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## Animals in Irish Literature and Culture edited by Kathryn Kirkpatrick and Borbála Faragó

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**Transformations, Oppositions and Collaborations: Animals in Modern Era Irish Literature and Culture**

***Animals in Irish Literature and Culture***  
edited by KATHRYN KIRKPATRICK AND  
BORBÁLA FARAGÓ

Palgrave MacMillan, 2015 \$116.00

Reviewed by **GENEVIÈVE PIGEON**

In her Introduction to this collection of essays, Kathryn Kirkpatrick reminds us with conviction of the fundamental role animals have played in Irish culture and in a certain representation of what Irishness could be. Considering the influence of both postcolonial and ecocriticism on the last decade of research on an international level, she suggests that this volume is a continuation of a conversation previously opened by Maureen O'Connor's *The Female and the Species: The Animal in Irish Women's Writing* (2010). By focusing on animals known by and familiar to Irish readers, such as horses and pigs, as well as less-considered animals such as hares, foxes and insects, the authors of this volume address a wide range of cultural productions spanning the early modern period to the present, with poetry and literature dominating the spectrum of genres.

The Introduction and essays featured in *Animals in Irish Literature and Culture* deal openly with the difficult task of writing about nonhuman animals and inquiring about them without falling blindsided into the current tradition of human exceptionalism. This prudence is well rooted in ecofeminist Carol J. Adams's "War on Compassion," which appears to have motivated a great deal of reflections, and new readings of the modern era's

cultural productions. In fact, one could wonder if Adams's influence on at least a quarter of the essays doesn't cast a shadow on other major works in the fields of ecofeminism and ecocriticism; of course, her important contribution cannot be overlooked, but the reader could feel like some essays were built around her approach rather than around the subject of animals. The remark should not, however, and does not intend to, tarnish the great quality of this collection of essays.

Divided into four parts (Hunting and Consuming Animals; Gender, Sexuality, and Animals; Challenging Habitats; and Unsettling Animals), the 16 essays of this volume provide insightful readings of poetry by such authors as Geraldine Mills, Dennis O'Driscoll and Mary Montague, to name a few; they also look at plays (Colm Clifford's *Reasons for Staying*, for instance), essays, films and novels (including a very interesting analysis of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*). The diversity and generosity of the texts are a testimony to the incredible richness of the theories used to think differently about nature, animals, animality, migrations and climate change. From Aristotle to Jacques Derrida, to Greg Garrard and Judith Butler, the authors have worked with the "classics" in such a way that their analysis can be appreciated by non-Irish readers and will, without a doubt, contribute to the fast growing field of animal studies and ecocriticism. Looking at animals in literature and culture as a symbol of transformation, Sarah O'Connor ("Hares and Hags: Becoming Animal in Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's *Dún na mBan trí Thine*") analyses Ní Dhuibhne's extensive use of "The Old Woman as Hare" legend, "a tale of a woman who transforms herself into a hare to challenge social boundaries and traditional hierarchies" (92). While her

subject is rooted in Irish history and cultural background, her use of Maureen O'Connor's *The Female and the Species: the Animal in Irish Women's Writing*, and the fact that O'Connor describes "the way in which women have historically been associated with children, animals, and other 'savages' both inside and outside Ireland" (93) contribute to the universality of her analysis. Like most of the essays of this volume, O'Connor's text shows a clear link between animals, nature and categories of humans considered inferior in both colonial and patriarchal systems. This association which, she recalls, has been named "somatophobia" by Elizabeth Spelman in *Woman as Body: Ancient and Contemporary Views*, is one of the common denominators allowing the volume to remain coherent and appealing to international readers.

In her well documented essay, "Porcine Pasts and Bourgeois Pigs: Consumption and the Irish Counterculture," Sarah L. Townsend provides a clear example of the way one animal, the pig, can absorb and represent complex aspects of a changing culture. With the help of featured caricatures from the beginning of the 20th century up to the 70's, she demonstrates how Ireland's long standing porcine comparisons have evolved, from the colonized country's perceived failings associated with pig behaviors (dirtiness, laziness, evolutionary lowness and lack of refinement) to the Celtic Tiger years of prosperity and international recognition. The 2008 recession and 2010 bailout have linked Ireland to the pig once again, this time through the acronym 'PIGS' (Portugal, Italy and/or Ireland, Greece, Spain). Her analysis of two literary works (Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy* and Enda Walsh's *Disco Pigs*) show how the pig is recuperated in counterculture, showing

"the exploitation [of] the protagonists—and their unwitting human contemporaries" (57) while fighting against mainstream culture.

While cultural, historical and political contexts are, understandably, major features of the essays, the environmental crisis and emerging theories related to Edward O. Wilson's problematization of the term "Anthropocene" have inspired authors, such as Luz Mar González-Arias with his contribution titled "'A pedigree bitch, like myself': (Non)Human Illness and Death in Dorothy Molloy's Poetry," to follow in Wilson's footsteps and think of the coming age as the "Eremocene, the Age of Loneliness," an era which "speaks to the utter solitude humans will be doomed to if there are no flora or fauna to reciprocate and balance their life" (119). In this case, animals are not so much apprehended as part of a binary opposition that privileges humans but rather as one part of a system, a symphony, necessary to keep us all alive. Poetry, here, is a language that allows for the natural world "to be seen as a space of regeneration and life, as opposed to depictions of nature as a passive context for human activity" (121) and Molloy's art provides readers with the experience of connecting the body with the whole realm of nature.

It is of course impossible to cover all the fascinating subjects, texts and ideas featured in this book. We have tried to give a brief overview of the variety and quality of its essays; it is rare to read such a collection and feel like they all belong together, each contributing in its own fashion to a better understanding of a very complex matter. In the end, Donna Potts's "'Room for Creatures': Francis Harvey's Bestiary" might provide us with the best

way to summarize this very solid and necessary volume: “His poems about animals—whether domestic or wild—are poignant reminders that our human responsibility is not to manipulate and control nature; rather, we are nature, and we are obligated to view our relationship to nonhuman nature holistically, recognizing the fundamental interconnectedness of humans and other animals” (165).

### Works Cited

Spelman, Elizabeth. “Woman as Body: Ancient and Contemporary Views,” *Feminist Studies*, vol. 8, no. 1, 1982, pp. 109-31.

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