

Ireland: A Traveler's Literary Companion

James McElroy, Editor

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Despite the heap of travel memoirs and tourist guides that are published every year, intrepid travelers often find that the best way to get a deeper sense of a country is through its literature. Whether it's well-loved classics or edgy contemporary work, fiction can convey subtle shades of meaning and nuance that not even a Lonely Planet guide can capture.

This premise is the driving force of *Ireland*, a small volume that would fit neatly into any carry-on bag, but which provides such a formidable, palpable sense of the country that it seems worth its weight in Guinness.

From the outset, editor James McElroy notes that the collection is a celebration of Irish writers and their various distinctive voices, but that the country's literature can't be fully understood without taking into account its "evolution in the context of a vexed and complicated political history," primarily the struggles between Ireland and England.

This is a wrangle that permeates many of the collection's pieces, tying them together in a way that unifies the work, melding the path-breaking prose of James Joyce to the political insights of activist Gerry Adams. Although the collection is organized by region—Leinster, Munster, Connaught, and Ulster—there's a feeling of wholeness that transcends history, and provides layers of perspective.

The most famous of the country's writers are represented, with James Joyce kicking off the short pieces with an excerpt from *Ulysses*, followed soon by Frank O'Connor, Patrick Kavanagh, and Edna O'Brien. And these familiar voices harmonize well with the more contemporary writers like Elizabeth Cullinan and Brian Moore, as well as lesser-known authors like J.M. Synge, who provides a memoir of his experiences exploring the Aran Islands in the late 1800s.

A particularly charming piece, "The Homesick Industry," by Hugo Hamilton, chronicles the life of a distribution manager at an Irish goods company. The firm specializes in shipping distinctly Irish products to people around the world, and he muses on how the whole globe seems to contain customers: "I can see them up there in Alaska, wearing thick Aran sweaters under their parkas and holding small tin whistles to their frozen lips," he writes. "Frozen fingers pressing out the first warped notes and bringing back the faraway feeling of home."

The collection is part of a series done by Whereabouts Press, and the fifteen different volumes span the globe from Australia and Chile, to Japan and Israel. Two collections focus on specific cities, Amsterdam and Prague. Given the care taken with selecting Ireland's pieces, the avid traveler—whether that means she with well-stamped passport or he with well-worn armchair—has much more to explore through the publisher than just the Emerald Isle, but any journey with James Joyce is a trip worth taking.

ELIZABETH MILLARD (February 15, 2008)

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