigh and Ní Dhomhnaill, have emerged from a situation where numerous collections of poems have been published. The context of their writing life is very different to that of the earlier generation. Coiscéim, Cl6 Iar Chonnachta, Cork University Press, even Gallery Press, have all published poetry in Irish; there are more readings, broadcasts, periodicals, travel opportunities, translations and prizes, all of which have contributed to a very different environment.

Sewell, while not altogether ignoring these factors, rather avoids contextualizing the four poets within a specifically Irish literary and historical framework. He seeks to extend the contextual boundaries beyond the obvious links to the major poets in English. Instead, he reaches out to a European tradition, looking particularly to Polish poets, or contrasting Ó Riordáin's career with that of Marc Chagall. Sewell sees Ó Riordáin's work as constituting a diminuendo, with the successive collections, from *Eireaball Spideoige* through to the posthumously published *Tar Éis Mo Bhás*, becoming less forceful. He twice borrows Muldoon's phrase in 'Mules', 'Neither one thing nor the other', to describe Ó Riordáin's position between the two languages of English and Irish. Ó Riordáin's poetic language and methods were clearly affected by his knowledge of English. The question arose as to whether this was to be seen as enrichment or contamination. Similar questions might be put nowadays regarding the prominent part translation into English has played in Ní Dhomhnaill's work especially. It is a pity that Sewell does not follow this up. The interesting issue would not centre on the reception of her work — whether the translations are primarily responsible for

making her poetry more visible — but on its production. How does the knowledge that one's poems will rapidly be made available to their majority readership in English translation condition the writing of poetry in Irish?

The title's curious reference to 'a new Alhambra' is based on a passage from Joep Leersen about the need to 'acknowledge the difference between present-day Ireland and its pre-nineteenth-century roots. The only simile I can think of is the Alhambra destroyed and the same rubble used to rebuild a different building according to a different architecture'. Sewell goes on to use this figure with particular reference to his own subject: 'If one uses the same rubble to re-build, then one builds anew the Alhambra which, as a metaphor for Irish art, was never (I believe) completely destroyed. This 'Alhambra' was sometimes obscured and/or went unrecognized; all along, however, it expanded because generations of Irish artists kept extending it in their own fashion'. This metaphorical move is emblematic of Sewell's approach generally, in which there is a constant endeavour to relate the poems under discussion to a wider international context. American, Russian, and, in the conclusion, Polish writing are brought into play to provide an imaginative context as if to compensate for the diminished historical and textual emphasis. It is a bold but not wholly convincing stratagem. Stretched comparisons with examples from the further reaches of the republic of poetry, rather like the oft-repeated insistence that Irish offers the oldest continuous literary tradition in Europe, may serve to impress us with the poems' associative worth but diminishes their current intrinsic merit as utterances for the here and now. The associative reach sometimes diverts Sewell from a steady treatment of the subject in hand. Introducing his discussion of Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry, he comments that her rise 'coincided with two major cultural movements to which she naturally belonged: the women's movement; and the "bright new wave of Irish language writers who produced or at least contributed to the magazine *INNTI*"'. *INNTI* has been very significant to those of us who read poetry in Ireland, but his casual implication that its emergence is somehow equivalent to the rise of the twentieth-century women's movement as a major cultural event suggests a temporary loss of perspective.

Ní Dhomhnaill did not appear in the first *INNTI*, published in March 1970. The twelve contributors (Ó Direáin and Ó Ríordáin among them, as well as Pearse Hutchinson and Tomás Mac Síomóin) were all men, as it happened. In pride of place was Pádraig Ó Fiannachta, the Irish scholar at Maynooth who is Ní Dhomhnaill's uncle, and whose publishing imprint An Sagart was later to publish the books by Ní Dhomhnaill that Sewell considers: *Féar Suaithinseach* and *Feis*. The second *INNTI* appeared a year later. Again, it had twelve contributors, but their average age was now much lower. Ní Dhomhnaill contributed one of the two poems by

women writers. She had five poems in the third *INNTI* in 1973, which drew on a broad range of contributors. The periodical did not resume publication until 1980. The core *INNTI* poets were principally Michael Davitt, the founder and editor, and with him Liam Ó Muirthile and Gabriel Rosenstock, in that they were founding contributors. Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry was to be the magazine's major find in its early manifestation. I mentioned at the outset the importance of a context for individual voices to emerge. While *INNTI* provided such a context for Ní Dhomhnaill, productive and necessary elements of the context that had produced the *INNTI* poets in UCC were Seán Ó Riordain and, as for the *Nuabhéarsaíocht* generation in 1950, Seán Ó Tuama. The Cork *INNTI* poets were nearly all students of Ó Tuama in the Irish Department. Ó Riordain had a very part-time attachment to UCC — a visionary initiative, long before the writer-in-residence became a commonplace fixture on Irish campuses.

Modern Irish Poetry: A New Alhambra is a serious, thoughtful and informed account of four poets; it offers us an opportunity to engage in a critical discussion of an essential strand of Irish poetry. It is the most developed account in English that we have of twentieth-century poetry in Irish, and it adds significantly to the corpus of such criticism in English, building on books and essays available from Ó Tuama and Declan Kiberd.

Our absolute need for books such as Sewell's is resoundingly exemplified by *Writing in the Irish Republic: Literature, Culture, Politics 1949-1999*. It is breathtaking to find that in its 280 pages — half of them devoted to sections on 'Literature' and 'Culture' — there is no consideration of writing in Irish. Of Sewell's four poets, the three men remain invisible; Ní Dhomhnaill is mentioned a few times, mostly in passing as a woman poet and as a lead-in to a more extensive consideration of Eavan Boland. Jonathan Allison, considering anthologizing decisions in his essay 'Poetry and the Republic of Ireland since 1949', moves on from Paul Muldoon's re-run of the mismatch between MacNeice and Higgins to discuss Kinsella's wish to give prominence to translations from the Irish, and seems to stigmatize or at least repudiate any desire to revive or maintain an Irish Language poetic heritage as a 'mentality'.

The absence of any consideration of Irish would be less regrettable were it not that the standard of the essays gathered here is generally high. In the section on 'Politics' there are essays by Tom Garvin, Colin Coulter, Tony Canavan and John Horgan on, respectively, the remaking of political culture in Ireland, Unionist attitudes to the Irish Republic, historical narratives, and the media. The concluding essay by Cormac Ó Gráda examines how the policy initiatives of the past five decades have contributed to the eventual spectacular growth of the Irish economy. Following an introduction by the editor, Ray Ryan, the collection opens with four articles on 'Literature'. Catriona Clutterbuck's essay 'Irish

Women's Poetry and the Republic of Ireland: Formalism as Form' is an examination of the interaction between poetry by women and concepts of poetic form. It is a scrupulous piece of work, but ultimately does not fully break free of the agenda set over a decade ago by Eavan Boland. Ryan himself in his essay 'The Republic and Ireland: Pluralism, Politics, and Narrative Form' takes issue with the Republic's attitude to liberal post-nationalism as exemplified by Colm Tóibín. In a lively article Chris Morash reassesses Irish theatre in the Ernest Blythe era. In the section on 'Culture' Michael Cronin and Barbara O'Connor write jointly about the interactions of Irish tourism and modernity, and Patrick Hanafin looks at 'Legal Texts as Cultural Documents: Interpreting the Irish Constitution'. Richard Haslam's 'Irish Film: Screening the Republic' is a survey that covers an impressive amount in a brief compass. The most far-reaching of the essays in the collection, Joe Cleary's 'Modernisation and Aesthetic Ideology in Contemporary Irish Culture', also takes film as its starting point, before moving on to look at fiction (*Amongst Women*) and drama (*Dancing at Lughnasa*). He offers these as exemplary of recent Irish narratives, in that they 'depict a crepuscular Irish world about to be pulverized by the arrival of industrial modernity'. One of the most telling passages in his authoritative essay is a disquisition on Marshall Berman's ideas on modernity, using them to complicate notions of the Irish revival as being characterized by a nostalgia for an imagined past. Cleary suggests that the nostalgia 'for some sort of pre-capitalist golden age passes through a passionate rejection of present capitalist and industrialist society which amounts to more than simply a rejection of modernity. The nostalgia for the past does not disappear, but is projected towards a post-capitalist future.' This section does, incidentally, provide one tenuous instance of overlap with Sewell's book: both Cleary and Sewell draw on Marshall Berman's work. Our critics should be in dialogue with each other.