

## Aberystwyth University

### *'All of Ireland had been wiped out'*

Nolan, Val

*Published in:*  
Irish University Review

*DOI:*  
[10.3366/iur.2021.0517](https://doi.org/10.3366/iur.2021.0517)

*Publication date:*  
2021

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Nolan, V. (2021). 'All of Ireland had been wiped out': Irish Nuclear Anxiety and Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's The Bray House. *Irish University Review*, 51(2), 247-262. <https://doi.org/10.3366/iur.2021.0517>

#### **Document License** CC BY

#### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Aberystwyth Research Portal (the Institutional Repository) are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Aberystwyth Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Aberystwyth Research Portal

#### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

tel: +44 1970 62 2400  
email: [is@aber.ac.uk](mailto:is@aber.ac.uk)

**‘All of Ireland Had Been Wiped Out’:  
Irish Nuclear Anxiety and Eilís Ní Dhuibhne’s *The Bray House***

**Val Nolan**

Published in 1990, *The Bray House* is Eilís Ní Dhuibhne’s curious and contested first novel, the story of a near-future archaeological expedition to an Ireland devastated by a British nuclear disaster. It is a book which has offered much analytical fodder to readers and critics alike. For Sheila Hamilton, in an early review, *The Bray House* offered an environmental parable.<sup>1</sup> For Derek Hand, in a comprehensive later essay, it is ‘a narrative about narratives’ and a meditation ‘on the Irish obsession with “texts” and interpretation’.<sup>2</sup> For Gerry Smyth it reflects the Irish obsession with land,<sup>3</sup> and for Constanza del Río it is ‘a fictional example of European travel writing traditionally linked to colonial and imperial expansion’.<sup>4</sup> Indeed the novel is all these things and more, among them a pastiche of 18<sup>th</sup> century adventure tales, an object lesson in unreliable narration, and a subversion – if not an outright parody – of academic objectivity. Yet what unites these disparate elements is the manner by which Ní Dhuibhne consciously inverts Old Irish narrative forms to create a work of speculative fiction which yokes together the seemingly contradictory concerns of the Gaelic literary tradition and contemporary Irish anxiety about vulnerabilities to the British nuclear energy industry.

Given this nexus of influences and anxieties, it is unsurprising that even understandings of the novel’s style and genre defy straightforward critical consensus. Hand considers *The Bray*

*House* to be ‘science fiction fantasy,’<sup>5</sup> while Carol Morris terms it ‘feminist genre fiction’ and an ‘anti-utopian’ novel.<sup>6</sup> Christina Hunt Mahony calls it ‘a fascinating postnuclear novel, a slightly futurist fantasy with allegorical implications,’<sup>7</sup> while Hamilton considers it best approached ‘as fantasy with a message’.<sup>8</sup> Hand’s article is the most sympathetic to Ní Dhuibhne’s use of science fiction, but even there one will note the emphasis on “fantasy” so apparent in the characterisations by other critics. There are many reasons for that, ranging from the greater comfort of Irish literary critics of the day with the fantastical to the assertion that ‘fewer than five years after Irish culture has been wiped out’ is an improbable timescale for ‘so many aspects of it [to become] unintelligible’.<sup>9</sup> For the purposes of the current article, *The Bray House* is classified as a work of post-apocalyptic science fiction, one which owes its unusual structure to the familiarity of Ní Dhuibhne – a doctoral trained folklorist – with aspects of the Irish oral tradition. It is deemed a science fiction narrative because, to quote Darko Suvin, ‘the SF element or aspect, the *novum* –’ in this case the near-future nuclear ash covering Ireland – ‘is hegemonic, that is, so central and significant that [it] determines the whole narrative logic’ of the novel.<sup>10</sup> In fact, the backstory of *The Bray House* could not have come about without a scientific cause: an explosion at a Northern Irish nuclear power plant triggering a(n admittedly improbable) chain reaction at British nuclear installations which in turn renders the majority of the Atlantic archipelago uninhabitable.

In that way Beth Wightman – in a carefully argued article in *Space and Culture* – comes closest to moving away from the novel’s reception and towards the crucial context of its composition. Wightman frames *The Bray House* as a deliberate inversion of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719): where Crusoe ‘rebuilds’ British culture on his island, Ní Dhuibhne’s protagonist, pointedly named Robin, discovers an island ‘destroyed by a foreign, that is, British, culture’.<sup>11</sup> For Ireland in *The Bray House* is left ‘devoid of organic life’ and ‘heavily contaminated by radioactive particles’.<sup>12</sup> Throughout the novel, Ní Dhuibhne plays on the

estrangement between the near-future setting – in which a group of Nordic archaeologists excavate the titular building from beneath ‘mountains of nuclear ash’ (Ní Dhuibhne, p.8) – and the Ireland in which *The Bray House* was written and published, a version of which appears in flashbacks to a point before the disaster, with the protagonist’s recollections of her in-laws’ home near Dingle presented to the reader as a kind of mythological ‘Golden Age of Ireland’.<sup>13</sup> Through this comparison, Ní Dhuibhne articulates widely held anxiety about Ireland’s vulnerability to foreign energy policy, unease compounded by the 1986 ‘fire and explosion at one of Chernobyl’s reactors [which] spewed radioactive material into the atmosphere’ and after which ‘a radioactive plume of smoke swirled over Europe’ before raining down on Irish soil almost two thousand miles away.<sup>14</sup>

It is therefore unsurprising that the mood of the Irish Republic, in the post-Chernobyl 1980s during which *The Bray House* was composed, was one which often perceived the country to be at the mercy of a much closer nuclear energy industry. There existed at the time a widespread concern that Ireland could be, if not destroyed, then badly affected by incidents arising from nuclear plants along the British west coast. Not unimportantly, this concern manifested as the kind of ‘cognitive estrangement’ which Suvin sees as the defining characteristic of science fiction.<sup>15</sup> Compounding this was the longstanding power imbalance between the political entities on the islands, with the Republic of Ireland, the smaller nation, having no say over the placement or operation of nuclear plants in the United Kingdom. Irish concern was summed up by Energy Minister Ray Burke in 1987, who said that ‘in my 20 years in public life I have never known a single issue raise such strong public feeling in Ireland. It is a gut reaction to the threat’.<sup>16</sup> That fear was of precisely the kind of devastation depicted by Ní Dhuibhne in the ‘allegorical implications’ of *The Bray House*’s striking, if exaggerated, dramatisation of the worst case scenario for Ireland.<sup>17</sup> Thus, by setting her novel in the aftermath of just such a disaster, the author satisfies Fredric Jameson’s assertion that ‘one of

the most significant potentialities of SF as a form is precisely this capacity to provide something like an experimental variation on our own empirical universe'.<sup>18</sup> Which is to say that Ní Dhuibhne harnesses science fiction's ability to, as Hand more succinctly puts it, 'comment critically upon the present moment' of her novel's composition.<sup>19</sup>

Such a 'constant intermingling of imaginative and empirical possibilities' is clear in the prominence afforded by that moment's media coverage of, and political discourse about, the Sellafield nuclear reprocessing plant in Cumbria, England.<sup>20</sup> Lying opposite Ireland's east coast. Sellafield 'has long been a cause of political discontent and anxiety' in Ireland.<sup>21</sup> Just 128 miles from Dublin, Sellafield – often cited as one of the leakiest nuclear plants in the world, – lies 'uncomfortably close to Ireland's densely populated eastern seaboard' and has been 'a cause of persistent tension between Britain and Ireland'.<sup>22</sup> Sellafield 'holds radioactive waste dating back to the dawn of the nuclear age' including used fuel 'from the manufacture of the first UK nuclear bombs in the 1950s and 60s'.<sup>23</sup> Known as Windscale until 1981, Sellafield was the site of the worst nuclear accident in British history, the Windscale Fire of October 1957, which ranked in severity at level 5 out of a possible 7 on the International Nuclear Event Scale. The site also housed the world's first commercial nuclear power station, and subsequently became a centre for storing highly radioactive reactor waste in sludge-filled ponds, 'each several times the size of an Olympic pool'.<sup>24</sup> The plant is known to have 'discharged large quantities of plutonium into the Irish Sea from the 1950s to the 1980s' and has repeatedly 'caused particular alarm to the Irish public'.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, the Irish Sea, as described by Britain's own Ministry of Agriculture, became 'the most radioactively contaminated in the world'<sup>26</sup> (in *The Bray House* flashbacks, Robin's in-laws note that fish from Ireland's west coast are much freer from contamination than fish from the Irish Sea – if one were lucky enough to find fish there at all). Indeed, just three weeks after the Chernobyl disaster in 1986, a list of Sellafield's safety lapses appeared in the *Guardian*. These included

the dumping of radioactive purified uranium in the Irish Sea, the release of radioactive plutonium nitrate solution into the atmosphere, years of irradiated uranium discharges (many of which had been exposed by an infamous Yorkshire Television documentary), as well as leaks of radioactive pond water.<sup>27</sup> It is not difficult to be put in mind of Ní Dhuibhne's description of a post-apocalyptic Ireland where 'the water was black, the sky was black' (Ní Dhuibhne, p.82), with the novel repeatedly emphasising the kind of east coast environmental devastation which Sellafield's most vocal critics feared.

The decade in which *The Bray House* was composed was much preoccupied with the purposes and the potentially Chernobyl-style effects of Sellafield. Throughout the 1980s, consecutive Irish governments condemned the siting of Sellafield and consistently demanded the plant's closure. The issue was discussed by the Irish cabinet and also in meetings between Taoiseach Garret Fitzgerald and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.<sup>28</sup> In 1984, Charles Haughey – then leader of the opposition – described contamination from Sellafield as 'bordering on a crime against the people on both sides of the Irish Sea'.<sup>29</sup> In 1986, Tánaiste Dick Spring went further, saying that 'while we appreciate that [the British Government] take[s] their sovereignty seriously, we take ours equally seriously and that by allowing the dangerous monstrosity of Sellafield to exist they are invading our sovereignty and undermining our integrity as a nation'.<sup>30</sup> Three years later, Energy Minister Bobby Molloy pledged in Dáil Éireann to 'continue to make representations to the UK authorities urging that Sellafield be closed and that there be no expansion of the UK nuclear industry at Sellafield, or at any nuclear installation especially on their west coast'.<sup>31</sup> A search of Dáil records reveals that Sellafield was discussed more than 300 times in the decade prior to the publication of *The Bray House*. These discussions typically took the form of questions from deputies representing the concerns of the Irish public over the pollution, health hazards, and environmental impact on Ireland generated by the plant – what Ní Dhuibhne refers to as 'pollution and all that shit' (Ní

Dhuibhne, p.90) – as well as about legal challenges to Sellafield’s operation. Specific releases of radioactive materials also made it into the parliamentary record, as they do – further signalling their inspirational importance – into the transcribed newspaper articles of *The Bray House* itself.

Gerardine Meaney, in her volume *Gender, Ireland, and Cultural Change*, briefly notes that this ‘fear of a Chernobyl-style accident at Sellafield’ was one of the inspirations which ‘prompted’ Ní Dhuibhne’s novel.<sup>32</sup> Del Ríó too cites ‘outrage at the Sellafield nuclear reprocessing plant pumping radioactive waste into the Irish Sea’ as one of the aspects of 1980s Ireland ‘easily recognised’ in *The Bray House*.<sup>33</sup> However, the individual focus of each critic leads them away from exploring this in more detail. Ní Dhuibhne herself has stated how real-world events ‘much in the news in the mid-1980s’ often inspired her work (in that case the stories of her 1988 debut collection *Blood and Water*) as much as did her interest in folklore and Irish literature both *as Gaeilge* and *as Béarla*.<sup>34</sup> This ability to ‘knit folklore into tales of contemporary reality’ would later come to be seen as the ‘signature style’ of Ní Dhuibhne’s writing, but, in broader fashion, that marriage of traditional storytelling forms to (then) current events is already apparent in *The Bray House*.<sup>35</sup> For her own part, Ní Dhuibhne has said that she sees herself as ‘an historian of the emotional and psychological life of my time. I want to write it down, so that people will know how it was’.<sup>36</sup> In that way, *The Bray House* treats the widespread Irish anxiety over Sellafield – the political statements and the media coverage, the hyperbole and, yes, the occasional mis- or under-informed beliefs and stories passed around by a scared and sceptical public – as exactly what it is: modern oral folklore.

Such an interpretation is in line with how Ní Dhuibhne herself would later state that she utilises more traditional folklore in her writing:

I counterpoint my own stories, set in the now, with oral stories, set in the past, or, more accurately, set in the never never or the always always. I feel, and hope, that this enhances my ordinary stories, gives them a depth and a mythic quality which, on their own, they would find it hard to achieve. It puts them in a large context - not only an Irish context, since the first thing one learns about oral narrative is its international nature.<sup>37</sup>

Going somewhat beyond Giovanna Tallone's observation that an 'estrangement of time underlies the estrangement of place' in Ní Dhuibhne's writing, this atemporal or extra-temporal notion of the 'never never' or 'always always' seems particularly germane to the imagined future Ireland of *The Bray House* and, for that matter, to the novel's bona fides as speculative fiction about a contemporaneous environmental concern.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, it unlocks Ní Dhuibhne's strategy of exaggeration, of making the ordinary larger than life. Not just never, but 'never never'; not just always but 'always always'. Such a sense of exaggeration is clear in *The Bray House* where the destruction of Ireland is caused after the first massive explosion has the effect of:

'devastating everything in a hundred and fifty mile radius. Since this area contained several other nuclear bases, for instance Windscale, Calder Hall [both, in reality, later incorporated into Sellafield] and so on, the chain reaction was quick and inevitable: these stations blew up, destroying vast areas around them, until within a short space of time, most of Britain and all of Ireland had been wiped out. (Ní Dhuibhne, p.64)

While it is true that, as Paul Dorfman of University College London's Energy Institute put it in a recent review of Ireland's nuclear vulnerability, once accidents at these sites go wrong 'they



keep on going wrong’, the runaway disaster in Ní Dhuibhne’s novel, though evocative and, for that matter, highly illustrative of Irish nuclear fears at the time, is implausible.<sup>39</sup> Such implausibility, however, should not be attributed to technical illiteracy on the author’s part but instead to deliberate choice. On one hand it readily corresponds to Suvin’s understanding of science fiction as a literature ‘whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment’ (and he is quick to emphasise that ‘the credibility of SF does not depend on the particular scientific rationale in any tale’).<sup>40</sup> On the other hand, and more importantly, it permits Ní Dhuibhne to create the exaggerated ‘never never’ of the post-apocalyptic Ireland, an inversion of the traditional Gaelic Otherworld which, in the best traditions of science fiction, manifests as a possible future timeline.

Such ‘self-conscious concern with the medium through which she is writing,’ especially with regard to form is, as Hand says, an aspect of Ní Dhuibhne’s ‘on-going need to make creative and productive links between the past, the present, and the future’.<sup>41</sup> Thus her engagement with Irish nuclear anxiety about Sellafield as a folk concern to be science-fictionalised provides her with a way ‘to bridge the gap between tradition and modernity’.<sup>42</sup> This is particularly apparent in Ní Dhuibhne’s use of forms and motifs drawn from the memory bank of Old Irish literature and storytelling. For as much as it is anything else, *The Bray House* is a modern *Echtra*, that genre of Old Irish ‘tale of a hero’s journey to the Otherworld’.<sup>43</sup> In fact, the novel begins, in its first act of estrangement, with the specific hallmark of the *Echtra*, a ‘long westward journey into the unknown,’ in this case the archaeological expedition of Robin Lagerlof which embarks from Gothenburg in prosperous Sweden for the spatiotemporal locus of an environmentally ruined and deserted Ireland in the near future (Ní Dhuibhne, p.5). In an *Echtra* (literally an ‘outing’<sup>44</sup>), the protagonist only goes to one destination, the details of the voyage itself being ‘not of central interest’, and in this way Ní Dhuibhne’s novel distinguishes itself from the influences of later Irish voyage literature with a focus on a hero’s

entire journey, those being *immrama* (literally ‘rowings about’<sup>45</sup>) which depict multiple locations. This use of an Old Irish narrative structure provides Ní Dhuibhne with a framework for challenging the epistemological authority of the British energy industry’s dismissal of Irish concerns. That she does so in a science fictional rather than a naturalistic or supernatural fashion is essential to her creation of a homegrown imaginative platform from which to depict a technological threat perceived to be existential in nature. In that regard, her borrowing of the *Echtra* form for *The Bray House* becomes less surprising once the novel’s fluctuating generic identification is established as science fiction, for it is entirely consistent with how Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. views that genre as capable of what he calls ‘plot loans’.<sup>46</sup> The novel, from the protagonist’s name onwards, thus fits neatly into what Csicsery-Ronay terms the ‘*techno-Robinsonade*’, a class of narrative borrowing developed from ‘the modern colonial adventure tale (the classical *Robinsonade*), the Gothic, and the utopia,’ a list to which one might here propose adding *Echtrae* and *Immrama* as distant progenitors.<sup>47</sup> Such tale forms, says Csicsery-Ronay, have been shaped in interesting fashion ‘by the social factors that have led to the cultural ascendancy of technoscience’ (for who, among the founders of the Irish state, might have imagined the by-products of nuclear fission to be among the talking points of Dáil Éireann?).<sup>48</sup> This process of ascendancy is one which the *techno-Robinsonade* stories have shaped in turn – in a manner which ought to be recognisable to any reader of *The Bray House*’s newspaper clippings and political pronouncements – ‘by giving it a store of mutually reinforcing narrative vehicles disseminated through art, journalism, and propaganda’.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, further confirmation of *The Bray House* as the conscious contemporary inheritor of Old Irish narrative forms is found in Ní Dhuibhne’s deliberate ambiguity as to just when it takes place, with dates of ‘20--’ given several times in the novel. While it can be argued, as, Csicsery-Ronay does, that ‘apocalypses occurring in the future would, by definition, abolish time itself, turning it, in retrospect, into the emptiness of mere expectation of its own

annihilation,’ there is more at play here on Ní Dhuibhne’s part.<sup>50</sup> While on the one hand the date of ‘20--’ serves the narrative purpose of placing events in the future from the perspective of the book’s initial publication date, what may first appear to be vagueness is in fact a crucial aspect of how Ní Dhuibhne conceals the characteristics of Early Irish literature within the genre expectations of the science fiction reader. For, as Muireann Ní Bhrolcháin puts it, one of the most recognisable aspects of Early Irish literature is how, ‘generally speaking, time is unimportant unless it is an integral part of the plot’.<sup>51</sup>

The term *Echtra* is often translated into English as ‘The Adventure(s) of...’, ‘The Journey(s) of...’, or, in the case of *Echtrae Chonnlaí*, ‘The Expedition of...’ (and Robin herself uses the term ‘expedition’ to describe her undertaking several times; Ní Dhuibhne, pp.83, 89). Ní Bhrolcháin follows this model by classifying the *Echtra* stories as ‘Adventures’, different from the predominantly Christian character of the Voyages (*Immrama*), though there are occasional overlaps between the categories.<sup>52</sup> Her definitions of the form’s primary characteristics include elements easily recognisable from *The Bray House*: the Otherworld is accessed via a voyage in a boat, the adventures there are the main element of the story, the protagonist ‘may return’ (as Robin does), and the voyage is usually to a single island.<sup>53</sup> Tomás Ó Cathasaigh equally considers *Echtraí* to be ‘an Otherworldly journey or experience,’ one in which the protagonist typically returns ‘with treasures for his people’ (in the case of *The Bray House*, these are the documents and material artefacts which Robin – herself a gender inversion of Ó Cathasaigh’s character – returns with in order to stage an exhibition about life in Ireland prior to the disaster).<sup>54</sup> Eleanor Knott and Gerard Murphy, in *Early Irish Literature*, also consider *Echtraí* to be ‘tales of expeditions to the Otherworld’.<sup>55</sup> They ‘tend to have a particular beauty by reason of the descriptions contained in them of the land “where there is nought but truth, where there is neither age, nor decay, no gloom”’.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, this latter definition is useful in how it illustrates Ní Dhuibhne’s creative reversal of the traditionally understood *Echtra*

tropes. The beauty of the Irish landscape has been ravaged by the nuclear disaster, transformed into a ‘crisp, cindery substance’ described as ‘repugnant’ and ‘heavily contaminated by radioactive particles’ (Ní Dhuibhne, p.88). Gloom hangs over everything, with age and decay palpable in the lives of the mature, loveless couple who inhabited the Bray house (Ní Dhuibhne’s inclusion of their story allows her to eschew the ‘antics of fantasy’, as Suvin memorably puts it, and instead offer a true work of science fiction though her focus on the causes of ‘alienating, murderous, and stultifying existences’<sup>57</sup>). Finally, Robin’s status as an unreliable narrator, combined with the power games being played by her expedition members, renders the Otherworld of the novel not a land of truth but a land of lies.

The journey to and from the Otherworld – less the ‘happy Otherworld’<sup>58</sup> one finds in the inspiration texts and more a post-apocalyptic nightmare – is, as in an *Echtra*, a frame story for Robin’s ‘full report and analysis’ (Ní Dhuibhne, pp.115-168) about her Pompeii style excavation of the Bray House (consider that fine building a stand-in for the royal forts frequently found in *Echtraí* and related tales), several chapters worth of which form almost the exact centre of the novel. Mahoney rightly calls this a shift to a ‘pseudodocumentary style’ with ‘the authority of an investigative or academic report’.<sup>59</sup> It is a striking intervention on the page, a ‘text-within-a-text, isolated from the action going on elsewhere,’ and a display of Suvin-style methodical doubt generally interpreted as a means of undermining Robin’s objectivity and ‘forcing the reader to fundamentally reappraise the purpose of the expedition’.<sup>60</sup> This serves, as Jameson might have it, ‘to defamiliarize and restructure our experience of our own present,’ in this case the suburban Ireland of the late 1980s.<sup>61</sup> Yet the destruction of the already decaying bourgeois seaside town recorded in Robin’s report is not simply designed to jar the reader, but also to express a furious discontent with Irish gender and spatial politics as encapsulated in suburban domesticity, as well as suggesting an early critique of the environmental unsustainability of such an existence. Crucially, it also functions to further align

*The Bray House* with the *Echtra* form. This is true both in terms of how it reflects the amount of ‘record rather than sagas’ found in Early Irish literature and how – with the list of items recovered by the excavation here forming a kind of eerie verse narrative within *The Bray House* as a whole – it directly echoes how the extant material from that time often combines prose and poetry in ways surprising to modern readers.<sup>62</sup> Robin’s archaeological motivation further replicates the purpose of an *Echtra* protagonist’s journey to enhance understanding of ancient races – sometimes the gods, sometimes not – and the land in which they lived. In Robin’s case, the reason for her expedition is ‘to elucidate the past as fully as possible’ – Ní Dhuibhne going so far as to invert Suvin’s *novum*, or ‘strange newness’, as a strange oldness<sup>63</sup> – though of course Ní Dhuibhne, through the use of estrangement, is seeking to elucidate the present of the novel’s composition and associated fears for the fate of the nation (Ní Dhuibhne, p.109). For, to quote Ní Bhrolcháin again, ‘in Irish tradition, stories are not just about events; they are also about the site where the events take place’ – in this case the titular Wicklow town, representative of the modern Irish nation more generally – ‘and the story may unfold in the real physical contours of the countryside; story and place are inextricably linked’.<sup>64</sup>

Additional connections are apparent in how Robin is, in *Echtra* fashion, metaphorically invited to the Otherworld of *The Bray House* by a female figure, that of the house’s former occupant Elinor MacHugh, and how, as opposed to the common *Echtra* trope of mystical fog, the plains of Ireland are blanketed by radioactive ash which has buried the country and so relocates the underworld or Otherworld to the overworld. Equally, the pre-eminently desirable Otherworld treasure one expects here comprises the furniture and clothes, diary entries, letters, and newspapers which Robin recovers from the house. In the place of the ‘substantially pre-Christian’ inspiration texts, Ní Dhuibhne offers the reader a *post*-Christian narrative of marital infidelity and political instability.<sup>65</sup> The ‘Otherworld’ in *The Bray House* is an atomic age inversion of that traditionally found in Irish literature. Instead of ‘a place without death, disease,

war, old age, sadness or decay,’<sup>66</sup> Robin – a secular protagonist and a trained academic – discovers a ruined island without life or hope of any kind, a literal wasteland strewn with the detritus of broken relationships and ruined lives (as evidenced by the diaries and letters recovered in the house). It is a place of death rather than one without death, a shattered mirror image of Tír na nÓg which, like Suvin’s reading of *Gulliver’s Travels* – arguably a distant progenitor of *The Bray House* in terms of Irish science fiction<sup>67</sup> – funnels ‘extreme anti-utopian despair into a critique of the anti-utopian world which it mirrors’.<sup>68</sup> Rather than the weary travellers disintegrating on their arrival home, the land of *The Bray House* itself has been turned to ash. And not just land in the sense that Gerry Smyth implies but, in one of Ní Dhuibhne’s most interesting innovations, the urban environment as well. Her destruction of Ireland’s built landscape and the (perceived or otherwise) ‘establishment propriety’ of the country’s east coast urban elites,<sup>69</sup> represented by the former occupants of the excavated home, depicts the materiality of Irish nuclear anxiety in a fashion comprehensible for an early 1990s Irish literary readership. Relocating her story to a suburban milieu allows Ní Dhuibhne to offer something more striking to her initial readership than a repetition of the comparable destruction suffered by rural Ireland in the past, the Great Famine of the late 1840s being the most obvious example not just in terms of its scale but its persistence in folk memory and the resulting *pre*-nuclear Irish anxiety at the country’s vulnerability to English policy decisions.

Ní Dhuibhne tightens this knot of reference and inversion in the latter stretch of the novel when a mysterious, half-feral survivor of the nuclear disaster – one of Ireland’s original ‘gods’/inhabitants who has ‘retreated underground’<sup>70</sup> – emerges from a souterrain much in the same manner that the Tuatha Dé Danann, or fairy folk, often reveal themselves in *Echtra* stories where Otherworld beings are often depicted as living underneath hills. This woman is described in terms which both invoke the imagery of the European Holocaust – ‘the appearance of one of those survivors of Belsen or Auschwitz’ – and that of victims of the Irish famine:

‘emaciated, apparently bald, with wide crazy eyes [...] an assortment of rags clinging to the body by miraculous means’ (Ní Dhuibhne, p.216). While her souterrain hiding place has been repurposed as a fallout shelter, it functions within the novel (and is described by one of Robin’s crew) as a ‘fairy mound’ (Ní Dhuibhne, p.222). Following this encounter, and as with many *Echtraí*, Robin returns home with new knowledge, dubious as it is, though, as in the well-known Fenian Cycle story of Oisín, she dies soon after touching her home soil.

Thus Robin’s own story – and, for that matter, the overall shape of *The Bray House* which it defines – echoes (and offers a female inversion of) the model of ‘the heroic biography’ prevalent in much Early Irish literature:<sup>71</sup> ‘Conception and birth’, of which there is the least material here; ‘account of youth and upbringing’, and the subsequent impact on character, which is extensively covered via Robin’s reminiscences; ‘invulnerability’, evident in her early academic career; ‘a fight with a dragon or a monster’, the betrayal by her academic mentor (with academia itself as a kind of separate underworld within the novel); ‘the hero acquires a wife’, or in this case a husband; ‘the hero visits the Otherworld’, which comprises the main action of *The Bray House*; ‘exile and return’, evident in both her exile from mainstream academia and in her journey to and from Ireland; and ‘death of the hero’, which occurs via suicide in the final chapter. That such careful renderings of Early Irish literature’s genre features, stock episodes, and motifs should reappear over a thousand years later in the guise of a science fiction novel is an extreme example of both Csicsery-Ronay’s principle of plot loans and of Jonathan Wooding’s observation that ‘Irish tales were evidently rewritten to suit new genres or reclassified to highlight features which made them appropriate to a particular genre’.<sup>72</sup> The deliberateness by which Ní Dhuibhne expresses such a modern Irish fear through a medieval form is underlined by Robin’s remark that Ireland before the disaster ‘was more different from the world in which we now live than itself was from, say, the Middle Ages’ (Ní Dhuibhne, p.108). Yet Ní Dhuibhne’s exaggerations and formal gestures are not, to quote

Derek Hand one last time, a ‘means to simply chastise present day indifference’.<sup>73</sup> They comprise a carefully designed rhetorical strategy for articulating contemporaneous fears of British indifference to Irish nuclear concerns. Ní Dhuibhne is conscious throughout of how, as Dominic Boyer puts it, ‘the material and infrastructural dimensions of energy both enable and disable certain configurations of political power’.<sup>74</sup> It is no coincidence that *The Bray House* presents the West of Ireland as a romantic wilderness of traditional society and scenery, one in which older ways of life are annihilated by a volatile modern energy source mismanaged by Ireland’s former imperial mismanagers. In fact, in a pointed critique of the pride and prejudice of the British government, Ní Dhuibhne names her fictional UK Prime Minister Elizabeth Bennett [sic]. Even as reactors were melting down, Bennett ‘reassured the British people on both islands’ that the problem was insignificant and would soon be under control (Ní Dhuibhne, p.63). Similarly, real life British authorities were largely dismissive of Irish concerns about Sellafield in the years leading up to the publication of *The Bray House*, maintaining that ‘the man on the street’ needed to draw a distinction between serious accidents and what that government termed ‘trivial leaks’.<sup>75</sup>

Bennett, in the aftermath of the *Bray House* disaster, says ‘there will always be an England [but] she did not mention Ireland’ (Ní Dhuibhne, p.65). For as Wightman points out, and what the Sellafield-conscious Irish public of the 1980s feared, ‘the Republic of Ireland does not exist in the context of this British “national” crisis’.<sup>76</sup> In this way Ní Dhuibhne anticipates the emerging field of energy humanities which, as Imre Szeman says, insists ‘that environmental dilemmas are fundamentally problems of ethics, habits, values, institutions, beliefs, and power’.<sup>77</sup> Indeed, in Dorfman’s real-life review of Irish vulnerabilities, he deemed the Republic to be an ‘imprisoned rider’ with regard to UK nuclear policy, warning that the Irish government needed ‘to reflect very clearly about future plans for a UK nuclear renaissance given [that] the risks to Ireland are substantial’.<sup>78</sup> Nonetheless, disregard for the environmental



impact of Sellafield on the Irish people remains widespread today. Thus, *The Bray House* prefigures ongoing Irish nuclear anxiety about Sellafield and, more than that, the ongoing *folklorisation* of the same. Evidence of such can continue to be seen in, for example, the iodine tablets debacle of 2002, when, following the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks on the United States, the Irish government issued every household with ‘packs of iodine tablets to be taken in the event of a nuclear emergency’ (or, as public understanding of the tablets was later summarised, ‘in case Sellafield exploded’<sup>79</sup>). The tablets became objects of national ridicule when it was revealed that the 2002 batch – ‘14.2 million tablets at a cost of €630,000’ – expired in 2005, and that the Radiological Protection Institute of Ireland later concluded that ‘even in a worst case scenario, the use of iodine tablets would not be justified in Ireland,’ or, if you prefer, ‘taking them wouldn’t do anything, anyway’.<sup>80</sup>

That fiasco illustrates a continuation of the unease which Ní Dhuibhne identified in her novel, that felt by small nations – both on a governmental level and in terms of popular consciousness via a kind of social cognitive estrangement – about their vulnerability to the energy policies of their larger foreign neighbours. Robin, towards the end of *The Bray House*, concedes as much, declaring that ‘Ireland did not die a natural death’ (Ní Dhuibhne, p.168). The country, she points out, suffered ‘much, much more from radioactive waste leaking from English container vessels and from English power stations and pipelines than from anything situated in Ireland itself’ (Ní Dhuibhne, p.167). Thus Ní Dhuibhne’s novel, while rewarding a wide variety of critical approaches – feminist, ecological, post-colonial, inter- or indeed meta-textual – all the time maintains a robust narrative integrity rooted in the fears of Irish society at a time when, as Diarmaid Ferriter says, ‘loud noises were being made’ about Sellafield ‘pumping radioactive waste into the Irish Sea,’ something ‘accompanied by much popular protest and outrage’.<sup>81</sup> For if it is true that the Irish, as Proinsias Mac Cana put it, tend to ‘think of their history mythologically,’<sup>82</sup> then *The Bray House* is certainly an example of both this

tendency – with history here reversed by the rhetorically and descriptively similar practice of future-facing science fiction – as well as the manner by which Irish stories have traditionally been ‘used as a vehicle to give a political, historical, or even legal messages’.<sup>83</sup> Ní Dhuibhne’s blending of concerns over contemporary energy politics with Gaelic literary structures to create a recognisably science fictional work in *The Bray House* brings to light ‘congenial’ and ‘congeneric elements in the cognitive and marvellous bias of the *voyage extraordinaire*,’ in this case the *Echtra* form.<sup>84</sup> More than that, her choice of science fiction (specifically the *techno-Robinsonade* model) as a means to express a particularly Irish national anxiety derives significance from how ‘the genre interposes virtual futures that serve both as tools for organizing thought, and as illusions to defer awareness of immediate being’.<sup>85</sup> Or, as Ursula K. Le Guin insists, ‘SF is not predictive; it is descriptive’.<sup>86</sup> The speculative element of the novel therefore functions, as Suvin sees science fiction more generally, not as ‘a departure from reality, but a perspective facing in from outside it,’ one which succeeds (and succeeds as science fiction) because of Ní Dhuibhne’s careful layering of ‘sociological, psychological, historical, anthropological, and other parallels’.<sup>87</sup> In such a light, *The Bray House* emerges as less a warning from future fictional history and more as an expression of contemporaneous existential anxiety articulated in a traditional literary style, a contrary amalgam of archaic oral forms and modern speculative mode which expresses real concern that ‘the ultimate cause’ of Irish nuclear destruction would be ‘human error’ (Ní Dhuibhne, p.63). Robin later specifies that this concern manifests directly from the greatest Irish fear of all, ‘British carelessness,’ something which, as any survey of the nuclear industry in the 1980s will confirm, was all too common at the time the novel was composed (Ní Dhuibhne, p.90).

## NOTES

---

<sup>1</sup> Sheila Hamilton, ‘Black Ireland, Green Novel’, *Fortnight*, 286 (July-August 1990), p.25.

- 
- <sup>2</sup> Derek Hand, 'Being Ordinary: Ireland from Elsewhere: A Reading of Ní Dhuibhne's "The Bray House"', *Irish University Review*, 30.1 (2000), 103-116 (p.103).
- <sup>3</sup> Gerry Smyth, *The Novel and the Nation: Studies in the New Irish Fiction* (London: Pluto Press, 1997), p.167.
- <sup>4</sup> Constanza del Río, 'Excavating Ireland's Contemporary Heritage in Eilís Ní Dhuibhne's *The Bray House*', *Estudios Irlandeses*, 4 (2009), 1-8 (p.4).
- <sup>5</sup> Hand, p.103.
- <sup>6</sup> Carol Morris, 'The Bray House: An Irish Critical Utopia', *Études Irlandaises*, 21.1 (1996), 127-140 (p.128).
- <sup>7</sup> Christina Hunt Mahony, *Contemporary Irish Literature: Transforming Tradition* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), p.259.
- <sup>8</sup> Hamilton, p.25.
- <sup>9</sup> Hamilton, p.25.
- <sup>10</sup> Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1979), p.70
- <sup>11</sup> Beth Wightman, 'Lost in Space: Geography, Architecture and Culture in Eilís Ní Dhuibhne's *The Bray House*', *Space and Culture*, 13.2 (2010), 164-177 (p.166).
- <sup>12</sup> Eilís Ní Dhuibhne, *The Bray House* (Dublin: Attic Press, 1990), p.113, p.88.
- <sup>13</sup> Muireann Ní Bhrolcháin, *An Introduction to Early Irish Literature* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009), p.85.
- <sup>14</sup> Nicky Ryan, '30 Years on: The Impact of the Chernobyl Nuclear Disaster', *TheJournal.ie* (26 April 2016), <<http://www.thejournal.ie/chernobyl-disaster-effects-ireland-2727840-Apr2016/>> accessed 16 May 2020.
- <sup>15</sup> Suvin, p.4.
- <sup>16</sup> Paul Brown and John Hooper, 'Irish to Fight N-Plant Proposals', *The Guardian* (17 September 1987).
- <sup>17</sup> Mahony, p.259.
- <sup>18</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), p.270.
- <sup>19</sup> Hand, p.107.
- <sup>20</sup> Suvin, p.6.
- <sup>21</sup> David Fickling, 'Irish Sellafield Appeal Ruled Illegal', *The Guardian* (30 May 2006), <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2006/may/30/energy.nuclearindustry>> accessed 7 May 2020.
- <sup>22</sup> Peter Geoghegan, 'Sellafield Will Remain a Threat to Ireland', *The Guardian* (4 August 2011); Gerardine Meaney, *Gender, Ireland and Cultural Change: Race, Sex and Nation* (London: Routledge, 2010), p.195.

- 
- <sup>23</sup> Fred Pearce, 'Shocking State of World's Riskiest Nuclear Waste Site', *New Scientist* (21 January 2015), <<https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg22530053-800-shocking-state-of-worlds-riskiest-nuclear-waste-site/>> accessed 1 November 2017.
- <sup>24</sup> Pearce, 2015.
- <sup>25</sup> Fickling, 2006; Stephen Goodwin, 'Thatcher Call to Irish on Sellafield Fears', *The Times* (8 March 1986).
- <sup>26</sup> Brown and Hooper, 1987; Geoghegan, 2011.
- <sup>27</sup> Tony Eardley, 'The Russian Roulette our Nuclear Industry is Playing', *The Guardian*, Letters to the Editor (18 May 1986).
- <sup>28</sup> Goodwin, 1986.
- <sup>29</sup> Paul Brown and Paul Johnson, 'Haughey Calls for Sellafield to be Closed: Irish Premier Demands Closure of British Nuclear Plant', *The Guardian* (30 July 1984).
- <sup>30</sup> Michael Morris, 'Irish Minister Urges Drive to Shut Sellafield: Deputy Premier Spring calls for Closure of British Nuclear Reprocessing Plant', *The Guardian* (29 November 1986).
- <sup>31</sup> Dáil Debates, Written Answers, 'Nuclear Power Stations' (7 December 1989).
- <sup>32</sup> Meaney, 2010, p.195.
- <sup>33</sup> Del Río, 2009, p.3.
- <sup>34</sup> Eilís Ní Dhuibhne, "'Some Hardcore Storytelling": Uses of Folklore by Contemporary Irish Writers' (n.d.), <[https://www.academia.edu/9814889/SOME\\_HARDCORE\\_STORYTELLING](https://www.academia.edu/9814889/SOME_HARDCORE_STORYTELLING)> accessed 28 July 2017.
- <sup>35</sup> Lorraine Courtney, 'Review: *The Shelter of Neighbours* by Éilís Ní Dhuibhne', *Irish Independent* (7 May 2012).
- <sup>36</sup> Nicola Warwick, 'One Woman's Writing Retreat: Email Interview with Éilís Ní Dhuibhne' (2004). The original website is no longer online, but a copy may be read via the Internet Archive at <[https://web.archive.org/web/20080514004502/http://www.prairieden.com/front\\_porch/visiting\\_authors/dhuibhne.html](https://web.archive.org/web/20080514004502/http://www.prairieden.com/front_porch/visiting_authors/dhuibhne.html)> accessed 7 April 2020.
- <sup>37</sup> Christine St. Peter, 'Negotiating the Boundaries: An Interview with Éilís Ní Dhuibhne', *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 32.1 (Spring 2006), 68-75, p.70.
- <sup>38</sup> Giovanna Tallone, 'Past, Present, and Future. Patterns of Otherness in Eilís Ní Dhuibhne's Fiction', in *Irish Literature: Feminist Perspectives*, ed. by Patricia Coughlan and Tina O'Toole (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2008), p.173.
- <sup>39</sup> Dick Ahlstrom, 'Nuclear Incident off our Coast has Potential to Bankrupt Ireland', *Irish Times* (1 December 2016) <<http://www.irishtimes.com/news/science/nuclear-incident-off-our-coast-has-potential-to-bankrupt-ireland-1.2889522>> accessed 26 March 2020.

- 
- <sup>40</sup> Suvin, p.4, p.67.
- <sup>41</sup> Hand, p.103.
- <sup>42</sup> Hand, p.104.
- <sup>43</sup> John, pp.36-43.
- <sup>44</sup> Jonathan Wooding ed., *The Otherworld Voyage in Early Irish Literature: An Anthology of Criticism* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000), p.xi.
- <sup>45</sup> Wooding, p.xi.
- <sup>46</sup> Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr., *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), p.217.
- <sup>47</sup> Csicsery-Ronay, p.217.
- <sup>48</sup> Csicsery-Ronay, p.217.
- <sup>49</sup> Csicsery-Ronay, p.217.
- <sup>50</sup> Csicsery-Ronay, p.80.
- <sup>51</sup> Ní Bhrolcháin, p.5.
- <sup>52</sup> Ní Bhrolcháin, p.78.
- <sup>53</sup> Ní Bhrolcháin, p.81.
- <sup>54</sup> Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, 'The Literature of Medieval Ireland to c. 800', in *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature: Volume I*, ed. by Margaret Kelleher and Philip O'Leary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 9-31, p.26.
- <sup>55</sup> Eleanor Knott and Gerard Murphy, *Early Irish Literature* (Oxford: Routledge, 1966), p.13.
- <sup>56</sup> Knott and Murphy, p.113.
- <sup>57</sup> Suvin, p.25.
- <sup>58</sup> Alfred Nutt, *The Voyage of Bran, Volume II: The Celtic Doctrine of Re-Birth* (London: David Nutt in the Strand, 1897), p.1.
- <sup>59</sup> Mahony, p.259.
- <sup>60</sup> Hand, p.113.
- <sup>61</sup> Jameson, p.286.
- <sup>62</sup> Ní Bhrolcháin, p.14, p.2.
- <sup>63</sup> Suvin, p.4.
- <sup>64</sup> Ní Bhrolcháin, p.7.

---

<sup>65</sup> Nutt, p.2.

<sup>66</sup> Ní Bhrolcháin, p.79.

<sup>67</sup> Much as with Ní Dhuibhne's novel, critical consensus is divided as to whether *Gulliver's Travels* is a work of science fiction. Brian Aldiss and David Wingrove, in their seminal *Trillion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction* (London: Gollancz, 1986) state that it 'does not count as science fiction, being satirical and/or moral in intention rather than speculative' (Aldiss, p.81). By contrast, Adam Roberts in the more recent (but equally seminal) *Palgrave History of Science Fiction* (London: Palgrave, 2016) argues 'that not only is Swift's great novel inherently science fictional, all four parts are deeply imbued with science, to such a degree that it becomes hard to avoid reading the book as being about science, or more particularly about the relationship between science and representation' (Roberts, p.93). Many others, from Kingsley Amis to Terry Eagleton have also addressed the question of genre with regard to *Gulliver's Travels*.

<sup>68</sup> Suvin, p.111.

<sup>69</sup> Val Nolan, 'Reading *The Bray House* and *Last Ones Left Alive*', Anglia Ruskin Centre for Science Fiction and Fantasy Blog (August 2019) <<http://csff-anglia.co.uk/news/reading-the-bray-house-and-last-ones-left-alive-by-val-nolan/>> accessed 13 April 2020.

<sup>70</sup> Ní Bhrolcháin, p.26.

<sup>71</sup> Ní Bhrolcháin, p.112.

<sup>72</sup> Wooding, pp.xii-xiii.

<sup>73</sup> Hand, p.111.

<sup>74</sup> Dominic Boyer, *Energopolitics: Wind and Power in the Anthropocene* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2019), p.1.

<sup>75</sup> Richard Owen, 'Irish Voice Concern at Sellafield', *The Times* (7 March 1986).

<sup>76</sup> Wightman, p.172.

<sup>77</sup> Imre Szeman, 'On the Energy Humanities; or, What can Philosophy Tell Us About Oil? (A Preliminary Sketch)' (Alberta: European Union Centre of Excellence, University of Alberta, 2015), p. 6.

<sup>78</sup> Ahlstrom, 2016.

<sup>79</sup> Hillary Fannin, 'I Would Have Eaten the Budgerigar to See Tahiti', *Irish Times* (28 February 2014), <<https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/people/i-would-have-eaten-the-budgerigar-to-see-tahiti-1.1707143>> accessed 12 September 2019.

---

<sup>80</sup> Paul Hosford, 'Remember Iodine Tablets? You Won't Be Getting Them Again', *TheJournal.ie* (14 June 2015) <<http://www.thejournal.ie/iodine-tablets-wont-be-sent-out-again-2157770-Jun2015/>> accessed 16 May 2020.

<sup>81</sup> Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland 1900-2000* (London: Profile Books, 2010), p.732.

<sup>82</sup> Proinsias Mac Cana, *The Learned Tales of Medieval Ireland* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1980), p.25.

<sup>83</sup> Ní Bhrolcháin. p. 6 n. 6.

<sup>84</sup> Suvin, p.22.

<sup>85</sup> Csicsery-Ronay, p.78.

<sup>86</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, Introduction to *The Left Hand of Darkness* (New York: Walker, 1969), p.viii.

<sup>87</sup> Suvin, p.36, p.13.