



Murray, Tony. *London Irish Fictions: Narrative, Diaspora and Identity*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012.

Much academic interest in diasporic narratives derives from the logical assumption that it is an intrinsically significant narratological decision for a migrant author to tell tales about migrant subjectivity or to speak his/her story in the voice of a migrant. Proponents of diaspora literary theory have often suggested, at many points compellingly, that in creating diasporic narratives, migrant authors can be seen to engage in what Theodor Adorno once described as the writer's attempt to "set up house." "For a man who no longer has a homeland," Adorno explained in *Minima Moralia* (1951), "writing becomes a place to live." Creating through their texts refracted images of their displaced, unsettled, psychologically homeless selves, migrant writers are seen to engage in the act of constructing homelands within the boundaries of their written narratives. These narratives thereby become "places to live"; spaces to which they (or, more accurately, their images) can belong.

To date, relatively scant attention has been paid to the writing of Irish authors who have chosen to emigrate to England. This is almost certainly because the Irish diaspora has popularly been figured as a mass movement from Ireland to North America, and migration statistics prior to the Second World War support these preconceptions. Between 1841 and 1921 approximately 4.5 million Irish people – more than half the population of Ireland – emigrated, the vast majority of them to America. Far lesser known and perhaps less willingly acknowledged is the fact that, as Tony Murray informs us in his excellent new study, by the middle of the twentieth century Britain had "overtaken the United States as the primary destination of Irish migrants" (39). Although the title of *London Irish Fictions: Narrative, Diaspora and Identity* does not make clear that this is a study of *post-war* London Irish writing, the migration statistics Murray cites offer sufficient reason for his concentration on texts written after 1945. Considering these statistics alongside the paucity of work on literary texts written by and about the Irish in Britain, it is obvious that *London Irish Fictions* is both a pioneering and imperative study.

Throughout the book, Murray draws regularly and usefully on the work of the foremost commentators on the relationship between Ireland, Britain and diasporic identity, including Bronwen Walter, Liam Harte and Aidan Arrowsmith. Most importantly for his purposes here, he also locates a compelling point of synthesis between the work of Avtar Brah on "diaspora space" and that of Paul Ricoeur on "narrative identity" which allows him to account for a multitude of ways of defining, describing and explaining the experience of being both Irish and an inhabitant of London. This dichotomous and often psychologically irreconcilable position is consistently negotiated, Murray argues, in what

he conceptualizes as the “narrative diaspora space” of London Irish writing, a concept through which he is able to expand his interpretations beyond ideas and experiences which are common or shared. As a result, instead of repeating the generalizations and simplifications which have sometimes led commentators on Irish migrant narratives to conflate the terms “diasporic” and “exilic,” Murray draws essential attention to the underused and implicitly unacceptable idea that emigration from Ireland has often been configured in texts, especially those authored by female writers, as a desirable means of escape rather than as an unwelcome imperative.

Murray opens his study with a pragmatic and, particularly given the volume’s limited word count, relatively comprehensive account of the history of the Irish in London which is interwoven with an illuminating if all too brief discussion of Irish London writing. Thereafter closely grouping texts under the headings “The Mail-Boat Generation,” “The Ryanair Generation” and “The Second Generation,” Murray draws important attention to the relationship, consistently evoked in these narratives but often overlooked in extant studies, which exists not only between migrant and receiving community, but also between migrant and sending community. By comparing and contrasting the London experiences of, for example, John McGahern’s female protagonist, Elizabeth Reegan, in *The Barracks* with those of Moran’s sons and daughters in *Amongst Women* and *That They May Face the Rising Sun*’s Johnny, Murray convincingly demonstrates that McGahern’s works afford a means of “transforming our understanding of migration... from an essentially linear and autonomous process to one of dynamic interdependence between individuals and communities both at home and abroad” (96).

The volume is impressive in its discussion of the variety of experiences and viewpoints that these texts display: there can hardly be more disparate subject positions than those revealed through the overtly masculinized “navvy narratives” of writers such as John B. Keane, Timothy O’Grady and Steve Pyke and those that emerge through the portrayals of escaped feminists in the works of Emma Donoghue and Sara Berkeley. Yet Murray also demonstrates that even as subject positions and narrative focuses alter, the search for personal identity that diaspora engenders remains a constant. Thus, while Joseph O’Connor and Robert McLiam Wilson explore in different ways the “postmodern pastiche” of London Irish spaces, they also conduct shared narrative investigations into the familiar but uneasy territory of the “double exile” (124): a form of emotional homelessness in which a sense of belonging is unattainable both in the place in which the migrant resides and in the place from which he or she originates.

In such a modestly apportioned volume, omissions are a necessity, but some here are more pronounced than others. Gendered configurations of identity are given precedence to good effect in the chapter devoted to the aforementioned “navvy narratives,” in which Murray ably delineates the “milieu where unspoken social codes and practices of masculinity, imported from rural Ireland, are refigured in an urban ethnic context” (43), and his subsequent discussions of Edna O’Brien’s novels co-exist well with his welcome and long overdue research into the “Gendered Entanglements” of Margaret Mulvihill’s texts and the works of Donoghue and Berkeley, which deal

centrally with themes of lesbianism and incest. Yet the volume sidesteps a comprehensive interrogation of the gendered anomalies evidenced by these texts. It is also curious that the third segment of a study focused on Irish fiction is devoted primarily to second generation memoirs. While the resulting analysis confirms Murray's assertion that texts by second generation Irish writers have consistently but regrettably failed to achieve the prominence that London narratives by migrant writers from other ethnic backgrounds have experienced, this portion of the book points to the necessity for a study which accounts more fully for the reasons for this discrepancy. Yet, if his obvious enthusiasm for second generation narratives reveals a personal bias (Murray admits in the volume's conclusion to being a second generation Irish Londoner himself), his decision to focus on these types of texts is understandable for three reasons. Firstly, it allows space for a discussion of an iconic work such as John Healy's *The Grass Arena* (1988), a tour de force of literary autobiography and one of the finest texts to concern itself with Irish London subjectivity in its bleakest forms of discontent. Secondly, his discussion of three memoirs of upbringing among the Irish cockney working class poor, and the pairing of John Walsh's and Gretta Mulrooney's narratives, both of which deal with subject of the return from London to Ireland for the purpose of nursing a dying mother, reveal a surprising and revealing depth of consanguinity between second generation Irish London texts. Finally and most importantly, the many merits of this segment – the most fascinating in the book – ably serve to negate concerns about its conceptual irregularities.

As the presence of second generation narratives indicates, Murray often chooses in this study to favor eclecticism over discrimination. The merits of such an approach are ably demonstrated through his deft use of Fintan O'Toole's embracing concept of "elastic Paddies" to counter the exclusionary "plastic Paddy" stereotypes which gained currency in the 1980s, a process which serves to blur and interrogate the boundaries of Irishness just as Murray's acknowledgement of the literary qualities of autobiography and the autobiographical qualities of fiction disrupt traditional boundaries between literary texts. In doing so, he laudably challenges the adherence to narrow and stilted definitions of what constitutes both "literature" and "Irishness."

In his introduction to this volume, Murray offers a rather complicated reasoning for his inclusions and exclusions, a process of justification which serves to highlight precisely how original his work is at the same time that it signals the degree of research still to be done. Referring to John Walsh's texts later in the volume, Murray suggests that Walsh's project is "to reflect as fully as possible the many nuances and gradations of cultural allegiance wrought" by the duality of experience inherent in being Irish and inhabiting London (174). The same could be said of *London Irish Fictions*. One can only hope that the attempts to cover the topic "as fully as possible" do not end with this absorbing and necessary study.

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