This book would have made a good essay, but an interesting subject pursued at this length within a very conventional historical framework becomes strangely tedious. While the blurb tells us that the book is based “in large part” on previously unpublished material, the claim on the Pound side has been superseded by the publication of A Serious Character, and the book contains little that will be new to Yeats scholars.

NOTES


Stan Smith

There is a good book to be written on the ideological significance of Celtic Ireland for the generation of 1916. A Terrible Beauty is a sad disappointment. Its history is pretty dodgy, whether it refers to “the dim past of Milesian Ireland” (p. 28) or to the mundane modern republic. Yeats, Carmel Jordan says, was “not interested in a factual linear view of Irish history, but in an epiphanic one where the Image is predominant” (p. 71); and neither is she. In fact, she is
interested only in “The terrible and splendid things . . . that have made up the history of Ireland – violence, bloodshed and death, and the splendid poetry and song that has grown out of that blood” (p. 37), and often more in the blood than the poetry, as in her digression on Bobby Sands, for, “Although his poems were not great, the passions that lay behind them were, and . . . he endorsed his poetry with his blood” (p. 33).

When it comes to strands of Irish nationalism other than the spilt religiosity of Padraic Pearse, Jordan is at a loss. Michael Davitt goes unacknowledged. Parnell appears once, in a quote from Pearse. Most significantly, of the three passing references to the socialist James Connolly, two confuse him with the Abbey actor named in “Three Songs to the One Burden” (pp. 15, 88). In the same vein, the book ignores the complexity of Yeats’s Anglo-Irish background, and slides over his contempt for Paudeen’s Ireland, blaming it all on the British, for “one must realize that life for the Irish was so barren under British rule” that it led to “a burning hatred” (p. 55) and a “notion of beauty inextricably tied up with their concept of nationality” (p. 54), which meant that “the Rising, in a sense, was their aesthetic masterpiece” (p. 61). In this book, all Yeats’s Irish contraries have merged into a homogeneous Catholic–Celtic myth peddled in the souvenir shops.

“As Yeats observes . . . Ireland has always been ‘a Druid land’”, Jordan remarks disarmingly, and goes on with equal ingenuousness to add of Amergin “This fragment is believed to be 3000 years old” (pp. 54–5). In its eagerness to establish the “unbroken continuity of the Gaelic tradition”, or (a paragraph later) “the unbroken continuity of the Irish imagination” (p. 38) the book works by incremental repetition, as the formulae bounce back through the “unbroken continuity” of p. 27 to their originary source in “the Irish writer P. Browne” (?), speaking of “the unbroken continuity and permanence of the Gaelic tradition” on p. 15. That “continuity” guarantees that Pearse in 1915 “was not preaching some ‘new’ radical gospel of blood sacrifice, but reiterating a belief that pervades Irish history and literature – a belief that is deeply embedded in the racial imagination” (p. 65). This dubious concept in turn finds its 1929 authority in Aodh de Blacam (p. 14), who later (p. 50) “points out . . . that intensity which is typically Celtic” and “notes that the Celt is famous for his love of superlatives and the denationalized Celt, deprived of the restraints of his native culture, becomes blatant”. Ms Jordan, born and raised in Dublin, received her undergraduate education in New York, and she obviously shares the affliction. Her Ireland is a land of saints, its beautiful lofty things preserved in the tourist brochures, like the cute folkloric anecdotes about the “sod of death” (pp. 35–6) or the Stone of Destiny, deployed to explain the central image of “Easter 1916” (pp. 78–80).

The handling of the Uprising is simple hagiography, expounding the “sheer