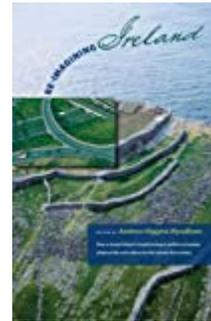


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Andrew Higgins Wyndham, ed. *Re-Imagining Ireland: How a Storied Island Is Transforming Its Politics, Economy, Religious Life, and Culture for the Twenty-First Century*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2006. xxii + 273 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-2544-8.



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Ireland in a Global Age

“Ireland, to be frank, gets far too much attention,” declares journalist and critic Fintan O’Toole in the opening pages of this new collection edited by Andrew Higgins Wyndham (p. 2). He is right, of course: to many outsiders and insiders alike, the field of Irish Studies often gives off a distinct whiff of self-regard and insularity, absorbing a disproportionate share of the resources at some American universities, while insisting upon an exaggerated (and often insulting) Irish exceptionalism that takes credit for everything from saving civilization to enduring the worst imaginable forms of human suffering and oppression. The wary reader might be forgiven, therefore, for approaching with caution a volume entitled *Re-Imagining Ireland: How a Storied Island Is Transforming Its Politics, Economy, Religious Life, and Culture for the Twenty-First Century*. To do so, however, would be a great mistake, because this volume is a sparkling example of the ways in which interdisciplinary scholarship can broaden our understanding not just of a specific place (Ireland), but of a much larger problem (globalization), and it does so with a daring and flair that ought to attract a wide audience.

Re-Imagining Ireland emerged from a conference of the same name held in Charlottesville, Virginia, in May 2003. The conference brought together dozens of Irish academics, writers, performers, politicians, artists, journalists, and activists, many of whom have contributed pieces to this volume. Indeed, the list of contributors is something of an honor roll of contemporary Irish life and letters, including as it does such eminences as President Mary McAleese, Fintan O’Toole, Colm Tóibín, Frank McCourt, Roddy Doyle, Angela Bourke, Mick Maloney, Roy Foster, Joe Lee, Arthur Aughey, and Kerby Miller, among many others. The volume itself is as attractive as its all-star cast. Each of its ten sections begins with a substantial essay by one of the conference participants, and this is followed by a series of short, two-three page reflections from other contributors under the heading “Voices.” With very few exceptions, the pieces are lucid, conversational, and jargon-free, easily accessible to the general reader or to undergraduate students. The overall effect is of sitting at a very large table and listening to a lively, sprawling conversation about the momentous changes that have reshaped Ireland over the past decade and more. Topics range from the politics and economy

of Ireland (north and south) to the cultural, environmental, and social challenges presented by the remarkable period of growth that Ireland has recently undergone. Eight glossy, full-color pages show some of the artistic pieces exhibited at the Virginia conference, and an hour-long DVD, tucked into the back cover, contains a documentary that intersperses interviews of conference participants with footage from the conference and from contemporary Ireland.

In his preface, Wyndham argues that Ireland is at a crossroads. Long one of Western Europe's most impoverished and traditional societies, Ireland has become the "most globalized society in the world" (p. xii), drawing massive foreign investment, European Union subsidies, immigrants, and tourists at the same time as it exports its music, language, and culture to a global audience. The question for the volume's contributors, then, is how this traditional society can and should adapt to the demands of globalization. This provokes a number of related questions. How, for example, can Ireland retain its cultural and social distinctiveness in the face of the homogenizing power of the global market? How is increasing immigration to Ireland and accelerating secularization among Catholics challenging traditional notions of Irishness? What happens to those left behind by the roaring success of the Celtic Tiger? What steps must be taken by northern Protestants and Catholics to ensure a lasting peace?

To their credit, most of the contributors avoid offering easy answers to these questions. In tones ranging from self-congratulatory to deeply anguished, the essays peer and poke their way into numerous corners of contemporary Irish life. Liz O'Donnell's upbeat assessment of the impact of economic growth in Ireland, for instance, is balanced by Peter McVerry's grim description of homelessness in Dublin. Angela Bourke provides an illuminating history of Ireland's Gaeltacht (Irish-speaking regions), while Aodhán Mac Páilín and Malcolm Maclean flesh out the discussion by examining the state of the Gaelic languages in Belfast and Scotland, respectively. An early highlight is Theo Dorgan's "Finding Identity in a Global Context: Thirteen Ways of Looking at the Question," which consists of a series of vignettes reflecting the complexities and ambiguities of Irish identity at home and abroad. "Sometimes the best way into a large subject is through the small, unexpected door in the corner," Dorgan writes (p. 31), and in this and the next few essays (from Tóibín, McCourt, Larry Kirwan, and Lenwood Sloan) the truth in this statement becomes clear. The state of Irish music, dance, art, film, and the landscape are

all addressed in turn, with valuable contributions from men and women keenly aware of the difficulties of maintaining cultural authenticity amidst a whirlwind of global competition and commercialization.

The largest section of the book is devoted to Northern Ireland, which, along with the Celtic Tiger, acts as a sort of bass note for most of the essays included here. Journalist Susan McKay's analysis of the career and legacy of Ian Paisley is enlightening, even if its conclusions appear (in light of recent political developments) unduly pessimistic. O'Toole, Aughey, Lee, and Ed Moloney all offer thoughtful reflections on the nature of the conflict and what needs to change if the peace is to survive, and Northern Ireland Police Ombudsman Nuala O'Loan provides a fascinating insider's glimpse into the struggle to create a legitimate police force in Northern Ireland. The concluding section of the book, headed by Kirby Miller's heavily researched response to historical revisionism, likewise examines relations between Protestants and Catholics, which the contributors hope can be improved by recognizing the wide social and cultural common ground shared by the two groups.

Despite the overall quality of the contributions and of the accompanying DVD, there are some significant limitations to *Re-Imagining Ireland*. For one thing, few of the contributors present substantial new research into contemporary Ireland, and the scholar looking for a detailed analysis of these issues would do best to consult more specialized studies.[1] In fact, readers who stay abreast of the literature and who frequent Irish Studies conferences are likely to find many of these arguments familiar. Thus, for instance, this volume finds Luke Gibbons discussing the cultural implications of *The Quiet Man* and Roy Foster criticizing the contemporary "heritage industry" in ways that echo work they have presented elsewhere.[2] Contributions of this sort are valuable within the framework of this book, however, largely because they are accompanied by adjacent essays that complement, challenge, or contextualize the topic under discussion. Indeed, one of the more rewarding features of this volume is the way in which it places different authors in conversation with one another, giving the reader a multifaceted understanding of the issues that they address.

A more serious limitation to *Re-Imagining Ireland* is the in-built obsolescence that inevitably accompanies any state-of-the-discipline publication. Recent changes in the political landscape of Northern Ireland, as noted above, have already rendered some of the essays on that topic outdated, if not exactly irrelevant. Similar changes

in the social, political, or economic outlook in the Republic may likewise undermine or strengthen the other contributions. The volume's shelf life, in other words, may be quite limited. A related problem arises from the extent to which both the book and the DVD are rooted in the 2003 conference in Virginia. Too often, the entire package is made to feel like a souvenir for conference participants—for those readers who were not present at the conference, the effect is a little off-putting, as if one were peeking into a party to which one was not invited. The appeal to the general reader, to whom this book appears to be pitched, is accordingly diminished.

Overall, these are minor reservations about a product that will, one hopes, find an audience well beyond Irish Studies programs. In the accompanying DVD, the late loyalist politician David Ervine poignantly insists that the story of Northern Ireland is not just a story about Protestants and Catholics in Ireland, but a story about all of humanity. The same could be said of the other topics examined in *Re-Imagining Ireland* as well. Societies everywhere from Shanghai to Brooklyn are grappling with the sorts of creative destruction that global-

ization inflicts. Vast new wealth alongside dire poverty, the homogenization and gentrification of neighborhoods, environmental degradation, the mobility (or uprooting) of populations, racism and xenophobia, the atomization of communities, the secularization and commodification of traditional cultures, and above all the uneasy feeling that everything could blow away with the slightest shift in the global winds—these are things that rightly command the attention of the entire world. Ireland, it turns out, has a lot to tell us about the globalized spaces we all inhabit.

Notes

[1]. For recent, specialized treatments of issues such as development, politics, the economy, immigration, health, and poverty, see, e.g., Brendan Bartley and Rob Kitchin, eds., *Understanding Contemporary Ireland* (London: Pluto Press, 2007).

[2]. Luke Gibbons, *The Quiet Man* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002); and R. F. Foster, *The Irish Story: Telling Tales and Making It Up in Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

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