

Introduction

What is 'Irish poetry'? Is it written in Irish or can it be written in English too? Must it be about the history, mythology and contemporary life of Ireland, or can it range wider, through Europe, the world, the cosmos? Does it include the work of poets from Northern Ireland, a territory that belongs to the British Crown, or is it restricted to poets from the Republic of Ireland? What are we to do with a poet who was born a subject of that Crown, receiving a Civil List pension from that same Crown, who could neither speak nor read Irish yet claimed he was in touch with the spirit of the nation? Does it include poets who lived and published for most of their lives in England? Does it include second-generation emigrants? What about a poet whose family lived for centuries in the country and were Protestants who believed in the Union with Britain? What if that same Protestant poet is one of the century's best translators and interpreters of ancient Irish poetry? Is he somehow less Irish than a Catholic peasant poet who wrote in Irish? There are many more such questions, but they do not proliferate as thickly as their answers; which is to say, there is no consensus about what Irish literature is, let alone Irish poetry.

For the purposes of this brief book, I have had to answer provisionally many of these questions, and here I wish to state these answers along with the contradictions and difficulties they involve. First of all, the question of period. The overarching theme of the book is indicated by the titles of the first and last chapters. In the year 1800, the Act of Union was passed, thus joining Ireland's political fate with Britain over the next hundred years. In the following decades, nationalism became the motive force in poetry written in Ireland, and although poets would react in different ways to this aesthetic ideology, their work was deeply marked by it. This is what I mean by 'The appearance of Ireland', the title of the opening chapter. The last chapter is entitled 'The Disappearance of Ireland' and it points to the gradual abandonment of the nation as a framework for Irish poetry – on the level of theme, technique, forebears, etc. – what one commentator has called the post-national moment.

Nationalist ideology informs much of Ireland's finest art and literature in this period, as well as many of the most intense cultural debates. That ideology

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both imagines an origin back in the vague ancient past and fantasises a glorious utopian future for the nation. It is fundamentally *unnationalist* then to say that the effects of the ideology are restricted to one particular period. While researching this book, I found myself constantly in disagreement with neo-nationalists as various as Thomas Kinsella, Eavan Boland, Seamus Deane and Declan Kiberd: these writers, with force and imagination, modernise the idea of Ireland in interesting ways, but the fundamental concept of the Irish nation itself remains unquestioned. That concept is only about 200 years old but to read these writers one would think it goes back to the Big Bang. Even a critic as sophisticated as Colin Graham in his *Deconstructing Ireland* (2001) still requires the Irish nation – in however vestigial a form – as raw material for his deconstruction, and he provides us with no glimpse of the theoretical and imaginative work to be done after the concept has been dismantled.

Why then write a book like this? Because although nationalism is on the wane, it was nevertheless the most important cultural force in much of the best literature of Europe, and perhaps the world, over the last two centuries. However much one might disagree with the tenets of nationalist literature, that the literature exists and is sometimes excellent cannot be denied, any more than the importance of *Paradise Lost* can be denied by an atheist. Furthermore, I attend to work which falls outside this debate – for instance, the poetry of James Henry in the nineteenth century, and the poets at the end of the twentieth century – and I show the way that nationalism is being overtaken by other concerns. I also examine elements of other poets' *œuvres* that are unconcerned with issues of Ireland. The approach is valedictory and as such must characterise what is being left behind and outline what is to come. It is probable that books of this kind will not be required in twenty years.

The second important issue is that of language. It is reported that Joseph Brodsky was once asked at a reading what the poet's political responsibility was, and he answered "To the language."¹ In the Irish context, I see the following implication: Yeats, Kavanagh, Clarke, MacNeice, Heaney, Carson, to name a few, are above all poets of the English language, and that they are Irish is only of secondary importance. They have more in common with the poets of England than they do with the Gaelic bards. In the chapter on Seamus Heaney, I quote the following passage from an interview when he was asked what makes him distinctly an Irish poet and not a British poet, and he responded thus:

Well, the issue probably wouldn't arise at all were there not the political situation in the North. All of those remarks about Irish versus British are actually intended as irritants rather than definitions. The adjectives have

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nothing essential to do with the noun. They have to do with the aggravation of the political and current situation. They're a form of game-playing.²

I do not wish to say that Anglophone Irish poets have not been deeply and variously influenced by Gaelic literature – most of this book traces that variety – but rather to say that the influences of, for instance, Shelley, Blake, Wordsworth and Tennyson have been more profound. While Tennyson boomed and gloomed at Ireland for all he was worth, the language he shared with Irish poets was infinitely more important than differing opinions about British imperialism. Yeats is not often thought of as a Tennysonian poet, in large part because of those differing opinions, but the *poetic* influence is there and is at least as significant as his engagement with Shelley, if not perhaps Blake.

What of poetry written in Irish? This is only mentioned insofar as it impinges on Irish Anglophone poetry – a separate book would be required to trace its development in the period. However, I have throughout tried to attend to the *border* between the two languages, especially to the occasions when writers pretend it doesn't exist. For instance, it does not seem strange to monoglot Irish audiences that J. M. Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* and Brian Friel's *Translations* are performed in English.³ The situation is similar to the film *The Piano Teacher* (2001): because it was a French-Austrian co-production it bizarrely depicted the population of Vienna talking French. This is a type of linguistic imperialism that presumes that all of the Gaelic world is accessible through English.

The book was written mainly in the Czech Republic, where I have lived for many years. In my personal life, English is a minority language, constantly eroded by Czech syntax, vocabulary and idioms. The experience has shown me how much is left outside English, how much cannot be brought over the linguistic border. It ranges from a way of breathing when one speaks to moral and philosophical concepts. I have also learned how difficult it is to explain those excluded elements, as monoglots often listen to such explanations as they would to fairy-tales. One cannot explain what is like to live in another language. At the same time, I have also learned that much can be brought over, but that conveyance is strongly conditioned by social, cultural and historical forces which often erase themselves in the end result.

I have not lived in Irish in the same way I live in Czech, as I only have reading knowledge of the language. It is still considered acceptable for a scholar of Anglophone Irish literature to have no knowledge of Irish. Some critics might defend this by saying that since the material they work with is in English, they have no need of Irish. But that very material frequently claims to express the

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spirit of Gaelic literature; critics without, at the very least, reading knowledge cannot assess that claim and thus can be fairly accused of professional incompetence. Only those critics with a knowledge of both languages are in a position to assess those deceptive social, cultural and historical forces I mention above. I do not claim such a purview for this book; rather I merely bring attention to this border at key junctures.

Perhaps the most important of those junctures is the poetry of W. B. Yeats, the poet with the Civil List pension that I mentioned in the first paragraph. He established modern Irish literature and yet had no knowledge of the Irish language. Yeats scholarship is voluminous and while his ignorance of the language is noted, little more is said of the matter, few critics have addressed the matter fully. His poetry, drama, criticism and autobiography can be read for the ways he compensated for that ignorance, presenting other nationalist credentials in lieu of knowledge of Gaelic. He rather uncharitably described Keats thus:

I see a schoolboy when I think of him,
With face and nose pressed to a sweet-shop window,
For certainly he sank into his grave
His senses and his heart unsatisfied,
And made – being poor, ailing and ignorant,
Shut out from all the luxury of the world,
The coarse-bred son of a livery-stable keeper –
Luxuriant song.⁴

The description fits Yeats's relationship with Gaelic culture surprisingly well – if we substitute his Anglo-Irish Protestant details in the penultimate line.

Seamus Heaney asked whether Yeats was an example for Irish poets or not. Modern Irish poetry would be impossible without him for many reasons, foremost of which is that he enabled it to be monoglot. He could depend on nationalist ideology to compensate for that lack, but at the end of the twentieth century, with the withdrawal of that ideology, poets have been left floundering ever so slightly. In an interview in 1997 the poet Vona Groarke was pressed on the issue of whether she saw her poetry as distinctively Irish. She responded as follows:

That's a difficult question, you know, for myself to answer. I mean, it's easy to say what *has* been an Irish poem, but now that glass has been shattered and there are so many different parts of it. It used to be a rural poem, but it's not anymore. Now it's equally likely to be urban as it is to be rural, it's equally likely to be about a woman as it is about a man. I find it quite difficult to define what an Irish poem is now, and I think that's a healthy thing. It's not as easy to immediately pigeonhole it as it

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would have been, say, thirty years ago. I'm sure, I'm sure, I'm sure I must read like an Irish poet. I wouldn't attempt to deny or to contradict my background in the poems that I write, I mean I write out of what has been my life to date and I'm sure there are hints of that in what I do. So I think it would be fatuous for me to say that I wouldn't read as an Irish poet, but . . . That kind of elusiveness in being able to define what an Irish poem is widens the scope an awful lot . . .⁵

Clearly, 'my life to date' does not guarantee a poem's Irishness. Groarke hardly seems convinced herself, yet she has nothing better to offer. I quote the passage at length because the confusion and uncertainty that Groarke expresses are not merely her own. This brings us back to the flurry of questions at the beginning. But it is also of note that the passage follows an exchange where the interviewers ask Groarke if she would be interested in translating Gaelic poems, and she jokes in response that it's sort of ruled out as she doesn't know Irish.

The third issue which is important for my reading of Irish poetry is the British Empire. Many postcolonial critics try to align the Irish with the wretched of the earth; however, I repeatedly found poets – from Thomas Moore to Seamus Heaney – who express their indebtedness to and complicity with the Empire. My approach has been influenced by a general change in attitude towards the British Empire. Niall Ferguson remarks:

what is very striking about the history of the Empire is that whenever the British were behaving despotically, there was almost always a liberal critique of that behaviour from within British society. Indeed, so powerful and consistent was this tendency to judge Britain's imperial conduct by the yardstick of liberty that it gave the British Empire something of a self-liquidating character.⁶

Thomas Moore, as English Whig, participated in exactly such a tendency; Seamus Heaney has been lionised by a British audience eager for accounts of Irish imaginative resistance to the Empire. It is then a distortion to read Irish poetry as continually opposed to the British Empire, because the attitude of both the colonising society and the colonised is more nuanced.

Only two of the twelve chapters are devoted to the nineteenth century because of the relative weakness of the poetry of that period. There is a cluster of three chapters on the Revival, with Yeats at the centre. In chapter 6, I deal with the legacy of Modernism in Irish poetry, and how it has been adapted to Irish materials by two successive generations. Chapter 7 groups Derek Mahon, Michael Longley and Richard Murphy together and considers them in relation to the theme of Empire. The more usual grouping would substitute Heaney for Murphy in order to provide a detailed discussion of the Northern Irish Renaissance

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at the end of the 1960s (Heaney is dealt with in chapter 8). It is not the point of a book like this to be original, but there are so many treatments of that phenomenon elsewhere that I considered it superfluous. Nevertheless, readers unfamiliar with the Northern Ireland Renaissance still receive an account of it, although cross-hatched by another narrative. Chapter 9 deals with poetry translation from Irish, French and Latin, and might be described as the nerve-centre of the book. Chapter 10 deals with the explosion of women's issues in Irish poetry in the 1980s and early 1990s; chapter 11 with Paul Muldoon and the theme of emigration in Irish poetry. In the last chapter – with the wave of a wand – Ireland vanishes into other concerns, such as city-writing, cosmopolitanism and the sea. I do not have a better answer than Vona Groarke to the question of what now is a distinctively Irish poem; I merely attempt to describe some of the most exciting, though disparate, elements in contemporary Irish poetry. My bet is people will soon no longer think in categories such as the interviewers' 'distinctively Irish'.

Chapter 1

The appearance of Ireland

Thomas Moore, J. J. Callanan, James Clarence Mangan

In 1801, the Act of Union came into force, stripping Ireland of its own parliament and bringing the country under direct control of Westminster; thus it was dissolved into perhaps the greatest European empire after that of Rome. Over the following century it would shed its native language and adopt English. Even after achieving independence 121 years later, it would keep English as its first language *de facto* (though Irish would be designated the first official language in 1937); it would also keep the principles of English law at the centre of its jurisprudence. Of course, English had been a native language in Ireland for almost a millennium, but only in parts of the Pale on the east coast. Now, within a century, it spread westwards across the whole country, leaving only small pockets of Gaelic speakers on the Atlantic shores. After a slow start in the nineteenth century, when there was little of great literary worth, Irish writers were at last completely at home in English, and produced some of that language's greatest works in the twentieth century. The claim was occasionally made that the national spirit had been brought over from Gaelic into English. However, Irish speakers themselves rarely confirmed such a smooth conveyance of the national spirit. As the novelist Tomás Ó Duinnshléibhe made one of his characters remark:

Tig le náisiún an tsaoirse a chailleadh agus a ghnóthú, agus a chailleadh agus a ghnóthú arís agus arís eile, ach dá gcailltí an teanga ní bheadh fáil ar ais againn uirthi. Ní thig le tír ar bith a teanga a chailleadh gan a hanam a chailleadh agus nuair a bhíonn an t-anam cailte tá deireadh léi mar náisiún.¹

It is ironic that many writers who claimed that the spirit of Gaelic literature and culture was transferred to the Anglophone literature of Ireland had scant idea of the real contours of Irish literature and would not be able to understand the passage quoted here. It is perhaps just as well for them, as they would find cold comfort in its message.

These facts suggest that this chapter should not be titled 'The appearance of Ireland' but 'The disappearance of Ireland'. But the disappearance I have

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outlined above set a counter-motion going. As Robert Welch remarks: ‘In the nineteenth century the strategy was to invent as many Irelands as possible. Because there *was* no Ireland, because there was no language, no system for it, then it was as well to try out as many possibilities as the brain could invent.’² The ideology of nationalism, which was spreading through Europe at this time, took hold in Ireland also, and writers and politicians endeavoured to preserve and develop the essence of Irishness often in the face of British hostility, and – what was often more difficult to manage – British interest. Prompted by the curiosity about James MacPherson’s *Ossian* (1760–3), a work in which a Scottish writer claimed to have discovered the texts of Scottish legends (they were in fact Irish), as well as by the growth of French and German scholarship in the area of Celtic culture, there was a surge in antiquarian activity in Ireland during the nineteenth century, as scholars attempted to get a clearer idea of the outlines of the Irish past. Translation of Irish texts became increasingly refined and accurate. The fruits of this labour were pounced upon by Irish propagandists of every hue. This interest in things Irish led to the phenomenon of the Gaelic Revival at the end of the nineteenth century, and to the revolution in 1916 that precipitated the end of British rule in the greater part of Ireland. The revolution came from within the British Empire at a time when it was fighting an enemy without, and the shock was very deep for the imperialists, as it was for their subject peoples throughout the world. Three decades later the Empire would lose its greatest possession of all, India, and that country’s statesmen would point out how instructive the Irish example was for them. Now, a mere century after the time of its finest flowering, the British Empire is but a memory: in comparison with the decline of that of Rome, the British Empire collapsed like a house of cards, leaving in its wake many countries around the world attempting to achieve national definition.

In the eighteenth century, Irish poets writing in English did not have as their goal the expression of national spirit, but viewed their work as an integral part of the British tradition, and wrote for a British audience. Matthew Campbell remarks that, in the nineteenth century, ‘while many writers published for the large literary market in Britain and the new, English-speaking audiences of Irish origin in the United States, the poetry was often more concerned with its responsibility in preserving the authenticity of the cultural achievements of Ireland’s past.’³ The audience of that literature and the Irish ‘nation’ were not identical. The intriguing fact about Irish culture at this time, and in some respects well into the twentieth century, was that English opinion often counted for more. Critics of several generations have tried to obscure this fact in order to preserve some pure Gaelic quality, but it no longer seems either desirable or possible to do so. For once we admit such a complication, we acknowledge

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a richer idea of Irish culture than we were previously accustomed to. The edges of Ireland become blurred and we see that Irish culture was not formed out some unsullied source in the misty Celtic past, but out of centuries of negotiation and conversation with Rome and early Christian Europe, and then most importantly with England in its earlier embodiments, and later as imperial centre. Like most other European cultures, Irish culture is hybrid, and becomes interesting as soon as the liens of ownership and lines of influence are most tangled and messy.

By admitting the existence of this complex situation, we immediately have a better chance of understanding Irish poetry at the beginning of the nineteenth century, both its failings and achievements. We must also recognise, as Welch again points out, that the work of Irish poets in this period was not underwritten by an Irish tradition in English – there was no secure frame of cultural reference for their work;⁴ and this made it clichéd and fissiparous, occasionally within individual poems, and more generally across the century. In what follows, I will look at the work of three poets often said to express the essence of the Irish national spirit. They often try to do that, and they often do other things, and I will follow their work as they move in and out of the nationalist frame of reference.

The works of Thomas Moore were often published in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in large green tomes gilded with designs incorporating shamrocks, harps and other Irish symbols. The cover of one edition has, among these insignia, a short text: ‘The hearts and the voices of Erin prolong for the answering future thy name and thy song’; and this is curved around a solid-looking female in gold-tooling who bears a harp.⁵ The front papers more or less repeat this arrangement, but now the woman is pointing with a wand to a vignette of Moore. This is Moore canonised as Irish saint with all the regalia of nationalist iconography, whose reputation lies on his *Irish Melodies*, lyrics he wrote to old Irish airs. The edition was published in London, and there were many others like it, in Britain, Ireland and the USA. After the application of a little astringent, however, a different design emerges that incorporates the cross of St George and, if not a John Bull figure pointing approvingly to Moore, then certainly a Prime Minister such as Lord John Russell, who was in power during the Irish Famine in the late 1840s, and was a close friend of Moore’s. These British and Irish symbolisms are complementary not contradictory.

Moore was born in 1779 in Dublin (in a building which is now famed for its jazz sessions), the son of a grocer and spirit dealer. Both his parents were Roman Catholic. He entered Trinity College, Dublin, a year after it was opened to Catholics. There he became friendly with a law student named Robert

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Emmet who would later lead an unsuccessful rebellion against the British in 1803, and be executed as a result; this had an important bearing on Moore's poetry. He went to England in 1799 and his first book, *The Odes of Anacreon* (1800), translations from the Greek, was dedicated to the Prince of Wales. The dedicatee had to agree to the dedication, and the approval of *The Odes* is a indication that Moore had ensconced himself in the highest echelons of English society with astonishing speed. As George Saintsbury remarked: 'He had, indeed a catlike disposition to curl himself up near something or somebody comfortable.' However, he was never a sycophant. Saintsbury continues: 'But it does not appear that Moore was any more inclined to put up with insulting treatment than the cat itself is.'⁶ In 1803 he was appointed Registrar to the Admiralty Prize Court in Bermuda, which dealt with the apportionment of booty among the officers and men of the Royal Navy. He, in his turn, appointed a deputy to look after these affairs. In 1818, Moore's appointee fled Bermuda, leaving him answerable for a large debt; because of financial embarrassment, Moore had to leave England temporarily, despite the great critical and financial success of his poetry at the time.

In 1807 he engaged to write the *Irish Melodies*: Moore provided the lyrics and Sir John Stevenson adapted the melodies that had been recorded and published by Edward Bunting in his *General Collection of the Ancient Music of Ireland* (1796). The first two instalments appeared in 1808 and eight more followed till 1834. These songs had original lyrics, but Moore could not read Irish, and indeed had scant respect for the language, writing his lyrics with little reference to them.⁷ But there is a more general sense in which it is possible to understand Moore's work on the melodies as translation. Stevenson smoothed away the rougher edges of the original melodies and Moore provided words that would be palatable to the drawing-rooms of England; they did this in order to bring what they considered the 'national spirit' to a wide audience. Moore's description of this spirit is noteworthy:

It has often been remarked, and oftener felt, that our music is the truest of all comments upon our history. The tone of defiance, succeeded by the languor of despondency – a burst of turbulence dying away into softness – the sorrows of one moment lost in the levity of the next – and all that romantic mixture of mirth and sadness, which is naturally produced by the efforts of a lively temperament to shake off or forget the wrongs which lie upon it. Such are the features of our history and character, which we find strongly and faithfully reflected in our music; and there are many airs which, I think, it is difficult to listen to without recalling some period or event to which their expression seems peculiarly applicable.⁸