

**Gay Lynch, *Apocryphal and Literary Influences on Galway Diasporic History* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010)**

Although it will be of interest to academic readers – particularly those interested in Gérard Genette’s work on *transtextuality* – this centrifugal book will take a broad variety of readers to many different horizons: it led this (Irish) reader back into Irish stories then forward into the literature and history of another continent. It gave me a taste for further reading in Australian literature, an awareness of what has become known as Australia’s ‘history wars’, astonishing me with Australian sensitivity to cultural struggle and dispossession, past and present (and the strict ownership of Booandik stories – Appendix C). Referred to throughout as an ‘exegesis’,<sup>1</sup> it contextualises Lynch’s Irish-settler novel ‘Unsettled’, situated in South South-east Australia (my only regret is that ‘Unsettled’ wasn’t included!). It will also be of considerable interest to creative writers of any genre, and a useful resource for postgraduate creative writing researchers.

‘The magistrate of Galway’ (Chapter 1) examines the religious and economic manipulation of the fifteenth-century story of Galway magistrate who – rather than compromise a jury – had his son executed for murdering a Spanish rival in love. Dr Lynch examines the story’s apocryphal resistance to historical verification, the archetypal aspect of the tension between fathers and sons, and its similarity to the tale of Cuchulainn killing his son in the stories of the Ulster mythological cycle.<sup>2</sup> She speculates that Galway Lynches may have carried enduring elements of the story when they arrived in Australia mid-nineteenth century. Through a plethora of literary transformations, including cantos by William Carleton Jr and the *Warden of Galway* by Revd Edward Groves, the author arrives at her own employment of the story in her novel ‘Unsettled’, currently in preparation for publication.

Chapter Two takes a closer look at the apocryphal figure of playwright Edward Geoghegan, convicted in Dublin in 1839 (for the theft of two reams of paper) and transported to Australia. His play *The Hibernian Father* carried the Galway magistrate’s story to Australia with some considerable success before Geoghegan disappeared from the records. Lynch solved the mystery of his disappearance, in 2008, with the help of archivist Janette Pelosi. The research increased her sympathy for his circumstances and his efforts as a creative writer who, as a convict, was obliged to write under assumed names. Lynch looks closely at the links between ‘writing against the canon’, which typifies apocryphal stories and (Gothic) melodrama. All of this, together with her observation of Irish family pride, provides parallels and a logic for transformation in Lynch’s own novel, where theatre will also have an important role.

‘Apocryphal stories generated by the 1859 wreck of the steamer *Admella*’ (Chapter 3) considers South-east Irish stories, Booandik Nation stories, poet Adam Lindsay Gordon’s

<sup>1</sup> Nigel Krauth (mentioned in the text and bibliography, but not the index) has underlined the similarity between exegeses and the traditional preface of writers like Poe, Greene, Nabokov (76). Krauth also says, ‘In Australia, higher degree candidates have the opportunity to “detail ... the processes” as Poe strove to do. This introduces a sensible mechanism for candidates to defend their work in the current cultural context ...’ (Nigel Krauth, ‘The preface as exegesis’, *TEXT*, 6.1 (2002)).

<sup>2</sup> Several articles by Dr Lynch consider this question. See n.83 (153), also ‘Fiction writing: theft or weft?’ in *TEXT*, 9.1 (2005).

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transformation of the story in his 'From the wreck' (often treated as 'truth'), stories of the Lynch family (into which Dr Lynch has married), and finally her own use of such stories in 'Unsettled'. Here one sees how stories and even events may shift and slide, be perceived differently, how people (Indigenous population, Irish settlers) may be marginalised, the stories re-arranged in function of the power and function of their teller or of the temporal and political context, never reaching any absolute truth, and how it may be precisely this aspect that allows for their continuous literary transformation, their very justification (as suggested by Barthes [71]), and their contribution to collective memory.

'Apocryphal stories in historical fiction' (Chapter 4) discusses in particular Kate Grenville's international bestselling novel *The Secret River* (2005) and its companion *Searching for The Secret River* (2006), a memoir about the process of writing it. Originally instigated by an apocryphal family story, Grenville's narrative, working 'both with and against historical fiction genre' (107), set off its own ripples into the history of the Hawkesbury River settlement, causing controversy and challenging views of Australian history.

'Architextuality, genre, the Australian fiction tradition' (Chapter 5), explores where 'Unsettled' may fit. Lynch thinks it too 'works with and against' previous models of literary, popular historical and historical fiction. Zooming in on these, the author considers: literary fiction's use of metaphor but also its new tendency towards pared-down prose; popular historical fiction's exploration of gender, in particular the treatment of sex and gender; language style and racial discourse in the work of Ann Clancy and John Fletcher; and finally, historical fiction's theorists, noting that

The exclusion of women from male historical narratives has been a major impetus for feminist re-writing of history in postcolonial novels. *Unsettled*, a small family story set against a larger history of the South-east, was partly begun for this reason. (105)

Dr Lynch concludes that 'Unsettled' fits both political and escapist criteria.

Detailed headings tend to break up a first reading but the detailed table of contents (reiterated at the head of each chapter) makes revisiting the book a pleasure. An index, bibliography and notes are provided, plus seven appendices: on Geoghegan, his play, Boandik customs and language, Gaelic, plus detailed acknowledgements to helpful historians and archivists, and to the Lynch family. (One oral Lynch family story speaks volumes: to a policeman complaining about his sons' behaviour, a Lynch father replies, 'Get off your hoss and say that'. The policeman returns to town without pressing charges – Appendix F).

Reflecting on the 'slippage [that] occurs between research and creative writing, one mode freeing the logical processes of the other', Lynch concludes, 'Apocryphal stories attract creative writers like me who want to dig up stories that already exist, like turf; then we watch them flare, creating new truths out of possible lies' (115). This book is a visit to the writer's echo chamber and I look forward to reading 'Unsettled', the result of its author's 'need to interrogate the past to understand the present and change the future' (106).

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