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Carl Steffeck, General Reille delivers to King Wilhelm I on the battlefield of Sedan the letter from Emperor Napoleon III, 1884

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Carl Steffeck, General Reille delivers to King Wilhelm I on the battlefield of Sedan the letter from Emperor Napoleon III, 1884

Chancellor Faustus

by [Daniel Johnson](#)

A review of *Bismarck: A Life* by Jonathan Steinberg

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No statesman has ever enjoyed such an inflated reputation as Otto von Bismarck. His catchphrases still reverberate around the echo-chamber of politics: “*Realpolitik*,” “honest broker,” “the art of the possible.” He fought three wars and won all of them. He unified Germany and made it a Continental superpower. But he also unleashed the daemonic forces that came close to destroying Western civilization in the twentieth century. If Hitler was the most devilish figure in modern history, Bismarck was the most Faustian. It was this Prussian reactionary whose “blood and iron” smashed the old rules that had hitherto constrained the destructive power of modernity. He probably never said “laws are like sausages: it’s better not to see them being made.” Yet the remark was attributed to him, for he held not only laws but humanity in contempt.

Jonathan Steinberg’s magnificent biography brings out the monstrous egotism of Bismarck more clearly than anybody before him. Steinberg suggests that the key to the young Otto was his cold, clever, and frustrated mother, from whom he inherited his brains and his ruthless streak, but who also left him damaged and emotionally crippled. At university in Göttingen, the teenage Bismarck fought twenty-five duels and befriended an American student, John Motley, later the celebrated historian of the Dutch Republic. Motley was so impressed by this “mad Junker,” who “in every respect . . . went immeasurably beyond any person I have ever known,” that he wrote a biographical novel about him. *Morton’s Hope* revolves around the character of Otto von Rabenmarck, who defeats all rivals with the duelling saber. Despite his wild conduct, he declares: “I intend to lead my companions here, as I

intend to lead them in after-life. You see I am a very rational sort of person. . . . To obtain mastery over my competitors, who were all extravagant, savage, eccentric, I had to be ten times as extravagant and savage as anyone else.”



Bismarck did indeed grow up to be a savage: a man of voracious appetites and volcanic temper, a liar and a bully who thought nothing of betraying friends and destroying enemies. According to Steinberg, Bismarck committed all seven deadly sins habitually. He threatened resignation regularly in order to blackmail his royal masters, but when the young Kaiser Wilhelm II finally called his bluff and dispensed with his services, Bismarck’s determination to exact vengeance endured beyond the grave. Even his lifelong friend and admirer Baroness Spitzemberg wrote a grim tribute: “Blood is blood and the Bismarcks are defiant, violent men, unrestrained by education and not noble in temperament.”

Yet he could also be charm itself. Among those charmed was Disraeli, who came to know him well during the Berlin Congress in 1878. This was perhaps the zenith of Bismarck’s career, when he had all the great powers dancing attendance on him. Their respect was mutual: “The old Jew—he is the man,” was another of Bismarck’s bon mots that went the rounds of the conference chamber. Disraeli, however, saw through the charm and discerned the abyss into which Bismarck’s “German revolution” had precipitated Europe: “Not a single principle in the management of our foreign affairs, accepted by all statesmen for guidance up to six months ago, any longer exists,” he told the House of Commons in 1871, days after Bismarck had proclaimed the new German Empire in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles:

There is not a diplomatic tradition that has not been swept away. You have a new world, new influences at work, new and unknown dangers and objects with which to cope. . . . The balance of power has been utterly destroyed, and the country that suffers most, and feels the effect of this great change most, is England.

It is entirely typical of Bismarck that he should have upset the delicate balance of European diplomacy for the sake of a goal—German unity—in which he had no emotional investment whatsoever. He did not care a fig for Germany; as for Europe, it was a mere “geographical expression.” As for the Balkans, the *casus belli* which gave him the excuse to hold the Berlin Congress, they were “not worth the bones of a Pomeranian grenadier.” The only cause that Bismarck cared about was the Prussian monarchy, on which his own power entirely depended. On his grave, the epitaph reads: “A faithful German servant of Kaiser Wilhelm I.”

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Yet how faithful a servant of the crown was he? He manipulated the “old gentleman,” Wilhelm I, whom he claimed to revere; intrigued against the son, Friedrich III, as he lay on his deathbed; and alienated the grandson, Wilhelm II, who responded by “dropping the pilot.” He tried to turn

Wilhelm I against his liberal wife, Augusta, and spied on her successor as Empress, Queen Victoria's daughter Vicky, spreading vicious rumors about her and her British doctor Sir Morrell Mackenzie, who treated Friedrich's terminal throat cancer. With ministers like this, a monarch does not need enemies.

Steinberg paints a vivid and persuasive portrait of this “genius-statesman,” but it comes with a health warning. He argues that Bismarck's *realpolitik*, in which dubious ends justified even more dubious means, accustomed the Germans to an autocratic and arbitrary style of government that infantilized them and left them vulnerable to the even more megalomaniacal Hitler. Most damning of all is the terrible political legacy that he bequeathed to the new German Reich. Having emancipated the Jews, Bismarck then turned against them; it suited him to let anti-Semitism emerge as a tool that could be used to bury liberalism as a political force. It was Bismarck, too, who fought the first “culture war,” the *Kulturkampf*, against Catholics. The only result of this was to strengthen Catholic resistance. Steinberg's two heroes are Eduard Lasker and Ludwig Windthorst, the leaders of German Liberals and Catholics respectively. When Lasker died, Bismarck revealed his contempt for the democracy he had created: the Reichstag was “the guest house of the dead Jew.” As a parliamentarian, however, Windthorst was more than a match for Bismarck; the Centre Party he created not only survived but became the forerunner of post-war Christian democracy. Nor could Bismarck's use of police state tactics halt the rise of socialism. By the time he lost power, Bismarck was plotting a putsch to reverse the very limited degree of parliamentary democracy that the 1871 constitution conceded.



The myth of Bismarck—the soldier and seer who saved the Germans from the machinations of Jews and Jesuits—was partly his own creation. This myth was wholly pernicious but, like the Faust myth, it had great power over the imagination. In retirement, Bismarck—a gifted journalist who might, Steinberg thinks, have made a great comic novelist—used a Hamburg newspaper to propagate his own version of history, a version which was taken up after his death by the anti-Semites and the ultra-nationalists. Steinberg has brilliantly transformed this man of “blood and irony” into a tragic figure worthy to be compared with Goethe’s Faust. If Bismarck himself was a Faustian figure, who had renounced all ethical and political principles for the sake of power, then the soul he sold was not merely his own, but that of Germany.

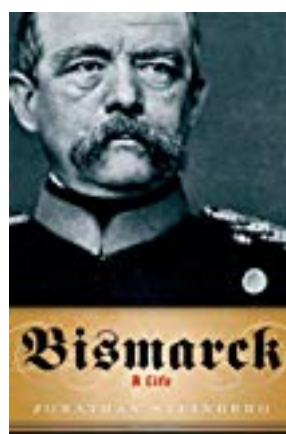
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Bismarck: A Life

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Out of Ireland

by Bill Coyle

A review of *An Anthology of Modern Irish Poetry* by Wes Davis



Ireland is associated in the popular imagination, or at least in that dwindling portion of the popular imagination that concerns itself with literary matters, with poetry. Seamus Heaney (“Seamus Famous,” as Clive James once dubbed him) is one of the best known writers of our time, while W. B. Yeats has only a few serious competitors—Robert Frost and T. S. Eliot chief among them—for the title of best English-language poet of the modern period. Heaney’s contemporaries, Michael Longley, Derek Mahon, and Eavan Boland are, if not household names, major figures in contemporary poetry. All this despite the fact that Ireland, as Wes Davis points out in his introduction to *An Anthology of Modern Irish Poetry*, “has roughly the population of Tennessee in a land area the size of South Carolina.” That’s a helpful reminder, given the enormous quantity and high quality of literature produced, in two languages, by this nation—or nations—during the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

At first glance you might think Davis has chosen to include all of it. Including the notes and index, the anthology is a whopping 976 pages. Granted, there are advantages to this sort of editorial generosity. We get all of Patrick Kavanagh's "The Great Hunger," and Anthony Cronin's "r.m.s. Titanic," and healthy selections of Richard Murphy's "The Battle of Aughrim." In the case of the younger poets here who haven't yet published a "selected," this is also a welcome opportunity to get an overview of their work. Still, it's not the sort of book you'd want to take with you on the plane while flying to the old sod, or in your backpack while cycling around it. Portability isn't the only test of a good anthology, of course, but it's all too easy to imagine this one suffering the same fate as, say, *The Riverside Shakespeare*, purchased when required for a college course, sold or left to gather dust thereafter.

That would be a shame, because this is a book that in every sense deserves a broad readership. I say in every sense, because we sometimes say that a poet or body of work deserves readers based entirely on literary merit, without taking into account the needs and capacities of those as-yet-unconverted readers. The English poet Geoffrey Hill may deserve a broad readership, but the difficulties posed by his work, even if often exaggerated, are sufficient to ensure that this will never happen. Most readers of poetry will never cotton to Hill, to say nothing of the larger group of readers who have largely abandoned poetry for prose fiction and non-fiction.

These are just the readers, however, that I can imagine perusing *An Anthology of Modern Irish Poetry* with a palpable sense of relief. Davis cites Louis MacNeice's assertion that the ideal modern poet is "a fairly normal person," and in fact most of the poets here are determinedly normal, or at least want

their readers to regard them as such. In part this seems a conscious strategy, adopted in response to the ways in which modern education created divisions within communities and families. Seamus Heaney, for one, returns obsessively to the ways in which his education and poetic vocation distanced him from his family and social class. You see this in perhaps his most famous poem, “Digging,” which Davis includes, and in “Casualty,” which I wish he had. The latter poem tells of the poet’s relatively casual acquaintance with a fisherman killed while violating an IRA curfew. The dead man had frequented a pub owned by Heaney’s father-in-law, where the poet helped out behind the bar:

Incomprehensible
To him, my other life.
Sometimes, on the high stool,
Too busy with his knife
At a tobacco plug
And not meeting my eye,
In the pause after a slug
He mentioned poetry.
We would be on our own
And, always politic
And shy of condescension,
I would manage by some trick
To switch the talk to eels
Or lore of the horse and cart
Or the Provisionals.

“Shy of condescension” is a lovely, double-edged phrase—the poet is “shy of condescension” in the obvious sense of fearing to condescend, but he is also “just shy of” condescension, which is to say he is very nearly condescending,

in his assumption that he needs to get the fisherman back on familiar turf.

That shyness inflects—not “infects,” its influence has been too salutary for that—much modern Irish poetry. References to Irish history and legend, to classical myth, to the Bible or Shakespeare abound in the anthology—Homer, Virgil, and Ovid might be ancient Irish poets, to judge by how often they’re mentioned—but these are typically handled with a minimum of fuss and bother, contra the example of high modernists like Eliot, Pound, and David Jones. The thrust of modern Irish poetry is not to lament a rupture with the Western past (“These fragments I have shored against my ruins,” as Eliot put it), but to demonstrate Irish culture’s continuity both with its Gaelic inheritance and with the broader European tradition.

Nowhere are literary references thicker on the ground, for example, than in Davis’s selections from James Simmons— also a singer and songwriter of some note—with more than half of the poems based on other literary works past and present, including a parody of Heaney’s “Station Island.” At the same time, Simmons’s work is direct to the point of bluntness. Many, though by no means all, of the poems in *Modern Irish Poetry* read as though they could have been written in a world where Modernism never happened; Simmons’ “Exploration in the Arts” offers a more direct critique:

Old Tom and Ezra battened on the Old.
Making it new, my arse. Rapists! Damnation!
Where’s the originality, the gold,
when every memorable line’s quotation?
“Hast ’ou seen but white lilly grow. . .”
 The cheek, the gall!
Compare Pound’s bits with the original.

Simmons is largely unknown in the U.S., which is a shame, as his combination of populism, intellect, and loyalty to tradition is unlike anything we have. Another name that's likely new to most American readers is Michael Hartnett, a contemporary of Simmons (and of Heaney, Longley, and Mahon). Hartnett produced major work in both Irish and English, abandoning the latter at one point for a period of ten years. "Death of an Irishwoman" is a small masterpiece, which concludes:

She was a summer dance at the crossroads.
She was a card game where a nose was broken.
She was a song that nobody sings.
She was a house ransacked by soldiers.
She was a language seldom spoken.
She was a child's purse, full of useless things.

As will be evident from the verses quoted above, Irish verse not only remained accessible, but unabashedly, if modestly, musical. Poetry in meter and rhyme, which in the US and Canada was nearly swept from the field at some points, has remained the gold standard in Ireland. Even those poets in the anthology who could arguably be said to write in free verse (always a difficult term to define), have a clear sense of the line, and of traditional prosody. And a number of the poets born in the late Sixties and early Seventies—Justin Quinn, David Wheatley, Connor O'Callaghan—make virtuosic use of traditional forms.

By contemporary standards, then, Irish poets are uncommonly conscious of craft, and this consciousness connects them at once to the tradition of high poetic art in their two languages, where craftsmanship is a necessary

precondition to the creation of art, and to the more ordinary crafts—digging, fishing, sewing—that make life, especially rural life, livable. Heaney famously concludes “Digging,” in which he compares his writing of poetry to his father’s digging potatoes by saying, “Between my finger and my thumb / The squat pen rests. / I’ll dig with it.” Paula Meehan establishes a similar connection, if a more personally troubled one, between her poetry and her mother’s domestic work in “The Pattern”:

Sometimes I’d have to kneel
an hour before her by the fire,
a skein around my outstretched hands,
while she rolled wool into balls.
If I swam like a kite too high
amongst the shadows on the ceiling
or flew like a fish in the pools
of pulsing light, she’d reel me firmly
home, she’d land me at her knees.

Tongues of flame in her dark eyes,
she’d say, “One of these days I must
teach you to follow a pattern.”

If I have a reservation about *An Anthology of Modern Irish Poetry*, aside from its bulk, it would be that Davis, as a critic, has one very big chip on his shoulder, a chip by the name of William Butler Yeats. One of the central theses of his introduction, and one to which he returns in his introductions to the selections from individual poets, is that Irish poets writing after the height of high modernism, when faced with a choice between the two

masters available to them, Joyce and Yeats, chose Joyce. Yeats, to hear Davis tell it, is a world denying, faintly ridiculous mystic, while Joyce is the great champion of ordinary life.

This is a gross oversimplification. There are many Yeatses (and many Joyces, too, but that's for another time): there's the love poet, early and late, of "Adam's Curse" and "Politics," for example, or the political poet of "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" and "Easter 1916." And if none of these Yeatses wrote as convincingly (or at times as drearily) about Irish country life as Patrick Kavanagh was to do in the 1950s, Yeats did attempt to write a vigorous poetry based in the vernacular, his desire to do so most memorably expressed in "The Fisherman," where the poet first imagines the title character, then vows, "Before I am old/ I shall have written him one/ poem maybe as cold/ And passionate as the dawn."

Yeats went on to make good on this promise. Yes, he was capable of writing lofty, sometimes sententious stuff that suggested a withdrawal into Platonic realms, but he could also write musically matter-of-fact lines like those in the first stanza of "Easter 1916," his great poem about the abortive uprising against British rule:

I have met them at close of day
Coming with vivid faces
From counter or desk among grey
Eighteenth-century houses.
I have passed with a nod of the head
Or polite meaningless words,
Or have lingered awhile and said
Polite meaningless words,
And thought before I had done
Of a mocking tale or a gibe
To please a companion
Around the fire at the club,
Being certain that they and I
But lived where motley is worn:
All changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

The Heaney poem “Casualty,” which I quoted earlier, draws some of its considerable power from its allusions to “The Fisherman” and “Easter 1916,” bringing together as it does the figure of a (real, not imagined) fisherman and the threat of revolutionary violence. To make the linkage all the more explicit, Heaney cast his poem in the same meter and rhyme scheme that Yeats employed for both of his. It’s striking, though, how little poetic form seems to enter into Davis’s reading of literary history. If Irish poets have generally preferred Joyce’s Dublin to Yeats’s Byzantium, they have by and large chosen to work in the traditional meters and unfragmented syntax of the latter.

Davis's lack of subtlety on the subject of Yeats and his influence is luckily not a fatal flaw. He does a fine job of introducing and contextualizing the work of the poets he has selected, and of translating and clarifying terms and allusions when necessary (though I wish one didn't have to flip all the way to the end of the book to find his notes). An anthology ultimately stands or falls on the strength of the work that it collects. In this regard, especially, *An Anthology of Modern Irish Poetry* is a notable success.

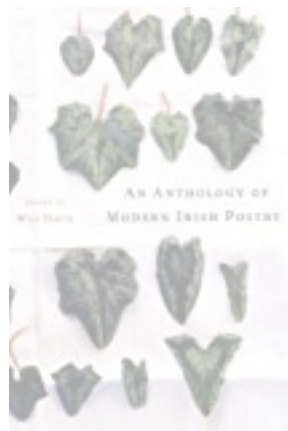
Bill Coyle is the translator of *Dog Star Notations: Selected Poems 1999–2016* by the Swedish poet Håkan Sandell.

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