REVIEWS

The Aging of the "Youngest People in Europe"

Donald E. Morse

Ingman, Heather. *Ageing in Irish Writing: Strangers to Themselves.* Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. 209 pages. ISBN 978 3 319 96429-4. Hb. €74.89.

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Heather Ingman in *Ageing in Irish Writing*, after a lengthy introduction to the theories of aging in general and a sampling of statistics for Irish aging in particular, divides the experience of aging as depicted by Irish writers into six sections and an epilogue. Her division works well and provides an ample frame for a discussion of dozens of Irish prose writers along with many of the significant scholars of aging. The book is, however, somewhat misnamed since it inevitably implies all forms of "Irish Writing" in general, and Ingman does not consider any Irish drama, despite there being a wealth of excellent plays on the subject, nor any poetry except for some late poems by W. B. Yeats.

The Irish, who were once dubbed the "youngest people in Europe," now confront a change in status because like all other European nations, they, too, are entering "the country of age." In the near-future of 2030 "one in five people resident in Ireland will be aged fifty or older" (1). In October 2009 The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA) established at Trinity College began issuing reports on aging in Ireland and they were startling. The percentage of over sixty-fives, for instance, in 2011 was 11.4% of the population and expected to increase by 2021 to 14.1%—a percentage increase of slightly less than 3%. The estimated increase from 2011 to 2041 in contrast is projected at a staggering 160% (15). "As the first TILDA report observed: 'Ageing on this scale is an unprecedented phenomenon in Irish history'" (15). No wonder the study of Irish aging has also grown apace. Yet, in Ireland statistics remain for many an unsatisfactory tool to understand the personal, the psychological reality of aging and ageism because they appear cold, impersonal, probably irrelevant, and, perhaps, untrustworthy. Fortunately, Irish writers have created a wealth of imaginative "case studies" of the process and reality of aging. Joyce ended *Dubliners* (1914) with Gabriel thinking of his Aunt Julia soon to be "arrayed for the bridal" with her groomsman, Death. "[H]e had caught that haggard look upon her face for a moment when she was singing . . ." (173). At the end of *Finnegans Wake*

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(1939), before the *recorso*, the aging couple HCE and Anna Livia Plurabelle confront their changed condition and status (625–28). Joyce's most lyrical evocation of the end of life occurs when Anna Livia, her time ending, flows out to sea, her place to be taken by her daughter "swimming in me [her] hindmost" (627).

Ingman opens *Ageing in Irish Writing* with "Ageing, Time and Aesthetics," in which she discusses Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), W. B. Yeats's last poems, and Elizabeth Bowen's *The Little Girls* (1964)—three writers who appear to question "the capacity of art to freeze time" and instead opt for the importance of "ageing through time" (51). "Resisting the Narrative of Decline" follows where Molly Keane, Deirdre Madden, and Anne Enright challenge "the cultural narrative of ageing as decline by highlighting new skills and strengths . . . gained during the ageing process" (59). "Ageing, the Individual and the Community" brings novels by Iris Murdoch, John Banville, and John McGahern to bear on the problems aging presents for "the individual and the community" (91), while in "Portraits of Old Age in the Irish Short Story," Ingman discusses numerous authors and a myriad of stories; for she rightly maintains that "the short story form lends itself particularly well to the subject of ageing" (125) since what is seen as its limitation in its brevity here helps to sharpen moments of change, crisis, and revelation. "Frail old Age" features characters in their eighties and nineties who "have no choice but to confront their own demise" in novels by Norah Hoult, Julia O'Faolain, Edna O'Brien, and Jennifer Johnston (153). What is distinctive about these works is "their attempt to convey, through imaginative reconstruction, what the experience of frail old age feels like from the inside" (155). Especially valuable is the portrait of dementia in Johnston's *Foolish Mortals* (2007), which in many ways is the dark convoluted side of the end of life as *Two Moons* (1998) portrays its final bright fantastic possibilities. Last, "The Bedbound and Dying," which in addition to the inevitable Beckett trilogy also discusses Iris Murdoch's *Bruno's Dream* (1968) and John Banville's *The Infinities* (2009), moves beyond gerontology into thanatology, the study of dying—a "radically different" experience from aging (181), but one amply represented in Irish literature. The various novels refute the notion that being bed-bound equates with passivity—far from it, as some wreck others' lives (Bowen, *The House in Paris* [1935, 183]), while others, such as Beckett's characters, ruminate, calculate, and even philosophize. Edward Albee's dying Tall Woman, although not Irish, spoke for many of these characters when she succinctly summarized her last experience of "[c]oming to the end of it . . . when all the waves cause the greatest woes to subside, leaving breathing

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space, time to concentrate on the greatest woe of all—that blessed one—the end of it" (109).

All of us are aging, all of our bodies are changing, and for some of us, our minds may be changing as well. It is a truism that the old are "forgetful" and now we have neurological proof with MRIs and fMRIs mapping the brain and pinpointing the gaps and blank spaces where blood should flow but, alas, no longer does. No statistic, however, prepares a person for the element of surprise that appears central to almost every one's experience of aging. The literary critic and poet Malcolm Cowley, speaking from the other side of eighty, succinctly describes this reality when he warns that "[t]o enter the country of age is a new experience, different from what you supposed it to be. Nobody, man or woman, knows the country until he has lived in it and has taken out his citizenship papers" (2–3). The surprise inherent in this "new experience" may well double when "[t]he last act has begun, [since] it will be the test of the play" (2). Against this background Ingman's eloquent plea at the end of her densely packed study resounds clearly: ". . . we need in Ireland to shape a fresh concept of the declining body in a way that rejects stigmatization, acknowledges agency and permits . . . later life to be fully integrated into mainstream society" (197)—a plea that Irish writers in imagining the "country of age" have seconded and cogently illustrated.

Highly recommended for all Irish Studies collections and for many general collections.

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