

*The Celtic Quest:
An Anthology from Merlin to Van Morrison
Edited by Jane Lahr*



Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

The Celtic Quest: An Anthology from Merlin to Van Morrison.

Edited by Jane Lahr

New York & San Francisco; Welcome Books. 2007.

238 pages. Illustrated

All images are taken from Wikipedia/commons following requested permission steps

As the title suggests, this is a search for Celtic culture from the earliest times to the late twentieth century. In this it resembles *Ireland in Poetry*, but of course the focus is wider as Scottish examples roughly equal those from Ireland and there are also several Welsh cultural works. There are no examples from the Celtic lands of Brittany, Cornwall, Galicia or the Celtic Diaspora, although some English writers notably William Blake and Robert Graves who use Celtic themes are included. These are the main differences from *Ireland in Poetry*.

Both works alternate vivid and intriguing illustrations with text. Both mix poetry, song, legend myth and history. Both present their cultural collections as a living force, not a museum collection. Both works do not eviscerate their texts by making them understandable to modern audiences by anglicising them, which is one way to make them bland. Ella Young's retelling of the creation myth 'The Earth Shapers' gains much of its power from the stark uncompromising language which was meant for prehistoric pagans, not us. Dylan Thomas's 'Fern Hill' is an expression of how he feels in his world, not an explanation of that world for outsiders.

Fixed symbols and imagery are two very different cultural fields. Celtic culture abounds in both, but expecting culture to be easily explainable is to lower its standard: wilful murkiness is one thing, complexity, cultural differences and mystery is another. This collection abounds in both texts and illustrations that appeal to the emotions and instincts, not to logic.

No anthology can include everybody and therefore not everybody can be pleased; even so, many important names are not represented. Among the missing are: George Bernard Shaw, Byam Shaw, Seamus Heaney, Compton MacKenzie, Cecil Day-Lewis, Turlough O' Carolan, Hugh MacDiarmid, Lord Dunsany, J.P. Dunleavy, Jack Yeats, George Moore, Edna O'Brien, Richard Llewellyn, Enya,

Maeve Brennan (include Sting but exclude the Brennan sisters?) Samuel Beckett, Sean O'Casey, J.M. Barrie, Sheridan Le Fanu, Arthur Conan Doyle, Frank O'Connor, Sean O'Faolain, Elizabeth Bowen and Maeve Benchy. These are big omissions. It could be argued that although they are all Celtic cultural figures, many do not create on Celtic themes that have a sense of questing – yet many did. Also missing are any of the famous Scottish ballads which are permeated with Celtic values.

Others get very short works for inclusion; despite his poetic gifts Oscar Wilde gets one short story, James Joyce a brief excerpt, Swift and Lady Gregory only a little more. One problem is space for words: playwrights and short story writers need more than poets and for editors space is the great limitation.

Yet what is here has a sensuality, a vividness that is extraordinary. It would be difficult to imagine a more beautiful book.



The colourful illustrations, like so many of the texts are by unknowns, but they deserve being represented. Photographs of landscapes, forests, seascapes and Celtic objects abound. Fortunately the paintings etchings and decorations are not all Art Nouveau, Pre-Raphaelite or Symbolist. Jane Lahr has ensured that Modern art also provides representations and these are shrewdly chosen so that a sense of magic and mystery that astounds emerges.

This is a book to read a few excerpts at a time, if that: one excerpt a day would be wise. This is one to savour in segments, to muse over its subtleties as well after being hit by its vividness and entranced by the sensual world it preserves, a world which Jane Lahr correctly if sadly describes as being under threat by the increasingly frenzied quest for the material values of the modern world.

*

