

*Introduction*  
*Irish Modernism, from Emergence to Emergency*  
Gregory Castle and Patrick Bixby

I

*A History of Irish Modernism* offers the first wide-ranging and in-depth account of an artistic and cultural phenomenon – modernism in Ireland – that has been attracting a great deal of critical attention over the last two decades. Broadly, our task is to reconsider the nature of Irish modernism across the cultural spectrum. First, in line with current developments in both Irish and modernist studies, we seek to reexamine the dominant narrative of Irish modernism that has so often been defined by major figures, particularly W. B. Yeats, James Joyce, and Samuel Beckett. Chapters featuring these authors seek to approach their subject from a new angle (as in Joseph Valente’s on Joyce and populism, and Emilie Morin’s on Beckett and the paradox of distance); or they seek to call into question the modernism of such figures (as in Nicholas Grene’s chapter on J. M. Synge) and of literary institutions (as in Frank Shovlin’s on *The Bell*); or they situate such figures among a larger and more varied cohort, one that both illuminates them in new ways and calls our attention to lesser-known figures in the Irish modernist landscape (as in Enda Duffy’s chapter on European influences on Joyce and Yeats, and John Paul Riquelme’s on the Gothic revivals of Bram Stoker and Oscar Wilde). This reconsideration of the literary canon leads to our second task, which is to feature these lesser-known figures, to shine a brighter light into the obscure corners of Irish cultural production in the modernist era (ca. 1890–1960). Realism, in both fiction and drama, is less often reckoned as central to Irish modernism, but Paige Reynold’s chapter on Sean O’Casey, Gerardine Meaney’s on Kate O’Brien and Derek Hand’s on Eimar O’Duffy and other political novelists illustrate both the innovative nature of Irish realist writing and its role in framing social observation and critique. Along with Simon Joyce’s chapter on Irish naturalism, these interventions suggest that the tendency in Irish

writing toward modes critical of existing social conditions accounts, at least in part, for the strong political valence of the Irish modernist imagination.

Our third and perhaps most important task, which is presupposed by the first two, is to illustrate the convergence of social, political, and cultural spheres in the emergence and development of Irish modernism. This broader cultural context includes painting, music, architecture, radio, film, book production, and a host of other activities (including crafts, illustration, furniture design, and fashion design) that are usually not represented together in the same historical or critical account.<sup>1</sup> From this perspective, Irish modernism is viewed as a movement that, in its early days, borrowed elements from British and European artistic traditions to augment and refine innovations in literary form and aesthetic practice that were in many cases rooted in indigenous Irish genres (for example, the *aisling* poem, the rebel romance, the Gothic novel, the so-called “peasant drama,” folktale, and legend). The interconnectedness of different facets of the public sphere emphasized throughout this volume is in part a function of an artistic and journalistic *habitus*,<sup>2</sup> in which artists found themselves among politicians, reporters, broadcasters, professors, lawyers, publishers, actors, and innumerable freelance writers. These various cohorts were linked in a network of allies and rivals, coterie and associations, including the Literary Revival, a largely Anglo-Protestant movement strongly associated with Yeats; the Gaelic League, led by Catholics and Protestants alike; the Gaelic Athletic Association, a strongly Catholic organization; and, as Luke Gibbons’s chapter reminds us, the circle of painters associated with Mainie Jellet and the Irish Exhibition of Living Art. Coterie and associations are particularly rich contexts for studying innovation and experimentation across artistic media, in large measure because the various connections among the members extend beyond a single class or profession, but gather them around a particular aesthetic program or major event, such as the premiere of Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World* in 1907 or the annual Living Art show beginning in 1943.

We take it as axiomatic that Irish modernism is not simply about the arts, or about artistic innovation and experimentation, but about political concerns, commercial interests, and media technologies, as well. This way of looking at Irish modernism, with an emphasis on the material social and political contexts in which art and literature are produced and consumed, is part of a larger critical trend. The New Modernist Studies, beginning in the late 1980s, challenged the dogma that modernism was somehow ahistorical and initiated a project of reevaluation that has led to new thinking about, among other things, nationalism and national identity, ethnicity and

sectarianism, gender and sexuality, and the material conditions of artistic practices and production.<sup>3</sup> Subtending this materialist revaluation is a general tendency toward materialist culture critique that has shifted the focus in modernist and Irish studies toward objects and our relation to them, as well as toward the object-status of the artwork itself.<sup>4</sup>

Irish modernists themselves were concerned with many of these tendencies, particularly the orientation toward material culture, often to the point of objectifying their work deliberately as a way to draw attention to it as a well-wrought artifact: Joyce's *Ulysses* is remarkable in this regard as are the beautifully crafted editions of Yeats's work, designed for the specialized collectors' market. More often the emphasis on materiality, on objects and their significance, falls on the deconstruction of Irish icons in literature and painting, in the innovative use of set design and costume in drama, and in the technological apparatus of film and radio, all of which reinforce the shock of the new as it confronts the archaic – an emphatically Irish confrontation, as Terry Eagleton has demonstrated.<sup>5</sup> These aesthetic practices, which link multiple discursive spheres (for example, the arts, politics, journalism, and the academy), form the substance of a media *habitus* that not only facilitates modernization (for example, in radio, the theater, and the film industry) but also enables modernist innovation in traditional art forms, such as realist fiction and formalist poetry, folklore and myth, and artisanal crafts (for example, needlework and deluxe editions of books, both produced by Dun Emer and Cuala Press, Yeats family enterprises). The *habitus* makes possible a politics that recognizes the value of art, and an aesthetic program that includes, as a condition of its possibility, a critical engagement with Irish social and political realities, such as the anti-imperial rebellion, state building, Republican in-fighting, and sectarian dissent that attended the opening of Synge's *Playboy* just as it would the creation and unveiling of Oliver Sheppard's statue of Cuchulain (1911; installed 1935).

This interrelationship between art and politics is illustrated in the publication history of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, a five-volume collection of Irish writing from a broad array of genres, including poetry, fiction, and drama together with a wide variety of social political writings. The *Anthology* was first issued in three volumes in 1992 with Seamus Deane as editor, and marked, or was meant to mark, the historical moment when Irish scholars and critics created their own canons.<sup>6</sup> But the dearth of entries by women writers caused controversy and debate about their role in the history of Irish literature and scholarship. Consequently, two additional volumes were published

in 2002, both subtitled *Irish Women's Writing and Traditions*, edited by Angela Bourke and others.<sup>7</sup> The 1990s saw an upsurge in scholarship and criticism of Irish women's writing, and the correction which scholars such as Bourke and her co-editors made to Deane's initial publication represents a canonical shift, based in no small measure on the work being done by women even as the original three volumes were being compiled and first received. Over a decade later, P. J. Mathews and Declan Kiberd's *Handbook of the Irish Revival: An Anthology of Irish Cultural and Political Writings 1891–1922*, published in 2015, in a similar way revolutionized the study of Revival movements by explicitly acknowledging the work of women writers who had been ignored in the past.<sup>8</sup> Both volumes offer crucial archival support for the kinds of scholarship that characterizes Irish modernist studies today, with its increasing attention to the conditions of cultural production – both in Ireland and in the global cultural marketplace in which Irish literature and art helped redefine the idea of national belonging.

## II

Although Yeats, Joyce and Beckett each have long occupied a prominent place in modernist ranks, it is only quite recently that the phrase “Irish modernism” has entered the critical idiom and enjoyed wide usage. This is evident in literary scholarship, as adduced by the Modern Language Association International Bibliography, which dates the first two uses of the phrase in scholarly titles to 1995 and a pair of essays in Patricia Coughlan's and Alex Davis's groundbreaking collection, *Modernism and Ireland: the Poetry of the 1930s*. Thereafter, “Irish modernism” appears no more than twice a year until 2010, when its usage increased by a factor of eight, later peaking at eighteen results in 2015. If this upward trend means anything, it suggests that recent developments in modernist studies have disrupted the old solidities of “modern English literature” and “European high modernism”; it also suggests that reading modern Irish literature in relation to the local *and* global conditions in which it was produced has helped to open up the field of modernist studies, even as it has increasingly overlapped with the expanding field of Irish studies. The scholarly assimilation of Irish modernists under the old solidities did not obscure the irony that many of the artistic qualities in modernist writing that scholars embraced originated in the early experimentations of Wilde, Yeats, Synge, and Joyce. This is not to claim that Irish writers founded the modernist movement but only to call attention to the fact that modernism

had multiple points of emergence, many of which can be traced back to Irish artists.

Postcolonial studies was among the first critical movements to challenge the hegemony of international modernism and its aesthetic autonomy – in the Irish case, by focusing attention on indigenous art and culture to interrogate the imperial world order that had subordinated (i.e., provincialized) such art in relation to the work of metropolitan modernists.<sup>9</sup> Indicative of this critical attention to Ireland’s position at the intersection of postcolonial and modernist studies (as well as crucial to the emergence of the New Modernist Studies) were essays by Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, and Edward Said, first published as a set of pamphlets by Field Day Theatre Company in 1988 and later collected under the title of *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature*. Said’s essay re-examines Yeats’s reputation as a canonical poet in the British tradition in order to emphasize his standing as a poet of decolonization, a “great *national* poet who articulates the experiences, the aspirations, the vision of a people suffering under the dominion of an offshore power.”<sup>10</sup> In a similar way, Jameson invokes the imperial heart of English modernity as represented in E. M. Forster’s *Howards End* and then invites readers to reconsider Joyce’s formal experiments in terms of a “Third world modernism” that depicts Dublin as a closed or paralyzed society in relation to the metropolitan center of London. These readings, as Seamus Deane claims in his introduction to the collected essays, are “designed to restore [Yeats and Joyce] to the culture in which they were still alive as presences” and thus to end their exile in the realm of “modern English literature” and “European high modernism.” In an essay first published in 1989, and later collected in *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment*, David Lloyd performed a comparable restoration of Beckett, by examining the “modernist procedures” of this “notoriously ‘apolitical’” writer as a response, and alternative, to cultural nationalism and its construction of the colonial subject.<sup>11</sup> Aesthetic features that positioned the work of the three writers in the context of international modernism – such as formal and linguistic experimentation, alternative temporalities, hybrid genres, free-indirect narrative styles, anti-mimeticism, allusiveness and difficulty, unconventional and provocative themes, and the importance of artistic autonomy – could now be examined in a critical and scholarly context that emphasized modernism with an Irish inflection.

One outcome of these developments is that Revival has found a new accommodation in narratives about the rise of modernism in Ireland. The recourse to myth, legend, and folklore in Revival writing has long

been misunderstood, in part because Revivalists were perceived as being caught up in the salvation of a pre-modern past and the production of an idealized (and thus inauthentic) cultural identity. “Old childhood memories will surface,” Frantz Fanon writes of artistic development under decolonization, “old legends be reinterpreted on the basis of a borrowed aesthetic, and a concept of the world discovered under other skies.”<sup>12</sup> These observations refer to a “pre-combat” phase of development that is both necessary and must necessarily be overcome; but to identify Revival with this phase of development misrecognizes a phase of a process for its goal. Critical consensus has been moving toward a reading of Revival that recognizes this necessity and the myriad ways in which it was overcome, as Ronan McDonald indicates in his chapter. Yeats’s movement from *Countess Cathleen* to *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* exemplifies Revival writing as it began to eschew a “borrowed aesthetics” in favor of one that is nurtured under Irish skies. For Revivalists across the board had little use for the legendary past, or the folklore and myths that inform it, if it was to be cordoned off from the vital present and kept from serving as the well-spring of the future. This understanding is captured in Yeats’s early claim that Irish legend might “well give the opening century its most memorable symbols,”<sup>13</sup> a claim that he makes again in his series of plays on the Iron Age hero, Cuchulain.

Revival attitudes toward time and temporality, historical fact and fiction, cultural authenticity, and the nature of Irish identity are rooted in the artistic and political ferment of the 1890s. For Yeats, the seeds of Revival lay in Standish O’Grady’s *History of Ireland* (1878–81), which grew in influence as the century neared its end. As we argue in our chapter in this volume, O’Grady hewed closely to the archival evidence of the ancient world: the legends of the Red Branch of Ulster and its champion Cuchulain that fill the second volume of his *History*. But he also took imaginative license of the sort that he attributed to bardic practice, a form of *realization* that made the real more real by virtue of the historian’s ability to link the concerns of his readers to the heroic world – and to hold it up as a model for a new national *ethos*. O’Grady, and a host of other historians, political writers, and journalists, contributed to Irish modernism in much the same manner as their artistic compeers: through ceaseless innovation in form and through the pursuit of themes that challenged their audiences to see Ireland, its past and its people, in a new light. Well in advance of Ezra Pound’s proclamation to “*Make it new*,” O’Grady’s *History* was insisting on the renovation of history so that it would be more legible and therefore vital to the present. It helped make possible the modernism

of Revival, as it struggled to overcome the ideological myopia, nostalgic phantasmagoria, and naive mimeticism that characterized it (aptly at times) in the press and the popular imagination.<sup>14</sup>

Though scholars and critics of Irish culture have raised questions about history and time, about the symbolic value of legend, and about the potential for the past to be the seedbed of the future, too often these questions have arisen in discussions of major figures and literary genres (poetry, drama, the novel) and have been framed in terms of a modernist aesthetic that was “discovered under other skies.” These questions were often entertained in the arena of popular or mass culture – on the stage and the pulpit, radio and television; in newspapers and novels, concert rooms and movie theaters – where they lost none of their urgency or the opportunity to make an aesthetic response. As we have suggested above, the opposition between popular and high cultural production did not often hold in the Irish context, largely because artists and other social, political, and cultural commentators moved within the same media *habitus*. When the opposition did seem to hold, as in Yeats’s promotion of esoteric Irish plays such as *At the Hawk’s Well* and *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, which used avant-garde stage techniques, costume design, dance, and music, it was meant to appeal to a modernist sensibility without obscuring a firm foundation in ancient Irish legends.

### III

*A History of Irish Modernism* is structured in such a way that each of the tasks that we have set ourselves – to reexamine the dominant narrative of Irish modernism, to feature lesser-known figures and works, and to take into account social and political spheres – is addressed in a variety of ways from a variety of perspectives. Part I, Revivals, considers a number of alternative perspectives on Irish Revival and its relation to modernism. The robust Gothic Revivals that John Paul Riquelme describes in the opening chapter – a genealogy of influence demonstrating a powerful line of development from Wilde and Stoker to the late modernism of Beckett and Djuna Barnes – offer a vision of Irish modernism that is inexplicable without the two earlier writers presiding at its emergence and directing its advance across the Atlantic and the Irish Sea. Strong affective ties bind the Irish Gothic to the tradition of “historical resuscitation” that O’Grady advocated, one that encouraged the life of the past to impinge upon and occupy the present.<sup>15</sup> This persistence of the past as an affect in the present – that is to say, a feeling in readers, audiences,

spectators, collaborators – reflects the Literary Revival’s interest in cultural continuity, which Yeats and Augusta Gregory took to mean an ongoing education in the appreciation of Irish literature, art, and thought, often conducted through the auspices of the Abbey Theatre. Christopher Morash focuses on this aspect of the Literary Revival and draws our attention to Yeats’s theory of audience, a little-known aspect of his work and a key component in his “theatrical modernism,” in which theater is “a futile but necessary site of resistance to modernity.” Nicholas Grene considers Synge’s representation of country life as a form of resistance, but asks whether his plays should be considered modernist at all. His late Romanticism, Grene contends, coexists with his “protomodernism,” which is less dependent on theories of literature and art than on a stylistic experimentation that allows him to convey the “true poetic language” that he found in “oral forms free from the artificiality of print culture.” It is precisely this print culture – an “ecology of periodicals, newspapers, and theatres” – that McDonald sees as the fertile ground for counter-Revival movements associated with the former Young Irelander, Charles Gavan Duffy, the Irish Irelander, D. P. Moran, and the Gaelic League stalwart, Pádraig Pearse, all of whom have a similarly ambivalent hold on modernist methods and aims.

As many scholars in Irish studies have argued, the Irish people found themselves, from the time of the Act of Union in 1800 until at least the founding of the Free State in 1922, implicated in the global project of British imperialism. Irishmen fought and died for Empire in the First World War, at a time when Irish social, cultural, and political life were saturated with norms and expectations imposed by an occupying power. This metrocolonial condition, as Valente calls it, provoked strong responses from Irish-Ireland Revivalists.<sup>16</sup> In 1894, Douglas Hyde had famously renounced these norms and expectations in his essay on the “The Necessity for De-Anglicizing Ireland,” in which he gave voice to a well-known sectarian division, but in a way that underscored the cultural imperialism that was its impetus.<sup>17</sup> What was made manifest, in Hyde’s view, was the startling reality that the Gaelo-Catholic Irish had, through cultural imitation, become willing participants in a system of oppression that succeeded despite the Anglo-Protestant Ascendancy’s failure to achieve meaningful social hegemony.<sup>18</sup> He believed that these imitative practices and traditions marked an internal division of collective identity, one approximating the long-standing sectarian conflict between Protestant and Catholic that had defined the history of the island for more than 700 years.



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The prolonged assault on native traditions, along with the wide dissemination of outside influences, generated urgent questions regarding the role that Irish culture should serve for its national community, for an understanding of the national past, and for a realization of the national future, particularly in view of Ireland's increasingly international presence. The remarkable achievements of Irish modernism are grounded in this unique set of geopolitical conditions – neither provincial nor derivative, nor in any sense marginal – in which cultural identity could be queried and constructed anew.

McDonald's chapter on counter-revivals prepares the ground for Part II, *Revolutions*, which focuses on the early decades of the twentieth century and the radical transformations of literary form and function that we see in a wide variety of writers, including those not often talked about in a modernist context, such as George Moore, George Egerton, Pádraig Pearse, and George Bernard Shaw. This part also recontextualizes Joyce and Yeats in terms of their engagement with European traditions and their involvement in the international book market, which underwent its own quiet revolution at this time. As both Simon Joyce and Enda Duffy illustrate, early Irish modernists were taking their cue from European writers and artists. Moore and Egerton (Mary Chevelita Dunne Bright) both developed a naturalist style on European lines, focusing on the real – that is, documentable elements of material culture – in ways that pushed their work closer to modernism than realism. Though very different writers socially and stylistically, they confronted the same question: “how to enable an understanding of social realities, often determined by multiple factors, to rise to consciousness in the characters who live them but don't always have a language through which to articulate them.” The question of naturalism and its relation to modernism raises another question about the influence of French literary innovations on Irish writing. For Duffy, these questions are indicative of a broader dialectical movement whereby European influences on Irish writing circle back in the form of innovative new work that in its turn influences a later generation of Irish writers. Referring to Moore and Wilde, Duffy notes that “the recourse to French models fitted the Irish nationalist mood,” which suggests “how an emerging Irish aesthetic, enabled by the adoption of European models, could reject British influence.” These new forms of mimesis, when combined with a Romantic tendency toward the supernatural (as in Stoker, Wilde, Yeats, Flann O'Brien and, to a limited extent, Synge and Bowen), went beyond representation to present the unrepresentable: the otherworld of faery and vampires, the fantasias of consciousness, the slippery destiny of

thought and desire when it is not encased in convention and cliché or limited to what can be directly perceived.

This capacity for imagined worlds, for recursive and trans-historical temporalities, is encapsulated in the vision of Yeats put forward by Michael Wood, who sees his poetry in terms of age and revolution. The poet who, even at a young age, mentions age and old age so often in his poetry is not yearning for youth but rather trying to understand the mysteries of time and the power of the image to create a new temporal order in the world of the work. In this respect, Wood writes, “the politics of Yeats’s poems are utopian in effect if not always in intention, and in that sense they are revolutionary.” If Yeats’s utopianism and the phantasmagorias of the Gothic novel signal new temporal orientations, other aspects of Irish modernism are pronouncedly more “timely,” in the sense that they are focused on the materiality of the here and now. Chapters by Clare Hutton and Nicholas Allen focus on this materiality and the way in which it determines specific valences of modernist cultural production. Hutton argues that book production constitutes an aspect of Irish modernism that has only recently come to the fore: not just new forms of book design and typography but a conception of the “total form of the book” as ultimately disjunctive, evoking and promoting “craft and primitivism” while remaining “indubitably a product of a modern Irish consciousness.” Allen’s chapter addresses this modern consciousness through other aspects of material culture. Focusing on the revolutionary year of 1921, the time of the War of Independence when there were “gunboats on the Liffey and warships in Galway Bay,” Allen examines the multiple forces that “operate on the cultural text.” In addition to examining how a major figure such as Yeats constructed an iconic poem (“Easter, 1916”), he also highlights Shaw’s often ignored contributions to our understanding of Irish modernism, particularly in his *Back to Methuselah: A Metabiological Pentateuch*. The modern consciousness Allen invokes was a conflicted affair, since alongside the material reality of cultural life there ran a spiritual dimension that took on the status of a “cultural dominant,” as Michael G. Cronin shows in his analysis of religious “structures of feeling” that are not always in line with the positions of the Church. He argues that “reforms of Irish Catholicism imposed during the ‘Devotional Revolution’ provided the salient ideological mechanism for the cultivation of [a] habitus,” one that was charged with “a rigorous process of disciplining the minds and bodies of this newly-dominant class.” Against this hegemony, Irish artists as varied as Joyce and Pearse offered “imagined communities” that were not simply an escape into art; Cronin shows that Pearse’s “Catholic modernist