

The Literature of
IRELAND
Culture and Criticism



TERENCE BROWN

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THE LITERATURE OF IRELAND

One of Ireland's foremost literary and cultural historians, Terence Brown's command of the intellectual and cultural currents running through the Irish literary canon is second to none, and he has been enormously influential in shaping the field of Irish studies. These essays reflect the key themes of Brown's distinguished career, most crucially his critical engagement with the post-colonial model of Irish cultural and literary history currently dominant in Irish Studies. With essays on major figures such as Yeats, MacNeice, Joyce and Beckett, as well as contemporary authors including Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon, Michael Longley, Paul Muldoon and Brian Friel, this volume is a major contribution to scholarship, directing scholars and students to new approaches to twentieth-century Irish cultural and literary history.

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THE LITERATURE OF IRELAND: CRITICISM AND CULTURE

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For Michael and Carolyn

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Introduction

In the second volume of *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature* (2006), edited by Margaret Kelleher and Philip O'Leary, the critic Colin Graham wrote as follows of a study of the poet Louis MacNeice that I published in Dublin in the mid-1970s:

By the time of Terence Brown's *Louis MacNeice: Sceptical Vision* in 1975, the sceptical-liberal version of MacNeice which Brown is interested in is entwined with MacNeice's often sardonic but affectionate relationship with Ireland. In reading MacNeice as something of a stranger in his own land, and as a man of personal and individualist integrity at a time of ideological extremity (in the 1930s in Britain), Brown claims a role for literary heritage in the maintenance of a neutral or, at least, a 'sceptical' vision when regarding the conflict in the North. Because it is one of the first substantial pieces of literary criticism in Ireland to undertake a rewriting of 'Northern' literature of the period immediately preceding the Troubles, Brown's book is absolutely crucial to the development of literary historiography from the 1970s on. Through its quiet polemic about the role of the writer (which effectively argues – by exemplary reading – that literature will always be political yet rise above dogma because it is literature), Brown's book marks out some of the key concepts by which both contemporary and past Irish writers are now understood.¹

It was gratifying, undoubtedly, to have a work of one's own so favourably mentioned in as authoritative a scholarly production as a Cambridge University Press *History*, but I must admit that my pleasure on having that book identified as 'crucial' to Irish literary historiography since the 1970s was mingled with considerable surprise. For the book in question was not written, as I remember it, with the kind of concepts in mind that Graham discerns as governing its 'quiet polemic', and in as much as they can be derived from what I began to write over four decades ago, that must be reckoned as an example of the way contexts can generate literary and critical meanings of which an author may have been unaware.

The book to which Graham so generously refers began as a doctoral thesis presented to Trinity College, Dublin, in 1970. The thesis and the volume publication certainly addressed the issue of the poet's political attitudes in 1930s Britain, but only, I thought then, as an aspect of a more fundamental religious and philosophic scepticism that I argued was a defining force in MacNeice's poetic imagination. The thesis and the resulting book were, I thought, attempts to answer the question whether scepticism could be a creative energy in poetry, notwithstanding a general sense that poetry involves commitment and beliefs. The issue of poetry and belief was in the 1960s a matter of some considerable critical discussion in relation to such poets as W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot and the fact that I was myself undergoing a crisis of religious faith in my postgraduate years added personal urgency to the work I was doing on MacNeice (agnostic son of a devout Christian clergyman father). Even though the research and writing were done as the Troubles broke out and intensified as I transformed thesis into publishable book, my focus remained on the MacNeice whose work spoke to the religious and philosophic efficacy for poetry (and, by extension, for living itself) of self-conscious, creative disbelief. I did not think of my work as a contribution to Irish literary history, or to what later came to be known as Irish Studies. Indeed, the introductory biographical chapter of *Sceptical Vision* (which explored among other things the poet's formative Northern Irish background) was only added at a late stage in the writing at the suggestion of a London publisher who then declined to publish on commercial grounds; MacNeice in the 1970s was little regarded in England.

I labour these points, in what I fear must seem a self-regarding fashion, because I think they suggest significant things about the way the institution of criticism and literary history has developed in Ireland since the 1970s, things that bear on the essays (all written since 1990) I have chosen to reprint (occasionally in slightly amended form) in this volume.

Sceptical Vision got written because the topic was suggested to me in 1967 by the poet-academic Brendan Kennelly and because I became absorbed in studying Louis MacNeice by the questions about poetry and belief referred to above. The fact that the kind of sensibility I helped to define as characteristically expressed in MacNeice's poetry could later help to place him as an enabling, exemplary presence in Irish literary history was an unintended consequence of my work, and one made likely by the Troubles. Which is to say that although I did not in 1975 primarily think of my book as a work of Irish literary criticism about a Northern poet (an essay published later in the same year tried to do that), but a work of

criticism about a poet, the times allowed it to be seen in the former way, the way Colin Graham in fact chooses to do.

Reading Graham's remarks about my book and thinking about why they surprised me, helpfully reminded me that criticism can be an existential encounter with ways of seeing the world and being in it. This does not necessarily mean that such encounters cannot be seen as contributions to the construction of a field or an institution like a literary history or, indeed, an Irish Studies bibliography. I have accordingly included in this book some essays which engage with Irish writings in this way: I adduce as examples the essay on Kavanagh as religious poet (which is concerned with how belief functions as an energising force in his poetry as scepticism did in MacNeice's) and the essay on John Hewitt and memory (a reflection on how memory is a compositional principle in his verse).

One could, of course, see how essays of this type could be reckoned to contribute to general discourses of one kind or another (on Irish poetry and religious faith, for example, or Irish writing and memory); in this collection, however, they stand as occasions when the critic seeks to engage with the phenomenon of poetic consciousness considered in its own right. Most of the other essays in the book can more readily be seen as contributions of one kind or another to Irish literary history, to cultural history or to the burgeoning contemporary field of Irish Studies. I hope, nonetheless, that all of them remain true to the critical imperative of engaging with literature as literature even as various historical and critical contexts, within which literary creativity can be situated, suggest themselves as analytically fruitful.

It may be in order here to address in terms of personal memoir how this commitment to literary phenomenology was formed in my case and has remained, I hope, vital, in a body of work which has been marked over three decades by its involvement with history (an involvement that is obvious in this collection). And in allowing the impulse towards memoir some free rein in the academic arena, I hope I may be indulged as I further consider how and why that commitment was joined in my case with a commitment to historical critique in a period when the latter involved matters of considerable contention.

The education I received at Magee University College, Derry, and subsequently at Trinity College, Dublin (the course bore the impressive title 'Moderatorship in English Language and Literature'), was markedly historicist in tenor. It ranged from the literature of Anglo-Saxon England to Ginsberg's *Howl*. Reading lists for specific elements of the course intimidated by their inclusive extent, and the overall structure enforced a sense

of historical development. One did not get to read the major novels of the English tradition until one had read quite deeply in Elizabethan and Jacobean prose. Joyce and other modern Irish writers (taught in the third year of the four-year course) were preceded by a year-long first-year course in nineteenth-century Anglo-Irish literature. It would have been difficult not to have understood that 'English' in the University of Dublin was a historical discipline, in the sense that it was predicated on the concept of a literary history slowly accumulating, with its major and minor works forming a rich continuum, well worth studying. The first-year course in Anglo-Irish literature in my own experience was especially significant in this respect. I read the works (or at least a proportion of them) on that extensive reading list, from Maria Edgeworth to Somerville and Ross, from Thomas Moore to Samuel Ferguson and early Yeats, at the window of a room in Magee College, overlooking the river Foyle in Derry (Magee prepared Honours candidates for the first two years of the Trinity College courses). For a young man for the first time gaining a sense of an Irish life lived beyond Belfast and the unionist community of its north-Down environs, the fact that the college's library contained a whole roomful of Anglo-Irish authors was an advancement in learning indeed, and one bearing a distinctive historical message. Ireland had a literature in the English language and I was holding it in my hands, for many of the works I was able to borrow from the library and take to my room were first editions or at least handsome nineteenth-century productions, three-decker novels or presentation copies. In some instances I had to blow away the dust of the decades. History was real.

From the vantage point of 2009, what is striking is how much of what was then termed Anglo-Irish literature Trinity English included. Equally striking is how little its inclusion was seen to raise problems about what its presence in a course called English Language and Literature actually meant (a course on the history of the English language barely mentioned Hiberno-English). Its presence in the course probably owed something to the insistence of the Marxist critic in the department, the Northern Irishman J. K. Walton (Shakespearean textual critic and admirer of Arnold Kettle) and to the foresightedness of the Head of Department, Professor Philip Edwards (Renaissance scholar), who had been to the fore in the construction of the course I was fortunate to take. As an Englishman in Ireland, he had had the vision to see that Anglo-Irish literature must be a key element in an undergraduate education in an English department in Ireland and not just a money-spinner at graduate level as it had tended to be before his arrival in 1960. When he left in 1966, he had in fact been

planning with the writer Frank O'Connor to establish a course in Irish Studies in Trinity. The project had foundered for lack of financial support and Edwards's departure and O'Connor's untimely death in 1968 meant that the college did not manage to make their vision of such a course actual until 2007, almost forty years later.²

In our current jargon, 1960s English at Trinity was under-theorised (literary theory in as much as it was mentioned at all meant a book by the American critics Austin Warren and René Wellek). So if the inclusion of Anglo-Irish literature and of a quite comprehensive course in American literature in the fourth year were not deemed in any way problematic alongside the major and minor works of the English literary canon, this was probably because, with one or two exceptions, most of the faculty were literary historians of settled historicist outlook for whom methodological issues did not seem at all pressing. One young lecturer, the late Geoffrey Thurley, did bring a Leavisite intensity to the explication of poetry, especially to that of T. S. Eliot, and the poet Brendan Kennelly bore witness in vivid lectures to the imaginative power of romantic art, but in the main, the department seemed basically untroubled by the kinds of theoretical issues that were beginning to disturb English departments elsewhere in the English-speaking world.

So my intellectual formation (to dignify what was often an undergraduate anxiety to second-guess the examiners) through the study of English Language and Literature certainly predisposed me to value historical perspectives in the life of the mind. In my case this sense of things was joined by a developing specific awareness that my own country possessed a valid English-language literary tradition (the presence of an Irish language tradition was not highlighted at any point, although the Irish Studies course proposed by Edwards would have been bilingual in content, in the way the current course is). This predisposition and national inflection has remained central to my academic preoccupations, as I hope is evident from this collection of essays.

However, there was another aspect of my intellectual experience in the 1960s that had a significant effect on my academic development and on such sensibility as I possess. The crisis of religious faith, referred to above, that I underwent in my undergraduate and graduate years was crucially involved with questions about text and history. These were questions that in many ways anticipated the hermeneutic disputes that invaded 'English' in the 1970s and 1980s as a consequence of the general 'theoretical turn' in the discipline, but which, for a Christian believer as I was in my early twenties, were of inescapable existential import. Let me explain.

As the elder surviving son of evangelical Christian missionaries, who had both spent the grim years of the Second World War in Japanese-occupied inland China, I was raised to consider the Holy Bible as the inerrant, infallible Word of God, Whose scriptural communication with his Christian children should be made the basis of daily reading, reflection, interpretation and prayer. The truths of salvation were to be found within its pages, open directly to the honestly searching spirit, without the mediation of any church, priest, minister or pastor. The act of reading was accordingly an awesome yet intimately familial one when the text was sacred. The ethos of a Northern Irish School where evangelical convictions were a pervasive presence had further confirmed family values. However, the 1960s in the English-speaking world were a decade when even the most cloistered Christian would have been aware that dependence on Scripture as an infallible source of revelation was fraught with intellectual difficulties. The immense popularity of Bishop John Robinson's little book of 1963, *Honest to God* (over a million copies sold), had put the cat among the pigeons in the English-speaking Protestant world, as it made very public the kind of historicised readings of Scripture and especially of the Gospels that had been the basis of theological disputation in the schools of theology for more than a hundred years. For a few years speculative theology became quite fashionable, with paperbacks rolling off the presses on such lively subjects as the death of God, the secular city and religionless Christianity³ (that oxymoron drawing on the Lutheran martyr to Nazism, Dietrich Bonhoeffer), but for a reader like myself life issues were at stake. Could one continue to commit oneself to the Christian life when the historical sources of the faith were so open to historical question, with Form Criticism the dominant force in the academy that inferred a radical scepticism about the Gospels' 'historicity'? As I read for my examinations and thesis, I also immersed myself in the contemporary debate about Christian origins and the possibility of religious revelation in texts so evidently constructions of believing communities with their life situations and needs. Looking back on one book I read at that time, I note that I underlined the following bleak sentence in an essay that sought to contract Form Criticism's findings: 'In other words, the Gospels are *both* the material rehandled *and* the evidence for the rehandling',⁴ introducing me to the kind of hermeneutic circle that later in literary theory texts would similarly induce the vertiginous sense of an *aporia*.

The writings of the German-American Paul Tillich were among the most influential among the works of popular theology of the period that

broadcast in such works as *The Courage to Be* the need to reinterpret the Gospel message as a call to feel 'ultimate concern' and to be aware that life possessed 'depth', in a way that seemed to rob Scripture of any propositional content. Yet it was the writings and ideas of Rudolf Bultmann, which called for the demythologising of the New Testament world-view (with its concepts of Virgin Birth, Incarnation, substitutionary atonement, resurrection, assumption into Heaven and promise of a second coming; the substance of the historic Christian creeds, indeed), that I found the most disturbing and challenging. His radical doubts about the historicity of the New Testament texts, and his urging that the essential *kerygma* (declaration, preaching) of the early church must be encountered by the reader of these mysterious works when their mythological way of speaking had been fully admitted, resonated with my own attempts as a student of literature to understand how myth functioned in some of the key Modernist works (three decades later as I struggled with Yeats's *A Vision* as a key work of the poet's maturity, my earlier theological readings about image, myth and religious symbol proved their critical use³). More significantly, they gave me to feel that religio-literary meanings, although products of historical circumstances and expressed in terms of particular world-views, could transcend the conditions of their production (a formulation that I know sounds hopelessly inadequate when one thinks, for example, of the Gospel of St John). That sense has remained with me in my literary-historical work, though the belief that the New Testament documents are some kind of special divine revelation has not (my problem was basic enough: once one accepted the dubiety of Christian sources and that what the Gospels contained was the 'preaching' of the early church couched in terms of mythic consciousness, what reason could be given for believing that Christianity was a revealed religion with a special claim upon us to believe its implicit truth claims about reality, whatever one makes of the ethic it advocates).

Given these kinds of concerns (and they had significant personal implications in terms of family traditions and friendships), it should not surprise that two books of literary criticism that deeply impressed me at that period of my life were J. Hillis Miller's *The Disappearance of God: Five Victorian Writers* (1963) and *Poets of Reality* (1965). The former explored how nineteenth-century writers had reacted to their own crises of faith in the era of metaphysical reductionism, while the latter examined how key twentieth-century English-language writers (predominately poets) had sought to deal with the impoverishment of imagination and spirit that modernity represented for them. These were subjects embraced by

the critic-son of a distinguished American Baptist in a way that spoke directly to my own questioning preoccupations. That they did so through a compelling synthesis of New Critical attention to verbal detail with the Geneva School's belief that literature opened a door to another's consciousness (Miller was at that time heavily influenced by the work of George Poulet) had direct impact on my own attempt to encounter the world of MacNeice's poetry and other writings as a phenomenon of consciousness.

In his subsequent career, of course, Miller was to heed the voice of the 'deconstructive angel', becoming in the 1970s one of the most ingenious and influential of those who sponsored a critical turn in the North American academy that made of Derridean insight a critical *praxis*. Developments in Ireland, I reckon, disallowed the kind of disengagement from history that deconstruction could encourage when insight and subversive critique became the basis of pedagogy and, sometimes, glib learned response. For the years 1968 to 1975 were those in which the Irish question (suppurating since the 1920s) reopened as a violently inflamed wound. History was not dusty books in a library, however fascinating, nor a matter of mere textuality to be experienced as a site of *aporia*, but dreadful occurrences in streets one knew. Events such as Bloody Sunday and Bloody Friday in 1972, the Dublin and Monaghan Bombings in 1974 during the Ulster Workers' Strike of that year, were shaking historic foundations. Minerva's owl was certainly on twilit wing. Who knew what night could bring? Crises of faith became crises of politics.

As a product of the British educational system, of the post-war welfare state, recipient of a university scholarship courtesy of the Butler Education Act (which was made applicable to British subjects in Northern Ireland in 1947), I had naturally greeted the election of Harold Wilson's Labour Government in the United Kingdom in 1964 with enthusiasm (Wilson promised social reform in 'the white heat of the technological revolution'). Labour traditions with roots in English Methodism and in Welsh non-conformism had historically given to the British Left a certain evangelical aura (the preacher and the prophet could share a platform). Labour seemed the natural home for those raised to believe the Gospel had a social dimension. And in my own field of English Studies, the writings of Richard Hoggart and of the Welsh Marxist Raymond Williams offered a rich cultural analysis of British society and its intellectual and social inheritance that supplied ideological grist to the mill of political hope. So it seemed possible in 1969 to 1970 (with James Callaghan as Home Secretary) that disaster could be averted in Northern Ireland through

genuine reform. That it was in fact a Tory Government under Ted Heath that negotiated with the Irish Government the Sunningdale Agreement of 1973 (which would largely be replicated by the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 a generation later) was surprising. That it was Wilson's second government that allowed it to fail in the summer of 1974 was not only surprising but utterly shocking. I still remember how unnerved I was by the querulous impotence of the Northern Ireland Secretary of State, Merlyn Rees, in face of the Ulster Workers' Council direct-action assault on the agreement, and how astonished I was by Wilson's ill-judged speech on the crisis, in which he had seemed to damn the whole northern Protestant community as a bunch of 'spongers' on the British state. It was hard not to sense that he was governed by a colonial mindset with Northern Ireland as troublesome a colony as the Rhodesia that had given him so much grief during his several premierships.

As it happened, in the month leading up to that momentous period in May 1974 I had been giving a lot of thought to the question of the province's status in the United Kingdom and in the island of Ireland. With support from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, I was researching and writing a book on the course of poetry in the north of Ireland since the seventeenth century (the pioneering work and conversation of the socialist poet of Methodist background, John Hewitt, had encouraged me in my efforts and Raymond Williams's book *The Country and the City* was an example of what such a survey could achieve). By grim chance I had been reading in the National Library in Dublin poems about the Nazi blitz on Belfast in the Second World War, when the dome of the building shook with the impact of one of the murderous bombs that loyalist terrorists placed in the city on 17 May, during the massive Workers' Strike north of the border (which brought down the power-sharing executive at Stormont established under the terms of the Sunningdale Agreement). The after-shocks of those events could not but affect what I wrote later that year as the conclusion to what was published as *Northern Voices: Poets from Ulster* in 1975 (the book included an essay on Louis MacNeice as an Anglo-Irishman, adverted to above, shifting the focus from my book-length study). My conclusion began: 'Chapter one of this study was entitled "Poetry in a Colony", considering as it did the North as part of colonised Ireland. Perhaps the entire volume might properly have borne that title, for many of the problems and thematic concerns that I have examined in the work of the various poets are those resulting from the province's status as a British colony in an island that has attempted to break that country's hold.⁶ I refer also to 'the colonial predicament', 'colonial domination',

and invoke in a final sentence as counter-weight to these ‘the quality of a free form of life, an independent pattern of living’.⁷ Looking back on this now, I am struck by the stark fashion in which I deploy the term ‘colony’ and by how little I interrogate it. I can only plead in mitigation that the times were frighteningly dangerous and that British inaction in Northern Ireland seemed like a prelude to full-scale civil war (we now know Wilson contemplated the ultimate inaction, precipitate withdrawal). Since then, as will be seen in this book, I have tended to use the term more sparingly, preferring to see the Irish experience of the twentieth century as bound up with the collapse of European imperialism following the Great War, and the country’s complex relationship with Britain as only partially illuminated by the colonial/post-colonial model of that relationship that has come to dominate the field of Irish Studies (in [chapter 1](#) of this volume I address this development in more detail). Ironically, it was the publication of *Northern Voices* that, in a sense, created the conditions for my beginning to think more comparatively about this issue.

In 1977 the historian F. S. L. Lyons, who had noted the cultural history elements of my study of the northern poets, invited me to contribute a volume on the post-independence period to a series on Irish socio-cultural history to be published by William Collins Ltd (who had published the paperback edition of his own magisterial *Ireland Since the Famine*, in 1973), of which he would be the general editor. After a good deal of trepidation I set to work, unaware that I would be the only member of the assembled team (historians almost to a man, if memory serves) who would complete the assignment. My *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922–79* appeared as a stand-alone work in paperback, to little notice, it must be said, in 1981 (subsequently it has been the most-cited of my works).

The preparation of this work involved not only extensive researches in the literary and cultural archives but an attempt to grasp the overall shape of independent Ireland’s historical experience. Such Irish social histories and anthropological studies as then existed proved locally helpful, but it was Clifford Geertz’s essay ‘After the Revolution: The Fate of Nationalism in the New States’ (included in his *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 1975), with its international perspectives, that proved most enabling. I was most struck by his contention that new states formed with nationalist underpinning in the twentieth century were driven by two impulses that he termed ‘essentialism’ and ‘epochalism’. The former involved states answering the question ‘Who are we?’ by employing ‘symbolic forms drawn from local traditions’, while the latter stimulated the new states to discern and adapt to ‘the outlines of the history of our time and what one takes to be

the overall direction and significance of that history'.⁸ Geertz saw this not simply as a kind of 'cultural dialectic, a logistic of abstract ideas, but a historical process as concrete as industrialization and as tangible as war'.⁹ In many ways the Irish Free State and the republic which succeeded it in 1949 offered a laboratory in which to test Geertz's theory, with some of the kind of 'thick description' that he encouraged elsewhere in his book as the purpose of anthropological study. In my book I sought to supply that to the degree that current research allowed, while being governed by the broad outlines of his general thesis.

I doubt I could have managed to conceptualise twentieth-century Irish history to the degree that I did in my book without Geertz as an organising presence. However, as I wrote I was aware of complicating factors, especially that an intimate if often uncomfortable propinquity exists between Ireland and Britain and that partition politically connects the two islands, whatever view one takes of it. In the post-independence period, the essentialist impulse found expression in Irish Ireland ideology and its expressive practice in a reactive response to what were thought to be alien English influences (which were often crudely vilified as pagan excrescences on native purity), while the attempt to discern the wider movement of history tended to aspire to European and North American vistas that could seem to render nugatory how much Ireland was affected by the United Kingdom's international decisions. Both tended to expunge from awareness how the United Kingdom itself was not a static unchanging phenomenon in the twentieth century and how often what happens in one island can affect the other. Accordingly, in the volume of essays I published in 1988 (all of which were composed in that decade of ongoing political and economic crises) as *Ireland's Literature: Selected Essays*, I was at pains to include entries that dealt in detail with literary relations between our two islands and to indicate how the Irish Literary Revival (the fulcrum in the book's historiography) could be considered as 'a part of the history of Victorian Britain' as well as an aspect of the 'rich and scarcely harvested field of Irish Victorian life and thought'.¹⁰

The essays included in this volume all, as stated earlier, date from 1990 onwards, and many of them derive from the period when I was at work on a critical biography of W. B. Yeats (published in 1999) and thereafter on a revised and extended version of *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History* (published 2004). Both these works, I believe, reflected my settled sense, expressed again in this new volume, that the study of the literature, culture and society of Ireland often requires an awareness of developments in the neighbouring island. The Yeats biography demanded an awareness of

the poet's near bi-location as Dubliner and Londoner throughout much of his life, while the new version of *Ireland* had to address British policy in Ireland in the 1990s as two states arranged a version of shared governance for Northern Ireland. So in what follows I take it as indicative of that pre-occupation that Louis MacNeice figures significantly in essays that assess the nature of his Irish identity, his experience as a Londoner (a role many Irish men and women have adopted to varying degrees over the centuries) during the Second World War, and how his work can be read as a contribution to English and British culture. (An essay remains to be written on how Heaney has impacted, probably to a greater degree, on the culture of Ireland's nearest neighbour, though his 'passport's green'.) Other essays consider how English literature and literary developments in Britain have affected the course of Irish writing from Yeats to Michael Longley, while studies of literary texts by writers from the north of Ireland indicate that a region as site of contestation highlights the complexity of socio-cultural relations in our islands. A final essay on Dylan Thomas and Ireland allows issues of region and nation, centre and periphery, to be considered in a less fraught context. In all of this, Hugh Kearney's pan-optic book *The British Isles: A History of Four Nations*, in its two manifestations (1989, 2006) has been an inspiration.

It was of course in the 1990s that the colonial/post-colonial model of British/Irish relations took firm hold in the discipline of Irish Literary and Cultural Studies. And Declan Kiberd's *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (1995), with its energy and panache, made its pre-suppositions seem necessary, even normative, in Irish Studies as a whole. Yet a key aspect of that deservedly influential work (its controlling sense that England remained a kind of constant in history, with Ireland generating its own creative hybridity in vibrant response) has tended in work by critics less gifted, less *engagé* than Kiberd to be taken as axiomatic; the result is sometimes an almost Manichean moralism of fixed critical certitude. Perhaps some of the essays in this book may be read as my demurral with regard to this development.

The force field of post-colonial interpretations of Ireland's experience can, of course, generate compelling readings of the past and present, especially when it affects the mind of a major writer. The essay on the drama of Brian Friel, in this volume, I think, makes that clear. But as a critical paradigm the model can occlude not only the complexity of sameness and difference (in this volume war emerges as a zone of such often bitter entanglements) but the specificity of Irish realities. The short essay on Joyce included here, I suggest, indicates how precisely calibrated these can be in the hands of a master.

Mention of Joyce naturally introduces the subject of the Irish Modernism to which he so signally contributed. That the critic can credibly deploy the term 'Irish Modernism' is a further indicator of significant change in recent years in the critical field. The phenomena of international Modernism and of post-modernity in the last two decades have, as I discuss in following pages, increasingly been subjected to analyses that explore national provenances as well as transnational defining characteristics. A number of the essays in this book are included as my contribution to this academic topic. That this element of my book comprises historical reflection and an extended formal reading of Yeats's poem 'Easter 1916', may indicate that the useful cast of mind Colin Graham discerned at work in my study of MacNeice, published over three decades ago, still affects the work I try to do as a literary and cultural historian. I can only hope it does.

NOTES

- 1 C. Graham, 'Literary Historiography, 1890–2000', in M. Kelleher and P. O'Leary (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature*, Vol. II: 1890–2000 (Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 585.
- 2 For Edwards's account of his efforts to establish Irish Studies in Trinity in the 1960s, see P. Edwards, 'Frank O'Connor at Trinity', in M. Sheehy (ed.), *Michael/Frank: Studies on Frank O'Connor* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan; London: Macmillan, 1969), pp. 129–36.
- 3 For a lively, journalistic account of this, see V. Mehta, *The New Theologian* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965).
- 4 R. P. C. Hanson, 'The Enterprise of Emancipating Christian Belief from History', in A. Hanson, *Vindications: Essays on the Historical Foundations of Christianity* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1966), p. 39.
- 5 See in particular E. J. Tinsley, 'Parable, Allegory and Mysticism', in Hanson, *Vindications*, pp. 153–92.
- 6 T. Brown, *Northern Voices: Poets from Ulster* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975), p. 214.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 221.
- 8 C. Geertz cited in T. Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922–79* (Glasgow: William Collins and Sons, Ltd, 1981), p. 181.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 182.
- 10 T. Brown, *Ireland's Literature: Selected Essays* (Mullingar: Liliput Press; Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble, 1988), p. viii.

The Literary Revival: historical perspectives

At the sixth Annual Conference of the Canadian Association for Irish Studies held in Montreal in March, 1973, Seamus Deane delivered a lecture entitled 'The Literary Myths of the Revival: A Case for Their Abandonment'. This was less than three years after the founding meeting of the International Association for the Study of Anglo-Irish literature, now IASIL, in the summer of 1970 at Trinity College, Dublin. At that Dublin meeting, the Northern Troubles, in their earliest phase, scarcely registered. No one seemed surprised. By 1973 with Bloody Sunday in Derry, Bloody Friday in Belfast, with internment poisoning the communities in Northern Ireland and the Provisional IRA in the midst of a bombing campaign, it would by contrast have seemed surprising if a meeting dedicated to Irish Studies had not heard something bearing on the developing Irish imbroglio. Deane, with severe passion (I remember the tone precisely in the grand 'colonial' chamber in McGill University's Great Hall, in a city that knew its own kind of ethnic and linguistic divisions), spoke of 'our present delapidated situation' that had 'borne in upon us more fiercely than ever the fact that discontinuity, the discontinuity that is ineluctably an inheritance of a colonial history, is more truly the signal feature of our condition'.¹ Deane's lecture, which was published in 1977, set literary historians the task of unmasking what he thought were the disabling Yeatsian myths of the Irish literary revival, which had for too long enjoyed the status of literal truth. For, he asserted, 'Perhaps the most seductive of all Yeats's historical fictions is that he gave dignity and coherence to the Irish Protestant Ascendancy tradition'.² The Yeats imaginary was not even an historical interpretation of the past, but an aesthetic strategy. Deane argued:

The aesthetic heritage with which we still struggle clearly harbors the desire to obliterate or render nugatory the problems of class, economics, bureaucratic systems and the like, concentrating instead on the essences of self, nationhood, community and *Zeitgeist*. If there is any politics to be associated with

such an aesthetic, it is the politics of Fascism. It is again surprising that this clear implication should pass almost unnoticed in the body of contemporary Irish writing and in the scattered conviction many writers still retain about the so-called autonomy of the imagination.³

What Deane called for in his lecture was for a literary history to be written in Ireland that took account of the things that historians proper should address – ‘the problems of class, economics, bureaucratic systems and the like’ – adding his own demand that that history should be read as ‘colonial’.

Deane’s was a minatory performance, made the more telling in the almost complete absence of social and cultural histories of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Ireland extant at that date and by the very limited amount of literary criticism or literary history written by Irish scholars in Irish universities since partition and the founding of the Irish state. For in 1973, something it is difficult to imagine now, there were almost no monographs on Irish writers by resident Irish scholars (other than Daniel Corkery’s *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature*, 1931) and few thematic or general works of reflection. Classics such as Jeffares and Henn on Yeats, and Mercier on the Irish comic tradition, had been penned by Irishmen who had made academic careers abroad. Some of the best critical works were in fact by writers, with Frank O’Connor’s *The Backward Look* (1967) an early plea for Irish Studies.

At the beginning of the 1970s, historians had in fact begun to lay the groundwork for the kind of socio-cultural and political account of the Irish Literary Revival, that Deane had called for. In November 1970 in the journal *20th Century Studies* (produced at the University of Kent at Canterbury), the historian L. P. Curtis, Jr, published an excellent article entitled ‘The Anglo-Irish Predicament’, which anatomised the caste Deane believed to have been successfully mythologised by Yeats. It remains a very valuable contribution as a study in the decline and fall of a complex social and cultural formation, brought low by five forces: ‘agrarianism, clericalism, egalitarianism, Celticism, and urbanism’. By the end of the Great War, Curtis argues, Anglo-Ireland was finished:

By rejecting so much of the new cultural nationalism as well as the old political nationalism and by denying the Irishman’s fitness for self-government in the name of Anglo-Saxon superiority, the Anglo-Irish gentry engendered a much more emotional and therefore lethal response from those whom they dismissed as separatists and self-seekers. To return to the arboreal metaphor, the Anglo-Irish tree crashed in the first strong wind after the war because it was attacked from without and diseased from within.⁴

In 1971 F. S. L. Lyons, then Professor of History at the University of Kent, published his magisterial *Ireland Since the Famine* with its groundbreaking chapter 'The Battle of Two Civilisations'. Roy Foster, in *Modern Ireland* (1988), has encouraged us to see how Lyons's chapter presents the ideological confrontations inscribed in the cultural debates of the Literary Revival rather too much on their own terms;⁵ but as a contribution to our sense of the period it remains a key text. It takes to heart what Curtis, Jr, had indisputably established – that Anglo-Ireland as a social-cultural formation was collapsing between 1880 and 1920 – and he reads the Anglo-Irish efforts by Yeats and his confederates as an attempt to envisage a cultural synthesis in a future Ireland to which they could contribute much of value. But where Deane found their machinations offensive, Lyons afforded the luminaries of the Revival sympathy and admiration as cultural politicians of a high order. As historian, nonetheless, he knew their fate had been sealed:

Although nothing can take from the quality of their achievement, those who made it possible were in the long run losers in the battle of two civilisations. Even by 1903, more clearly by 1907, beyond any conceivable doubt by 1913, it had become evident that their movement could not succeed on their terms, only on terms which seemed to them humiliating and dishonourable. The truth was that their initiative ... was founded on a false assumption, an assumption easily enough made in the silence that followed the fall of Parnell. It was the assumption that in art, as in society, collaboration between the classes, religions, and races would fill the political vacuum. But in reality there was no vacuum. The political issue – the separation from Britain – remained the central issue and everything else would continue to be judged according to whether it added or subtracted from the national demand.⁶

If a taxonomy of accounts of the Irish Literary Revival were to be assembled, Lyons's would be a persuasive political entry, which has been complicated by further work but not really superseded. What subsequent political studies have added to Lyons is the concept of colonialism, which Deane adverted to in Montreal in 1973, and of course an awareness of Modernism as informing context. These later accounts work with the socio-political parameters identified by Lyons, without always acknowledging his contribution in the field, setting them explicitly in the context of colonialism or in that of international Modernism, to which Irish writing in English made such a significant contribution, or in both.

In the 'colonial' reading of the Revival, writers, and particularly Yeats, are to be understood as colonial agents seeking cultural power for themselves and their caste at the very moment when the Ascendancy's actual

political influence was on the wane and the British state was preparing to abandon them. Lyons had seen the Revival writers as Irish men and women of a distinctive kind with something valuable to contribute to Ireland as a whole. In stringent versions of the 'colonial' reading of the Revival enterprise, the main movers are defined and limited by their imperial role, indeed, they are almost dismissed. As Gerry Smyth succinctly states of Yeats in his *Decolonisation and Criticism: The Construction of Irish Literature* (1998), (exaggerating it must be said the demographic crisis of Anglo-Ireland in the late Victorian period): 'As self-appointed spokesman for the dwindling Anglo-Irish Protestant population of Ireland, Yeats's task ... was to invent a history and an identity which would guarantee Anglo-Irish inclusion in, if not domination of, a restored Irish nation.'⁷ In David Cairns and Shaun Richards's Gramscian terms in *Writing Ireland: Colonialism, Nationalism and Culture* of 1988, in their case in fact citing Lyons: 'What complicated the early twentieth-century struggles for hegemony in Ireland, however, was the colonial dimension, for as Lyons has stated, "the dominant culture was the English culture – other cultures had no option but to relate closely to it".'⁸ In this sternly binary context, they identify 'Celticism' as 'One form of discourse through which engagement with the metropolitan power was invited – on terms which advantaged the metropolitan vis-à-vis colonial culture'.⁹

A good deal of energy has been expended since 1973 in studying the construction of Celticism in nineteenth-century Ireland as an aspect of the Revival project. Matthew Arnold's 'On the Study of Celtic Literature' of 1865–6 has been a much visited text. In this work scholars and critics have drawn on John V. Kelleher's seminal 1950 article, issued as a pamphlet by the American Committee for Irish Studies in 1971, 'Matthew Arnold and the Celtic Revival'. There he saw the identification of 'the Celtic genius' in Arnold's work as the stimulus for 'the fanciest hogwash ever manufactured in Ireland. In scores of slim green volumes the discovery of popular Celtic mysticism was celebrated.'¹⁰ Kelleher exonerated Yeats and indeed AE, Lady Gregory and Synge from perpetrating this fatuity, arguing indeed that Yeats to his credit 'never wrote a perfect Celtic Revival poem or play'.¹¹ Other scholars have not been so discriminating or so forbearing. For them the construction of Celticism is seen to be a Revival strategy, in which Yeats played a major part, which allowed Irish culture to be represented in terms that involved complicity with the imperialism that is taken to underpin Arnold's treatise. So conventional has this line of argument become that in 1996 Marjorie Howes, in her *Yeats's Nations, Gender, Class and Irishness*, announced in

her introduction: 'Thus chapters 1 and 2 do not focus on the question of whether or not Yeats's early Celtic nationalism was complicit with British imperialism and Anglo-Irish domination. They ask what shape that complicity took, what heuristic value it has, and how particular conceptions of gender and class functioned within it.'¹²

The basic argument is simply outlined. In associating the Celt (and by implication the Irish, though Arnold's work is largely focused on the very limited number of Welsh texts which he knew in English) with sensibility, the lyric cry, with a lack of architectonics in brief melancholic utterances, with 'natural magic', the English poet/critic had paid the Irish a backhanded compliment. They were called to Celticise the English whose Saxon natures needed an infusion of Celtic spirit, just as their Hebraic and puritan consciences required the sweetness and light of Hellenic humanism to help keep anarchy at bay (Arnold's lectures, which became the treatise, were delivered in the decade in which he was also delivering the lectures that would become *Culture and Anarchy* in 1869). They were not suited to self-government. Celticism, therefore, finding expression in poems by a genius like Yeats or by the kind of poetaster Joyce satirises in 'A Little Cloud' in *Dubliners*, reinforces a deceptively benign English view of Ireland which in fact serves the interests of a British Imperialism disinclined to grant Ireland even Home Rule. And when the gender implications of Arnold's theories are drawn out – with critics noting how he follows Renan in gendering the Celtic race as feminine and examining how Arnold's sense of the Celts as given to transports of excitable exaltation parallels Victorian stereotypes about women – then the case that Celticism is a regressive phenomenon is apparently open and shut.

So dominant is the political and colonial paradigm in contemporary Irish Studies that any attempt to interrogate it or to complicate it unduly is likely to be dismissed as itself complicit in some way with regressive forces. Terry Eagleton, it is true, could write unequivocally in 1995 (in his book *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*) that 'the enlightened wing of the Anglo-Irish remains an object-lesson ... in ... *rapprochement*, and one whose magnanimous spirit Irish history has yet to surpass';¹³ but Emer Nolan's observations in *James Joyce and Nationalism* (1995) that a post-colonial reading of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, in its vision of the post-imperial, sets the nation the admittedly difficult task of distinguishing 'between those who are complicit with neo-colonialism and those who are not, whether they be former natives or former settlers'¹⁴ suggests a more exacting critical climate.