

Passing the Time in Ballymenone: Culture and History of an Ulster Community. By Henry Glassie. (Indiana University Press, 1995. ISBN 0-253-20987-0 \$24.95 (pbk, U.S.))

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Passing the Time in Ballymenone: Culture and History of an Ulster Community.

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Passing the Time in Ballymenone was first published in 1982; this is its second edition. It was widely read then, and is unchanged now, and this is my second complete reading of it. What follows, therefore, is not a comprehensive review, but some reflections on a familiar work from the point of view of a historian of modern Ireland.

Glassie's subject is the microregion of Ballymenone in County Fermanagh, observed throughout the 1970s. In this "not remote but mostly Catholic and angry corner of Ulster", he found "a culture of the hearth, of penetrating thought, deep faith, and courtly hospitality, a place of small fires and hard work, where people calmly, plainly tell one another the truth." It is this truth, embodied in the stories, songs, talk and work of a small circle of ageing friends and neighbours, that the author seeks to evoke.

This seven-hundred page work is brimming over with detail which is almost always relevant. The technique, and the effect, is cumulative. Emerging out of the lanes, fields, homes and *ceilis* described minutely by the author and his informants, Ballymenone's landscape and people are not merely assembled but actually come alive. When Glassie gives us a story or statement, we get not just the words but also a sense of how they are shaped, their setting (the room, the clothes, the smoke), and the gestures that accompanied them. For example, an old man, sitting in his bed, but in his suit and tie, recounts his days as a brick-maker: "Mr. Boyle rams the short shovel into the pudding of clay and gracefully, slowly, turns his wrists, revolving a shaft of air above the bedclothes. His memory is banked in specific gestures and words." This is writing of an order far beyond that of most academic monographs.

Unfortunately, this great strength is also the book's chief weakness, as Glassie fails to put his beautifully remembered characters into any greater context. Indeed, he refuses any critical engagement with the material. Nationalism and sectarianism suffuse his material, but he deliberately avoids discussing the fundamental divide between Protestants and Catholics, except in occasional asides. The local folk history is reconstructed in great detail but it has little meaning without being connected to the broader nationalist narrative from which it is derived. Glassie insists that the neighbourly politics of the community differ from those of the larger, ideologically driven world, but the stories themselves — formulaic tales of tribal victory and defeat — suggest

otherwise. In this crucial respect, he fails to tell us who these people are and how they think. This analytical sterility has meant that the book is almost never referred to, quoted — or read — by historians.

Passing the Time in Ballymenone is a triumph of description, not of analysis. As such it belongs, not to any academic field or debate, but to what might be termed “border literature”, a rich territory shared by Eugene McCabe, Patrick Kavanaugh, Shane Connaughton, Colm Toibin and Seamus Heaney. Glassie brings this world of bogs, farmyards and back lanes, of obstructed and enclosed lives, to the page as well as any of these writers.

The book's re-publication is to be welcomed as it deserves a new audience. Recent events in Northern Ireland may supply one, but, like the poems of Kavanaugh and Heaney, it is not a work of purely local interest. It is a superb and ultimately — for those who read it all the way through — a moving piece of writing. I was surprised at how absorbing I found it the second time around. However, while I would recommend it on this basis, I probably would not put it on a reading list or suggest it as a book to be read “about” Irish or Ulster culture or history. It is not a book to refer to for its arguments, bibliography or data: in fact, Glassie repudiates any such ambition. Nor is it a model to be emulated. It is a fine and valuable book, but not a very useful one.

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From the Land: Two Hundred Years of Dene Clothing. By Judy Thompson. (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1994, p. lx + 129, photographs, maps, preface, introduction, notes, bibliography, ISBN 0-660-14025-x.)

Having always been fascinated by Native American dress and adornment, I jumped at the opportunity to review Judy Thompson's book *From the Land: Two Hundred Years of Dene Clothing*. In this book, Thompson, who is Curator of Western Subarctic Ethnology at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, describes the clothing and personal adornment of the Gwich'in, Sahtu T'ine, (Hareskin, Bearlake and Mountain people), Slavey, Dogrib, Yellowknife and Chipewyan. These are Northern Athapaskan speaking people who live in the Mackenzie River watershed and have a long tradition of wearing and producing fine, ornately decorated clothing.