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John Wilson Foster, *Between the Shadows: Modern Irish Writing and Culture*, Dublin & Portland, OR, Irish Academic Press, 2009, XII + 257 p., ISBN 978-0-7165-3005-3

- 1 The essays contained in John Wilson Foster's latest publication, most of which are slightly revised versions of papers, talks and previously published articles, cover a period of almost fifteen years. This time span is not unproblematic, especially given the significant political evolution which has taken place in the north over that period. In the preface, however, Foster pre-empts any criticism of his decision to let the articles stand in their original form by claiming that despite their potential inaccuracy from a 2010 standpoint, they capture the spirit of the times and are evidence of the fluctuating nature of politics. More footnotes could, however, have been used to avoid misreadings, such as when Foster berates the Field Day Anthology editors for largely avoiding women writers and does not stipulate that volumes IV and V have long since rectified this unacceptable omission.
- 2 Perhaps the greatest strength of this work is also its weakness: Foster covers a wide range of writers, from major canonical poets such as Yeats and Heaney, to more recent talented playwrights Martin McDonagh and Conor McPherson, to much lesser known writers, such as Joseph Tomelty and Tim Robinson. Although the inclusion of writers who have received less critical interest alongside major authors is to be welcomed in so far as it contributes to the creation of 'more elbow-room than before, a broadening of the syllabus' (viii), it is regrettable that Foster contents himself in most cases with an enumeration of themes and/or a demonstration of how the author in question regards or disregards northern Unionism.
- 3 As Edna Longley points out in her foreword, Foster "writes Irish literary and cultural history from a neglected northern angle" (xii), and while this approach is certainly to be

welcomed, “the cultural anxiety and partisanship” (vii) which pervades this collection of essays, and which Foster is fully aware of, is its most irritating feature and it borders on the disingenuous at times. In the essay “Guests of the Nation”, in which he focuses on the state of politics in the North in 1998 (when the talk was delivered), he refers to “a presumably tongue-in-cheek reference in the Agreement to the ‘Ulster-Scots’ language which, having been duly noted, can be quietly shown the door.” (156) Although a footnote subsequently rectifies this fallacious suggestion, clarifying that Assembly documents are translated into both Irish and Ulster-Scots, Foster cannot help but indulge in conjecture, imagining that the reference “might have been included with rolled eyes”. (172) His partisanship is also moralistic in places, as when he refers in passing to literature by Gerry Adams, Martin McGuinness and Danny Morrison and to the “badness” in these authors, instead perhaps of remarking on the relative merit (or absence thereof) of the texts under scrutiny.

- 4 Foster also takes to task recent literary and cultural critics as eminent as Declan Kiberd and Seamus Deane for their tendency, as he sees it, to “revert to an old nationalism in new bottles” (172). Instead, however, of focusing in depth on their critical work, Foster relies on psychological remarks about the critics themselves to make his point: “I detect in Deane the chronic and romantic disappointment of Northern nationalism in Southern Nationalism.” (187) Although he positions himself as championing ‘latitudinarianism’, he curiously (indeed paradoxically) takes issue with a number of contemporary critical perspectives through which to tackle Yeats and, more generally, Irish studies. Among these are the well-established critical schools of Feminism, Postcolonial Studies, Deconstruction and Gay and Lesbian Studies, all of which, according to Foster, give cover to “ideologues” who are placing the subject “under a barrage of attack” (193). It is hard to see how the “elbow-room” he argues in favour of and his outright rejection of these critical approaches are compatible.
- 5 These reservations aside, this collection of essays is nevertheless an entertaining read, if only because of the diverse authors and themes Foster tackles. The new perspectives he offers on Irish perspectives on the Great War and an Ulster literary scene largely ignored before Heaney will be of interest to specialists of Irish literature and culture and the general public alike.