

REVIEWS

PROBING THE NEGLECTED OEUVRE OF WALTER MACKEN

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Sandra Heinen and Katharina Rennhak, eds. *Walter Macken: Critical Perspectives*. Cork: Cork University Press, 2022. 239 pp. ISBN 978 1 78205 491 7.

Walter Macken (1915-1967) ranked among the most famous Irish authors in the 1950s to the 1970s on both sides of the Atlantic; however, the fact will be known only to specialists now. Much of his fiction remains in print but has received scant critical attention up to date, and his dramas are rarely performed. *Walter Macken: Critical Perspectives* is the first collection of essays dedicated to the prolific, versatile author; edited by Sandra Heinen and Katharina Rennhak from the University of Wuppertal which holds Macken's papers, it was triggered by a centenary symposium that the editors hosted to celebrate the legacy of the neglected writer.

Macken was indeed a man of many talents: hailing from a working-class Galway family, he joined An Taibhdhearc – the Irish-language national theatre in Galway city – as an actor at the age of seventeen, where he became also a set designer, stage manager and translator of plays. Having married a fellow actress, Peggy Kenny, he was forced to move to London in 1937 because Peggy's affluent family disapproved of the marriage. Shortly before the outbreak of World War II, the couple moved back to Galway where Macken was invited to become the manager of An Taibhdhearc. For over eight years, he worked tirelessly for the theatre, directing and writing plays, creating designs, overseeing the theatre's daily business and recruiting actors (including the celebrated Siobhán McKenna). In 1947 he left An Taibhdhearc to act in English at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin; his three years at Ireland's national theatre involved a tour to Broadway, which was followed by another US tour of his most successful play, *Home is the Hero* in 1954 in which he performed the lead role. By this time, however, Macken was already famous as a novelist as well, and he gradually stopped acting in favour of being a professional writer. In the mid-1960s, he briefly held a senior position on the Abbey Theatre board but decided to move back to his native Galway; he died of a heart attack at the age of fifty-one amidst unfinished projects, one of which was an almost completed musical.

The contributors to the volume – who range from established names in various areas of Irish Studies to Wuppertal PhD students – provide a comprehensive analysis of Macken's oeuvre, in which very little is missing (the present reviewer

would have welcomed a discussion of Macken's autobiographical novel *Sullivan* [1957], and at least a mention of Macken's excellent performance as Warder Regan in the film adaptation of Brendan Behan's *The Quare Fellow* [1962]; indeed, a detailed survey of Macken's successful acting career would be useful to have – but these are perhaps matters for a future book). In the introduction, the editors argue that Macken's writing should not be regarded as “high literature” perhaps but rather an embodiment of the “middle-brow,” a body of work that “reflects, tests and shapes” the “attitudes and assumptions” of mid-twentieth-century Ireland (7); this perspective is shared by the chapter authors, together with a consensus regarding the central importance of community ties and the resilience of ordinary people to Macken's vision of Ireland.

In the first chapter, Radvan Markus provides an extremely valuable survey of Macken's work at An Taibhdhearc, offering a glimpse of the plentiful and often unexplored archival materials housed at Wuppertal and the University of Galway. Markus shows Macken's concerted effort to develop a repertoire of plays that would include not only new dramas in Irish and world classics in Irish translation but also risky titles such as Karel Čapek's anti-Nazi play *The White Scourge* (1941) or Labhrás Mac Brádaigh's *An tUghdar i nGleic* (1943), a play focused on a sympathetic treatment of an unmarried mother's life, either of which would have been impossible to produce in English at the time due to the vigorous censorship introduced by the Irish state and orchestrated by conservative Catholic pressure groups. Markus vividly details the constant issue of low audience numbers at the Irish-language theatre, which has indeed remained a problem until the present day, and shows how it influenced Macken's own practice as a playwright. According to the author's family, Macken was a prolific writer since early childhood; however, he wrote first in English since that was his native tongue. Ever since his first engagement at An Taibhdhearc, he worked hard on improving his knowledge of Irish, but as Markus has discovered, at least some of his Irish-language plays – of which there were four – were originally written in English, and two were first submitted to the Abbey and rejected. As Markus asserts, Macken was essentially a “reluctant” language revivalist who, in contrast to most others, did not believe in the viability of the Irish language if connected only to the rural and saw its future in association with the urban and modernity, like a few other prominent authors of the period, such as Brian O'Nolan (aka Flann O'Brien / Myles na gCopaleen).

The following four chapters focus on Macken's English-language dramas. Chris Morash and Shaun Richards examine a “quadrilogy” (32) of plays, *Mungo's Mansion* (Abbey Theatre, 1946), *Vacant Possession* (unproduced, 1948), *Home Is the Hero* (Abbey, 1952, Macken's most popular play, the film version of which is

examined by Luke Gibbons later in the book), and *Twilight of the Warrior* (Abbey, 1955). These stage works have gained Macken the appellation “the O’Casey of the West.” Morash and Richards examine the validity of this label scrupulously, arguing that while Macken focused on abject poverty like Sean O’Casey, and shared his “social intention” (33), there is a vital difference in Macken’s use of violence: in Macken’s work, violence is “part of the fabric of the domestic, onstage space” (40), filling the void left by the demise of the revolutionary dreams for the displaced male protagonists. Ian R. Walsh’s contribution focuses on Macken’s later, unpublished plays, *Look into the Looking Glass* (1958) and *The Voices of Doolin* (1960), making a compelling case for Macken to be regarded as a precursor to Brian Friel due to the way in which he foregrounds the constructed nature of the play-world, thus attempting to abandon the “simple realism” (44) of his earlier work. Eva Kerski discusses another unpublished late play, *Merchant’s Road* (1963), focusing specifically on its depiction of the Irish Travellers. Her detailed analysis convincingly shows that Macken’s play may be regarded as an early instance of a more balanced representation of the Travellers which breaks with the conventional binary opposition between “settled folks” and the “tinkers” established in the early years of the Free State (56). Further contributions to the volume unravel an interesting oscillation in this respect, however: while Anna Hanrahan and Katharina Rennhak come to a similar conclusion as regards the depiction of Travellers in Macken’s children’s novel *Flight of the Doves* (1968), Elke D’hoker notes in contrast that Traveller characters in Macken’s short stories are nothing but stereotypical (151). This contradiction invites a further study perhaps, to examine the use of Traveller characters by an author whose focus lies mostly elsewhere, and consider if and how the inconsistencies reflect mid-twentieth century literary practice.

Paul Delaney and Katharina Rennhak both discuss Macken’s bestselling trilogy of historical novels in their respective chapters. Delaney’s essay in particular belongs to the highlights of the volume, carefully examining *Seek the Fair Land* (1959), *The Silent People* (1962) and *The Scorching Wind* (1964) in the context of the popular historiography of the day, perceptively unravelling Macken’s use of Biblical allusions, Catholic hymns and iconography, and commenting on the appeal of the novels to a US diasporic audience. Defending the merit of the novels, Delaney argues that while the characters may appear “flat, simple or two-dimensional,” this is given by their function as generic types in the overall structure of the trilogy, where they “find themselves in similar scenarios in each of the three texts” (102). Rennhak’s perspective on the three novels corresponds to Delaney’s in regarding them as an accomplished example of “popular historical fiction” (105); given the remarkable success of the trilogy with

readers in Ireland, the US and elsewhere, Rennhak argues that Macken's contribution to the project of "inventing Ireland" as defined by Declan Kiberd has been at least as significant as that of the "more canonical" (107) Irish authors.

Sandra Heinen's analysis of Macken's "novel of migration" (125), *I Am Alone* (1949), outlines the vitality of an external perspective on Ireland to Macken, who based his novel loosely on the two years that he spent in London as an immigrant Irishman in the late 1930s. Heinen also interestingly details the influence that Macken's publishers had on his work: both his British and American editor were clearly intent on presenting Macken as an author of the Irish West and had little enthusiasm for the author's thematic departure (in fact, the US publisher ultimately rejected the novel). Macken defended his book staunchly to his editors, explaining the importance of the project for him as he wished to prove to himself that he was capable of more than writing just about Galway and Connemara – but ultimately gave in: virtually all of his subsequent work deals exclusively with the West of Ireland again.

Elke D'hoker's comprehensive chapter is dedicated to Macken's short fiction. It seems that Macken's first serious effort at short story writing came with the (rejected) project of a short story collection about Galway in 1944; from that point on, he dedicated considerable time to short fiction which was published mostly in magazines (five stories came out in the *New Yorker*, which is likely to have provided much-needed financial revenue). As D'hoker shows, however, Macken's overall concern in the genre is to be "first and foremost a storyteller" (142), any social critique is absent and the stories evince a backward-looking sense of timelessness. Moreover, only two of the plentiful stories feature a female narrator of focaliser. Regardless of that, D'hoker has undertaken truly painstaking research in order to establish beyond any doubt that Macken's stories are expressive of hegemonic masculinity predicated on a "muscular Catholicism" typical of its era (155). She notes that while now rather deservedly forgotten, the stories thus stand in curious contrast to Macken's plays where male protagonists are thoroughly critiqued for abusing their "prerogatives" (155).

The final two chapters are dedicated to the author's two books for children, which have been as popular with readers as some of Macken's novels. Indeed, *Flight of the Doves* was adapted for the screen by Columbia Pictures in 1971 (a mere three years after its publication), while *The Island of the Great Yellow Ox* (1966) was turned into a TV mini-series in a BBC collaboration with RTÉ the same year. Anna Hanrahan and Katharina Rennhak propose to view the children's novels as "didactic versions of [Macken's] general quest to define what it means to be Irish in the young republic" (158); however, reading the books as national allegories seems somewhat counterintuitive, given – for instance – how quickly they were

both picked up by American and British film and TV companies. Moreover, there seems to be as much in the books to contradict this approach as to confirm it, notwithstanding that the argument is predicated on Frederic Jameson's assertion that all writing from postcolonial areas is to be read as a national allegory which evidences a remarkably hegemonic attitude on Jameson's part. Sandra Heinen and Pia Martin-Bodynek discuss in detail the film version of *Flight of the Doves*, directed and produced by Ralph Nelson. As the chapter outlines, Nelson reshaped Macken's novel into a Hollywood family movie, casting two principal actors from the recent Oscar-winning musical film of *Oliver Twist* (*Oliver!*, 1968) and adding two songs, one of which was sung by Dana, the fresh winner of the Eurovision song contest for Ireland. Heinen and Martin-Bodynek persuasively depict Nelson's approach as an honest effort within the tradition of the cinematic genre; all the same, one can easily understand the reservations that Macken's family had as regards the liberties taken with the novel and the omnipresence of stage Irish clichés. Viewed from the perspective of many a contemporary spectator, the film might rank rather amongst those immortal classics characterised by unintended comedy such as *Brigadoon* or *The Quiet Man* (one wonders is this the reason *Flight of the Doves* continues to be shown on Irish television every now and then).

Since only a few specialists will have Macken's bountiful career at their fingertips, it would have been useful to provide at least a brief chronology of Macken's life and a bibliography of his works by way of an appendix to the book, helping the reader navigate the analyses of Macken's individual works. That notwithstanding, *Walter Macken: Critical Perspectives* is a very useful volume, implicitly asking important questions about canon formation, reasons for neglect, and the influence of diasporic readers on the popularity of Irish writing. From the early 1940s to his death in 1967, Macken wrote nearly three dozen stage works, ten novels, some seventy-odd short stories and two novels for children. Since much of this extraordinary output remains unpublished, this collection of essays might hopefully serve as a prompt to further explore the riches of the Macken Archive at Wuppertal.

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