

Richard Blake Martin, A novel

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Bernard O'Grady. *Richard Blake Martin*. São Paulo: Olavobras, 2000.

Richard Blake Martin, reluctant heir to the diminished Castle Wallscourt estate, returns to the Galway of his birth to encounter a society fractured by history. Educated in the London metropolis young Richard is only instinctively aware of the traditional divisions at the heart of Irish life; nonetheless those divisions, and the forces that maintain them, will come to influence his own destiny.

O'Grady writes an eclectic Galwegian society basing many of his characters upon the town's actual historical figures. Deconstructing the traditional Anglo \ Irish dichotomy O'Grady's novel unearths the Semitic roots of influential members of the Galway gentry and points to overlapping and obscure religious histories. O'Grady works also to write an anti-insular version of Irish history, highlighting the state's position in a broader European and indeed global network by inclusion of German University students, Irish-Americans and Eastern European refugees.

Set in 1936 the novel concentrates predominantly upon the experiences of the young Blake Martin and his contemporaries at University College Galway. Representative of the collapsing aristocracy, Blake Martin's crisis of identity contrasts boldly with the self-confidence of his mainly Catholic middle-class colleagues. History and conflicts of tradition overshadow the otherwise amiable relationships within the group. The young students are more aware of the positions of their fathers than of their own position as potential makers of the future. The "Lit. and Deb. Society" meetings betray almost inevitable partisanship. Interesting is the history class on the Spanish Armada in chapter 20 wherein the subjective nature of history is underlined through varied readings of the event.

In his preface O'Grady notes his difficulty in finding proof-readers and, presumably, editorial advice for the novel here in Brazil. The type errors are indeed hard to ignore and the text in general could do with refinement. The shift into first-person narrative in chapter 11, for example, is difficult to understand. *Richard Blake Martin* being his first novel, O'Grady's main interest is history and indeed his writing seems most self-assured in essentially historical passages. Character development is a detail often too quickly brushed over in and inter-character relationships are at times confusing;

the Richard / Eileen relationship being a good example. Ultimately I suggest that there are simply too many aspects and characters for so short a novel. *Richard Blake Martin* seems caught between genres; O'Grady unsure as to whether he wants to write a *Dubliners*-type city portrait or an extended historical saga.

Patrick Kavanagh once wrote of an Ireland "that froze for want of Europe" similarly *Richard Blake Martin* points a finger at the socio-cultural politics that would stifle Ireland's development for much of the last century. The "Economic War" with England in particular comes under attack. That a book subtitled "An Irish Novel" ends with German University College Galway student, Gunther Wormholdt, contemplating the growing tension in his homeland is, to this reader's mind, O'Grady's central message.

