



Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

Opponent's Review

Aneta Kantorová, "Brian Friel's Conception of Forming History and Its Implications," BA thesis

Choice of Topic:

The proposed topic of this BA thesis is an interesting one with potential. The potential of the topic is quite well realised by the resulting work, given the complexity of the chosen field.

Thesis statement / aims and objectives:

The project is constructed around a relatively clearly articulated area of enquiry, namely "Brian Friel's attitude to historical writing based on an analysis of three of his plays that deal directly with themes of Irish history and heritage." However, what is occluded by such a purpose statement is the fact the distinction between writing history and writing a history play.

Structure and development:

The general structure of the work is logical. Following a brief introduction which delineates plan of the thesis quite well, Ms Kantorová proceeds to her theoretical chapter on the philosophy of history. The attempt to map nineteenth century historiography is not bad, however it is somewhat regrettable that given the centrality of Nietzsche to the discussion, his work is never cited directly but comes filtered through Hayden White's *Metahistory* alone. The chapter then moves on to the Field Day group and their seminal ideas and motivations. While undoubtedly Seamus Deane advanced the link to Lyotard's notion of meta/micro-narratives, in fact the manner in which he deploys the reference runs somewhat counter to Lyotard's. Additionally, it is questionable as to whether any of the other members of the group, Friel included, would welcome an alignment with postmodernism as such. The aspirations of the Field Day group are easy to overstate as happens here: "They believed that these metanarratives, as produced by the followers of Irish nationalism or unionism, are the major cause of the Troubles and that by their re-examination and eventual reassessment presented in art the problems should be resolved" (p.9), as well as in the conclusion see page 48. Certainly cultural change is a necessary feature of the landscape of peace and reconciliation but, as recent history testifies, it is not a solitary element. The comments cited by Tom Paulin and Friel at the end of this chapter (p.11) concerning cultural and political states point to some of the difficulties that dogged the Field Day – the incendiary potential of such statements for many Northerners seems unobserved by Ms Kantorová. Chapter 2 presents a detailed analysis of *Translations* beginning with the influence of George Steiner's *After Babel* on Friel's thinking. On page 14, it is suggested that the 1830s marks the beginning of the Anglo-Irish conflict and that the violence of the Donnelly twins in the play foreshadows the Troubles, both statements are rather simplistic. There follows a concerted attempt to survey the differing critical views of the plays and Friel's responses. Chapter 3 juxtaposes the methods of dealing with history in *Translations* with Friel's next play *The Communication Cord*. Generally this is well developed, although there is some confusing regarding what constitutes the "pre-colonial period" (p.24) and whether *Translations* is to be interpreted as nationalist or not (p.30). Chapter 4 on *Making History* makes some promising points although there is some slippage in the use of the term nationalist – see p.39 where nationalist is used in a seventeenth century context. Overall the thesis presents and explores relevant contexts and assumptions regarding the issue. A consistent close reading of the selected works is developed but is sometimes undermined by a lack of critical energy especially as regards Friel's own often contradictory defensive gestures. Although the focus on historiography is vital, the thesis might have benefited from a consideration of the genre of the history play (see for instance work by Mark Berninger).



FACULTY OF ARTS
OF CHARLES UNIVERSITY
IN PRAGUE



Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

Research:

The research undertaken for this project is strong and shows critical initiative.

Use of sources:

There are no major formal or stylistic issues concerning the use of sources. Materials have been carefully cited throughout.

Stylistics and language:

Ms Kantorová's writing style is good although occasional errors in word choice are in evidence.

Format:

A great deal of care has been taken with format of the project.

I recommend the thesis for defence and propose to grade the work "very good" 2, depending on the result of the defence.

1.9.2011

Clare Wallace, PhD