

***Ireland, a Bicycle, and a Tin Whistle.* By David A. WILSON.
(Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995. Pp. 175.)**

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our act of lovemaking will be completed ("you will be a true lover of mine"). But she delays that completion by responding with a set of equally impossible, and just as sexually connotive, tasks for *him*. She is exhibiting a version of stamina by deferring consummation, as it were, extending the encounter to revel in the process (positively valued in the female world view) rather than in the act's accomplishment (the male imperative). The maid in Child 46, "Captain Wedderbuen's Courtship," might very well be doing the same thing by answering the man's sexually suggestive riddles so that he has to keep thinking of *fresh* ones to pose, getting more and more frustrated that she, too, like the Elfin's Knight's partner, is deferring consummation (when she *cannot* answer and "must lie next to the wall").

Morning Dew is a most enjoyable and stimulating work, achieving far more than the author modestly claims for it. May I speak for most folksong scholars and say that I hope Barre Toelken will concentrate his efforts on ballads for a while? He has neglected us for too long.

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Ireland, a Bicycle, and a Tin Whistle. By David A. WILSON.
(Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995. Pp. 175.)

David A. Wilson is a Canadian professor of Celtic Studies who was born and spent his early childhood in Northern Ireland. This book is an account of his cycling tour around Ireland together with his "musings and meanderings about Irish music, folklore, fakelore, culture, and history," as the blurb puts it.

His primary interest is music, so his journey is punctuated by the folk festivals he visits and the sessions he seeks out in towns and villages along the way. Folklorists will find his depiction of the Irish music scene to be of interest, from the more "ethnographic" writing about traditional music sessions to his comments on the commercialization of the village of Doolin, famous for its music ("a victim of its own success"), to his dismissal of the role of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, the national organization for

traditional music ("This music belong in pubs and kitchens, not schoolrooms and competitions. It thrives on spontaneity, devilment, and irreverence..."). He captures the dynamic of the session, compares sessions in Ireland to those in Kentucky, discusses the popularity of country-and-western music in Ireland, describes exuberant dancing ("This is what it must have been like in the old days before the priests got hold of it and took the sex out of it"), is surprised at hearing rebel songs in a "holiday pub" and grumbles about being forced to stand up for the national anthem at the end of the session. The festival and the pub descriptions are lively, but characterized with a perceptiveness too often blunted by a style which approaches the burlesque. Here is the most vivid writing. The passages in between, the links between sessions, are somewhat contrived and stereotyped, usually including descriptions of the beauty of nature, the names of the tunes that come to mind while cycling, and the author's playing the tin whistle in some wild and lonesome place. There is no serendipity in the book, little sense of discovery: the author knows what he is looking for and finds it.

His "musings" go beyond his itinerary, and include a discussion of the great fiddler Michael Coleman, the flippant account of the cult of Mary ("Elvis stands for sex without love; Mary stands for love without sex"). About Ossian he writes that during the 18th century "[t]he Scots tried to claim him as one of their own; a couple of con artists from the Highlands began to circulate forgeries of Ossian's 'poems' to prove his Caledonian origins," leading the Irish to counter this by locating his grave "in the Antrim hills, within a disdainful giant's spitting distance of the far shore" — which clearly misleads, on the nature of the tradition itself, and on the importance of Macpherson, despite his dishonesty, in European intellectual history. Considering the conflict in Northern Ireland, the author begins with Patrick Pearse's glorification of war and arrives at the tally of over three thousand dead in the "Troubles," thus reducing the problem to a native (and nationalist) strain of fanaticism, and the protagonists (in number and in behaviour) to "two sides locked in this destructive dance."

How true to life is the account? The author paints a picture of a devil-may-care, talkative, witty, passionate people addicted to drink, history and invention: "'There are two rules of survival here,' a Canadian friend told me the day after she had landed in the country. 'First, don't believe anything that anyone tells you. And second, don't take anything or anyone seriously'." Of Dublin

he writes: "The pubs are about as crowded as the roads, and the drinking matches the intensity of the driving." These are hardly original observations, if observations at all; they belong rather to the category of hoary old stereotypes, the tritest of ways of making sense out of difference. He seems to meet few if any individuals who excite his sympathy, which may be part of the problem, or at least of his problem. Alcohol is an obsession in the book, usually leaving the author suffering its effects each morning, and causing him somewhat ostentatiously to devote a chapter heading — without a chapter — to the "alcoholic fog" which enveloped him between Cork and Dublin. Of course the implication is of the "When in Rome..." variety.

The author is really convincing only when describing the music scene, and fails to inspire with his journey. There is no sustained travel writing. The shift of gear from sanguine cyclist to solemn scholar makes it a bumpy ride at times, and interrupts the immediacy and subjectivity of the travel writing (which is the essence of the genre). The jaunty style, sometimes clumsily coloured with formulae of exaggeration from Gaelic literary and folk tales, seems to be at odds with the few self-consciously earnest observations, and particularly with the acknowledgments to scholars and the note on sources, which seem to belong to a different genre of writing. The serious observations detach him not just from his musical concerns, but from his journey, and their authority is diminished by his tendency towards facetiousness and exaggeration ("Most Irish love songs worth their salt have at least two suicides, one unwanted pregnancy, and maybe a murder thrown in for good measure..."; "[the harper] Delis Hempson... kept going until 1807, when a barrel of beer finally got the better of him").

Wilson tries to be fair. To his credit is his punctiliousness in dealing with Irish language names, which many scholars and commentators in Ireland could do well to emulate. As a travel book, this is less than engaging, and the observations on Irish culture and history bring few insights to bear. I suspect that it will satisfy neither of its likely reading constituencies — those interested in travel writing or Irish Studies.

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