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Citizens of the World

Berkeley's Telephone and Other Fictions.

By Harry Clifton.

Lilliput. 239pp, £14.99.

Harry Clifton is one of Ireland's most travelled writers. In the five volumes of poetry and one memoir he has issued since the mid-seventies, he has charted his experiences of various parts of Africa, Asia, Continental Europe and England. He points out, nevertheless, that there is always in his work 'the umbilicus back to Ireland'.

With autobiographical resonances, this home-and-away dialectic informs the ten pieces of Clifton's first book of fiction: four are set in Dublin, three in Africa, and one each in Paris, Germany and Thailand. The volume does not have a particularly auspicious opening. 'Moonlighting', narrated by Charlie, a budding poet and night-watchman in seventies Dublin, has little substance and acts mostly as a kind of prolegomenon, finishing with Charlie leaving for Nigeria, where the following three stories are set.

These do not depend on mere exoticism for effect. There is in all of Clifton's work a discursive and observational method, a 'journalistic facility' as Derek Mahon has put it, and he pays close attention to Nigeria's history, environment and society through the Ceylonese Chinnakone, Resident Engineer and observer of the 1960 Independence ceremonies in 'Independence', through an Irish missionary priest in 'Where the Track Fades', and through Amos, the native teaching supervisor of 'Heartlands'. Though a little less compelling, the Asian and European stories equally achieve an impressive balance between the inner lives of principals and their unfamiliar milieux.

While its appearance at halfway is organisationally damaging (it should be held, climactically, for the end), the novella-length 'Those Who stand and Wait' is in effect the centrepiece. Set amidst Dublin civil servants, and utilising a diaristic format Clifton appears to like, it is a touching illustration of the imbalance between a man's interiorised experience and others's perceptions.

Most laudable overall is Clifton's steady portrayal of middle-class life, a self-conscious habitude towards which he manages to be simultaneously empathetic and critical. All of his people seem disillusioned if not outrightly cynical, exhausted with the life of education, religion, conscientious work and professional relations, even with travel itself. Convincingly, books are important in these stories: Schelling, Blavatsky, Kavanagh are read and there are delightful incidental moments, such as when a young man with bohemian moustache holds forth on animal imagery in Ted Hughes. The most intense, but also most sardonic treatment of this aspect is the title story which is narrated by a Dublin philosopher in Paris who has taken Berkeley's idealism to heart and who rejects the curative of an 'ansafone' proposed by his alienated girlfriend: " 'But what if no one called?' I persisted. 'Wouldn't our place only exist then, if somebody tried to get through on the phone?' "

With a tasteful high-quality production, this collection is intelligent, often funny, realistically introverted and extroverted by turns, stoic yet animated in the world-weariness it portrays. Isolated awkward constructs aside, it is stylish in a mode all the more distinctive for its discrete, cumulative imprint.

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