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Mentioning the War: Essays and Reviews 1999–2011 by Kevin Higgins

Kevin Doyle

9 December 2012

Kevin Higgins is a poet from Galway and a long-standing contributor to the independent left publication Red Banner Magazine. A former member of the Militant Tendency (now the Socialist Party), he has played no small part in making the world of writing a more accessible and pleasant place to be in this country – not least for those who don't normally find themselves welcome in the hallowed, middle class halls of Literativille.

His approach is no accident. Higgins knows that good writing can be found anywhere and is not the preserve of the privileged or the best educated. But importantly too in terms of writing (and poetry in particular) he is committed to high standards. 'Political poetry' with little poetry in it, as well as doggerel in general, are two of his *bête noires*.

His poetry should be treasured on the left (but it isn't of course) in particular because we have so few poets who cherish the streets we wander along. Dave Lordan or Diarmuid O'

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Dalaigh in Cork might appear to fit that role too, but their concerns in the main are with the world outside the left. Higgins in contrast often looks in at where we are and there is much that is valuable and sobering in what he sees.

His poetry I recommend highly but his essays, collected here by Salmon Poetry, are much more of a mixed bag. One problem to be pointed out at the outset is that a fair number of his reviews (mostly attributed to *The Galway Advertiser*) are simply too short to be of much value. I am all for brevity but with many of these, interesting points are raised only to be left hanging in their entirety at conclusion of said review. A case in point being that of Lorna Siggins' *Once Upon A Time In The West* which is strangely equivocal. As I said, it would be interesting to know more about Kevin Higgins' thoughts about the significant yet tragically defeated protest centred on the Corrib gas fields.

When Kevin does have space to elaborate, he is invariably interesting and informative. He is good at explaining and is always interesting and clear when writing about literature and poetry. This is a real asset and rarer than you might imagine. Not surprisingly his way with words is one of his strongest suits. Generally he is even handed (see his review of Michael D's last collection of poems) but he can be ruthless too, as with his hilarious review of Ruairí Quinn's *Straight Left – A Journey Into Politics*. Such an opus was bound to provoke Kevin Higgins' ire and it sure does. Among many fitting observations about the Labour Party's ultimate clown is the comment that Quinn "as a writer is dull beyond belief".

Since this collection has been reviewed elsewhere by general left commentators I will focus for the remainder on what anarchists and libertarian socialists might find interesting. On the positive side Kevin is one of the few socialists who is prepared to face up to the authoritarianism (some call it the Leninist or Stalinist mindset) that is, even now, a significant feature of the serious left, both here and abroad. This is big plus for me.

The disaster that befell us all when the idea of socialism became inextricably linked to censorship, the Gulags, show trials, self-criticism sessions and so on and so forth (stand up Lenin, Trotsky and the others), is too easily glossed over by many within the Marxist left. Some don't see the huge problem even now or imagine it to be some past aberration or some plot by the CIA to denigrate our ultimate goal. Not Kevin Higgins, I feel. He knows, as many of us do to our cost (I came across it myself only recently in the Anti-Household Tax Campaign) that the toxic world of authoritarian left politics is still very real and debilitating.

On the negative side, Kevin is just a bit too prone to lampooning the left, in contexts that are often not clear. Some of this, I am guessing, is scar tissue from his Militant Tendency days, but often the swipes are too easy and undiscerning. They are to be found here and there in this collection but an example is his observation about a speaker at a left meeting who was 'earnest but dead-in-the-mouth'.

Of course this could well be true (and who hasn't been at such meetings?) but the problem is that there's loads of mundanity in trying to organise even the smallest of protests. Our resources are almost pitiful when compared against those ranged against us, and I just wonder, in places, where the empathy is for the countless individuals who have been the foot-soldiers of important (and un-newsworthy) protests – against deportations, against the household tax, for choice around pregnancy termination?

Anarchists will find much of interest in this collection but there will be dissatisfaction too. Like many from within the Marxist tradition, Kevin Higgins shows much insight into the problems of the authoritarian left. But more searching scrutiny is not developed here.