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Book Review: Salvador Ryan (ed.) - Death and the Irish: a miscellany, 2016

Alexander W. Anthony
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

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Death and the Irish: a miscellany

Salvador Ryan (ed). Dublin: Wordwell Ltd, 2016.
289 pp. ISBN: 978-0-993-35182-2. Price \$29.50.

Alexander W. Anthony

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, USA

In *Death and the Irish: a miscellany* Salvador Ryan (ed.) has compiled an entertaining assortment of multi-disciplinary works into one volume. Squeezing 75 chapters into the book's 282 pages, the volume manages to touch upon an enormous range of topics. Contributors include scholars from a variety of fields including history, anthropology, archaeology, linguistics, folklore, musicology, theology, and Celtic studies to name only a few. Refreshingly, the contributions have not been limited to academics. While the majority of the volume is centered around scholarly work, selected chapters include lived experiences from individuals who interact with death regularly; including contributions from an undertaker, a priest, and a palliative care worker. Ranging between three to five pages in the length, the chapters are kept necessarily short to accommodate their number. The brevity of each chapter acts as a double-edged sword, often leaving the reader's appetite unsatiated at the end of a particularly interesting chapter. This, however, may also be one of the greatest strengths of the volume as well. The multi-disciplinary nature of the collection allows each chapter to serve as an appetizer (to continue the metaphor) which teases at both the breadth and depth of research being done within so many fields regarding the Irish and death. Thankfully, many chapters end with either a bibliography or a short list of suggested readings; a welcome addition for readers looking to sink their teeth into meatier material.

With so many chapters it would be impossible to mention them all. However, particular chapters stand out as rich in ethnographic detail. In this respect, "Graveyard Folklore" by Clodagh Tait serves as an exemplar. A heavy two and half pages bursting with Irish folklore surrounding cemeteries and the dead. Early in the chapter the reader's attention is grasped by tales of "...skulls with nails in them being used to cure headaches, and human finger bones being rubbed on the gums of those with toothache" (Ryan 2016, 183). The ritualistic analogical action

(Tambiah 1985) described above are followed by other folk beliefs as anthropologically useful as they are entertaining to absorb. Perhaps knowing that less than three pages will only leave the reader only wanting for more, Tait ends by offering four additional readings for those interested.

Chapter after chapter reveals glimpses into Irish beliefs, customs, and rituals surrounding death. This often takes the form of historical narrative. In “The suicides of Thomas Judkin Fitzgerald (1864) and Lord Waterford (1895)”, Georgina Laragy examines public reaction to the suicides of two Irish landlords. Laragy concludes in nineteenth century Ireland, that for individuals trying to make sense of suicide “[m]eaning was sought not only within the details of an individual’s life but also from the actions of generations long dead” (Ryan 2016, 140). Shane McCorristine also utilizes historic narrative in “Captain William Coppin, the ghost and the lost Arctic” explorer as he details the use of spiritualism in the search for the lost Franklin expedition by the widow Jane Franklin.

As stated earlier, several chapters relate lived experiences rather than scholarly study. These chapters are no less useful for their anecdotal nature, however. For instance, in his introduction “Death and the Irish: Reflections from a Moneygall childhood”, Salvatore Ryan relates stories of his own remembrances of funerals as a child. A charming narrative which serves to not only set the tone for the remainder of the volume but, in it we find ritual and customs surrounding death in modern Irish History. We are reminded that the subject of this book is not the dead, rather it is the people they leave behind, and their use of ritual, custom, and tradition in confronting death. In “‘Don’t have a row over a coffin’: an undertaker’s perspective” Gus Nichols shares some of his experiences working as an undertaker in Dublin. Nichols stories illustrate the familial tensions that can arise around death and funerals in Ireland and elsewhere.

The volume contains tales of wakes, Catholicism, and traditional folklore (including an informative read entitled “The banshee” by Patricia Lysaght), but it is noteworthy that Ryan has been careful to avoid essentializing the Irish through the thoughtful inclusion of certain chapters. Modern and historical Ireland is populated by peoples of many backgrounds and this is reflected in this collection of readings. Chapters such as “The Muslim funeral prayer (Salat al-Janazah)” by Shaykh Umar Al-Qadri, “Irish Pres-

byterians and death” by Laurence S. Kirkpatrick, “Funeral rites in the Travelling community” by Nell and Michael McDonagh, and “A holy brotherhood? Death and the Irish Jews (1839-1914)” by Natalie Wynn remind the reader of the diversity of the Irish experience.

Death and the Irish: a miscellany leans heavily upon the field of history. Very few chapters are dedicated to modern interactions with death and dying. The final chapter *Keeping the dead alive: death and the use of social media in contemporary Ireland* by Kevin Myers stands out in this regard. A welcome addition would have been more contributions along similar lines. Noticeably absent are discussions of media including movies, television, and the internet (aside from the previously mentioned). This is a minor shortcoming, however, in a volume which offers such a variety within its pages.

The short chapters and beautiful color illustrations make this volume an attractive read to the general public. The brevity of the chapters limits the potential that the key to an allusive research question is hidden within this collection. Although each chapter delves only briefly into their respective thesis; the breadth of material contained within *Death and the Irish* serves as an extraordinary primer for any researcher interested in exploring new research perspectives. Teeming with folklore, ritual, custom, and ghost stories; *Death and the Irish: a miscellany* is as entertaining as it is informative. By any measure, it is a worthy read for any student of death or the Irish.

References

Tambiah, Stanley Jeyaraja, ed. 1985. Form and Meaning of Magical Acts. In *Culture, Thought, and Social Action*. Boston: Harvard University Press.
