

## Hugh Linehan Imma's show a dismal litany of progressive platitudes

Call me a homophobic, misogynistic, climate-change-denying reincarnation of Cecil Rhodes if you must, but there's something dispiriting about the relentlessly on-message progressivism of the programme launched this weekend by the Irish Museum of Modern Art (Imma) to mark its 30th anniversary.

Titled *The Narrow Gate of the Here-and-Now*, Imma: 30 Years of the Global Contemporary, the four-part sequence of exhibitions and events, running until the end of the year at the museum's home base in the Royal Hospital, Kilmainham, focuses on a number of different thematic concerns.

The first chapter, *Queer Embodiment*, which has just opened, reflects on legislative changes such as the decriminalisation of homosexuality, provision of divorce, marriage equality and the repeal of the Eighth Amendment. "The museum's collection and archive reflects a strong history of feminist practice, relaying the defiance of women in Ireland against church and state oppression; as well as queer histories that capture moments of resistance and joy," says Imma's press release.

Chapter Two: *The Anthropocene*, from September 24th, considers how human activity has become visible "as a dominant and destructive influence on Earth", with a focus on "rising sea levels, heatwaves and species extinction, the exhibition looks at the temporalities and underlying structures of the Anthropocene".

The third chapter, *Social Fabric*, opening on November 5th, "shows how artists have used textiles as a space of resistance and activism". And finally, *Protest and Conflict*, beginning on November 19th, "celebrates how artists have utilised protest as a dynamic act of resistance and assertion; subverting power while surrounded by turmoil and conflict".

Perhaps to make sure no box goes unticked, the programming, we are told, also "embraces decolonisation as a process to actively reflect the diversity and the voices of the people within the collection and around us."

### Hopelessly in thrall

Obviously, taken on their individual merits, all these themes are worthy of exploration and interrogation. But presented here as a full package to be delivered over several months, they feel like being trapped for a very long time in the worst transition year project ever. As a representation of three decades of cultural practice, they also seem hopelessly in thrall to an instrumentalised theory of creative expression, which sees culture's function first and foremost as an agent for effecting certain forms of social and political change. It can, of course, be that,

but often it isn't. Reactionaries and social pessimists make art too. Some of it is equally thought-provoking.

Apart from the ideological narrowness, the overall narrative, as laid out by Imma's promotional material, seems to leave little enough space for other considerations. What, for example, of the tensions, which haven't gone away, between the words "modern" and "museum" in Imma's own name? Or the awkward fact that the turbo-charged contemporary art market means that purchases of major new works are mostly beyond Imma's modest means? In fact, what about art's very interesting place in the story of modern capitalism? In his superb book, *Empire of Pain*, Patrick Radden Keefe describes how some members of the eye-wateringly rich Sackler family made billions off the misery and death of the opioid crisis, while others were acclaimed for the philanthropic donations they made to museums and galleries, whose self-consciously progressive mission statements sound very like the language used by Imma.

### Interesting hypocrisies

Perhaps some of these interesting hypocrisies and thought-provoking contradictions will be teased out in the "painting, sculpture, film, video, installation, performance, internet art, sound, textiles, drawing, community-based practice, collaborative practice and socially-engaged practice" promised over the coming months in Kilmainham. Or maybe they will be debated as part of the "engagement-and-learning programme with a significant online presence including virtual tours, online presentations, lectures and public programming". Or in the promised major publication on the history of Imma's collection, "bringing international voices together to probe what it means to be both global and local in 2021".

Since its establishment in a typically grandiloquent gesture by then taoiseach Charles J Haughey, with a bequest from collector Gordon Lambert and under the directorship of Declan McGonagle (who fatefully insisted it should be located in the Royal Hospital), Imma has struggled to define itself against the backdrop of a beautiful but not very well-suited exhibition space and of perennially limited resources. That has sometimes led to it portraying itself as some sort of platform for resistance against the hegemony of the establishment and the status quo. This was always a faintly absurd position for a state-funded body housed in one of the country's grandest historic buildings to take, but it looks as though awareness of that ridiculousness continues to elude the current custodians. Perhaps in its own way, the programme they have laid out for Imma's anniversary perfectly illustrates Imma's problem.



Seamus Heaney at a turf bog in Bellaghy wearing his father's coat, hat and walking stick in 1986; John McGahern, Leitrim, 2004; Patrick Kavanagh harvesting, Inniskeen, Co Monaghan, 1963. PHOTOGRAPHS: BOBBIE HANVEY PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVES/JOHN J BURNS LIBRARY/BOSTON COLLEGE; COLM HOGAN; WILTSHIRE COLLECTION, NATIONAL LIBRARY OF IRELAND



# DIGGING DEEP, FINDING GOLD

Patrick Kavanagh, John McGahern and Seamus Heaney all made great literary hay out of the farming experience

NICHOLAS GRENE

I have never enjoyed writing anything as much as this book. I grew up on a farm in Wicklow and, like my father before me, have combined a career as a university teacher of literature with part-time farming.

My father, the classicist David Grene, was a Dubliner who developed a passion for farming on summer visits to Tipperary relatives. He and my mother bought a farm in Illinois when they taught at the University of Chicago. And when they decided to move the family to Ireland in 1952, the US farm was traded for the one in Wicklow where I still live, though my father continued to spend half the year working in Chicago. He resisted mechanisation, insisted on using horses rather than tractors on the farm, so even by 1950s Irish standards we must have been considered fairly retro.

My farming childhood, therefore, very much belonged to what Seamus Heaney calls the "age of bare hands/and cast iron", a pre-modern intimacy with land and animals. All those labour-intensive practices – hand-milking, thinning turnips, making haycocks, stooking and stacking corn ahead of the big threshing day – were completely familiar. So

the Irish literature in which they figure so frequently was home territory for me.

I started out with a notion of writing an essay on the rhythms of farm work in John McGahern. It was only when my wife suggested I do something broader that I realised I had a subject for a book. Because, once you started to look, farm scenes were everywhere in Irish writing: plays and poems, short stories and novels, memoirs and autobiographies. It almost seemed that if you didn't have an Irish farm childhood, you had to invent one, as Maura Laverty did in *Never No More*. Her charming first novel, very closely based on her own life, features a loving farm grandmother who was a necessary fiction.

Research took me to Irish writers I scarcely knew, such as Patrick MacGill, Peadar O'Donnell and Seamus Ó Grianna, who all came from the same small area of Donegal. Any time I mentioned my project to friends and colleagues, I was steered towards additional texts. Niall McMonagle said I had to read Tom French's remarkable long poem *Pity the Bastards*; Cormac Ó Cuilleain suggested Kevin Barry's brilliantly satirical *Animal Needs*.

Of course, the land figures extensively in 19th-century Irish writing from William Carleton on. But I decided to concentrate

on the generations of writers who began to work in the period since 1922. Some of them, like Kavanagh and Heaney, grew up on farms. But others came from a slightly more removed farming background; their experience was of the farms of grandparents, uncles or aunts. (Who would have thought of Anne Enright as having any sort of rural roots before *The Green Road*?)

The writing and the writers reflect the social, cultural and demographic features of our island. Land ownership was linked to political independence in the decolonising struggles of the late 19th century. The possession of those small family farms, gained with such difficulty, was not going to be lightly relinquished. The farmers in independent Ireland were conservative in every sense of the word, having learned the bitter lessons of the famine period against any subdivision of their land, determined to hand it on intact to a single chosen heir. In what were often large families of children, those who were not so chosen had to find other careers as best they could, often through emigration.

There were opportunities, however, in the new State, and many found employment in schoolteaching, the civil service and the Garda. In many cases, it was their children who became writers: Dermot Healy and Thomas Kilroy, for instance, as well as McGahern, were all sons of gardaí.

Writing is largely a middle-class, urban-based occupation but in an Ireland which for most of the 20th century remained a predominantly agricultural country writers were very conscious of the farming environments where they were reared or visited as children. A great deal of modern Irish literature concerned with the farm is retrospective; I wanted to call my book *Back on the Farm*, but my publishers told me this would baffle the all-important computer search engines. There are idylls

of remembered country childhoods such as Alice Taylor's *To School through the Fields* and its sequels. There are grimly dystopic versions, as in the terrifying stories of Claire Keegan.

For many writers, such as Edna O'Brien, the rural environment was one to escape as soon as possible. But for many, the farming experience remains formative, the bedrock of their imagination, to which they must return again and again: John Montague with Tyrone, Bernard O'Donoghue and north Cork. Any over-romanticised view of rural Irish communities is challenged by the subsistence narratives of the Blasket Island autobiographies, the bleak picture of the closed-in parish of John B Keane's *The Field*, or the hilariously dark evocation of the talking dead in Máirtín Ó Cadhain's *Cré na Cille*. (I have to confess my Irish is nearly non-existent, so I am very grateful for the two translations of this great novel into English.) And an interest in farm writing has not gone away in the 21st century – witness the success in 2018 of John Connell's *The Cow Book*.

With such a mass of varied material before me, I had initially no idea how to organise it. It was only gradually that topics for the first five chapters emerged: family and inheritance, the dynamics created by that need for an heir to the farm; life on the poorest land of the west of Ireland seacoast from Donegal to the Blaskets; childhood memories and their varied deployment; the politics of rural communities; and reactions to a modernising Ireland.

One thing, though, I knew from the start: my last three chapters would have to be devoted to individual studies of Kavanagh, McGahern and Heaney, the three major writers who made most significant literary capital out of the farming experience. I had never studied any of the three in detail before and the prospect was daunting,

particularly in the case of Heaney to whom so much critical attention has been devoted. But the time spent with them has been hugely rewarding, all the more because I had the opportunity to teach their work to gifted Trinity undergraduates – no better way to shape one's ideas in dialogue.

Kavanagh's slow and painful self-creation as a writer, with the minimal resources available to him as a small farmer and cobbler in Monaghan, is a heroic story. Though he was to denounce *The Great Hunger* as a "sociological lie", in its devastating evocation of the small farming community, it remains one of the great poems of the 20th century. He could re-tune his farming experience to the bitter recriminations of *Stony Grey Soil*, the splendid comedy of *Tarry Flynn*, or the transcendental visions of *Iniskeen* of the later poetry.

McGahern is one of the relatively few Irish writers to have returned to active farming – Peter Fallon and Eugene McCabe other exceptions. In his fiction, the life of the farm is always there as an alternative to the urban spaces where so many of his characters actually live: representative of a rootedness that has continuous attractions though at the same time filled with memories of the crippling life of home and family on the land.

Heaney is a striking case of the sheer impact of farming memories. He left home for boarding school in Derry at the age of 12; Mossbawn, the family farm on which so many of his poems are focused, was sold when he was 15. And yet right up to the poems of his last collection, *Human Chain*, those childhood recollections keep coming up new and fresh. From the extraordinarily tactile images of *Death of a Naturalist*, through his treatment of the Troubles where so often norms of country life afford the peaceful contrast to the war he confronts, to the later work where the people and places of the farm life are ghostly visitants, Heaney's extraordinary image-making power takes off from that primary "omphalos" of Mossbawn.

The imaginative investment in farming, and the multiple ways in which Irish writers have responded to it through the last century, is what has made it for me such a rich subject. I can only hope that those who read the book will share some of the excitement I had writing it.

Farming in Modern Irish Literature by Nicholas Grene will be published by Oxford University Press on August 5th

Stella

Showing in Rathmines  
SUN 01 AUG - 15:00 THUR 05 AUG - 17:50

Showing in Rathmines  
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SUN 01 AUG - 21:30  
TUES 03 AUG - 21:30  
THUR 05 AUG - 21:30

Ranelagh  
SAT 28 AUG - 20:00  
SUN 29 AUG - 16:00

Showing in Rathmines  
SAT 28 AUG - 19:00  
SUN 29 AUG - 15:00

Ranelagh  
SAT 28 AUG - 20:00  
SUN 29 AUG - 16:00

Rathmines  
THUR 01 AUG - 18:30  
FRI 02 AUG - 18:30  
SAT 03 AUG - 21:30  
SUN 04 AUG - 18:30  
MON 05 AUG - 21:30

Ranelagh  
SAT 31 JUL - 21:15  
SUN 01 AUG - 21:15  
TUE 03 AUG - 21:05

Showing in Rathmines  
FRI 06 AUG - 19:00  
SAT 07 AUG - 21:30  
SUN 08 AUG - 21:00  
MON 09 AUG - 21:15

Ranelagh  
TUE 10 AUG - 18:30  
WED 11 AUG - 21:15  
THUR 12 AUG - 21:30

NIGHT OF THE KINGS (15A)  
Showing in Ranelagh  
SAT 31 JUL - 18:45  
MON 02 AUG - 16:15

Ranelagh  
THUR 05 AUG - 18:30

SUMMER OF SOUL (12A)  
Rathmines  
SAT 31 JUL - 15:15  
MON 02 AUG - 18:20

Ranelagh  
SUN 01 AUG - 15:30  
TUES 03 AUG - 21:15  
WED 04 AUG - 18:20

PHIL LYNOTT - SONGS FOR WHILE I'M AWAY (12A)  
Rathmines  
SAT 31 JUL - 18:15  
MON 02 AUG - 15:30

WED AUG 04 - 18:30

RATHMINES

ALSO SHOWING

BRUNCH CLUB  
GROUNDHOG DAY (PG)  
SAT 31 JUL - 12:30

THE BIG LEBOWSKI (18)  
MON 02 AUG - 12:30

CLUELESS (12A)  
SUN 01 AUG - 12:10

FAMILY FLIX  
ALADDIN (U)  
SAT 31 JUL - 10:00

ENCHANTED (PG)  
MON 02 AUG - 09:45

FINDING NEMO (G)  
SUN 01 AUG - 09:40

RANELAGH

ALSO SHOWING

NOMADLAND (12A)  
SAT 31 JUL - 16:00

TUES 03 AUG - 18:30

MINARI (12A)  
SUN 01 AUG - 18:20

SUPERNOVA (15A)  
MON 02 - 18:45

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Clockwise from far left: Meryl Streep applies an orange glow on the set of *Don't Look Up*; director Adam McKay with Jennifer Lawrence; Jonah Hill and Leonardo DiCaprio with Streep and Lawrence.

PHOTOGRAPHS: NIKO TAVERNISE/NETFLIX



McKay was then also a performer but, when the inevitable move to Saturday Night Live came along, he settled behind the keyboard and, by 27, found himself head writer at the show. Looking down through the list of films he then directed, I see quite a few that, indifferently reviewed on release, became major hits on home video. *Anchorman* is the obvious example. But you could say the same of the still underrated *Step Brothers*.

"They did quite well. Everyone was happy. We got to have the enjoyment of the successful release. But the fun thing is really to see how it starts to stick to the culture over the next couple of years. I remember one time I was at a bar and someone said a line from *Anchorman*. And I thought they were talking to me. I was, like: 'Oh, hi!' And I realised they were just saying it."

I wonder if he felt he was doing a different job when he moved on to *The Big Short*. That film is certainly very funny. But it is based on a big, serious book by Michael Lewis and it takes seriously its remit of explaining credit default swaps and collateralised debt obligations. It is in its own category.

"One thing that really struck me was people tend to think of comedies as a lower genre," he says. "Thank God for all the other filmmakers who did movies that blended genres, like *Get Out* and most recently *Parasite*. These movies are funny. But they're also sinister and they're heart-breaking. And because of that there's a freedom now in writing that I'm really, really loving."

McKay has fingers in many pies. He is a producer of the unavoidable TV series *Succession*. He helped develop recent film hits such as *Hustlers* and *Booksmart*. Pressure comes with that degree of success. In a weird irony, he suffered cardiac problems while making *Vice*, a film about a man dogged by heart attacks for decades, and has been steering back towards a healthier path.

"I had a heart scare when I finished filming," he says. "I changed all my habits as people will do after a heart scare. I've lost 35 pounds. I've stopped smoking regularly. I've cut down on the drinking and the carbs and blah, blah, blah. And, yeah, I just had a check-up. That was three months ago. And the doctor was like: 'Oh my God, you're healthy!'"

It was almost certainly the Cavan air that did it.

*Don't Look Up* is in selected cinemas from next Friday, and available on Netflix from December 24th

## Hugh Linehan

# Haughey's legacy to the arts is consequential but mixed

**A**lmost three decades after he left frontline politics, and 15 years since his death, Charles Haughey is still capable of arousing feelings ranging from bitter contempt to deep admiration. One notable aspect of Gary Murphy's magisterial new biography is the number of writers and artists who were keen to pay court to Haughey when the politician was in his pomp, and how pleased he was to accept their praise as his due.

When considering Haughey's political career, mention is always made of his genuine interest in the arts, but that subject can be as divisive and contested in its own way as his record in other areas. It is indisputable, though, that – with the exception of Michael D Higgins – Haughey was more intellectually and actively engaged with questions of the State's role in culture during his political career than any other senior politician in the history of the State. Unlike Higgins, he had his hands on the levers of real power for a long time, first as minister for finance in the 1960s and then during his four terms as taoiseach between 1979 and 1992. The results are still with us. The tax exemption for artists which he introduced in 1969 may have been gradually whittled down over the years and no longer attracts millionaire novelists and rock stars to Ireland, but it still plays an important role in providing a boost to the incomes of writers, artists and composers. *Aosdána* continues to provide financial support in the form of an annual payment of €17,180 to those of its 250 members who need it.

The Irish Museum of Modern Art in Kilmainham, the cultural institutions built or renovated in Temple Bar, the decision to refurbish Dublin Castle and the old College of Surgeons on Dublin's Merrion Street for government use; these and others stand as testament to Haughey's willingness to push past bureaucratic obstacles and political inertia to achieve the sort of imaginative grand projects which his predecessors – and most of his successors – shied away from. For his many critics, they also represent the shortcomings of his conception of the State's role in culture and the self-aggrandising nature of his assumption of the persona of great patron of the arts. In an interview in 2003, he pronounced that just as in the past rulers and church leaders would bestow their patronage on their favourite artists, "today that role must, in the main, be filled by the State". It's not hard to see that statement as an assertion of his own self-image as a latter-day prince.

In 2007, commenting on a TV documentary on Haughey and the arts, Fintan O'Toole argued that in return for his patronage, Haughey "got a touch of class and an air of mystery – both useful assets for a cynical crook", and that he also effectively bought the silence of Irish

artists, who failed to hold him to account for his misdeeds.

Judging by the evidence in Murphy's biography, which draws extensively on Haughey's private correspondence, one can now add that the manner in which some of the country's most celebrated writers were happy to bow and scrape to Haughey may reflect something deeper about how creative artists can be easily seduced by proximity to power and by demagoguery.

Although some reviewers have criticised the book for not being harsher on its subject's obvious corruption, one of its strengths is that Murphy leaves the readers to draw their own conclusions about Haughey's behaviour. He's more interested in exploring what the man himself thought, behind that basilisk stare. Haughey fancied himself a political leader in the mould of De Gaulle or Mitterrand, and he chafed at the restraints the Irish political system placed on his power. And



**In a sense, Haughey was a quintessential Irish politician of his time, seeing his role as the acquisition and maintenance of power through patronage**

his Great Man theory of history extended to a conception of artistic practice, shared by his influential advisor Anthony Cronin, which favoured the solitary (and almost exclusively male) writer or painter over interpretive or collaborative forms such as acting, musical performance or filmmaking. The fact also remains that, after many years in power, Haughey left behind a country which continues to this day to fall well short of the European Union average when it comes to State support for culture.

And yet. In a sense, Haughey was a quintessential Irish politician of his time, seeing his role as the acquisition and maintenance of power through patronage, a sensibility he brought to his initiatives for the arts. But, as the new biography makes clear, he also believed in the need for the State to help people improve their lives while being aware of the same State's institutional failings: a faceless, unaccountable and sometimes heartless bureaucracy; a reflexive conservatism; a failure of imagination. Can anyone honestly say that these problems are not still with us, in culture policy and elsewhere?

## Hugh Linehan

# Live audiences are back but will they behave themselves?

**H**ave you booked your tickets yet? With remaining Covid restrictions set to be lifted on Monday, many people are no doubt looking forward to returning to crowded cinemas, theatres and music venues unencumbered by masks and free of social distancing regulations.

Over the past two years, much ink has been spilt – some of it here – on pontificating about how the pandemic has revealed to us the importance of communal live events. Nothing beats being part of a real audience in a real place experiencing a play or a concert or a film together. Right?

Not so fast, as Jean-Paul Sartre might have said. It was the French philosopher who coined the phrase “hell is other people”, and one unremarked but soon to be tested hypothesis about lockdown is that it has caused us to forget what a bunch of wretched, ignorant swine our fellow human beings can be when they’re up close and personal.

If you think I exaggerate, consider the events which unfolded last Saturday at Belfast’s Lyric Theatre, during Northern Ireland Opera’s sold-out production of the Stephen Sondheim musical *Into the Woods*.

The Belfast Telegraph reports that audience members repeatedly talked and moved about the auditorium during the first half of the show, which has been enthusiastically reviewed in this newspaper and elsewhere. “As they came off stage, actors complained to company managers that the conduct of the audience was disrupting the performance,” wrote the Telegraph. “Front of house staff also reported that they were being abused as they tried to appeal to some audience members to be quiet and to stop drinking in the auditorium.” At the interval, the cast and members of the orchestra were told by director Cameron Menzies that the show was being cancelled and that they should leave the theatre by the back door.

Northern Ireland Opera declined to comment further when I contacted them about the incident, beyond confirming that it had taken place and that it was “looking forward to and focusing on this week’s final six performances of *Into the Woods*”.

There is a school of thought which argues that contemporary expectations of how an audience should behave are rooted in a set of prissy, 19th century bourgeois rules

about remaining quiet and motionless during a performance. Before that, audience members would shout at the stage and at each other, eat, drink, wander about and relieve themselves openly. Which sounds pretty much like the behaviour of the people in the Lyric last Saturday. Some theorists argue we should throw off these stuffy Victorian conventions in order to return to a less passive, more primal relationship between spectator and performer.

Perhaps. And perhaps we should bring back bear-baiting and public executions while we’re at it. It seems unlikely that the audience at *Into the Woods* were some sort of radical collective dedicated to breaking down society’s expectations of what live musical theatre should be. One might more reasonably surmise that many of them were over-stimulated by pre-show refreshments and under-invested in Stephen Sondheim’s deconstruction of gender and power in the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm.

Different rules apply to different audiences in different contexts. Many theatres won’t readmit people if nature calls during the performance. Stern admonitions about switching off phones and not talking are par for the course in cinemas (whether they’re observed is another matter). Popular music events are much more laissez-faire, which is as it should be. But a common phenomenon across nearly all genres in recent years has been the perceptible decline in standards of consideration for others. Is it because people are more habituated to home entertainment and don’t realise or care that they should act differently when they’re

out? Has the lure of the always-on digital device lessened their awareness of where they are and that they’re making life miserable for those around them? Are they more drunk or stoned than heretofore? Whatever the reason, more and more seem to prefer continuing their tedious shouted conversations after the lights go down rather than paying any attention to what’s on stage.



**We should bring back bear-baiting and public executions while we’re at it**

Versions of this phenomenon can also be seen at sports events. It’s worth noting that last Saturday’s audience at the Lyric was a corporate block-booking. This may help to answer the puzzle of why people would pay large sums to see a show or a match and then proceed to ignore it: they often haven’t spent anything at all. With arts and sports increasingly dependent on corporate partnerships and sponsorships, tickets end up being distributed to people who are just there for the boozy pre-show function and the Insta-friendly Big Night Out. They’re the antithesis of an engaged audience, and unfortunately the rest of us will just have to suffer. Hell remains other people.



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