



## **“We Are Translated Men”: Mobility in Children’s Literature** — Emer O’Sullivan

Maguire, Nora, and Beth Rodgers, eds. *Children’s Literature on the Move: Nations, Translations, Migrations*. Dublin: Four Courts, 2013. 167 pp. €55.00 hc. ISBN 9781846824128. Print.

Home (nation), away (migration), and everything in between (transnationalism) as topics in literary texts produced in Europe for young readers and as a feature of their production, distribution, and reception are the areas engaged with in the collection *Children’s Literature on the Move*, which was named a 2013 Honor Book by the Children’s Literature Association. Since the volume was published, the topic of migration has acquired a dramatic relevance and actuality in Europe, making the publication all the more timely. More than a million migrants and refugees entered the continent in 2015, driven by war in Syria, violence in Afghanistan and Iraq, and poverty and political repression in North Africa, while another four thousand were drowned trying to cross the Mediterranean. The resettlement of migrants is creating division in the

European Union accompanied by ugly demonstrations of right-wing, xenophobic groups and by the increasing popularity of anti-immigration right-wing parties in many countries.

Although these acute developments succeeded publication of this collection, in their introduction to the volume, editors Nora Maguire and Beth Rodgers rightly justify their engagement with the topic of nationalism by referring to Benedict Anderson’s observation that ideas of the nation and nationalism “command . . . profound emotional legitimacy,” adding that it has “lost none of its relevance in the wake of the seismic social, cultural and geopolitical transformations” (9) that have taken place since the now canonical *Imagined Communities* was published in 1983. They also point out that current collective

fears about economic crisis, social justice, democracy, and globalization have given “an increased significance to notions of national sovereignty and identity” (9).

The editors invoke the intertwined nature of Western ideals of nationhood and childhood rather than teasing it out. They cite Mary S. Thompson, who, in her lucid reflections on childhood and the nation in the introduction to *Young Irelands*, observes that the “tropes of nineteenth-century European nationhood—seen as elemental, natural and untainted by Enlightenment ideology”—are also those of the evolving Romantic concept of childhood (13). If they had expanded on how childhood is a powerful signifier that represents “both the origin and future of the state” (Kelen and Sundmark 263), however, it would have lent more weight to their statement about “the acute collective anxieties that gravitate towards both the child and the nation” (11).<sup>1</sup>

As a site of intergenerational communication about what it means to be a member of any given community, children’s literature is a privileged domain for constructing and challenging notions of collective identity. Discourses of identity and belonging can be positioned at the different ideological poles of children’s literature: they can be texts that have the potential to be radical forces for change (Reynolds 3) or their reactionary counterparts, which seek to condition young readers in line with contemporary and culture-bound norms. This volume fittingly presents a range of different critical stances toward and instances of nations

constructed and deconstructed in writings for children “acknowledging their potential for cohesion and empowerment as well as for oppression and violence” (11). It addresses the role that literature can play in probing and creating identity for readers as well as the topic of migration, and how it impinges on personal, cultural, and national identity. By implementing the metaphor of movement in the title of their collection, the editors align themselves with cultural translation studies, which has expanded the range of its focus beyond addressing the translation of texts from one language and cultural context to another in order to include people, travel, and migration. As Salmon Rushdie famously claimed, when writing about the British Indian writer, “The word ‘translation’ comes, etymologically, from the Latin for ‘bearing across.’ Having been borne across the world, we are translated men” (16).<sup>2</sup> The combination of the two dynamic terms “translations, migrations” in the subtitle of the collection fits well into this discursive context, and it is the response to these issues that often determines the degree of dynamism or otherwise of the first term, “nation.” A reactionary stance toward nation that rejects migration and translation as undermining national sovereignty and self-sufficiency (as in Nazi Germany, for instance) will result in stasis; a progressive and inclusive notion of it that embraces both of these as enriching factors increases its potential for renewal and change.

Ten chapters on a wide variety of genres in Turkish, Estonian, Irish, Canadian, French, Polish, and British children's literature are divided into three thematic sections. The relationship between history and identity is at the fore of the essays in the first section, "Constructing Nations and Nationhood." Deniz Arzuk provides a fascinating account of how the Turkish children's periodical *Çocuk* engaged with the concepts of nationalism and nationhood in Atatürk's Republic in the 1930s and, in line with the cultural revolution, propagated a homogeneous notion of "Turkishness" and the unification of language at the expense of de facto demographic and linguistic heterogeneity. She relates how the periodical employed national narratives to turn children's minds and hearts and to make them "internalize nationhood, both mentally and sentimentally" (30). The conclusion opens up the perspective on nationalism and children during that era by noting that analyzing the journal presents only one side of the issue and by referring to interviews conducted by sociologists at Ankara University with people born at the turn of the twentieth century about their childhood experiences. These gave very different accounts of how they experienced the Turkish Republic as children—a diversity not reflected in the official discourse on childhood as exemplified by *Çocuk*—and many of them (especially women) recalled how they felt a new sense of empowerment.

Mari Niitra writes about the connection between national identity and songs in the children's literature of Estonia, where singing played a central role in the formation of Estonian identity. At the centre of her article are two contemporary fantasy books for children by Aino Pervik (the translated titles are "The World of the Feathered and the Furry" and "The Feathered, the Windy and the Black Monk") that connect national identity and songs and that draw symbolic parallels to events in recent history. Kate Harvey's chapter on Shakespeare's history plays seems, at first sight, a surprising inclusion in this volume, but her account of how these plays were taught in British schools in the wake of late nineteenth-century educational reforms and of how two early twentieth-century collections of adaptations of the plays of Quiller-Couch and of Thomas Carter served a double purpose—"to foster a love of Shakespeare and also to cultivate a sense of pride in their nation's history and international status at a time when the future of Britain's international position was becoming increasingly insecure" (53)—makes this a rewarding case study that resonates with the issues discussed in the other chapters of this section and beyond.

The editors write in their introduction that the second section, "Irish Childhoods: Past and Present, at Home and Abroad," complements the *Young Irelands* volume of essays edited by Thompson; while that volume examined a wide range of texts from the



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eighteenth century to the present that reflected or challenged concepts of Irish national or imperial identity, the chapters in the “Irish” section of this volume address translation, migration, and writers of the diaspora. It opens with a very strong piece on the transnational genesis of “Pangur Bán,” probably the “single best-known Irish-language poem” (60). Celia Keenan deconstructs the essential Irishness of this iconic text by unearthing its origins, highlighting some of the myths that have attached themselves to it along the way and, in an act of exacting and exciting scholarly detective work, uncovering the “radical mutability and the many acts of translation and adaptation that underlie apparently stable images of culture and nationality” (60). The poem ultimately reflects many languages and places: “Scholars whose identity and nationality we shall never know saved it for us in times of war and persecution. . . . We have it now after all those years because of the work of Celtic scholars from Britain, Germany and Ireland. Its story is a European one as much as an Irish one” (72). Caoimhe Nic Lochlainn examines the issue of domestication in translations of two children’s books into the Irish language: Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* by Pádraig Ó Cadhla in 1922, during a phase of intensive translation into what was the official language of the newly established Irish Free State, and Enid Blyton’s *The Secret Mountain* by Tomás Mac Aodh Bhúí in 1994. While *Alice* was relocated to Ireland and used by the translator as “a repository for traditional songs, rhymes and proverbs” (80), Blyton’s translator created a “self-consciously anticolonial and often overtly didactic text” (85). With reference to the contemporary discussion on translation for children, Nic Lochlainn provides interesting reflections on the situation pertaining to translating into a minority language, the vast majority of whose speakers are bilingual and can thus recognize

source texts in English, making these ideologically motivated translations seem all the more alien.

Siobhan Dowd is hailed as one of the most significant voices in recent Irish children's literature. Her four acclaimed novels (*A Swift Pure Cry*, *The London Eye Mystery*, *Bog Child*, and *Solace of the Road*) were published in Britain shortly before or just after her untimely death in 2007. In her chapter, Valerie Coghlan discusses Dowd's ambivalent relationship with Irish national identity—she was born in England to Irish parents—and the in-between state of emigrant writers that enabled Dowd to use her perspective as an “insider/outsider” (99) to look at contemporary Ireland and to tackle contentious moral issues relating to changing social and (especially female) sexual behaviour, as well as the conflict in Northern Ireland in a way that displayed considerably less caution than books for young readers published in Ireland.

The Irish president Mary Robinson, in a speech in 1995, redefined those who were hitherto known pejoratively as “Irish emigrants” as the “Irish diaspora,” broadening and making more inclusive the term “people of Ireland” and opening up the possibility of reimagining what it means to be Irish and/or of Irish descent. How members of this diaspora not only help to shape Irish identity but also contribute to the process of national formation and reformation in their new home country is the subject of Clóna Ó Gallchoir's chapter. She examines the different configurations

of identity offered in the works of “dual identity” Irish-Canadian children's authors Caroline Pignat and James Henegan in the context of settler and immigrant texts and of home and belonging. Looking at how the position of Irish immigrants to Canada is reimagined in the contemporary context, she probes the role of memory and imagination in the “creation of narratives which help to sustain immigrant identity” (115).

In the final section, “Contemporary Children's Literature: Challenging Discourses of Nation,” Ruth Scales discusses—after providing copious contextual information—three novels by Faïza Guène, born in France to Algerian parents. Putting special emphasis on the oral mode of these novels, she notes how contemporary fiction by an author from the *banlieue* empowers young people from the margins of French society to show them “that they need not be defined by the dominant perceptions of them in French society” (133). Fiction that rehearses and retells events from the past and commemorates historical events plays, as Ann Rigney reminds us, a special role in creating and maintaining a sense of selfhood through historical remembrance and cultural memory. These are issues addressed by Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak in her chapter, in which she discusses how recent graphic novels on and photographs of the period of martial law in Poland actively engage Polish children with the history of their country, empowering them to interpret it “and use it to build a better world for themselves” (150).

The final chapter in the volume opens with the suggestion that “[t]he Anglophone world is notoriously unreceptive to fiction in translation” (151), one that is confirmed by every available statistic and is to be found in numerous studies on translation. The author of this chapter, Siobhán Parkinson, wears many hats in Irish children’s literature. A prolific and critically acclaimed author in both English and Irish, Parkinson was Ireland’s first Laureate na nÓg (children’s laureate); she also comments on Irish and international children’s literature in her role as (former) co-editor of the international and national journals *Bookbird* and *Inis* and is involved in publishing as commissioning editor at Little Island, an imprint of New Island Books, which was launched in 2010 with the joint aims of fostering new Irish writing and translations—something completely new in Irish publishing.<sup>3</sup> Parkinson starts her chapter wearing the critic’s hat but swaps it later for her publisher’s hat to give enlightening insights on the challenges involved at the different stages of decisions involving the selection of books, the choice of titles, and translation strategies. At Little Island, they are decidedly against domestication: “Since our aim . . . is cultural, we do not set out to localize the books we translate, or to erase the markers of the originating culture” (156). Her upbeat conclusion is wonderfully fitting for a volume dedicated to transnational issues: “books in translation can hold their own in the marketplace as long as they are well

jacketed, have attractive titles, do not draw specific attention to their foreign origin on the cover, though retaining their identity within the text, and, of course, are excellent books” (160).

Although none of the individual chapters is comparative in nature and each of them unique in the respective cultural and historical specificity of its focus, collectively they generate various dialogues, so the essay on nation building and language reform in Turkey resonates, for instance, with those on language, memory, and identity in Poland and Estonia, or the reflections about the potential of Irish-Canadian narratives to help sustain immigrant identity reverberates with the account of Algerian-French ones. And even if some of the most extreme manifestations of nationalism in the form of xenophobia, propaganda, and genocide to be found, for instance, in essays that explore the representation of war in children’s literature and media in collections edited by Elizabeth Goodenough and Andrea Immel or by Lissa Paul, Rosemary R. Johnston, and Emma Short do not feature here, the spread of themes is nonetheless impressive.

This sixth publication of the Irish Society for the Study of Children’s Literature<sup>4</sup> continues the laudable tradition of promoting scholarship of Irish literature in conjunction with that of other cultures by looking beyond English-speaking countries to identify points of contact with other literatures, especially from other European peripheries. It maintains the high standard

of scholarship and breadth of scope established by the previous volumes, is handsomely produced, and has a comprehensive index. It also boasts a wonderfully appropriate jacket illustration depicting the protagonist from Andrew Whitson and Catriona Nic Sheáin's Irish-language picture book *Cogito* sitting on her suitcase in the middle of a strange-looking environment, immersed in a huge book. The cover does not show this, but the book and the related video (see "Cogito") reveal that she is about to be asked existential questions by some of the natives: where she comes from, who she is, and whether she really exists at all. It seems that she has lost her shadow in this place and, without it, is no longer sure of her identity—a poetic image for the

sense of dislocation that can be felt in a new, strange environment. She takes refuge in her secret and familiar "hiding place," the magical realm of the book, where she seeks and finds the letters that make up her name—Cogito—thereby restoring her shadow, and can then re-emerge, confidently able to proclaim who she is, and declare that she is there to stay. The considered choice of cover illustration thus reflects many of the themes addressed in this rich volume: migration and its threat to personal, cultural, and national identities; the often difficult struggle to find one's place in a new environment; and, ultimately, the role that children's literature can play in establishing and confirming identities.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Christopher (Kit) Kelen and Björn Sundmark's volume of essays offers various discussions about how the idea of childhood pervades the rhetoric of nation and citizenship.

<sup>2</sup> Although it does not make the statement less problematic, we might assume that Rushdie used "men" as a generic form here rather than a gendered one.

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted, though, that as a small publisher, it issues only two books per year, which is roughly 20% of the total numbers produced.

<sup>4</sup> Details of all the volumes can be found at "Our Publications" on the *ISSCLblog*.

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Emer O'Sullivan, Professor of English Literature at Leuphana Universität Lüneburg, has published widely in German and English on image studies, children's literature, and translation. *Kinderliterarische Komparatistik* won the IRSC Award for outstanding research in 2001 and *Comparative Children's Literature* the Children's Literature Association 2007 Book Award. *Imagining Sameness and Difference in Children's Literature* (co-edited with Andrea Immel) will be published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2016.