

A Literary and Historical Treasure by DM Denton
Review of 'Martyrs and Traitors', a novel by Marina Julia Neary

"My lifelong quest is to dig up lost treasures, literary and historical, and bring into light those figures that have remained in the shadow for whatever reason ...this novel is my hymn for all prematurely extinguished stars."

This quote from Marina Julia Neary's bio, although placed at the end of the novel, is a perfect place to begin my thoughts on it. 'Martyrs and Traitors' is a complex and character driven historical fiction that goes below the textbook surface of historic events and the people involved in them, and highlights the clash of cultures and motives, foolishness and courage that so often underlie them. Its theatrical, dialogue-rich style employs a multitude of players in the lead up to the Irish Easter Rebellion of 1916, its dramatic and bloody realization, and the subsequent building of the new Irish state; weaving their stories into that of the Quaker Ulsterman and atypical revolutionary, Bulmer Hobson. Too often a mere footnote in history, Hobson was somewhat of an anti-hero, awkward in himself yet (often unrealistically) determined in his beliefs, at times his own worst enemy, brought up to avoid violence but at one point earning the British government's label of "The most dangerous man in Ireland".

Ms. Neary cleverly and unsentimentally develops Hobson's relationships, especially with the women who come and go in his life: including his mother, sister, various lovers, wife, and finally his daughter. Although the novel focuses on Hobson, Ms. Neary leaves us in no doubt that she meant to bring these women to the forefront of the social and political story of Ireland as well as Hobson's, making each of them significant characters in their own right and offering, for me, some of the most compelling reading in the novel.

Ms. Neary nimbly makes you think and dream, believe and question, smile and cower, rise and fall right along with the company of 'Martyrs and Traitors'. As if directing a movie or play, and with literary agility, she manages a large cast that is initially (and purposefully) disconnected but slowly through integrated historical detail, absorbing conversations, layered characterizations, and plot dexterity, tells a hypnotizing story.

This was a challenging novel to read, for its length and intersecting plots and their many accomplices, but very satisfying as it engaged me more and more with each chapter. In the end it proved entertaining and energizing, rewarding my intellect and stirring my sense of the powerful ambiguity and subjectivity of life and its causes. A highly recommended read!