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JOHN JORDAN AS CRITIC

Crystal Clear: the Selected Prose of John Jordan, edited by Hugh McFadden (The Lilliput Press, 2006), €25.

John Jordan was closely connected with Poetry Ireland in its various forms. He edited all seven issues of the periodical of that name published by Dolmen Press in the 1960s. Later, on the formation of the Poetry Ireland organisation in the late 1970s, he was the first editor of its magazine, *Poetry Ireland Review*, overseeing eight issues between 1981 and 1983.

Jordan's reputation has rested largely on the impression he left with those who knew him, rather than on any enduring body of work that has remained in continued circulation. That said, Jordan's friend and literary executor Hugh McFadden has been assiduous in ensuring that Jordan's work, somewhat fugitive by nature, is given more permanent form. He put together a *Collected Stories* and *Collected Poems* in the 1990s, and now we have this volume, *Crystal Clear*, gathering a generous selection of essays, reviews and radio scripts. It is a useful reminder of Jordan as polymath, informed critic and judicious reviewer. Running to well over 350 pages without counting the introduction and notes, the book is a compendium of occasional writings over nearly four decades – from the 1940s when Jordan was in his teens to the year before his death in 1988, at the age of fifty-eight. Apparently, there is further material sufficient for another volume of the same size.

While the book is broad-ranging in scope, at first sight it looks a little haphazard in organisation. The hundred or so pieces are grouped partly thematically, partly chronologically. This is to allow writings on a particular topic – say, his various pieces on Kavanagh or on Kate O'Brien, done over a number of years – to be put together. In fact this is not a bad editorial stratagem, as many of the essays are short, and a cluster of them on a subject gives a more sustained treatment. A lot of the pieces were written for the fortnightly *Hibernia*, and are well under a thousand words. Indeed, one of the things that this collection reminds us, is just how remarkable a publication *Hibernia* was. Its coverage of the arts was extensive and considered, and the frequency of its publication meant that it could sustain a critical dialogue with cultural productions. Jordan was one of its star literary contributors and critics through the 1960s and 1970s, as can be seen from the pieces collected. We do not have any equivalent nowadays. And honourable mention also to *The Irish Press*, which gave Jordan review space for other pieces here.

Many of the items in *Crystal Clear* are book reviews, and on original publication would have carried the titles of the books in question at the head of the article. Jordan writes on this assumption, and does not necessarily make explicit the subject of his review in the body of his text. In this collection the titles are buried in the notes at the back of the book, and it is often necessary to turn to these before Jordan's observations begin to make full sense.

Jordan was an acute critic of poetry; it is therefore lamentable that for most of the book when poems are quoted the passages are centre-justified, making a nonsense of the original layout and stanzaic structure. This is a particular curse of word-processing and desk-top publishing, but one would expect better from Lilliput. Mysteriously, the defect is corrected in the last seventy pages or so.

So, what do we learn about Jordan from this book – both his own writings and the editorial apparatus? That he was a perceptive critic, yes; among the writers he championed were his contemporaries Kate O'Brien, Kavanagh, Clarke and Behan – McFadden rightly points out that Jordan could see the merits in each of the last three, even though his contacts with them encompassed the Dublin pub milieu characterised by petty but deep-felt hostilities.

For readers of this magazine, Jordan's writings on poetry are bound to be the main area of interest. He does not range much beyond his Irish contemporaries. There is relatively little on the international scene, notwithstanding his breadth of interest. The only sustained discussion of Yeats centres on his plays. Jordan had youthful experience of the stage, and performed with the Gate Theatre. His writings on theatre here show him primarily inclined to treat plays as texts rather than as productions. That said, his sign-off sentence for a review of *Othello* at the Gate must have given his former employer cause to wince: 'Mr MacLiammoir's tights, however, were not skillfully designed.'

There are some real nuggets to be found. McFadden reprints Jordan's anonymous report on Kinsella as a poet, drawn up in the 1960s for some assessment process – alas, we do not know for which body. And there is an enthusiastically perceptive review of one of the lost voices, Caitlín Maude. It is also apparent from this book that Jordan the poetry editor was among the first to recognise Michael Hartnett and Paul Durcan as emerging figures in the 1960s, and backed their poetry. Some of his editorials for the early numbers of *Poetry Ireland Review* are reprinted, including that for his eighth and final issue (although misnumbered 'Four' in the heading here). This valedictory and retrospective piece is given complete, apart from the unnecessary omission of two sentences – in one of which Jordan had singled out Peter Sirr as a new poet worth encouraging.

While many of the items in *Crystal Clear* are exemplary short review essays, some of the longer pieces show Jordan to particular advantage.

He is good on Joyce, and his unbroadcast script for a radio presentation of Leopold Bloom in terms of his contacts with animals and other living beings is rather more than that; it a succinct précis of *Ulysses*. McFadden writes with the disadvantage of having been a close friend and associate of Jordan, and so never quite extricates him from the Dublin literary milieu he inhabited.

The editor has supplied endnotes, although it appears that occasionally notes originally supplied by Jordan to his own pieces are silently included among these. In the spirit of Jordan's own scrupulousness, a few inaccuracies should be pointed out in the introduction: the Longford name is Pakenham, not Packenham, and that of the English scholar is Helen Gardner, not Gardiner; Jordan is repeatedly described as a 'ranconteur', which would surely have jarred with a man who was not only a raconteur but a French scholar; the hospital in which Jordan spent time was 'Dr Steevens' not 'St Steeven's'. Furthermore, the writing style is less than crisp, with too ready a recourse to clichés such as 'groves of academe' and 'back to the future'; instead of telling us that Jordan had experience as an actor, we are told that he was a 'Thespian' who used to 'tread the boards'. Words like 'legendary' and 'mythical' leave McDaid's pub, the Bailey, and their regulars bubble-wrapped in reminiscences of hearing chimes at midnight. There is more than that to be said about Jordan – his health and alcoholism, his sexuality. He quit an academic career in UCD, went to work in a university in Newfoundland (abandoning the last number of the 1960s *Poetry Ireland*, which had to be seen through its final stages by his contemporary John Montague), and then quit that post. Why? One of the most remarkable and personal pieces here is reprinted from one of the books Jordan published in his lifetime, *Blood and Stations*. This is 'The Haemorrhage', a first-person account of being hospitalised while on a visit to Spain. Susan Sontag has written on *Illness as Metaphor*, but this is a notable piece of observational writing, direct yet deeply felt. In many ways this self-penned essay from 1964 is more revealing than McFadden's account of Jordan in the introduction. Similarly, one of Jordan's pieces on Behan suggests something of the sexuality issues that hovered around both their lives.

But notwithstanding these cavils, McFadden and Lilliput have done a service in getting so much of Jordan's output between covers. Jordan was a formative presence in the genesis of *Poetry Ireland Review* and in the reception and promulgation of poetry in twentieth-century Ireland generally. And the more that figures from the mid-century can be rescued from the anecdotage of McDaid's and the Bailey, and be seen in terms of their own making rather than through a reminiscent fug of Bohemian bonhomie, the better.