

Review of Hijmans, Alex. *Splancanna ó Shaol Eile*, Cois Life, Dublin, 2013, ISBN 978-1-907 494-37-6

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There is a common perception that Irish language writing is confined to the island of Ireland. Thankfully, there are exceptions. Pádraig Ó Siadhail is a prose writer based in Nova Scotia in Canada; Tomás Mac Síomóin is a poet and writer living in Catalonia in Spain; and the poet Derry O’Sullivan has lived in Paris for many years. Alex Hijmans, however, is particularly exceptional in that he is a Dutch national who writes in the Irish language from his base in Salvador, Brazil where he works as an international correspondent.

Hijmans moved to Galway in the West of Ireland at the age of twenty. There, he learned Irish and went on to spend twelve years working in various Irish language media. Cois Life have previously published three works by him: a collection of short stories entitled *Gonta* (2012), a novel, *Aiséirí* (2011), and *Favela* (2009), an account of life in a poor suburb of Brazil. In many respects, this latest work, *Splancanna ó Shaol Eile* (‘Glimpses of Another Life’) has much in common with *Favela* as it deals with the *fiordhaoine* – real people – of Brazil, rather than a sanitized, Tourist-Board approved version of life there.

Splancanna ó Shaol Eile contains 100 photographs and accompanying short essays by Hijmans. These images, he tells us, are deliberately not postcard perfect and were taken during a six-year period between late 2006 and late 2012. The essays were written in response to the pictures, rather than the other way around. The intention here is to suggest the integrity of the work, although one imagines that at least some of these photographs were premeditated in order to portray a specific aspect of the country. This sense of self-consciousness works both ways, such as when the indigenous couple in Olivença who insist on putting on their traditional dress for the photograph, rather than the jeans and t-shirts that they usually wear. The political aspect of this costume change is not lost on Hijmans. There is an echo here of Synge’s experience on the Aran Islands, where the Islanders wish to be photographed in their shop-bought ‘Sunday Best’, rather than their homespun garments that were of interest to the photographer. The

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‘authenticity’ of such photographs is marred by the desire of the subjects to be portrayed in a specific way.

The reader’s attention is drawn to the diversity within Brazil, such as disparate religious beliefs and regional identities, and the various indigenous peoples in this vast country. Some of the most memorable photographs are of Afro-Brazilian rites and rituals, such the *Tambor* parade through the streets of São Luís where the children dress up as the Three Kings, and the rebirth or initiation ceremony of the *Candomblé*. The goddess of the sea, Iemanjá, is offered roses on the second of February, as well as jewels and lavender water, to petition for her protection.

In a primary school established by the indigenous tribe, Tupinambá-de-Olivença, the young pupils are trying to learn the language spoken by previous generations. This prompts Hijmans to draw a (justified) parallel with the Gaelscoil movement in Ireland. This is not the only occasion where Hijmans contextualizes Brazilian life for his Irish readership: the importance of the aforementioned Iemanjá day is compared to the Pattern Festival on Inis Mór. A country town in Rio Grande do Norte is about the same size as Tullamore, Co. Offaly, though the climate is dramatically different. The Irish references act as a nudge and a wink to the reader who will instantly recognize them.

The most interesting pieces have a political dimension: a picture of a favela in São Paulo which was being cleared to make way for a new stadium before the 2014 World Cup. In the lead up to the World Cup last year, local people anticipated earning extra income by selling traditional food around the stadia. FIFA rules, however, dictate that street sellers are not permitted within a two-kilometre radius of the venues. The forthcoming Olympic Games in 2016 will bring further crowds of tourists, though it is uncertain what the poorer communities will gain from the ‘legacy’ of the Games.

Occasionally, the images reveal the darker aspects of Brazil’s colonial past, such as the uneasy disclosure that the impressive church of Saint Francis of Paola was built by slaves, or that the *pelourinho* was used as a post where slaves were publicly flogged. In a book that aims to portray a faithful impression of Brazil, these grim details, by necessity, had to be included.

The lighter topics covered in this book, such as travel and food, provide a good balance to the more somber musings. The various subjects flow together in a natural progression and overall unity that indicates a keen editorial eye.

The language used throughout this book is informal and accessible, and the Portuguese is incorporated in a natural manner with native terms being explained through Irish. For the reader who is not entirely

comfortable reading in Irish, the attractive photographs are beneficial and the short essays are inviting, rather than intimidating. There is certainly an appetite for such travel literature in the Irish language; the Irish language reader, like any reader, is excited by the prospect of ‘visiting’ another country, albeit virtually. Hijmans, then, is broadening the horizon of Irish language writing, like Frank Reidy in *Ó Chósta go Cósta* (Cló Iar-Chonnacht, 2009), Cathal Ó Searcaigh, *Seal i Neipeal* (Cló Iar-Chonnacht, 2005) and Gabriel Rosenstock, *Ólann mo Mhiúil as an nGainséis* (Cló Iar-Chonnacht, 2003).

The reproduction of attractive coloured photographs is of high quality and is deserving of praise. It is not an oversized coffee table book, however but a regular sized book in landscape format.

The intention is to provide us with *splancanna* or ‘glimpses’ of Brazil, but particularly of an alternative Brazil, a more ‘authentic’ impression than what we commonly see through tourism campaigns. Hijmans is successful in this aim and his essays explain the context of each photograph. The difficulty inherent in ‘glimpses’, of course, is that, occasionally, the reader wants more information than is provided in the book. Be that as it may, this book is a wonderful introduction to life in Brazil through the eyes of a European who has made his home there. *Splancanna ó Shaol Éile* is a welcome addition to Irish language writing and we look forward to future work from Alex Hijmans.