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Introduction: Ireland and modernity

The aim of this *Companion* is to introduce readers to modern Irish culture in all its complexity and variety. Before moving into detailed cultural analysis, however, the opening chapter invites readers to consider the historical and theoretical meanings of our framing concept: modern Ireland. What does modernity mean for Ireland? How can we conceptualise the modern culture of a country and a people with two languages, divided since the early twentieth century into two states? Officially incorporated into the United Kingdom with the Act of Union in 1800, Ireland in the nineteenth century was a constituent element of a sprawling empire of global reach. Union with Britain survives into the twenty-first century in the shape of the political border dividing Northern Ireland from the Republic. And yet the long history of Irish migration and diaspora means that even the divided island – the basic geopolitical unit – cannot be taken for granted as the sole sphere of modern Irish culture.

The nowadays much-debated terms terms 'modern' or 'modernity' also require consideration. For a long time, these words were associated with the radical intellectual iconoclasm of the Enlightenment and with the transformational dynamism of capitalism. The revolutionary utopianism of feminism, socialism and communism sprang from such quintessentially Enlightenment beliefs as human rights and global justice and equality: all such claims expressed in terms of a cry for the optimal extension of the modern. At the start of the new millennium, however, calls for the extension of modernisation are more likely to hinder than to abet campaigns for social justice or the dream of a better world beyond capitalism. As Oskar Lafontaine remarks: 'If you try to figure what the people called "modernizers" today understand by "modernity", you find that it is little else than economic and social adaptation to the

supposed constraints of the global market.' The term thus becomes a 'code for turning down alternatives to capitalism', signifying little more than a long goodbye to the more utopian hopes once invested in the radical Enlightenment project of modernity.[1]

While even the most cursory survey of the vast body of writing about the 'modern' will reveal the vicissitudes of that term, our starting premise here is that in Ireland the meanings of 'modernisation' and 'modernity' – terms now come to crisis point in metropolitan social theory – have actually been an object of intellectual and cultural controversy for some considerable period. Ireland's long colonial connection to a British state thought to be the exemplary incarnation of modernity has meant that the historically subordinate country's relationship to 'the modern' has always been much vexed, much disputed. Irish intellectuals and cultural commentators have over the centuries returned time and again to questions as to whether Ireland was a modern society at all, whether the modern was to be equated with progress or its obverse (and if the former, with the progress of what and for whom), whether the agencies that had apparently generated or stymied the modern were largely external or internal to Irish society, and so forth. These conundrums were never simply the preserve of academics and intellectuals; the issue as to how to articulate the relationship between Ireland and the modern has also constituted an abiding stimulus or tonic to Irish cultural activity in literature, in cinema, in music and in the visual and other arts. In short, a complex, contested history of claim and counter-claim means that in an Irish context the term 'modernity' is stripped of its semblance of obviousness: its meanings have been consistently interrogated. For this reason alone, it will be worth our while at the outset of this volume to dwell briefly on some of the matters provoked by these debates.

Beginnings and endings

Conceptions of the 'modern' or of 'modernity' typically connote an epochal rupture with the 'pre-modern' or the 'non-modern', the latter then conceived of as the pre-history of that modernity. As Fredric Jameson describes it, this separation of the past and present operates 'by way of a powerful act of disassociation whereby the present seals off its past from itself and ejects it; an act without which neither present nor past truly exist, the past not yet fully constituted, the present still living

on within the force field of a past not yet over and done with.'[2] The ascription of modernity, in short, always requires setting a date and positing a beginning. When, then, does modern Ireland begin and end?

Historical conceptions of Irish modernity are typically derived largely from standard European versions or metanarratives. Western modernity is conventionally ascribed to an inventory of inaugural ruptures of the following kind: the Protestant Reformation and the development of novel modes of consciousness, discipline and enterprise; the emergence of capitalism and the gradual dissolution of the feudal mode of production with its characteristic forms of authority, land tenure and labour; the conquest of the Americas and the expansion of the European terrestial and maritime empires across the globe; the conception of a sovereign and self-reflexive human subjectivity as one of the cardinal features of modernity.

Taking its cues from these wider paradigms of Western modernity, the emergence of 'modern Ireland' is conventionally ascribed in Irish historiography to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: the inception of that modernity is attributed (in a manner chronologically congruent with inaugural events of European modernity generally) to the Tudor and Stuart colonisations of the island, conquests viewed either as part of the larger theatre of struggle between European Reformation and Counter-Reformation or as a component of the westward drive of imperial expansion: its corollary was the inception of a centuries-long attempt to render Ireland amenable to the imperatives of English and later transnational capital. Whichever of these narratives is accepted, the inception of Irish modernity is invariably associated with British dominance on the island and with the termination of the older Gaelic civilisation instigated by these sixteenth- and seventeenth-century intrusions. Modernity and modernisation, as conceived in this historiographical enterprise, come entirely from 'above' and 'without', rather than from 'within' or 'below': modernity is a gift of colonial or religious conquest mediated primarily through an expanding British state (and the ruling élites that promoted the remit of that state in Ireland) rather than through any efforts by the pre-existing Gaelic society to modernise itself by its own exertions and on its own terms. Modernisation in such accounts is coterminous with the Anglicisation of the island: Gaelic culture by that same move is aligned with the medieval, with the pre-modern, the archaic and the maladapted; with all those things whose inevitable fate it was to be vanquished by modernity.

It is also conventional in Western historiography to distinguish a later, more mature and fully fledged modernity from this incipient or early version. In this later instance, inaugural moments typically include the French Revolution and the European Enlightenment that prepared and accompanied it; the development of industrial capitalism, and its accompanying technological revolutions; the emergence of the modern bureaucratic state and its modes of disciplinary and instrumental reason; the elaboration initially in the Americas and then in Europe of anti-colonial and official state nationalisms; the dissemination of Darwinian evolutionism and the secular natural and social sciences and the consequent crisis of religious conceptions of human history; the formation of modern bourgeois subjectivity and sexuality. The advent of Irish modernity in this later 'mature' sense is typically ascribed to some time between the end of the eighteenth and the mid nineteenth centuries, with the United Irish Rebellion of 1798, the Act of Union in 1800, Catholic Emancipation in 1829 or the Great Famine in the late 1840s variously offered as decisive watersheds in that wider transition.

The Irish transition from an 'early' to a more 'mature' or 'advanced' modernity is again conventionally situated in terms of a wider Euro-American context: contributing forces include the influence of the American and French Revolutions on the development of Irish republicanism; the impact of the British industrial revolution on Irish economic subordination and underdevelopment; the emergence of the 'second', eastward-looking British Empire, and the technological dominance of the Anglo-American industrial world with its gravitational effects on Irish migration and diaspora from the nineteenth century onwards; the ideological 'wars' between clerical and secular forces that raged across the European continent throughout the nineteenth century even as in Ireland the Catholic church, after two centuries of suppression, established a moral monopoly over Irish society designed to shelter the island from the icy blasts of continental secularism.

Irish modernity in this second 'mature' phase, as in its 'early' phase, can quite clearly be tracked to a larger concatenation of social, political, technological and cultural forces that made Western modernity generally. The emphasis on democratisation and citizenship in this second moment brings a significant new element to the narrative; this later modernisation drive is more closely associated with upheavals from below or originating within the emergent middle classes rather than with the colonial officials and settlers newly arrived from Britain deemed the

emissaries of the modern in the earlier period. In an Irish context, this drive towards democratisation and citizenship can be identified with either the revolutionary and militant republicanism of the United Irishmen, who insisted that a viable Irish polity could be created only by abolishing the congealed sectarian social structures and mentalities that were the invidious legacy of the plantations, or with a constitutional nationalism that aspired to democratise Irish society electorally via the political mobilisation of the Irish masses (in the campaigns first for Catholic Emancipation and then the Repeal of the Union led by Catholic politician Daniel O'Connell), or with the start of public lobbying for the rights of women from the mid nineteenth century onwards.

Readers of the volume may wish to pause here and consider what is at stake in explanations such as those offered above, which seek to make Ireland comprehensible in terms of wider European and Atlantic developments. The normalising power of such explanations has made them powerfully attractive; they allow us to construe Ireland as a reasonably typical instance of universalising Western European and North American patterns. Nevertheless, any account that describes Irish modernisation primarily in terms of local reactions to wider tendencies leaves itself vulnerable to the objection that in such accounts modernity is always one-way traffic, with the modern invariably disseminated outwards from a given centre – England, France, Europe or America – to the retarded margins. In such paradigms, marginal cultures (like Ireland), reduced to the status of the recipients of modernity, can only progress to the extent that they imitate the centre; it becomes impossible to imagine any alternative future to that already prescribed by the centre; the marginal culture's destiny is to emulate; it does not inaugurate, initiate or invent.

A counter-version suggests that modernity, however, is not a one-way process issuing from metropole to benighted periphery; the circuits of the modern have always been more latticed and labyrinthine than simplistic diffusion models of the kind just described allow. In an Irish context, the United Irishmen, for instance, though certainly adherents to the universal ideals of the Enlightenment, were not simply the crude importers of American or French republicanism. The Address of the United Irishmen to the Scottish Convention of 1793 boldly asserts: 'We will not buy or borrow liberty from America or France, but manufacture it ourselves, and work it up with those materials which the hearts of Irishmen furnish them with at home.'[3] Working with these domestic materials, the United Irishmen sought to reformulate the intellectual

heritage of republicanism to take account not only of the hitherto despised Catholicism of the Irish masses, but also of the equally despised Gaelic culture of the island. Whereas American and French republicans were fiercely hostile to North American Indian or to Breton and Basque cultures respectively, viewing them only as barbaric impediments to progress that ought to be wholly extirpated, the United Irishmen, chastened by Ireland's colonial experience, refused to regard either Catholicism or the vernacular culture of the masses as insuperably opposed to national advancement. Without surrendering their Enlightenment principles, they also repudiated the stadialist conceptions of history and the cultural hierarchies endorsed by the Scottish Enlightenment; in so refusing, there is a real case to suggest that the United Irishmen opened fertile new intellectual territory for rethinking the relationship between the Enlightenment and specific cultures. In Ireland, in other words, the Enlightenment attitude to tradition was developed in more complex ways than in the European mainstream. After the defeat of 1798, Irish republicans forced overseas were also to become important agents for the transmission of republican ideals in Scotland, England, the United States and Australia; hence the effects of the Irish experience made themselves felt not only at home but also much farther afield. Viewed from such a standpoint, peripheries cease to be regarded essentially as passive consumers of ideas of the modern; at certain pivotal moments in their histories, at least, they can function as sites of 'alternative enlightenment' where ideas of the modern are intellectually tested, creatively extended, radicalised and transformed, and indeed transferred eventually to the metropolitan centre.

Secondly, one might want to question not just the geographical but also the chronological parameters of conventional narratives of the modern. In such accounts, metropolitan societies are typically identified with a more advanced temporality and with a more fully modern consciousness than peripheral ones, but assumptions of this kind have also come under increasing interrogation in recent decades. Alternative accounts of modernity would argue that it was the oppressed peoples of the world, whether African slaves or colonised peoples, who were in fact the first to endure the accelerated processes of social transformation and cultural hybridisation, the violent uprootings and diasporic migrations, now routinely deemed typical characteristics of modernity and indeed globalisation. This alternative model of modernity contends, in other words, that it was the peripheries and their peoples that first endured, and with

least shelter or state protection, a massive assault on their inherited traditions – the melting of all that had appeared culturally solid in the smelter of imperial conquest and assimilation. Their traumatic experience of cultural convulsion and dislocation only became the substance of everyday life in metropolitan places much later.[4]

Where diffusionist models, then, typically conceive of peripheries as fastnesses of tradition prised out of their retarded pre-modern mentalities reluctantly and belatedly, this alternative view takes the cataclysmic contact between centre and periphery or coloniser and colonised as its starting point, and concludes that as a result of that encounter the peripheral masses had no alternative but to acquire a modernised consciousness at least as early as and indeed often well in advance of their metropolitan counterparts. This model compels a re-thinking of the Irish situation since Ireland can be considered an exemplary nursery of exilic consciousness. For those who migrated into the country as colonial settlers in the early modern period, Ireland was and was not home; the very fact that the settlers referred to themselves as New English, Anglo-Irish or British implies an outlander mentality, which claims allegiance to the centre but does so self-consciously from the frontiers of a radical otherness. Alongside this exilic consciousness of the inward migrant, a persistent pattern of outwards migration can also be observed: this extends from the flight of the native nobility (or 'Wild Geese') in the aftermath of the Williamite conquest, to the Catholic clergy under the Penal Laws, to the Irish poor compelled to emigrate to Britain and America in the post-Famine period. Hence Ireland did not have to await – as is too frequently assumed – the arrival of industrialisation or technological modernity to undergo that traumatic sense of breakneck modernisation, of rapid cultural transformation and psychic alienation – the shock of the new – conventionally regarded as a constitutive or exemplary experience of the modern. In Ireland, modernisation via colonisation preceded modernisation via industrialisation; colonisation was at least as devastating and destructive to any idea of stable organic society or to the continuity of tradition as the latter would ever be.

Anomalies of the modern

The array of competing temporal and spatial coordinates considered thus far should suggest some of the challenges involved in plotting the development of Irish modernity. In this section, we consider the ways

in which Irish culture presents a challenge to the normative Western models of development previously outlined. While Irish historiography comports quite comfortably in many respects with standard accounts of Western modernity, the country's history has in other fundamental respects proved stubbornly recalcitrant to these same metanarratives. In the early modern period, Ireland was indeed, as mentioned earlier, one of the bitter theatres of war between European Reformationist and Counter-Reformationist forces. Yet the increasingly centralised and successful British state never secured the mass conversion of the Gaelic and Old English populations to Protestantism, despite this having been an ostensible objective of the various plantations. Whether in its 'early' or 'later' stages of modernity, therefore, Ireland, unlike neighbouring peripheries such as Scotland or Wales, remained a largely Catholic country. As the country's Gaelic culture and language receded, and as its ties with both England and the United States intensified through emigration and trade during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries especially, Ireland's Catholicism became increasingly one of the essential markers of its distinctiveness, something which set it apart in the overwhelmingly Protestant and Anglophone world it increasingly inhabited.

The distinction between Catholic and Protestant on the island – one of the enduring axes of Irish socio-cultural division – was from the outset complicated by issues of class, cultural capital and national or state allegiance. It was also susceptible, however, to codings in terms of a wider international 'civilisational' conflict between the pre-modern and the modern: one in which Protestantism was commonly equated with the enterprise, rationality, materialism and liberalism of the modern, Catholicism with the traditionalism, superstition and dogmatic 'Gothic' authoritarianism of the pre-modern. The temporalities and values of the modern and the pre-modern, in other words, have routinely been mapped in Ireland not only onto the topography of the country (the modern identified with the urban, the industrial northeast, and the eastern seaboard; tradition or the pre-modern with the country, with agriculture, the West and the islands), but onto the island's religious or sectarian denominations as well. From this standpoint, the minority Protestants were the exemplary bearers of Irish modernity, the Catholic masses remaining trapped in everything from which the modern had heroically detached itself.

If its Catholicism was one of the things that seemed to render Ireland anomalous, its capitalist development was another matter perceived as

strangely aberrant. Political economists over the last two centuries have consistently remarked upon the many ways in which Ireland can be seen to depart from those pathways to capitalist development regarded as normal in the Western world. Thus in the nineteenth century Ireland's population doubled from somewhere near 4 million in 1800 to over 8 million by the 1840s. This remarkable demographic expansion was not accompanied by wholesale industrialisation along the lines of England, Scotland or Wales. It issued, rather, in the devastation of the Great Famine – a drastic reduction of population to market rather than expansion of market to population and the last great subsistence crisis of its kind in Western Europe – which left 1 million dead and another 2 million forced into emigration, and setting in motion patterns of demographic decline well out of kilter with Western European patterns generally. Even after independence, the country still remained largely a dependent agricultural economy until well into the 1970s, primarily a supplier of cheap food to Britain, and its levels of emigration still remained by far the highest in the entire 'British Isles' region.

In Ireland, therefore, the lived experience of modernisation meant something quite different to what it did to its near neighbours in Europe where modernity was associated with domestic innovation, industrial trailblazing, national aggrandisement and even global pre-eminence. From the Elizabethan period on, political modernisation in Ireland meant a diminishment rather than an extension of political sovereignty. Incorporation into the United Kingdom with the Union of 1800 did not usher in the economic prosperity promised. For peoples such as the English, the Spanish, the French or the Germans, modernity brought about a dramatic elevation, indeed globalisation, of their national cultures and vernaculars; for the Irish, modernity issued in the wholesale collapse or destruction of Gaelic culture. All of this generated a heightened intellectual scepticism about the equation of either political or economic modernisation with progress; in the period after the Great Famine, the country proved a fertile breeding-ground for unorthodox economic theories of development, uneven development and underdevelopment as political economists grappled with the question as to whether Ireland had failed political economy or whether political economy had failed Ireland.[5]

Irish modernity has thus in one way and another come to seem to many as puzzlingly eccentric and strange, its history enigmatically at odds with the standard vectors of modernisation that Western European

core countries apparently exemplify: a largely Catholic enclave within a Protestant British state; a chronically underdeveloped economy situated cheek by jowl alongside the most industrially developed European economy; a 'feudal' or 'semi-feudal' redoubt that was nonetheless after 1800 an integral part of the most advanced Western liberal democracy; an overwhelmingly rural and, across all denominations, devoutly religious society until virtually the end of the twentieth century in a supposedly increasingly secular and urban Western world. In the circumstances, theories, histories and sociologies of Irish modernity frequently turn into extended deliberations on Ireland's deficient modernisation, anxious ruminations on the ways in which Irish society has remained an uncanny site of the 'pre-modern' or the 'non-modern', despite its geographic location astride the very highway of Euro-American modernity.

There was an important flip side, however, to the obsession with Ireland's deficient or perennially laggard modernity. For those who were disenchanted with modernity – those disposed to view the modern not as coeval with progress but rather as the tyranny of civilisation over instinct, of reason over imagination, of smokestack and asphalt sterility over green hills and natural spontaneity, of bourgeois materialism and anomie over the vital organic community of the folk – Ireland's supposed deficiencies could be trans-valued and recreated as its greatest resource. From this perspective, Ireland acquired an aura of mystery and romance, an association with the archaic and the antique. The country was construed as a sublime periphery to the European mainstream, a place that was out of the world, beyond the world, an alternative to the world. Viewed thus, Ireland becomes almost wholly identified with 'tradition', the latter conceived from this perspective, however, in a positive sense; not as a lamentable obstacle to progress (as 'tradition' is typically construed in modernisation discourses) but as a repository of all those values lost or about to be lost in the destructive maelstrom of 'progress'.

From the nineteenth century onwards, Ireland acquired a refurbished reputation as a national culture distinguished by its supposed antipathy to the modern. Irish culture (like that of Scotland in the same period) became a significant site for the elaboration of a European Romanticism that represented both a reaction against and a radicalising extension of the European Enlightenment. The Romantic reaction against the abstract universalism of the Enlightenment, a reaction that disputed the equation of tradition with ignorance and which advanced the idea that