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## Doing the Dirt

### **Sad Bastard**

by Hugo Hamilton  
Secker and Warburg  
193pp, £9.99 in UK

### **Emerald Underground**

by Michael Collins  
Phoenix House  
234pp, £15.99/£9.99 in UK

Whether by angry young men or otherwise, a society's comfort should be continually disturbed by having its official mores challenged, its underbelly probed. When it is programmatic and indiscriminate however, or when it is just a display of street cred, iconoclasm can itself become complacency.

With *Sad Bastard*, Hugo Hamilton continues the very selfconscious examination of crime and a host of other Irish social ills he began in *Headbanger* (1996). Sequel does not depend for resonance on prequel here since Hamilton has basically written the same flawed novel twice. Garda Pat Coyne, the misanthropic 'Dublin Dirty Harry' that earlier headbanged his city's criminal underworld is currently on leave, but still 'playing the role of civil conscience'. The new plot is rudimentary, loosely revolving round the activities of a smuggler of Romanian refugees, and is incidental to a didactic intent. Coyne is more a template than a character, designed to repeat complaints against, well, pretty much everything in Irish culture. Surrounded by phrases like 'the old Ireland', 'the new Ireland', 'contemporary Ireland', he is a contrived anachronism, a 'walking paradox' who reviles the singing of 'The Fields of Athenry' while simultaneously indulging his nostalgia: 'Every change in his country, every sign of progress was an assault on his person'.

The main area of attack is consumerist ethos and this leads to some new ethnic stereotyping: 'What evolutionary platform had the Irish arrived at now, Coyne thought. Their identity was what they purchased'. Hamilton's indignation is arguably justified, but it is uncontrolled and frequently approaches the nonsensically cynical ('the Irish would basically eat anything as long as it was dead and came with french fries') and the clichéd ('Maybe Ireland was not a real place at all but a country that existed only in the imagination'). His own fictionalised Ireland is certainly unreal: brief references to Connemara, hurling, Irish dancing, the Irish language, appear only as essentialising ciphers, and his 'new' country is often just a matter of plopping in sound bites from pop culture ('In the background, George Michael was screaming Freedom!').

Before *Headbanger*, Hamilton wrote three less forcedly topical novels set outside of Ireland. If he wants to return to form while maintaining his current state-of-the-nation project he should calm down a little and aim to make his view of Ireland more panoramic and his irreverence more stylistically cohesive.

Compared to the world of Michael Collins, the fetid details of Hamilton's low lifers appear fairly harmless, and even Bukowski - an ostensible influence on *Emerald Underground* - reads like a Ladybird book. Collins specialises in squalor and viciousness and his narrator here, eighteen-year-old Liam, spends a saison en enfer as an illegal Irish immigrant in the US. Temporarily languishing in a seedy New York motel, he undergoes a metaphorical metamorphosis via a rash: 'My new skin had a hard roughness, more scar than skin, the armour of prehistoric survival'.

After a period selling his 'clean piss' to methadone-seeking addicts, and a stint in an abattoir, he sets off, in an on-the-road sequence, for Pennsylvania with Angel, a sixteen-year-old prostitute, and her pimp Sandy. They settle in a trailer park and the best part of the story ensues with Liam's

training sequences as he dreams of gaining an athletics scholarship. Though the climactic scene, where he wins a five-mile race, is somewhat mawkish, there is a general gutsiness to Collins' subjects throughout, dealing as he does with unofficial lifestyles and with such inflictions as pornography, ghettoization, drug-addiction.

While this partly autobiographical novel is the best attempt yet in Irish fiction to deal with the subspecies of Irish illegals in the eighties, *Emerald Underground* is considerably damaged by the aggressive hipness of the sordidness, by the imprecations being heightened to such a degree that they become histrionic, unreal, and quickly inure the reader. When the word 'shite' is so frequently used as it is here, some of it might be better left under the carpet.

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