

A HISTORY OF IRISH BALLET FROM 1927 TO 1963. By Victoria O'Brien. Pp 188. Bern: Peter Lang, 2011. €38. (Reimagining Ireland).

Victoria O'Brien's book provides much-needed insight into the development of ballet in Dublin in the middle of the last century, presenting a most interesting first survey of the activities and achievement of the main groups operating there, studying them in four chapters. The surviving records of these schools or companies were scattered and fragmentary; without the writer's extensive searches much might have been lost forever.

The Abbey Theatre School of Ballet (1927–33) was founded by Ninette de Valois at the invitation of W. B. Yeats. She directed the school for six years, spending in all about seven weeks per year in Dublin, overseeing teaching and rehearsals for the fourteen distinguished dance performances for which she choreographed new works and in which she danced. When she ended the experiment, the 'architect of Irish ballet' (p. 32) had trained a nucleus of young Irish dancers, teachers and choreographers.

The Abbey School of Ballet continued until 1958 as a private school, no longer attached to the theatre, run by the de Valois student Muriel Kelly. Sara Payne, whom de Valois had brought over to teach at the Abbey Theatre School, opened a Dublin school and company in 1936, staging eight performances between 1937 and 1942 with innovative ballets of her own, in which she developed a new type of dance adopting elements of traditional Irish dance into the ballets. She left Ireland in 1946. Cepta Cullen, an Irish student of de Valois, opened her Irish Ballet Club in 1939, staging fourteen performances during the five years in which it operated. She too used Irish themes for many of her ballets, and collaborated with distinguished writers, artists and musicians.

The final chapter deals with Patricia Ryan's National Ballet School (1956–63), National Ballet Company (1959–63), and the fifteen performances given during its eight years. Like her predecessors, Ryan choreographed ballets on Irish themes, and cooperated with Irish musicians and poets; in 1962 she organised a ballet week with Russian principals, in that year too registering the company as professional. In 1963, National Ballet was forced by its funder, the Arts Council of Ireland, to merge with Irish Theatre Ballet, the Cork-based professional company. The Arts Council ceased funding in 1964 after one joint season. The papers of the composer A. J. Potter, one of National Ballet's directors, were not consulted: they cast much light on the history of the company and the reasons for its closing.

De Valois, Payne, Cullen and Ryan all left Ireland; their records have not survived. O'Brien has reconstructed their activities on the basis of documents that were found in the Dublin theatre archives, newspaper archives, personal collections of dancers involved and interviews with them. The reasons for the company closures have not been ascertained.

It is a pity that there is no sketch of the historical and social context in which work for ballet was undertaken during this period, something which would greatly facilitate an understanding of the enormous difficulties facing those active in that field and would provide a background against which to measure their remarkable achievements.

O'Brien's book is a history of ballet in Dublin, not of ballet in Ireland. Two of the main companies operating at that time have been omitted: the Cork Ballet Company (1947–1993), and Ireland's first professional ballet company, Irish Theatre Ballet (1959–1964). There is no chapter on Joan Denise Moriarty, who founded these companies. Irish Theatre Ballet toured Ireland, North and South, in two annual seasons, giving some five hundred performances between 1959 and 1964. Marie Rambert and Alicia Markova were the company's patrons, Stanley Judson the first ballet master; twenty-four new ballets were created for the company. Moriarty, the Cork Ballet Company (Ireland's longest-lasting amateur company) and Irish Theatre Ballet constitute central elements of the history of ballet in Ireland.

While Moriarty's twenty-five years of work for dance during the period in question are ignored, her competence and indeed integrity are called into question. She is referred to in

the sections of the book dealing with the impact of the Dublin groups on the subsequent development of ballet in Ireland. She is said to have derived her concept of Irish ballet from the Dublin groups (pp 70, 112), to have copied their ballets 'to a large extent without accrediting the original choreographers' (pp 148, 150), and to have facilitated their being forgotten so as to enhance her own reputation (pp 147, 149). The evidence offered for these charges are the mere titles of ballets, and one extract from a programme note. The charges do not withstand scrutiny.

The history of ballet in Ireland during this period has yet to be written. However, the task will have been made much easier by the study of thirty-six years of ballet in Dublin undertaken by Victoria O'Brien.

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IN SEARCH OF THE PROMISED LAND: THE POLITICS OF POST-WAR IRELAND. By Gary Murphy. Pp 325, illus. Cork: Mercier Press. 2009. €29.99.

Gary Murphy's study of the 'search for the promised land of economic fulfilment' in post-war Ireland (essentially the so-called long 1950s from the end of the Second World War up to the early 1960s) is one of those books that mirrors the period during which it was written as well as the period of history that it describes. Surely the author felt a strong sense of *déjà vu* writing in late 2008 about the dire economic conditions of 1950s Ireland and the various efforts of those with contrasting political and economic ideologies to solve them?

The stated aim of the book is 'to show how Irish isolationism in the late 1940s and 1950s has been overstated and misunderstood, and how the factors that have shaped the success of modern Ireland can be traced back to the period between the end of the Second World War and the beginning of the 1960s' (p. 18). The opening chapter paints a familiar picture of post-war Ireland at the outset – high emigration, significant political change with the formation of the first inter-party government and the crippling conservatism of the Department of Finance–Central Bank nexus. The role of Marshall Aid in ending Ireland's international isolation (a strong theme throughout the book) is highlighted: Marshall Aid allowed 'Ireland to rejoin the community of Western European states ... It ended the country's diplomatic isolation after the end of the Second World War' (p. 71). This chapter also introduces bodies that figure strongly throughout – state agencies (such as the Industrial Development Authority and *Córas Tráchtála*), trade unions and government departments as well as individual politicians and civil servants. The book is very important in highlighting the influential role of what would now be called social partners in the quest for economic progress, foreshadowing the partnership process of the late twentieth century. In some ways the sub-title of this book is a misnomer; those looking for a narrative account of political events in post-war Ireland will be disappointed. It is more the story of policy than of politics and illustrates well how economic, fiscal and foreign policy intertwined in these years and were aimed at the one goal of progress.

There are some fascinating studies of individual politicians also. The discussion of Patrick McGilligan's term as minister for finance in the first inter-party government (chapter 2) and his tentative embrace of Keynesianism is particularly enlightening and illustrates how little has been written about this very influential yet somewhat anonymous figure. Unsurprisingly, Seán Lemass, about whom Murphy has written elsewhere, emerges as one of the most forward-looking policy makers: 'He more than any other politician of the period recognised that conditions in Ireland were driving young men and women out of the country, and his various policy suggestions during the 1940s and 1950s attempted to explicitly address this' (p. 304).