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The Journal of Mind and Behavior
Autumn, 1985, Volume 6, Number 4
Pages 603–606
ISSN 0271–0137

Great Hatred, Little Room: The Irish Historical Novel. James M. Cahalan. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1983, 240 pages, $25.00.

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Northern Ireland's usual state of uneasiness detonates with distressing regularity. Explosions of "great hatred"—perpetual conflagrations fueled by tribal fanaticism, intense nationalism, loyalty to a proud heritage, staunch religious faith, or whatever label one's loyalties or one's historical perspective affixes to the "troubles"—rarely make sense to outsiders, the non-Irish who, unfamiliar with Ireland's complex history, are apt to view the strife as a sectarian anachronism more appropriate to the Reformation than the twentieth century.

The Irish, as James Cahalan points out, cannot escape their history; it's hardly surprising that Irish literature is saturated with the country's history almost to the point of obsession. After all, if they cannot makes sense of the tangled web of causes and effects leading to today's violent impasse, what hope exists for an eventual solution? What is surprising is that "the most persistent genre of nationalist literary endeavor short of the popular ballad: the Irish historical novel," has received so little study. Especially since, as Cahalan declares, it is in the Irish historical novel that "the Irish writer returns to a major national crisis prior to his own experience in order to recreate the past and make sense of his own heritage."

Unfortunately, Cahalan is forced to limit his study severely, for "just about every Irish novel ever written" contains some history. His limiting definition of an historical novel is a fair one, from the point of view of literary criticism, but those readers interested in making some sense of the present troubles would have benefitted from a broader definition and the wider ranging survey this would have generated. Cahalan confines himself to a few of the major historical novels, those whose "quality, significance, or typicality . . . recommend them." In addition, he limits himself to the Irish historian J.C. Beckett's era of "the making of modern Ireland: 1603–1923." Cahalan argues that the period since 1923 has not yet become "history," and that Ireland until 1600 "existed in a state that had persisted since the Middle Ages," with English authority virtually confined to "the Pale," Dublin and environs.

Obviously, some dates are more important than others in history, but just as obviously, any cut-off dates are arbitrary and artificial when one traces the path of cause and effect leading to the present. Certainly Cahalan had to limit his subject to make it manageable; however, given the tremendous importance of the Celtic mythos to the creation of the Irish Republic, it is unfortunate that he ignores historical novels set in Celtic Ireland: those of Austin Clarke, for example. And given the techniques of modern historiography, limiting "history" to 1923 and before is arbitrary, too. It also necessitates ignoring superb novels such as William Trevor's *Fools of Fortune* and Bernard MacLaverty's *Cal*, both of which elucidate the violent milieu of the ongoing conflict.

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Cahalan begins with an examination of the prototypical historical novelist, Sir Walter Scott, justifying his inclusion on the grounds of his pervasive influence. Granted his influence was inescapable. The early Irish historical novelists imitated him, and later ones reacted against his model. However, the characteristics of the Scottian historical novel are repeated so often throughout *Great Hatred, Little Room*, that a few brief introductory remarks on Scott would have sufficed. The space could have been more profitably spent on discussions of Irish novelists. Cavils perhaps; perhaps not. One's attitude toward history determines how one judges Cahalan's cut-off dates, just as literary judgements argue for or against the inclusion of Scott. Such angles of vision are, in fact, central to the study. As Cahalan soon makes clear, historical perspective is at the heart of the nationalist psychology he is exploring.

Cahalan very wisely includes a chapter of background, "The Mythos of Irish History," in which he points out a major difference between the Scottian model and the Irish historical novelist's work: the Irish novelist—and this has remained true to the present moment—cannot see that historical polarities have been resolved in modern Ireland, as they were resolved in Scott's Scotland. No "peaceful synthesis," "no glorious middle way" has yet presented itself in Ireland, nor does it seem likely to do so. Cahalan's survey of Irish history, and the concerns the major events of this history presented for the novelists of each century, is a masterpiece of scholarly pith and economy. For the novice in Irish affairs, it is probably the most valuable, the most nearly indispensable, chapter in the book.

Cahalan then proceeds chronologically, examining the best and most representative Irish historical novelists, beginning with the Banim brothers, "who first opened up the broad panorama of Irish life to the literary world." The Banims were confronted with a problem which has plagued many Irish writers. Subjected to English rule, politically and economically, the novelists of the early 19th century depended upon English publishers and English readers for success. Thus the Banims were forced to be somewhat circumspect in placing the blame for the horrendous state of affairs in Ireland completely upon English misrule. Irish nationalism had to be presented with more caution, more reservation, than they would have liked. Yet, within prudent limits, the Banims attempted to present Irish history—and British blame—realistically.

Sheridan LeFanu and William Carleton illustrate, among other things, the gradual departure from Scott's model, just as Standish O'Crady and William Buckley demonstrate the shift from romanticism to realism and the role of the Irish historical novel in the Irish Literary Renaissance. Over half the book treats twentieth century writers: Seán Ó'Faoláin, Francis MacManus, Liam O'Flaherty, Walter Macken, Iris Murdoch, Eoghan Ó'Tuairisc, James Plunkett, Eilís Dillon, and Thomas Flanagan. Certainly all are first-rate writers, and it would be difficult excluding any of them. Yet this numerical bias in favor of the twentieth century is probably a form of chronological chauvinism.

Cahalan writes of the Irish novel "maturing" in the twentieth century and declares: "twentieth century Irish historical novels are clearly superior to those of the nineteenth century." Among the justifications for this opinion: "The nineteenth century novels indulge in a certain amount of romantic excess, distortion, and escapism. . . . The later novels come to focus more and more on all classes of Irish society, and the peasantry and proletariat become increasingly portrayed in a realistic and sympathetic manner that does not hide the unhappy endings of Irish history," and "The superiority of the later novels is due to changed social and political conditions as well as to more sophisticated literary sensibilities and political views. . . ."

The present is always convinced of its own superiority and sophistication, but future eras will regard the 1980's as artless and unsophisticated as we do the 1890's. Evidence of literary history supports the notion that literary superiority is usually more a matter of

taste than truth. Perspectives shift, sensibilities alter, standards change. It had little to do with maturing sensibilities when the Romantic era regarded *Don Quixote* as championing imagination over reason, whereas the eighteenth century had regarded the same novel as a satire on excessive imagination. One era valued reason more highly, the other valued imagination. Literary works differ from era to era and their form, if they are successful, is appropriate to their age. A later age may malign the twentieth century's preference for realism, formal emphasis, and impersonal narrators. Were the pendulum to swing back to Romanticism, the Banims might be declared superior to Seán Ó'Faoláin. This bias in favor of the present and its immediate surroundings is as insidious in literature as it has been in evolution: the past did not exist merely to produce the wonders of the present. The present is simply one more intermediate stage in a progression.

It is too easy to find fault with Cahalan, perhaps because the expectations he raises are so high. One wishes that he had dared more than literary criticism, for he is very good when he suspends his worry over literary categories and standards and deals with the writers as people who were reacting to events which shaped their lives and the lives of their country. He is less good as the academic critic, worrying about categories and theory. At such times, things seem to unravel a bit. For example, he supports his view that Walter Macken's books were meant to appeal to the young by citing the "youthful appeal" of their covers. Yet he later defends the quality of Eilís Dillon's books against the lurid covers her publishers chose. Demonstrating the relative superiority of fictional techniques can land one in odd tangles of thought.

Cahalan devotes a good deal of space, for example, to attacking Leon Uris's novel of Ireland, *Trinity*. He may be correct in his judgments; Trinity may be bad literature and inaccurate history. Yet Cahalan argues the Irish historical novel's great debt to folklore, and he points out how folklore creates pure heroes from men such as Daniel O'Connell and unadulterated villains of the likes of Cromwell and Coote. Surely to criticize Uris for the same thing is inconsistent, for Uris's immense appeal is doubtless to a great extent due to his ability to simplify issues and people: not unlike the folk imagination of ballad and tale.

As Cahalan himself notes in emphasizing the reciprocal relationship between novel as product and novel as influence, IRA martyr/hunger striker Bobby Sands had committed *Trinity* to memory, and he entertained his fellow IRA prisoners in Long Kesh prison's infamous H-Block with a recitation of it that took eight days to complete. Clearly whatever Cahalan's opinion of *Trinity* as literature, or his opinion of what *Trinity*'s influence deserves to be, *Trinity* contributed heavily to the mythos of Irish nationalism.

Great Hatred, Little Room promises more than it delivers. Its title, and its justification, suggest that it will go far beyond the literature bias that confines it. The book is essentially academic literary criticism. However, it is a worthwhile book for all its faults. It is an excellent first step toward an understanding of the snarled politics and history of Ireland, especially as these are reflected in Ireland's historical novels. If Cahalan has made things easier for the scholars who will follow the trail he has blazed, and surely others will follow, or if he has made the "Irish troubles" any clearer for the readers of his book, then he has accomplished a great deal.