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John McCarten's 'Irish Sketches': The *New Yorker's* 'Other Ireland' in the Early Years of the Troubles, 1968-1974

During the years 1968-1974, while the Troubles were brewing in Ireland, John McCarten submitted 21 "Irish Sketches" to the *New Yorker* magazine, though editor William Shawn published only six of the light but probing pieces on Irish art and culture. Nevertheless, all the "Sketches" are worth reading even today because McCarten satirized Irish stereotypes and went behind the scenes to get beyond the conventional images of the culture with a mature, well-crafted voice that he developed in Irish New York in the 1930s and 1940s while writing for the *New Yorker*. McCarten also wrote gently satirical fiction with snappy dialogue and brief Talk of the Town reportage—"Talk Stories"—that complemented the accurate but humorous voice created by the magazine's early writers, such as E. B. White, James Thurber, Robert Benchley, Dorothy Parker and several others. McCarten also crafted memorable Profiles that demonstrated his abilities as a reporter, storyteller and irreverent critic of social and political figures and their actions. He later sharpened his critical acumen while reviewing movies and Broadway plays. By the time he moved to Ireland, he brought a mature voice and aesthetic to writing the "Irish Sketches."

When I first read the "Irish Sketches" and first talked to McCarten's son Hugh McCarten, who repeated his father's complaints about how Shawn often postponed publication of writers' work, I agreed with Hugh McCarten that Shawn had not published enough of his father's "Irish Sketches." Two years ago, I thought that Shawn could have used many more of the "Irish Sketches" to create a more complex

image of Ireland during the Troubles. In the two years that have passed since my first trip to New York, more research and two more days of interviewing Hugh McCarten have brought me to some new insights. First, a review of what Shawn published regarding Ireland between 1968 and 1972, the years that McCarten was writing and submitting his “Irish Sketches,” reveals that Shawn was trying to project a balanced image of life in Ireland, and McCarten’s “Irish Sketches” were only a part of Shawn’s larger editorial canvas. Second, Hugh McCarten, having gone through many of his father’s materials in the year between our two interviews, had come to the conclusion that his father’s “Irish Sketches” may have made the *New Yorker* seem too “bucolic” for the late 1960s and early 1970s.¹

Prolific John McCarten

McCarten, born into an Irish American family in Philadelphia in 1911, went to sea with the Merchant Marine instead of going to college, and started writing for *American Mercury*, *Fortune* and *Time* magazines in the 1930s. McCarten began writing for the *New Yorker* in 1934 and over the next thirty-eight years he wrote short stories, Profiles and Talk of the Town pieces for founding editor Harold Ross and after 1951 for editor William Shawn. McCarten wrote film criticism for the *New Yorker* under The Current Cinema column from 1945 to 1960 and he was the magazine’s Broadway theatre critic from 1960-1967. In all, he wrote and co-wrote about 1,000 pieces for the magazine.

In July 1967, McCarten unexpectedly quit reviewing and moved to Ireland with his third wife Nancy. They rented a flat in Fitzwilliam Square in Dublin, near the Pembroke, a neighborhood pub that he frequented and became the setting for some of his interviews with various storytellers and educated experts. During the years that McCarten lived in Ireland, from 1967 until 1974, he wrote twenty-one pieces of first-person reportage under the heading “Irish Sketches,” six of which Shawn published in the *New Yorker* between February 24, 1968 and November 20, 1971.

When McCarten died in September 1974, Shawn killed the “Irish Sketches” set in galleys and those banked in manuscript form and filed the fifteen unpublished “Sketches” in his office. In June 2012, I found the five “Irish Sketches” set in galleys and the ten “Sketches” in manuscript form from Shawn’s office in the *New Yorker* archives at the New York Public Library. Although Shawn published other writers’ work posthumously, such as Frank O’Connor’s, he chose not to publish any of McCarten’s banked pieces even though the six “Sketches” set in galley proofs were ready for publication. They cover topics that might have interested *New Yorker* readers, and they all demonstrate good reporting: McCarten sought to secure insider information, he entertained his readers with anecdotes and tall tales and he captured factual, timely information from experienced, educated experts. Among his topics were the two oldest hotels in Dublin, both built in the first half of the 18th century, the Island of Lambay, a privately owned sanctuary a few miles from Dublin, a world renowned dance instructor and his love of the Irish jig, marriage brokers and their practices in County Kerry, the Irish National Stud Farm and a nearby Japanese garden, and a three-generation wooden boat building company whose owners loved tradition but were very progressive in their award-winning designs. In every piece, McCarten presents history, folklore, tradition and progressive changes—all of which suggest McCarten was searching for what he sees as authentically Irish. As a result, he depicts an Ireland unfamiliar to American readers who know the country only through stereotypes in movies, songs and plays.

McCarten’s “Irish Sketches” and the new *New Yorker* of the 1960s

Since McCarten’s “Irish Sketches” were more like the humorous, sometimes satirical short stories and profiles that he wrote in the 1930s and 1940s than his incisive, sharp-edged movie and theater criticism, his “Sketches” were in sharp contrast to some of the pieces that had revived the *New Yorker*’s reputation for innovative reporting and social criticism. Among the pieces that renewed the magazine’s reputation were Rachel Carson’s “Silent Spring” (1962), Truman Capote’s “In Cold Blood” (1965), James

Baldwin's "Letter From a region in My Mind" (1965) and critics Michael Arlen (television starting in 1967) and Pauline Kael (film beginning in 1967 with her review of *Bonnie and Clyde*). Shawn also published comments and reportage on the disasters of the War in Vietnam beginning in 1965 with Michael Arlen, Jonathan Schell, George Wald, Richard Goodwin and several more. These and numerous other pieces depicted the over-reaching, violent, weird elements of the 1960s in sharp contrast to McCarten's light, ironic reportage on Irish arts and culture.

The overall image of Ireland portrayed in the *New Yorker* during the years 1968-1974, under Shawn's editorship, was diverse in genre, tone and topic, and it changed as the Troubles escalated from peaceful demonstrations to shootings, bombings and near civil war. In addition to McCarten's six "Sketches" about Irish art and culture, Shawn also published six short stories by Edna O'Brien, two by Mary Lavin and one by Michael O'Donovan, many of which depict lost or unrequited love in Irish settings. In many of the stories, the authors use allegories of family relationships or marriage to suggest the history and emotions behind the current Troubles. As Katarzyna Bartoszynska points out in "Adam Smith's Problems: Sympathy in Owenson's *Wild Irish Girl* and Edgeworth's *Ennui*," such allegories of family and marriage tap into a tradition in Irish literature that dates back to at least Lady (Owenson) Morgan's *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806) and Maria Edgeworth's *Ennui* (1809), both novels that employ allegories of marriage to model political relationships between Ireland and England (127-144). And last, but perhaps most important in Shawn's effort to create a complex, timely image of Ireland between 1968 and 1974, were two long pieces of reportage by Jane Kramer—a "Letter from Dublin" published on July 25, 1970 and a "Letter from Ireland" published February 19, 1972, just twenty days after Bloody Sunday when British troops shot twenty-six unarmed Catholic demonstrators in Londonderry, killing thirteen and critically wounding several more (48). Kramer's two long "Letters," plus a brief one published on April 15, 1972, provide an unflattering, realistic analysis of Irish politics and conflict. Her pieces, which will be

discussed in more detail later, depict many Irish (and English) as belligerent extremists, in sharp contrast to McCarten's depiction of the Irish as purveyors of culture and storytelling.

McCarten submitted his first "Irish Sketch" in January 1968 and Shawn published it in the February 24, 1968 issue, which was the annual anniversary edition. In "Irish Sketches: Ring in the Old, Ring in the New—with a Bit of Jangle," McCarten is largely in the role of observer, but does report that he is happy to be back in Ireland after a decade's absence and that the weather is blithe. He then meets the subject of the piece, an old friend, an architect and art historian, who has been instrumental in putting together an art show called Rosc 67, which has earned the status of a museum because it houses 150 contemporary abstract paintings from all over the world, along with a sampling of ancient Irish monuments "of which there are about 800 dotted about the Irish countryside" (96). McCarten allows the architect/art historian a lengthy monologue in which he explains that *rosc* is Gaelic for "the poetry of vision" and that the abstract paintings selected for Rosc 67 came as "something of a shock to people unaccustomed to avant-garde developments. But the thing that excited the most furious uproar was the decision of the jurors to combine with these creations a few ancient Irish artifacts that are, in their own way, just as abstract as anything the moderns have dreamt up" (96).

McCarten then listens to the architect/art historian mock the critics of Rosc 67 with comments such as "even an occasional poet smote a dissenting lyric about Rosc's plans for combining the new and the old." Near the end of the piece, McCarten, who has joined his friend at the art exhibition, points out three elderly ladies in the gallery of abstract paintings who are "reverently pondering a rather arcane creation" (100). McCarten quotes his architect/art historian friend again: "It is fantastic how these people, who are rather insular as far as art goes, show these abstractions a reverence such as they might render to the Pieta in Rome" (100).

But this bit of mocking praise is not the last word. The sketch ends with McCarten reporting on a light but tender scene:

After we had surveyed the Main Hall, Scott (his friend) guided me back to the anteroom, where I, being no archeologist, did my poor best to establish some sort of rapport with the carven rocks. I was studying an item called the Tanderagee Figure, a grotesque little object that was found in a bog near Newry, in County Down, and that may represent some mythical Celtic character, when a small girl came along. After staring for a while at the Tanderagee Figure, she bent over and kissed it tenderly. Scott, who was standing at my elbow, said, “The child of the Atomic Age sends her love to the Early Iron Age. What a lovely gesture (100).

The two scenes described above demonstrate McCarten’s voice as a *New Yorker* writer. He tells the truth in gentle, mocking praise without savaging his subjects. What’s more, the gently ironic scene of the child kissing the Tanderagee Figure captures in one action the significance of Rosc 67, namely, the links between Ireland’s ancient and its contemporary cultures, particularly the visual resemblance between old and new works of art. Typical of McCarten, and of many *New Yorker* writers old and new, he makes serious points with light, ironic language and action.

Enthused by publication of his first “Irish Sketch,” McCarten submitted six more in 1968, all of which Shawn had set in galley proofs, but none of which he published. Shawn always bought more material than he could publish, as do many magazine editors, but it’s also important to recall that 1968 was a tumultuous year in the United States and in Ireland. Some Irish historians argue for 1968 as the beginning of the most recent spate of Troubles in Ireland and thus it is not surprising that McCarten’s reportage, that depicted Ireland as a progressive country with a long, strong tradition of art, culture and storytelling, made Shawn reluctant to publish his work. Secondly, McCarten’s “Sketches” do not fulfill one of the *New Yorker’s* original goals—to parallel the news. To fulfill this goal in the late 1960s and early 1970s meant reporting on innovations in art and culture, but more frequently it meant reporting on

assassinations, riots, the War in Vietnam, the civil rights movement and other tumultuous events rather than the art and culture of Ireland.

Nevertheless, McCarten's six 1968 pieces were successful enough to be set in galley proof, but his first two submissions in 1969 were banked in manuscript. "The Mountain Tea of Connemara," a report on *poteen*—illegally distilled liquor, and conflicts with tax collectors, and a second piece, "Fun and Games with Certain Exclusions," about bans or restrictions on everything from birth control to English-style sports, considers the under-side of Irish culture. The glimpse at illegal activities and, ironically, the Irish eagerness to ban or outlaw even popular games such as soccer, offer insights on Irish society that would have been of interest to readers of the *New Yorker* because they were in marked contrast to the relaxing of political and social regulations in this country. In the 1960s and 1970s, U. S. high schools and colleges dropped dress codes and curfews, some states reduced the legal drinking age to eighteen or nineteen and, most importantly, the 26th Amendment lowered the voting age from twenty-one to eighteen in 1971. In short, the Irish interest in new rules and restrictions would have been an interesting curiosity for most Americans, whether of Irish or other heritage.

McCarten must have been frustrated with Shawn, with eight pieces in the bank, six in galley proofs and two in manuscript. But then, much to McCarten's pleasure, Shawn published an "Irish Sketch" subtitled "Kilkenny Without Any Irate Cats" in the February 22, 1969 issue, that year's anniversary issue. Although Shawn did sometimes publish former regular contributors in the anniversary issues, his decision to publish "Kilkenny Without Any Irate Cats" is curious. If Shawn has been reluctant to publish McCarten's "Irish Sketches" because of the Troubles in the North, he now publishes a piece that opens with a gentle mocking of the IRA. McCarten begins his piece by explaining how the IRA blew up a monument to the English naval warrior, Admiral Nelson. He describes the IRA as "an outfit mysteriously and mystically engaged in bringing about the unification of Northern and Southern Ireland by dynamiting statues and monuments hereabouts that memorialize Englishmen, and by attacking customhouses on the

border between the North and the South” (95). Having dispensed with the IRA with mocking praise, he introduces a stage Irishman: “a tall, thin, sad-faced man who had an air of seedy gentility” who claims that his wife, “a sweet woman if ever there was one, has given birth to a lovely set of twins” (95). McCarten then admits to the reader that the mendicant had nicked him for five pounds with the same routine when he’d visited Dublin ten years ago. McCarten tells the sad-faced man that his material needs overhauling, but this doesn’t stop the panhandler. He entertains McCarten with a long monologue full of “it’s the truth I’m telling you now” about how the IRA blasted Nelson’s Pillar skyward and then one dark night stole the broken stones and buried them somewhere in County Kilkenny. McCarten gives the “old fraud” two pounds for the story (95). As the sketch progresses, McCarten leaves behind the stereotypical storyteller and rings up one of his Irish mentors who is a graduate of Kilkenny College, director of the Kilkenny Design Workshops, a Yeats scholar, and the former director of the Irish Export-Import Board. As McCarten enters the world of serious Irish culture, he steps back, reporting a few facts now and then to set up the expert’s testimonies throughout the rest of the profile (96-100), providing a multi-faceted approach.

Following publication of “Kilkenny Without Any Irate Cats” in February 1969, McCarten submitted eleven more “Irish Sketches” before Shawn published “Confabulations in Kerry” on September 12, 1970 and “Après Cousin Charles” on October 31, 1970. In these and several other “Sketches,” McCarten introduces each piece with personal anecdotes and history to set the story in motion before taking up his accustomed position of reporter and observer. In most of the remaining “Irish Sketches,” McCarten first meets a stage Irishman or Irishwoman who supply myths, tales and folklore typical of what Americans expect from the Irish. After giving voice to this sector of Ireland, McCarten goes on to consult with educated, professional men and women who revise the myths, tales and folklore with facts, scholarly research or extensive observation and experience. Although both types of people come in for a

little of McCarten's gentle satire or mocking praise, it is in the contrast between the stage Irish and the experts that McCarten explores and dramatizes the richness of Irish society and culture.

A Fuller Picture of Ireland: McCarten's "Irish Sketches" and Kramer's "Letters"

McCarten's light touch and reporting are a pleasure to read but they do not capture what was in the news after the Troubles began in 1968. To balance McCarten's "Irish Sketches" with investigative reporting that paralleled the news, Shawn published in July 1970 Jane Kramer's "A Letter from Dublin," which is a detailed analysis of the Troubles in Ireland. She reports that Dublin has been spared violence but the politics and the fighting in the North mean that many people are in a fighting mood, especially after a few pints of beer. Kramer's piece fulfills the *New Yorker's* goals—originating with Ross and adopted by Shawn—of paralleling the news but not taking itself too seriously.

Kramer's "Letter from Dublin," for instance, opens with the sentence, "What makes Dublin an especially odd place to be during a crisis is that it manages to come with all the drama worthy of a grand capital and still keep the boozy intimacy of an Irish village" (56). And by the second page of the letter, she dispels any notion of a coming holy war: "the real issue in Ireland has never been religion so much as religious politics—whether it would be Catholics or Protestants who controlled the land, the government, the army and the country's wealth. The Protestant cause here was always a cover for Protestant privilege, just as the Catholic cause became a cover for Catholic supremacy" (57). She continues in the first letter with a sometimes irreverent, lighthearted depiction of the history and politics associated with the fight over reunification. But Kramer's sometimes irreverent, ironic voice, which Shawn welcomed in McCarten's and many other writers' work, will give way in the coming months to the magnitude of the conflict.

By February 1972, there had been a great deal more violence in Ireland than when Kramer wrote her first letter in July 1970. Kramer's second letter, titled "Letter from Ireland," which Shawn published in the February 19, 1972 issue of the *New Yorker*, opens by remarking on the divisiveness between the North

and the South and then adds a point of sad irony: “Ireland is united again by dreams and bloodshed” (65). In this lengthy piece, Kramer focuses in a more serious voice on the cycle of political action, violence and reprisals that afflict the country. And after detailing the grievances on both sides and speculating on ways they may be resolved, she ends the piece by describing the Protestants and the Catholics as deadlocked because each side sees itself as the majority in their respective part of the country and thus each side demands that it have the right to control everyone’s destiny. Two months later, in a brief letter published on April 15, 1972 in the *New Yorker* Kramer writes, “There is a kind of crazy irony in the responses of both the Catholics and the Protestants to [Prime Minister David] Heath’s decision to impose direct rule on the Six Counties [of Northern Ireland]. Each acknowledges that they will live near each other in their respective ghettos, but one side has to be on top and each is determined to make sure their side dominates” (126).

From first letter to third, Kramer’s letters increasingly read like reporting from a war zone in which those who are not directly involved in the battle are psychologically burdened by the conflict going on around them. Unlike McCarten’s “Irish Sketches,” which suggest the battle is in the North and not much evident in other parts of the country, Kramer’s reportage suggests the effects of the near civil war are widespread.

The increasing violence in Ireland apparently persuaded Shawn that the balance had to remain in Kramer’s favor. As a result, Shawn published only two more “Irish Sketches” in the *New Yorker*, namely, “A Hundred Thousand at a Glance,” about a world famous daffodil grower, on May 8, 1971, and “The Locks That Are Threatened with Rape,” about a three-day trip on Ireland’s Grand Canal where the locks do not work effectively, on November 20, 1971. Shawn published the two “Sketches” between Kramer’s first and second “Letters,” thus giving Kramer’s serious reporting on the conflict the last word. Following publication of McCarten’s two pieces, he submitted only one more “Irish Sketch”—“Winnie Restored,” a lighthearted profile of a pub owner down in Sneem, County Kerry. Shawn had this “Sketch,” an endearing

depiction of Irish country life, set in galley proofs so that McCarten was paid, but he never published the piece, much to McCarten's disappointment.

"He was not a man of the 60s," said Hugh McCarten when I interviewed him at his home in Brooklyn in September 2013. "My father believed strongly in civil rights and women's rights, but he disliked the methods they and the war protestors were using. He hated noise and violence. But he was the *New Yorker's* theater critic. From the point of view of Editor William Shawn the question became, 'What do we do with John McCarten?' My father became aware of the issue. [...] We all see the irony in that now, but it was not so evident in the summer of 1967," said Hugh. "He had been to Ireland four or five times and he and Nancy had honeymooned there, so I'm sure that Ireland had been in the back of his mind for many years. But things did not work out as my father had hoped. His health failed slowly and he was unable to write a novel [set in Ireland]. He wrote the 'Irish Sketches,' but he felt he was losing out because of the turbulent times in Ireland." ²

"What he wrote in the 'Irish Sketches,'" said Hugh McCarten, "was what he wanted, the way he wanted things to be, the way he wanted things to end." Hugh McCarten's recollection of his father's intent rings true because in the "Irish Sketches" John McCarten focused on social and cultural events in the southern part of the country, touching on the Troubles only twice. He apparently wanted to find and to communicate to his American readers what he thought was aesthetically valuable and under-reported in Ireland – the Ireland of storytellers and educated experts, the Ireland of both ancient and contemporary approaches to arts and culture.

By choosing to largely ignore the Troubles and by focusing on topics that he thought interesting and significant, McCarten chose to write about what he knew best and what he appreciated most. In doing so, he created an opportunity for bringing his experience as fiction writer, reporter, critic and master of the light, ironic touch to Irish art and culture. His "Sketches" undoubtedly qualify as literary journalism because of the quality of the reporting, the development of scenes and anecdotes, and the capturing of

significant aspects of Irish culture. But, by ignoring the near civil war in Ireland, he placed his “Irish Sketches” in a category that meant Shawn needed to complement them with Kramer’s “Letters” in order to parallel the news coming out of Ireland and to give *New Yorker* readers a fair, accurate and balanced picture of what was happening in Ireland during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Notes

¹Biographical information on John McCarten is from the following sources:

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---. Personal interview. 13-14 Sep., 2013

² McCarten, Hugh. Personal interview. 13-14 Sep., 2013

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