
Arts & Letters

PADDY & MR. PUNCH: Connections in Irish and English History. By R. F. Foster. Penguin. 382 pp. \$27.50

Elizabeth Bowen once described the uneasy relationship between the English and the Irish as "a mixture of showing-off and suspicion, nearly as bad as sex." In this new collection of essays, Foster argues that that relationship, however strained, shows that there is no such thing as a purely "Irish" history or a purely "English" history: The two islands' histories are inevitably intertwined.

Foster is a professor of history at Oxford University. More important, he is Irish and thus a product of the connection between England and Ireland. Bowen, too, was such a product, having, as Foster writes, lived ambivalently between two worlds: the Anglo-Irish gentry in an independent Ireland and literary London and Oxford. Just before she died in 1972, Bowen wrote to friends: "I hate Ireland." Foster says Ireland had grown away from her, "or away from the collusive, stylish, never-never land which she had chosen to inhabit." The Ireland of Bowen's imagination made her view England as eccentric, peculiar, exotic. The interaction between the two nations moved her art in a tradition distinctively, if uncomfortably, Irish. This is a predicament that faced other figures Foster treats, including W. B. Yeats, Anthony Trollope, and William Thackeray.

Foster's main argument is that "cultural diversity and cross-channel borrowings are implicit in Irish history." That may seem an obvious notion, but for making similar assertions in the past Foster has been called a "revisionist," a London Irishman, an Oxford Mick, a Southern Prod Historian. These labels are hurled at him by the keepers of the grail of classic Irish nationalism. As Foster explains, "One version of Irish history stood for many years as an important component in political state-building and in religiously dominated education: Any mild attempt to review it arouses a disproportionately vehement reaction from vested interests."

That version of history is based on the notion that the "real" Ireland was Catholic and Irish-

speaking. This nationalist view, which began to emerge in the mid-19th century, denies the major role of Protestants in the south of the island in culture, business, and particularly in the independence movement. Equally, it ignores the fact that only a very small percentage of the population still spoke Irish. And finally, the nationalist "ideal" excludes a culturally different community of one million Irish people in the north of the island, the Ulster Protestants, who were of largely Scottish stock and Calvinist in religious bent. Similarly, early Ulster Unionist mythmakers refused, in most cases, to accept any connection with the label "Irish."

Foster's version of history challenges and, using new scholarship, corrects the record. As he says, in a country continually invaded and settled, who qualifies as "Irish" anyway? Indeed, almost half of the revolutionary movement's leaders had lived in Britain or were of returned emigrant stock. Even Erskine Childers, the director of publicity for Sinn Fein (and author of *The Riddle of the Sands*) who eventually was executed by his former comrades in the Irish Civil War (1921–1923), qualifies as "a quintessential English adventure-hero." He had been educated in England and spoke with an English accent.

There seems to be a clear correlation, Foster notes, between mixed identity and stridency and extremism. The poet Yeats, for example, was a Protestant Irishman whose youth was spent alternating between England and Ireland, and his only permanent home for decades was in London's Bloomsbury. Yeats was regarded with suspicion by the more muscular figures of the independence movement for not being sufficiently "Irish." Is this why he overemphasized his Irishness? And was his pursuit of the occult the product of his envy of Catholic "magic" that most of his fellow Irish possessed as their birthright? Foster would have us think so.

Both the nationalism in what is now the Irish Republic and the nationalism of Ulster unionism were exclusive, inward looking, tribal. Foster's book advocates a new Ireland: pluralistic, diverse, all-encompassing, where the two traditions show each other mutual respect. This does not mean Irish "unity" necessarily but an attempt to share power within Northern Ireland and, at the same time, allow links for both com-

munities with the Irish Republic and Britain. Slowly but surely a less antagonistic relationship between the two islands—including membership of both in the European Union and the loosening of church power—is inching Ireland into the 21st century. An honest and inclusive re-examination of shared history such as Foster's can only accelerate the process.

PERSPECTIVES ON MUSICAL AESTHETICS. Ed. by John Rahn. Norton. 386 pp. \$35

What is the function of music? Should it act, as French intellectual Jacques Attali has suggested, as a mirror to the modern world and a prophecy of its future? Or should it respond to some loftier—if undefinable—aesthetic? Indeed, it may be fruitless to ascribe meaning to a medium so inherently subjective; what strikes one listener as pleasurable may send another shrieking from the room. Nonetheless, most of the essays in this volume, culled from the pages of the journal *Perspectives of New Music* and written by composers as well as theorists, grapple bravely with just such questions.

One difficulty with discussing modern musical composition is pinning down exactly what is being discussed. It was once a relatively simple matter to categorize music as baroque or classical or romantic, but such reliable signposts are much harder to come by in today's all-inclusive repertoire. As philosopher Michel Foucault points out in a dialogue with composer Pierre Boulez, "The evolution of these musics after Stravinsky or Debussy presents remarkable correlations with the evolution of painting." And just as Cézanne and Picasso pointed the way toward abstract expressionism, so too did Arnold Schönberg open the door for composers such as Philip Glass and John Cage (who in his famous 4' 33" [1952] added no sounds to the space in which the piece was performed—silence as music). Once the door was ajar, it became impossible to bar entry to any manner of composition, a phenomenon that composer J. K. Randall comments on humorously in his freeform essay, "Are You Serious?" Randall relates his impressions of a weekend festival of "spiritual expression through music and dance,"

a celebration of New Age music and its purported healing effects on the soul. Ultimately, the music leaves Randall cold: "I'm agog at the coupling of 1. find your true self & unblock your creativity & get in touch with the cosmos with 2. do exactly what I'm doing and saying as I transmit to you by rote what I got by rote from someone who got it from God by rote."

Other essays explore the narcissism of composition and performance, and of the self-conscious pressure of not repeating what has gone before. The hand-wringing exhibited by composers such as Milton Babbitt ("I try to write the music which I would most like to hear, and then am accused of self-indulgence, eliciting the ready admission that there are few whom I would rather indulge") makes one wonder how they ever manage to put notes on paper. Sometimes they do not. Babbitt has been a proponent of taped improvisation, essentially classical "jam sessions" that attempt to fill a space with sound in the hope that something worthwhile will emerge.

What emerges from these essays is the idea that the function of music is multiple and contradictory. Indeed, it's easy to feel a certain sympathy for the composer's task: to create music that brings self-satisfaction, breaks new ground, and remains accessible enough to gain entry into the symphonic repertoire (with enough attendant recording sales and airplay to keep one off the breadlines), while at the same time saying something significant about the human condition. Clearly, the impulses that drive composers are as varied as listeners' responses to their music, but it may be best not to overanalyze them. Comments such as these from David Dunn, noted for his experimentation with animal sounds, may make one long for the days when composers merely wrote the music, and left its interpretation to others: "There may be clues for our continued survival on this planet which only music can provide. . . . I'm much more interested in that than in being a composer."

THE OXFORD BOOK OF EXPLORATION. Ed. by Robin Hansbury-Tenison. Oxford Univ. 530 pp. \$30

One pleasure afforded by this enchanting anthol-