Introduction

In the second volume of *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature* (2006), edited by Margaret Kelleher and Philip O’Leary, the critic Colin Graham wrote as follows of a study of the poet Louis MacNeice that I published in Dublin in the mid-1970s:

By the time of Terence Brown’s *Louis MacNeice: Sceptical Vision* in 1975, the sceptical-liberal version of MacNeice which Brown is interested in is entwined with MacNeice’s often sardonic but affectionate relationship with Ireland. In reading MacNeice as something of a stranger in his own land, and as a man of personal and individualist integrity at a time of ideological extremity (in the 1930s in Britain), Brown claims a role for literary heritage in the maintenance of a neutral or, at least, a ‘sceptical’ vision when regarding the conflict in the North. Because it is one of the first substantial pieces of literary criticism in Ireland to undertake a rewriting of ‘Northern’ literature of the period immediately preceding the Troubles, Brown’s book is absolutely crucial to the development of literary historiography from the 1970s on. Through its quiet polemic about the role of the writer (which effectively argues – by exemplary reading – that literature will always be political yet rise above dogma because it is literature), Brown’s book marks out some of the key concepts by which both contemporary and past Irish writers are now understood.

It was gratifying, undoubtedly, to have a work of one’s own so favourably mentioned in as authoritative a scholarly production as a Cambridge University Press History, but I must admit that my pleasure on having that book identified as ‘crucial’ to Irish literary historiography since the 1970s was mingled with considerable surprise. For the book in question was not written, as I remember it, with the kind of concepts in mind that Graham discerns as governing its ‘quiet polemic’, and in as much as they can be derived from what I began to write over four decades ago, that must be reckoned as an example of the way contexts can generate literary and critical meanings of which an author may have been unaware.
The book to which Graham so generously refers began as a doctoral thesis presented to Trinity College, Dublin, in 1970. The thesis and the volume publication certainly addressed the issue of the poet’s political attitudes in 1930s Britain, but only, I thought then, as an aspect of a more fundamental religious and philosophic scepticism that I argued was a defining force in MacNeice’s poetic imagination. The thesis and the resulting book were, I thought, attempts to answer the question whether scepticism could be a creative energy in poetry, notwithstanding a general sense that poetry involves commitment and beliefs. The issue of poetry and belief was in the 1960s a matter of some considerable critical discussion in relation to such poets as W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot and the fact that I was myself undergoing a crisis of religious faith in my postgraduate years added personal urgency to the work I was doing on MacNeice (agnostic son of a devout Christian clergyman father). Even though the research and writing were done as the Troubles broke out and intensified as I transformed thesis into publishable book, my focus remained on the MacNeice whose work spoke to the religious and philosophic efficacy for poetry (and, by extension, for living itself) of self-conscious, creative disbelief. I did not think of my work as a contribution to Irish literary history, or to what later came to be known as Irish Studies. Indeed, the introductory biographical chapter of *Sceptical Vision* (which explored among other things the poet’s formative Northern Irish background) was only added at a late stage in the writing at the suggestion of a London publisher who then declined to publish on commercial grounds; MacNeice in the 1970s was little regarded in England.

I labour these points, in what I fear must seem a self-regarding fashion, because I think they suggest significant things about the way the institution of criticism and literary history has developed in Ireland since the 1970s, things that bear on the essays (all written since 1990) I have chosen to reprint (occasionally in slightly amended form) in this volume.

*Sceptical Vision* got written because the topic was suggested to me in 1967 by the poet-academic Brendan Kennelly and because I became absorbed in studying Louis MacNeice by the questions about poetry and belief referred to above. The fact that the kind of sensibility I helped to define as characteristically expressed in MacNeice’s poetry could later help to place him as an enabling, exemplary presence in Irish literary history was an unintended consequence of my work, and one made likely by the Troubles. Which is to say that although I did not in 1975 primarily think of my book as a work of Irish literary criticism about a Northern poet (an essay published later in the same year tried to do that), but a work of
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criticism about a poet, the times allowed it to be seen in the former way, the way Colin Graham in fact chooses to do.

Reading Graham’s remarks about my book and thinking about why they surprised me, helpfully reminded me that criticism can be an existential encounter with ways of seeing the world and being in it. This does not necessarily mean that such encounters cannot be seen as contributions to the construction of a field or an institution like a literary history or, indeed, an Irish Studies bibliography. I have accordingly included in this book some essays which engage with Irish writings in this way: I adduce as examples the essay on Kavanagh as religious poet (which is concerned with how belief functions as an energising force in his poetry as scepticism did in MacNeice’s) and the essay on John Hewitt and memory (a reflection on how memory is a compositional principle in his verse).

One could, of course, see how essays of this type could be reckoned to contribute to general discourses of one kind or another (on Irish poetry and religious faith, for example, or Irish writing and memory); in this collection, however, they stand as occasions when the critic seeks to engage with the phenomenon of poetic consciousness considered in its own right. Most of the other essays in the book can more readily be seen as contributions of one kind or another to Irish literary history, to cultural history or to the burgeoning contemporary field of Irish Studies. I hope, nonetheless, that all of them remain true to the critical imperative of engaging with literature as literature even as various historical and critical contexts, within which literary creativity can be situated, suggest themselves as analytically fruitful.

It may be in order here to address in terms of personal memoir how this commitment to literary phenomenology was formed in my case and has remained, I hope, vital, in a body of work which has been marked over three decades by its involvement with history (an involvement that is obvious in this collection). And in allowing the impulse towards memoir some free rein in the academic arena, I hope I may be indulged as I further consider how and why that commitment was joined in my case with a commitment to historical critique in a period when the latter involved matters of considerable contention.

The education I received at Magee University College, Derry, and subsequently at Trinity College, Dublin (the course bore the impressive title ‘Moderatorship in English Language and Literature’), was markedly historicist in tenor. It ranged from the literature of Anglo-Saxon England to Ginsberg’s Howl. Reading lists for specific elements of the course intimidated by their inclusive extent, and the overall structure enforced a sense
of historical development. One did not get to read the major novels of the English tradition until one had read quite deeply in Elizabethan and Jacobean prose. Joyce and other modern Irish writers (taught in the third year of the four-year course) were preceded by a year-long first-year course in nineteenth-century Anglo-Irish literature. It would have been difficult not to have understood that ‘English’ in the University of Dublin was a historical discipline, in the sense that it was predicated on the concept of a literary history slowly accumulating, with its major and minor works forming a rich continuum, well worth studying. The first-year course in Anglo-Irish literature in my own experience was especially significant in this respect. I read the works (or at least a proportion of them) on that extensive reading list, from Maria Edgeworth to Somerville and Ross, from Thomas Moore to Samuel Ferguson and early Yeats, at the window of a room in Magee College, overlooking the river Foyle in Derry (Magee prepared Honours candidates for the first two years of the Trinity College courses). For a young man for the first time gaining a sense of an Irish life lived beyond Belfast and the unionist community of its north-Down environs, the fact that the college’s library contained a whole roomful of Anglo-Irish authors was an advancement in learning indeed, and one bearing a distinctive historical message. Ireland had a literature in the English language and I was holding it in my hands, for many of the works I was able to borrow from the library and take to my room were first editions or at least handsome nineteenth-century productions, three-decker novels or presentation copies. In some instances I had to blow away the dust of the decades. History was real.

From the vantage point of 2009, what is striking is how much of what was then termed Anglo-Irish literature Trinity English included. Equally striking is how little its inclusion was seen to raise problems about what its presence in a course called English Language and Literature actually meant (a course on the history of the English language barely mentioned Hiberno-English). Its presence in the course probably owned something to the insistence of the Marxist critic in the department, the Northern Irishman J. K. Walton (Shakespearian textual critic and admirer of Arnold Kettle) and to the foresightedness of the Head of Department, Professor Philip Edwards (Renaissance scholar), who had been to the fore in the construction of the course I was fortunate to take. As an Englishman in Ireland, he had had the vision to see that Anglo-Irish literature must be a key element in an undergraduate education in an English department in Ireland and not just a money-spinner at graduate level as it had tended to be before his arrival in 1960. When he left in 1966, he had in fact been
planning with the writer Frank O’Connor to establish a course in Irish Studies in Trinity. The project had foundered for lack of financial support and Edwards’s departure and O’Connor’s untimely death in 1968 meant that the college did not manage to make their vision of such a course actual until 2007, almost forty years later.¹

In our current jargon, 1960s English at Trinity was under-theorised (literary theory in as much as it was mentioned at all meant a book by the American critics Austin Warren and René Wellek). So if the inclusion of Anglo-Irish literature and of a quite comprehensive course in American literature in the fourth year were not deemed in any way problematic alongside the major and minor works of the English literary canon, this was probably because, with one or two exceptions, most of the faculty were literary historians of settled historicist outlook for whom methodological issues did not seem at all pressing. One young lecturer, the late Geoffrey Thurley, did bring a Leavisite intensity to the explication of poetry, especially to that of T. S. Eliot, and the poet Brendan Kennelly bore witness in vivid lectures to the imaginative power of romantic art, but in the main, the department seemed basically untroubled by the kinds of theoretical issues that were beginning to disturb English departments elsewhere in the English-speaking world.

So my intellectual formation (to dignify what was often an undergraduate anxiety to second-guess the examiners) through the study of English Language and Literature certainly predisposed me to value historical perspectives in the life of the mind. In my case this sense of things was joined by a developing specific awareness that my own country possessed a valid English-language literary tradition (the presence of an Irish language tradition was not highlighted at any point, although the Irish Studies course proposed by Edwards would have been bilingual in content, in the way the current course is). This predisposition and national inflection has remained central to my academic preoccupations, as I hope is evident from this collection of essays.

However, there was another aspect of my intellectual experience in the 1960s that had a significant effect on my academic development and on such sensibility as I possess. The crisis of religious faith, referred to above, that I underwent in my undergraduate and graduate years was crucially involved with questions about text and history. These were questions that in many ways anticipated the hermeneutic disputes that invaded ‘English’ in the 1970s and 1980s as a consequence of the general ‘theoretical turn’ in the discipline, but which, for a Christian believer as I was in my early twenties, were of inescapable existential import. Let me explain.
As the elder surviving son of evangelical Christian missionaries, who had both spent the grim years of the Second World War in Japanese-occupied inland China, I was raised to consider the Holy Bible as the inerrant, infallible Word of God, Whose scriptural communication with his Christian children should be made the basis of daily reading, reflection, interpretation and prayer. The truths of salvation were to be found within its pages, open directly to the honestly searching spirit, without the mediation of any church, priest, minister or pastor. The act of reading was accordingly an awesome yet intimately familial one when the text was sacred. The ethos of a Northern Irish School where evangelical convictions were a pervasive presence had further confirmed family values. However, the 1960s in the English-speaking world were a decade when even the most cloistered Christian would have been aware that dependence on Scripture as an infallible source of revelation was fraught with intellectual difficulties. The immense popularity of Bishop John Robinson’s little book of 1963, Honest to God (over a million copies sold), had put the cat among the pigeons in the English-speaking Protestant world, as it made very public the kind of historicised readings of Scripture and especially of the Gospels that had been the basis of theological disputation in the schools of theology for more than a hundred years. For a few years speculative theology became quite fashionable, with paperbacks rolling off the presses on such lively subjects as the death of God, the secular city and religionless Christianity (that oxymoron drawing on the Lutheran martyr to Nazism, Dietrich Bonhoeffer), but for a reader like myself life issues were at stake. Could one continue to commit oneself to the Christian life when the historical sources of the faith were so open to historical question, with Form Criticism the dominant force in the academy that inferred a radical scepticism about the Gospels’ historicity? As I read for my examinations and thesis, I also immersed myself in the contemporary debate about Christian origins and the possibility of religious revelation in texts so evidently constructions of believing communities with their life situations and needs. Looking back on one book I read at that time, I note that I underlined the following bleak sentence in an essay that sought to counteract Form Criticism’s findings: ‘In other words, the Gospels are both the material rehandled and the evidence for the rehandling’, introducing me to the kind of hemeneutic circle that later in literary theory texts would similarly induce the vertiginous sense of an aporia.

The writings of the German-American Paul Tillich were among the most influential among the works of popular theology of the period that
broadcast in such works as *The Courage to Be* the need to reinterpret the Gospel message as a call to feel ‘ultimate concern’ and to be aware that life possessed ‘depth’, in a way that seemed to rob Scripture of any propositional content. Yet it was the writings and ideas of Rudolf Bultmann, which called for the demythologising of the New Testament world-view (with its concepts of Virgin Birth, Incarnation, substitutionary atonement, resurrection, assumption into Heaven and promise of a second coming; the substance of the historic Christian creeds, indeed), that I found the most disturbing and challenging. His radical doubts about the historicity of the New Testament texts, and his urging that the essential *kerygma* (declaration, preaching) of the early church must be encountered by the reader of these mysterious works when their mythological way of speaking had been fully admitted, resonated with my own attempts as a student of literature to understand how myth functioned in some of the key Modernist works (three decades later as I struggled with Yeats’s *A Vision* as a key work of the poet’s maturity, my earlier theological readings about image, myth and religious symbol proved their critical use). More significantly, they gave me to feel that religio-literary meanings, although products of historical circumstances and expressed in terms of particular world-views, could transcend the conditions of their production (a formulation that I know sounds hopelessly inadequate when one thinks, for example, of the Gospel of St John). That sense has remained with me in my literary—historical work, though the belief that the New Testament documents are some kind of special divine revelation has not (my problem was basic enough: once one accepted the dubiety of Christian sources and that what the Gospels contained was the ‘preaching’ of the early church couched in terms of mythic consciousness, what reason could be given for believing that Christianity was a revealed religion with a special claim upon us to believe its implicit truth claims about reality, whatever one makes of the ethic it advocates).

Given these kinds of concerns (and they had significant personal implications in terms of family traditions and friendships), it should not surprise that two books of literary criticism that deeply impressed me at that period of my life were J. Hillis Miller’s *The Disappearance of God: Five Victorian Writers* (1963) and *Poets of Reality* (1965). The former explored how nineteenth-century writers had reacted to their own crises of faith in the era of metaphysical reductionism, while the latter examined how key twentieth-century English-language writers (predominately poets) had sought to deal with the impoverishment of imagination and spirit that modernity represented for them. These were subjects embraced by
the critic-son of a distinguished American Baptist in a way that spoke directly to my own questioning preoccupations. That they did so through a compelling synthesis of New Critical attention to verbal detail with the Geneva School’s belief that literature opened a door to another’s consciousness (Miller was at that time heavily influenced by the work of George Poulet) had direct impact on my own attempt to encounter the world of MacNeice’s poetry and other writings as a phenomenon of consciousness.

In his subsequent career, of course, Miller was to heed the voice of the ‘deconstructive angel’, becoming in the 1970s one of the most ingenious and influential of those who sponsored a critical turn in the North American academy that made of Derridean insight a critical praxis. Developments in Ireland, I reckon, disallowed the kind of disengagement from history that deconstruction could encourage when insight and subversive critique became the basis of pedagogy and, sometimes, glib learned response. For the years 1968 to 1975 were those in which the Irish question (suppurating since the 1920s) reopened as a violently inflamed wound. History was not dusty books in a library, however fascinating, nor a matter of mere textuality to be experienced as a site of aporia, but dreadful occurrences in streets one knew. Events such as Bloody Sunday and Bloody Friday in 1972, the Dublin and Monaghan Bombings in 1974 during the Ulster Workers’ Strike of that year, were shaking historic foundations. Minerva’s owl was certainly on twilit wing. Who knew what night could bring? Crises of faith became crises of politics.

As a product of the British educational system, of the post-war welfare state, recipient of a university scholarship courtesy of the Butler Education Act (which was made applicable to British subjects in Northern Ireland in 1947), I had naturally greeted the election of Harold Wilson’s Labour Government in the United Kingdom in 1964 with enthusiasm (Wilson promised social reform in ‘the white heat of the technological revolution’). Labour traditions with roots in English Methodism and in Welsh non-conformism had historically given to the British Left a certain evangelical aura (the preacher and the prophet could share a platform). Labour seemed the natural home for those raised to believe the Gospel had a social dimension. And in my own field of English Studies, the writings of Richard Hoggart and of the Welsh Marxist Raymond Williams offered a rich cultural analysis of British society and its intellectual and social inheritance that supplied ideological grist to the mill of political hope. So it seemed possible in 1969 to 1970 (with James Callaghan as Home Secretary) that disaster could be averted in Northern Ireland through...
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genuine reform. That it was in fact a Tory Government under Ted Heath that negotiated with the Irish Government the Sunningdale Agreement of 1973 (which would largely be replicated by the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 a generation later) was surprising. That it was Wilson’s second government that allowed it to fail in the summer of 1974 was not only surprising but utterly shocking. I still remember how unnerved I was by the querulous impotence of the Northern Ireland Secretary of State, Merlyn Rees, in face of the Ulster Workers’ Council direct-action assault on the agreement, and how astonished I was by Wilson’s ill-judged speech on the crisis, in which he had seemed to damn the whole northern Protestant community as a bunch of ‘spongers’ on the British state. It was hard not to sense that he was governed by a colonial mindset with Northern Ireland as troublesome a colony as the Rhodesia that had given him so much grief during his several premierships.

As it happened, in the month leading up to that momentous period in May 1974 I had been giving a lot of thought to the question of the province’s status in the United Kingdom and in the island of Ireland. With support from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, I was researching and writing a book on the course of poetry in the north of Ireland since the seventeenth century (the pioneering work and conversation of the socialist poet of Methodist background, John Hewitt, had encouraged me in my efforts and Raymond Williams’s book The Country and the City was an example of what such a survey could achieve). By grim chance I had been reading in the National Library in Dublin poems about the Nazi blitz on Belfast in the Second World War, when the dome of the building shook with the impact of one of the murderous bombs that loyalist terrorists placed in the city on 17 May, during the massive Workers’ Strike north of the border (which brought down the power-sharing executive at Stormont established under the terms of the Sunningdale Agreement). The aftershocks of those events could not but affect what I wrote later that year as the conclusion to what was published as Northern Voices: Poets from Ulster in 1975 (the book included an essay on Louis MacNeice as an Anglo-Irishman, adverted to above, shifting the focus from my book-length study). My conclusion began: ‘Chapter one of this study was entitled “Poetry in a Colony”, considering as it did the North as part of colonised Ireland. Perhaps the entire volume might properly have borne that title, for many of the problems and thematic concerns that I have examined in the work of the various poets are those resulting from the province’s status as a British colony in an island that has attempted to break that country’s hold.’ I refer also to ‘the colonial predicament’, ‘colonial domination’,...
and invoke in a final sentence as counter-weight to these ‘the quality of a free form of life, an independent pattern of living.’ Looking back on this now, I am struck by the stark fashion in which I deploy the term ‘colony’ and by how little I interrogate it. I can only plead in mitigation that the times were frighteningly dangerous and that British inaction in Northern Ireland seemed like a prelude to full-scale civil war (we now know Wilson contemplated the ultimate inaction, precipitate withdrawal). Since then, as will be seen in this book, I have tended to use the term more sparingly, preferring to see the Irish experience of the twentieth century as bound up with the collapse of European imperialism following the Great War, and the country’s complex relationship with Britain as only partially illuminated by the colonial/post-colonial model of that relationship that has come to dominate the field of Irish Studies (in chapter 1 of this volume I address this development in more detail). Ironically, it was the publication of Northern Voices that, in a sense, created the conditions for my beginning to think more comparatively about this issue.

In 1977 the historian F. S. L. Lyons, who had noted the cultural history elements of my study of the northern poets, invited me to contribute a volume on the post-independence period to a series on Irish socio-cultural history to be published by William Collins Ltd (who had published the paperback edition of his own magisterial Ireland Since the Famine, in 1973), of which he would be the general editor. After a good deal of trepidation I set to work, unaware that I would be the only member of the assembled team (historians almost to a man, if memory serves) who would complete the assignment. My Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922–79 appeared as a stand-alone work in paperback, to little notice, it must be said, in 1981 (subsequently it has been the most-cited of my works).

The preparation of this work involved not only extensive researches in the literary and cultural archives but an attempt to grasp the overall shape of independent Ireland’s historical experience. Such Irish social histories and anthropological studies as then existed proved locally helpful, but it was Clifford Geertz’s essay ‘After the Revolution: The Fate of Nationalism in the New States’ (included in his The Interpretation of Cultures, 1973), with its international perspectives, that proved most enabling. I was most struck by his contention that new states formed with nationalist underpinning in the twentieth century were driven by two impulses that he termed ‘essentialism’ and ‘epochalism’. The former involved states answering the question ‘Who are we?’ by employing ‘symbolic forms drawn from local traditions’, while the latter stimulated the new states to discern and adapt to ‘the outlines of the history of our time and what one takes to be