

Too busy to show his parents around, their son books them on a coach tour, and Western Culture has a profound effect on the relationship. Janaki enjoys her first ever soak in a bathtub. She also becomes inebriated. And, strangely, Balu seems to be encouraging her. She doesn't know, as we do, that the sex displays in Amsterdam have made him have his first ever truly lustful thoughts towards his wife. Sharing his desires with the modest woman who shuts her eyes when she 'lets him' perform his marital duties would be unthinkable. He only dare explore her body when she is insensible.

Equally intriguing is the emotional flowering of Janaki, whose eyes are opened by the raunchy 'Chicago ladies'. Gaining confidence in her intellect, she rediscovers her identity, with consequent unravelling of her unquestioning obedience. All this is subtly and stunningly played out.

We also meet Inder and Rami, who have lived in England for some years. Through them debates about education, and the problems this can lead to, are brought in. I adored this novel, and loved peeking into Indian culture. I understood far more from this intimate gem of a novel, than I've ever learned from documentaries or factual accounts.

Grace Kane is in a stifling relationship too. But in Grace's case, it's her domineering mother who keeps the hapless girl in virtual slavery. There are echoes of *Middlemarch* at the start of Una Brankin's first novel, as vultures Bobby, Ignatius and Georgina circle their cousin Grace's bed, willing her to die. The ghastly trio make no secret of their desire to win back the farm they feel was stolen from their father. So starts a book set mainly in seventies Northern Ireland, with flash-forwards to the present day, as Brankin gradually unveils Grace's secrets, and the reasons she has become a recluse.

The ungainly Grace lives with her widowed, bitter mother and her mild brother Frank. Grace is bright, but seems resigned at forsaking a place in college to combine her domestic duties with work on the family farm. Grossly clumsy and shy, she lumbers through life, stealing trinkets, and avoiding people. Until Saul, the stranger and love interest enters her life in mysterious circumstances.

Una Brankin writes well, with good descriptions and mostly authentic dialogue. She can hold the pace well too, and has produced a good page turning read. But apart from the beautifully done drug scene, this novel doesn't conjure up the seventies at all. It seems stuck in the bleak decade of fifties Irish fiction, when daughters unquestionably obeyed. Except of course, for the backdrop of the troubles, which provides Brankin with much of her plot material.

There were some poignant moments in this novel, but I couldn't get to grips with Grace, and her victimhood. The central love story didn't convince me either, and as the novel draws to its clichéd, over cluttered climax, Brankin seems to have lost the plot. Or rather to rush it to its conclusion with clumsy short cuts and revelations. Were her publishers standing over her with deadline threats, I wondered?

I would have liked to have heard more about Georgina. It just wasn't enough for her to have that change of heart, and to suddenly realise she has been drinking out of guilt. And oh, the guilt! It seems Brankin is hooked on it, and with her lapses into outdated language, the novel sometimes feels like a modern day Victorian melodrama. Those fed up with modern heroines will no doubt adore this novel for its old-fashioned feel and language. But I rather hoped we had left such gloominess behind. □

**Half Moon Lake.** Una Brankin. *Pocket Books and TownHouse.* 412 pp €8.99 pb 20 cm 1-903650-39-9.

## Ordering things

Fred Johnston

**T**HE TITLE of John Ennis' eleventh collection of poetry derives from a Carlow townland where St Moling, who is said to have eased that strange bird Sweeney's tribulations in his last days, built a church.

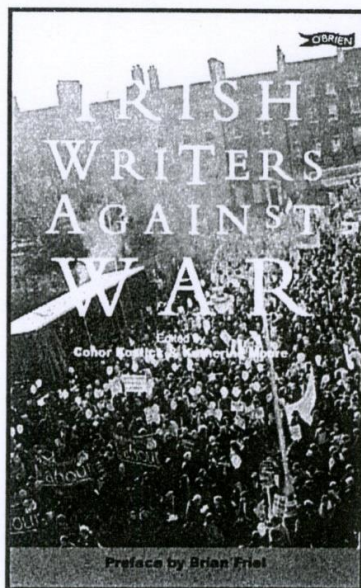
Sweeney is what you make of him. Suibhne Gelt has never properly been allowed to rest; poets have tackled his progress through Ireland without, in my view, determining the mytho-symbolic relevance of the story itself.

He has become every poet's symbol for something or other; John Ennis masterfully has ignored previous versions and texts and dived headlong into the imagined story itself. In doing this he edges closer to the oral tradition in which the story had its birthing. No academic exercise this, but an attempt, and a good one, I'd suggest, at a sort of restoration.

One of the more convincing 'explanations' I've been offered for the story of Suibhne Gelt is that it is in fact a glossary of herbal cures; the bird-figure of Suibhne taking on the nature of an illumination at the beginning of each chapter. I had part of this from a Cork friend, construed the rest and it sounds plausible. Then again, I have never believed that 'The Hag of Beara' was merely an old woman lamenting her lost youth.

Ennis' dedication—'to Suibhnes everywhere'—tends us closer to the time-honoured image of Sweeney the Magical Rover, itself an archetype for the poet. But the poetry here is

This anthology of prose and poetry from Irish writers is a strong, creative stand *against* war.



Edited by **Conor Kostick & Katherine Moore**  
Preface by **Brian Friel**

**ALL ROYALTIES TO THE  
IRISH ANTI-WAR MOVEMENT**

The O'Brien Press, 20 Victoria Road, Rathgar, Dublin 6.  
E-mail: [books@obrien.ie](mailto:books@obrien.ie) Website: [www.obrien.ie](http://www.obrien.ie)

about more than poetry; it's about the agony of transformation, the healing to be had on the way. It's a herbal-cure for the soul.

Woods became my home.  
One talon from the predatorial  
I fed on honey in hollow boles.  
—'Metamorphosis'

John Ennis has a deft lyrical touch which approaches music, the lyricality of the orally-transmitted tale. Small things leap out of the poem's branches; is the 'Guairé' mentioned in his 'Bealtaine' fragment that same Guairé of Dun Guairé Castle at Kinvara, Co Galway? Again, in recalling the old Irish season-calendar, Ennis reminds us that old ways of ordering things have not left the rural consciousness; Temple Bar Ireland is a figment of a doomed and slightly hysterical urbanism which cannot find roots anywhere. Perhaps the flittering Sweeney has something to say to this, too.

A very relevant collection for anyone interested in the Sweeney legend, scholars and lay.

I had both an interest in and a curious discomfort with reviewing this book. Well-written and heartfelt, it is a collection of poems which 'bear witness' as the blurb says, to the Holocaust. That very phrase itself, as it conjures the rip in humanity's psyche which was the horror of Auschwitz, Treblinka, Buchenwald and the rest, has a decidedly Old Testament ring to it.

We know a great deal about the Holocaust.

Primarily—but, through its entire reign, not *exclusively*—it attempted the utter destruction of European Jewry. Gypsies, homosexuals, Catholics, Left wingers, religious ministers—in short, anyone the paranoid eye of Nazism lighted upon or saw as less-than-men, life-not-worthy-of-life, perished also in its flames. O'Siadhail acknowledges this in the sonnet late in the book, 'Chinks.'

We know it as a *Jewish* horror because without question, and with a deliberate industrial coldness that still boggles reason, more Jews than any others died in it—and on occasion we have seen opposition to the notion that it was *not* an *exclusively* Jewish apocalypse.

It might be argued that the Holocaust has, regrettably, become to some a political ikon and its history has been held up on occasion (shamefully, in my view) to ward off unwanted criticisms of Israeli policy towards Palestinians, as anyone who has a radio or TV or can read a newspaper can testify. No one seems to have remarked on the moral ugliness of using one horror to justify the creating of others. Critics of Zionist fanaticism are shut down quickly with mention of the Holocaust.

Edward Said has commented amply on the role guilt, both American and European, played in the acceptance of Zionist 'Jews-only' ideas, and American liberalism. American Jews, doing little or nothing when their fellows were being gassed in Europe—as a ghetto Jew in Roman Polanski's marvellous film *The Pianist* testifies—adopted this guilt as a comfort zone.

One result has been an easy eradication—a *refusal*—of unacceptable truths about the founding of the Israeli state and the destruction, often recently unsettlingly Nazi-like, of Palestinians as a people. One should not forget that not long ago Israeli soldiers numbered the arms of Palestinian men they arrested as suspected terrorists—until a Holocaust survivor and member of the Israeli Knesset protested at the surreal horror of it: Jews, the abused children of Europe, now

an adult nation re-enacting upon others the abuse once done to them.

As I read Micheal O'Siadhail's often heart-wrenching poems, I was reminded that the Israelis had refused permission for two Arab poets to attend a reading in Belfast's Linen Hall Library recently; that the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences had refused to allow *any* Palestinian-made films to enter the Oscars Foreign Film race "because it does not accept Palestine as a nation", and thus Elia Seleiman's *Divine Intervention*, highly awarded at Cannes, couldn't get a look-in (Hollywood does, however, see Chad, Bangladesh and Afghanistan as acceptable). Similarly, the Israelis came under criticism from both Palestinians and Israelis for banning a documentary by Mohammed Bakri, an Arab Israeli, on the battle in Jenin—the first film banned in Israel for fifteen years—which was described as propaganda. Ironically O'Siadhail, perhaps unwittingly, comments here on media manipulation in a poem called 'Imagine':

The overlords and barons of print and screen,  
Oligarchies of news  
Shaping our images. Everything overseen . . .

Part of extremist Israeli policy includes the 'removal' of the sense of Palestinians even *having* a culture. Israeli history is acceptable—Palestinian history . . . well, Palestine *has* no history. Israel can remind us of the horrors of its history with another film, book or play: Palestinian poets can't leave the country to read, films are banned. One might do worse, in the circumstances, than to take a look at the current (as I write) *Poetry Ireland Review* for poems by Arab poets and the novel, *Unreal City* by Tony Hanania, published by Bloomsbury. Through it all, the US administration and its unPresident grants unwavering, even increasing, support.

The dangers of artistically supporting, or even giving a voice, to Palestinians are, for the politically nervous, obvious. It seemed to me as I read, and perhaps it was an uncharitable thought—and I make no other comparisons here—that I might be waiting a long time before I would read an Irish poet's reflections on the fate of the Palestinians.

There *is* a connection between our perception of the Israeli state and our knowledge of the Holocaust. It is sad that the actions of the Israeli state have so often dishonoured the memory of the Holocaust dead, while fanatical commentators blasphemously take the collective name of those murdered millions in vain to try to justify atrocities against Palestinians. A people who swore 'Never Again' are doing it again.

So, how to read *The Gossamer Wall*?

It is an utter nonsense to suggest that one should simply 'read' the poems as if they stood apart from their context. They are good poems, well-structured, delicately crafted, as befits a good poet such as O'Siadhail; lyrical too, in a bleak way. Anyone of the sound-bite generation who doesn't know about the Holocaust will learn about it here.

Arguably one of the more unspeakable horrors of the Holocaust was the way in which, gradually, a powerlessness was instilled in its victims which allowed them to be shot, dig each other's graves, and walk to death-chambers—while most of the time the numbers of prisoners far outnumbered the camp guards. A hypnotism of the already-doomed, perhaps; certainly a reduction of the human spirit to primal levels of self-disregard.

Is a survivor's memory of the Holocaust a memory, therefore, of a sort of spiritual nothingness or blankness of the will; a black hole in the soul where nothing could happen and light was destroyed?