

<AT>Rough Beasts: The Monstrous in Irish Fiction, 1800-2000, by Jack Fennell; pp. vi + 285. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019, £90.00, \$120.00.</AT>

With its relatively broad historical coverage -- which frequently lingers on events and texts prior to 1800 -- and at-times eclectic selection of texts, Jack Fennell's *Rough Beasts: The Monstrous in Irish Fiction, 1800-2000* may prove a somewhat frustrating read for researchers seeking insight into the function of horror in nineteenth-century Irish culture. Organized thematically rather than chronologically, the book opens with a succinct introduction to the theory of horror -- a concept which Fennell rightly distinguishes from the generic gothic which has customarily dominated the criticism of supernaturally inflected Irish fiction. Following this opening gambit, the seven subsequent chapters guide the reader successively through the specter of famine; various incarnations of the witch; the ghost in its myriad forms; the Faustian bargain in Irish context; the revival of the undead in the familiar corporeality of zombie and vampire, supplemented by post-Celtic Tiger relics of failed capitalist enterprise; and the crypto-zoological shape-shifter. The closing chapter addresses the spatial -- as opposed to the personified -- incarnation of horror. Finally, the whole is summed up in a conclusion which, sometimes irritatingly, rehearses once more essentially the same survey of Irish events that underpins the preceding narrative.

Fennell's argument is premised upon the intimacy between horror and history, and the quite reasonable assumption that the horrific, in the form of monsters and the monstrous places they variously occupy or else create, represent the end of history. The horrific, in essence, is something that demonstrates the processes by which history is negated, overwritten, rendered uncanny, and made differently meaningful in the context of a country which has seemingly always been conflicted in its internal identity as well as in its relationship to England specifically, and the world-that-is-not-Ireland more broadly. Fennell's thesis thus goes somewhat beyond the Protestant Magic proposed elsewhere in Irish studies scholarship, and is more subtle and nuanced than the common yet simplistic assumption that the gothic and horror traditions of Irish writing represent first and foremost the fears of Protestant settlers menaced by the Indigenous dwellers beyond the Pale. There is horror, as Fennell convincingly demonstrates, in how a self-consciously Irish population may regard the personalities and behavior of their geographical neighbors in both historical and contemporary discourse; in how Roman Catholic identities (for, being historical, these must be fractured and plural rather than seamless and singular) may visualize not merely outsider-Protestants but also a native Pagan population whose beliefs inconveniently persist in the form of perceived superstition; and in how the nation (or the consciousness that became nation) expresses its own ambivalent attitude to a troubled history of division leading to civil war, and of a pervasive religious fundamentalism which has nonetheless underwritten a progressive move to secular statehood in recent years. As a broad and panoramic consideration of Irish history through an ingenious thematic perspective, Fennell's work is surely praiseworthy.

It is in the demonstration of this thesis, its exemplification through text and analysis, though, that the volume's shortcomings become evident. Given the breadth of historical coverage implicit in the volume's subtitle, it is to be expected that a significant proportion of the texts under scrutiny will have been published in the twentieth century. Necessarily, again, these latter will almost inevitably foreground writing that was published following the establishment of the Irish Republic as a stable and independent entity -- though, wonderfully, Fennell does take care to demonstrate how accession to the European Union was viewed by some as compromising Irish independence, the EU being demonized as the *Vampir an Bhruiséil*, or the Vampire of Brussels. There is some decent coverage of Edwardian material -- relevant, certainly, to those who contemplate a long nineteenth century -- and this nicely offsets the tenor of the later works Fennell discusses, including Seán Ó Cuirrín's "Beirt Dhéseach" (1922), which amply illustrate the cultural paranoia of a Free State struggling to define a political orthodoxy under the watchful eye of ascendant theocracy. The nineteenth-century content, when juxtaposed with the more emphatic twentieth-century matter, seems muted by comparison, although what is present is often intriguing and in some cases refreshingly different from the textual consensus that has historically demarcated academic criticism of the Irish gothic.

There is, as would be expected, a conventional freighting of those authors -- Charles Maturin, Sheridan Le Fanu, and Bram Stoker -- who have produced the marketable texts which undergraduates will still no doubt continue to consume well into the current century. Curiously, though, Oscar Wilde is not present, and an opportunity is lost to consider at length Stoker's *The Snake's Pass* (1890), a comparatively neglected novel set in Ireland which is passed over in favor of the more familiar *Dracula* (1897). There is a decent reading of Le Fanu's Chapelizod stories (1851), similarly, but these appear somewhat muted when laid beside the separate analysis of (the again familiar) *Carmilla* (1871). All in all, when examining the familiar canonical texts of nineteenth-century Irish gothic, the author appears to have far less to say than when considering those texts published in the twentieth century, a period of achieved self-determination and still-evolving self-definition.

That is not to say, however, that Fennell's engagement with the Victorian period is wholly disappointing. Indeed, the author is at his best when contemplating works scarcely acknowledged in Irish studies, let alone in Irish gothic. Hence, it is refreshing to find an author willing to revive interest in the works of William Carleton, Samuel Lover, and Charles Lever, and to see some speculation as well upon an anonymous 1890 story regarding an Irish ghoul, which Fennell attributes to Lord Dunsany. If these authors might perhaps have been dealt with in a little greater depth, others are accorded a far more substantial presence in the volume's rhetoric: certainly, the fictions of Frank Frankfort Moore, Mrs. Riddell, and Robert Cromie appear worthy of further consideration by the reader, whose appetite will surely have been whetted by Fennell's precise evocation of plot and implication.

Rough Beasts is an uneven work, perhaps even an unbalanced one, but it opens up new possibilities in both Irish studies and the theory of horror. For this reason, it deserves the attention of any reader researching a definitively Irish gothic.

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