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## Looking Down the Barrel of History. Review of The Dead Eight, by Carlo Gébler

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Looking down the barrel of history

*The Dead Eight*, By Carlo Gébler, New Island, 404pp. EUR 11.99

LIVING IN HISTORY, as the late Garret FitzGerald pictured it in this newspaper in 1998, is a bit like finding oneself in a shuttered mansion to which one has been brought blindfold, and trying to imagine what it might look like from the outside. In defiance of this idea of history as a constricting challenge to the imagination, Irish novelists have for some time been treating Irish historical figures and episodes as opportunities to implicitly assert the natural independence of the storyteller's art.

The writer, like any individual, is inescapably within his own historical moment. This can hardly be denied. Yet in the strike for freedom that is literature, the writer must run contrariwise to FitzGerald's classic image (in which he in any case includes an important nod towards the imperative to imagine) and head instead for Henry James's more famous version of the house of fiction, where there are a million open windows, the view from each of which is inconsequential without the conscious artfulness of the watcher.

The James house is where the novelist properly lives. And, in the James way, the novelist must know that the style of his watching is primary, because everything is already out there for us all to see in our own artless way anyhow.

Over the course of his reports from his particular watch, any novelist is entitled to be judged in some way on his consistency. As best represented still perhaps by his version of the Bridget Cleary story in *The Cure* (1994), Carlo Gébler's historical novels have some fine traits: a commitment to the uncovering of wrongs done within and by history to certain individuals; an emotive investment in the interior lives he creates; a detailed attention to realist observation by way of achieving a sense of historical period. These are all carried through to some degree into his new adventure in fictionalised history with *The Dead Eight*, based on the controversial case of the hanging of Harry Gleeson for the shooting dead of Moll McCarthy at New Inn in Co Tipperary in 1940.

Though presented in a straight series of sometimes quick-fire chapters, Gébler's version of the story is split in two in a way that proves problematic. Given the structure of the story, the blurb provides a spoiler in that the hinge dramatic event, the discovery of the slain Moll McCarthy (whose Foxy Moll designation, along with the import of the title, is way overplayed in the novel) by the Gleeson character, is advertised in advance yet doesn't occur on the page until three-quarters of the way through. It can therefore seem that time is just being filled up to that late point.

Through the conjectural narrator, Moll's grandson Hector, Gébler does a decent job of filling in a difficult background for Moll by focusing on her mutually sexually wayward mother and grandmother, during which he displays the admirable refusal of moral condescension evident in all his fiction. In his afterword, Gébler explains that he has invented everything up to the discovery of the body. This need not necessarily mean anything for the reader just getting on with the story, but the problem is that with the narrative move into the framing of Gleeson by the nicely realised bad cop, Sgt Daly, the earlier material on Moll's ancestry quickly begins to seem inconsequential.

And thereby a symptomatic stylistic dilemma is starkly presented. In the part of the story that depends exclusively on invention, there seems insufficient historical actualisation; when the story relies more on the facts of the case, complete with incorporated newspaper clippings, a distinct authorial stylishness seems absent.

Sources may have to be acknowledged for propriety's sake, but even if it has one foot solidly trapped in time, the art of fiction within the historical novel must stand up for itself. Whatever the demands of editors, it may be time to throw off the ties of authors' notes and explanatory afterwords in this kind of novel. Those who like to compare and contrast and obsess about divergence from fact can be told they've got the wrong shelf and to make sure to file under fiction. Those who see fiction as a window on the real world and simply want to know more can surely be left to go Google.