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Another Green World  
A Review of *A Brilliant Void: A Selection of Classic Irish Science Fiction* (2019)

Reviewed by Richard Howard

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## ANOTHER GREEN WORLD

Review by Richard Howard

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**Fennell, Jack, editor. *A Brilliant Void: A Selection of Classic Irish Science Fiction*. Tramp Press, 2018.**

Jack Fennell extends the study of Irish Science Fiction yet further with the publication of this anthology. For a subgenre so little studied, the stories presented in *A Brilliant Void* (2018) contain an impressive sweep of the genre's concerns: parallel universes, alien encounters, colonisation of the moon, suspended animation, lost worlds, longevity treatment, and time travel, all of which are represented here within this edited collection. In Fennell's 2014 book *Irish Science Fiction*, he cites Gary Westfahl, who writes "literary genres appear in history for one reason: someone declares that a genre exists and persuades writers, publishers, readers and critics that she is correct," and in the case of Irish Science Fiction, there is a sense that the subgenre is being assembled from fragmented elements that have been lodged in other genre spaces (5). For instance, in Fennell's *Irish Science Fiction*, Flann O'Brien is framed as an Irish Science Fiction author, making the often overlooked *Dalkey Archive* the author's central work, which it may not have been considered to be previously. This process of reframing has tremendous potential in affording a unique perspective on Irish literature, with works by diverse authors from different time periods being studied through the same sub-generic lens.

In *A Brilliant Void*, Fennell does an admirable job of retrieving and relabelling, in the process furthering the notion that Irish Science Fiction indeed exists, and is worth studying in more depth. In the introduction, Fennell notes that many of the tales, particularly those written by women, had been mislabelled as Gothic (xiii). These tales swim in the same genre pool as the early Science Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe, treading the tide between rigorous descriptions of scientific procedure and the intrusion of the irrational. As Fennell notes, this makes it possible to classify many of the tales just as easily as Weird Fiction, rather than Science Fiction (xiv).

For Fennell, Ireland's ambivalent relationship with science and modernity is central to understanding Irish Science Fiction, the genre lying on the threshold between pre-modern and modern worldviews. There are without doubt countless debates to be had about that assertion from within both Irish Studies and Science Fiction Studies, but it is striking that the issue of science and the supernatural arises regularly across the stories in the collection, as well as a scepticism of scientific progress that seems to prefigure the concerns of the high modernist Science Fiction of the early twentieth century that Adam Roberts discusses in his *History of Science Fiction* (156-172).

Fitz-James O'Brien's "The Diamond Lens" (1858) connects scientific positivism to the prurient interest of the scopophilic drive, its narrative climax a note of caution for would-be scientists. Francis Power Cobbe's satirical "The Age of Science" (1877) goes further with the depiction of a future in which science directly hinders progress by substituting itself for "Religion, Conscience, and for Honour" (68). This is a quite literally 'post-feminist' world in which reading is prohibited for women because it is deemed "unsuitable for their sex" (59-60). One chilling passage reminiscent of the viciousness of Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" parodies scientific detachment by reporting the slow drowning of a dog watched by an eminent physiologist for its "scientific interest" (61-62).

Margaret Wolfe Hungerford's tale of suspended animation "The Professor's Experiment" (1895) is more ambivalent. Science may well have the potential to improve human existence, but there is a price to pay for certain individuals. The origin of the Professor's formula for suspended animation in a Peruvian anaesthetic "known to the Indians of South America years ago", points to the primitive accumulation that drives scientific research (108-109). The Professor's attempt to secure a condemned prisoner from Kilmainham jail highlights exploitation in the pursuit of knowledge, while also anticipating the plot from Mike McCormack's *Notes from a Coma*, a 2005 Irish Science Fiction novel that explores suspended animation as a form of punishment. The "spectral" air that the Professor gives off speaks to his attempt to transcend the border between the living and the dead, as well as the persistence of "pre-modern" modes of thought (119). The Professor prays when he believes his experiment has killed a woman, and the narrator notes that "he appealed to the Creator occasionally, as some moderns still do to Jove" (119). But for all his status as a quintessential reckless 'mad scientist,' it is the Professor who succumbs to its excesses, becoming so bodily exhausted with perfecting his formula that "all the science in Europe could not have kept him alive for another twenty-four hours" (122). The tale ends with the Professor's acquaintance Wyndham realising that the formula is irretrievable, having been memorised by the Professor rather than written down.

In Dorothy McCardle's "The Sorcerer" (1922), pre-modern traditions themselves come under the gaze of science, the Experimenter performing empirical experiments on the local use of charms and cures in order to explain their effectiveness. As Fennell's introductory note hints, the location of the Experimenter in the space of the Anglo-Irish Big House suggests a nation floundering for a position between tradition and modernity in a post-independence context in which both functioned to some extent as metonyms for Ireland and Britain in the national imaginary.

The latter are two of the eight stories by women collected in the book, Fennell noting the historical dismissal and "outright contempt" of material of this nature written by women (xii). Fennell has provided a valuable service in unearthing these stories, and many of them speak to us across the years, allowing us to connect the Irish Science Fiction of the past to more contemporary authors such as Louise O'Neill or Sarah Maria Griffin. The novella excerpt from Amelia Garland Mears's "Mercia the Astronomer Royal" (1895) imagines a globally connected, technologically advanced Earth that has largely achieved gender equality, but has failed to supersede Empire and its concomitant chauvinism. The Emperor's attempt to frame Mercia in response to being spurned is undone by the presence of a recording device, affording us perhaps a connection to that other classic of Irish speculative fiction, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897).

The labelling of Jane Barlow's "The Advance Sheet" (1895) as a Gothic tale is unsurprising. The story blends psychology, philosophy, and scientific speculation to create an atmosphere that threatens to develop into full-blown cosmic horror, but is in fact the set-up for a grisly take on the Gothic trope of the double.

Of the two stories by Clotilde Greaves in the collection, "Lady Clanbevan's Baby" (1915) is the most recognisably science fictional, with its cars driven by radioactivity, its formula for everlasting life, and its denouement that presents a hilarious consequence of its central novum of longevity treatment.

Fennell's introduction notes that "Ireland is not perceived as a place where sci-fi 'happens,'" and it is telling that across the collection, the majority of the stories are set in other locales (xiv). Of course, there are exceptions: Tarlach Ó hUí's "The Chronotron" (1946), translated from Irish by Fennell for the first time, is a particularly genocidal take on the grandfather paradox tale, in which a Professor attempts to erase the Great Famine from Irish history by travelling back in time and dropping an atomic bomb on London. The tale is told in a humorous register, with a satirical wink to prevailing nationalist attitudes to the former coloniser. When the narrator begs the Professor to think of the "millions of innocent English" before going through with his plan, the Professor smiles and declares "Innocent English...there's no such thing!" (246).

*A Brilliant Void* is aimed at a popular rather than academic audience, signified in Fennell's use of the term 'Sci-Fi,' rather than the 'SF' that has become the norm among Science Fiction academics. As a result, there is a disappointing lack of scholarly references across the collection, which makes it difficult for those tracing Fennell's steps, as well as for those of us who wish to set Irish Science Fiction readings in a teaching context. However, securing a popular audience for work like this is a worthwhile endeavour and can only further the appeal of Irish Science Fiction as an object of study. After all, the act of persuading the reader that a genre exists is an important component in genre formation. With this in mind, *A Brilliant Void* is a significant step forward.

## WORKS CITED

Roberts, Adam. *The History of Science Fiction*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

## BIONOTE

**Richard Howard** is an early career researcher. His research interests include Irish Science Fiction, Weird Fiction, critical theory, science and technology studies, and postcolonial theory. He also writes fiction and has had work published in *Weird Tales*, *Electric Velocipede* and most recently in Jeff and Ann VanderMeer's *The Bestiary* anthology. *Space for Peace*, his study of the science fiction of Bob Shaw and James White will be published by Liverpool University Press in 2021.