

Reviews

Diarmaid Ferriter, *On The Edge: Ireland's Off-Shore Islands – A Modern History*

Paul O'Brien;

Brian Hanley, *The Impact of the Troubles on the Republic of Ireland, 1968-79*

Kieran Allen;

Anna Burns, *Milkman* — Seamus O'Kane

On The Edge: Ireland's Off-Shore Islands – A Modern History

Diarmaid Ferriter,
Profile Books, London.

Review by Paul O'Brien

The Islands off the coast of Ireland have long been a source of fascination, and a repository of Irish culture, that have attracted visitors and scholars for over two centuries enchanted by a way of life that was uncontaminated by modernity or materialism.

But the notion of the islands as a sanctuary for Irish culture was far removed from the reality of island life. They have faced poverty, hardship, sickness, and official hostility, while they were expected by officialdom to preserve a unique culture and way of life.

Ferriter takes a thematic approach examining how both the British and Irish governments dealt with the day to day issues faced by the islanders, how they were both celebrated and neglected by successive governments and where they now stand in relation to Irish identity and modernity. The strength of the book is the exhaustive archival research that is always a feature of Ferriter's work.

The island life that is displayed in the books by the Blasket Islanders and other writers from the edge of

Europe was censored and expurgated. Peig Sayers, for example 'was a far wittier, wiser, saltier woman than she appears in her sanitised autobiography, edited to be Catholic propaganda'. Declan Kiberd wrote about the way these writers 'were co-opted by state forces to stand sponsor over the baptismal font of De Valera's Ireland'. While it is true that the islanders were wary of giving away too much information about aspects of their social life, religion, marriage and sex, Ferriter's extensive trawl of the archives, letters, and recordings by the Irish Folklore Commission has helped to fill that gap. On Tory Island, as late as 1963, one in five family units were not co-habiting. For some, a woman's duty was to her own people, rather than her husband. Children would live with the mother, and for sexual relations 'there is always the field' a researcher was told; orgasm and procreation was the goal, nor was the 'horizontal position deemed essential'. The researcher was also told 'better an illegitimate child than an unsuitable marriage'; an attitude far removed from that on the mainland. There is still much work to be done on the role of women in island life. We know something about the harshness of life for woman on the islands, but we know very little about their social role and especially their private lives and attitudes towards

sex and marriage. Woman's work was backbreaking, but they were feisty, prepared at times to resist assaults on their liberty, or defend their community by throwing rocks to sink the boats of the bailiffs or, on one memorable occasion, driving away a bailiff by shoving a pair of shears up his rear end. Ferriter's book has provided some useful signposts for researchers to follow.

Religion

A substantial portion of the book deals with the religious beliefs of the islanders and the role of island priests. Some of them were tyrants, while others championed the cause of the islands. They were a devoutly religious people, although their roots seem, at times, still firmly planted in pagan soil. There was an ambiguous relationship between the clergy and the people. Many of the islanders felt that the clergy lacked any real commitment to their flock; commenting on the comfort of the priest's house, one islander referred to it as 'the house that indulgences built'. One traveller to Inishkea wrote that the people there 'form an independent state of their own and must be pretty near heathens'. A dispute between the local teacher and the priest on Aran led to an attempt to assassinate the infamous Father Farragher in 1908 with a homemade bomb. On the other hand Ferriter records the

efforts of numerous priests to help the islanders. In 1890, facing starvation on Aran, Father O'Donoghue sent a dramatic message to the Government 'send us boats or send us coffins'.

The Future

In 1841 there were 211 inhabited islands with a combined population of 38,000. By 2011 only sixty-four islands were inhabited with a total population of 8,500. At the same time that Ferriter's book was published, the last full-time resident on Omey Island died. The book explores how the islands were observed, celebrated, and neglected by successive governments, and how they now stand in relation to Irish identity and modernity.

Up to 1922 the British Government in the guise of the Congested Districts Board provided harbours, landing slips, and housing for the islanders, and in truth did far more to preserve island communities than the Irish State did in the following seventy years. The little-Irelanders preferred to keep them in poverty and ignorance in order to preserve the culture and language. For some Dublin based language enthusiasts greater accessibility was a double edged sword, fearing that the cultural costs of such improvements outweighed the benefits. A civil servant reporting in 1947 remarked that there was not a single radio on the Blasket Islands; the report added 'but from the point of view of Irish, perhaps this is just as well'. As late as 1969, as the first person landed on the moon, the people of Inisheer were still without electricity. In such circumstances it was not surprising that many island families demanded that their children be taught in English, as their only prospects for advancement was in Scotland or America.

Lack of Concern

In fact, as Ferriter's research reveals, the government seemed more concerned that the island communities did not pay any rates or taxes, which reflected, as Peadar O'Donnell noted, the fierce independent attitude of the islanders; 'What have we to do with Ireland? What notice did Ireland ever take of us? This is the central problem that the book highlights. Too often the islands were seen as a place outside history, defined by outsiders, but left in a cultural and linguistic isolation; their voices or opinions rarely listened to.

Yet, for all of that, there is in existence an important folklore collection that gives us insights into an ancient culture that survived long after it had died out on the mainland. In addition we have a small library of acclaimed literature in which the islanders provide an insight into their way of life, which counters the 'professional Gaels' whose condescension erased island humanity. The writer Seán Ó'Faoláin was scathing of those who ignored the isolation and poverty that was endemic on the islands.

The Fianna Fáil Government of Eamon De Valera stressed the positives of Irish rural identity in contrast to that of industrial Britain. But such assertions proved hollow and the decline and difficulties on the islands continued under successive Irish governments. What seemed to agitate the government was the survival of the language, rather than the survival of the people. Ferriter's book is a tale of neglect, starvation, drownings, and death that questions whether island life can survive in any meaningful form into the future.

As Ferriter notes, the thousands of words, books and folklore that

celebrated this unique culture had become their elegy by the end of the twentieth century. Whether it is possible to salvage the remnants of this culture is still open to question. The population has remained relatively stable at about 8,500 over the last five years, which gives some hope for the future.

Yes, the islands need government support and infrastructure, but not to create a day tripper's theme park, where their way of life and culture is packaged as a product for the tourist trade as some quaint throwback to the past. On too many of the islands land is being sold piece by piece for luxury second homes for weekenders who have little interest or commitment to the survival of the islands. On some of the Western islands up to half the houses are now owned by outsiders who occupy them for short periods during the year, and in the process price the locals out of the market.

Change

A case study in 1975 on Cape Clear was critical of the nature of the people and their resistance to change. Another study of life on the edge pointed to the difficulties of organising co-operatives, and that the islanders were too dependent on the priest or some other outsider to intercede for them, rather than on themselves. But the islanders reacted by pointing out that many of these studies were made by outsiders who had no real conception about the essence of island life and mentality.

As long ago as the 1930s George Thomson, the Marxist scholar and writer, argued that 'a social system that would let a culture die must be rotten'. He went on to suggest that if the unique culture and language of the islands was to survive it would be on the basis

of these communities embracing modernity on their own terms. They needed to develop their own independent political and social organisations to encourage co-operative development as the way forward. They should nurture and cherish their culture as something that enriched their own lives, rather than as a commodity to be sold to the tourist trade. The government can play a role in terms of providing funds for modern infrastructure and housing for families that wish to live on the islands but, as in the water charges or the housing campaign, it is people power, self-organisation, that offers the way forward and the possibility of survival for this unique way of life.

The Impact of the Troubles on the Republic of Ireland, 1968-79

Brian Hanley

Reviewed by Kieran Allen

In January 1980, an estimated 700,000 people took part in PAYE protests organised by the trade union movement. It was the biggest demonstration of organised labour in the history of the Southern state. In Belfast, however, a columnist with the *Andersonstown News* was not impressed. The anonymous author wrote that *'It is not an altogether bad cause... but at the end of the day, its money they're marching for and not idealism. The marchers could have marched for many better causes but*

they choose to march for money. The manifest priorities tell us something about the 26 county state and its ethos'

The writer was complaining about the contrast between the size of marches on economic issue compared to the weak response to the oppression of Northern nationalists.

Brian Hanley's new book is a welcome antidote to the notion that 'The South did not care' or that its working class 'stood idly by' when Northern nationalists faced attacks by loyalist forces and the British army.

The reality was that between 1970 and 1972, there was a rising level of solidarity and mobilisation of Southern workers. This reached a crescendo after Bloody Sunday when 13 people were murdered by British paratroopers. In its aftermath, workers took strike action and forced the state to call a National Day of Mourning. Tens of thousands surrounded the British Embassy in Dublin and burnt it to the ground. The British Ambassador noted that there was 'a wave of fury and exasperation the like of which I have never seen in my life.'

Yet within a few months, solidarity action dwindled to a small minority. How are we to explain this dramatic change?

One factor was the role played by Fianna Fail and later the Fine Gael/Labour Coalition. For decades FF had deployed an anti-partitionist rhetoric, talking about 'taking back our fourth green field'. In reality, the project was to inculcate a loyalty to the 26 county state – and to use partition only as a symbolic wrong to bolster a green 26 county nationalism. The last thing FF – and later the FG-Labour Coalition – wanted was any connection between a militant trade union struggle and

an anti-imperialist movement in the North.

After Bloody Sunday, they succeeded in turning the minds of the population back towards a concern with the security and peace of the Southern state. They used the terrible car bombings in Dublin organised by loyalist paramilitaries and British intelligence to frighten people and to present the IRA as the cause of threats to their security.

A second factor which played into the hand of the Southern establishment was the military strategy and tactics of the IRA. The Southern population had – and still has – an historic memory of a 'war of independence'. But by the 1970s, there was a massive difference between Ballymully in Belfast and Ballymun in Dublin. In Ballymully, people saw the British army kick in their doors, lift young men, beat them up and intern them. Support for an armed struggle grew spontaneously in response. In Ballymun, there was no British Army, no loyalist attack – so there was no spontaneous support for armed action.

Quite the opposite – it helped to alienate people from the struggle. The Provos refused to recognise this elementary fact – and resorted to moralistic attacks on 'the 'free state mentality'. The difference in experience between Southern workers and Northern nationalist could never be overcome by moralism and certainly not by a tactic of armed struggle.

But there was also a missing factor that is not fully discussed in Brian Hanley's book – the absence of a radical left that had the politics to link together the class instinct of Southern workers with the fight against the Northern state. Consider, for example, the role of



the Official Sinn Fein, later re-named the Workers Party. This claimed to have a Marxist –Leninist orientation and took a strong line in promoting the distinctive class interest of workers. In reality, its ‘Marxism’ was a thin coating that had been heavily mixed with adulation for the ‘communist’ regimes of Eastern Europe. Its main strategy lay in capturing a section of the union bureaucracy and promoting its own electoral advances. Crucially, it played an important ideological role, in working with Labour Party figures such as Conor Cruise O’Brien, in breaking any support for resistance to the Northern state. Take one example. In 1972, Official

Sinn Fein denounced the censorship of RTE under the infamous Section 31 directive. They said that ‘it prevented radical opinions from being voiced ... while fascist like Craig (a loyalist leader) and Imperialist like Heath (the Tory Prime Minister) can utter blood curdling threats. However, within a few years supporters of the Workers Party became the most ardent defenders of Section 31 in RTE, -justifying it by claiming they were opposed to the ‘fascist’ activities of the Provisional IRA. There was no genuine radical left of any size that encouraged militant forms of workers action while training its members to resist the

propaganda of the Southern state and show solidarity with those fighting oppression in the North – even while disagreeing with their tactics.

The number of left wingers who saw the Southern state as a product of a counter-revolution that stabilised partition was tiny. Yet opposition to that state – with its Catholic fundamentalist ethos – could also have played a role in showing Protestant t workers that the fight was not about ‘taking back the fourth green field’ but about creating a better socialist Ireland.

Brian Hanley’s book is great on detail – but weaker on the political implications. Nevertheless worth a read.

Milkman

Anna Burns,
Faber, London 2018.

Reviewed by Seamus O'Kane

Milkman is the third novel from Belfast novelist Anna Burns and made headlines earlier this year as it won the Booker Prize (the first novel by a Belfast novelist to do so). Its protagonist is an unnamed 18-year-old woman (known only as “middle-sister”) who finds herself being pursued by an older man. The titular “milkman”, a sinister middle-aged paramilitary who drives a white van, insinuates himself into her life. This subject matter makes this a relevant novel in the age of #MeToo and, in the Irish experience, may particularly speak to a new politicised generation of young women involved in the abortion rights movement and #IBelieveHer.

The milkman stalks the young woman, revealing his knowledge of the details of her life, her routines, and family. The woman’s discomfort and uncertainty about how to react are exploited as he insists on speaking to her when she has no interest. She is unable to properly process this experience or articulate it to anyone else, making it all the more unnerving as the reader observes these unwanted sexual advances. Without needing to make physical contact he is affecting her significantly and we see the psychological effects of his encounter disrupt the woman’s routines of walking and running.

We experience these events through the woman’s perspective in a way

that brilliantly captures the effects of this harassment but also guides us through the people, politics and place of 1970s Belfast. The opening line gives us a brief look at a climactic scene and it is impossible to know what any of it means until much later in the novel: “The day Somebody McSomebody put a gun to my breast and called me a cat and threatened to shoot me was the same day the milkman died”.

Anna Burns gives us a stream of consciousness which wonderfully captures the Irish working-class voice. The prose is a delight to read and constantly surprises with details, observations, and truths. The violence of the northern conflict is certainly present and with it there are discussions of death and misery. However, despite the many bleak aspects of the narrative it refuses to be weighed down by its subject matter. Burns has a gift for describing ordinary life in a comical way and the narrative is peppered with humorous jokes and observations. At times, the narrative veers into the surreal, such as when the protagonist’s “maybe-boyfriend” notices that his parents have left him and his siblings to become ballroom dancers after several months of them not being in the house.

Yet the Booker Prize judges commented on the “challenging” prose, comparing the novel to climbing a mountain. Long sentences have a tendency to meander with meaning elaborated upon or clarified eventually. For those used to modernist novelists like Virginia Woolf or Jean Rhys, reading will be a breeze but

other readers may need to exercise patience. The absence of place or character names is somewhat disorientating. While this may give the sense of a universal, non-Irish story, it also transforms the familiar into the unfamiliar. Republicans and loyalists are renamed as “renouncers-of-the-state” and “defenders-of-the-state” while the 26 Counties and Britain are “over-the-border” and “over-the-water”. One could almost imagine the setting as a civil war outside of Ireland but for the dialogue and countless disguised references.

At times in the novel the lack of reference points adds to the feeling of isolation and helplessness as memory itself is questioned. Anyone from outside Ireland or unfamiliar with recent Irish history may be grasping for some sort of anchor in the text. For a novel about such a parochial community obsessed with customs and rules, excluding those who do not follow them, and divided from their neighbours by sectarian geography, this is rather fitting. This is a novel not about the conflict itself but life within it. State forces may be harassing women, tapping phones, keeping everyone under surveillance and committing numerous assassinations but the protagonist finds herself equally beset by sexual harassment, gossip, and the prejudice of societal expectations. Within the larger narrative of “renouncer-of-the-state” and “defender-of-the-state” we see the injustices and anxieties which apply to life more generally, brilliantly captured through the eyes of a young woman.