The Cambridge Companion to Modern Irish Culture

This Companion provides an authoritative introduction to the historical, social and stylistic complexities of modern Irish culture. Readers will be introduced to Irish culture in its widest sense and helped to find their way through the cultural and theoretical debates that inform our understanding of modern Ireland. The volume combines cultural breadth and historical depth, supported by a chronology of Irish history and arts. A wide selection of essays on a rich variety of Irish cultural forms and practices are complemented by a series of in-depth analyses of key themes in Irish cultural politics. The range of topics covered will enable a comprehensive understanding of Irish culture, while the authors gathered here – all acknowledged experts in their fields – provide stimulating new essays that together amount to an invaluable guide to the shaping of modern Ireland.

Joe Cleary is senior lecturer in English Literature at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth, and has been Visiting Professor at Notre Dame University. He has published several essays and book chapters on modernisation, colonialism and twentieth-century Irish culture, and a book, Literature, Partition and the Nation State: Culture and Conflict in Ireland, Israel and Palestine (Cambridge, 2002).

Claire Connolly is a senior lecturer in English Literature and Cultural Criticism at Cardiff University, and has been Visiting Associate Professor of Irish Studies at Boston College. She edited the critical anthology, Theorizing Ireland, as well as a number of scholarly editions of nineteenth-century Irish novels, including two volumes of the Tales and Novels of Maria Edgeworth and (with Stephen Copley) Sydney Owenson’s The Wild Irish Girl.
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Contributors

Alan Bairner is Reader in the Sociology of Sport at Loughborough University. He is the author of *Sport, Nationalism, and Globalization: European and North American Perspectives*, the co-author of *Sport, Sectarianism and Society in a Divided Ireland* and co-editor of *Sport in Divided Societies*. He has advised the Sports Council for Northern Ireland and the Irish Football Association on community relations issues and was a member of the ministerial advisory panel set up in 2001 to examine the future of soccer in Northern Ireland.

Hugh Campbell is College Lecturer at the School of Architecture, University College Dublin, where he teaches the history and theory of architecture as well as working in the design studio. He has published numerous essays on modern architecture and urban history. His doctoral research was on the politics of urban development in nineteenth-century Dublin, and he is currently researching the relationship between urban consciousness and architecture.

Joe Cleary is Senior Lecturer in English Literature at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth, and has been Visiting Professor at Notre Dame University. He has published several essays and book chapters on modernisation, colonialism and twentieth-century Irish culture, and a book, *Literature, Partition and the Nation-State: Culture and Conflict in Ireland, Israel and Palestine* (Cambridge, 2002).

Claire Connolly is Senior Lecturer in English Literature and Cultural Criticism at Cardiff University, and has been Visiting Associate Professor of Irish Studies at Boston College. She edited the critical anthology, *Theorizing Ireland*, as well as a number of
scholarly editions of nineteenth-century Irish novels, including two volumes of the *Tales and Novels of Maria Edgeworth* and (with Stephen Copley) Sydney Owenson’s *The Wild Irish Girl*.

**Fintan Cullen** teaches Art History at the University of Nottingham. His most recent publication is *The Irish Face: Redefining the Irish Portrait*, published by the National Portrait Gallery, London (2000). In 2005 he is co-curating an exhibition with Roy Foster at the National Portrait Gallery, entitled ‘Conquering England: Ireland in the Victorian Metropolis’.

**Luke Gibbons** is the Keough Family Professor of Irish Studies at the University of Notre Dame. His publications include *Edmund Burke and Ireland: Aesthetics, Politics and the Colonial Sublime*; *Gaelic Gothic: Race, Colonization and Irish Culture*; *The Quiet Man*; *Transformations in Irish Culture* and (with Kevin Rockett and John Hill) *Cinema and Ireland*.

**Mary J. Hickman** is Professor of Irish Studies and Sociology at London Metropolitan University. Her publications include *Religion, Class and Identity* and (as editor with Avtar Brah and Mairtin Mac an Ghaill) *Thinking Identities: Ethnicity, Racism and Culture* and *Global Futures: Migration, Environment and Globalization* (1999). She and Bronwen Walter co-authored *Discrimination and the Irish Community in Britain* for the Commission for Racial Equality (1997). Professor Hickman has served on the Irish government’s Task Force on Policy Regarding Emigrants (2001–2) and is currently writing a book about the Irish diaspora.

**Tom Inglis** is Associate Professor of Sociology at University College Dublin. He has written extensively on religion in Ireland, particularly the influence of the Catholic Church on Irish culture and society. He is author of *Moral Monopoly: The Catholic Church in Modern Irish Society; Lessons in Irish Sexuality; and Truth, Power and Lies: Modern Irish Society and the Case of the Kerry Babies*.

**Alvin Jackson** is Professor of Modern British and Irish History at the University of Edinburgh. He has been Professor of Modern Irish History at Queen’s University, Belfast, John Burns Visiting Professor at Boston College and a British Academy Research Reader. His recent books include *Home Rule: An Irish History* (2003) and *Ireland 1798–1998: Politics and War* (2004).

**Siobhán Kilfeather** teaches in the English Department at Queen’s University, Belfast. She has edited *The Field Day Anthology*...
Notes on contributors

Of Irish Writing: Irish Women’s Writing and Traditions and the Pickering and Chatto edition of Maria Edgeworth’s Belinda. She has published a number of influential essays on Irish women’s writing, particularly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and is currently writing a book on Rhetorics of Atrocity in Romantic Ireland.

Christopher Morash is author of A History of Irish Theatre: 1601–2000, winner of the Theatre Book Prize, 2002. His earlier work includes Writing the Irish Famine and many articles on Irish cultural history. He is currently Director of Media Studies at National University of Ireland, Maynooth.

Emer Nolan is a Lecturer in English at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth. She is the author of Joyce and Nationalism, a study of Joyce’s politics and Irish modernism.

Bernard O’Donoghue teaches Medieval English at Wadham College, Oxford. He has written a study of Seamus Heaney’s language, as well as an anthology of medieval European love poetry. His first book of poems was Poaching Rights and he has published four collections with Chatto & Windus, of which the most recent is Outliving.

Liam O’Dowd is Professor of Sociology and Director of the Centre for International Borders Research at Queen’s University, Belfast. He has published extensively on the political sociology and economy of Northern Ireland, on Irish intellectuals and on changing state borders.

Diarmuid Ó Giolláin is Senior Lecturer in Folklore at the National University of Ireland, Cork, and author of Locating Irish Folklore: Tradition, Modernity, Identity. He has published essays on ethnoology; popular religion; historical tradition; and Irish, Nordic, Estonian and Latin American (particularly Brazilian) popular culture and research traditions.

Lillis Ó Laoire is Lecturer in Irish Language and Literature, Department of Languages and Cultural Studies, University of Limerick, and Visiting Assistant Professor at Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles. A noted traditional singer, he is also director of Ionad na nAmhrán, a centre for the study and performance of traditional song at the Irish World Music Centre, University of Limerick. His book, On A Rock in the Middle of the Ocean: Songs and Singers in Tory Island, will be published in 2005.
GEARÓID Ó TUATHAIGH is Professor of History at the National University of Ireland, Galway. He is the author of Ireland Before the Famine 1798–1848 and many influential essays on nineteenth-century history and the Irish language.

PÁDRAIGín RIGGS is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Modern Irish at the National University of Ireland, Cork. She is the author of Donncha Ó Céileadháin: Anailís Stíleach; Pádraic Ó Conaire: Deoraí and the editor of Dáibhí Ó Bradaigh: His Historical and Literary Context and (with B. Ó Conchúir and S. Ó Coileáin) Saoi na hÉigse. She is currently preparing an edition of the writings of Pádraic Ó Conaire for the Irish Texts Society.

NORMAN VANCE is Professor of English and Director of the Humanities Graduate Research Centre at the University of Sussex. He has published widely on Victorian and Irish literature: his books include The Victorians and Ancient Rome, Irish Literature: a Social History and Irish Literature since 1800.

KEVIN WHELAN is the inaugural Michael J. Smurfit Director of the University of Notre Dame’s Keough Centre in Dublin. He has been a Visiting Professor at New York University, Boston College and Concordia University. Among his books are Nations and Nationalisms in the Eighteenth Century, The Tree of Liberty, The Atlas of the Irish Rural Landscape and 1798: A Bicentenary Perspective.
Preface

Ireland is a small island that has made large claims on world interest. To some, it will be best known for its eventful history of conquest and settlement, dispossession and diaspora, repression and rebellion, land agitation and famine. Its independence struggle triggered the beginning of the end of an empire, but issued domestically in partition, civil war and new state repressions – a turbulent history, then, the bitter intensity of which has been most recently evident in the quarter-century-long conflict in Northern Ireland usually termed the ‘Troubles’.

Despite this, Ireland has long nurtured a romantic rural self-image calculated to appeal to those in flight from the complexities of the modern world. History fades against its much-sung landscape of rocky coastlines, rolling grasslands, misted mountain ranges, boglands and moor. In one of the many paradoxes of modern Irish culture, the country has come to represent both the romantic pleasures of solitude and seclusion and traditional virtues of conversation, sociability and tight-knit communities. Ever since the mid nineteenth century, when Belfast became one of the world’s major industrial centres, that rural image became associated more with the southern than with the northern part of the island, and indeed it was not until the census of 1966 that the urban population of the Irish Republic was first recorded as having exceeded the rural. Today, the old rural national image is on the wane and the country currently likes to represent itself as a thriving, energetic, cosmopolitan place, a vibrant multicultural hub of postindustrial, information-age entrepreneurial activity. The revels of the comely maidens dancing at the crossroads of the local townsland now are ended or linger only as national kitsch; the country prefers instead a corporate quick-step on a global crossroads between Boston, Bermuda and Berlin.
For many people, of course, Ireland’s claim to attention will reside primarily in an extraordinarily sustained tradition of literature and letters distinguished by Bishop Berkeley and Jonathan Swift, Oliver Goldsmith and Edmund Burke, Thomas Moore and Maria Edgeworth, Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw, James Joyce and W. B. Yeats, Sean O’Casey and Samuel Beckett, Louis MacNeice and Seamus Heaney, Elizabeth Bowen and John McGahern. Classical music traditions weigh lightly compared to those of other Western European nationalities such as the Germans or Italians, and yet the Irish are no less famous for their love of music and song. The country’s traditional airs, sean nós singing, ballad treasuries and folk-music revivals have exerted influence across the globe, either in their own right or as stimulus to other musical cultures. Ireland’s own cultural traditions have drawn heavily on popular song and the lyric inheritance. In contemporary times, Ireland’s accomplishments in popular music especially have won a global audience that will compare in reach with that which its writers have already achieved.

The small population of the island itself must be set, moreover, against an extensive Irish diaspora that stretches from the Americas to the Antipodes and all across the far-flung territories of what was, until relatively recent decades, the British Empire. Some of the great cities of modern times, Manchester, New York, Liverpool, Boston, Glasgow, Toronto or Melbourne, to name but a few, have modern Irish histories and heritages as varied and interesting as those of Dublin or Belfast. By virtue, then, of its tempestuous history, which generated this far-flung diaspora, and which inspired its sometimes extraordinary achievements in literature and the other arts, Ireland attests in a whole complex of ways to the manner in which supposedly minor or peripheral societies can have an impact on the world as significant as that of countries more commonly considered major and metropolitan.

This volume aims to offer its readers a useful overview of modern Irish culture as it has changed and developed from 1800 to 2000. Beginning with a century of frequently calamitous change that followed the United Irishmen’s rebellion in 1798 and Ireland’s integration into the United Kingdom consequent to the Act of Union in 1800, the volume concludes with another period of rather dramatic social transformation ushered in by the economic boom in the Republic of Ireland usually known as the ‘Celtic Tiger’ and by the concurrent ‘peace process’ in Northern Ireland that has proceeded since the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. A country with so disputed a history has inevitably generated much scholarly
controversy and today Ireland as subject is of interest to academics and students concerned with issues as diverse as nation-building and globalisation, colonialism and postcolonialism, sexuality and religion, modernism and regional cultures, migration studies and ethnic conflict.

The topics engaged here have been selected with an eye to the interests of both the general reader and the more specialised student of the culture, and while the volume cannot over a two-century stretch claim to comprehensiveness, the individual chapters, all written by distinguished authorities in the field, offer lucid, accessible surveys that are also scholarly, searching and provocative. Some of the chapters lean towards a chronological or narrative account of their matter, dealing with the more significant episodes or contours of development in the area in question; others are more conceptual in format, opting for an approach that evaluates the major controversies that have shaped scholarship in their subject areas. The volume as a whole offers its readers, we believe, an attractively varied account of the manifold social forces, domestic and international, that have gone into the making of Irish culture over the past two hundred years.

Contemporary commentators remind us that the word ‘culture’ is at once too slack to serve specialist analysis and too rigid to be greatly useful. In its broader anthropological definitions, culture can refer to the ‘whole way of life’ of a group of people, or to the state of intellectual development of a complete society; in its more restrictive usages, it is narrowly identified with processes of self-cultivation and mental refinement and associated with certain valued artistic and intellectual activities. Whereas ‘culture’ broadly defined risks becoming co-extensive with society such that any capacity to distinguish between what is and is not deemed cultural activity collapses, in its narrower versions the term can connote forms of practice so rarefied as to be almost totally unconnected to the everyday lives of the vast majority of people in any society.

The present volume can hardly escape the conceptual dilemmas that attend to our contemporary usage of the word, but it does try to steer its way between the more all-inclusive and the more specialised notions of ‘culture’ as adroitly as possible. The volume opens with an introductory essay designed to give readers a solid foundation in the historical and conceptual frameworks necessary to understand modern Irish culture. In critically surveying the different ways in which Ireland’s relationship to the modern and to modernity has been elaborated over the past two centuries, the introductory chapter serves to ground and position
what follows. The chapters in Part I, ‘Cultural politics’, then move on to
deal with defining historical events (such as the Act of Union or the Great
Famine) or with broader social movements and political and cultural
practices (such as unionism, republicanism, religion, language change,
migration and feminism) that have significantly conditioned the tex-
ture of Irish culture understood in the extended sense of the whole way
of life of a people. Part II, ‘Cultural practices and cultural forms’, deals
with culture in the more restricted aesthetic sense that refers to the arts
and social recreation, but does so in a way that makes space alongside
what are conventionally deemed the ‘high’ or ‘fine’ arts for more popu-
lar pursuits such as sports, cinema or folklore as well. Ireland’s excep-
tional achievements in the literary arts are reflected in the weighting of
the volume, but one of the attractions of the present collection will be,
we hope, that developments in the various ‘popular’ and ‘fine’ arts can be
surveyed here directly alongside each other such that the diversity and
the inter-weave of modern Irish cultural production can more readily
be appreciated. In so far as has been possible within the remit of these
short essays, the volume attempts to deal with modern Irish culture as
it extends not only across two centuries but also across two languages
and indeed across the two states that emerged when the island was parti-
tioned in the early nineteen twenties. Recognising that some of the most
exciting and controversial developments in Irish cultural history begin
at Holyhead, Larne or Shannon, the chapter on migration deals with the
Irish abroad, primarily with their modern histories in Britain and the
United States, but also in Australia, New Zealand and Canada.

We hope to have assembled here a volume useful to those wishing
to understand the contradictory, contested elements that went into the
making of the past two centuries of modern Irish culture. Should those
wishing to renovate and innovate within that culture as we move into the
new century ahead also find some stimulus in its pages, we would be espe-
cially pleased.
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