

A HISTORY OF IRISH WORKING-CLASS WRITING

This book provides a wide-ranging and authoritative chronicle of Irish working-class writing. It is a major intervention in Irish Studies – ground-breaking in scholarship and comprehensive in scope – charting representations of Irish working-class life from eighteenth-century rhymes and songs to the novels, plays and poetry of modern Ireland. The cultural world of Ireland’s labour movements, the depiction of working-class women, the experiences of the northern Irish conflict from working-class perspectives, and the marginalisation of the less well-off in Celtic Tiger Ireland are just some of the relatively neglected areas covered by this book, which provides many original insights in relatively untilled fields. Exploring working-class experience in various literary forms, from early to late capitalism, this book is an original and substantial contribution to Irish historical and literary research, which will, as Declan Kiberd puts it, ‘set many of the terms of cultural debate in the decade to come’.

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*This book is dedicated to the memories of Paul Devlin,
Paul Cumberton and Dermot French, all, in their own ways,
committed to the Irish working class, and lost to it much too soon.*

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Foreword

Declan Kiberd

According to an old joke, the English have a class system and are so obsessed by it that most of their novels and all of their plays derive from it. The Americans have a class system but, being democrats in theory, must pretend it doesn't exist. The Irish, however, are the worst of all, for they have a class system but will not tell anyone what it is.

Novelists are forever on the lookout for subtle indicators of class: but Ireland has often proved resistant to such readings. Kate O'Brien, in writing of the Victorian Catholic middle class, found that she was compelled to invent details of their culture in the act of seeming to report them. It was as if such a middle class had yet to be fully created. The young James Joyce, in a letter to his brother Stanislaus, made the same point about the Irish proletariat – it, also, had still to be made. In this, as in much else, he found his people the most 'belated' race in Europe. Yet by July 1916, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin could complain of the same people's prematurity: 'the misfortune of the Irish was that they rose too soon, before the revolt of the European proletariat had matured.'

One reason for this frequent undecodability is that the interests of working people have most often been defined against those of a ruling middle class – an entity which only emerged fully in Ireland in the affluence of the late twentieth century. The lack of heavy industry outside of the north-east of the island was another factor in this. Insofar as a middle class began to emerge in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it missed out on the heroic phase of the international bourgeoisie, when factories were founded and heavy industries created. As a consequence of that, the native bourgeoisie tended to be consumerist and professional.

Another reason was that most Irish people, apart from a privileged few, had recently experienced poverty. This meant that one's accent was primarily rooted in locality rather than social class. A sense of this undecodability persisted even in Britain, where Irish voices were amplified in the electronic

media as user-friendly and free of associations of social class. This tradition went back to the social comedy of Sheridan, Shaw and Wilde – writers whose Irish appeal made them interestingly but not forbiddingly ‘different’ (all three were, of course, social radicals within the British scheme). But it persisted into recent decades in the figure of the nurse or schoolteacher, whose ambiguous class position seemed to come from their Irishness.

Even in the Ireland of the Penal Laws, a native middle class was emerging by shrewd resort to growth industries such as distilling. The bards, once attached to aristocratic patrons, often had to find work as schoolmasters, farm labourers or hucksters. The Revivalist notion that Gaelic Ireland was somehow free of the hidden injuries of class is fanciful. Even in the 1700s, Gaelic writers were describing the narcissism of small differences experienced, say, by a spalpeen-poet as he went from Meath through Louth into Armagh. And when Tomás Ó Criomhthainn from the Great Blasket island set foot on the quayside in Dingle, he was outraged to find a managerial elite wearing gold-tipped belts, while workers on the jetty sweated in torn rags. Islands off the west coast were often portrayed by radical authors as utopian communes. J. M. Synge on the Aran Islands rediscovers many of the values of the Parisian Commune of 1871. In later decades a British communist such as George Thomson or a Dublin house-painter like Brendan Behan located a similar set of values on the Blaskets. Behan, brought up among the Dublin poor of Rutland Street, identified the islanders as an ‘out-group’ similar to inner-city proletarians, yet they were tokenised as representative of the core values of the nation.

The cultural expression of socialist ideals by Irish radicals was more often a result of their reading than of the pressure of felt experience – an observation which might be made of socialist texts from other European countries too. The poor are usually too busy surviving to theorise their condition. Wilde and Shaw wrote little about the lives of the poor – a subject left in their time to figures like Henry Mayhew. Instead, they chose in their plays and prose narratives to unmask the hypocrisies of the upper middle class. The socialism-for-superior-brains which they embraced was as much aesthetic as materialist. Yet it took the battle into enemy territory by addressing itself to potential sympathisers among the privileged groups. It is hard to imagine *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, much less *The Intelligent Woman’s Guide*, being read by many workers, though the publication of the latter as a Pelican Book ensured a wider audience than Wilde could ever win in an elite review.

There was, perhaps inevitably, a tone of condescension in the writings of Fabians and social democrats in *fin-de-siècle* England. This note can also

be heard in the texts of Wilde and Shaw, as well as in the writings of the Bloomsbury Group. The depiction of an intellectually ambitious but lowly worker such as Leonard Bast in Forster's *Howards End* not only describes but partakes of such condescension. It is useful, in that context, to be reminded that in the Dublin of that same period, artisans, shop-assistants and flower-sellers mingled with aristocrats like Augusta Gregory and intellectuals like W. B. Yeats in the early work of the Abbey Theatre. It was a cross-class project in ways the Schlegel sisters could never have imagined.

Were the clerks and carpenters who joined in the Abbey movement seekers of higher social status by that very fact? Some were doubtless bourgeois nationalists, but Fearghal McGarry's recent studies of Abbey rebels in 1916 and after suggests rather that many were socialist radicals, deeply disillusioned by subsequent developments in the Free State. Many died in conditions of dire impoverishment. There are few Nora Clitheroes among the Helena Moloneys and Máire Nic Shiubhlaighs treated in his analyses. The depiction of actual workers on the Abbey stage in the early years of the Free State was mainly caricatural. It isn't true that many members from the Dublin working class came to the Abbey in order to laugh at themselves in the dramas of Seán O'Casey. Those who came were, in the main, members of the newly empowered bourgeoisie, already sentimentalising Fluther Good and his companions as urban leprechauns, cartoonish figures with little sense but gifted with high-voltage speech. The imaging of the rural peasantry in works by nineteenth-century authors was now applied to the depiction of the inner-city Dublin poor. The four or five families living in a tenement were a fairly close approximation to the population of a rural village in the earlier texts. The prevailing tropes of Irish writing proved stronger than the pressure of felt experience within the literate working class. There were few enough texts generated from within inner-city life. By comparison with, say, the many books produced by the tiny population of the Blasket islands, life among the destitute of Dublin hardly expressed itself at all. As Marx said of another out-group, these people could not represent themselves, so they had to be represented by authors from James Stephens to Paul Smith and James Plunkett. The life of Irish emigrants in Britain was also seldom written from within. A rare exception might be Dónal MacAmhlaigh's *Dialann Deoraí* about the experience of navvies in the mid-twentieth century, but even it recycled a lot of old tropes (fighting Irish; drink; wounded masculinity) when compared with the audacity and freshness of the Blasket books.

There was a reason for this, of course. It was difficult for anyone to become an acclaimed writer and remain a member of the working class.

The fate of Behan is indicative – celebrity followed hard on literary success. What James Baldwin wrote wistfully about the plight of the African American author applied in this case too. Success could seem to former comrades like betrayal, lifting the writer out of the very community which he or she wished to record and to serve. The complex fate O’Casey endured in exile in Devon overtook Behan in New York but also figures such as Roddy Doyle and Conor McPherson in Dublin. W. B. Yeats, with his acute antennae, had sensed the same strain in himself, when he wrote as early as 1900 that every writer had to choose between expressing and exploiting material. History was to show that even those who sought honestly to express were often accused of exploiting. The envy directed at James Plunkett after the success of *Strumpet City* was not very different from that withstood by Baldwin.

This is in a sense a problem which dogs all writers. Many wish to detach themselves from the constraints of a class position by the act of art; some wish to use their art to change one class for another. Yeats wished to become an aristocrat, Orwell to make an act of solidarity with tramps and dishwashers. But the sheer fact of being a writer secures for most of them, in spite of their deeper aims, a place in the middle class. The ‘aristocratic’ tradition of Anglo-Irish writing, concocted by Yeats in the 1920s and 1930s, invoked figures such as Swift, Burke, Goldsmith and Sheridan as exemplars. But the truth is that all earned their living by hard work with the pen, and each of them wrote with supreme sarcasm about the cultural nullity and idle lifestyles of hard-riding country gentlemen. If the ruined Gaelic bards ‘fell’ into the emerging Catholic middle class of the 1700s, so also did most writers of Anglo-Irish literature; hence the remarkable similarities of tone and topic in the texts produced by both groups, not least in their very middle-class attacks on the more vulgar arrivistes among that middle class.

The farther a person moved from Ireland, the less likely he or she was to be caught up in these ambiguities. The Irish in Australia and the United States often discovered that they were ‘Irish’ at the same moment as they found themselves members of a working class. Hence many became key contributors to trade union activity, to suffragism and to the labour movement. Some members of their families would eventually write moving books of documentary, autobiography or fiction about the experience. It was as if tendencies towards socialism, so often hushed up or suppressed at home in Ireland, came to the fore in a commensurate act of national self-identification; and as if nationalism, often denounced as limiting by many socialists at home, could fuse with it abroad as a truly radical option.

The same was true of members of the minority community in Northern Ireland after 1922. Many suffered poverty, in the conditions of near apartheid which were allowed to prevail even in the early years of the welfare state; but they placed their faith in that welfare system, whose educational opportunities allowed them to blend their republicanism with social-democratic values. They took Wolfe Tone's appeal to 'the men of no property', repeated by Parnell, as a rallying cry. Of course, the success which many finally experienced was based ultimately on an old-fashioned Enlightenment republican notion of 'the career open to talents'. It did not truly transform social relations or the distribution of wealth, but simply ensured that more people of ability could be recruited into the managerial and professional elites. In this it anticipated and reflected the postmodern world of market forces, in which traditions of militant trade unionism and organised labour were trumped by an economy divided between overpaid experts and underpaid service providers.

This returns us to the tragedy of the working-class movement in Ireland – it was another case of belatedness (despite Lenin's comment). The rise of a sharpened sense of workers' rights in the 1960s and 1970s, especially in tandem with global movements for civil rights, coincides with the decline of heavy industry in the United Kingdom, the United States and Northern Ireland itself. The apparent triumph of market forces and managerial elites caused some people to reflect ruefully on R. H. Tawney's contention that 'opportunities to rise are no substitute for a general diffusion of the means of civilization.' The old bourgeoisie, on which socialists had heaped such ire, turned out to have had a social scruple, endowing many valuable projects from Carnegie Libraries to radium research. But the consumerist middle class which replaced it after the mid-twentieth century was far less willing to share any spoils.

This shift can be observed in the ways in which the social-democratic legislation of the European Union in its early days was gradually side-tracked for a Europe of free markets. By the crash of 2008, it had created a wholly new kind of underclass – youth. Though few of these young people did heavy labour, most of them suffered from exactly the kind of casualised conditions and hiring fairs satirised by someone like Thomas Hardy a century earlier. The difference was simply this: where once a social disadvantage might be traced to space – where a person came from, now it was increasingly traceable to time – when they were born and when they sought to enter the labour force. Some baby boomers who had once espoused social reform and workers' rights, spotting these changes with a mixture of selfishness and dismay, held on tenaciously to their pensions

and state-guaranteed salaries as most of a younger generation felt history's cutting edge. Instead of staying in their home countries to fight these degenerations of society, many young people simply voted with their feet and moved elsewhere.

This raises the old question: can there be an Irish or an Italian working class? Has the notion of a proletariat or an 'out-group' always been international, a coalition of the dispossessed? In the 1980s Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher and Charles Haughey unleashed new uninflected versions of two old movements – nationalism and market forces. It might have been said by radicals that the obvious counter to this was international socialism. But that was not to be – or not yet anyway. People still yearn to express a cultural identity in ways which allow for the benefits of modernity and the liquidation of its costs. Perhaps resistance to naked market forces must again, as in the nineteenth century, organise itself in the name of an outraged community, whether it calls itself a nation or a generation or a working class. It would be wise for such trade unions as remain, as well as for socialist parties, not to cede all ideas of national identity or entire generations or social classes to the radical right, which must now confront the deep contradiction between the narrow nationalism and heedless consumerism which so many of its leaders espouse.

The rich diversity of essays in this book, so ably edited by Michael Pierse, has prompted these thoughts by way of an initial response. Those essays deal with an astonishing range of writing – from work-songs and political rhymes to poetry and government reports, from novels and plays to biographies by or about working people. They will set many of the terms of cultural debate in the decade to come. And they could hardly be more timely.

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