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Book Review: Carin Berkowitz and Bernard Lightman (eds): Science Museums in Transition: Cultures of Display in Nineteenth-Century Britain and America

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Visiting Britain in 2014 on the first state visit by an Irish President, Michael D. Higgins argued that ‘affecting a kind of amnesia is of no value’ and that, instead, it was necessary to ‘show humility about the past’ and say sorry.

That of course sounds reasonable, but the victim narrative that so many Irish-Americans adopt as their identity is, to put it mildly, highly tendentious. See, for example, the treatment of the Easter Rising of 1916. The emphasis is on the executions of resistance figures after the suppression of the Rising, and not on the fact that Britain was then at war, that the rebels had links with the Germans, and that those they killed included Irishmen in what was in part a case of Irish-on-Irish violence. Indeed, if the term ‘rebels’ is replaced by ‘terrorists’, then a different impression is created.

More generally, the relationship between public discussion and scholarly discussion is frequently remote. Thus, in the nineteenth century, the focus, as in these works, is on the Famine not on the survival of the Union. The extent of Irish participation in the Empire tends to be downplayed in public memorialization. In practice, there was a disproportionately large number of Irishmen in the army. Moreover, many Irish Catholics volunteered to fight for George V in the First World War. Little effort has been put into war memorials for them.

These three works are handsomely produced and well illustrated. *Ultimate Witnesses* is impressive, and more generally valuable, for its treatment of changes in burial practices and memorialization during the nineteenth century. *Subjects Lacking Words?* shows that those who suffered in the Famine were able to describe their grief. *Twinsome Minds* is interesting on the commemoration of 1916 and is worth reading, although far from a complete account. Hopefully, this excellent format can be expanded to include other and different readings of the Union.

Jeremy Black

Science Museums in Transition: Cultures of Display in Nineteenth-Century Britain and America. Edited by Carin Berkowitz and Bernard Lightman. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017. Pp. xiii + 375. \$45.00.

Until about a century ago, the meaning of both ‘science’ and ‘museum’ was not fixed. Institutional frameworks were not that rigidly drawn yet and, consequently, professionals and amateurs alike were involved in the business of collecting artefacts and curiosities and presenting them to the public. *Science Museums in Transition*, edited by Carin Berkowitz and Bernard Lightman, contains essays documenting the change from private, often chaotic collections to the monumental public displays that many museums are today. The authors in this book are interested in ‘the ways in which nationalism, politics, and social structures were embodied in attempts to display natural knowledge’ (p. 2).

This the book by and large achieves. The authors of the ten essays in this interesting collection provide as many differing answers to the book’s central questions. Berkowitz and Lightman have organized the volume logically in five thematic sections on, for instance, expertise, the ‘scientist-showman’ and the museum as a national institution. Museums, one gets the impression, were indeed quite different things from what they are

now: as Caroline Cornish writes in her remarkable essay on the exhibitions held at Kew's Museum of Economic Botany, we should see the museum as 'a shifting and mutable entity' (p. 189), with fewer institutional constraints and limitations than we are used to today. *Science Museums in Transition* convincingly shows how those shifting entities over time become more fixed and regulated.

The first two essays in this collection analyse the interconnections between museums and other forms of knowledge: 'miscellaneity' not only describes the nature of many exhibitions, it also refers to museums' relations to, for instance, literature. The second section, on expertise, shows well the contingency of nineteenth-century developments: in particular Iwan Rhys Morus's essay on the National Repository interrogates important epistemological questions. He is followed by two contributions that study the scientist as a showman, an individual who uses science to strengthen his public persona. These essays, by Jeremy Brooker and Lukas Rieppel, are central to the volume's interest in the blurry boundaries of nineteenth-century museums. In the fourth section, on the national museum, the issue of labelling takes centre stage. Here, too, the decision to open the book with discussions on miscellaneity pays off: institutions like the Smithsonian in Washington DC tried to impose order on the often sprawling, disconnected collections with labels. The volume concludes with two essays that trace the connections between museums, research and science education. Here, the issue of presenting to a specific public, touched upon in earlier contributions, is foregrounded once more.

One would, however, be hard-pressed to find a sustained interrogation of the role science, museums and exhibitions played in the context of imperialism and slavery. Some authors do hint at these larger realities, although most seem content to treat nationalism and nineteenth-century politics as phenomena related only to a narrowly territorialized UK and USA. Writing on P. T. Barnum's American Museum, Katherine Pandora for example notes that its exhibitions 'raised inescapable questions about the lability of species ... Conversations about Barnum's "living curiosities" were also conversations about race' (p. 61). Rather than closing the discussion, such a remark should be an opening, an invitation. Especially if, as *Science Museums in Transition* persuasively argues, museums were actors in a wider network of educational and research institutions, and presenting information in the context of a museum automatically gives that information legitimacy and credibility, the foundations and assumptions upon which their knowledge production were based deserve more attention.

John Tresch, then, is right to point out in his afterword to this collection that 'the public status of science was a crucial resource for the building of a nation and an empire' (p. 272). Museums were sites of power, where knowledge of the colonized world was reproduced, consolidated and shown to citizens in the imperial centre. How London or New York presented the natural or human world in their colonies to the centre was, then, a significant practice worthy of more attention than it is given here. Similarly, it would have been worthwhile if the contributors to the collection had thought more about how the centre remained the 'unmarked category' (p. 274), the window through which one looks at the world and which purports to be neutral. This desire for objectivity stands in stark contrast to the act of labelling, as Pandora briefly acknowledges in the passage quoted above. Maybe, then, *Science Museums in Transition* can be understood as

referring not only to the transitions the museums themselves went through in the nineteenth century, but also the transitions they initiated through their work.

J. D. van Amelsvoort

Surreal Beckett: Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, and Surrealism. By Alan Warren Friedman. New York and London: Routledge, 2018. Pp. xviii + 248. £105.00.

Alan Warren Friedman has done for Beckett's relationship with, and debt to, Joyce and Surrealism what the late Nicholas Zurbrugg, in his magisterial study *Beckett and Proust* (1987), did for Beckett's relationship with, and debt to, Marcel Proust. This book, while being very readable, is encyclopaedic, drawing on the vast corpus of Beckett criticism and Friedman's extensive knowledge of the works of James Joyce and of the Surrealist poets and artists whom Beckett frequented in Paris in the interwar years. The text is accompanied by numerous illustrations of Surrealist works in black and white, which no doubt explains the high price of the book.

It argues that the early influences on Beckett of Joyce and the Surrealists went ever deeper 'as he made his own unique way forward, transforming them, particularly the Surrealist ones, into resources that he drew upon his entire career' (p. i). Friedman's demonstration that Beckett's path to becoming a writer 'was a circuitous and complex one, geographically, intellectually, psychologically, aesthetically' (p. xi) carries great conviction. Like Zurbrugg's, his is one of those rare studies of which it can truly be said that it is definitive and unlikely ever to be surpassed.

It has been known for a long time, as Friedman acknowledges, that before finding his own voice in *Murphy* (1938), Beckett admired Joyce, and in his early attempts at writing imitated him somewhat slavishly. What is less well known is that Beckett did not initially envisage a career as a writer. He was awarded the top first of his year at Trinity and was expected to become an academic: 'My father died when I was a boy', he wrote of a fictional alter ego, 'otherwise I might have been a professor, he had set his heart on it' (*From an Abandoned Work*, 1958). It was when he went to Paris as lector under Trinity's exchange arrangement with the École Normale Supérieure that everything changed. At the end of his contract with the École he returned to Trinity as assistant lecturer in French. He resigned after four terms because, as he put it, 'I couldn't bear teaching others what I did not know myself.'

His two years as lector in Paris (1928–30) were therefore life-changing. He arrived a Dublin intellectual, he left as a close associate of James Joyce and a fairly close associate of the Surrealists. No wonder he did not wish ever again to live in his native land, which had by then become the theocratic Irish Free State.

The great virtue of Friedman's book is that it does not overstate the influence on Beckett of Joyce and the Surrealists. While there is evidence of Surrealist imagery in his work, he cannot be classified as a Surrealist any more than he can be called a Joycean. He was his own man, which explains why he is now seen as the equal of Joyce and as a far greater figure than any of the Surrealists, with the one possible exception of Paul Éluard. Beckett admired and translated several of Éluard's poems, and his versions stand