

THE “IRISH THING”

CRITICAL RESPONSE: MADELEINE O’CONNOR

Who gets to speak for a country - and what happens when its writers refuse?

The “Irish Thing” traces a fascinating and often uneasy relationship between Irish writers and the nation they are expected to represent. Beginning with Ireland’s ancient bardic tradition and travelling through the Irish Literary Revival, the Troubles and contemporary culture, the work explores how the writer became poet, historian, critic and reluctant national spokesperson all at once.

At the centre of this critical response are two strikingly different responses to this inheritance: Seamus Heaney’s careful, conflicted poetry and the provocative, bilingual performances of Belfast rap group Kneecap. One hesitates; the other makes a spectacle of refusing to behave. Yet both confront the same impossible demand: to somehow explain “Irishness”. Moving between poetry, politics, history, language and popular culture, The “Irish Thing” asks whether refusing to define a nation might itself become a powerful way of defining it.