

Review

Jack Fennell, *Irish Science Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014), viii + 264 pp., ISBN: 978-8-78138-119-9. £75.00 (hardback)

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In a 1 March 1963 letter to his publisher Timothy O’Keeffe, Brian O’Nolan voices his ‘horrible fear that some stupid critic (and which of them is not) will praise [him] as a master of science fiction.’¹ Jack Fennell, with *Irish Science Fiction*, joins a growing number of critics such as Samuel Whybrow and Joseph Brooker who would make O’Nolan’s fears become a reality, and convincingly too.²

However, those looking for a work solely dedicated to the crossovers between Flann O’Brien, Myles na gCopaleen, and the genre of science fiction will have to look elsewhere.³ The fleeting references to O’Nolan are set firmly in the historical and contextual arcs, the two great strengths of Fennell’s book. Instead O’Nolan emerges as one figure among scores of others from the mid-19th century till the present day who were literate in the genre of science fiction and used it as material to express the historical, political, and social complexities and contradictions of Ireland in this period. The book, working between Irish studies and science fiction studies successfully widens both disciplines; Irish studies gains a much-needed context in science fiction, while the theory and discourse of science fiction studies is questioned and deepened by its specific grounding in Irish history and literature.

Fennell’s introduction sets out the theoretical groundwork for the historical chapters that follow. Central to Fennell’s thesis is the idea that myth is both the root of and closely aligned to the genre of science fiction. Following the work of Tatiana Chernyshova on myth and science fiction, he argues that the genre is an ‘expression of humanity’s myth-making urge.’⁴ Science fiction is ‘a literature of *gaps*’ (10) in knowledge and understanding of the modern world, which are filled in from one’s own cultural and traditional experience. The formulation might be broken down into the following equation: a partial knowledge of science plus one’s own conception of the past together form hopes and anxieties of the future (i.e. science fiction). The ‘science’ of science fiction is therefore a misnomer; in fact, it should be ‘pseudoscience’ fiction, stories we tell ourselves in order to make sense of modernity, expressing a tension between the traditional and the modern. Fennell’s theory is compelling for its

general applicability to the genre, reading it as a set of contradictions between the scientific and the anti-scientific, modernity and tradition, change and stasis.

However, Fennell goes further, suggesting that it is within colonial and post-colonial settings that the gaps to be filled are widest and therefore most productive. As he points out, modernity is partial and uneven, the colonisers educating the colonised in science only insofar as it is profitable for the home economy. The gaps are thereby greater at the periphery than at the centre, presenting greater opportunities for the creation of pseudoscience, for a hybridised knowledge, which reproduces the master's knowledge unfaithfully. Fennell argues that like Jonathan Swift's character Lemuel Gulliver, Ireland exists 'on the hyphen' (29) between an indigenous knowledge and an imperial one, between a traditional and modern understanding of the world creating its own peculiar science fiction. Such a viewpoint would suggest that Ireland is what Mary Louise Pratt has termed a 'contact zone,'⁵ colonial spaces in which disparate cultures meet often in asymmetrical power relations, creating hybrid cultural products which both reproduce and resist colonial relations.

The first three chapters cover the period from the mid-19th century up until the Second World War, applying Fennell's theory of science fiction produced in the colony as a form of mythmaking to a wide variety of sources. In the first chapter Fennell looks at the works of Fitz-James O'Brien and Robert Cromie, exploring the assertions of the introduction that science fiction in Ireland is created through a pseudo-scientific popular understanding that expresses the hybrid identity and anxiety over the relation between the British Empire and Ireland in the 19th century and between Irish tradition on the one side and the rationalism and modernity put forward by the Empire on the other. The second chapter discusses the particular development of 'Future War' stories in Ireland. These stories began appearing at the end of the 19th century after an example of the British novel *The Battle of Dorking*, by George Tomkyns Chesney, which expressed fears over the strength of the Prussian army by having them successfully invade Britain. Fennell shows how, in the Irish context, the genre was used to express domestic anxieties and tensions, Republicans writing of imagined victories against, and Unionists of feared abandonment by, the British. Embedding the readings within a complex understanding of gender and nation strengthens Fennell's analysis; Britain was seen as the 'man' of the union in partnership with 'feminine' Ireland manifesting itself in these texts *via* a reassertion of violent masculinity. Next, Fennell takes us through the history of Ireland from the First World War and the Easter Rising, up until just before the Second World War, looking at Independence and the Civil War along the way. Analyses of science-fiction texts of the time sit alongside the ideology of socialist James Connolly and 'the mystic poet' (87) Pádraic Pearse, the national political

conflict is read as being accompanied by a cultural one, between modernity and realism on the one side and myth and traditionalism on the other.

The vast breadth of these opening chapters, especially in Chapter 3, covering the tumultuous interwar period, inevitably makes the readings of texts seem at points explanatory of history rather than interrogative. However, I must admit that I have not read the texts themselves, but the connections are made convincingly, linking the history and literature with Fennell's overall reading of Irish science fiction. From the fourth chapter onwards, Fennell allows himself to slow down and so the readings become more complex and fruitful in their relation to their context. Fennell argues that the science fiction of the 1930s and 1940s is inflected with paranoia over outside influence due to a rejection of and hostility to modernity. The texts that Fennell uses are read at an angle to this formulation, allowing a richness and complexity to emerge. Particularly effective is the reading of *Out of the Silent Planet* by C. S. Lewis (Lewis incidentally agreed with Fennell over science fiction seeing its most successful manifestations as 'mythopoetic'⁶), which has been characterised by Roger Luckhurst as part of a movement of British writers and novels which expressed a rejection of modernity following the horrors of the Second World War.⁷ However, Fennell argues that Lewis's novel, with its hostility toward modernity, is better characterised within a pre-war Irish setting (this makes more sense as it was published in 1939) and shows it in dialogue with other Irish authors, particularly George Bernard Shaw, around the discourse of eugenics. Lewis emerges from this context as a strange champion of resistance to eugenics, conservative yet humane, and not simply a reactionary.

In the next chapter Fennell reads science fiction in the 1960s as reflecting a new liberalism brought about by a number of emergent phenomena: modernisation of the economy post-Second World War, the decline of the influence of the Catholic Church, and the access of the population to mass media, especially the American pulps of the 1930s to the 1950s. Fennell concentrates on the works of Cathal Ó Sándair, especially the *Captaen Spéirling* series in context of 'the Lemass Era,' referring to the modernisation programme encouraged by 1960s Taoiseach Seán Lemass (1959–66). The derivative nature of the character *Captaen Spéirling*, embodying as he does the pulp science-fiction heroes of the American market two decades before, is not a defect but rather the point; as Fennell explains, 'the good Captain's principal purpose is *to speak Irish in outer space*, and thus to show that there is no objective reason why the Irish should not dare to dream of such things' (145).

The next two chapters take a darker turn as they look at three northern Irish authors over two chapters. The first discusses Bob Shaw and James White, reading their work as two reactions and mediations on the Troubles in Northern Ireland, through escape in the former, and through a circumvention of historical conflict in the latter.

Again, I was impressed by the attention to specific context and historical grounding of the texts. James White's *Sector General* series, which follows the character Dr Conway in his many ordeals in a multi-species general hospital set in a galactic future, is seen as a 'never-ending war against xenophobia' (158) reflecting White's sadness at the seemingly unsolvable crisis in which he lived. Escape, in the work of Bob Shaw is not escapist but rather alienating, allowing for a distanced and nuanced view of conflict as well as turning the idea of escape on its head: 'the "escapist" can also be a refugee' (169). The two writers use clichéd science-fiction tropes in poignant ways, challenging the progress paradigm of the American science fiction which was their source.

From Captaen Spéirling's positive use of genre to reflect the modernity of Ireland, *via* the more critical use for meditation on conflict in Northern Ireland with Shaw and White, we arrive at Ian McDonald, whose work is the sole focus of the following chapter. Here, Fennell expands in more detail on the theme of reusing genre tropes for resistance; he argues that McDonald consciously adopts cliché in order to challenge and offer alternatives to the 'shiny, libertarian, culturally homogenous techno-utopias of the past' (173). Fennell ends by looking at the more recent developments in science fiction in Ireland, covering the dystopic work produced during the recession of the 1980s, the rise of Cyberpunk and a strain of reactionary mysticism during the Celtic Tiger years, and the increasing appearance of strong women characters as we approach the present. Fennell rounds off the book with a meditation on the future of science fiction in Ireland. He notes that a general move towards the blurring of boundaries in genre works in the 21st century perfectly suits the always already hybrid and ambiguous alliance of Ireland and science fiction in the 19th and 20th centuries. As Fennell pleads in the introduction, the book 'is not intended to be both the start and the end of the discussion' (2). *Irish Science Fiction* is most certainly a provocative and compelling start. There is a wealth of information and texts that demands further attention here, and the book, intersecting as it does at the nexus between Irish and science fiction studies, illuminates both in productive ways. If Flann O'Brien is to be forever known as an Irish science-fiction writer, at least now he will not be alone.

Notes & references

¹ Brian O'Nolan, letter to Timothy O'Keeffe, 1 March 1963, in 'A Sheaf of Letters,' in 'A Flann O'Brien–Myles na Gopaleen Number,' eds. Robert Hogan and Gordon Henderson, special issue, *The Journal of Irish Literature* 3, no. 1, (January 1974): 81.

² See Samuel Whybrow, 'Flann O'Brien's Science Fiction: An "Illusion of Progression" in *The Third Policeman*,' in *'Is it about a bicycle?': Flann O'Brien in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Jennika Baines (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2011), 127–41. Joseph Brooker has analysed the thematic cross-over between the work of Philip K. Dick and Flann O'Brien, in particular *Ubik* and *The Third Policeman*, in his paper 'Do Bicycles Dream of Molecular Sheep,' given as the keynote address at the III International Flann O'Brien Conference held in Prague in September 2015.

³ For example, see Fennell's chapter 'Irelands Enough and Time: Brian O'Nolan's Science Fiction,' in *Flann O'Brien: Contesting Legacies*, eds. Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and Werner Huber (Cork: Cork University Press, 2014), 33–45, and his article 'Myles in Space: Science Fiction and *Cruiskeen Lawn*,' *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* 3, no 1 (2014): 64–77.

⁴ Fennell, *Irish Science Fiction*, 9. All further references to this work will appear in parenthetical references.

⁵ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes* (London: Routledge, 1992), 6.

⁶ C. S. Lewis, *C. S. Lewis: Essay Collection and Other Short Pieces*, ed. Lesley Walmsley (London: HarperCollins, 2000), 456.

⁷ Roger Luckhurst, *Science Fiction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 123.