

Colin Graham, *Ideologies of Epic: Nation, Empire and Victorian Epic Poetry*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998. 194 pages. Stg. £40.00 (hardback).

The epic is pre-eminently the poem of nationality, and as such it presupposes a univocal and shared culture for its effective production and reception. Colin Graham looks at the work of three nineteenth-century poets who engaged with the epic, Tennyson, Samuel Ferguson, and Edwin Arnold, and examines how they dealt with the inherent monologism of the form in the context of the various national, imperial and colonial forces of the age. But for these nineteenth-century poets, writing in an age of imperial expansion and consolidation, of assimilation and suppression of difference, and of emergent cultural nationalism, the epic form proves to be refractory and fractured, no matter how earnest the underlying aspiration to a homogenizing vision. The consequent tensions are the particular focus of Graham's *Ideologies of Epic*.

This book is a valuable contribution to nineteenth-century Irish studies. Graham begins by setting out his theoretical basis, which he develops from Bakhtin's approach to the epic genre by highlighting Bakhtin's assumed linkage between epic poetry and political entity. He also brings to bear the studies of nationalism by Benedict Anderson and Ernest Gellner. 'The nation insists upon its historical continuity. Just as epic sanctions itself off from the present in the "epic distance" it establishes between its world and contemporaneity while using "tradition" to transmit itself through history, the nation is seen to exist in a permanent conceptual stasis which is constant throughout (and constantly aware of) history.' The Bakhtinian conception of epic has it reading the past in a manner which becomes ideologically interwoven with the processes of nationalism, so that epic 'becomes an ideological force (with nation overarching it) seeking to pull inward all cohesive forces, to expunge difference, to foreclose the possibilities of past and future.'

Graham deals with Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, Ferguson's *Congal*, and Edwin Arnold's *Indian Idylls* and *The Song Celestial*, even-handedly affording each poet in turn some fifty pages and two chapters. Arnold's work from the eighteen eighties is chronologically the latest; culturally, it also appears the most distant, taking its material from Sanskrit and Indian legend. In the transcultural accommodation of the Indian material to a British readership, there is an inevitable negotiation which runs counter to the single-voiced assumptions of the epic form. Fifty years after Arnold, Yeats in 'A General Introduction to my Work', recalled a formal dinner in London at which he spoke of India: 'I told how they had learned everything, even their own Sanskrit, through the vehicle of English till the first discoverer of wisdom had become bywords for vague abstract facility. I begged the Indian writers present to remember that

no man can think or write with music or vigour except in his mother tongue.' Graham shows how such and other related tensions play through the epic poetry, although his focus is on ideology rather than on language.

Tennyson is taken as the Victorian poet who is central to the debate on the efficacy of epic — central because he was the most notable and successful in the attempt to revivify the ancient values of epic in the form in the nineteenth century, but central also because he wrote from a position within the imperial centre. Graham's reading of the *Idylls of the King* is particularly good, not just as setting up the terms of the subsequent discussion of Ferguson and Arnold, but as an examination of the tensions and deliberations in Tennyson's own work.

For *IUR* readers, the central section on Ferguson's *Congal* will be of greatest interest. It also emerges that Ferguson and Ireland offer the most rewarding subject of study for Graham's Bakhtinian approach. Ferguson 'sought a culturally ratified nationality which was laced in a "dialogic" relation with other nations. His version of Ireland was intended to co-exist with, rather than monologically override, other national and political formations (specifically "England", "Britain", the "United Kingdom" and the empire).' Graham concentrates on what Ferguson saw as his *magnum opus*, *Congal*; Ferguson seems to have had the germ of the idea in the eighteen forties, three decades before the poem's eventual publication in 1872. The shorter narrative poems collected as *Lays of the Western Gael* in 1864, and the earlier lyrical translations from Irish songs published with them, for both of which Ferguson was more anthologized in his own day and is better remembered in ours, were intended mainly as 'shoeing-horns' to ease a readership into his forthcoming epic poem. Arguably, *Congal* should not be seen in isolation but as the culmination of a large project sustained over many years, and in this way similar to Tennyson's *Idylls* and to the scope of epic generally. As such, the epic shares — on a biographical scale — the shifting and evolving character of the idea of nation, which manifests itself on a historical scale.

Noting the references to classical epic in *Congal*, Graham suggests that Ferguson includes them to claim classical legends and narratives as part of its Victorian cultural fabric, so as to show that Irish culture, like any other respectable European culture, has its roots in those ancient sources designated, in literature, by the term 'classics'. Agreed, references to classical epic in *Congal* may, as Graham claims, be introduced with such a purpose. It has, however, been established that there was a knowledge of Virgil and other Latin texts in seventeenth-century Ireland, and a number of classical texts had been translated into Irish by the Middle Irish period (ninth century). In other words, the classical references in Ferguson's *Congal* are not there necessarily as part of a

project to include Ireland in the Victorian scheme of an imperially dominant European civilization. Arguably, Ferguson included them so as to reproduce a feature of his Irish sources. It seems likely, as W.B. Stanford has argued, that the early practitioners of the native Irish literary tradition were already measuring their narrative material against that of Greece and Rome and 'refused to accept barbarian status'. The anxieties which Graham perceptively detects in *Congal*, with Ferguson attempting to place Ireland within a civilized world and outside the domain of the colonized, are not peculiar to the nineteenth century; they are also traceable in the literature of a pre-colonized Ireland, before the arrival of the Normans. Obviously, this does not undermine Graham's contention that a Bakhtinian reading of *Congal* is revealing in what it shows of the contradictions in terms of colonial and English-Irish relations; however, it may point to the possibility that such a programmatic reading can itself tend to be critically monologic, occluding the complexities of its historical and literary background.

But, such incidental reservations aside, it is refreshing to find Ferguson's work subjected to a sustained theoretical rigour which manages to retain the presence of the poem under discussion. There is a section in Chapter 6 dealing with 'Congal, Ireland and Ulster' which admirably demonstrates dissonances between the delicacy required for the success of Ferguson's overall cultural project, and the unwieldiness of the epic's formal conventions which are rooted in ideas of the nation and empire. In the poem, as Graham points out, Ferguson has Domnal remind his troops that they were all incomers to Ireland at some point in history, so bringing the opposition of 'indigenous' and 'colonizer' into question and foregrounding the mobility of the idea of nation. Ferguson's poetry acutely demonstrates the competition between monologic and dialogic tendencies to cohesion and dispersal, between nation and empire, that are particularly evident in nineteenth-century Ireland. And the value of what Graham has to say about Ferguson — who, while one of three writers examined, is the one which most engages his attention — is enhanced by his being set against two other poets whose positions within the imperial ideology were shaped by different concerns. *Ideologies of Epic* is not going to enable us to read *Congal* with a light enjoyment; it does, however, persuade us that the poem is worth studying as a text in which concerns crucial to Irish literary cultural studies are played out. This book is an excellent example of explicitly theory-driven criticism in practice.

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