



Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The Colonial Conan Doyle: British Imperialism, Irish Nationalism and the Gothic* by Catherine Wynne

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through the writings of Frank McGuinness. She argues that his plays are a series of attempts to reconstruct Irish history, reading the past and the present as reciprocally enlightening. As suggested by the title, the McGuinness corpus to date is characterised by a concern with contradiction and ambiguity in both the personal and the political realms, seeking to explore paradoxical situations through the distance of theatre. "The wide range of his writings make for a wide variety of vantages on Ireland, on its past and present, on its contemporary political and cultural divides, on issues of gender and sexuality, and on relations with England".

The structure of the book is more or less chronological, grouping the plays in families. Her critical approach is one of careful paraphrase rather than of ambitious interpretation, although she is keen to highlight the political and religious context out of which the drama is born. At times her accounts of recent Irish history rely more on journalists than on historians. Some seventy pages of the book are devoted to a most detailed bibliography and listing of the plays, their reviews, the numerous interviews given by McGuinness. In addition she offers a wealth of material about his many adaptations from Ibsen, Brecht, Chekhov, Sophocles and several other dramatists. In short this book, while never offering a critical evaluation of its subject, will be a most useful source of reference for future students of McGuinness.

Michael Paul Gallagher, S. J.

***The Colonial Conan Doyle – British Imperialism, Irish Nationalism and the Gothic*, by Catherine Wynne, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2002, pp.212.**

In the increasingly eclectic and crowded field of post-colonial studies, each new critical study needs to demarcate clearly the field in which it intends to operate. Catherine Wynne's detailed and informative analysis of the work of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of Sherlock Holmes, attempts to place his work within the context of a burgeoning Irish nationalism, an accreting British concept of empire and Doyle's obvious desire for a natural absorption of Ireland into the heart of the imperial centre, despite his disquiet over colonial excesses in the Belgian Congo (*Crime of the Congo* – 1909). Wynne cleverly re-interprets his canonical works in the light of recent post-colonial re-readings of iconic literary constructs, such as, amongst others, landscape, inter-colonial sexual encounters and land rights. Dartmoor, the evocative setting for *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, becomes a microcosm of one of the founding principles of colonialism, namely the struggle between the rationality of the coloniser and the clear superstitions of the colonised. Wynne portrays Sherlock Holmes as a believer in 'rational positivism', an island of colonising calm in a seething world of darkness, bogs and ferocious animals. In this section of her book (chapter two), Wynne's analysis bears a strong resemblance to Chinua Achebe's hugely influential 1988 critique of

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in which Achebe attacks the portrayal of Africa 'as the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilisation, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality'. Wynne describes the moor in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* as 'a treacherous site of instability that unleashed dark and degenerative forces', clearly paralleling Conrad's description of the Congo river as 'a black and incomprehensible frenzy', at once serving the imperial process and resisting total subjugation. Her argument convincingly displays the unstable nature of the landscape in much of Doyle's work and she makes clear and logical connections with other Irish Gothic texts of the late 19th century, including works by Charles Lever, Anthony Trollope and Bram Stoker.

The book includes many of the features of a good post-colonial critique, including minute deconstruction of the narratives to a comprehensive overview of the complex and individual nature of imperialism. Doyle emerges as a contentious political figure, a man prepared to acknowledge and recognise the legitimacy of a distinct Irish identity within the paternalism of British colonialism. Interestingly, both Sherlock Holmes' first and last cases involve the Irish separatist cause in various guises, pointing to Doyle's desire to utilise his famous fictional character in the political as well as the literary sphere. Wynne's thorough account of the liminal spaces between the literary and the historical are credible and well constructed, and her research cannot be faulted. In an illuminating note, she describes an unusual event when Doyle convinced The American Club of Magicians in New York in 1922 that a cartoon film of dinosaurs he has commissioned was actual footage shot for his novel *The Lost World*. Doyle clearly derived much pleasure from 'mystifying the mystifiers' and it is just such an episode that perhaps reveals the real intent behind Doyle's literary creations.

John McDonagh.

***Against the Odds, Family Life on a Low Income in Ireland*, by Mary Daly and Madeleine Leonard, Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 2002, pp.258.**

Against the Odds is study of how poverty affects families in present day Ireland. It is also a testament to lives of discipline, hard work, courage and selflessness that utterly contest the stereotypes of fecklessness that have been levied against the poor since time immemorial. The study consisted of individual interviews with the adults and children of thirty two-parent and lone-parent families. Some but not all of these were dependent on social welfare. A number were in low-wage employment and farming. In all 40 per cent of respondents fell below the 40 per cent poverty line and 80 per cent fell below the 60 per cent poverty line. The study, as such, explored the consequences of having significantly less than average levels of income in modern prosperous Ireland.