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This Seamus, Too, is Famous

SEAMUS DEANE, *Small World: Ireland, 1798 - 2018*

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Cyraina Johnson-Roullier

In 1993, I had one burning question for Seamus Deane, once he began teaching at the University of Notre Dame as the head of its new Keough-Naughton Center for Irish Studies. This question was born of my complete disbelief—even almost outrage—that given his personal history, nationality, historical understanding, and intellectual commitments, Deane would have produced something like *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, Vols. I-III* (1991)—no matter that the entire international critical community thought of it as a much-needed masterpiece (all except the Irish feminists who rightly criticized its almost complete neglect of writing by Irish women). What was at the time my own extensive yet, nevertheless, incomplete knowledge of Ireland had been derived from my research and writing on James Joyce, my faithful attendance at the annual International James Joyce Symposium, including a visit to Ireland for that event, and another to Zürich, Switzerland at the invitation of Fritz Senn, director of the Zürich James Joyce Foundation. The question was simply this: why would someone with Deane’s intellectual, personal, critical, and cultural history create something so influential about that history, about that literature and culture, only to reinstitute, through its bringing together of 1500 years of Irish literature, what seemed like the paradoxically hegemonic move of creating a literary canon? Yet this question, deeply urgent to me at the time, is precisely what *Small World* answers in abundance, in ways to which Deane—fully aware that I had only a surface relation to a very deep cultural complexity that he himself had lived and breathed—at the time only alluded.

I first met Deane in Fall 1992, at a scholar lunch also attended by two of my senior colleagues, Chris Fox (who was, unbeknownst to me at the time, trying to engage Deane to lead what would be the new Keough-Naughton Center for Irish Studies) and Greg Kucich, both of whom spoke a lot about *Field Day* with such focused interest that I realized I needed to learn more about it. Fresh out of graduate school (I had been hired by Notre Dame as an ABD lecturer in 1991), by Fall 1992 I was a newly minted Ph.D., just beginning my first year of teaching as an assistant professor in Notre Dame’s English Department. I had come from SUNY/Buffalo, where I had studied with Rodolphe Gasché, a leading scholar of deconstruction, who was also unique in the field because Jacques Derrida had been his thesis advisor at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) in Paris. At Buffalo, surrounded by Gasché and other top deconstructionist scholars (including Carol Jacobs and Henry Sussman, who later directed my dissertation), my ongoing fascination with deconstruction grew exponentially, and by the time I began interacting with Deane in 1993, it had helped me to realize that an enormous absence, a massive silence around critical analysis of the meaning and significance of race sat blatantly within the cultural context of modernism and modernity, my chosen field. Considerations of canon became more and more important, and African American works were organized into their own, relatively isolated from those, like that of high modernism, that dealt with Euro-American culture. And it was

here that my fascination with deconstruction gave way to a new preoccupation with postcolonial theory, which is what lay behind my intense and ongoing questioning of Deane.

As I pulled up stakes from my long romance with deconstructive theory and dove headlong into the postcolonial perspective, the more my interactions with Deane around the institutionalization of Irish Studies at Notre Dame represented a difficult conundrum for me. I had been for several years in what had seemed a superhuman wrestling match with the idea of international high modernism, trying to figure out what might be the effect on our understanding of the field if we were to attempt to read James Joyce, Marcel Proust, and James Baldwin together in the same work. This represented a disruption of two literary canons in order to get at what lay in the dark silence between them, and I was finding it an immensely difficult task. At the time that I encountered Deane, I was in the throes of this figuratively physical combat, and his intellectual concerns collided with my own in an electrifyingly intriguing and explosive way. We were so intellectually in tune on so many relevant issues that much later, when Deane's novel was published, to my great surprise, it had the exact same title I had intended for my own book, that is, *Reading in the Dark*, and so my book became *Reading on the Edge* (2000) instead. Initially, however, we connected immediately over Joyce and his view of Irish history, along with his revered place within the field of modernism. This connection then led to multiple meetings over lunch throughout the years that Deane remained at Notre Dame, at first primarily for me to argue about what was happening with Irish Studies under his direction while Deane listened respectfully and patiently, occasionally responding in a gentle, measured tone that, over time, had one overriding effect: it gradually became clear to me that I would be doing myself a huge favor if I would stop arguing and listen instead. Though it was so gradual, so subtle as to be almost imperceptible, I began to realize that I was actually in the presence of such erudition that the best thing I could do, the most intelligent thing I could do, was to shut my mouth. I knew very little then of just how large was the Irish context Deane sought to address in his work, and, as a result, the incredible importance of those encounters. At that time, I was much more focused on the political and postcolonial problem presented by the 1916 Easter Uprising over whose battle with imperial power and control I wanted to take Deane to task concerning what I felt was his subtle openness to that same hegemony in establishing the Keough-Naughton Center in the way that he was. But I had no knowledge of just how fragile was the cultural project forming the central mission of what Deane had been called upon to build, how delicate was the line he insisted on drawing between Irish Studies and Irish *American* Studies, and that for Deane there was a larger, much more important reason to take the path he had chosen, one that reached far beyond nationalism and nationality. I didn't know, for example, that the argument I was putting forward would have seemed to Deane tinged with the sectarian Northern Irish unionist accusation of a narrow republicanism on his part (to which Deane's commitment to internationalism was a tangible denial, despite his Bogside ties), and that this would be particularly meaningful to him given his Derry (Bogside) youth. Nor did I know how crucial it was that for Deane, the project needed to be undertaken in exactly this way, no matter what it looked like on the surface. Most importantly, it was not because Deane's efforts *seemed* to entirely exclude the Irish American diaspora by organizing Irish Studies in a way that appeared distinctly hegemonic, and to support a narrowly conceived nationalist idea that went against all notions of postcolonialism, that this is indeed what it was. To my postcolonial critique of Deane's seemingly nationally oriented canon-building, his carefully articulated, very quiet, very calm answer was that it was necessary to focus first on Ireland, and that the incorporation of the diaspora would come after.

But I could neither understand nor accept this and other things in this line as the answers to my urgent question, although they were indeed the answers, and Deane was all the while carefully, gently, providing them to me, though I was not then equipped to understand. The day I told him, as a response to one such answer, that I had understood that the smartest thing I could do at that

moment was to listen, he drew back in consternation, almost horrified, obviously concerned that he had intimidated and/or overwhelmed me. But through that small gesture he gave me one of the most important lessons of my fledgling academic career: that greatness is broadened and amplified—made even more great—by humility. If I had had even an inkling of the enormous distance between our two critical positions—his that of a renowned cultural figure with an international reputation well-established on multiple fronts, mine that of a young assistant professor with barely a foot in the door and only a dissertation to her name, perhaps I would have been far less focused on my own hungry intellectualism and more recognizant of the fact that I actually had no authoritative ground for such critique—at least nothing at which the external academic world would not scoff.

Nevertheless, the problem remained, exacerbated by my strong engagement with postcolonial theory, which insisted that in its focus on the concept of national identity, the construction of a literary canon can in some measure represent an act of imperial hegemony, as was brilliantly examined by the postcolonial Irish Studies scholar David Lloyd in his *Nationalism and Minor Literature* (1987), and as was even earlier asserted by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their study *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1986), in which they argue that a “...minor literature doesn’t come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language” (Deleuze and Guattari 16). This seemed to me precisely what James Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus was trying to do, especially as concerned literary culture, and especially as concerned the delicate matter of language. Though it was not completely clear to me at the time, where Deane and myself had locked horns was over precisely this issue—that we were both extremely sensitive to the cultural power of language; for him it was the destructive relationship between Gaelic and English, for me it was about the right to speak the only language I had ever known— a non-code-switching Standard English—without cultural injunction on all sides, as opposed to externally imposed expectations that I would/should speak black English vernacular, and that not doing so was an intentional, self-denying, if not self-hating, act. But, as Joseph Cleary makes clear in his superb introduction to *Small World*, any imputation of nationalism with regard to Deane’s work actually represents only a surface reading of the deep, multifaceted complexity by which the breadth of that work must be understood. Cleary writes that not many “Irish critics or historians have been more vigilantly attentive to the antinomies of cultural nationalism than Deane, so the application of the term ‘nationalist’ to his career is therefore a misnomer” (x).

Taken in its entirety, then, Deane’s work may be seen to exist in an ongoing, uncompromising state of cultural precarity encompassing a long history of war, of struggle and oppression, physical and cultural violence, sectarian and political strife, partition and colonial subjugation, both oral and literary cultural traditions, the suppression of language and the willful destruction of cultural identity. Once the enormity of this cultural and historical complexity is fully understood as its backdrop, Deane’s work can only be seen to be much more subtle and nuanced than any initial impression of it might reveal. Taking the full measure of that work means recognizing that the perspective offered by any aspect of Deane’s multi-faceted critical and cultural contributions is never, and never can be, all.

Small World: Ireland, 1798-2018 (2021) is certainly a testament to this fact. *Small World*, a collection of Deane’s essays from early to late, is a wonderful crowning achievement to a long, brilliant, and prismatic career. Joseph Cleary’s aforementioned introduction opens the book with an in-depth overview by examining the relation between Deane’s earlier book-length works and then using that understanding gained from this to consider the relation between these works and the shorter pieces included in *Small World*, not individually, but taken together as a whole. Added to this is Cleary’s very condensed analysis of Deane’s complicated intellectual and cultural background. What is particularly useful about Cleary’s essay is that it first puts Deane himself in the context of his

own complicated cultural particularities, i.e., born in the Bogside area of Catholic Derry, Northern Ireland (on the border between north and south), and raised in a Catholic nationalist household, Deane was neither ignorant of nor indifferent to the rancorous sectarian politics of that cultural milieu. But as Cleary describes, Deane's own intellectual proclivities led him far beyond that more narrow circumstance into an in-depth examination of French and British literary culture, history, and intensely conflictual politics, while his academic career took him both to a public-facing prominence in Ireland through his early involvement with the Field Day Theatre Company, and later to the American university system, then finally back to Ireland for a time. He then came to the University of Notre Dame in the midst of the furor over the *Field Day Anthology's* (1991) insufficient inclusion of Irish women's writings, where the effort to build Irish Studies by becoming the first head of the university's new Keough-Naughton Center of Irish Studies met with the fierce challenge of ensuring, as previously mentioned, that its focus would be on Ireland, not Irish American Studies, which was already well-established in America at the time. Throughout this very cursory biography, however, it is clear that Deane's work was always undertaken within an international context, one that did not uphold the more Yeatsian, Revivalist, romanticized understanding of Irish identity with which Deane was intellectually (and problematically, given his cultural background) at odds, particularly for its dismissal of the importance of Irish political history and its insistence on an unequivocal yet romanticized return to what was posited as Ireland's seemingly uncomplicated, authentic past. But it is also this understanding that most fully illuminates the importance and significance of *Small World*, especially as a book, rather than simply a collection of essays. Even though *Small World* mostly contains previously published work, the collection nevertheless speaks originally through the organization of the included essays, something that articulates the larger understanding to be derived from encountering them in book form, and what this says about Deane's work overall. Taken as a whole, the book is a superlative examination of Irish literature and culture, but it's not just that—it also provides an unsurpassable, extremely thorough and nuanced understanding of Irish literature and culture in the context of politics and history, certainly as these play out in Ireland but, not unexpectedly (given Deane's international training and perspective), also in the larger world beyond its borders. But it doesn't stop there. *Small World* also provides a sense of what Ireland, though a small country whose lengthy history also encompasses the ignominy of colonization, was able to contribute to that larger world despite that long experience of colonial subjugation. Hence its somewhat ironic title, *Small World*.

Subtly contained within the essays is a historical overview, representing both the breadth of Deane's intellectual concerns and his expansive knowledge, beginning with Swift, Burke, and Tone, in a consideration of the critical centrality for Deane of the 18th century and its Enlightenment explorations coupled with its revolutionary energies. Of these three initial essays, "Tone: The Great Nation and the Evil Empire" seems particularly to stand out. An in-depth analysis of Wolf Tone and his iconic status in Irish history and culture, as the father of Irish republicanism and one of the founders of the United Irishmen, this essay immediately reveals the multiple layers of cultural, political, and historical complexity underlying any consideration of Irish culture. Focusing on the idea of Britain as a great nation but an evil empire, Deane critiques the idea that a truly great nation can maintain that status in such circumstances. By contrasting "nation" and "empire" through the figure of Wolf Tone, a Protestant who nevertheless fought for the rights of Catholics, Deane suggests that Irish culture cannot be fully understood without considering how it has been influenced by this central political contradiction. The essay also represents a subtle critique on the risks associated with nationalism—that an overweening emphasis on nationalism in any context can result in neglect of concern for the well-being of one's fellows. Following this essay with "Imperialism and Nationalism," "Irish National Character 1790-1900," and "Civilians and Barbarians" further complicates this understanding by showing how multiple strands of complexity

wind around this issue from different directions, like the tentacles of an octopus. “Imperialism and Nationalism” provides more background on this problem through an astute world-historical analysis of the relationship between these two concepts. Through it, Deane provides an extremely useful understanding of the double-sided nature of nationalism, and how it can provide the ground for conflict and strife while simultaneously fostering unity, solidarity, and collective action. Following this, Deane provides a sweeping historical overview of how the Irish national character has been historically defined. Approaching this analysis within the context of cultural history is very helpful because it identifies the hidden politics within these ideas and how they have developed over time. In some regards, this also suggests a critique of some aspects of Irish nationalism, as it reveals how easy it is to inaccurately simplify it in very damaging ways. In this context, then, it is important that in “Civilians and Barbarians,” Deane turns to a consideration of the fundamental meaning of these different understandings of human behavior and how they relate to the law. This too functions as a subtle critique, suggesting that the breaking of the law that Deane mentions in the Tone essay ultimately, essentially, breaks down to the relation between nationalism and imperialism, which in turn breaks down to the relation between civilians and barbarity. It is the deft sophistication with which Deane accomplishes this critique that is most valuable here, because he does so quite powerfully, yet without confrontation or accusation. From here, however, due to space constraints, I must unfortunately glide over the next three essays, “Heroic Styles: The Tradition of an Idea,” “*Ulysses*: The Exhaustion of Literature and the Literature of Exhaustion,” and “Dead Ends: Joyce’s Finest Moments.” While this might seem problematic, given the importance of James Joyce to Irish literature and culture, the significance of these essays to the central point of this review is considerably less than others, so a difficult choice must be made in order to stay on that path.

In view of this need, (as it could certainly be asserted that each of the volume’s essays is brilliant in its own way), it is understandable that more detail would be offered on the essays that follow the three just mentioned. Given the omissions of *Field Day*, it is very important for *Small World* to include Deane’s analyses of the work of Irish women who contributed to the literary understanding of Irish culture in significant ways, and the volume doesn’t disappoint: there are two essays on Elizabeth Bowen and one on Mary Lavin. But a close look at these essays reveals that these are not just any such women, included only for the sole reason that they are female. A careful selection has been made here, which can be seen in the fact that Bowen’s focus on the Protestant Ascendancy is contrasted with Lavin’s work on the Catholic perspective, especially concerning life in rural Ireland—revealing from a feminine perspective the realities of Irish life at opposing ends of the social, political, cultural, national, and historical spectrum.

It is totally fitting, then, that these essays should fall near the end of the volume, in light of their subjects. Providing more of an insight to the social complexity created by the larger political and historical issues that the earlier essays outline, these essays offer more of a sense of the lived experience of those issues. It is also not without significance that Bowen’s work comes before that of Lavin. The fact that Lavin details not only the importance of Catholicism, but also the role played by rural Ireland in any understanding of Irish history is a deeply meaningful issue in Irish culture, because it has to do with the contentious problem of authenticity and what might be understood or thought of as a cultural dilution wrought by both modernity and colonial subjugation. In this regard, taken together, both essays, but especially that of Lavin, set the stage for the significance of the next essay “Wherever Green is Read,” which helps to sum up the implications of Lavin’s essay, if not all of the essays previously found in the volume, with its focus on the problematic, splintered reality of Ireland’s lengthy history. “History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake,” Joyce’s Stephen says in Episode Two of *Ulysses*. And with this essay, highlighting the vagaries of history as lying at the center of the complex intertwining of Irish culture and politics, Deane interrogates history’s assumed reliability through a critique of revisionism and the historian R. F. Foster’s analysis of the

importance in Irish culture of the color green. For Deane, it is history itself, in fact, that is the problem. Which history? Whose history, out of the many versions from which to choose in Ireland? In the logic of *Small World*, “Wherever Green is Read” suggests that Bowen’s work represents one such history, Lavin’s another, while both remain crucial to an understanding of Ireland’s challenging social reality.

Yet in order to most clearly understand the cultural significance of *Small World*, it is useful not to passively follow the volume’s chronology, and to instead discuss its last essay, “The End of the World,” in advance of the one that comes just before. As occurred in my numerous conversations with Deane, the volume’s chronology represents the more direct, obvious way to understand its meaning, whose immense complexity renders it immune to immediate accessibility. In its apocalyptic recounting of the evacuation of the Blasket Islanders from their isolated island home and thus the tragic loss of their hermetic existence characterized by a precious—and living—untouched even, and certainly not a fantasized into existence connection to Irish history through Gaelic, “The End of the World” would seem to be the perfect note on which to end. However, a deeper understanding exists which may offer something more true, and which, typical of Deane, is not something conveyed by direct communication. And it is actually this, in fact, that was all along the answer to my urgent question concerning Deane’s goals and motivations regarding the project of building Irish Studies at the University of Notre Dame. How would he ever have been able to explain the deep love of country that made the extinction of the much older, non-fabricated version of Irishness represented by these islanders so painful, so bittersweet, to someone like me, whose own national relationship to history was, by comparison, so brief? From this perspective, the focus on *Irish*, not *Irish American* studies—and its concomitant emphasis on Gaelic—becomes a heroic rescue of the oldest expression of Irish culture, beyond the simplifications of romanticization or any clinging to mythology or fantasy. What *Small World* details is that it is the rescue of Gaelic that lay at the heart of Deane’s plans for Irish Studies at Notre Dame, and for him, this was far more important than any false imputation of nationalism. After the removal and thus deterritorialization of the Blasket villagers, the canon—a canon—was just necessary for this rescue—without it all would indeed be lost. For Deane, the canon formed a figurative territory, the last bastion of this culture almost extinct, and this is why the seeming postcolonial conflict surrounding the project’s relation to the Irish diaspora and Irish American studies had to be denied from the start. It is in this way that *Small World* provides the answer I sought from Deane himself, in all of the fullness it seems he had found too complicated to share.

Here, then, “The Famous Seamus” becomes a much more revealing end to the volume. Perhaps it was a result of his immense humility that in this essay, Deane reveres his friend, Seamus Heaney, while in contrast, highlighting what he felt were his own shortcomings. But it would not have been like him to grant himself the superlative distinction that was actually his due. Speaking of Heaney’s Nobel acceptance ceremony, Deane writes:

Heaney was aware too, of the chemistry that alters a writer who has gained fame and transforms him from what he is to what his reputation is. I felt as though I were seeing him recede into an abstraction, another one of the Irish Nobel winners, up there with Shaw and Yeats and Beckett, an object of national pride, a writer reified into a prize... Would we ever be as we had been? Would his fame now leave me, and others, feeling that we, I, had nothing left to say except that we had remained ordinary, whereas he had become extraordinary? (286)

Yet Deane himself, as the incredible vision of *Small World* attests, was very far from ordinary. Rather, he was extraordinary in his own right. Small matter that artistic achievement is considered, by the world, more distinguished than that which is critical. There is far more to fame than the Nobel, as Deane unintentionally yet expansively reveals to us, through the lasting legacy now so beautifully

enshrined in *Small World*'s deep-rooted, lengthy and in-depth analyses of Irish politics, culture, and history. Moreover, it is the valiant effort to put that culture before the world in its entirety, to memorialize it so that its most precious iteration would remain before us forever, that merits a quieter, yet every bit as meaningful, fame.

For that alone, *Small World* is a scintillating jewel in the annals of Irish culture, and its many rich gifts make it very hard to critique. But if there is one to make, it is that the work is far more political than it presents itself to be. Though it is written in academic form, it is not simply a work of scholarly research. In other words, it is somewhat overdetermined by its academic presentation in a way that obfuscates its more public cultural value. This is a problem because as much as it is focused on critical contribution, it is also at times a scathing public-facing polemic on the ills of Irish culture and history, past and present, as well as a celebration of its best features, much like the analysis of Irish hospitality in Joyce's short story, "The Dead." But despite this very small criticism, the incredible gift that is this work—the analysis and heroic rescue of a culture—brightly shines through, revealing a *differently* famous Seamus—one who is quite famous, in fact, and equally important—in ways that, humble as he was, he would never openly recognize or admit.

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