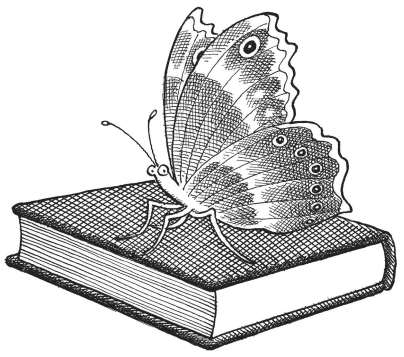

Irish Literature

Richard Rankin Russell, editor
PETER FALLON
Poet, publisher, editor and translator
268pp. Irish Academic Press. €22.95.
978 0 7165 3159 3

Cultural and country pursuits make an intriguing framework to Peter Fallon's life. As a publisher and founder of the Gallery Press, he is in the thick of the poetry business, and, as a sheep farmer in *Co*. Meath, he is in the thick of glaur, cattle feed and wicked weather. He is also a poet and translator, as the subtitle of this collection of essays and poems, edited by Richard Rankin Russell, reminds us. The tributes to Fallon assembled here are a testament to the integrity and versatility of this "leading publisher of Irish poetry".

The Gallery Press, established in Dublin in 1970 when Fallon was just nineteen, and still going strong, was transferred to Loughcrew in *Co*. Meath in 1988. Since then, Fallon has addressed all his ventures with charm and aplomb. He has found a way of negotiating a passage between the local and the cosmopolitan. A number of Russell's contributors draw attention to Fallon's own declaration of rural attachment, quoting his lines – from the poem "Winter Work" – about finding it "exquisite" to stand knee-deep in "cowshit and horseshit and sheepshit". True, but at the same time an urbane detachment informs his approach.

One of Russell's objectives is to place emphasis on Fallon's poetry, and to this end he has enlisted a good variety of academics and critical commentators. The best of the essays included here are, on the whole, those which come with fewest endnotes (an exception is the illuminating piece by Maurice Harmon, "Peter Fallon's Profane Rituals"). Sometimes the endnotes can be disorientating, as when we encounter an allusion to a paper on Seamus Heaney "and the Politics of Parturition". The essay, by Moynagh Sullivan, is called "The Treachery of Wetness". Heaney himself is in sparkling form, with his introduction to the Gallery Press's fortieth-anniversary reading at the Abbey Theatre in 2010. (In acknowledgement of the great loss, this book is dedicated to Seamus Heaney and Dennis O'Driscoll, both of whom died last year.) Derek Mahon is here, with an exemplary appreciation, succinct and evocative. Shaun O'Connell, recalling a visit to Fallon at Loughcrew, provides a lively antidote to a few of the more pedestrian appraisals. And the final, scintillating section of the book brings together a group of Gallery Press poets – Ciaran Carson, Bernard O'Donoghue, Medbh McGuckian, Seamus Heaney, Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill and others – all brimful of inspiration and celebration.

PATRICIA CRAIG

Grace Kwami, "Hair Plaiting", *c.*1960; from *Kumasi Realism, 1951–2007: An African modernism* by Atta Kwami (488pp. Hurst. £30. 978 1 84904 087 7)

Travel

Christopher Howse
THE TRAIN IN SPAIN
Ten great journeys through the interior
256pp. Bloomsbury. £16.99.
978 1 4411 9805 1

Spain has the world's second-largest high-speed rail network after China, but Christopher Howse, in his offbeat book *The Train in Spain,* prefers slow trains, and particularly those that meander along single tracks in obscure parts of the country. A very observant traveller, he shuns the fast trains, known as AVEs, except on one occasion (Cuenca to Valencia), and regrets it as he travelled "too fast to see a bird or a goat".

His narrative, describing ten railway journeys, is, as Howse explains, "about Spain, not about trains". He shows a profound knowledge of the country and its language. His main interest is ecclesiastical art and architecture; there are some very evocative and meticulous descriptions of lesser-known cathedrals such as Tudela and Tortosa, as well as erudite digressions into the origin of local specialities such as *horchata de chufa* (a refreshing summer drink made from nut sedge tubers), and we even get a recipe for acorn pie.

Madrid is avoided and Barcelona only gets a brief mention; instead Howse heads for out-of-the-way places such as Canfranc in the Aragon Valley on the border with France, whose enormous abandoned railway station (790 feet wide) was known as the "Titanic of the Pyrenees" and through which the Third Reich exported tonnes of gold to Spain including tooth fillings and jewellery stolen from murdered Jews.

The contemplative Howse is more interested in buildings than people, which can seem strange and impersonal as, in his previous book *A Pilgrim in Spain* (2011), he praised trains as the best way to travel because they are a "moving public space and most of the passengers are Spanish, getting in and out, nervous, eating, sharing food, and talking, talking, talking". Howse comments on a few people he observes (for example, a Romanian immigrant expelled from a train for not paying his fare), or refers to (the Duchess of Alba is amusingly described as having "dash and beauty" in her youth and "the expression of an inscrutably defiant monkey" in her old age), but engages with hardly anyone. Spain's economic crisis is also very much in the background.

The book, in deft historical asides, is laced with quotes from other British Hispanophiles, especially Richard Ford whose *Handbook for Spain* (1845) is still the most perceptive account of the country. Howse's book deserves a place on the shelf alongside it.

WILLIAM CHISLETT

Food

Nicolaas Mink
SALMON
A global history
128pp. Reaktion. £9.99.
976 1 78023 183 9

At the dwindling number of dedicated fish shops and at many fish counters, the chances are that Atlantic salmon will be the most prominent fish on display. Look more closely at the tattered fins of the whole fish and the width and fattiness of the strips of connective tissue that separate the muscle blocks, and it will be clear that the fish on offer has grown to maturity not in cool sub-arctic seas but confined with large numbers of its fellows in a cage floating close inshore, above a seabed blackened by its wastes. To nutritionists, farmed salmon, provided it is free of the toxic contaminants used to control parasites and diseases, is a source of first-class protein and unsaturated fats. Its appeal lies principally in its cheapness relative to the depleted stocks of traditional species, such as cod, turbot and halibut. In his entertaining history of this fish as food, Nicolaas Mink reminds us that this controversial expression of our love affair with eating salmon is but the latest chapter in a story that long predates recorded history.

Totemic to the native peoples of the North Pacific Rim and a symbol of wisdom to the Celtic tribes of North -west Europe, the annual runs of salmon seemed a gift from the gods, whose continuing grace could be guaranteed only by honouring the fish itself through ritual and in not wasting it. An important part of how this was achieved lay in the development of techniques for preserving the highly labile flesh by drying, salting, smoking and even controlled fermentation. Developed originally for purely utilitarian reasons and enabling a geographically limited trade, the best of these processed products persist today in gourmet foods such as smoked salmon and gravlax. Although trade in iced wild Atlantic salmon was important in Europe from the eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century, the first world market was in canned salmon from the Pacific North-west, where the various species of *Oncorhynchus* occur in numbers so great that they dominate the pelagic ecosystem of the North Pacific. This trade, which began in the nineteenth century, is still important today although suffering from competition from canned tuna and the wide availability of fresh farmed salmon. The popularity of the latter and the health and environmental concerns of some consumers have stimulated an increasing demand for fresh wild Pacific salmon. Mink's book is a worthy addition to Reakton Books' Edible Series. Be sure to try the recipes at the end.

RICHARD SHELTON

Drama

Lucy Kerbel
100 GREAT PLAYS FOR WOMEN
240pp. Nick Hern. Paperback, £10.99.
978 1 84842 185 1

Why are there more men on stage than women? The latest statistics put it at roughly two men to each woman, and that's before counting lines and stage time. Theatre-makers have been asking how we can change things. One route is gender-blind casting (like Fiona Shaw's *Richard II*, 1995, and Phyllida Lloyd's all-female *Julius Caesar*, 2012), but the director Lucy Kerbel wondered if she could simply find more good, interesting roles for women – and this essential book is the result of her rigorous research.

Kerbel skips Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* in favour of *The Assemblywomen*, about desperate housewives who furtively cultivate tans, grow their armpit hair, don fake beards and their husbands' clothes to take over parliament.

Alan Ball's *Five Women Wearing the Same Dress,* about disgruntled bridesmaids, also sounds hilarious. She finds room for Mike Bartlett's dark *Contractions*, Kia Corthron's explosive *Breath, Boom*, Rona Munro's devastating *Iron*, Dodie Smith's sparkling *Dear Octopus* and Abi Morgan's kaleidoscopic *Splendour*, alongside feminist classics such as Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* and Amanda Whittington's *Be My Baby*.

Kerbel could almost, she writes, have filled the book with plays by just four women (Bryony Lavery, Churchill, Sarah Daniels and April de Angelis) but her decision to include only one play by each playwright gives *100 Great Plays for Women* impressive scope and sweep – and gives the male playwrights a chance. Her second rule – that the plays must have all- or mostly-female casts – unfortunately excludes some plays with wonderful roles for women. And perhaps the roles are not as ethnically diverse as they could be. But the range she does cover is exhilarating. With luck, theatres will take note and playwrights will be inspired, but for women this is also a book about all the curious, various things we can be – the roles include sex tourists, murderesses, schoolgirls, septuagenarian hookers, cannibal concubines, a crazed couturier, a maddening ghost, a cross-dressing explorer and a sadistic alcoholic diva.

In her vivid, concise essays on each play, from cast breakdown to analysis of style, structure and staging challenges, Kerbel includes some sobering history. Charlotte Jones wrote *Airswimming* in 1997 because she was frustrated by the limited choice of available roles, but this was hardly a new situation. In 1908, 400 angry actresses formed the Actresses' Franchise League, campaigning for more and better roles, as well as for the vote – they believed that poor representation on stage was inextricably linked to women's disempowerment. Let's hope that Kerbel's book means that we aren't having a similar debate in another hundred years.

SAMANTHA ELLIS

Social Studies

Kimberly Theidon
INTIMATE ENEMIES
Violence and reconciliation in Peru
480pp. University of Pennsylvania Press. $75.
978 0 8122 4450 2

As late as 1991, the Shining Path Maoist guerrilla movement had seemed to threaten the survival of the elected Peruvian government. The insurgency gained control of rural areas "through a combination of persuasion and coercion", writes the anthropologist Kimberly Theidon in *Intimate Enemies*, a sombre study of war's aftermath. In 1995, when she arrived in remote Andean villages coping with the return of refugees and the defeated guerrillas, Shining Path had largely collapsed owing to the capture of its leaders and the rise of peasant militias that were sometimes trained and equipped by the army.

The scars of war were everywhere. Anger and desire for vengeance consume Theidon's interviewees, most of them Quechua-speaking farm folk. One, referring to the demobilized and sometimes repentant guerrillas, says she "could never accept reconciliation with those people. Nothing can replace those years of pain". Others mourn the deaths of relatives and the loss of community identity caused by the army's forced removal of residents into easily defended camps. Few have any illusions about Shining Path's broken idealism; a government truth commission cited by Theidon found that of the war's 69,280 fatalities, 54 per cent were caused by Shining Path. If her narrative can feel a bit long-winded, it is because she rejects tidy over-simplified accounts of her theme.

Some of Theidon's insights are not particularly new, such as that Shining Path gained early popularity by combating banditry in rural areas where the state was all but non-existent. But she uncovers some striking trends, including that of former guerrillas flocking to evangelical Protestant churches. Mistrust and resentment still infect Peruvian society, yet there has been little violent score-settling in recent years. Still, given the psychic scars Kimberly Theidon describes, her extremely valuable and moving account shows that the end of war does not necessarily bring anything resembling peace.

ROGER ATWOOD

Film

Ramona Fotiade
À BOUT DE SOUFFLE
128pp. I. B. Tauris. Paperback, £12.99.
978 1 78076 509 9

Shot on locations around Paris in four weeks on light-sensitive film, often with hand-held cameras, no script, only three professional actors and nearly no supporting crew, *À Bout de souffle* is Jean-Luc Godard's classic riposte to the luxurious splendour of the Hollywood studio film. It often feels like a film attempting to answer every intellectual question, and trying, single-handedly, to change the nature of cinema. On its release, it immediately became the subject of contrasting opinions and it has provoked fierce debate ever since. Filmmakers, critics and audiences have discussed and engaged with the film continually, which in many ways was the point of the exercise. Godard's peers in the *nouvelle vague* praised it (François Truffaut compared it to *Citizen Kane*); others were more cautious. Ramona Fotiade surveys the varying responses while demonstrating that the film is designed to ensure the audience's active engagement. Her account of the afterlife of the film – from initial criticism to the ill-advised remake in 1983 – shows clearly its huge impact and unique, revolutionary quality.

As Godard argued, the point was "to take a conventional story, and remake, but differently, everything the cinema had done". Fotiade grounds Godard's work in several contexts. She considers his film criticism in some detail to emphasize the development of a serious and engaged manifesto for the film, accounting for a desire for conscious innovation rather than accidental amateurish effect. The work on Godard's theories of montage is excellent. Fotiade outlines the production process and explains how some decisions that seem important were simply down to budget (but, additionally, how this lack of budget was made by necessity into a virtue in the evolution of the film's immediate and documentary-style aesthetic). Her work on Godard's early short movies is important, and locates his later approaches in some of these short and rare pieces. *À Bout de souffle* can seem in many ways an improvisation, a flash of iconoclastic, speculative, almost guerrilla filmmaking. Fotiade's account gives Godard intellectual and aesthetic control over what he was doing.

JEROME DE GROOT

American Literature

John Williams
BUTCHER'S CROSSING
336pp. Vintage Books. Paperback, £8.99.
978 0 099 58967 9

Two quotes are laid out just after the title page of *Butcher's Crossing*: the first, from Ralph Waldo Emerson presents Nature as a benign – if judgemental – magistrate; the second, from Herman Melville, asks why, if Nature is the universal panacea described by poets, his teamster froze to death on the prairie. The settlement of Butcher's Crossing sits on this same prairie. The novel which takes it as its name is set in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, when the American buffalo was already a near-vanished species. It was a time when young men from the East travelled West for adventure, and to be made sound in mind and body. One such is William Andrews, a drop-out from Harvard, who arrives in Butcher's Crossing much like the narrator of Owen Wister's *The Virginian* arrives in Medicine Bow. But butchery rather than doctoring is John Williams's subject. In the course of the novel the attentive reader will learn how to make bullets, shoot and skin a buffalo, and survive a winter in the Rockies.

Williams's detailed descriptions hold up against Wayne Gard's encyclopedic chronicle of slaughter, *The Great Buffalo Hunt* (1959), and that book's very first sentence provides a key to Williams's novel: "Like the hardy New England whalers of an earlier day, the hunters of the buffaloes were mighty men". His book is a cross between *The Virginian* and *Moby-Dick*, his America a place where Manifest Destiny is driven by the damned. The mighty man William Andrews encounters, the novel's Captain Ahab, is a buffalo hunter named Miller. Knowing the prairie to be played out, he has ambitions to annihilate a vast herd he once glimpsed in a remote Colorado valley. Eager for an educational experience Harvard cannot provide, Andrews agrees to fund the expedition, and pay its crew, which is supplemented by a cook and a skinner.

The novel is hardly yet begun, so that the reader is keenly aware that the expedition is unlikely to return home undamaged. Sure enough Nature provides a variety of anathemas; including heat, with attendant thirst, and cold, with the ever-present possibility of freezing to death. Despite the predictability of disaster, William's intense semi-skimmed prose – so different from Melville's full-fat variety – has the same power to mesmerize. Equally powerful is Miller's hubris, which brings heavenly fire and ice on the party. But in the end it is not these retributions that undo him. What finally tips him over the edge is the combination of bad luck and economics.

Good luck has arrived a little late for John Williams (who died in 1994). A recent reissue of his novel *Stoner*, from 1965, featured prominently among those chosen by *TLS* critics as their book of 2013. *Butcher's Crossing* (first published in 1960), is likely to become a favourite of 2014.

CLIVE SINCLAIR

Biography

Simon Thompson
A LONG WALK WITH LORD CONWAY
An exploration of the Alps and an English adventurer
320pp. Signal. £16.99.
978 1 908493 80 1

The first British visitors to the Alps in the 1860s wore plus-fours and used primitive skis made of hickory planks on which they wobbled downhill, taking many croppers. In the course of his feverishly eventful life, Martin Conway corresponded with the English mountaineers Edward Whymper and Albert Frederick Mummery, who had gone out of their way to scale virgin ice cliffs in gung-ho style. In their romantic vision, Alpine Europe was a place where men (rarely women) could rediscover the "spiritual values" which had been repressed by the grime of city life. Men like Whymper were among "the great celebrities of the Victorian era", Simon Thompson writes; Conway yearned to be like them.

Born in provincial Rochester in 1856, Conway was a socially ambitious if somewhat roguish individual. An amateur mountaineer, he undertook treks through Latin America, the Himalayas and Spitsbergen, claiming the world altitude record in 1892. He became one of the founders of the Imperial War Museum, moreover, and counted Winston Churchill among his friends. In Conway's somewhat forgotten book *The Alps from End to End*, published in 1895, mountaineering emerges as a maverick, risk-taking sport as well as a sort of morality. Fired up with the pioneer spirit, Conway felt like his heroes Mummery and Whymper when, in the summer of 1894, he set out on a "ruggedly all-male" expedition to walk from the Col de Tende in Italy to the summit of the Ankogel in Austria. He became the first man to complete the 1,000-mile route.

Thompson follows in Conway's footsteps across the Alps, quoting from his notebooks of "Ruskinian prose" as he goes, and recreating the expedition that set out from Turin. Gurkhas were taken along as weight-carrying manservants (like many of his background, Conway was a convinced imperialist). Thompson, an energetic tramper, tries whenever possible to stay in the same refuges that Conway passed through. Overlooking the scenic Susa Valley, the Rifugio Daniele Arlaud serves espressos so potent that they would have "jolted Frankenstein into life", says Thompson. It was near this refuge that Horace Walpole's adored Prince Charles spaniel, Tory, was eaten alive by a wolf in 1739, he notes, before moving on to Switzerland.

Shortly before he died in 1937, Conway was created First Baron Conway of Allington. He had worked hard to gain his peerage, networking with the likes of the Liberal politician Lord Rosebery and socially useful eminences at the Royal Geographical Society in London. In the spirit of the times, he was a snob as well as a eugenicist who believed in the superiority of occidental human "types". He wrote a total of thirty books on subjects ranging from climbing to skiing to crowd psychology. *A Long Walk with Lord Conway*, an absorbing amalgam of travel, biography and history, will help to rehabilitate one of the more "colourful" late Victorian personalities.

IAN THOMSON