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Imagining Belfast

JOHN KENNY

Irish Pages: A Journal of Contemporary Writing.

Edited by Chris Agee, and Cathal Ó Searcaigh (Irish Language Editor).

240pp. £8 sterling.

The pitch reads almost like a parody of political correctness: “IRISH PAGES is a non-partisan, non-sectarian, culturally ecumenical, and wholly independent journal. It endorses no political outlook or cultural tradition, and has no editorial position on the constitutional question. It [sic] title refers to the island of Ireland in a purely apolitical and geographic sense ...”. Though the lamentable proofreading continues throughout, the editors’ accentuated broadmindedness is appreciable since this inaugural issue takes “Belfast in Europe” as theme.

Top of the acknowledgements is Imagine Belfast 2008, the body responsible for organising the city’s bid to become a European Capital of Culture; and the journal seems, at least at this early stage, a related promotional sortie. Mindful of “the unfolding cultural potential of the new political dispensation”, the editorial promotes the creation of a new literary “space” (currently the most overused and empty word in cultural parlance).

The somewhat disunited contents include fiction, poetry, visual art, and primarily essays of various kinds. There are poems by Harry Clifton, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, John Montague, Medbh McGuckian, John Burnside, Seamus Heaney, Michael Hamburger, and the Palestinian poet Zakaria Mohammed. There is a short extract from a new Deirdre Madden novel. There are very short pieces by our two resident geo-men, Tim Robinson and Michael Viney. While the “Belfast in Europe” idea occasionally goes walkabout with such things as American essays on 9-11 and on general poetics, the European ground is well covered with translations from Polish and Croatian writers, and with work from, and tributes to, W.G. Sebald.

Though it defies the “contemporary” compass of the journal, Hubert Butler’s uncollected essay, “In Europe’s Troubled Lands” (1950), accompanied by Neal Ascherson’s appreciation of Butler’s “Contemporary Relevance”, is a centre-piece. The cohesive thematic centre is composed of four consecutive essays. John Gray and Agee write on “Belfast in Europe” and “Good Friday Week, 1998” respectively. George Watson’s lucid personal reminiscences of life in Portadown and Tom Paulin’s directly promotional account of elements of Belfast history are perhaps the most enjoyable essays and nicely illustrate the editors’ determination to avoid what they call “narrowly academic articles”.

Longevity, inevitably, is the real test in the precarious world of journal publication, and while the expansive invitation to contributors will surely elicit a wide range of material it may be that the biannual frequency of *Irish Pages* will not be sufficient for retention of readership. Meanwhile, there is, *inter alia* and virtual “spaces” aside, enough of an actual, situated Belfast here to warrant purchase and to generate support for the city’s claims as a cultural capital.

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