

Review

Niall Montgomery: Dublinman, ed. Christine O'Neill (Dublin: Ashfield Press, 2015), 229 pp., ISBN: 978-1-901658-86-6. €20.00 (paperback)

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From the pages of Christine O'Neill's *Niall Montgomery: Dublinman* emerges the portrait of an intelligent, diligent, and humorous individual. The son of the Irish Free State's Film Censor, Montgomery was a mild drinker, a conservative dresser, and was described by colleagues as 'hard to read' and 'enigmatic.'¹ Yet, as O'Neill writes, he was 'anything but conservative in outlook. His mind, certainly, was the opposite of conservative; it was vital' (25). As O'Neill, who knew Montgomery personally, expands: 'Not only was his knowledge prodigious and his mind sharp and fast, but his wit was acerbic and his criticism often withering. Always impeccably dressed, he seemed highly strung, sensitive and impatient, and one feared that he expected the same high standards of others that he demanded of himself' (28). The texts of Montgomery's that this volume collects certainly show no hesitation in direct and forcible expression.

An architect and an artist, a poet and a playwright, a translator and a literary critic, Niall Montgomery was a man possessed of an impressive range of interests and aptitudes. His conversion of the Ormonde Castle stables to the Kilkenny Design Centre in 1963 won him the Conservation Medal of the Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland, and his scholarly work on planning and design was invested with creativity, wit, and passion. His was a strong voice for the conservation and protection of Ireland's historical buildings, and his resistance to profit-driven city planning remains strongly relevant today. As a founding member of the Dublin James Joyce Society, he spoke at numerous James Joyce Symposia, lectured at Harvard and John Hopkins University, and wrote essays and theatrical scripts on Joyce. He was also a published poet, frequent reviewer, and commentator on Beckett and Proust. In his papers, now catalogued and available to researchers at the National Library of Ireland, O'Neill found over 200 pages of translations of modern French poetry into Irish and English. Yet Montgomery's creative output was not restricted to the literary; he was a successful artist who contributed seven times to the Irish Exhibition of Living Art between 1964 and 1979, had a piece exhibited at the Dublin Arts Festival Sculpture

Exhibition in 1975, and held solo exhibitions at the Peacock Theatre in 1972 and 1980. Niall Montgomery was also, of course, a close friend of Brian O'Nolan, and one of the assembly that comprised Myles na gCopaleen.

Niall Montgomery: Dublinman presents selected writings edited and introduced by O'Neill. It is divided into two main sections: the first contains O'Neill's introduction to Montgomery, which sets a brief familial, personal, and professional scene, and then presents descriptions of and backgrounds to Montgomery's creative and critical works. The second half of the book proffers a selection of Montgomery's own output, with his written pieces interspersed with beautiful colour reproductions of his art and photographs. Each section is subdivided into themes such as architecture, Joyce, and Beckett, and so O'Neill's exposition of the background to Montgomery's work on Joyce, in the first half, is matched by some of Montgomery's essays and reviews on Joyce in the second part.

While the overriding theme of Dublin is less pervasive in O'Neill's selection of Montgomery's works than the title might suggest, a clear love for the city, and a personal and professional investment in its preservation is found in many of Montgomery's writings published in this volume. In a letter to *The Architect's Journal* in 1955, Montgomery blamed the destruction of historic buildings in Dublin on the ignorance of urban beauty found in Irish politicians – those 'fugitives from the mountains of Kerry and Belfast who govern us' (37). His architectural essays demonstrate a laudable, progressive commitment to Dublin's people and buildings rather than to development and financial gain:

While hearts and minds are officially dedicated to the oneiric ideal of a united, Gaelic-speaking Ireland, a blind eye (literally) is turned to the country's sole forty-year aim, i.e. profit. To that end all cultural activity has been subordinated, as the Universities could testify, at the loss of their Grants. To assure maximisation of profits, the city of Dublin, for instance, is being destroyed – not deliberately, but as an incident in the growth and development of private enterprise. (41)

For a man invested in the city's physical identity, even Joyce's Dublin was a sore misrepresentation of the urban environs. Writing in *The Irish Times* on Bloomsday 1962, Montgomery argues that 'nowhere in [Joyce's] writing is a sign that he saw, much less enjoyed, the city's rare architectural quality, its urbanity. [...] To him, Dublin was people, but Dublin's Dublin is something more than the singing pub-crawlers and the economy-type brothels he describes' (46).

The sounds of the streets were as important to Montgomery as the buildings in it, of course, and in his 1954 essay 'No Symbols Where None Intended' he praises Beckett's, Joyce's, and O'Nolan's abilities to accurately depict Dublin dialogue. Interestingly, however, by 1973, in a review of Flann O'Brien's *Stories and Plays* in *The New Republic*, he re-evaluates this position, and describes O'Nolan's version of Dublin speech as closer to Synge's representation of the English spoken on the west coast:

O'Nolan's polemical language was eccentrically precise and destructive: his 'vulgar' speech had other qualities. Synge presented as reported speech a language of his own invention. Reported speech in Joyce has more verisimilitude: the parameters are different, the controls more 'scientific.' Reading O'Nolan's 'vulgar' speech, one is constantly reminded of Joyce. In fact, the method is rather that of Synge. O'Nolan's language was vigorous, ornamental, and, at the same time, exciting. (192)

O'Nolan, had he been alive to read this review, would have derived little pleasure from a comparison with a writer the *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns took frequently to task, and despite the praise offered for exciting invention, would, no doubt, have been less than flattered by the idea that his Dublinese was inauthentic. But it seems that Montgomery was unconvinced by O'Nolan's understanding of Dublin and felt that O'Nolan's Plain People, in all their guises, were not real Dubliners. Importantly, this sense of O'Nolan as insufficiently attuned to Dublin is not a belated opinion: in 1961 Montgomery wrote to *The Irish Times* to offer a weekly piece called 'The Half Nelson Column' by Persse O'Reilly. In making the case for his own, independent column he argued a better voice of Dublin than O'Nolan was needed, as O'Nolan had 'no consistent view on the matter, no visual sense, *not* a Dublinman!'²

Montgomery's friendship with O'Nolan lasted all of their adult lives, and the letters between them in the National Library and in O'Nolan's archives in Boston College and the Southern University of Illinois, Carbondale, are marked by the honesty, criticism, affection, disagreements, and expletives that the intimacy of a long friendship creates. Montgomery's responses to drafts of O'Nolan's later works manage to be encouraging to a man oscillating between arrogance and insecurity, while pointing out ways to improve them, and O'Nolan incorporated the vast majority of Montgomery's suggestions into the final versions. Their intimacy survived a number of quarrels, including that caused by Montgomery's 1964 'The Liberties' column, published in *The Irish Times* under the pseudonym Rosemary Lane, and detailed in O'Neill's volume. O'Nolan was furious, as he felt that the column was an imitation of *Cruiskeen Lawn*, and wrote a letter condemning what he saw as the 'painful, laboured,

unblushing copying of another man's work' (94). Montgomery's desire for his own column clearly hurt O'Nolan, and we can surmise that O'Nolan was worried that a rival column might harm his income, concerned that an independent writing career for Montgomery might mean that Montgomery would no longer write *Cruiskeen Lawn*, and fearful that Montgomery's column would be better received than his own.

While Montgomery refused to write longer pieces on O'Nolan and declined requests for information from biographers Anthony Cronin and Peter Costello (98), the little he did write on his friend is fascinating, some of which O'Neill makes available in this work. Her volume also contains details of the friendship and correspondence between Montgomery and Beckett, as well as Montgomery's work with Joseph Strick and Patrick Bedford on Joyce. Yet Montgomery should not be remembered as an associate of talented individuals, but as a formidable man in his own right, and this volume does much to re-evaluate his position in the Irish 20th-century scene. That is not to say that Montgomery, while alive, gained the literary recognition he desired. O'Neill outlines the difficulties Montgomery had in getting his plays performed and his poetry and short stories published. Although his essays on Joyce and Beckett received much contemporary praise, they are not impeccable examples of the art; the level of textual detail is at times excessive, and they would have gained much from a slower pacing and signposting of argument. The absence of a book appears to have been a source of some disappointment for Montgomery, and O'Neill's detailing of the rejection letters he received in the weeks before his death presents a poignant picture.

O'Neill's valuable archival work has produced a much-needed sense of Montgomery's creative output. As the first book on Montgomery, O'Neill's volume is inevitably burdened by the amount of ground she needs to cover, and it is to her credit that the reader leaves with a clear sense of Montgomery's range of accomplishments. That noted, some structural changes would have added much to the clarity of exposition. I would have welcomed a more standard biographical introduction; as valuable, insightful, and often charming as the presentation of reflections by friends and colleagues of Montgomery is, when presented individually rather than integrated into a biographical narrative they render the 'Portrait of a Dublinman' section rather fragmentary. Similarly, the division of the book in two – with all of O'Neill's introductions grouped together in Part 1 and followed by Montgomery's own texts in Part 2 – means that the reader spends a lot of time moving back and forward between the book's halves. For each of the thematic sections in Part 1 O'Neill provides an introduction to some of Montgomery's texts, and where possible provides a description of the texts' background, reception, and associated aspirations and frustrations. If one reads as the book is presented much of the value of the insights

offered by O'Neill are lost by the time the corresponding piece by Montgomery is engaged with.

Although O'Neill offers important contextualising material, I would have welcomed rather more sustained critical analysis of Montgomery's texts. In a review of Richard Ellmann's *James Joyce*, Montgomery writes: 'it is to the author's credit that the reader's ultimate view may not be Mr Ellmann's' (153). It is perhaps with this in mind that O'Neill conceived *Niall Montgomery: Dublinman* and worked to modestly efface her own editorial and critical intrusions. Unfortunately, the result of this humility is to deny Montgomery the critical interpretation and attention that is his due. Finally, while the material that was included is without question of great interest, I would also have liked to have seen some explanation of the editorial decisions made. The cover inset states that the volume 'collects the best of [Montgomery's] writing on the architecture of Dublin, on James Joyce and Samuel Beckett. It aims to present Montgomery's passionate attachment to his native city.' In order to make an assessment of Montgomery's output as a whole, some description of why other texts were excluded would have been valuable, particularly as none of Montgomery's poetry, plays, or translations are found in this volume, and of the pieces that do figure, only a few prioritise Dublin, Joyce, or Beckett. As Montgomery's play *The Winter Man* is based on *Buile Shuibhne*, scholars of O'Nolan would have been eager to read an extract, and his experimental play *Poor Silly Bitch* sounds intriguing. Did O'Neill judge the rejected pieces to be of inferior quality, were they thematically inappropriate, were there copyright issues, or were there simple restrictions of space? A summary of the compilation process would have answered many of these questions.

Christine O'Neill's *Niall Montgomery: Dublinman* presents itself as an introduction to Montgomery and to his selected writings, and despite some flaws in structure, offers important insights to a talented member of the Dublin literati. It does much to record aspects of the 20th-century Irish scene that all too easily could be lost, and affords to Niall Montgomery the book he desired. May more follow.

Notes & references

¹ *Niall Montgomery: Dublinman*, ed. Christine O'Neill (Dublin: Ashfield Press, 2015), 26. All further references to *Niall Montgomery: Dublinman* will appear as parenthetical citations. The book is sold through the bookshop of The Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland; copies can be ordered at info@riai.ie.

² MS 50,118/6/2 Niall Montgomery Papers, National Library of Ireland.