



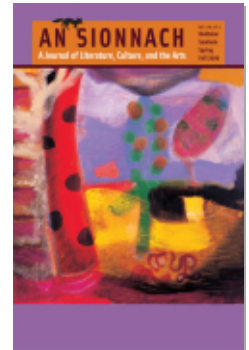
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Ancestor Worship (review)

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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-

derstanding that this was a newly created post. What the determining factors were for the selection of the James Liddy Chair, only the dear now late Liddy seemed to know . . . and maybe Professor Gleason. I don't recall what poems of Mike's that Liddy gave me to read in advance. Liddy knew I wasn't on the up-and-up or on the who's who, so if I were to accompany him to a reading, as the driver, often he would hand me a book or a copy of a poem to update me, so that if cornered I could produce at least one poem title to pronounce as my favorite.

Assuredly, one of the factors that determined Begnal's earning the seat of the James Liddy Chair was that Begnal wrote poetry in the Irish language. The Chair is, after all, a part of The Irish Cultural Center. So I sat down on a nice comfy couch in a nice comfy room on the Marquette University campus to hear for the first time what the Irish language sounded like. Interestingly enough, it sounded very sarcastic. Most of the poems felt uneasy. The poet told us that we probably didn't really care what the Irish language sounded like, and that's why he hurried through them to get to the translations, so we would understand what they meant. His demeanor was, how can I say this, punk rock inside a library.

I found myself chuckling a little during the performance and even thinking, "He means you, blue hair!" when glancing at the old, blue-haired ladies in attendance who did not linger for the reception. It was certainly a to-do. I found myself chatting with Begnal after the reading. The next day we drove around with Liddy on a tour of the city, and then later I drove him to the airport without Liddy. It's not often you go to a poetry reading at the Irish Cultural Center and make friends with the poet reading for the first-ever James Liddy Chair and end up chatting about early '80s hip-hop and the few '80s California hardcore acts I was familiar with. I even got an autograph on my copy of *Lakes of Coma*, Begnal's first book.

If the reading was legendary for all the wrong reasons, so be it. I've been able, thanks to the miracle called the Internet, to stay in contact with Begnal, even solicit him for poems for my own humble magazine, *Burdock*. I even once attempted to write a paper for Liddy based on our conversations about poetry. Needless to say emails do not translate to essays. I think I ended up writing about Sylvia Plath, or something else, instead.

The lesson: dialogue is important. Conversation, however technologically slanted, yields insight. And after having conversed with Begnal for a few years now, I think I understand what made that first impression tick on as it has. During conversations with him, and after reading *Ancestor Worship*, I think I have a better understanding of his reading that shocked and appalled people: there is frustration rooted in the passage of a culture. To

realize that Irish is not an active language in the real sense, that most people in Ireland don't speak it, and that Ireland only exists in America as a cultural artifact, is the hidden argument of *Ancestor Worship*.

The argument comes to the surface in the poem Begnal chose to translate out of the Irish *To the Gaelic People* by Ó Longain. One of the footnotes states that Ó Longain's poem's are "urging/inciting . . . didn't stir them in the slightest." A sort of status check in 1800 for the poet but for a long time both struggles went on but now, with independence gained for the country, the language of ancestors is threatened.

It's not just Ireland, though. Time, it seems, moves even quicker now. And what may have been a cultural movement in the '60s translates to a fashion statement today. We may understand history as it is or we understand it through plastic. I read this in "Old Men's Bar." If we read this poem simply for its imagery, that is enough.

*Sexless trio in the middle
of cunt colored painted walls,
dead wives,
creeping stink of age,
glasses of beer,
raincoats,
galoshes,
neckties*

That the walls started out "salmon pink" in the poem is nicely done, intentional or not. That the poet becomes wary of his position in this bar is where I get my theories about the book.

*(I'm furtive—
if they caught me they'd raise a shaking fist)*

Does this refer to the pitfalls of dual citizenship? Can you belong to two tribes when so much of Ireland is rooted in the tribal, the notion of clan? The voice in the poem does not seek separation. It is felt. It already exists. These men, who may have seen a history the narrator can only learn of secondhand, exist separately from the narrator. They are living ancestors. So much of the pub culture is meant as an exchange, and yet, there it is in the pub. And an American can't approach it with any comfort for fear of what? Rejection? Perhaps the answer is exile. The book ends with "Another Exile."

*The line bending,
curving,
the burden being lightened*

That Begnal's book begins with "Expatriation" tells us everything we need to know about this subtext. Other ideas exist in the pages of this book, but this next excerpt seems to explain a lot of what may be the thesis of the book. Presumably, it's the author's entry into the rituals of worship, and it contains lines that describe the narrator and the terrain he will be navigating for most of the book.

*and I too'm "American" now,
sauntering the local lanes,
land of ghostly progenitors,
cold stone,
bitter defeat*

The poems in *Ancestor Worship* strive to define worship in a different way. A history-obsessed American often has science on the brain, whereas an Irish mind once had Druids, fairies, and monks, who kept everything alive for a time. Begnal has little choice but to approach this in an American fashion. That is to say, the tribal element will be overcome. Is this another sort of catholicism (universal appeal)? I hear composition teachers (they are my ancestors too) saying, "Beware the rhetorical question in your essay." But I adopt Begnal's ideas and ask why do we want to hear everything our way, in our language?

That first time I met Mike Begnal was a strange experience, and my initial review of Begnal's book was a bit off, so I felt I had to get a little more personal with this review. This is a side effect of *Ancestor Worship*, not the book but the concept it is named for—you feel compelled to make strange events known to multitudes.

KEITH GAUSTAD

Jim Chapson | *Daphnis & Ratboy* | Galway: Arlen House | 2009 | 96 pp. | paper | ISBN 978-1-903631-57-7 | €12.00

Daphnis & Ratboy (2009) is the first and long-overdue book-length collection of poems by Jim Chapson. From start to finish, he presents a stunning body of work that deftly moves between razor sharp satire and passionate spiritual concern. While terms like "clarity" and "truth" may be out of vogue in today's poetry world, Chapson avoids obfuscation or trendy syn-