CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The Irish short story has been read, debated and lectured about to generations of students. A study by Deborah Averill, *The Irish Short Story from George Moore to Frank O'Connor*, came out in 1982, while two important collections of essays have been devoted to the subject: *The Irish Short Story*, edited by Patrick Rafroidi and Terence Brown, published in 1979, and *The Irish Short Story*, edited by James Kilroy, published in 1984. In recent years there have been as well many studies of the short stories of individual authors like James Joyce, Mary Lavin, John McGahern, William Trevor, Bryan MacMahon and others. Irish practitioners of the art, notably Seán O'Faoláin and Frank O'Connor, have written influential studies of the form, and there have been volumes devoted to the Irish short story in particular contexts, such as Michael Storey's *Representing the Troubles in Irish Short Fiction* (2004). We think we know very well what the modern Irish short story is, to the extent that another overview may well seem redundant.

Yet for a form often regarded, particularly in relation to the novel, as the pre-eminent Irish prose form, this handful of studies is numerically small. Even in Ireland, short fiction has been relegated to the margins of critical discourse, the short stories of major short story writers like Elizabeth Bowen treated as minor or apprentice pieces in comparison with their novels. The relative lack of attention to the genre is reflected in the fact that, for example, the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* has no separate section for the short story. Recent studies, such as *The Irish Novel in the Nineteenth Century*, edited by Jacqueline Belanger, and John Wilson Foster's *Irish Novels 1890–1940: New Bearings in Culture and Fiction*, have gone some way towards up-dating our view of the Irish novel, but there have been no comparable volumes devoted to the Irish short story. Moreover, earlier studies were naturally unable to take account of Irish writers' increased interest in the form during the last two decades of the twentieth century, an interest which shows no sign of

abating in the first decade of the twenty-first. The huge number of excellent short stories by a variety of contemporary Irish authors, including, for the first time, women writing in large numbers, urges a fresh consideration of the form.

In general terms, the short story, perhaps more than any other form, has been associated with modernity, both in terms of experimentation and theme. In her brief but insightful comments on the short story, Nadine Gordimer argues that the art of the short story, seeing 'by the light of the flash', makes it an art always of the present moment and that its 'fragmented and restless form' renders it ideally suited to the modern age.[1] The association of the short story with modernity would come as no surprise to Elizabeth Bowen, who judged the short story to be the most modern of forms, 'the child of this century', she wrote in 1937, and connected it with that other modern art form, film.[2] In the specific context of the Irish short story, however, these comments pose a challenge to the long-perceived relationship between the literary short story and the tradition of oral storytelling in Ireland, a relationship that has often been adduced to account for the centrality of the genre in the Irish canon. To compare Bowen's preface to *The Faber Book of Modern Short Stories* (1937) with Vivian Mercier's introduction to *Great Irish Short Stories* (1964) is to become aware of two entirely different ways of looking at the genre. Whilst Bowen stresses the form's newness and lack of tradition, Mercier's specific focus on the Irish short story leads him to emphasize its strong roots in the oral folk tradition.

Like Mercier, many writers and scholars have argued that the vibrancy of oral storytelling in Ireland is one of the reasons why the short story established itself as a characteristically Irish form, never suffering from the inferiority complex that plagued the Irish novel.[3] Other scholars have drawn a clear distinction between the copious and dramatic art of the storyteller and the tautness of the modern short story, operating through irony, suggestion and precision; between the oral tale's emphasis on chance and the unexpected, and the short story's demand for a logical and psychologically plausible sequence of events.[4] In his 'Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov', Walter Benjamin outlines the essential differences between oral storytelling and the literary short story. Whereas oral storytellers used tone, gesture and facial expression and relied on a shared sense of values with their community to help them tell their story, the modern short story writer, Benjamin argues, cannot rely on such shared experience and has only language as a tool. Benjamin goes on to point out that the subject matter is different: oral storytellers aimed to

convey something useful to their community, either a moral, some practical advice or a maxim. Though personality intruded heavily on the narration, storytellers rarely told stories about themselves and character development was unusual, character generally being presented in a single stroke.[5]

In his study of the contrasts between oral and literate cultures, Walter Ong goes further and argues that to write down oral material is irrevocably to alter it since the aims of oral and written narratives are entirely different.[6] In oral cultures, theme was dictated by the need to organize and conserve knowledge (of the history of the tribe or the tribal king). Style was governed by mnemonic needs, as in the use of formulas, patterns, repetitions, antithesis, alliteration, assonance, maxims and other techniques of the oral storyteller. The change to writing resulted in profound alterations, both in our thought processes and in narrative modes. Writing became analytical, inward-looking, sparsely linear, experimental; it eschewed the heroic and moved into the everyday. All these are characteristics of the modern short story.

The distinction between the oral tale and the modern short story seems clear, yet in Ireland the distinction breaks down. If the short story has generally been regarded as the characteristic Irish prose form, this implies a sense of community that challenges Benjamin's denial of shared values. Irish authors of short fiction often use the form to convey a message to their community, from Sheridan Le Fanu's submerged warnings to the Anglo-Irish, to Yeats' vision of a new order in *The Secret Rose*, to feminists' exposure of the hidden realities of Irish women's lives in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, sometimes drawing on motifs from Irish folklore. This suggests consciousness of an audience, however distanced it might seem in comparison with the storyteller's circle of listeners. Moreover, the advent of radio allowed writers to prolong the oral tradition through their readings. Notwithstanding his emphasis in *The Lonely Voice* (1962) on the solitary, critical reader, Frank O'Connor, when reading his stories for the radio, would alter or excise passages in the written story that interfered with his ability as a storyteller to engage directly with his audience. His work in the form reveals a preoccupation with retaining a warm human speaking voice that would reach out to the reader or listener; indeed, one of his criticisms of Joyce was that he had abandoned that voice.

The oral culture may be, literally, another world but it is one that in Ireland shadows even the English language short story. Elements of the storytelling tradition are visible in the work of William Carleton, George Moore, Seumas O'Kelly, Daniel Corkery, James Stephens, Frank

O'Connor, Bryan MacMahon and Benedict Kiely, to name only a few of the writers who have endeavoured to incorporate into their short fiction the speaking voice of oral tradition. If themes as well as techniques are considered, the list of Irish writers interested in the myths and legends, fairy and folk tales of oral tradition lengthens considerably to include writers as diverse as Sheridan Le Fanu, Oscar Wilde, W. B. Yeats, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne and Angela Bourke. Folk themes may have largely fallen into disfavour in the period following the Irish Revival, but more recent research into the oral tradition has prompted a fresh awareness of the complexities and subtleties of oral tale-telling so that to be an Irish short story writer even today is to be aware at some level of this other tradition.

Nonetheless, it is also true that one of the greatest Irish short story writers, namely Joyce, produced in *Dubliners* a collection that stylistically, at least, bears no connection with the oral tradition, and while William Carleton's *Traits and Stories* may have begun with storytelling around Ned M'Keown's fireside, the urgency of his desire to comment on Irish circumstances was such that he quickly found the storytelling tradition too constraining for his purposes and moved towards an omniscient narrator and standard English. Yeats may have joined Lady Gregory and other Revivalists in collecting Irish folk tales but his interest in folklore rapidly became subordinate to his personal literary and occult enthusiasms. Daniel Corkery was a strong exponent of the Gaelic storytelling tradition but it came to him second-hand, and the realist mode he adopted for his stories could not help but record its passing. Even a writer like Liam O'Flaherty, who was born into an Irish storytelling family, attested to the influence of foreign authors such as Maupassant and Gorky in his stories. In 'The Search for the Lost Husband' (*The Inland Ice and Other Stories*, 1997), Éilís Ní Dhuibhne draws on folklore but rewrites the traditional ending to render it more attuned to contemporary women's lives. Time after time, we will find that where Irish authors draw on the oral tradition they do not seek so much to reproduce oral techniques as to combine them with modern literary forms and themes.

There were other factors besides the link between the Irish short story and the Irish tradition of storytelling that account for the centrality of the form within the Irish canon. The material conditions in which Irish writers lived and worked influenced the development of the form. Financial necessity, for instance, impelled writers like Wilde and Yeats to make forays into short fiction at the end of the nineteenth century when the demise of the three-volume novel in England and the rise of small literary magazines encouraged writers' work in the genre. In the twentieth

century, the lucrative nature of the American magazine market stimulated development of short fiction generally and a large Irish American readership encouraged Irish writers towards the form. Magazines like the *New Yorker* did much to publicize the Irish short story at mid-century, and chapter six of this study examines the way in which their relationship with the *New Yorker* shaped Irish writers' handling of the form.

Sometimes, however, it was simply the case that the short form suited a writer's particular skills. This was notably true for Frank O'Connor, Seán O'Faoláin and Mary Lavin, though again, the material circumstances in which they were writing should not be underestimated: O'Faoláin despaired of encapsulating Ireland's contradictions in the novel form and Lavin admitted that her domestic responsibilities militated against producing novels. The pre-eminence of the form in the middle years of the twentieth century in Ireland may be partly accounted for by the international prominence of critical writing on the short story by Irish practitioners such as O'Connor and O'Faoláin. Both O'Connor's *The Lonely Voice* and O'Faoláin's *The Short Story* (1948) were important Irish contributions to establishing the short story as a serious art form with its own distinctive aesthetics. Their thesis that while the novel form suits a stable, structured society like nineteenth-century England, the short story prospers at times of social upheaval, was hugely influential on subsequent writers and critics. The lingering effects of this may be seen in John McGahern's explanation for the flourishing of the short story in Ireland – 'the short story is often stronger in less structured societies where locality and individualism are rampant'[7] – as well as in scholarly works presenting Ireland as a society uncongenial to the novel form.[8]

Ireland, however, was not unique in the inability of its culture to cohere into the novel form. As Graham Good points out, in nineteenth-century Germany, where delay in developing industry, national unity and a solid middle class hindered the introduction of the social novel, the novella became the favoured fictional genre, adapted as it was to the atypical and the regional.[9] In the United States, also, preconditions for the social novel were not fully present till the late nineteenth century and the tale became a popular form. In her preface to *The Faber Book of Modern Short Stories*, Bowen associates the American short story with the Irish short story, characterizing both as products of an uncertain society. The centrality of the short story to the American canon arguably played its part in the eagerness with which the work of O'Connor, O'Faoláin, Lavin and others, was promoted by American reviewers and publishers mid-century; in other words, the importance of the short story in the

American canon may have influenced the enthusiasm of American readers and publishers to associate Irish writing also with the form. Irish writers, in turn, acknowledged the skill of American short story writers in handling the genre, witness O'Connor's admiration for Sherwood Anderson and J. D. Salinger in *The Lonely Voice* and O'Faoláin's for Hemingway in *The Short Story*.

Since Ireland is not unique in regarding the genre as central to its national canon, the moment of emergence of the modern Irish short story needs to be set in its international context, something O'Connor himself did in *The Lonely Voice*, where he did not limit himself to study of the Irish short story but dealt with a range of international writers. If writers like O'Connor and O'Faoláin later came to admire the American short story, it was French and Russian authors who first caught their attention, and it was their influence that enabled the Irish short story to shed some of the limitations of the oral tradition and develop as a modern literary form. Chapter four considers the influence of Russian writers, particularly Turgenev and Chekhov, and of French writers like Flaubert and Maupassant on the development of the modern short story in Ireland. Foreign authors continued to influence Irish writers after that date, of course; witness Mary Lavin's admiration for Chekhov, Turgenev, Katherine Mansfield and Eudora Welty, or John McGahern's repeated allusions to Chekhov and Proust.

Definitions of the short story are notoriously tricky to pin down but any history of the genre needs to consider, at least briefly, the distinction between the short story and other forms of fiction to which it is adjacent. For Valerie Shaw in *The Short Story* (1983), hybridity is the essential characteristic of the short story, embracing as it does fable, fairy story, ghost story, anecdote, sketch, tale and novella: 'the short story is an independent yet hybrid genre, which connects with other art forms at various points and keeps eluding definition except as an interplay of tensions and antitheses'.[10] Suzanne Ferguson has likewise argued that the short story as a genre possesses no distinct characteristics; she regards it simply as part of the general emergence of the impressionist movement.[11]

Despite these warnings about the fluidity of the genre, there have been attempts at more precise definitions. One of the earliest came in 1842, in Edgar Allan Poe's review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, in which he defined the short prose tale as distinguished from and superior to the long narrative by its unity of focus and singleness of effect. For Poe, it was the short form's intensity and compression that distinguished it from the novel, or even the novella, and it was its artistic

patterning that differentiated it from the anecdote. Events, he insisted, should only be included where they contributed to the overall theme: 'the unity of effect or impression is a point of the greatest importance'.[12] In the hands of a writer like Poe, the nineteenth-century tale approaches the modern short story in its intensity but remains distinguished from it on account of the characters' lack of inner consciousness; in a tale by Poe or, in the Irish context, James Stephens, characters generally represent a state of mind or a psychological trait.

Following on from Poe, practitioners like Chekhov and theorists like Susan Lohafer have argued that it is the focus on the ending that distinguishes the short story as a form.[13] Whereas the novel may contain incidental events, everything in the short story has to be selected and controlled in preparation for the conclusion. The novel may illustrate by means of accumulating detail; the short story achieves its effects through compression, relying on suggestion and implication rather than multiplicity. The first drafts of a writer like Mary Lavin may have extended to over a hundred pages and contained seven or eight characters, but in the revised versions they were cut down till everything irrelevant to the overall effect and purpose had been ruthlessly stripped away and only two or three characters remained. This editing process was not simply to suit the publication requirements of the literary magazines in which Lavin's stories were initially published but was an essential part of her methods as an artist, geared to achieving maximum focus and clarity.[14] The novel provides us with a world we can sink into, whereas in the short story artistic considerations are paramount. This is perhaps what Frank O'Connor was getting at when he wrote: 'What Turgenev and Chekhov give us is not so much the brevity of the short story compared with the expansiveness of the novel as the purity of an art form that is motivated by its own necessities rather than by our convenience.'[15]

Poe characterized the short story not only by the unity of its effects, but also by its element of suggestion, requiring from the reader an attentiveness to what is going on beneath the surface equal to that of the writer. This attentiveness he termed 'a kindred art'.[16] In her study of the form, Clare Hanson, too, stresses the liminality of the short story, hovering on the border between known and unknown worlds and, like Poe, points to the concomitant effort required by readers to exert their imagination to fill in the gaps in an often elliptical text.[17] In a modern short story we accept elision and mystery, hence its appropriateness for exploring themes related to hauntings and terror: Elizabeth Bowen wrote many ghost stories, but only one, not particularly successful, novel of a

haunting. Charles May, editor of the influential study, *The New Short Story Theories*, sees the form as maintaining an affinity with the transcendent and the mythic: 'the tradition of the short story as descended from myth, folk tale, fable and romance forms, drives it towards focusing on eternal values rather than temporal ones and sacred or unconscious reality rather than profane or everyday reality'.[18] A historical survey allows us to see that while in Ireland this definition may hold true for writers of the Irish Literary Revival and for some contemporary writers such as Éilís Ní Dhuibhne and Angela Bourke, it does not suit the mimetic fictional worlds of mid twentieth-century Irish writers like Frank O'Connor, Seán O'Faoláin and Michael McLaverty. May's further characterization of the short story as an intuitive form dealing with the subconscious, operating through dreams and metaphor, foregrounding style and rejecting chronology in favour of artistic patterning, suggests an alliance with modernism that in Ireland finds its flowering in Joyce's *Dubliners* and is later picked up by writers like John McGahern and William Trevor.

In relation to other forms, as early as 1901, Brander Matthews distinguished the short story from the sketch by positing that 'while a Sketch may be still-life, in a Short story something always happens'.[19] This is a distinction that will be valuable when we come to Liam O'Flaherty's work, where his nature sketches take on aspects of the short story through movement. The novella is another form adjacent to the short story and adopted by several of our writers, notably Mary Lavin, Maeve Brennan, William Trevor, and Colum McCann. Graham Good judges the novella to be mid-way between the novel and the short story, permitting a more complex line of action to be developed, yet never moving too far from the single focus of the short story. A novella may redevelop a situation, allowing for more lengthy character revelation and a more extended time frame than a short story, while retaining greater thematic intensity than a novel.[20] Yeats' 'John Sherman' is one example, discussed in the interchapter to chapter three.

Frank O'Connor dated the appearance of the first literary short story to 1840 with the publication of Nikolai Gogol's 'The Overcoat'.[21] Later critics have tended to concur, sometimes adding in the names of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe, both of whom were writing tales in the 1830s and 1840s that marked the transition from older forms of romance and folk tale to the tightly woven structure and psychological plausibility of the modern story form.[22] There are disputes, however, as to when the modern Irish short story began. Frank O'Connor and Deborah Averill locate its origins some sixty years after Gogol's 'The Overcoat'

with the appearance of George Moore's collection, *The Untilled Field*, in 1903. O'Connor's influential anthology, *Classic Irish Short Stories*, originally published as *Modern Irish Short Stories* in 1957, begins with George Moore and ranges in a typical trajectory through the stories of, among others, Edith Somerville and Martin Ross, Daniel Corkery, James Joyce, James Stephens, Liam O'Flaherty, Seán O'Faoláin, O'Connor himself, Michael McLaverty, Mary Lavin, James Plunkett and Elizabeth Bowen. For some scholars, such as Patrick Rafroidi, the publication of Somerville and Ross' *Some Experiences of an Irish R.M.* in 1899 marks the beginning of the Irish short story.[23] Others, like Seamus Deane, go back to the stories of William Carleton.[24] Vivian Mercier's anthology, *Great Irish Short Stories* (1964), emphasizes the link between the oral tradition and the modern literary short story by including translations and adaptations from folk tales by John Millington Synge, Augusta Gregory, Douglas Hyde and Gerald Griffin, before commencing his selection of literary short narratives with Carleton. Benedict Kiely demonstrates his commitment to the oral tradition in his *Penguin Book of Irish Short Stories* (1981) by printing two early Irish tales, one translated by Augusta Gregory, the other by himself, before beginning with Carleton. William Trevor's anthology, *The Oxford Book of Irish Short Stories* (1989), is wider-ranging than any of these, finding room for Seumas MacManus' retelling of a Donegal fairy story, as well as for Anglo-Irish writers like Maria Edgeworth, Oliver Goldsmith and Sheridan Le Fanu, and a handful of contemporary women writers.

To some extent, the starting-point for any study of the short story is always going to be arbitrary since stories, in one form or another, have been around as long as human life. An examination of the Irish language short story might have a completely different time scale going back, as the anthologies of Mercier and Kiely indicate, to the tales of the Ulster cycle or the twelfth-century story-ballads of the Fianna. Since the object of this book is not to discuss storytelling in general, nor folk lore, nor the Irish language tradition, all of which would require separate studies, twentieth-century pioneers of the short story in the Irish language, such as Patrick Pearse, Pádraic Ó Conaire, Máirtín Ó Cadhain, Seán Mac Mathúna, Biddy Jenkinson, have had to be excluded. Nevertheless, rather than beginning simply with Moore, this volume adopts the practice of recent anthologists in going back into the nineteenth century to take a look at precursors of the modern short story in Ireland. This longer historical perspective will allow us to bring forward hitherto neglected writers. In studies of the Irish short story dating from the 1970s and early 1980s, the

contribution of writers such as Frank O'Connor, Seán O'Faoláin and Liam O'Flaherty was naturally seen as central; with a longer historical vantage point, new writers come into focus. The rise in the number of Irish women published during the 1980s and 1990s, for example, encourages us to look back and uncover a strong, though neglected, tradition of Irish women's attention to the short story form. The historical context will give us not only the well-known examples of Somerville and Ross, Elizabeth Bowen and Mary Lavin, but lesser-known early writers such as Rosa Mulholland and Emily Lawless, both of whom wrote noteworthy short fiction, as well as neglected early and mid twentieth-century writers like Norah Hoult and Maeve Brennan. In the contemporary period, the extraordinary flowering of short stories by women writers has as yet received little critical attention.

A fresh examination of the way in which Irish women have used the short story raises the question as to whether their treatment of the form modifies our view of the Irish short story. O'Connor's association of the short story with voices excluded from the ruling narrative of the nation seems peculiarly appropriate for Irish women, an often submerged population group within the public life of the nation. At the same time, the stories of Somerville and Ross, Mary Lavin and Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, for example, resist his theory of 'the lonely voice' by writing out of and to a community. Indeed O'Connor had difficulty fitting Mary Lavin into his framework for the Irish short story: 'The point of view is perhaps too exclusively feminine,' he confessed.[25] It is a statement that would seem to reveal a pressing need for the canon of the Irish short story to be looked at again in a way that would allow for the admission of short stories by Irish women. Attention to representative stories by male and female writers of each period in the interchapters will, it is hoped, go some way to redressing the gender balance and to determining whether giving equal weight to women writers alters our view of the Irish short story itself.

Clearly there is a tension between the Irish short story as a transmitter of tradition and its current position as the form that perhaps best expresses Irish modernity. It cannot be a coincidence that the renewed Irish interest in the short story form in the last two decades of the twentieth century happened at a time when the country was undergoing an unprecedented period of change and growth. The short story's ability to encapsulate fleeting insights allowed it to reflect more easily than the novel, which requires a more comprehensive vision, the rapid succession of changes that Ireland underwent in the 1990s. The short story's presentation of brief moments of existence, 'something glimpsed from the