Introduction

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This volume represents the first comprehensive overview of Irish women's literary and cultural production from the early modern period to the present day. Its appearance is timely, in that there is now a solid foundation of research on women's writings across this historical period and a significant number of scholars and critics are working in the field, but it is also undoubtedly belated when considered in relation to the development of feminist literary criticism and feminist literary history in both Britain and America. The reasons for the comparatively slow acknowledgment of the value and importance of women's writing in the Irish context are complex but also instructive, in that an analysis of inhibiting factors has to a degree helped to shape the critical methods and approaches used by scholars of Irish women's writing. In turn, the perspectives and insights produced by critics in the field of women's writing have contributed to a more critical interrogation of the assumptions that have underpinned constructions of the Irish literary tradition in the post-Revival period. In this introduction, we will firstly consider the specific context in which the writing of this history of modern Irish women's literature has taken shape, before outlining some of the themes and interpretative paradigms that emerge across the different chapters of the volume.

In the preface to the 1994 reissue of B. G. MacCarthy's *The Female Pen: Women Writers and Novelists 1621–1818*, Janet Todd remarks that it has, for scholars of early women's writing, 'the kind of status achieved in feminist theory by Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* or Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*'.[1] Its significance for scholars and critics of women's writing in Ireland is much less straightforward. MacCarthy, who was Professor of English at University College Cork, was indeed remarkable in her anticipation of feminist methods and perspectives that did not fully emerge in the academy until several decades later. Her book, however, is notable in its inability to celebrate the achievements of Irish women writers. She engages in a pioneering act of what would later be termed

feminist recovery, tracing a female tradition that links writers such as Mary Davys, Frances Sheridan, Elizabeth Griffith and Maria Edgeworth – but the fact that all of these women were Irish either by birth or upbringing is never mentioned; their work registers as part of a literary history of women's writing, but its Irish context is invisible. The invisibility is all the more remarkable given MacCarthy's own cultural location and suggests a powerful occlusion of women's role in literary production in Ireland. Some fifty years later, with the publication the *Field Day Anthology*, a landmark in Irish literary studies, Irish women writers were marginalized in a different way, by dramatic under-representation in a work that had set out to redraw the map of Irish literary culture. The apparently unconscious omission was all the more striking, given the anthology's aim of accommodating 'micronarratives', its pioneering coverage of a long historical time span and its inclusion of works in Latin, Irish and English.

The *Field Day* controversy was in many ways indicative of the progress that had been made in the project of recovering women writers excluded from the Irish literary canon. Ann Owens Weekes's groundbreaking study of six writers, *Irish Women Writers: An Uncharted Tradition*, had appeared the year before, in 1990, and the disappointment of many with the anthology stemmed from the fact that it 'coincided with a perceived flowering of women's writing, political activism and feminist scholarship in Ireland'.[2] The controversy was also a significant catalyst for research on women's writing, culminating notably in the publication in 2002 of the 'supplementary' volumes four and five, charting 'women's writing and traditions'. The sheer quantity of material contained in these volumes generated a mixed reception, with some criticizing what they deemed to be an undiscriminating approach and a disregard for aesthetic criteria; the amount of material made available also created something of a lag in terms of its reception. But the impact of *Field Day IV & V* has, with the passage of time, become increasingly significant, as can be seen throughout the chapters of this history, and it has the potential to grow still further when the digitization of all five volumes is completed. The ten years that separated the first three volumes of *Field Day* from its later companion volumes witnessed other significant publications, including *Unveiling Treasures: The Attic Guide to Published Works of Irish Women Literary Writers,* edited by Ann Owens Weekes (1993); Patricia Boyle Haberstroh's *Women Creating Women: Contemporary Irish Women Poets* (1996); Christine St Peter's, *Changing Ireland: Strategies in Contemporary Women's Fiction* (2000); and *Border Crossings: Irish Women Writers and National Identities* (2000), edited by Kathryn Kirkpatrick.

Scholarly output in the field has grown significantly in the twenty-first century, and shows no sign of slowing down. We have seen valuable bibliographical and biographical resources, such as the joint University College Dublin and University of Warwick 'Database of Irish Women's Writing, 1800–2005' together with the *Dictionary of Munster Women Writers 1800–2000* (2005) and *Irish Women Writers: An A to Z Guide* edited by A. G. Gonzalez (2006), as well as anthologies including *The Wake Forest Book of Irish Women's Poetry: 1965–2000* edited by Peggy O'Brien (2011) and *Poetry by Women in Ireland, 1870–1970* edited by Lucy Collins (2012). Book-length studies devoted to different aspects of Irish women's writing include Rebecca Pelan's *Two Irelands: Literary Feminisms North and South* (2005), Heather Ingman's *Twentieth-Century Fiction by Irish Women: Nation and Gender* (2007), Cathy Leeney's *Irish Women Playwrights 1900–30* (2010) and Elke D'hoker's *Irish Women Writers and the Modern Short Story* (2016). Edited collections include Patricia Boyle Haberstroh and Christine St Peter's *Opening the Field. Irish Women: Texts and Contexts* (2007), Patricia Coughlan and Tina O'Toole's *Irish Literature: Feminist Perspectives* (2008), Heidi Hansson's *New Contexts: Re-Framing Nineteenth-Century Irish Women's Prose* (2008) and Elke D'hoker, Raphaël Ingelbien and Hedwig Schwall's *Irish Women Writers: New Critical Perspectives* (2011). Recent years have seen publication of collections of critical essays on writers such as Elizabeth Bowen, Kate O'Brien, Mary Lavin, Edna O'Brien, Molly Keane, Eavan Boland, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne and Anne Enright, as well as studies of individual writers such as Maria Edgeworth (Clíona Ó Gallchoir), Emily Lawless (Heidi Hansson) and Rosamond Jacob (Leeann Lane).

The appearance of such a significant amount of scholarship (of which these titles give only an indicative snapshot) does not in itself mean that the frameworks that led to the erasure of women's writing within the Irish literary canon have disappeared. The root of the issue lies in the concept of the canon itself. One of the chief insights of Anglophone feminist criticism since the 1970s has been the ways in which the construction of literary canons tends almost inevitably to marginalize and exclude women's writing, usually on the grounds of inferior aesthetic quality. Although similar structures can be observed in the Irish case, the desire to align literary expression with the imagined nation has been a further, persistent obstacle to the recognition of women's literary and cultural production in Ireland. Demands for women's rights have often been seen as either in competition with, or even incompatible with, the imperative of national self-determination that dominated Irish political and intellectual life from the late 1800s,[3] and the privileging of the national was reflected

in the construction of a 'literary tradition' that could not encompass voices that either challenged the national narrative, or whose primary focus simply lay elsewhere.

The project of writing a history of modern Irish women's literature at this moment in time has however been enabled not only by the achievements of scholars working on women's writing and feminist criticism, but also by a marked shift within Irish literary historiography more generally. In 2006, the editors of the *Cambridge History of Irish Literature,* Margaret Kelleher and Philip O'Leary, in explicit response to the combined achievement of the five-volume *Field Day Anthology*, proposed a much wider and longer view of Irish writing than had ever been offered before. Taking their starting point from 600 AD, they articulated the aim of the history as a way 'to make sense of that long tradition by providing an authoritative chronological history that will enable readers … to trace in meaningful detail stylistic and thematic developments and influences through time, or to explore the often neglected interrelationships between the two literary traditions that have shared the island over the past five hundred years'.[4] Although the editors' aim of producing an 'authoritative chronological history' is in many respects conventional, the volumes' embrace of a very long historical timeframe and of both language traditions precludes the reliance on 'the nation' as a central structural or conceptual framework, and thus requires a much more expansive understanding of how writing and literary representation have been produced and received in Ireland, and beyond. Broadly speaking, whereas a carefully and selectively constructed national canon once functioned to cover or mask the fracturing that frequently characterizes the relationship between place and identity in Ireland, contemporary scholarship now actively explores how writing has grown in precisely these cracks and fissures.

The development of these more nuanced, flexible and inclusive frameworks has come about in part as a response to feminist critiques of the hegemonic national narrative, which all too often elevated symbols of femininity while erasing and silencing women's voices, lives and experiences. We are now at a point in time where a fruitful dialogue between feminist literary scholarship and new practices in literary history and literary criticism in Ireland can combine to generate a history of modern Irish women's literature. Critics of women's writing have, for instance, benefited from the insights of book history, especially the renewed attention to the popular and to reading as well as writing; the literature of the diaspora has highlighted another cohort of previously invisible women; research on literary and cultural production in Ireland in earlier periods

allows for new considerations of how and why women in particular gained access to writing and publication; attention to women's involvement in both language traditions demonstrates that gendered obstacles to women's cultural expression are a constant, while also challenging simplistic constructions of the 'woman writer'.

The research of the past thirty years has thus made critics and readers aware of the important contribution made by women to Ireland's literary cultures, and also provided new perspectives and frameworks through which to discuss this work. As yet, however, there has been no comprehensive attempt to chart and analyse the history of writing by women in Ireland, or to ask what different stories emerge when gender, as a category, shapes and frames the discussion. In order to address what is by now a glaring absence, the contributions to this collection bring together specialists working on women's writing from the seventeenth to the twenty-first centuries, and include writing in both English and Irish. The policy of 'generous inclusion' adopted by the editors of the *Cambridge History of Irish Literature* in relation to the term 'Irish writer' has also been adhered to here, so that in these pages you will find writers who were born in Ireland and those who lived for significant periods of time in Ireland, including women who are part of the increasing immigrant population in Ireland today. The definition used in this volume is in fact even more broadly inclusive, in that it incorporates writers who form part of diaspora communities in Britain and America.

The volume opens with Marie-Louise Coolahan's account of women's writing and literary production in the early modern period, a contribution that is in many ways paradigmatic of how new approaches to women's writing and Irish literary history can illuminate and inform one another. Coolahan outlines the different contexts and purposes of women's writing in different language communities and from different religious backgrounds. With the country's power structures in flux, women from different communities in Ireland wrote for both communal and personal ends. They wrote in Irish, Latin and English, from within both the Old English community and the New English colonial settler class. They composed Irish-language verse, drawing on the native oral tradition, autobiographical narratives, official documents, correspondence, devotional poetry, courtly poetry, religious texts and many other forms. These women were important precursors, contributing to the shaping of genres and carving out new possibilities for female authorship. Coolahan suggests that much material from this earlier period remains to be uncovered, particularly in the genres of letters and life writing.

Beginning the history of women's literature in Ireland in the early modern period highlights the fact that women's involvement in literary culture predates the emergence of the idea of the nation state. This offers an essential grounding for the chapters that follow, in which the expanding range of women's writing took place against a backdrop of successive alterations in Ireland's political status: the 'territory' to which writers related changed profoundly across the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Coolahan's survey of women's writerly activity in this period also depicts different language communities operating side-by-side, as well as in interaction and at times in competition with one another. A more complete picture of women's participation in the Irish-language tradition across the entire time span of the volume lies to an extent outside the scope of this *History*, given its central focus on written material. The editors are conscious of the neglect of Irish-language material in the nineteenth century in particular, which in general, as Gearóid Denvir has noted, has suffered from a failure to recognize that it 'emanates from a different conceptual framework and from a different world view to modern concepts of the function and aims of the literary act'.[5] One of the many fascinating insights that emerges from the chapter by Ríona Nic Congáil and Máirín Nic Eoin on women's writing in the Irish language from the period of the language revival up to the present day, is that the language revival movement itself was characterized by unresolved tensions over the superior status of modern print culture, coupled with the ideological construction of native speakers, many of whom were illiterate in Irish, as the most authentic sources of Gaelic culture. Prominent Irish-language authors and activists such as Úna Ní Fhaircheallaigh and Máire Ní Chinnéide were highly educated, urban, middle-class women whose sense of affiliation with their female contemporaries in Irish-speaking areas arose from a cultural and political commitment, rather than from meaningful shared experience.

The nuanced picture that emerges from Nic Congáil and Nic Eoin's discussion of women's participation in the language revival movement acts as a vivid example of the fact that nationalism and its centrality to Irish history and culture must be addressed in any history of Irish women's writing, while also exploding the static image of the woman as an icon of national identity. This iconic figure was, in the twentieth century, the focus of much early feminist critique, notably in Eavan Boland's *Object Lessons*, as an obstacle both to the recognition of women as writers and to the representation of lived female experience. But it is vital to recognize that nationalism also facilitated women who wished to

write. In the 1780s, writers like Charlotte Brooke and Elizabeth Sheridan explicitly articulated patriot views and aligned themselves as women with the fate of Ireland as a nation while in the nineteenth century, authors such as 'Eva of the Nation' were celebrated for making important contributions to nationalist literature in characteristic genres such as the ballad. In the post-Union period, romantic nationalism was a theme that inspired many women writers, the most celebrated of whom was Sydney Owenson. Other Irish women had solid ties to the British empire, as travellers and settlers in the colonies, as wives and daughters of imperial administrators, as missionaries and social reformers and as members of the increasingly displaced Protestant Ascendancy. Some, like Augusta Gregory, moved between Ascendancy circles and close engagement with the nationalist ideals of the Irish Literary Revival. The intersection between nationalism and women's writing is multilayered, and care must be taken not to distort the politics of the work that is being recovered.

Engagement with the concept of the nation provided some women with a vantage point from which to write, but it is only one strand in a wider movement that sees the legitimization of Irish women's voices in public discourse. In contrast to the turbulence of the seventeenth century, Ireland in the eighteenth century experienced a long period of relative stability. As Clíona Ó Gallchoir shows in Chapter 2, this stability, coupled with the growth of print media that characterized the period in Britain as well as Ireland, and the gradual development of a patriot consciousness among the Anglo-Irish in Ireland, were all factors in the emergence of women not only writing but publishing their work, even if to do so required the negotiation of gender-based objections. The traditional historiography of eighteenth-century Ireland constructs the end of the century as an abrupt termination, with the Act of Union following the failed United Irish uprising. But as James Kelly demonstrates in Chapter 3, devoted to literature under the Union, the story of women's involvement in literary culture is in fact one of continuity and growth. In response to the huge structural changes wrought to Irish political, cultural and social life post-1801 and despite limitations on female agency, Maria Edgeworth, Sydney Owenson and their contemporaries created a body of work that explored the links between female influence, national identity and political involvement and in the process gave women a public voice. A salient feature of their work was the national tale in which the marriage of an English lord to an exotic, though ultimately subordinate, Irish woman took on an allegorical dimension in the aftermath of the 1801 marriage / union between Britain and Ireland. In Chapter 5,

James Murphy discusses Victorian Irish women novelists' refashioning of this trope of the 'national marriage' into the trope of 'the independent woman' who is nationally representative. Murphy sees in this the beginnings of New Woman themes, the focus of the following chapter by Tina O'Toole.

The reader thus begins to discern the emerging acceptance of Irish women's writing and an acknowledgement of the wish of women writers to enter public discourse; yet it is important not to erase differences. In Chapter 6, O'Toole stresses that New Woman was not a homogenous category: coming from a variety of backgrounds, New Woman writers adopted differing stances on class, politics and even gender. Nevertheless, common to most New Woman fiction is a central character who, having had her consciousness raised by contact with feminist ideas, feels sufficiently confident to fight for her rights. O'Toole argues that New Woman writers mount a challenge in their fiction equal to that posed by campaigners for women's suffrage.

A volume such as this enables us to trace the gradual development of women's public voice from official documents, devotional poetry, ballads, autobiographical narratives, from the period before 1700, through post-Union writers' defiance of limits on femininity in order to enter the public arena of debate around nation and gender, and Victorian women novelists' development of this voice, to the newly empowered, educated and politically active women of New Woman fiction. Yet what these women writers were saying was often obscured by critical reaction to their work based on stereotypes about women, Ireland and the Irish canon, and this holds good for later periods too, notably in the case of a writer like Edna O'Brien, as Sinéad Mooney highlights in Chapter 13. In the area of life writing, discussed by Anne Mulhall in Chapter 20, women have had to battle not only against economic, social and legal subordination in order to make their voices heard but also against well-intentioned, though often patronizing, attempts by feminists and others to appropriate their experiences in order to promote a particular political agenda. Migrant women in particular have had difficulty being accepted as part of the literary and cultural community. Women in the theatre, however, as dramatists, directors, performers and producers, had the potential to, and often did, assert a public presence with the aim of changing national, civic and cultural discourses, as Cathy Leeney demonstrates in Chapter 17.

A comprehensive history also allows us to discern certain patterns and themes in Irish women's writing across the centuries. A single example

may be taken to illustrate this, namely the issues of female sexuality and the body that came to prominence in New Woman writing as a way of expressing women's lived experience. Despite her Catholic upbringing and education, George Egerton was determined to use her writing to portray the hitherto unexplored realm of female sexuality and women's erotic lives, tackling such themes as miscarriage, abortion, post-natal depression and infanticide. Not surprisingly her work fell into neglect in later years when the intertwining of Catholicism and nationalism in the newly independent Ireland produced a homogeneous nation state founded on gender distinctions. Irish men were expected to, and often did, fight for their country while Irish women, with the example of the Virgin Mary set before them, were to embody the purity of the Irish nation: 'The personification of Ireland as "Woman" and "mother" necessitated that the purity of that image was maintained on all levels.'[6]

We have to leap over the decades to the 1960s to find another Irish woman, Edna O'Brien, prepared to tackle the topic of female sexuality with similar frankness. In Chapter 13, Sinéad Mooney explores O'Brien's pioneering themes around women's sexuality and women's bodies, and her political critique of the cultural and religious restrictions on Irish women's lives. In Chapter 12, Eibhear Walshe's highlighting of Kate O'Brien's more veiled depictions of lesbian love, adds another dimension to this theme, as do Mary Lavin's short stories, discussed in Chapter 15. Lavin's stories broke new ground in the Irish short story tradition by dealing with themes such as female sexuality, illegitimacy and the repression of the female body that would be taken up by women writers from the 1970s onwards, a point emphasized both by Patricia Boyle Haberstroh in her chapter on women's poetry and by Anne Fogarty writing on fiction in the period between 1960 and 1995, and extending even into fiction of the Celtic Tiger era, discussed in the final chapter of this volume. Irish women's lack of agency over their bodies and their experiences of various forms of abuse, including institutional abuse, are major themes in their life writing from the 1970s onwards, explored by Anne Mulhall in Chapter 20.

In Chapter 19, Caroline Magennis argues that embodiment is also a feature of Northern Irish women's writing, along with other themes such as domestic confinement, mental illness, discontented motherhood, the unreliability of memory and distrust of patriarchal institutions. Women's fiction from Northern Ireland, Magennis argues, complicates straightforward narratives of sectarian conflict by this focus on gender, class and embodiment. In the theatre too, women writers, directors and performers

have often placed the emphasis on the female body, as for example, in Anne Le Marquand Hartigan's *Beds* produced at the Dublin Theatre Festival in 1982 where, as Cathy Leeney describes it, scenes of birth, sex, love and death were represented, including an account of a woman's experience of abortion. Such representations of the body, Leeney argues, disrupted both gender and literary expectations. Leeney's chapter also discusses a group of plays (*On Trial* by Máiréad Ní Ghráda, *Eclipsed* by Patricia Burke Brogan and *Laundry*, created by Anú Productions) that deliberately set out to challenge public discourse around maternity and female sexuality. Ní Ghráda's play, one of the earliest works to explore the treatment meted out to women who fell foul of the rigid and oppressive sexual morality of the Irish state, was in fact first performed in Irish as *An Triail*, illustrating that, as Nic Congáil and Nic Eoin point out in Chapter 18, women's writing in Irish similarly gives voice to women's bodily and lived experience, as is clearly instanced also in the work of poets such as Máire Mhac an tSaoi and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill. This cluster of writing in different genres and from different periods allows us to identify, without erasing difference, specific themes concerning the body and female sexuality associated with Irish women's writing. It would be possible to perform a similar task across the centuries with themes such as motherhood, the dysfunctional family, the female artist, the nation, travel and female emigration.

Although some of the writers and works discussed in the following chapters are well known, many more are not. In addition to offering the possibility of creating new narratives and asking new questions, the *History* therefore also offers an opportunity to reflect on and understand the varying reasons why so many works by women were forgotten, ignored or dismissed. In Chapter 4, for instance, Matthew Campbell uncovers a rich corpus of women's poetry published between 1845 and 1891 but which subsequently disappeared from the Irish canon partly, he suggests, because in their elegiac poems for the famine dead or the sorrows of exile, and, in their confessional poems expressing anguished conflicts of faith, women writers adopted a gendered subjectivity that in subsequent generations was all too easy to ignore. More generally, one possible reason for this erasure may be that women writers did not always confine themselves to recognizably Irish themes. In Chapter 5, James Murphy points out that Irish Victorian writers, like twenty-first century Irish writers, worked in both national and transnational contexts. In Chapter 6, Tina O'Toole stresses that New Woman writers frequently looked outside Ireland for literary models and topics and for this reason