

Original Research Article

Mad, Bad, Dangerous to Know: The Fathers of Wilde, Yeats and Joyce by Colm Toibin: Book Review

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ABSTRACT

Colm Toibin begins his incisive, revelatory *Mad, Bad, Dangerous to Know* with a walk through the Dublin streets where he went to university, a wide-eyed boy from the country and where three Irish literary giants also came of age. Oscar Wilde, writing about his relationship with his father, William Wilde, stated: "Whenever there is hatred between two people there is bond or brotherhood of some kind...you loathed each other not because you were so different but because you were so alike." W.B. Yeats wrote of his father, John Butler Yeats, a painter: "It is this infirmity of will which has prevented him from finishing his pictures. The qualities I think necessary to success in art or life seemed to him egotism." John Stanislaus Joyce, James's father, was perhaps the most quintessentially Irish, widely loved, garrulous, a singer, and drinker with a volatile temper, who drove his son from Ireland. Elegant, profound, and riveting, *Mad, Bad, Dangerous to Know* illuminates not only the complex relationships between three of the greatest writers in the English language and their fathers, but also illustrates the surprising ways these men surface in their work. Through these stories of fathers and sons, Toibin recounts the resistance to English cultural domination, the birth of modern Irish cultural identity, and the extraordinary contributions of these complex and masterful authors.

Introduction

At the beginning of his essay on John B Yeats, the artist father of the poet WB Yeats, Colm Toibin turns first to think about the act of biography, the moment of intense connection that characterises the beautiful attentions of his latest work: "Somewhere in the great, unsteady archive where our souls will be held, there is a special section that records the quality of our gaze. The stacks in this branch of the archive will preserve for posterity the history of those moments when a look or a glance intensified, when watchfulness opened out or narrowed in, due to curiosity or desire or suspicion or fear. Maybe that is what we remember most of each other – the face of the other glancing up, the second when we are held in someone else's gaze." *Mad, Bad, Dangerous to Know* is not a book of new material per se, and the very readability of the essays might perhaps obscure what is innovative and exciting about them. Toibin presents us with new constellations of material: letters, poems, autobiographies, memoirs, events and his own experiences are placed side by side, with Toibin holding them newly up to the light. What we get, here, is a writer's take on literary history: a set of essays that probes emotional resonances, the aftershocks of family drama, the peculiar ways that buried tensions and influences can resurface down the generations.

Toibin's own generous presence lifts in and out of these essays: the moment when he sees John B Yeats's self-portrait, worked and reworked for years, hanging in a stairwell; the day that he spent reading Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis* aloud in Wilde's cell in Reading Gaol; a chance meetings with a scholar in a New York archive; a discursive and writerly walk through

Dublin past and present, his own personal history intertwining with the history of the city. But Toibin never inserts himself into his essays through ego: rather, he presents moments of recognition, of connection, where the gaze of his subject meets his own gaze for a second, and teaches something much more valuable than the historical details of dates and shifting geographies. In each of these essays, Toibin finds the human, the personal connection between father and son, the realignment of family relationships, and in turn rehumanises through context these canonical writers and their works.

In the first essay, Toibin draws illuminating connections between the public scandal over the allegations lodged against William Wilde by Mary Travers and the later trials of his son. He also makes a wonderful discursive argument about class heredity and the possibility of forming identity through literature that is both a revealing and refreshing take on the 19th-century Anglo-Irish. The trembling, ecstatic letters from John B Yeats to Rosa Butts are also placed in oblique but fascinating relation to the later poems of his son. As Toibin writes of John, “the foolish, passionate man, with his excited, passionate, fantastical imagination, did not write about the life he had missed, but the life he imagined, and he gave that life a sense of lived reality, as though it were not only somehow possible, but almost present.” Although based in biographical and historical “fact”, it is Toibin’s intuitive sense of emotional and psychological nuance, of character, we might say, that really makes these essays so engaging. The final piece, on John Joyce, father of James, is more heavily focused on James’s processing and refiguring of his father through his literary works, from *Dubliners* and *Stephen Hero* through his poetry and on to *Finnegans Wake*. John’s family background, though consisting of well-to-do merchants and property owners, perhaps makes documentation of his life less accessible for literary exploration than the intensely literate lives of Jane Elgee, William Wilde, John B Yeats and Susan Pollexfen, and so Toibin’s essay is more geared to James’s grappling with his father than his father as a standalone figure. That choice is understandable. Taking much of its documentation from Stanislaus Joyce’s often embittered recollections of family life, the John Joyce we get here is “domineering and quarrelsome”, “lying and hypocritical”, “spiteful like all drunkards who are thwarted”. In Toibin’s shifting exploration of John’s figure in James’s work, we see how Joyce took his father out of time, saw himself in his guise, and eventually merged with his spirit, as in *Finnegans Wake*: ‘it’s sad and weary I go back to you, my cold father, my cold mad father, my cold mad feary father’.

Does every man secretly desire his father’s death? The great biographer Richard Ellmann believed there was something in this idea, noting that it recurs in the work of, among others, Dostoevsky, Turgenev, Edmund Gosse and JM Synge; and in his new book about the fathers of Oscar Wilde, WB Yeats and James Joyce, the novelist Colm Toibin quietly suggests that it was only thanks to a certain paternal absence that their sons were able to release their genius into the world. Death itself, of course, often took its time: John Butler Yeats and John Stanislaus Joyce both lived into their 80s. But while their sons patiently, and sometimes not so patiently, waited – even if they didn’t know exactly what it was that they were waiting for – they also, in various other ways, set about hurrying things along. Joyce did not see his father once during the last 19 years of his life; nor was Yeats much inclined to visit his ageing dad in New York, where he lived from 1907 until his death in 1922 (though he did help pay the bills at his West 29th Street boarding house). Oscar Wilde was still a young man when William Wilde, an eye and ear surgeon and archaeologist, took his last breath in 1876 at the age of 61. But as Toibin explains rather brilliantly: “Since Wilde put so much energy into letting it be known that he had invented himself, it is easy to understand how having a father might have seemed at certain points quite unnecessary for him.” When he came to write *De Profundis* in Reading Gaol 20 years later, one figure would be almost entirely missing from his letter: that of his father. And yet the two had so much in common, the scandal that had trailed William uncannily foreshadowing the one that would later bring down his son (his patient Mary Travers, having accused him of seducing her, brought and won a libel case against William’s wife, Jane).

Mad, Bad, Dangerous to Know began its life as a series of Richard Ellmann Lectures, given at Emory University, Georgia, in the biographer’s memory and each of the essays in it comes with the mild but confounding sense of lifelessness and disorganisation one often finds when reading words that were written originally to be spoken aloud (I do not know how to account for the gap between these two things, but I will say this: I hope there is an audio book, read by the author, who has one of the most marvellously suggestive voices I’ve ever heard). I think, too, that we’ve probably already heard quite enough – too much – about Wilde and his strange, passionate family: of their “unstable and gnarled allegiances” as Protestants in a Catholic country; of William’s flouting of sexual morality by acknowledging his illegitimate son. Reading about all this again made me feel as I do when I’ve eaten too much cake. All the same, there is something interesting and insightful to be found on almost every page. In the chapter on Joyce’s father, Toibin devotes himself to looking for the man among the pages of his son’s stories and novels. In life, John Stanislaus was a violent drunk who had fallen, largely through his own fault, on hard financial times, and his many children were frequently disgusted by him – facts that only make his shimmering resurrection in Joyce’s writing all the more remarkable, an act of love as well of artistic creation. In a cultural climate that grows ever more sententious, determined to ignore both historical context and human frailty, Toibin understands that what captivated Joyce

was the dizzying, unfathomable space between what he knew about his father, and what he felt about him. Out of this, he forged his style: generous, varied, replete. It had to be so, if it were ever fully to encompass the “shivering ambiguities” that lay at its heart.

Most enjoyable of all, however, is the essay on John B Yeats, an artist who struggled ever to finish his work, and who only painted those he liked, the act of creation being for him one of sympathy. His influence on his son’s poetry came to be profound; safely at a distance in the US, it was possible for him to write to William often, and fervently, about his work. But I found myself more moved and captivated by his love letters to Rosa Butt. Though he and Rosa, the daughter of Isaac Butt, the Irish politician and first leader of the Home Rule League, had known each other when they were young, they began their passionate correspondence only in old age, separated by the Atlantic, their creaking bones and John’s spoony hopelessness (this widower in exile was all longing and no action). His side of it (hers was destroyed) has something in common with several poems WB Yeats wrote after his death, verses that vividly encompass defiance in the face of old age. But these are letters to be cherished for their own sake, too. To Rosa, John wrote not about the life he had missed but, as Toibin has it: “The life he imagined, and he gave that life a sense of lived reality, as though it were not only somehow possible, but almost present.”

References

[1] Toibin, C. (2018). *Mad, Bad, Dangerous to Know: The Fathers of Wilde, Yeats and Joyce*. Hodder & Stoughton: England, Print.