Brian Friel by George O'Brien, and: *Contemporary Irish Dramatists* by Michael Etherton (review)

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theatrical terrain as Yeats"; and more of the same. In the end, even the author seems to recognize how insubstantial most of this must seem, offering an almost apologetic conclusion: "The late plays of W. B. Yeats provide a frail but nonetheless supportive foundation for the early works of Samuel Beckett" and "Only with some difficulty does the analogy with Yeats's drama clarify the later work of art that needs no clarification."

When the author turns to Jack Yeats, where we have reason to hope for more, there seems to be even less. It does not help that the author begins by radically mis-stating one of the few actual sources of Beckett's views on the painter: the homage of 1954. We are told that "Beckett professed that he could submit 'in trembling to the unmasterable' images that his Irish compatriot assembled on canvas." He said nothing of the sort. It is Yeats's own "final mastery which submits in trembling to the unmasterable," an admittedly dark formulation which nonetheless has nothing to do with Beckett's submitting to Yeats.

Once again we are treated to weakly-supported generalizations, "There can be no question that the influence of Jack Yeats was important for the development of Samuel Beckett as an artist," followed by the merest of assertions: "Taking their cue from Jack Yeats, the principal characters, Didi and Gogo, consume time as they wait for Godot, the absent antagonist of the plot, by telling stories, improvising scenes, [etc.]"; "Beckett's inspiration for *Fin de Partie* belonged to Jack Yeats"; "The generation and regeneration of *Molloy* derived from Yeats's work of the twenties and thirties." If such assertions could indeed be convincingly argued, it would be of profound interest, but they are not. Instead they merely float to the surface from time to time, awaken our interest, and disappear.

My own disappointment with this volume is a function of how much I hoped for in it. Perhaps that hope was itself unreasonable. Perhaps it is true that, as Beckett says, "In images of such breathless immediacy as these there is no occasion, no time given, no room left, for the lenitive of comment."

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GEORGE O'BRIEN. *Brian Friel*. Boston: Twayne Publishers 1990. Pp. xii, 148, illustrated. $21.95.

MICHAEL ETHERTON. *Contemporary Irish Dramatists*. London: Macmillan 1989. Pp. xvi, 253, illustrated. $25.00.

George O'Brien's *Brian Friel*, like other books in Twayne's English Authors Series, is designed for the university student beginning a serious study of an individual author and needing an introduction to the scope of the author's literary achievement and to the range of critical response both to discrete works and to the oeuvre. It usefully provides a detailed account of the short stories with which Friel made his name in the 1950s, of the plays that by 1960 encouraged him to become a professional writer, and of every item of his dramatic output in the next 28 years. This approach gives as

much weight to minor plays of the early 1970s, such as *The Mundy Scheme* and *The Gentle Island*, as to such major achievements of the 1980s as *Faith Healer* and *Translations*. For obvious reasons, *Dancing at Lughnasa*, the huge success of the early 1990s, is not discussed.

O'Brien begins with a biographical chapter that takes us to Friel's sixtieth year and defines for us the imaginative landscape of the short stories and the plays – plays that, frequently and not surprisingly, echo the themes and reinvent the characters of the stories, as O'Brien shows painstakingly. The second chapter deals with the early plays – from *A Sort of Freedom*, broadcast by the BBC Northern Ireland Home Service in 1958, to *Philadelphia Here I Come*, staged in the Gaiety Theatre, Dublin in 1964. Here the reader looks in vain for an attempt to assess the imaginative and, especially, the technical influence on *Philadelphia* of Friel's Minneapolis "schooling" in 1963, when he spent a few months observing Tyrone Guthrie directing plays by Shakespeare and Chekhov.

Disappointments of this sort are characteristic, for O'Brien is more committed to story than theory, more to synopsis of action than analysis of structure. This is especially true of chapter 2 – about *The Loves of Cass McGuire* and other plays of 1964–73 grouped as Theater of Character – but it is true also of the commentary on what O'Brien labels the Theater of Fact (e.g. *The Freedom of the City*, a 1973 response to Derry's Bloody Sunday of '72) and the Theater of Language, the category in which he places *Faith Healer* (1980) and later plays.

What I call a fault may be seen as a virtue by instructors who prefer books such as this to have the function of maps – to depict in graphic detail the minutiae of the imaginative and critical landscape but to leave readers to make their own explorative decisions. O'Brien does not steal the thunder of those who wish to discourse on Friel's theatrical singularities or on his experiments in dramatic structure.

There is one fault that can in no way be construed as a virtue – a surprising one in that O'Brien is an award-winning creative writer and memoirist; surprising too if it is the editor's job to blue-pencil solecisms. There are too many pages blemished by the infelicitous phrase, the grammatical lapse, and the indecipherable assertion. "The remains' evidence of violence" is the expression for the marks of brutality on a corpse.

The Macmillan Modern Dramatists series also aims primarily at the student reader, as the bibliography in Michael Etherton's *Contemporary Irish Dramatists* tacitly acknowledges. Etherton offers an introduction to and history of Irish drama from M. J. Molloy's *The King of Friday's Men* (1947) to Thomas Murphy's *Bailegangaire* and Frank McGuinness's *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* (1985). He discusses conventional theatre in Dublin and Belfast, recent theatrical movements in Galway and Derry, TV and radio drama, plays in Irish (particularly the works of Siobhan Ni Shuilleabhain and the Gaelic productions at Galway's An Taidhbhearc theatre), and products of the theatre of political activism such as *The Non-stop Connolly Show* by Margaretta D'Arcy and John Arden.

Etherton, committed to scope rather than balance, devotes nearly half the book to the works of Friel and Thomas Murphy but only a few pages to those of Hugh

Leonard. Still, his survey chapters contain interesting mini-essays, such as that on Thomas Kilroy (pp. 51–62), which call attention to artists whose stature has not yet been properly measured.

Etherton is an optimistic cultural materialist who privileges performance over print and collectively produced over author-driven drama. He values playwrights who, like Kilroy and Friel, dramatize the parallel between linguistic and social change and who, he claims, write with the purpose of provoking social change. But often enough he plays Polonius, forgetting his theory in practice. Committed to the analysis of dramatic texts as performance, he gives a three-page synopsis of Molloy's *Petticoat Loose* without a word on the relationship of script to community or a thought on the feminist implications of the action. Furthermore, he never discusses the actual staging of any scenario or records any audience response to a performance.

Etherton is a lively writer but not a wholly accurate one. He never gets the real name of Shivaun O'Sullivan right. He places the Norman invasion of 1169 in the eleventh century. He attributes *School for Scandal* to Goldsmith. In the index he misprints the title of Tom McIntyre's *The Great Hunger*. And, Saints Alive! he calls a pattern (cf. OED def. 12) a "patten." Lastly, he sees Irish English as a language not only imposed by Gall on Gael, but one that historically has "most easily expressed the rhetoric of political domination" (p. 126).

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STEPHEN HINTON. *Kurt Weill: The Threepenny Opera*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1990. Pp. xv, 229, illustrated. $39.50; $14.95 (PB).

DOUGLAS JARMAN. *Alban Berg: Lulu*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1991. Pp. xiii, 146, illustrated. $39.50; $18.95 (PB).

These small volumes are the latest in a Cambridge University Press series about composers and their works, each oeuvre treated in a separate book. Hinton and Jarman provide the fascinating background history to the gestation of Weill's *The Threepenny Opera* and Berg's *Lulu*, respectively, as well as an interpretation of the librettist's plot and the music itself. The musicological analysis is sensibly aimed at showing the synchronicity between stage action and musical dynamics, meant to underscore the dramatic highlights. In their conciseness, both volumes are well crafted, and they are doubtless of value to musicologists as well as to general historians of culture.

Hinton dwells on the tortuous evolution of *The Threepenny Opera*, a plot whose libretto by Bertolt Brecht was based on John Gay's *Beggar's Opera*. The scenes, from the world of petty criminals and prostitutes of London, were moved to the twentieth century so that Brecht and Weill could justify their overt criticism of what they perceived as social injustices engendered by modern capitalism. This opera, which was first performed in Berlin in 1928, had only a short run in its home country Germany, because in 1933 the National Socialist regime banned it from every stage. Its world