

**Brian Fallon. *An Age of Innocence: Irish Culture 1930-1960*. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1998. 313 pp.**  
**Gerry Smyth. *Decolonisation and Criticism*. London: Pluto Press, 1998. 262 pp.**

Irish scholars talking about Irish history, politics and literature have very often referred to the Irish situation as unique and therefore have not seen any relevance in comparing Irish and international matters. This has, for example, meant that comparative aspects of Irish literature have been largely neglected by Irish critics and have really only been acknowledged by scholars from other countries, such as Italy, Hungary and Sweden. Declan Kiberd's monumental book *Inventing Ireland* is the first example where an Irish academic has seriously taken on board foreign ideas as an integral part of a discourse on Irish literature; no matter how successfully that may have been, it is a milestone in Irish scholarship for that reason alone. Furthermore, the period in Irish culture covered by the two books under review here - the 1930s to 1960 - has been largely neglected by critics, Terence Brown's *Ireland: a Social and Cultural History 1922-1979* being the most prolific exception. The lack of critical contributions regarding this period in general and in particular using theoretical approaches is partially remedied by two new books, by two authors using very different methods to deal with their chosen topic, and as a consequence they reach diverging conclusions in the process. *Decolonisation and Criticism* by Gerry Smyth - one of the younger shooting stars on the academic horizon - and *An Age of Innocence: Irish Culture 1930-1960*, by the well-respected Irish journalist Brian Fallon. Both books, in different ways, exemplify the process of coming-of-age that has been evident in Irish Studies during recent years. In his previous book, *The Novel and the Nation*, Smyth concerned himself with contemporary Irish fiction. His new book, however, focuses on the 1950s - a much neglected period in Irish history so far - while Fallon's book includes the period 1930-1960, an era in Irish cultural and intellectual life often compared to the Dark Ages. The two books are essential reading for anybody who wants to widen their perspective of this significant period in recent Irish history and acquaint themselves with two different approaches to Irish cultural life; as the two accounts complement each other it is a fruitful exercise to read them back to back.

In the opening chapters of *Decolonisation and Criticism* Smyth explicates the concept of decolonisation in a general sense upon which he applies it to an Irish context, with particular references to cultural and intellectual life. Smyth's theoretical framework rests on ideas by prominent postcolonial writers like Frantz Fanon, Edward Said and Homi Bhabha. Without labouring the purely theoretical elements Smyth's main argument is that Ireland in the 1950s remained a country resting heavily on old colonialism, that is English values, and neo-colonialism, implemented through, for example, intellectually restrictive government policy. Smyth systematically illustrates his discourse by discussing periodicals at the time, such as, the short-lived magazine mainly written by Peter and Patrick Kavanagh, *Kavanagh's Weekly*, the policy of universities - bringing to our attention how examination questions in English literature at Trinity College reflects the attitude that Irish literature was still seen as a secondary appendix to the central English literary canon (138, 152-53). Furthermore, Smyth points to examples revealing the deliberate policies by the Irish government to enhance the profile of the Gaelic heritage, by, for instance, establishing the Irish Institute of Advanced Studies under its auspices. Smyth's overall conclusion is that Ireland was positioned in an intellectual and cultural vacuum for a long time after independence, conditioned by lingering English influences and by attempts to revert Ireland to Gaelic traditions, without any influence from the outside world; Smyth recognises Sean O'Faolain as one of the few persistent voices of defiance against the evident intellectual claustrophobia caused by this situation. Smyth supports the established idea of post-independence Ireland as, to use Patrick Kavanagh's definition, a parochial country, which thought it had nothing to learn from other countries and whose politicians saw it as their mission to revive and retain uniquely Irish cultural elements in Ireland.

In *An Age of Innocence: Irish Culture 1930-1960* Brian Fallon puts his proficiency as a journalist into a fluid, partially eye-witness, account of many aspects of Irish cultural activities during his chosen period. Contrary to Smyth, whose method of persuasion is through theoretically based arguments, Fallon very often seeks to persuade the reader by the pure fact that he has witnessed events or situations with his own eyes. Fallon's explicit purpose in this book is to balance the recent revisionist wave of critique of the Irish past, most evidently when rhetorically asking, "How much more intelligent, and more constructive, it is to come to terms creatively with the past than to amputate it like a diseased limb..."(3). Fallon proposes that the high feel-good factor in the Ireland of today has increased the urge by the Irish to damn the past in order to disconnect from it, and to prove themselves as members of a modern society in the eyes of the world. He further argues, that the black picture of Ireland as an intellectually backward bog is an exaggeration; he concludes that Ireland was not really any worse in that respect than other western countries at that time, and that there were more foreign ideas influencing the Irish cultural scene than has generally been acknowledged. He does not denounce completely the existence of restricting forces in Ireland, but claims that they were not as paralysing to Irish cultural life as is most often suggested.

Fallon sets the scene for his discourse by outlining the period immediately preceding the 1930s, with accounts of Yeats, Joyce and that often forgotten, almost mythical figure George Russell, AE, who takes on a most human form in Fallon's narrative. He further reminds us of artists and musicians long forgotten who contributed to Irish life in earlier decades during the

twentieth century. He excels in his narrative style when describing the now gone literary pubs, reminiscing when they were almost turned into a theatre stage by characters like Patrick Kavanagh, Brendan Behan and legendary newspapermen like R. M. Smyllie, editor of the *Irish Times* in the 1940s and early 1950s. Fallon's historical awareness peaks when he declares that a predominantly Catholic people expected a country to be governed by Catholic ethical principals; the subtext is, that although it may be difficult to understand for a more secularised Irish people of today, Catholic ethics was a natural part of life to most Irish people of that day.

Fallon declares his rejection of, what he sees as, a steady growth of populism in Ireland throughout the twentieth century. But instead of simply throwing these current ideas out the window he tries to explain what, in his view, brought about this agenda in Ireland, while also recognising similar tendencies in other countries. He traces the appeal of populism to the fact that many politicians and members of the Catholic hierarchy came from non-intellectual farming communities. In the spirit of this approach Fallon balances the view of certain prominent figures who are regularly personified as the vanguard of Irish insularity and Gaelic culture, Daniel Corkery being exemplified as a case in point. More often than not, Fallon stresses, Corkery has been singled out as the foremost representative of reactionaries who promoted most forcefully Gaelic literature and language, at the expense of English, totally disregarding literary merit. Fallon throws a different light on Corkery by pointing to the historical context in which he lived and further reminding the reader that Corkery was one of the first in Ireland who recognised the literary merits of Russian writers, especially Turgenev. However, in all honesty, the fact that Corkery read Russian writers is not solid evidence that Corkery was not a single-minded promoter of all things Gaelic in Ireland, especially when considering that the main attraction of Turgenev for Corkery was his way of portraying Russian "folk" in a realistic way, which he encouraged his *protégé* Sean O'Faolain to emulate in Irish settings. O'Faolain followed his mentor's advice in the early stage of his career but later rejected it, not to the detriment of his literary output.

Fallon's indirect attempt to justify events in earlier decades in twentieth-century Ireland is most evident in his statement that the failure to revive the Irish language was the most devastating trauma in post-independence Ireland and that its implications far exceed the negative aspects of Irish censorship, as he is satisfied by the fact that banned books were possible to obtain by those who wanted them and that there was no censorship on ideas. However, the public ostracising of Hubert Butler in 1952, after he had upset the Papal Nuncio after a public talk by making negative comments about certain Catholic priests in Croatia, shows that ideas were indeed under censorship in Ireland at the time. The events involving Butler are not mentioned by Fallon.

The two books *Decolonisation and Criticism* and *An Age of Innocence* demonstrate that two different accounts, one highly academic and the other a pronounced subjective evaluation of similar phenomena and times can reach such diverging yet important conclusions about related issues. Both Smyth and Fallon highlight significant aspects in their respective arguments which must not be discarded in a discussion about this period in Irish cultural history, a period largely left unattended by scholars. A further discussion on this period is important in the current process in Ireland, that of defining the nation and its people as part of Europe. Ireland now eagerly projects itself as a modern society with a dynamic economy, independent of previous colonial masters. But as recently an American was, albeit briefly, the managing director of Telecom Eireann, and Bewley's Cafe' in Dublin's Grafton Street was revamped to accommodate the taste of foreign tourists, one wonders if maybe in Ireland today there are new forms of colonial traumas lurking in the background.

*Marie Arndt*