Introduction

MARGARET KELLEHER AND PHILIP O'LEARY

In 1875, one year short of the centennial of the American republic, the publisher George H. Putnam asked Moses Coit Tyler to produce a 'manual' of American literature. Tyler was to do much more than that. Convinced that it was now time to write an account of what he called 'the most confidential and explicit record' of the American mind, the record preserved in the nation's literature, he undertook a full-scale history of American literature from 1607 to 1765, a pioneering effort that was to mark the beginning of the serious study of that literature. Tyler himself was in 1881 to join the faculty of Cornell University as the holder of the first professorship in the United States devoted to American history.

We believe that now is the time for a similar pioneering effort to create a coherent and authoritative history of Irish literature in the two major languages of the island. The publication in 1991 of the three-volume *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, the first attempt to formulate a standard if not definitive anthology of Irish literature, has in effect established a canon of Irish literature, a canon since expanded with the appearance in 2002 of the fourth and fifth volumes of the anthology, volumes dedicated to writing by and about women. The existence of such a canon, however contested, only makes more compelling – even urgent – the need for an accessible and reliable historical framework within which the newly canonical texts can be read, and marginalised texts, together with the reasons for their marginalisation, can be explored. Indeed the *Field Day Anthology* has created the anomalous situation in which Ireland now has a chronologically organised literary canon but no comprehensive literary history in light of which to think about it.

Of course that does not mean that there are not sound works of Irish literary history available. Unlike Tyler, we face a situation in which there is an almost baffling profusion of histories, biographies, critical monographs, and so on, dealing with various aspects of the literatures of Ireland. Yet for all this wealth of scholarly material, we have as yet no definitive literary history. To be sure,

there are important and useful surveys like those by Jeffares and Deane for Irish writing in English, and for Irish writing in Irish by Hyde, de Blacam and J. E. Caerwyn Williams (the last translated into Irish and English from the original Welsh). In addition, there are, of course, histories of individual periods, movements, genres, themes, etc. But for the scholar or general reader trying to make sense of the bigger picture, looking for a reliable overview of the Irish literary tradition as it has developed in both Irish and English, there has been next to nothing.

Given the enormous scholarly and popular interest in Irish literature at present, now is the time to remedy this deficiency. Ireland's literary tradition spans more than fifteen hundred years. As we begin the new millennium, we have both a need and an opportunity to make sense of that long tradition by providing an authoritative chronological history that will enable readers to check facts on specific authors and literary works, 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. For as Homi Bhabha has pointed out in *The Location of Culture*, 'what is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivity and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences'.[1]

At the moment, Irish culture is experiencing unprecedented visibility and acclaim on the world stage. Simultaneously, Irish Studies has developed as a respectable academic discipline in many universities, most notably in North America and Great Britain, but also in Australia, continental Europe and, curiously belatedly, in Ireland itself. Yet despite this visibility, not all those engaged with Irish culture share the confidence, even occasional complacency, that is the predictable by-product of such striking accomplishments. In fact, some have experienced a nagging ambivalence, a concern that superficial successes, however impressive, are actually obscuring rather than illuminating an authentic understanding of crucial questions called forth by those very successes. Are Irish writers in English the Anglophone flavour-of-the-moment for jaded cosmopolitan readers? Is translation a vital transfusion of cross-cultural energy that will make writing in Irish more visible and ultimately more viable, or is it a lethal injection leading to linguistic redundancy? Do the plays of Martin McDonagh give new voice to the ever-evolving vitality of Irish theatre, or do they cynically parasitise that tradition to propagate a (not all that) new species of stage Irishism? What does the controversy over the *Field Day Anthology* say about the

possibility of thinking about Irish writing as a distinct and coherent literary entity?

It is, however, difficult, if not impossible, to think clearly and creatively, much less authoritatively, about these and other questions, large and small, without a specifically Irish context in which to read the literary works all too often seen as curious offshoots from a normative English tradition. At present, scholars and general readers alike lack such a context, with even those professionally involved in the study of Irish culture often experiencing an insecurity about finding a proper approach to thinking about Irish literature, about whether and how current developments relate to an ongoing tradition, and indeed about the existence and nature of that tradition itself. Given that those previous histories that do exist have concentrated exclusively on one or the other of Ireland's two major literary traditions, we see *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature* as a pioneering as well as a timely project. Far more than simply supplementing existing and forthcoming histories of English literature, it provides the first systematic and comprehensive overview of the Irish literary tradition as it has achieved expression over the centuries in both Irish and English.

The adherence to a chronological structure of organisation for the history means that the earlier chapters focus almost exclusively on Irish-language texts and writings in insular Latin and Norman French. Later chapters alternate between the Irish and English language traditions, with literature in English playing a considerably – and appropriately – more prominent, though never exclusive, role from the seventeenth century on. Our approach should, by its very novelty, generate new comparative insights, particularly in areas such as oral tradition, antiquarianism, translation or bilingualism, where the two languages have been, and still are, in direct and fruitful contact.

For general readers and even teachers and students, many of whom know only of an Irish literature in English, the relevant chapters provide a thorough and authoritative discussion of both familiar and less well-known texts along with an analysis of historical trends and current developments in the different periods. At the same time, readers of the *History* will also be introduced, many for the first time, to the diversity of the Irish-language tradition, a tradition many may have only encountered previously at second-hand through the uses and misuses to which it has been subjected by Irish writers of English. The older Irish-language material will thus not only be of interest to those with a special interest in the Gaelic past or to medievalists and scholars of comparative literature seeking access to seminal texts previously denied them. It should also enable those primarily interested in Irish literature in English to see how that literature has been influenced right up to the present by the older native

tradition. We do not, then, see this as two discrete histories sharing the same covers, but rather as an integrated narrative addressing the needs of a wide readership from many different backgrounds. On the other hand, we have not tried to construct a unitary or teleological 'metanarrative' from the rich and often refractory reality of Irish literature. Rather, our intention is to offer a comprehensive and accessible survey of two thousand years of Irish literature in two principal and several incidental languages.

One controversy that the editors have had to face from the title page itself concerns the complex and often contested definitions of what an 'Irish' writer is. Our primary criterion for inclusion has been that authors were born on the island of Ireland or lived a significant and formative period of their lives there. Thus we include writings by Spenser, Moryson, Davies, Swift, Sterne, Goldsmith, Trollope and many others as important contributions to the history of Irish literature. In the case of representations of Ireland by English and other commentators (Carlyle, Engels, Gaskell, Asenath Nicholson, etc.), we are interested in the shaping role acquired by such representations, in particular their influence in Ireland and the response they generated from Irish authors. Obviously this definition by its very flexibility generates its own ambiguities. In cases of genuine uncertainty as to whether writers should be considered 'Irish' in any meaningful sense, we would prefer to err on the side of generous inclusion rather than to impose any kind of ethnic or ideological litmus test. Indeed, in some ways the very fact that an author's 'Irishness' is an issue worthy of debate is itself proof that he or she belongs in the *History*!

By defining Irishness on an inclusive island-wide basis, we are also asking our contributors to be sensitive to the existence of differing cultural, political and literary traditions on the island. By no means should this be seen as a genuflection to a transient political correctness. Given the rapid changes affecting Ireland today, in particular the still-embryonic growth of a newly multi-cultural society as a result of increasing immigration, this question of creating and living with a more fluid and embracing sense of Irish identity may well be *the* most important new theme in Irish literature confronting the editors of the successor to these volumes in the future. For now, however, we are attempting to subvert more familiar dichotomies. Thus, for example, we do not intend to marginalise writing from the unionist tradition in Northern Ireland by relegating it to a separate chapter as a regional or provincial offshoot of a putative dominant national tradition.

In keeping with the practice adopted in other *Cambridge History* volumes, we use the term 'literature' in an expansive sense, not limited to *belles lettres*, but also encompassing where appropriate a wide range of other forms of literary

expression. We are not seeking to denigrate or subvert the term 'literature', finding it instead both a useful and a necessary term. The traditional genres of poetry, prose and drama are, as is proper, at the heart of this project. Yet by adopting a more comprehensive working definition of what constitutes literature, we make room for several forms of literary expression that have been more prominent in Irish literature than in that of other predominantly Anglophone countries. Could any comprehensive history of Irish literature fail to engage with autobiographical writings such as those by Wolfe Tone, Yeats, George Moore or Sean O'Casey in English, or the so-called 'Blasket autobiographies' in Irish, a genre memorably parodied by 'Myles na gCopaleen' in *An Béal Bocht* (The Poor Mouth)? In like manner, any discussion of Irish literature in either of the island's languages would be poorer for the absence of the many adaptations and reworkings of early Irish heroic tales by authors such as Standish James O'Grady, Lady Gregory, Thomas Kinsella and Seamus Heaney. And of course such adaptations provide a particularly rich illustration of an ongoing cross-fertilisation between the two traditions. Another example of an ongoing Irish cultivation of less traditional genres is the popularity of political writing from Swift and Burke, to the Young Ireland writers of *The Nation* newspaper in the mid-nineteenth century, to the contemporary social and cultural critics associated with Field Day and the Raven Arts Press.

We have asked contributors to address the question of generic ambiguity as a persistent and positive quality of Irish literature in both Irish and English. We hope to show that the Irish tendency to challenge, subvert, redefine and/or merge traditional genres is one of the major forces that gives Irish literature its distinctiveness and vitality, and by no means an indication that Irish writers have either failed to master the canonical genres or devoted an inordinate effort to the cultivation of miniaturist adaptations of major genres from the dominant English tradition. In fact, Irish experimentation with genre goes back to the very origins of Irish literature, to the often anti-climactic heroic tales that represent the oldest vernacular literature north of the Alps and that, despite the example of classical models of the epic, are almost entirely in prose. In this light, one could see Swift's satires, Wilde's subversions of the well-made play, Synge's violent comedies, Yeats's experiments with the *Noh* drama, O'Casey's blendings of high tragedy and farce, and the stylistic experiments of Joyce, Beckett and Flann O'Brien as only a few of the most conspicuous examples in a mainstream Irish tradition of revisioning and revising conventional genres.

The part played by literary works in the broader cultural sphere in Ireland, and their relation to the history and politics of their time, is of necessity an essential theme throughout. Chapter titles are used to help place the literary

texts under discussion into a recognisable historical context. A fundamental theme of this *History* is the role of literature in the formation of Irish identities. (And again it should be noted here that we are not positing any unitary or essentialist definition of what it means to be Irish.) Of particular interest throughout the *History* is how literature has been shaped by and in turn has helped shape the political and social developments of its time. Literature in Ireland has often provided a forum in which issues suppressed or neglected in the political arena can continue to circulate. On the other hand, literature has also been the subject of state control and censorship under both colonial and native governments. One of the more fruitful contributions of the *History* is its exploration of these themes through history, showing, for example, how intricately contemporary political issues were woven through the early literature in Irish, how the works of writers as diverse as Swift, Goldsmith, Wilde and Shaw take on different resonances when read in a specifically Irish context, and how Free State censorship blended moral and political objections to suppress dissident voices in the first decades of native rule in the South. By no means do we read the interplay between literature and politics as straightforward and unambiguous. Rather, we hope to explore how this interplay has generated its own traditions in Irish writing – past and present, in Irish and in English, North and South – traditions shaped by diverse, complex and shifting impulses which somehow manage to co-exist, however uneasily and at times all but invisibly.

The contents of this history span work from the sixth century to the year 2000, interweaving literature in Irish and English. Using this scheme readers should be empowered, in a way that was never possible while the two linguistic traditions were treated in isolation, to note and trace the existence of parallel or contradictory trends in the literary development of two languages sharing a single small landmass. Needless to say, the complexities and discontinuities of Irish life as expressed in two very different languages under the stress of a colonial hegemony seen very differently by different segments of the population often render any simplistic linear narrative inadequate, if not downright misleading. But these gaps and disjunctions are at the very heart of the Irish experience, and can therefore be far more interesting, challenging and suggestive, not only for specialists in Irish literary studies, but also for an international audience. Among the practical consequences of the acknowledgement of such gaps is that chapters do not always flow together seamlessly, a development we see as inevitable and beneficial.

The break between volumes occurs just before the commencement of the Literary Revival (*c.*1890). Volume I ends with a transitional chapter on the reciprocal relationships between oral and literary traditions in Irish and

English. This chapter looks back to the nineteenth century (and earlier) and forward to the twentieth century from this dual-language perspective. The opening chapter in volume II is also organised around a crucial theme, in this case the interplay between literature and politics in Ireland. In like manner, the final two chapters of the entire *History* are intended to continue this thematic focus and indeed extend it into the future. These chapters, one dealing with literature in Irish, the other with literature in English, provide an assessment of the current state of Irish writing as well as a projection of possible future trends, all in light of current critical and theoretical methodologies that have radically changed the way we think about Irish literature at the turn of the new millennium.

The allocation of an entire volume to the period 1890–2000 obviously represents a bias. We are aware of this bias, and see it as almost inescapable. Many readers will doubtless consult the *History* for an understanding of the place and significance of modern and contemporary authors in an evolving tradition. Deprived of the luxury of a critical consensus formed over time, we may well have attributed an importance to writers of the recent past and the present that future historians will find inappropriate. But thus has it always been. We believe our decision to devote so much space to twentieth-century literature is justified both by the extent and quality of that literature and by what we believe will be significant reader interest in it. Moreover, readers drawn to the *History* primarily by an interest in the recent past may find especially illuminating and empowering the opportunity to explore the traditions and circumstances that shaped twentieth-century Irish literature in both languages.

One of the potentially more enlightening and provocative aspects of the *History* is its commitment to acknowledging the centrality of canonical figures, while also noting and discussing the contributions of less well-known writers, including those in the process of being retrieved from what now seems inexplicable obscurity and those previously marginalised for reasons having nothing to do with literary merit, but instead based on religion, gender or sexual preference. Indeed a recuperative impulse has been a fundamental motive throughout these two volumes.

Moses Coit Tyler's 1875 history was a pioneering effort, although one whose path can no longer be blindly followed, in large part because he was so sure of where that path would lead – to an ever-clearer, uncontested definition of what it meant to be American. The American tradition in literature will be more accurately explored in the pluralist and multivalent *New Cambridge History of American Literature* (edited by Sacvan Bercovitch) than it ever could be, even in its own time, by the monochromatic and teleologic approach of Tyler. Of

course an emphasis on living tradition always looks to the future as well as the past, though the parameters of that future can only be suggested, never defined, much less guaranteed. Nevertheless, as Linda Hutcheon points out in her essay 'Rethinking the National Model', the traditional national model of literary history, one that lays down 'a familiar bedrock of development' and 'historically guarantees a sense of cultural legitimacy', may have to be created 'before competing, correcting, or even counterdiscursive narratives can be articulated'.[2] In this *History* we have tried both to lay down that 'familiar bedrock' and to suggest where 'competing, correcting, or even counterdiscursive narratives' might begin to reshape our understanding of the past. A future *Cambridge History of Irish Literature* will look very different from this one. We hope, however, that its editors will not find their intellectual forebears an embarrassment.

Notes

1. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 1.
2. Linda Hutcheon, 'Rethinking the National Model', in Linda Hutcheon and Mario J. Valdés, *Rethinking Literary History* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 13.

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Literature and politics

DECLAN KIBERD

The artist and the social world

When Seamus Heaney was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995, that story received front-page treatment in the Irish broadsheet press and on news programmes of the electronic media. This was but one indication that creative writers are central to the self-image of Ireland. Another might have been found on the national banknotes still circulating in that year. These featured such figures as W. B. Yeats, James Joyce, Douglas Hyde and Jonathan Swift, as well as the nineteenth-century political leaders Daniel O'Connell and Charles Stewart Parnell. The number of artists far exceeded the number of political figures, such as were to be found on the currencies of most other European countries. In the modern Republic of Ireland, culture is often seen as healing, whereas history is viewed as divisive. If the last national currency before the arrival of the Euro in 2002 projected writers as part of the self-description of a people, the design of the very first set of coins for the Free State back in the 1920s had been entrusted to a committee chaired by W. B. Yeats. That same author was, even then, putting the final touches to *A Vision*, his attempt to write a personal imaginative system which might also function as a Celtic constitution for the emerging nation. Nor was there anything immodest about the ease with which Yeats identified his intellectual project with that of the nation. After all, by then James Joyce had presented his first collection of stories, *Dubliners*, as 'a chapter of the moral history of my country' and had ended *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* with the protagonist's promise to forge in the smithy of his soul 'the uncreated conscience of my race'.[1] Against that backdrop, it may not have been surprising that the question most often put to Seamus Heaney in interviews during the quarter-century leading up to his Nobel Prize was this: what was his solution to the 'troubles' of Northern Ireland? A poet was expected to propound an answer to a problem which had defeated the best intelligence of political science for generations. As far back as 1972 Richard

Rose had called Northern Ireland 'a problem without a solution'.[2] In Ireland, however, artists are expected to see things other mortals don't see and the social powers accorded to the artist are of ancient lineage.

Catastrophism and art: the sense of an ending

The *filí* or poets stood second only to the chieftain in the power-structure of Gaelic Ireland, carrying rods as symbols of their vatic powers. They composed while lying on pallets in darkened huts and their job was to praise a good prince, rebuke his enemies and memorialise dead heroes in immortal lines. After the collapse of the old order in 1600 and the Flight of the Earls in 1607, all that changed: and so the *filí* became the first 'dandies' of Europe, which is to say courtiers dispossessed of a court. Deprived of their aristocratic audiences, the *filí* had no choice but to aim a reconfigured lyric at the wider public and to submit to the conditions of the marketplace. In other parts of Europe, the tradition of literary patronage would last for many more decades – in Germany for two whole centuries – but in Ireland it was now destroyed. Much of the writing of the Irish Renaissance between 1890 and 1925 is an attempt to reverse this reel and to restore elements of the old Gaelic order. The use of actors by Yeats, Synge and Augusta Gregory at the Abbey Theatre recalls the employment of the *reacaire* as a formal reciter of lines by the *filí*, with the audience replicating the old convivial gatherings in the prince's hall.[3] Even a figure as unlikely as James Joyce seems to have been caught up in this project: his Stephen is described in *Ulysses* as a 'youthful bard' complete with vatic cane, just as Joyce himself wished to re-enter what he called 'the fair courts of life' (pressing gullible but monied bluestockings into service as replicants of the old princely patrons).[4]

All of this revivalism was of course wish-fulfillment. After 1607 it was clear to those who had eyes to see that the old days could never return. The serfs had been freed in 1605 and from that moment on could save money, press cases in court or even buy land. They were no longer obliged to provide free field labour to princes but must now be recompensed for all work done. With pastorage giving way to tillage, there was good money to be made and life became easier for many. Soon the former serfs were outbidding fallen noblemen for tracts of land. A centralised administration was being established in Dublin. As primogeniture took the place of custom, the old rule of poets as interpreters of rightful sovereignty was lost. Under the new laws, there was no place for them. Small wonder that these ruined aristocrats floated their poems on the market in a heavily ironical search for a buyer. Over two centuries before Charles