

2012-09-24

Piece Celebrating the Publication of the French Art Historian Françoise Henry's Inishkea Journals : an Irishman's Diary

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Recommended Citation

Maher, E., "An Irishman's Diary", Piece celebrating the publication of the French art historian Françoise Henry's Inishkea Journals (Four Courts Press), The Irish Times, 24 September, 2012.

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An Irishman's Diary

Last Updated: Monday, September 24, 2012, 01:00

AS someone with a lifelong interest in island civilisation, it was a genuine pleasure for me to attend the recent launch of a book detailing the visits undertaken by French art historian Françoise Henry to Inishkea North in Mayo. The guest of honour, former President Mary Robinson, speaking as a proud Mayo woman in this instance, spoke emotionally of her own first visit to Inishkea on a beautiful September's day in 2001.

Her enjoyment of a pleasant outing in the company of family and friends was abruptly brought to an end by the devastating news that reached her later in the day of the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Tower and Washington. It was difficult to reconcile the calm beauty of her surroundings with the carnage that had occurred on the other side of the Atlantic.

Henry's journals, compiled during her trips to this western outpost in 1937, 1938, 1946 and 1950, reveal a genuine appreciation for the people and the unique landscape of Inishkea and its environs. The editor of the journals, Janet T Marquardt, in an illuminating introduction, explains how serendipity played a role in her discovery in April 2010 of the Henry notebooks in the Royal Irish Academy. She found herself there in the first instance because volcanic ash had led to the cancellation of a conference she was due to attend in Maynooth. Seeing the potential interest of the notebooks, she got in touch with the emeritus Professor of French in Trinity College, Barbara Wright, who agreed to work with her on the material, a collaboration that resulted in two publications, one in French and the other in English.

Henry, a French national who taught the history of European painting in UCD for more than 40 years, was a resourceful and energetic woman. She did not suffer fools gladly, as can be seen in her firm handling of the people she hired to work with her on the excavations; and yet she could also be receptive to the beliefs and simple lifestyle of the inhabitants in and around Inishkea. Spending months on a remote island without electricity, running water or any of the luxuries that she would have been accustomed to in Dublin, was no cakewalk. The changeable weather, even in summer and early autumn when most of the excavations took place, the swelling seas, basic accommodation and simple food were compensated to some degree by the rugged

beauty evoked by Henry's memorable prose, skilfully translated from the French by Huw Duffy.

Here is an example of one of the canvasses she paints: "The fog comes apart in grey clouds that roll on the sea. Flights of gulls rise, black, on the scallop-pink sky. A gale rises from the open sea and beats like a sail. The sea drools on the rocks; sometimes a spurt of foam shoots up. A delayed lapwing moans about the chapel of Colum Cille". Henry's study of art clearly contributed to her powers of evocation. She is especially good at describing the overwhelming power of the ocean: "A harsh wind that passes flat over the sea and land, scraping, biting. The sea bubbles around the rocks but does not manage to rise up again. Black, fermenting with quiet rage. At times the horizon clouds over, gusts of spray pass by in a more furious wind".

John McGahern frequently observed how beauty is rarely appreciated by those who live constantly in its shadow. Sometimes it takes an outsider to fully grasp its awesomeness, a task to which Henry was ideally suited.

Lists of the supplies that were needed for the time spent on Inishkea North illustrate the Spartan type of diet awaiting the expeditionary force: flour for making bread, potatoes, butter, corned beef (which was exchanged for fish), salt, powdered milk, all of which illustrates that haute cuisine was in short supply. Henry is sad to observe that human inhabitants have all but abandoned what she describes as "this dying island", a place that is constantly being eroded by nature: "The sea gnaws at it, breaking the granite slabs, throwing them back on top of the cliffs, devouring the sand wherever it can reach it. The wind wears it away, little by little removing the dunes. The rabbits undermine it . . . The sheep, a great many of which are put here now, gnaw it away".

On a recent trip to nearby Achill, I was gloriously unaware of Inishkea, an island rich in history and folklore, a place where one can commune with a past that is also being slowly "gnawed away". Thanks to Janet Marquardt's fine editing of Henry's journals and the numerous photos that enliven and reinforce the narrative in the Four Courts publication, it is now possible to return momentarily to a simpler time and savour its many pleasures. Another trip to the West might well be necessary in the near future.

Françoise Henry in Co Mayo: The Inishkea Journals is published by Four Courts Press

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