

### **Corkery at the Crossroads?**

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A review of

**Heather Laird (ed.), *Daniel Corkery's Cultural Criticism: Selected Writings***

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The early twentieth-century nationalist writer Daniel Corkery stands over Irish Studies like a mountain in a landscape by Paul Henry: an uncompromising, storied landmark that is more often viewed from afar than approached. Corkery's ideal of Ireland, too, is redolent of the world depicted by Henry: rural in situation, Gaelic in race, Irish in language and Catholic in religion. The present-day suspicion of homogeneity, and Corkery's frequent use of that word in his praise of the Irish people, suggests the disjunction in ideas that has relegated him from the cultural agenda. Perhaps inevitably, a closer look reveals new facets and subtleties in his thought. In producing a selection from his cultural criticism, Heather Laird has performed a valuable task: showing the variegated colours of a figure that for too long has loomed darkly over the national consciousness.

Corkery's essays, articles, book extracts and reviews are usefully set out chronologically within three thematic sections: on the Irish language and Gaelic culture; on Ireland's representation in art; and on the nation and state. While this aids the clarity with which developments in his ideas can be discerned, it also helps us to see the most consistent themes that informed his thought. Happily, Corkery's writings most come alive in his passionate, articulate criticism of poetry: in many ways the emotional centre of the book is his extended praise of one of the flowers of Munster Gaelic culture, the poetry of Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin. The controversy that has attached to Corkery's name is not due to his literary criticism, however, so much as his ideas of how criticism should be pursued. In *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature*

(1931), he asserted that the true nature of Ireland could be found in the overlapping of three elements – the Catholic religion, preoccupation with the land and a nationalist outlook. Furthermore, he implicitly argues that an Irish literature in the English language would always lack authenticity. Ideas and people that were connected with Ireland but that lacked proper involvement or insight into one of these national elements were castigated with varying proportions of sorrow and anger as the offence demanded. So Daniel O’Connell is sadly chastised for not promoting the Irish language; Sean O’Casey is mercilessly excoriated for his satirical treatment of nationalists. J. M. Synge is treated with something in between the two for not understanding and therefore traducing the religious sensibilities of the islanders that his plays represented.

The contemporary response to Corkery can be found in the fourth part of the book, which is reserved for the critical appreciations and antipathies that his work provoked during his lifetime. Although Laird expresses sympathy with Corkery in her introduction, it is a measure of her prioritisation of cultural debate over personal preferences that this final section is largely given over to the case for the prosecution. To summarise the charges: Aodh de Blácam demurred from Corkery’s linkage of religion and nationality; P. S. O’Hegarty, too, objected to his separating the constituent inhabitants of Ireland on the grounds of ancestry and religion, and accused Corkery of ‘carrying bigotry and intolerance into literature’. Frank O’Connor and Sean O’Faolain shared the concerns of these older writers, and objected not only to the ideas that Corkery prescribed for literature, but to the fact that he presumed to prescribe ideas at all.

Those who incline in sympathy either towards or away from Corkery will find plenty to challenge what they already think in this lively volume. There are also

several surprises in store for those (both pro- and anti-) who have only come across Corkery's ideas in potted form. For example, though class consciousness is not something normally associated with him, this book shows Corkery to have been highly suspicious of the professional, town-based Catholics who grew in numbers and strength as a class in the nineteenth century. This collection's revelation of Corkery's admiration for political and artistic figures across the religious divide (and his consistent preoccupations with the literature and painting of the world beyond Ireland) also reminds us not to mistake his cultural nationalism for sectarianism and chauvinism. More surprisingly, the thematic structure of the book highlights how his dismissal of the idea that a valid Irish culture could exist outside the Irish language came relatively late in his life. Though he later repudiated the idea, Corkery at one point held up Synge as evidence of the possibility of a genuine Anglo-Irish literature – not colonial but Irish and in English.

One of the more striking aspects of this book is Corkery's repeated anatomisations of the processes and consequences of mental pain. In his reflections on the cultural state of Ireland it is a constant preoccupation. It justifies the violence that greeted Synge's plays; it is the focus of his descriptions of Irish readers being forced to choose between what they read and the circumstances of their own lives; it frequently forms the basis of his quotations from poetry. These are not the triumphalist tones in which one-paragraph sketches of Corkery have taught us that he spoke. Rather, the writer who comes into view both experienced and identified the exceptionally short distances in Ireland between the circumstances of individual and national life, and was determined to get to the root of the psychological conditions that this brought about.

In common with Cork University Press's recent productions, this collection is beautifully produced, and its chronology and contextual footnotes helpfully place Corkery in a his generation of writers, politicians and churchman (many half or wholly forgotten) who dominated Irish life early in the last century. Because two-dimensional opponents justify two-dimensional ideas, the reduction of Corkery to a caricature is in no one's interests. When a country's towering cultural figures are cited and not read the country understands itself less. This valuable showcase of the range of Corkery's thought brings him back into the living stream, situating readers in the imaginations and preoccupations that were current in the generation that experienced the liberating enthusiasm of the Gaelic League and the excitements of a forthcoming Irish state, as well as the limits and limitations that this state brought into being. If this collection does not change views of Corkery among its readers, it will enrich them, adding an array of colours to a picture that to date has too often been monochromatic.