

Derek Mahon

**THE  
PROSE**

(1970-2020)

*Edited by Peter Fallon*



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## Dublin in the Sixties

I first set eyes on Jeremy Lewis, the author of *Playing for Time*, in October 1961. He was coming down Dawson Street wearing a large false red beard and I thought, 'What a twit!' In those days half the undergraduate population of Trinity seemed to be English, most of them the chinless-wonder variety, much given to shouting, vomiting and whimsical affectations like the false beard. But whereas some were twits, there were happily many intelligent and likeable persons among them; and of these (despite the beard, which he soon discarded) Lewis was one. No chinless wonder he: as a glance at his cover photo will show, he has chin enough for two or three. Chins of this kind are supposed to indicate strength of character and firmness of purpose, attributes Lewis firmly disclaims; yet some resolution must have been involved in putting together the present memoir. The raffishness is here, and the atmosphere of conscious privilege. Whether he really 'gets' Dublin is another question.

I should declare an interest. Jeremy Lewis has been a friend of mine since those days, and a figure bearing my name makes four appearances in the text, three of them friendly enough, one potentially libellous; but even the libellous one is qualified by 'or so the story had it', so perhaps there is nothing in it for me. More interesting are his portraits of other contemporaries like Fenella, 'a handsome, strong-featured girl in a corduroy coat, with auburn hair, an exciting-looking bosom and in one hand a copy of *The Tin Drum*', with whom our hero falls gauche in love; and of well-known 'characters' like the retired judge who, his last day on the bench, 'had condemned a man to death for stealing a bike, so achieving a lifetime's ambition of donning the dreadful black cap'.

En route to Dublin for the first time from his Sussex home (Euston-Holyhead-Dun Laoghaire), the author falls in with an Irish-man in a knobbly white jersey. 'Trinity, eh?' chuckles this

travelling companion. 'By God, they'll have your guts for garters!' His first impression of Dublin, as it was a half-century ago, seems to confirm this racketsy promise: 'After the sobriety of London, Dublin seemed wonderfully seedy and raffish; for all its 18th-century elegance, the city had something rotten and rancid about it, as though it were built upon a compost of straw and dead rats and old tweed jackets and unmentionable alcoholic drinks.' But this is no reprise of Donleavy or Cronin. Apart from a single visit to the Brazen Head, the city Lewis discovered was one of quiet suburbs and respectable digs.

I might, in recompense for 'so the story had it', reproach him with not discovering Dublin at all. But his obvious Englishness must have been against him there; and he clearly loved Ireland, for the right reasons. A screening of *Mise Éire*, and 'the plangent, heart-rending music of Seán Ó Riada', did funny things to him and, taken with intoxicating doses of Yeats, Synge and Joyce, 'had the schizophrenic effect of giving me a strong if vicarious sympathy for Irish Republicanism, while at the same time regretting that so congenial and familiar a country was no longer "one of us", at least as far as formal politics were concerned'.

He records an instructive visit to the Aran Islands: 'I assumed, in my patronizing, ignorant way, that few of the islanders had been to Galway, let alone Dublin or England, for their distinctive hand-made clothes and shoes, their unusual bony looks and their quiet gentle speech seemed to set them apart even in the West of Ireland, as though they were a protected species on some kind of Celtic reservation. To my surprise I found that many of the old-timers to whom I had been speaking in slow and measured tones, wondering if they had heard of trains or aeroplanes or television sets, had, in fact, spent most of their working lives in Boston or New York, returning in old age to the islands they had left in their teens.'

Only half of the book is set in Ireland. Alternating chapters deal with life in England or travels abroad, which makes for a more rounded autobiography, besides setting the Dublin experience in a larger context. Before going to Trinity he worked briefly in advertising, but came a cropper by disclosing a preference for Dickens over Marshall McLuhan.

Student travel in the sense that we know it began in the 1960s, and Lewis was quick off the mark; but his chapters on hitching to

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Greece and Greyhound Busing around America suffer from a straining after laughs. The joke is generally on himself, the Englishman Abroad; yet I could have wished for more original observation and less of the rib-tickling hilarity. Perhaps the problem lies in the fact that he never seems to travel alone, always in a protective pack. He looks better in Paris, drinking with John Montague; or back in London, with the present writer in Ward's Irish House, a pub which no longer exists. There we met (my fourth and last mention) a pleasant Galwayman called Alan C. Breeze, who was something of a poet. Lewis gives him his due, citing 'Tshombe's Lament', about the Irish UN force in Katanga. Alan C. Breeze, not his real name, died alone in a frozen attic in Camden Town in 1969. It's good to see him remembered here.