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Alex Davis

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Alex Davis

‘They Grow American’: Irish Modernist and Postmodernist Poets from the 1930s to the 1970s

In the first section of *Missouri Sequence* (1962), Brian Coffey says of his children, ‘They know nothing of Ireland, / they grow American.’¹ The comment’s immediate context is the poet’s relatively unhappy time as an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Saint Louis University, from 1947 to 1952.² More generally, the remark is part of a lengthy meditation on, among other topics, the poet’s relationship to Ireland and to the Irish literary tradition in the wake of Yeats and the Literary Revival. In this broader context, the Americanization of Coffey’s children provides a humorous parallel to the poetry of Thomas MacGreevy, the dedicatee of this section of *Missouri Sequence* and the author of the first critical monograph on Saint Louis’s most famous literary son, T. S. Eliot. MacGreevy functions as a node around which cluster reflections on the baleful influence, as Coffey sees it, of Yeats on Irish poetry, and the consequent failure of an indigenous modernist poetry, informed by Eliot rather than the Literary Revival, to emerge. The example of MacGreevy counterpoints the figure of Yeats in Coffey’s text, a draft of which (sent to MacGreevy) states that Yeats, though a great poet, ‘failed when he advised our Irish poets’.³ MacGreevy’s most extensive work, *Crón Tráth na nDéithe*, is strongly influenced not by Yeats but by Eliot, specifically by *The Waste Land*, as evinced in its fragmented, collage-like juxtapositions, mix of registers and allusiveness; the similarities between the two texts extending to their shared use of Wagner.⁴

It would be overhasty to conclude that the unspoken subtext to Coffey’s rejection of Yeats is an unqualified valorisation of Eliot. Coffey had been seriously studying Eliot’s poetry, as well as Pound’s, from at least the early 1930s; his mixed reaction to the American’s work is apparent in a 1936 letter to MacGreevy in which he makes the intriguing claim that Eliot’s ‘poetry shows him not to understand anything about grace v. the choice of a Becket in *Murder in the Cathedral*’.⁵ Whatever we