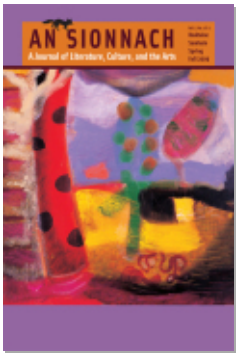
A Tour of Your Country (review)

Patrick Hicks



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cisely the same: "With this collection it can be said the poet has become in charge of his literary undertaking: he has been able finally to write out his own language." One doesn't want to be too critical of a small press, but this does suggest that the two books were hastily assembled. It's also not clear why a dual publication was necessary at all—why not one book? It is evident, anyway, that Liddy's canon will need further attention from editors and scholars. True, the now defunct Creighton University Press brought out a handsome edition of his *Collected Poems* in 1994, but now we need an edition that will incorporate the large volume of later material, not least these two books. We also need a sympathetic *Selected* for readers on both sides of the Atlantic in order to bring into sharper focus his true achievement.

JOHN REDMOND

Eamonn Wall | *A Tour of Your Country* | Cliffs of Moher: Salmon Poetry, 2008 | 57 pp. | €12.00

Eamonn Wall's first collection of poetry appeared in 1994 and, since then, it has become increasingly difficult to imagine the landscape of contemporary Irish-American poetry without him. Born in Enniscorthy, Co. Wexford, he has lived in the United States since 1982, and his writing easily glides across the Atlantic; he paces the ocean and pulls the land of his childhood and the land of his adulthood into constant dialogue. His previous collections—*Dyckman-200th Street* (1994), *Iron Mountain Road* (1997), *The Crosses* (2000), *Refuge at DeSoto Bend* (2004)—all ask thorny questions of place, and Wall seems at home whether he is writing about Ireland or the prairies of North America. His non-fiction, too, explores such themes, most notably in *From the Sin-é Café to the Black Hills* (2000).

We quickly understand that the Lakota Indians in South Dakota and the cornfields of Nebraska are just as vital for Wall's imagination as anything he grew up knowing in Ireland. These may be differing geological landscapes but he blends them together, pointing first to Ireland, then to the Midwest, and his words—like a tightening center of gravity—bind these two worlds together. His books remind us of the immigrant's wide-eyed stare as well as that longing for home which can never be truly satisfied.

It is therefore fitting that his fifth collection of poetry is called *A Tour of Your Country*. From the outset we are doubly displaced from the land in question because the word "tour" implies a lack of intimate knowledge while the use of "your" suggests uncertain ownership. We cannot pinpoint

whose country is being addressed in the title and such ambiguous possession is significant because the ground constantly shifts beneath our feet, it becomes protean and open to interpretation. The title could therefore represent Wall addressing America as an immigrant, or he could be discussing how he no longer feels wholly a part of Ireland, or he could be talking about Finland, which also makes several appearances in this book. The slipperiness of this word disallows and frustrates a sense of home. Like Wall himself, we are in constant motion. We move from one country to another and our imagination is never allowed to settle, which makes each page of this book exciting, unpredictable, and compelling.

As we move from Omaha to Helsinki to the Slobs (a wildfowl reserve in County Wexford), these poems firework with vibrant words and surprising observations. One of the opening poems in this collection, "Yellowstone Bus Tour," reads like a found poem, as if we are touring alongside Wall through one of America's national parks. Stops along the way include places such as Great Fountain Geyser, Tangle Creek, Mud Pot, and Biscuit Basin, all of which become single lines of text as if they were nothing more than stops along a bus route. There is no narrative voice here, only a list of touristy place names. And yet, the last stop is "Dinner at the Lodge" along with the lines: "That night / I prayed too / For the trees / That fire / Might spare / A little longer / Their coniferous / Bones." We read this poem and see only place names, but Wall leaves us with imagery of a scorched landscape, the beauty he has just witnessed immolated by a giant forest fire. From the beginning of this collection we are reminded that foreign places are always more than just names; for those who visit them with a generous eye they become delicate and fragile.

This sense of being a visitor permeates the entire collection, and Wall deftly acknowledges the complexity of his own national identity in "Hearing the Ambassador Speak." While in Finland he listens to the US Ambassador address a group of university students but he silently asks: "Please, Ms. Ambassador, / don't mention our president by / name or frame your thoughts to / wind them down, or up, to the / Iraq War." Here, the words "our president" suggests that Wall identifies himself as a citizen of the United States and he becomes a greater ambassador when he stops to spend an hour with Finnish students. He gives them poetry from Frank O'Hara, his Missouri driver's license, a lottery ticket, and a $20 bill. Although Wall could easily claim his Irish background and disavow any relationship with an unpopular American presidency, he instead becomes wholly American and celebrates the work of Jimi Hendrix and Kurt Cobain with these students. The true ambassador of this poem is Wall himself and, by concealing

his Irish identity while in Finland, he complicates and expands what it means to be a citizen.

Wall moves gracefully between memories of his birth country and his adopted home, and we swim in his imagination as he brings Old and New World together. In "Brewery-Millwheel-River Folly" we see an old waterwheel in Enniscorthy—immobile, broken, a relic of the past—but rather than focus on its lost history, Wall points out that he and his childhood friends, "coursed its banks as bands of Iroquois & Sioux." The poem goes on to show us the destruction of this waterwheel and, with it, part of Wall's past. The closing lines are masterful because they lock his past and present together with a neat click: "One week ago today / in South Dakota, I had lulled a child to bed with the / promise of another Old World tale & then sat an hour / to watch her sleep on the prairie grounds of the Lakota." Here, Wall lives among the same Native Americans he once imagined when he was a kid but, rather than use them as bedtime stories, he offers up tales from the Old World. Just as Wall dreamed of America as a child, his own child now dreams of Ireland. His sensitivity to place and language is particularly subtle because he refers to the Indians of his youth as "Sioux" but later mentions their more proper tribal name as "Lakota." Such a nuanced view of history can also be found in poems such as "Dawn in Pennsylvania," "Lewis & Clark: Omaha, Nebraska," and "The Art of Forgetting."

This collection is primarily a transatlantic dialogue between Europe and America but we are also nudged into Asia with poems that pay quiet homage to such Chinese poets as Su Shih, Tu Fu, and Li Po. The latter has a direct influence on the structure of Wall's humorous poem, "Dodge Neon / Li Po" because a brightly painted car talks to its salesman and says, "You boast that SUVs / are more beautiful than me. But, / Sir, it is at me your customers ogle. Pink Dodge Neon, / purple racing stripes." Humor also appears in "Hammer Coffee Shop, Boise" when we hear the voices that swirl around Wall. We lean forward with him to eavesdrop on "two lively knitters" and the whole scene is so well paced we can almost smell the coffee as the "espresso machine shrieks up and up higher." The poem is breathless, it tugs us forward, and we delight in the distractions that keep Wall from reading his copy of the *New York Times*. No wonder our first period—our first chance to catch our breath and come to a full stop—doesn't occur until the poem is nearly half finished.

A Tour of Your Country celebrates the intersections between home and away, and Wall's words are certainly flinty sparks of life, but the collection would have benefited from a few subtitles or even a *Notes* section in the

back. Readers may get confused by such concepts as Kaamos, the location of the Slobs, the meaning of Crex Crex; similarly, they may not be familiar with the Finnish poet Mirkka Rekola. A *Notes* section would have been helpful, especially since this book is a poetic tour guide through so many foreign landscapes. This is a small point of criticism, though, one that is easily solved by the reader with a little external research.

The great joy of this book is how we wander between Ireland, America, and elsewhere. We move like Odysseus between these islands of poetry, we find foreign worlds bustling with life, and we glide with a journeymen's peripatetic curiosity. It is only fitting that one of the final poems in this collection is "Basque Museum, Boise." We read about Basque shepherds moving to Idaho in the 1800s to begin a new life, but of course they are fleeing an older country that is still a part of Spain today. These are people who are both from a country and not from a country. It is an ingenious metaphor for the entire collection and, as we read about their confusing journey into the New World, it could easily mimic Wall's own passage into America.

Increasingly, and with the recent passing of James Liddy, Eamonn Wall has become one of the most prominent and exciting contemporary voices of the Irish-American experience. He has an intimate understanding of what it means to be neither here nor there, and his words pull us toward new places. *A Tour of Your Country* reminds us that we are all linked to foggy roads elsewhere, and it celebrates displacement with the exuberant joy of a homecoming.

PATRICK HICKS

Michael S. Begnal | *Ancestor Worship* | Salmon Poetry | 2007 | 70 pp. | ISBN: 978-1-903392-54-6 | €12.00

I realize it may be more interesting for readers to have me write about the poet rather than the poetry. I say this only because the pitfalls of academic jargon are out there, and I'm just the clod to go traipsing through the field looking at the sky. Holy shit! That's poetry.

Mike Begnal or Michael S. Begnal to fans and critics, has a new book from Salmon called *Ancestor Worship* (2007). He sent me a copy because, as a friend, he knew I'd like it. However, how does a poet living in North Carolina formerly of Pennsylvania and previously of Ireland know someone who has never lived anywhere but Milwaukee? Answer: James Liddy.

Begnal came to Milwaukee to take on the prestigious position of the James Liddy Chair at the Irish Cultural Center of Milwaukee. It was my un-