

## Critical Précis

Cairns, David, and Shaun Richards. Writing Ireland: colonialism, nationalism and culture. New York: St Martin's, 1988, 178 pages.

Writing Ireland traces the formation of Ireland's national identity through an examination of selected political and literary writings by British, Irish, and Anglo-Irish writers. According to Cairns and Richards, literature has provided the basis for the "making and remaking of the identities of colonized [Ireland] and colonizer [England, the Catholic Church, the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy]" (1). By identifying key historical moments in the development of modern Irish culture, Cairns and Richards demonstrate the manner in which literary and political works reflect and, in turn, have significantly shaped modern Ireland's cultural identity, an identity which is "always, finally, political" (vii) in nature.

Cultural materialism serves as the critical methodology for this cultural study. To fully understand the authors' argument, the reader must understand the critical orientation and intent of their methodology. Cairns and Richards understand 'culture' to mean the attempts by anthropology or the social sciences "to describe the whole system of significations by which a society or a section of it understands itself and its relations with the world. . . ." (vii). They define 'materialism' as follows: "'Materialism' is opposed to 'idealism': it insists that culture does not (cannot) transcend the material forces and relations of production. Culture is not simply a reflection of the economic and political system, but nor can it be independent of it. . . . Cultural materialism sees texts as inseparable from the conditions of their production and reception in history; and as involved, necessarily, in the making of cultural meanings which are always, finally, political meanings" (vii). By highlighting the political content and implications of literature, Cairns and Richards examine the evolution of Irish cultural identity from the sixteenth century to the present. This examination is carried out through an interdisciplinary approach to literary studies which ignores traditional disciplinary boundaries and combines literary theory, feminism and sexual politics, Marxist and cultural studies.

Relying heavily upon Michel Foucault's cultural studies, the

authors outline the development of Irish culture primarily from a political and nationalistic standpoint. The book provides detailed analyses of works by the following authors: Spenser, Shakespeare, Matthew Arnold, Yeats, Synge, O'Casey, D.P. Morgan, Thomas Davis, Arthur Griffith, George Moore, P. Pearse, Thomas MacDonaugh, Beckett, Joyce, Sean O'Faolain, and Seamus Heaney. By placing representative works of these and other writers in their historical context, Cairns and Richards attempt to demonstrate the cultural, "and finally, political" consequences of such works in Ireland's on-going struggle to establish and assert a viable national identity.

Seven chapters (bearing titles such as "What ish my Nation?", "An essentially feminine race", "What do we hope to make of Ireland?", and "Revolutions are what happen to wheels"), portray Ireland's literary efforts to shake off the bonds of "oppressive" external and internal forces. The authors point to various cultural forces which have impeded and assisted the establishment of Irish hegemony. The book emphasizes the cultural, political and literary legacy of the following "restrictive" forces: British colonialism (particularly the imperialistic rhetoric contained the writings of Spenser, Shakespeare and Arnold); Catholicism; familism (the various practices used by Irish farmers to prevent fragmentation of the family holding); and the debilitating influence of literature produced by Anglo-Irish intellectuals (especially Yeats' version of the Irish Revival). Juxtaposed against these "repressive" forces, the book examines literature's role in the interplay of the following cultural forces which have significantly shaped Ireland's national identity: the French Revolution's impact on Irish literary-political culture and the subsequent rise of Irish nationalism; the formation and triumph of the Irish "people nation"; and the cultural identity crisis triggered by the creation of the Irish Republic.

The book contains an invaluable glossary of terms pertaining to the Irish cultural-political experience, an extensive annotated bibliography which provides detailed suggestions for further reading, and a highly user-friendly index.

Precis: Deane, Seamus. Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Irish Literature 1880-1980.

London: Faber and Faber, 1985. 7-199.

Deane, in a series of essays, examines the close connection between literature and politics in Ireland. His introduction contains a rationale for the selections--they address the central strains and questions of the Irish experience. He believes that Irish history and Irish writing have a mutual attraction and he includes a brief historical overview of Ireland. He begins with discussing the roots of modern Irish literature in the 18th and 19th century Celtic Revivals. His two main commentators are Arnold and Burke; however, he also discusses the differing attitudes of Yeats, Synge, Pearse, Joyce, O'Casey, Beckett, Kinsella, Montague, Mahon, Friel, and Heaney.

*Arnold, Burke and the Celts* discusses the idealized concept of the Celts with their tradition of both continuity and surrender. It gives the parameters of the first Celtic Revival--beginning in the late 18th century and ending with the Rebellion of 1847, and the second Celtic Revival which began in 1878 with Standish O'Grady's Bardic History of Ireland. Arnold adopted a view of the Irish problem similar to Edmund Burke who asserted that Irish Catholics must be fully admitted to the political and civil life if the country (Ireland and England) were ever to be stable. Irish instability was the direct result of British policy. Arnold's Oxford Lectures, *The Study of Celtic Literature*, indicated that everything the philistine middle class needed, the Celts could supply.

*The Literary Myth of the Revival* asserted that Yeats' version of the Irish community was an Ascendancy-led cultural nationalism with aristocratic claims. His glamorization of the Celts and of the Ascendancy was an attempt to reconcile on the level of myth what could not be reconciled at the level of politics. It allowed the Irish to be unique but not independent because independence would lead to a loss of their uniqueness. Yeats, Deane writes, distorted history in the service of myth; he had a desire to see Ireland as the country of the imagination. *Yeats and the Idea of Revolution* asserted that the peasant and the aristocrat were kindred spirits united in the Romantic battle against the industrial and utilitarian ethic. Yeats wanted Ireland to remain a people not become a mob; a people who lived imaginatively on their local histories and stories and not on a diet of parliamentary speeches and the gutter press.

*Synge and Heroism*. Synge, with the use of the oral tradition and folk-tale, created a new hero, one who suffered for his ideals and left behind him a community more hopelessly imprisoned than ever. His

characters who achieve self-realization are alienated. "Real heroism is never in the here and now; it is always in the past of the mind" (61). *Pearse: Writing and Chivalry*. Pearse's writing are direct and didactic. Chivalry is a love and service to Ireland so excessive as to annihilate all thought of self.

*Joyce and Stephen: The Provincial Intellectual and Joyce and Nationalism* Deane discusses Joyce specifically his Stephen who refuses to sermonize about life like other idealistic protagonists. He discusses Joyce's stream-of-consciousness and the democratic nature of his works. He believes that history is dominated by the idea of the noble spirit debased by "ignoble domination and demeaning circumstances" (96).

*O'Casey and Yeats: Exemplary Dramatists*. Deane argues that Yeats is a more profoundly political dramatist than O'Casey. In Yeats's plays we find the search for a new form and feeling that would raise national consciousness, and that more than O'Casey, he stands as a greater example of a political dramatist.

*Thomas Kinsella: 'Nursed out of Wreckage.'* Kinsella the poet used violence and horror as a way out of the provincialism of the time. He treats historical images (castles, museums) as false structures imposed on the past or the people. His poetry constantly struggles with the order of life imposed by humanity and the order of nature. He deals with the cycles of life: illness, recuperation, wholeness of health; birth and death, and the growth of consciousness. "If culture," writes Deane, "is always in a state of illness, infected by violence, poetry is culture in a state of convalescence, homeopathically immunized against the disease" (145).

John Montague attempts to remake his poetry by refashioning the concepts of self and community, of art and country. He sees his history as a strange presence, even protection, in a culture he feels alienated from. In contrast Derek Mahon is not a typical Irish poet. He neither projects an image of a world-citizen as many Irish writers have before nor does he play the Belfast urbanite. Instead he plays a middle ground that imparts both sides complete with their alienation. He uses irony and prophecy in an attempt to get rid of the history. He develops a drama of belonging and not belonging, isolation from history, "divided within itself, obsessed by competing mythologies" (159). He doesn't attempt for a sense of community instead his version of community is a disengagement from history achieved by maverick individuals (not unlike American heroes).

Celtic Revivals includes a table of contents; an index organized by author, subject, title; selected bibliography of primary sources, secondary materials, general background (info on social, cultural, literary history), and other works cited.