Caball carefully avoids the word ‘nationalism’, aware that it would be open to misinterpretation by readers seeking simple answers to complex questions. An absence of poetic endorsements of ‘the actuality of Anglo-Saxon hegemony’, (p. 113) or an absence of ‘overt provincialism’ (p. 150) are less than convincing evidence of a cogent articulation of national consciousness. Evidence of ‘ethnic sensibility’ and ‘Gaelic cultural consciousness’ were nothing new in this period. In an attempt to avoid any anachronistic reading of the evidence as a prototype for post-1922 notions of a ‘united Ireland’, he talks instead of simple ‘pan-insular’ awareness. He only reluctantly admits the role of exile in awakening consciousness of the distinctiveness of the island of Ireland.

The author’s linguistic inventiveness is his means of coping with the reality that even those occasional poems that can be interpreted as a ‘response’ to a political process of ‘conquest and colonisation’ have only the most tenuous ideological connection with either modern Irish notions of national identity or with the ideas about the origins of Irish nationalism that Bradshaw proposed in The Irish Constitutional Revolution of the Sixteenth Century (Cambridge, 1979). Indeed, Caball is forced to resort to evidence from the 1650s to support his guarded and qualified conclusions about the poets’ understanding of ‘insular sovereignty’ (pp. 150–1).

An examination of political attitudes in Gaelic and Gaelicized Ireland that is conducted as a search for a ‘response’ to conquest and colonization with little discussion of the political and social structures of lordship society or the nature of literary patronage is bound to leave many questions unanswered. Yet within the parameters he has set himself Caball has ably illustrated that literary sources can be successfully analysed from a historical perspective when due attention is paid to the particular circumstances from which each specific text emerged. However, the decision to limit the investigation to just one type of literary source, disregarding the evidence of the annals, genealogies and prose writing has lessened the impact of his conclusions.

BERNADETTE CUNNINGHAM

So, here’s to you, Mrs Robinson


In Book I of Endymion, Keats poses the question ‘Wherein lies happiness?’, the answer to which he speculates resides in part in friendship, ‘whence there ever issues forth/A steady splendour’. In each of the one hundred poems that make up Greetings To Our Friends In Brazil, Paul Durcan engages with what might be called the politics of friendship’s steady splendour. For if there is a keynote, an architectonic in this, his eighteenth and decidedly most expansive collection to date, it must be the necessity for, and the rewards of equable, courteous relations, whether private or public, local, national or global. The book’s title brings this nexus of concerns into
sharp focus: a verbatim transcription from Micheál Ó Muircheartaig's radio commentary on the 1997 All Ireland Football Final between Mayo and Kerry, it becomes for the narrator of the introductory title poem a prayer for pluralism, tolerance, compassion, peace.

The book falls into eleven sections, its structure recalling the seven-part Daddy, Daddy and eliciting a comparable effect of moving from room to room in a well-conceived exhibition of paintings. There is, however, a greater impression of overall thematic unity here than in previous collections, the poems at once 'canvases' as well as 'conversations' or 'dialogues' in the Classical sense with mentors, contemporaries, lovers, and a number of subjective personae or 'different selves'. And while the characteristic range of voice and tonal register, the precision control of metaphor, diction and the so-called prose line, the deft conflation of the outrageously comic and the deeply serious are all present, the collection is informed by a new awareness of social and personal responsibility, and offers a fresh angle on the position of the individual in society. Without sacrificing any of the acerbic wit and genuine anger that give many of his poems their force and direction, Durcan in this collection has achieved a mellower, more mature note of acceptance which, while not devoid of lament and indignation, makes possible a thorough-going exposition of a personal poetics, and an increasingly inclusive vision, the axis of which remains the omphalic island of Ireland, North and South. If one were to trace a literary genealogy, these are poems distinctly reminiscent of Yeats or Kavanagh (both, 'presences' in and behind many of the pieces here) in full stride, yet technically and contextually allied to the novels of Richard Ford or Don DeLillo.

In a poem called 'Making Love inside Áras An Uachtaráin' (the title is one of a number of playful yet pointed self-revisions), Durcan writes, 'To be utterly public is to be utterly private.' While the line has its immediacy within the context of the particular piece, it is also crucial to an appreciation of not just Greetings to Our Friends in Brazil, but the broader outlines of Durcan's project as well. Durcan is frequently referred to as Ireland's most public poet both because of his accessible engagement with contemporary social and political issues, and his exploration in verse of topics including the breakdown of his marriage and his thorny relationship with his father. Recently, he has been dubbed 'the people's poet' and the nation's 'unofficial poet laureate'. The new collection lends some credence to these designations, but it also challenges them. While the poems are on one level an impressively accurate record of events in Irish public life from 1990 onwards, at the same time they comprise a subjective, idiosyncratic 'chronicle or 'journal' of one person's - named as Paul Durcan alias Tinkerly Luxemburgo - 'soul-making' during the course of those years. The chief implication of this interface is that one's engagement with, one's 'take' on, all that is not, or other than, one's self is what in fact bestows one's sense of self/selves. Repeatedly in the poetry we are shown how the individual is impinged upon, defined by, yet responds to society and the world. Yet it is in that symbiotic exchange that being human is understood. In this context, Durcan has spoken candidly of the impulse to write poems about national and international accomplishments and atrocities, saying that he thinks of it not as documentation or duty, but as 'the natural
function of the writer’. The public/private conjunction also suggests that the ‘utterly public’ personae we all cultivate are ‘protective cover’ for the ‘utterly private’ beings we also need to be. For a writer whose work is often transparently autobiographical, the objectivity afforded by the diversity of masks and voices Durcan has adopted from the outset of his career is a vital necessity.

If these are notions which complicate the simpler concept of ‘public poet’, then they do so productively. Keenly aware of the multiplicity and the contingency of the self, Durcan here continues to question the authenticity and indeed the viability of ‘a consistent vision of the universe’. Concurrently, he makes poetic forays into the political philosopher Michael Oakeshott’s assertion that in the civil condition ‘every situation is an encounter between ‘private’ and ‘public’ . . . and no situation is one to the exclusion of the other.’ In all its parts, Greeting To Our Friends In Brazil is concerned not with the singular ‘pure drop’, but with ‘the mixture’.

The opening section of the book consists of the six-part title poem, which not only sets the tone and introduces dominant concerns but also knots beginning and end of the collection together in a neatly worked spatial conceit. One of the most notable stylistic features of Greeting To Our Friends In Brazil is Durcan’s rewriting or, more accurately, ‘reinscription’ of his own earlier poems, the reasons for which may range from a desire for reassessment mid-career and an unwillingness to take one’s self too seriously (we recall the comic/self-parodic recitation of ‘An Item Once Again’ in Christmas Day) to a means of measuring how far we have, or have not, come in the thirty years since he began writing and the aesthetic conviction that all work is work in progress. As he puts it in ‘Samambaia’, one in a series of finely-wrought tributes to Elizabeth Bishop, ‘Nothing should stay the same. Everything changes.’ Thus the narrative of the title poem, which reads as a re-envisioning of Christmas Day via ‘O Westport in the Light of Asia Minor’ and ‘The Haulier’s Wife Meets Jesus on the Road Near Moone’. Like Christmas Day, this is a poem fundamentally about friendship. The speaker, who is resident on Achill Island, is invited by Father Patrick O’Brien of Killmeena, Co. Mayo, to watch the All Ireland Football Final with him on his television on ‘the last Sunday in September’. At the heart of a day in which he observes:

the holy mountain
Of Croagh Patrick asleep on its back
on the skyline in blue pencil outline
– God on his back asleep under a haycock –

is then nourished by the cadences of Father O’Brien’s sermon, and enjoys ‘lunch and conversation with a compatible man’, is the speaker’s obvious delight in ‘marrying radio sound to television picture’, tuning into ‘the cordial Kerry maestro’ declaiming, ‘We send greetings to you all from Djakarta down to Crossmolina’. Sunday sermons, radio and sport are not new subjects in Durcan’s writing, and the poetry and communal congress to be found in each is amply represented in this collection. After meal and match, the speaker drives home alone, to bed and prayer, but en route gives a lift to a middle-aged woman who, in a nod to Joyce:
looked like a bat at nightfall in a doorway
Under the lintel hovering
‘In darkness and secrecy and loneliness.’

Her beatific destitution and hard-headed tenderness lift his depression and enable the prayer for humane mercy that guides him home and closes his day: ‘Greetings to our friends in Brazil.’

This signal phrase leads into the next section of the book, which contains poems composed after Durcan’s reading tour of Brazil in 1995, but it is also intimately linked to the final poem in the collection, ‘The Mary Robinson Years’. Initially, this was the title of the entire collection and, with its variation ‘The Nineties’, remains for Durcan a kind of unofficial tag for the closing section. This sequence of sixteen poems pays homage to Mary Robinson, as an individual and as the president of Ireland, acknowledging in particular her policy of extending the hand of friendship to Irish and non-Irish at home and abroad. Like many of the poems in the collection, these register the social, political and spiritual changes which Ireland experienced during her period in office, and recognize her as both symbol and catalyst of a new maturity that is outward-looking, more moderate and relaxed, less restrictive and self-obsessed. In stark contrast to the de Valera of Durcan’s 1978 poem ‘Making Love Outside Aras An Uachtarain’, who hunts the lovers in the grass of Phoenix Park with his ‘ancient rifle’, the Mary Robinson of ‘Making Love inside Áras An Uachtarain’ is a president for whom ‘Power is conditional on love.’ Durcan was, of course, a staunch supporter of Mary Robinson throughout her election campaign, and she quoted his ballad-lament on the subject of Irish emigration, ‘Backside To The Wind’, in her victory speech. While these poems will doubt elicit accusations of hagiography from the opposition, such labelling would be to dismiss what is in essence a portrait study of a complex, strong-willed, eminently human personality. From the acute sensitivity to a young girl’s world registered in ‘Real Inishowen Girl’, through the anger and compassion of ‘Private Luncheon, Maynooth Seminary, 8 July 1990’ to the apostrophic absolution of ‘Somalia, October 1992’ – ‘Why did you apologize for your tears?/Do not ever again apologize for your tears’ – and Mary Robinson’s rehabilitation of the ‘dysfunctional family’ of the Irish Republic in ‘The Functions of the President’, these are poems of praise and celebration, but also of great insight and political acumen.

They are not, however, without moments of implicit criticism, nor, it should be pointed out, are they exclusively about President Mary Robinson. Several pieces applaud the similarly efficacious effect on the Irish of ‘That Douce Woman Who Was Your Neighbour’, the American Ambassador Jean Kennedy Smith, whose ‘function’ is to be, Saint Christopher-like, ‘One who dares wade flooded rivers, carrying a child –/The only child who has the only message.’ But Durcan also records his disappointment at the 1997 presidential election ‘In which we defiled the status of women’, and despairs at what has become the chronic abuse of language – ‘The formality of spontaneity is dead;/The chaos of cliche has succeeded.’ The closing poem, however, is an upbeat fantasia set, appropriately, in the ‘Copacabana Palace Hotel/On the seafront in Rio’. It opens with the speaker’s – Paul’s – recollection that ‘In
November 1990 Mary Robinson lit a candle in her window/For all the exiles of the Irish diaspora.' Seven years later – 'It was midnight, September 1, 1997 – Mary Robinson has completed her term as President, and 'Paul' knows it is:

   High time to get down on my knees
   And to light a candle in the sand,
   Cupping a flame in my hand.

Durcan's position vis à vis Mary Robinson could not be plainer: Only a friend/Cupping a flame in my hand.

   Set between the opening and closing sections are sequences of poems which chronicle Durcan's travels to, as well as Rio de Janeiro and environs, Mecca, Tel Aviv, Chicago, Vancouver and Cheltenham. There are poems in praise of an eclectic range of women, tributes to artists including Marie Foley, Tony O'Malley and Brian Friel, and moving elegies for Lar Cassidy, Lady Diana, Dr Hugh M. Drummond and Iris O'Neill. Among the strongest pieces in the collection is a clutch of six love poems which make sensitive exploration of the joys and the limitations of love in middle age. 'Thistles' is a bittersweet statement of regret:

   How I wish
   We could have had children of our own!
   Instead the field outside our bedroom window
   Is a roofless creche of thistles:
   A homeless thistle for every child we might have had;
   A tattoo of embryos
   Whose fingernails have never been cut.

But it is also a defiant refusal to go gently:

   While our ghost progeny hold their breath;
   I am going to ask you to dance with me
   Upside down on the Ceiling of Old Age –
   On the Floor of First Infancy.

   As in 'Making Love inside Áras An Uachtaráin' ('My young bride with whom I have lived seven year/Making love inside Áras An Uachtaráin'), there is here an oblique conflation of the beloved and the president. As 'October Break (Lovers)' has it:

   For seven years I have been her lover.
   For seven years visiting her in her home.
   For seven years coming and going.

What this emphasizes is, again, the inextricable weave of private and public, personal and political, which focus is graphically expressed in the specially commissioned cover drawing by Alice Maher. Coma Berenices (The Love-Knot) depicts a woman's loosely woven coil of hair, evoking at once the token traditionally exchanged by lovers as a sign of fidelity, and the story of Berenice, who sacrificed her long hair to the gods to ensure her husband Ptolemy III's safe return from war and the
consequent preservation of her people. Stolen and wafted to the heavens, the hair became the seven stars in the tail of Leo, known as Coma Berenices. Duly feted at the close of her seven-year term on 'a fireworks night in Rio', Mary Robinson is, like Berenice, 'stellified', while 'On the shores of Achill Island facing Newfoundland', the poet beholds the changing face of his beloved:

As she grows older, her face grows younger.

Until she dies and goes away, far off, near,
To dwell under the star on the mountain:

Comparable conflations of 'far off, near' can be found in the series of poems which register Durcan's grief and outrage over the continuing atrocities in Northern Ireland, as well as Irish and international politics. Several of these poems were first published in the Sunday Independent at the time of the incidents, and most have dates as part of their titles, details which attest to Durcan's need and ability for immediate response, and which add to the entire collection's effect as a journal of contemporary events. There are 'entries' remembering the Shankill Road bomb, the Bloomsday and Poyntzpass murders, and the deaths of Richard, Mark and Jason Quinn; there are others which condemn the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Catholic Church's position on divorce. Decidedly the bravest, and also perhaps the angriest, of this particular set is 'Omagh', whose fourteen parts constitute a separate section which is, first and foremost, a tribute to the people of Omagh, but also a scathing indictment of those who subscribe to Robespierre's verdict 'On the Theory and Function of Terror in History'. The opening segment takes the form of an icy ironic memo from 'the Omagh Quartermaster' to 'GHQ', the Quartermaster upbraiding Gerry Adams for his 'unequivocal condemnation' of the Omagh massacre in the face of his tacit endorsement of other equally heinous crimes:

Are you seriously proposing that Omagh
Is a different kettle of fish to Canary Wharf?

As for ex-terrorists:

There is no such thing as an ex-terrorist
And well you, above all, know it.
Terror is terror that has no end.

Durcan's position here is neither as marginal nor as subversive as it might appear; indeed, former IRA prisoner Anthony McIntyre has expressed a similar opinion. Durcan also comes down hard on Gerry Adams in 'The Bloomsday Murders, 16 June 1997', where Adams appears on television signing books and 'fibbing like a spoilt child . . . not caring to see, /Saw two angels in their silver spines shot.' It is 'the word games', 'the palaver' and 'mantras' – 'The politics of the next atrocity . . . The atrocity of the last politics', etc., etc.,' the corruption of language by a self-professed wordsmith, that incenses Durcan.

What follows in the poem is a catalogue of mots justes, as Durcan litanizes the home places, names and ages of each of the thirty-one victims, sets the profound
despair in revisiting his own ‘Letter to Ben 1972’ (written at the height of ‘the Troubles’) against the carnvale of the Tall Ships arriving at Ringsend – ‘The happiest civic event of the century’ – and, penultimately, prays ‘for, to the people of Omagh’, whose sacrifice puts all personal catastrophes into perspective. ‘The Last Post’, however, confesses the speaker ‘Paul Francis Durcan’s’ inability to forgive the architects of this destruction:

No, I cannot forgive you.
For the extinction of the moans –
Unborn, born –

As if to right the balance, ‘Omagh’ is followed by a group of poems which meditate on the possibility of peace and the reality of human kindness. Like many of the poems in Greetings to Our Friends in Brazil, the first of these, ‘On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity’, has an autobiographical source and exemplifies Durcan’s frequent turn to self-revision, prose versions of this particular piece having appeared in print twice previously. The two sections at the centre of the collection, which might well be titled ‘Self-Portraits’ and ‘Portraits of Patrick Kavanagh’, contain what are perhaps the most innovative, and the most challenging, of the new poems. Both are part of the book’s larger construction as, on one level, a journal or diary of a single life during seven years in ‘the nineties’, and the ‘re-membering’ of significant moments in the course of the poet’s life as a writer. Durcan renders this development of personality and aesthetic as a combination cubist/serial self-portraiture, a kind of ‘Portrait of the Artist as a Young and Maturing Man’.

To this end, ‘Paul Durcan’ is a more or less constant presence in the poems of Greetings to Our Friends in Brazil. The inscription of Paul Durcan in Paul Durcan’s poems is not a new phenomenon: ‘Paul’ introduces himself in the first poem in Durcan’s first collection, Endsville, and makes frequent appearances from ‘Doris Fashions’ through to the deceased of ‘Paul’ and the narrator of Christmas Day. He is at once an honourable yet fallible, frequently self-deprecatory Everyman, and a liminal oddball, looking from strange angles through the windows of other people’s houses. Yet as readers are warned in ‘Notes Towards a Supreme Reality’, ‘There is no necessary linkage between the egotist who is overweight and vain/And the magic connections, dreams, constructions of his brain.’ Like the Kilfenora Teaboy or the Haulier’s Wife, Paul Durcan is one of many dramatic personae or ‘different selves’ which enable a variety of voices and perspectives. Multiple yet consistent, his presence in the poems is perhaps best understood as something which acknowledges but is essentially other than Romantic self-regard or Postmodern self-consciousness. To achieve, and to evoke, the ‘self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration’ prescribed by Elizabeth Bishop in her letter to Anne Stevenson, which Durcan makes the epigraph to his collection, the poet, like the painter, takes as a primary subject him or herself to study in different lights and shades and circumstances. Given Durcan’s painterly consciousness, and his particular attraction to figural self-portraitists including Francis Bacon, Lucien Freud and R.B. Kitaj, the analogy seems logical and inevitable.
‘Self-Portrait 95’ invokes a humorously Whitmanesque ‘Do I contradict myself? . . .’:

Paul Durcan would try the patience of the Queen of Tonga.
When he was in Copacabana he was homesick for
Annaghmakerrig;
When he got back to Annaghmakerrig
He was homesick for Copacabana.

Humour is the baseline in the self-portraits, from the tourist ‘Akimbo in a wheelbarrow in Copacabana/I am a gringo sober as a judge --/Grey-souled as my father who was a judge’ to the ‘Televised Poetry Encounter, Casa Fernando Pessoa, Lisboa’, in which ‘The Irish poet Mr Paul Durcan’ tells his interviewer ‘‘To be the Irish poet of the twentieth century . . . Is to be an Irishman playing for England in Brazil!’’ It is significant that this ‘encounter’ should take place in the ‘casa’ of the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa, for as the interviewee discloses, he shares with Pessoa a cultivation of heteronyms:

    I write
    Under the pen name
    Paul Durcan
    But my real name –
    Like Balthus
    Or William Trevor –
    Is Tinkerly Luxemburgo.

A subsequent elegy for Patrick Kavanagh (which rewrites Durcan’s ‘November 1967’ and salutes Kavanagh by making the last line of ‘The Hospital’, ‘Snatch out of time the passionate transitory’, the title of his new poem) reveals:

    There was only one way – one way I could face
    The death of Patrick Kavanagh
    And that was to become Patrick Kavanagh myself.

This trying on of masks and voices (consider also the first-person monologues of Lady Diana, Patrick Kavanagh, Iris O’Neill) contributes to Durcan’s portrait of the poet as multi-dimensional, multi-vocal, fluid rather than fixed, his identity capable of containing, of dextrously metamorphosing into, multitudes. Tinkerly Luxemburgo is a suitably apt alias on a number of fronts. The name conjures Durcan’s great affection for radio, his ‘tinkering at the dials’ (itself a loose parody of the poet tinkering in words, and forever ‘tinkering’ with what he, and others, have already set down) to bring in, in his youth, the exotic Radio Luxemburg (the subject of Durcan’s collaboration with Van Morrison, ‘In the Days Before Rock’n’Roll’). It also recalls his appellation in Christmas Day as ‘‘The Tinker Durcan’’ who, in keeping with both sides of his family, posts, ‘That’s what I’ve been all my life/From Copacabana to Portballauntrae,/A Protestant Tinker’, a declaration reiterated here in ‘The Only Isaiah Berlin of the Western World’. That protesting disposition has fuelled Durcan’s vision, and while like the maligned ‘travelling tinker’ his ways may raise the ire of the ‘settleds’, his marginal,
Sweeneyesque position favours him with fresh sight-lines, glimpses of the lux of knowledge. As Durcan puts it, half jokingly, half seriously, in 'Holy Smoke', 'The problem of being a poet/Is the problem of being always right.' Tinkerly is a trickster, thus his amusing antics and his 'Wilde' fantasy in 'Tinkerly Luxemburgo' are at once pure play and serious statement. As the repeated refrain - 'If you are going to be lonely/be lonely in style' - conveys, being Tinkerly is not just a game, it is a vocation.

The vocation of the poet is a central concern, and throughout these poems Durcan assesses it in a variety of forms, while at the same time developing and refining the components of a personal aesthetic. In the first poem of the Brazil sequence, 'Recife Children's Project, 10 June 1995', he praises Fr Frank Murphy not only for his work in founding the 'crèche', but also for his attitude to poetry. He is a man 'For whom poetry is reality, reality poetry'. This is a conviction which, in all its ramifications, Durcan holds as fundamental to his poetics and his Weltanschauung. As he writes in 'Cissy Young's', it was one of 'the basics of my trade' learnt during his apprentice years in a public house on Cork's Bandon Road. Reinforcing and extending a key phrase in Daddy, Daddy - 'In reality fiction is all that matters' - Durcan is here prepared to say 'Life's supreme reality is reading fiction/In poetry or prose', and to exclaim, 'Poetry is pure research.'

The poems to and about Patrick Kavanagh, like the 'conversations' with Yeats and Joyce, Wallace Stevens and Isaiah Berlin, Elizabeth Bishop and Seamus Heaney, are essentially a form of tribute, a means of acknowledging a writer who exerted a positive influence on Durcan's philosophy, technique and, in the case of Kavanagh, the course of his life. They also compose a picture of literary Dublin in the 1960s that has rarely been drawn, least of all in poetry. While brimming with fun, they are also deeply affectionate and seriously engaged with Kavanagh's entire project, none more so than the intricate paean to Durcan's grandmother, 'Kavanagh's Ass':

She borrowed the loan of Kavanagh's ass  
To bring her grandson to first Mass:  
Despite the stutter in my tongue  
I was the Estonia of her eye.

In all of the borrowings and allusions and payings of tribute there runs the risk of succumbing to the cult of the poet; Durcan, however, outrightly refuses to take himself or his 'vocation' too seriously. 'Irish Subversive' finds 'Paul Durcan, Poet', well able and literally willing to 'take the piss' out of himself. After delaying his fellow-passengers at a departure gate in Bristol Airport, and conjuring the utter consternation of the security guard, by delivering an impromptu reading of 'The Centre of the Universe', Durcan 'strode on, head goose-high in the air'. Later, the poet is seated next to a family acquaintance who tells him, 'You look like a walking urine sample':

Durcan smiled that silly-filly smile of his  
Informing me that if our Fokker 50 crashed  
On a rocky island in the Irish Sea  
He'd be happy to drink his own urine.  
Phenomenal thirst these poet chaps have.

McCRAKEN, 'So, here's to you, Mrs Robinson', Irish Review 24 (1999)
This is Durcan in top form – witty, incisive, innocently wise. The imagination that drives these one hundred poems is as broad as it is focused, as compassionate as it is critical. 'All risk and give', Durcan squares our sight-lines and cleanses our vision, succeeds in showing us the absolute necessity for the 'Commander-in-Chief's' sole commandment: 'First and last you must learn to love your different self.'

Once again – Victory to the Blue Cap Boy!

KATHLEEN MCCRACKEN

Marxism and Irish Culture


These two excellent collections of essays in the Field Day Critical Conditions series foreground and engage both the problematics and the potentialities of the British Left’s relationship with Irish culture. Too often a British Left in crisis has sought recourse to Ireland as the repository of compensatory allegories of community, as the site of a unitary and oppositional popular subject to shore against the fractures of late capitalism. Such wistful utopian investments not only provide little historical or political substance for the contemporary struggles of socialists, women’s groups and community projects within both nation states in Ireland; they also assume a further political debilitation when one considers the British Left's catastrophic failure to construct its own national locus for the valiant but often sequestered collectivities who opposed the Thatcherite state, and whose defeat has left a profound historical legacy.

The work of Francis Mulhern proves a challenging intervention in redirecting the trajectories of Marxist cultural politics in Britain and Ireland today. Originally from Enniskillen, Mulhern’s rise to prominence in the British Left was confirmed by his eleven-year editorship of New Left Review. Given this position of critical leverage, however, it is surprising how few articles on Ireland, and the conflict in the North in particular, the journal has published over the last few decades. Mulhern only fleetingly acknowledges this absence by means of a defensive footnote which maintains that repeated efforts to gather material worthy of publication failed. Nevertheless, it is precisely this sense of a dearth of ideas on Ireland, and of a creative exhaustion on the Left more generally, which impels and distinguishes many of Mulhern’s essays. The title piece, which resonates throughout the collection, meditates upon the complexity of historical time, upon the hegemonic contest of the antagonistic, discrepant narratives and temporalities which encumber the present. Tracing how a differential assemblage of pasts and futures inhabit and rive our present, Mulhern’s global sense of the dynamics of late capitalism and its