

All writers are influenced by the works of others. When the calibre of an earlier writer is such that a novelist can remould such an influence into an original voice it is a fine thing. But when they appear to be unequal to the task, the result can be unsatisfactory, as in the case of this novel. I think that Quinn may be trying, perhaps unconsciously, to capture the spirit of Lawrence Durrell's *The Alexandria Quartet*, but does not quite make it.

Brazil is a captivating country whose people are full of cheerfulness, resilience, warmth, stoicism and, above all, passion. They are the very stuff of fiction, and yet Quinn hardly gives any impression of such a striking country and its people. He certainly seems to understand them, as is evident from such sadly infrequent insights as "Life revolves around sexuality; sexuality is the untamperably active, volcanic core of life, and they are astonished that elsewhere it is considered otherwise" (p. 65). Here at least Quinn gives us an accurate account of what makes the average Brazilian tick. I think that it would have been a far more rewarding read had he focused more on the country and its people. As it is, I feel the relationship of the main character to those closest to him isn't explored enough in the narrative and the book suffers for this. A lot more thought should have been put into what the writer wants to say and a lot more discipline applied in saying it.

Finally, on the back of the book there is a quotation from one German reviewer in *Die Rabe* hailing Quinn as the spiritual successor to Kerouac and Burroughs. I beg to differ, from my reading of this novel.

JOHN LOFTUS

Medbh McGuckian, *On Ballycastle Beach*, revised edition. Oldcastle, Co. Meath: Gallery Press, 1995. 64 pages. IR£11.95 hardback. IR£5.95 paperback.

Gerald Dawe, *Against Piety: Essays in Irish Poetry*. Belfast: Lagan Press, 1995. 194 pages. £7.95 paperback.

Gerald Dawe, *Heart of Hearts*. Oldcastle, Co. Meath: Gallery Press, 1995. 48 pages. IR£10.95 hardback. IR£5.95 paperback.

Of Medbh McGuckian's work so far, I would suggest that *On Ballycastle Beach* (first published in 1988) and the preceding collection *Venus and the Rain* (1984), contain her most satisfying and characteristic poems. This Gallery Press edition of *On Ballycastle Beach* is described as "revised", but the revisions of the material in the 1988 OUP edition are minimal. What we get are the same poems in the

same order. The division of the collection into two numbered parts is dispensed with. Dedications are added to a few individual poems, and some accidentals (punctuation, capitalisation, a mis-spelt title) are changed here and there. The volume does good service in keeping these poems available and, following the republication of her earlier books, brings McGuckian altogether within the Gallery Press stable.

Against Piety gathers a dozen articles on recent Irish poets by Gerald Dawe, one of the most active commentators on the current poetry scene. The articles are prefaced by a few pages of autobiographical "situationing", a gesture which is becoming almost *de rigueur* among Irish critics — or is it only so among those from the north? I have in mind John Wilson Foster's introduction to *Colonial Consequences*, and Denis Donoghue's book-length *Warrenpoint*. The essays themselves are well worth gathering, even though nearly all of them are already available between hard covers in various multi-authored compilations. The one new essay is on Charles Donnelly, which takes him as encapsulating the cultural predicament of Ireland in the nineteen thirties. Dawe looks at the twists and turns of the poetry and the short life, but refuses to concede that Donnelly's early death in battle at Jarama renders the achievement incomplete. The book earns its place on the desk for this essay alone, but there are other goods besides bound in with it. The nineteen thirties generation is one to which Dawe gives special attention, looking not just at Donnelly but also at Louis MacNeice, and at Devlin and Coffey in "Three Modernist Poets: An Absence of Influence". Thomas Kinsella is the third man in the latter essay, and it is the perhaps surprising pair of Kinsella and Padraic Fiacc who emerge as the presiding figures of this book. Several other poets get consideration; among the notable absentees are Medbh McGuckian, Paul Muldoon, Richard Murphy, and Tom Paulin. However, given the nature of the book's origin, this may be a result of the chances of various editors' commissionings or beseechings, rather than a specific focus on the part of the author.

The essay on Longley and Mahon (the earliest of these pieces) dates from 1985, since when Longley has added substantially to the corpus of his work and Mahon has comprehensively rewritten much of his. It would have been better if Dawe had arrived at some way of accommodating or at least acknowledging those developments. And it is to be regretted that Lagan Press, in publishing what is in other respects a useful and well-produced volume, did not equip it with an index; this is the type of book that, after it has once been read, should sit honourably on the shelf for reference when needed.

Heart of Hearts is Dawe's fourth collection, and his first since *Sunday School* (1991). Here, as previously, his poems are characteristically spare and understated; he is content to leave much unsaid,

particularly when it comes to drawing conclusions. The poems are short, and there are fewer of them than one has come to expect from the typical collection nowadays. But Dawe is not afraid of producing a slim volume, and the leanness is probably the outcome of a cutting back which some others might profitably emulate. The poems enter into the territory of the introduction to *Against Piety* — memories of the family dredged from childhood, and seem to set out to convey the inconsequentiality of that world, its essential incompleteness. As a result Dawe's poems do not strive after the big effect, the portentousness of a vaulting metaphor that swathes a moment in added meaning. Instead they come to rest on the inevitable chances of the banal. It is not without its risks, but Dawe has been developing this for nearly two decades. It is a mode of writing which more recently a poet such as Simon Armitage has been making a go of in some of his work. Here's one of Dawe's ("1967"), complete:

The bus veered to one side
and the faces, straight out
of Magritte, stared ahead;
where you looked said it all.

Like the house with a *Sacred Heart*
lit in the vestibule, and the girls there
went every Saturday without fail
to Irish Dancing and what-have-you.

Or the wedding outside St Matthew's,
as the guests flocked the young couple
two women in front look on.
Holly-golly-molly, says one to the other.

The poems in the second part of the collection exhibit less imperviousness to the pressure of contemporary events, although they always preserve a salutary and salvific distance. The book ends with something of a departure, a relatively long poem "A Fire in my Head". If this echoes a line of Yeats's "Song of Wandering Aengus", then the nocturnal wandering of Dawe's poem is through a very different landscape: derelict, dangerous, and distorted by fog, an urban search that ends back in the sanctuary of home. If Yeats is one begetter of this poem, then surely the others are Kinsella of "Nightwalker" and Fiacca who has written so well about the dark side of Belfast.

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