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La crise ? Quelle crise ?

After the Titanic

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the Shannon Hydroelectric Scheme by Cumann na nGaedheal and the tensions between the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of Ireland surrounding the centenary celebration of Catholic emancipation in 1929 and the 1500th anniversary of St. Patrick's arrival in Ireland in 1932. Moreover, Justin Dolan Stover's contribution traces the shifting discourse on loyalty during the Irish revolution and the early years of the Free State.

The volume also offers new perspectives on existing topics, such as the 1923 Land Act, the origins of Fianna Fáil and the treatment of the Catholic minority by the Northern Ireland state. Significantly, Mel Farrell's re-evaluation of Cumann na nGaedheal demonstrates that from its inception the party regarded itself as a cross-class "national party". He also challenges the idea that by absorbing the remnants of the Irish Parliamentary Party, Cumann na nGaedheal became a reincarnation of John Redmond's party. Farrell points out that both Cumann na nGaedheal and Fianna Fáil attracted former Home Rulers and that in their structures and methods both parties were influenced by previous nationalist movements. Overall, this volume makes an important contribution to our understanding of Irish politics in the 1920s and it will stimulate further research into the early decades of Irish independence.

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Stephen ENNISS, *After the Titanic: A Life of Derek Mahon*, Dublin, Gill & Macmillan, 2014. xx + 329 p. ISBN 978 0 7171 6441 7.

If the essence of drama is conflict, then the life of Derek Mahon as presented to us by Stephen Ennis has indeed been a dramatic one. In this reading, there scarcely seems to have been a conflict in which Mahon has not been a protagonist: conflict with his Belfast upbringing, conflict with employers, conflict with women, conflict with friends, conflict with writer's block, conflict with publishers, conflict with alcohol, even conflict with conflict where Mahon opts for *non serviam* on the Northern Irish Troubles. But if this is a story of ἀγωνία, it is not told by a Homer. Ennis appears to have compiled his tale from index cards, some full, others only containing a phrase, as he tries to reconstruct Mahon from the recollections of his contemporaries and the manuscript material that as Emory University's Librarian, he acquired for that institution before moving on to become Director of the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas – Austin, self-described as "a place of unlimited discovery".

Unlimited discovery is not, however, Enniss's forte. Rarely stepping outside his theme of unrelenting conflict, he is content to burrow within it, finding a few veins of ore with which he wishes to enrich his narrative. The most substantial of these is his fastening upon an incident when as an undergraduate with drink taken, Mahon jumped into the Liffey. To this Shelleian moment, Enniss returns many a time and oft, as if repetition alone can invest it with significance. Indeed, Enniss privileges drowning before all other experiences, as the title of his book conveys. Why, of all Mahon's poem titles, did Enniss choose this one? He might have called the book *Night-Crossing* or *Beyond Howth Head* or *Harbour Lights* – many of Mahon's titles would sit well as prefixing "A Life of Derek Mahon". "After the Titanic" evokes images and associations that are all gloomy, from Hardy's "The Convergence of the Twain (Lines on the loss of the *Titanic*)" to Adorno's dictum "after Auschwitz no poetry"¹ to Hans Magnus Enzensberger's "The Sinking of the *Titanic*", and appears to be there only because it serves Enniss's overarching aim of interpreting Mahon's life as a series of drownings.

Mahon's *life*, be it noted. Mahon's *work*, that of one of the most distinguished poets now living, for the most part lies outside the critical faculties of his biographer. We learn little here of Mahon's immersion in the literary culture of our world, from Euripides and Sophocles through Racine and Molière to Nerval and Wilde and beyond. And even with the life, instead of revealing the charm and intelligence of the man, we get (those index cards) a series of snippets that have neither pride of ancestry nor evidence of posterity. Of what use is it to be told without further explication that Mahon dined with Jean-Paul Pittion at the Café du Départ (miscalled the Café au Départ) (58) or that "It was on this second visit to Paris this year that he met, through [John] Montagu, the art critic Ann Cremin with whom he would become friends. He was back in Dublin few days later"? (195)

"With whom he would become friends": we meet this curious grammatical form frequently and it well represents the pedestrian prose style in which the book is written. Thus (41), on the publication of a poem by Michael Longley, "while Mahon would have been happy for his friend, that happiness would have been tempered by no small measure of envy". Well, was he happy or wasn't he? Was he envious or wasn't he? This is not simply stylistically clumsy; it suggests that Enniss is willing to wound but afraid to strike – this is also evident in Enniss's mealy-mouthed euphemism that Mahon was "seeing" this or that woman, *anglice* having an affair with. These lexical contortions form a good introduction to his limited vision of both his subject and his task: Enniss is no Ellmann and he is not even a David Cecil.

1. Adorno actually wrote "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" – "nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch".

The limitation is not, however, confined to his vision. After 2002, the narrative tails away, with Mahon's important work in the last decade only treated in the three page Afterword, where it is noted that "there were prizes and late recognition for a lifetime devotion to his craft", a cursory description of the 2007 David Cohen Prize for Literature, the Poetry Now Award in 2006 and 2009 and the *Irish Times* poetry prize in 2009. "Desultory" is David Wheatley's description of this attenuated summation, "notably scant" is John McAuliffe's². This drying up of the narrative coincides with the drying up of Mahon's confidence in Enniss and his ability to provide a dispassionate and balanced text. It is also clear that this held good for Mahon's friends, whose initial co-operation withered away. This is no wonder, given the superficiality of Enniss's accounts of Mahon's relations with friends, lovers and fellow poets, many of which only suggest the flippant gossip that is the mainstay of conversation in Dublin bars.

It is hard to square Enniss's Mahon with the poet whose "peerless lyric gifts are responsible for some of the finest poetry of the past half-century" (David Wheatley), "one of our greatest lyric poets" (Nicholas Grene). Fortunately, we have Mahon's work to show us that he is not drowning, but waving.

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The Oscholars

2. Reviews respectively in the *TLS* and *The Irish Times*.