

Learning to see the signs

UMBERTO Eco became justly famous for a cunning, oblique, subtle display of his intellect. That took the form of the medieval detective novel, *The Name of the Rose*. *Faith in Fakes* enables Eco to show off all his coruscating talents in a more open, deliberate but equally scintillating style.

Faith in Fakes is an anthology of Eco's journalism for Italian magazines, in which he explores some themes, assails some opponents, makes some pin-money, and revels in the power of his mind. One essay commences with the query: "If they met aboard some unidentified flying object near Montailou, would Darth Vader, Jacques Fournier and Parsifal speak the same language?" The pedantic answer is, no; the wider point to make is that all Eco's writing displays the same quirkiness, the same propensity to upset our habits and perspectives, the same combination of erudition and fluency.

In fact, for a disciplined semi-ologist, Eco reveals a distinctly quixotic and whimsical turn of phrase and cast of mind. He is disciplined in the sense of exact-

disciplined in the sense of exacting, rather than narrowing. His common sense might even give semiotics a good name, for he used that approach to evaluate lucidly our "language, communication, organisation of the system of signs that we use to describe the world and to tell it to each other".

FAITH IN FAKES. By Umberto Eco. Trans. by William Weaver. Secker & Warburg. 307pp. \$39.95.

ASCENDANCY TO OBLIVION: The Story of the Anglo-Irish. By Michael McConville. Quartet. 269pp. \$48.95.

Reviewer:

MARK THOMAS.

The compass is deliberately drawn as extensively as possible; "those signs are not only words and images — they can also be forms of social behaviour, political acts, artificial landscapes". Eco's signs include: American wax-works, Italian terrorists, *Casablanca*, problems in arranging "the exterior reproductive apparatus" when wearing jeans, the decline of reason, Aquinas and Superman.

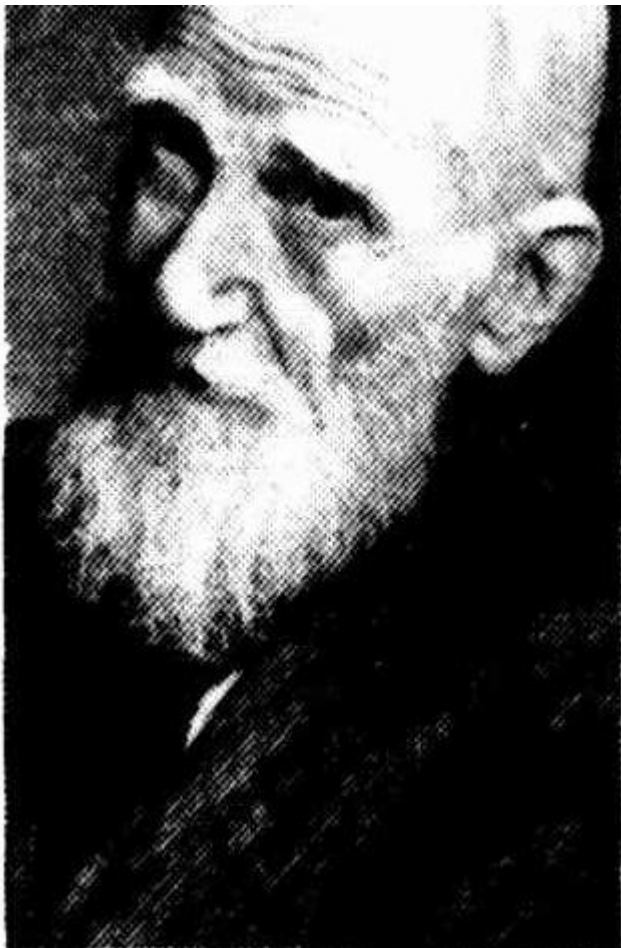
Eco's thinking is both quick and deep. He neatly avoids the French semiologists' temptation to become entrapped in the text, digging themselves deeper and deeper into more and more esoteric layers of

more and more esoteric layers of "meaning". He produces not a coherent theory but a work of *bricolage*. That French word for how a bower-bird builds its nest is pretentious, but more accurate than anything we have in English. Eco does spend a lot of time just teasing out ideas and toying with images, but, even at this reduced pace, he has more to say and says it better than most of us ever do.

Eco tells the reader that he believes "that an intellectual should use newspapers the way private diaries and personal letters were

once used". He may be right, but only a few intellectuals would have enough guts and application to expose themselves in the papers, and fewer papers would be prepared to countenance intellectual ramblings in their pages. Eco's Italian journals and English publishers deserve some credit here. They have produced a book which resembles nothing so much as the way Eco characterises the Middle Ages: "it was an immense work of





George Bernard Shaw: product of the Ascendancy.

bricolage, balanced among hope, nostalgia and despair”.

The Anglo-Irish ascendancy would have made a splendidly evocative subject for Eco's signs. The ascendancy is wasted on Michael McConville.

A student of signs would have known what to make of the small world which the Ascendancy created in its own image, with its own Church of Ireland, its Royal Irish Academy, its Royal Dublin

Irish Academy, its Royal Dublin Society, its Georgian architecture, its beer and its biscuits. He could have assessed the extraordinary, double flowering of the Ascendancy culture, which bequeathed to us Swift, Burke, Goldsmith, Sheridan, Berkeley, Wilde, Shaw, Yeats and Beckett.

Terence de Vere White started that sort of appraisal. Michael McConville has gone backwards, in deciding to present the Ascendancy through a bland chronology of wars and a trite set of potted biographies. The latter are epitomised by his treatment of James II as "a very autocratic Catholic, lacking in tact". Ireland would have delighted Eco, who could have talked about houses and horses, plays and poems, summed up what a people meant and how they sought to be regarded by the world. Unlike McConville, Eco would also have had enough wit simply to commend to us the works of the Anglo-Irish themselves, which constitute one of the oddest commemorations of minority culture and testaments to *imperialism in Western history*.