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978-1-107-00951-6 - A Cultural History of the Irish Novel, 1790–1829

Claire Connolly

Excerpt

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Introduction

This book offers a cultural history of the Irish novel in the period between the radical decade of the 1790s and the gaining of Catholic Emancipation in 1829. During those years, a group of talented Irish writers developed and advanced such innovative forms as the national tale and the historical novel. They wrote fictions that took Ireland as their topic and setting, often imagining its history via domestic plots that addressed wider issues of dispossession and inheritance. Their novels regularly incorporated footnotes and extra-fictional material as spaces of cultural mediation. Such openness to contemporary politics, as well as to recent historiography, antiquarian scholarship, books of travel, poetry, song, plays and memoirs, produced novels of notable permeability. Irish fiction is defined by this porosity: the novel became an active cultural agent in the period because of its ability to absorb and reshape other discourses in the context of wider shifts in the aesthetics of locality and nationality, the politics of representation and the meaning of national culture. At the same time, however, Irish novels circulated as commodities on the cultural market, and as such possess material as well as ideal forms of value.¹ The mode of analysis proposed in this book is a cultural history alert to the rich array of relations that existed between these novels, the world from which they emerged, and the print culture in which they participated.

A major aim is to restore seriousness and nuance to our understanding of the Irish fiction of the romantic period, and to refuse or at least redirect readings that treat the novels as so many failed efforts to contain the hectic world of early nineteenth-century Ireland. The fictions which I discuss have been repeatedly characterised in terms of an engagement with political reality that is nonetheless blocked by a tendency towards 'wishful thinking and happy endings'. These 'modes' – surely quintessentially fictional ones – are thought to issue in forms of 'premature closure' and a failed effort 'to seal off the injuries of the past from the present'.² In such accounts, Irish novels are at one and the same time deeply and

compellingly involved in the situation they depict, yet distressingly unable to produce the right kind of combination of political and aesthetic resolution. Imagined as ‘desperately struggling to encompass the wildly divergent class divisions of pre-Famine Ireland within one fictive frame’, the nineteenth-century Irish novel is fated never to intervene effectively in a situation that it is barely able to represent.³ Whereas once these fictions were judged patronising because alienated from the situation that they sought to represent – ‘traveller’s tales’, as Daniel Corkery put it – more recently, it is the supposed combination of effort and failure that has generated comment. The idea that Irish national novels carry the burden of a specific political project – fuller union between Ireland and Britain – remains, but critics now condemn the fictions for both their presumed politics and their inability to realise them.

The novels of Maria Edgeworth have played a key role in these debates. It has become almost routine to cite a letter written by Edgeworth to her brother in India, dated 19 February 1834, in which she updates him on the progress of her latest novel: ‘Though “Helen” cannot reach you for a year’, she writes, their younger sister Fanny ‘has desired Bentley to send you a copy before it is published’. The novel, Edgeworth warns, has ‘no humour in it, and no Irish character’:

It is impossible to draw Ireland as she now is in a book of fiction – realities are too strong, party passions too violent to bear to see, or care to look at their faces in the looking-glass. The people would only break the glass, and curse the fool who held the mirror up to nature – distorted nature, in a fever. We are in too perilous a case to laugh, humour would be out of season, worse than bad taste. Whenever the danger is past, as the man in the sonnet says,

‘We may look back on the hardest part and laugh.’

Then I shall be ready to join in the laugh.⁴

Described as ‘prophetic and astute’ by Declan Kiberd, the letter seems to address an unfolding democratic history, the beginnings of which Edgeworth recognises (and dislikes) in the O’Connellite mass politics of the 1830s.⁵

Edgeworth’s observations on reality and fiction have been widely understood as ‘an angry acknowledgement of Irish resistance’ to modes of literary representation.⁶ Even as she confesses to the impossibility of representing Ireland, however, Edgeworth draws attention to the work of fiction as both process and product. The practical arrangements with the publisher, Richard Bentley, regarding the posting of *Helen* stand in contrast to her evocation of the work of writing in the image of ‘a

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book of fiction' that is also a shattered mirror. The letter further contains references to diplomatic correspondence, 'domestic occurrences', Irish orthography and family gossip. All of this is leavened by quotations from Shakespeare, comparisons between Ireland and India, and Edgeworth's wonder at the heat endured by her brother: she is amazed at the '*puddle* [of] ink' that stained his last '*dropping* letter' home. The focus on the practicalities of writing remains closely entwined with Edgeworth's commitment to proper and informed modes of literary observation: less often quoted than the lines above concerning the problem of representing Ireland is her avowed intention to 'think of it continually, and listen, and look, and read'.⁷

Such an interplay between fragile fictionality and an elusive reality is shared by many of the other Irish novels of the romantic period. It is the complex relationship between fiction and fact – rather than any purposeful set of 'interests and protocols', let alone the "civilizing mission" of the English to the Irish' – that makes these novels distinctive.⁸ There has, however, been a tendency to keep Edgeworth separate from a radical national tale tradition exemplified by Sydney Owenson (later Lady Morgan).⁹ Ina Ferris's stimulating and influential study of the national tale leaves the novels of Edgeworth largely to one side, partly on the grounds that hers was a 'critical profile' that was growing in prominence at the time of Ferris's writing.¹⁰ The extent to which Ferris's choice of authors determines her critical models is worth considering: the often compelling analysis of the 'mobilities and aggravations' at work in the national tale derives from what is in fact a rather narrow corpus of texts.¹¹ Ferris is, however, always fair and even-handed in her criticism, and scrupulous in her analyses. Less accomplished studies of the Irish novel are marred by similar questions of exclusion, a problem greatly enhanced by the tendency of many critics to recycle judgements that were never in the first place the product of a full engagement with the breadth of writing characteristic of the period. Ferris's concern for literary texture and representational strategies found within the national tale is not widely replicated.¹²

An associated problem concerns the new prominence of the critical category of 'national tale' itself, often used to differentiate one kind of fictional writing about the past from the historical novel proper and now quite broadly applied to early nineteenth-century Irish fiction.¹³ Katie Trumpener's contrast between the national tale's 'thick evocation of place' and the historical novel's 'plot of loss and growth through historical change' boldly re-imagines the field of Irish and Scottish fiction in

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terms of a system of generic evolution. Her thesis that ‘the emergence of the national tale out of the novels of the 1790s and the subsequent emergence of the historical novel out of the national tale can be plotted quite precisely, book by book, through the 1810s’ has been widely accepted.¹⁴ Yet it is very difficult to locate important Irish novels such as Edgeworth’s *Patronage* (1814) within this account. Irish national fictions in fact are characterised by an interpenetration of topographical and historical modes, while the generic modes characteristic of the first national tales were to surface not only in historical and gothic novels of this period but also in such sub-genres as silver-fork fictions and nautical and military tales. Irish writers such as Lady Blessington, William Hamilton Maxwell and Charles Lever all play key roles in the developments of these latter trends. The present study acknowledges the influence of Trumpener’s trail-blazing argument but makes a more cohesive case for the Irish novel as a single cultural phenomenon with, however, far greater evidence of generic and sub-generic diversity at work than can be conveyed by the designation ‘national tale’.

A new model for understanding the fictions in terms of the cultural history of their own moment is a corollary to this conceptualisation of the Irish novel as a coherent cultural entity. For David Lloyd, the nineteenth-century Irish novel is condemned to be judged in relation to either Joyce’s modernist masterpieces on the one hand or monuments of Victorian realism on the other.¹⁵ In contrast, developments in and debates about Romantic-era prose fiction represent the chief axis of comparison in this book, which, rather than forging ‘the theoretical terms in which the atypicality of the Irish novel can be analysed’, discovers fictions that are highly characteristic of the everyday world from which they emerge.¹⁶

The methods advanced in my book consist of a close and detailed engagement with a wide range of novels, contextualised by a correspondingly careful reading of history, informed by recent scholarship. Such attention to contingent meanings in literature and history is informed, in turn, by early nineteenth-century debates about place, location and the apprehension of cultural distinctiveness. This mode of analysis has particular relevance for novels that were published in the midst of a great debate about the importance and meaning of local and intimately experienced detail, and in the aftermath of Edmund Burke’s defence of a politics founded on a specific, just and timely engagement with history, over and above any abstract theory of rights or politics of perfectibility.

Burke’s death in 1797 meant that he did not live to see much of the Irish cultural response to and reroutings of these debates. Yet a broadly

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Burkean metanarrative – with the granting of Catholic Emancipation as representative of the kind of gradual change which he favoured – has been taken by many critics to represent the political tendencies of Irish romanticism. Seamus Deane's stringently expressed suspicion of this Burkean metanarrative has been influential in its turn. Early nineteenth-century Irish culture is, in Deane's reading, trapped within 'the history of a consolidated effort, frustrated by prejudice but implacable in its direction, to recruit Irish Catholics into the Union with the help of the Irish Catholic Church while appeasing the endless fears and bigotries of Irish Protestants'.¹⁷ Gradual accommodation within the Union functions as 'a kind of armature within which different works are produced': neither the internal complexities nor the external cultural life of such works matter much.

In this book, in contrast, I have gone against the grain of a supposed gradualist tendency and have advanced a fuller appreciation of both the wide field of Irish fiction and the internal workings of many of the novels. It is from such a detailed engagement with the Irish novel, rather than from bald summaries of the political tendency of one author or another, that a fuller appreciation of the rich political meanings of these books can emerge.

BOOKS, AUTHORS AND READERS

Before developing my wider argument, it may be helpful to establish some of the salient facts regarding the material history of the Irish novel. How can we define, so as to begin to analyse, a distinct corpus of Irish fiction in this period? And what difference does my choice of dates make?

A starting point in the 1790s anchors this study within an expansion in popular fiction about Ireland and a growth in radical politics on the island. The decade yields, according to Ian Campbell Ross, 'considerable evidence that Irish readers were developing a taste for national fiction related to but distinct from that of British novel readers'.¹⁸ Nineteenth-century Irish novels draw on and adapt from a range of earlier eighteenth-century fictions, which are in turn informed by a rich blend of Gaelic history and European philosophy.¹⁹ The earlier eighteenth century had seen such notable achievements in fiction as novels by Laurence Sterne, Henry Brooke and Oliver Goldsmith, while fictions by Sarah Butler, Charles Johnstone and Thomas Amory allow us to see a distinctly Irish fictional aesthetic in development. There is good evidence to suggest that the national tale was not so much born with as rather first branded by

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Sydney Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl: A National Tale*; such 'patriotic' titles as *The Irish Guardian* (1776), *The Fair Hibernian* (1789) and *The Irish Heiress* (1797) already link national politics with domestic plots.²⁰

It is possible to discern an Irish readership in this period too. Máire Kennedy posits the presence of 'an interested female public' in 1790s Munster, who supported via subscription several novels of the decade, including Anna Millikin's *Corfe Castle* (1793), *Eva: an Old Irish Story* (1795) and Sophia Briscoe's *History of Julia and Cecilia* (1797).²¹ Evidence of circles of engaged and interested readers of contemporary fiction can be found in Edgeworth's extensive correspondence. Yet the wider question of a separate Irish readership for the Irish novel remains difficult to establish. Toby Barnard suggests that functional literacy in English was 'permeating the modestly circumstanced in the towns' by the middle of the eighteenth century.²² Rolf and Magda Loeber's work on fiction written for and available to cottagers and their children helps to nuance further our understanding of the role of national fictions within the sharply stratified social worlds of early nineteenth-century Ireland.²³

Undeniably, however, these are novels with a transnational dimension. Many of the novelists either lived in London or spent long periods there, while British publishers account for the vast majority of Irish novels published. The flow of culture was not only one way, however: in 1816 Maria Edgeworth complained in a letter to her friend Lady Romilly of how 'the heart is sick with hoping and hoping before books reach Ireland'.²⁴ The Irish novel is located at this intersection of these dynamics of proximity and distance. Increasingly close political and cultural connections between Britain and Ireland in the aftermath of the Act of Union challenge any attempt to disaggregate an Irish aspect to the overall picture of the novel in this period. The extension of the Copyright Act of 1709 to Ireland in 1801 all but killed off an Irish publishing industry that was reliant on markets for cheap reprints in Ireland, Britain, the American colonies and the West Indies.²⁵ The anonymous *False Appearances*, Sydney Owenson's *St Clair; or, the Heiress of Desmond* and Sarah Isdell's *The Vale of Louisiana: an American Tale* represent rare examples of Dublin-published novels in the immediate post-Union period, all dating from 1803.²⁶ John Connor of Cork, who had commercial connections with the Minerva Press in London, published local author Anna Milliken's *Plantagenet* (1802) and *The Rival Chiefs* (1804).²⁷

As Jacqueline Belanger has shown, patterns in the production of Irish fiction mirror the overall British picture: an upward surge from the 1790s, with a 'slight dip' between 1800 and 1802; a falling off of production

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of new novels in the 1810s; and a renewed rise in the 1820s, interrupted by the publishing crash of 1825–6.²⁸ Of 2,256 novels published between 1800 and 1829, over a hundred were Irish. Belanger's checklist gives 114 'Ireland-related' titles appearing between 1800 and 1829, but excludes, for example, the Dublin-published novel of the American war of independence, *The Vale of Louisiana*, as well as important works by Edgeworth, Owenson and Maturin that are not set in Ireland. The significantly more inclusive definition of 'Irish fiction' adopted by Rolf and Magda Loeber would bring Belanger's figure closer to two hundred.²⁹ Numbers of novels actually published in Ireland were tiny, certainly until the 1820s.³⁰

The 1820s and 1830s saw the growth of an indigenous Irish publishing industry, which was to remain 'somewhat stable' until the 1860s.³¹ Some types of fiction (chiefly chapbooks and novelettes, often sensational or Gothic in nature) were published in Dublin from the 1810s onwards. John Cumming (1811 onward) published *Tales for Cottagers* (1814), written by the Quaker diarist Mary Leadbeater and her niece Elizabeth Shackleton; *Nice Distinctions*, a novel by Miss Driscoll; *Eccentricity*, a novel in three volumes by Mrs MacNally; and the anonymous *The West-Indian: Or, The Brothers* followed in 1820. The two latter titles are the first Dublin-produced triple-decker novels. All three of the novels had London co-publishers: Longman in the case of *Nice Distinctions* and *Eccentricity*, and A. K. Newman and Co. for *The West-Indian*.

The histories of the Irish novel and the British publishing industry are closely intertwined for the period studied here. The publishing history of the earliest national tales ties them quite closely to radical trends in 1790s fiction, particularly to the London-based Jacobin publishers Joseph Johnson and Richard Phillips. Phillips, who published Sydney Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806), was imprisoned in 1793 for selling Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* in Leicester; in London he published chiefly popular works of instruction, aimed at the lower classes, as well as fictions by William Godwin and John Thelwall. Johnson, a radical Unitarian, published William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft, Thomas Paine, Henry Fuseli and Joseph Priestley. Maria Edgeworth's relationship with Joseph Johnson was established via her father, Richard Lovell Edgeworth, and his Lunar Society contacts; when Johnson died, in 1809, the publisher's nephews, Rowland Hunter and John Miles, took over Edgeworth's business. In the period between 1809 and 1815 (her most commercially successful years), Richard Lovell Edgeworth dealt with Miles on his daughter's behalf. Hunter, who took over the business, overreached himself with the £2,100 he offered for *Patronage* and was later to complain that he

lost money by publishing Edgeworth's books. On his deathbed, Richard Lovell Edgeworth advised taking his *Memoirs*, on which he had collaborated with his daughter, to John Murray, but Edgeworth remained with Hunter until relations finally broke down in 1827. Richard Bentley published *Helen* in 1834, for which Walter Scott's son-in-law, J. G. Lockhart, helped her secure the very good price of £1,100.³²

The Irish writers that came after Edgeworth were less cautious in their dealings, none less so than Lady Morgan, who moved from publisher to publisher in search of better deals and whose career keeps track with the rapidly changing world of London publishing in the first three decades of the nineteenth century. Morgan's difficult relations with her publishers find some parallels in the case of Charles Robert Maturin, whose early fictions were published with Longman and then Henry Colburn, but whose relationships with Archibald Constable (publisher of his *Women* of 1818 and *Melmoth the Wanderer*, 1820) were especially tangled. Maturin corresponded with Walter Scott from 1812, and, like many other impecunious writers of the period, sought the latter's patronage via his publishing contacts. As Sharon Ragaz puts it in her detailed study of this triangular relationship: 'Eager to propitiate Scott, the principal author on whom his firm depended, and aware of Maturin's by now established if still somewhat shaky reputation, Constable agreed to take *Women*, and the experience associated with the publication history of this novel underlies the complexities and strains of Melmoth's later journey into print.'³³

Both Edgeworth and Owenson went on to have careers that spanned the succeeding decades. Edgeworth's last publication was a temperance tale for young people, *Orlandino*, published in 1848. Irish language translations of Edgeworth's *Forgive and Forget* and *Rosanna* were published in Belfast and Dublin in 1833. Like Edgeworth, Morgan survived the Famine. After the publication of *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys* (1827), she turned increasingly to journalism. She elicited public controversy for the last time with her 1851 *Letter to Cardinal Wiseman* (1851), in which she upheld a claim made in her earlier travel book, *Italy*, that the ceremonial chair of St Peter in the Vatican bore a message in Arabic proclaiming Mahomet as the true prophet.

As Edgeworth and Morgan continued to write and publish, a group of talented Irish male writers who shared a Catholic upbringing came to prominence. Thomas Moore, who already had made a name with his early amatory verses, his political satires and more famous *Melodies*, published 'a little prose work on Ireland' with Longman in 1824.³⁴ *Memoirs of Captain Rock* aims 'to awaken the drowsy ear' of the British parliament

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with a tale of Ireland's wrongs that melds established narrative conventions into a new form of imagined cultural biography.³⁵ A letter that Moore received from Dublin in 1824 informed him that 'Rock's the boy':

I cannot describe to you the sensation that Captain Rock seems to make here, the Editor of the D[ublin]. E[vening]. Post assured me that he had heard that in the Country they are subscribing three shillings and sixpences to buy a Copy and should not be surprised if it was pirated. We had not a Copy remaining this morning and today 2 o Clock received 50 by Case making 200 of which only 16 remain so send me 50 by Coach and 100 more by Case.³⁶

William Parnell's *Maurice and Berghetta* (1819) yields a different kind of evidence of the emergence of a distinct Irish, Catholic-oriented market for Irish novels. The novelist and Wicklow MP, William Parnell, claimed of his novel that he 'did not write for English readers, but with the hope of forming a popular book that should interest the peasantry of Ireland'. Parnell, who had had been the first to propose the idea that a voluntary tax paid by Irish peasants would 'give union to the Catholic body' (Daniel O'Connell's famous 'Catholic rent'), was politically interested in ways in which 'a vague feeling of importance from their number' could be translated into an effective Catholic campaign.³⁷ With *Maurice and Berghetta*, Parnell sought to cultivate a distinct Catholic readership and a rare Dublin edition of the novel (published by Richard Coyne in 1820) is adapted to meet the presumed needs of a popular Catholic audience. Changes include a smaller, cheaper format, as well as revisions to the plot.³⁸

Yet the close relationship between Irish books and London publishers continued throughout the 1820s, and shapes the careers of John and Michael Banim and Gerald Griffin. Catholics such as Moore, the Banims and Griffin are sometimes thought to herald indigenous ownership of the genre of the novel. Yet, just as often, it is the struggle 'with the problem of how to depict Ireland' that occupies their critics.³⁹ Such a struggle can be seen rather starkly in their regular switches of publisher and form. Gerald Griffin's one-volume *Holland-Tide; or, Munster Popular Tales* was published with Simkins early in 1827 and his *Tales of the Munster Festivals* in the autumn of the same year with Marshall and Saunders and Otley. The latter firm published Griffin's subsequent fictions, *The Collegians* and *The Rivals and Tracy's Ambition*, both of which appeared in 1829 in three volumes. The Banims' case is highly unusual in that these two brothers embarked on a collaborative writing career that traversed the Irish Sea. Their story seems to enact many of the paradigmatic splits that characterise the field of Irish fiction in the period. One of John Banim's last letters,

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to the publisher John Murray, refers to ‘two volumes of the English Tales of which I have had the pleasure of speaking to you’, and suggests that Banim was working on ‘an English tale’ during his final period of severe illness.⁴⁰

The passing into law of Catholic Emancipation in 1829 marks an end to this formative phase of the Irish novel. It is worth noticing briefly here, however, the continued lives of the fictions, especially as they were reprinted, translated and adapted throughout the nineteenth century. Although the transgeneric, transcontinental and transatlantic afterlives of these novels are beyond the scope of the present study, the question of anthologies and multi-volume collections of novels is more immediately relevant. Books were still more borrowed than bought during the early decades of the nineteenth century, which meant that publishers paid well for copyright but fostered ‘a cult of exclusivity’.⁴¹ Changes in technology (the steam-driven rotary press, the development of stereotype plates and mechanised paper production) drove a new interest among publishers in the 1830s in collected and serial editions of fiction.⁴² Edgeworth’s *Belinda* (1801) and *The Modern Griselda* (1805) had already been republished as part of Anna Letitia Barbauld’s fifty-volume series of *British Novelists* (1810),⁴³ while her best-known Irish novels appeared originally in series form, as part of her *Tales of Fashionable Life*. Meanwhile, Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* and Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Vicar of Wakefield* were reprinted in volumes five and nine of Ballantyne’s *Novelist’s Library* (1821–4).

Henry Colburn (from 1829 in partnership with Richard Bentley) followed his monthly *Modern Novelists* series with a nineteen-volume set of *Irish National Tales*, priced at 4s per volume and in octavo format and announced alongside a new twenty-volume set entitled *The Naval and Military Library*. Contemporary advertisements describe the *Irish National Tales* volumes as eclipsing even ‘the cheapness of the Waverley Novels’ (at 5s), and as ‘of a handsome size, good paper and print, and neatly lettered in green and gold’.⁴⁴ The series, also advertised as the ‘Library of Irish Romance’,⁴⁵ is described as seeking ‘to accomplish, as far as possible, for Irish Story, what Sir Walter Scott has done for Scottish national history, by collecting together all the modern celebrated works illustrative of the manners and peculiarities of the Sister Kingdom’.⁴⁶ The claim reforms the relationship between Scott and Irish fiction at least twice over: first by reversing Scott’s own original expression of a debt to Edgeworth and second by making the role of the publisher rather than the novelists decisive in this process. For all the claims, however, this was not a full