

**Speech by R.F. Foster at the launch of ‘Melancholy Witness’ by Seán Hillen  
26th April 2013, Front Hall, National Library of Ireland Kildare St. Dublin.**

Despite what Tanya [Kiang] has said, I’m not launching this book out of the goodness of my heart- but because my feelings for Sean Hillen’s work are both passionate and covetous.

I’ve called him a National Treasure in the past –indeed it’s quoted on the cover of *Melancholy Witness*- and I think he is one. He has contributed remarkably to what might be called, if it’s not too pretentious, the national discourse of this country. His images have been adopted not only by historians like me, and literary critics such as Luke Gibbons, and the Welsh acid-rock band the Super Furry Animals, but also by Government departments including the Board of Works- a Hillenesque irony in itself.

Many of the most familiar images come from his immortal series *Irelantis*: those visionary conglomerative collages, manic, antic, sardonic: where glaciers rear up at the end of Dublin shopping streets, meteorites are gathered from Connemara bogs, Thor Heyerdahl’s raft *Kon-Tiki* approaches Joyce’s tower, classical ruins materialize in Irish landscapes before astonished mannequins in sweaters (from John Hinde postcards), and the Queen of Heaven is beamed down by the solstice to the central chamber of Newgrange.

More recently, we’ve seen his astonishing series ‘WHAT’S WRONG?’ with *The Consolations of Genius*, where great Irish writers appear in bemused conjunction with scantily-clad screen goddesses (though never quite conjoining with them, in the manner of great Irish writers)- against an ominous background of explosions and demolitions.

I could talk at length about these and other works, but I want to look now at the book we’re launching tonight. I’m very proud to do so. The work in it comes before the series I’ve described.

Think of a very young Newry man, almost a boy (he’s nineteen when these pictures begin), with a camera. It’s the early 1980s, a grim time. He observes Orange marches, he goes to the funeral of the hunger striker Patsy O’Hara, he goes up to Belfast for a march down Royal Avenue on the Twelfth: he observes and records the rituals of the two tribes of his homeland.

And, perhaps most movingly, he takes a ravishing set of photographs from a long day spent at a mass rock near the town- one of those most poignant sites of memory in a country full of them. These pictures aren’t political in a narrow sense, except perhaps for the painful series showing the effects of plastic bullets- one of which was used to make a political point in a newspaper.

The pictures –often brilliantly constructed in terms of how people are placed in frame, sometimes technically jagged for one reason or another, but all the more effective for that- these pictures are more than this. They are social documentation, of course, but they are also a statement about the spirit of place, and the unendurable sadness of living in uncertainty, masked by certitude. They are about conflict and a poverty that is spiritual as well as actual.

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I was recently looking at *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, the extraordinary book of text and photographs produced in the late 1930s by James Agee and Walker Evans, when they recorded the lives of poor sharecroppers in dustbowl America, and Sean’s pictures have some of the same anger and beauty.

They are also visionary, in that Hillen way with which we would later become familiar. Note the eye for bizarre conjunctions, such as the altar set up under the awning of a barred-up Dunnes supermarket. Note the cinematic sequence of a stone-thrower and his Land-Rover antagonist.

Note the cunning and suggestive use of the written word, bizarre assertive legends advertising the unlikely amid the unthinkable. And –if you want to look forward to the artist he will become- note the eye for the banal and bizarre, the Hillman Minx or Ford Cortina placed at an angle to the universe, while in the background an explosion-cloud unrolls ominously behind a half-demolished building.

This is the Hillen vision- a world where people nod at apparent certainties, and go about their business, while apocalypse trembles on the edge of their eyeballs.

I own two original Hillens (and covet more). One of them is from a series that followed some years later, and preceded *Irelantis*. It’s called ‘*Londonewry, a Mythical Town*’. In it, one of those mass-rock scenes appears- people grouped on the grass around a holy place, a place that may well have been holy long before Christianity. But it is juxtaposed into an unreal landscape involving (*inter alia*) the towers of Battersea Power Station, and the advent of a flying object which looks part military helicopter, part UFO.

It’s a disturbing, eerie and beautiful work, which I look at every morning (it hangs by the kitchen table).

After studying *Melancholy Witness* I can see –partly- where it comes from: though the critic of Sean’s work who can see where *everything* comes from has not, I think, yet been born.

His unsettling, hyper-real, sad and somehow compassionate “take” on life, reflected in his powerful and original art, is already the subject of distinguished critical essays and brilliant commentary, by people like Mic Moroney and Fintan O’Toole, as well as student theses.

This book is a vital component in the development of that work. That is one reason why it must be bought tonight: it will be a collector’s item.

The other reasons are, simply, because it is history, and it is beautiful.

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