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978-0-521-86191-5 - The Cambridge Companion to the Irish Novel

Edited by John Wilson Foster

Excerpt

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JOHN WILSON FOSTER

## Introduction

### Beginnings

The Irish novel emerged in the tangle of social, cultural, commercial and literary interrelations of Great Britain and Ireland. It shares its genesis with the English novel, as do all English-language national traditions of the genre, though much older and distinctively native Irish narrative forms and energies influenced its course later. When we write of the eighteenth century (the century in which the novel written by Irish authors decisively appeared) and use the phrase ‘the Irish novel’, we are necessarily referring to novels written by authors who, irrespective of birthplace, inhabited both England and Ireland, but chiefly England, and who thought of themselves as English or possibly both English and Irish, with the first identity being the defining one. The once standard *History of the English Novel* (ten volumes, 1924–39) by Ernest A. Baker, and the once standard short histories of the English novel that took much from Baker – *The English Novel: A Short Critical History* (1954) by Walter Allen and *The English Novel: A Panorama* (1960) by Lionel Stevenson – like the once standard history of the genre’s starting decades, *The Rise of the Novel* (1957) by Ian Watt, do not normally identify as Irish those early novelists who had in fact some claim to the title. If they did (Baker calls Thomas Amory ‘half an Irishman’), the Irishness of the authors was regarded as of little consequence and this seemed to be a view derived from these almost exclusively Protestant or Anglo-Irish authors themselves, who failed to stake their claim to Irishness. True, thirty years ago and more, there was little sensitivity among British critics to matters of national pride or ethnic identity outside England and they would not have been scrupulous about Irish attribution. This may have been a vestige of an imperial attitude, certainly of a metropolitan attitude largely indifferent to regional identity, which was regarded as a mark of minor literature; but I recall it in my student days in Northern Ireland rather as a concern for literary texts

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instead of cultural contexts and national subtexts (Baker and Stevenson, after all, were North Americans). The English novel, like English literature, was as a literary matter largely sequestered from the anxieties of nationality; even James Joyce, though manifestly Irish, was seen as an ornament of both the English novel and English literature.

When Allen, Stevenson and Watt were writing, academic Irish Studies were in their infancy, though it had been assumed by many Irish readers ever since the first two decades of the twentieth century that Ireland had a literature that helped distinguish the country from Britain. William Butler Yeats (1865–1939) was to a degree interested in reclaiming Irish writers from the English canon and in recalling living expatriate Irish writers for duty in Ireland, but he was far more interested in building an entirely new canon by recovering the ancient or traditional native Irish sagas, folk tales and poems and encouraging young Irish writers to write a new national literature inspired by them. Yeats was aided in galvanising Irish writers into producing this national literature by Standish James O’Grady, Douglas Hyde, Lady Gregory and other ‘culture-givers’ of the early years of the twentieth century, and the abundant fruits of their success we call the Irish Literary Revival (c.1890–1930). When Irish Studies were gathering momentum thirty years ago, they were conducted in the long shadow of this revival, and thus the Irishness of writing by Irish writers outside the movement was not a given. The Irishness of the work of, say, Oscar Wilde and Bram Stoker was regarded as seriously qualified and indirect, since that work did not concern itself primarily with the new Ireland; these writers did not in an obvious way boast the Celtic eyes Yeats saw the novelist William Carleton (1794–1869) looking out from, and so their work was not a portion of the previously hidden or of the newly emerging Irish canon.

But recently, and encouraged by widespread contemporary academic interest in minority cultures, national beginnings, ethnic identities, minor literatures and anti- and post-colonialism (all components of Cultural Studies, into which literary studies have been largely absorbed), critics of Irish literature have made fascinating raids on the vast corpus of English literature and sought to unpick the English–Irish interrelations I have mentioned. *Castle Rackrent: An Hibernian Tale* (1800) had traditionally been read by English critics as a pioneering regional British novel but later Irish critics retrieved it as a pioneering national work, indeed the first truly Irish novel. Recent critics have tended to return it to the complex universe of colonial discourse while not detracting from its national importance. The author’s biography would lend warrant to this: Maria Edgeworth belonged to an old English family long settled in Ireland; she was born in Oxfordshire

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and was fifteen before she arrived in Ireland; she did so in 1782, a year momentous for contemporary advocates of greater Irish autonomy; she lived her life in Ireland but spent productive periods in London. In the cases of Wilde (including *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 1891) and Stoker (especially *Dracula*, 1897), it is largely courtesy of the new criticism and cultural studies, in which Irishness in texts is being detected in increasingly oblique and coded ways, that they are now staples of Irish literary studies, though of course, being Irish, they ought to have been so from the start. With some irony, the expanded Irish canon has almost achieved the amplitude it once enjoyed in such an anthology as Charles A. Read's *Cabinet of Irish Literature* (1879) and its 1902 revision by Katharine Tynan – an assembly too indiscriminately Irish to be of use to Yeats's Revival – but is now enveloped in an ideology that neither editor would have understood.

In any case, the search for early Irish novels uncovers further unfamiliar entanglements that are not obvious demonstrations of the ideology. For example, much work has been done on the genres and modes that fed into the early English novel, including the European picaresque novel, satire, travel narratives, biography, history, moral tracts and romances. The first and last of these are of particular interest, being narratives of comparable length to the novel proper.

Romances by English writers were inspired by Sir Philip Sidney's example and later by the vogue for French heroic romances in the middle of the seventeenth century. They are set in ancient Greece or Rome or equivalently exotic places and times; they are retellings of legends or classical stories, or narratives spun from characters and episodes from legend or history; they are peopled by royalty or nobles, with heroes and heroines tangled up in love and embarked on necessary quests (often at the insistence of oracles); they exhibit little realism of circumstance, motive or dialogue, but instead employ set pieces, indirect speech and civilised debates (often lengthy) on moral dilemmas. It is not surprising to find Irish contributors to the genre of romance. Roger Boyle (1621–79), 1st Earl of Orrery (son of the 1st Earl of Cork), studied at Trinity College Dublin; as both a royalist and a Commonwealth man, he periodically crossed from England, where he chiefly lived, to Ireland to help restore order there. For his loyalty, including military service during the Irish rebellion of 1641, he was rewarded with large grants of Irish land. *Parthenissa, That Most Fam'd Romance* (1651, 1654–65, 1676) is a long, unfinished prose fiction in six volumes (printed in Waterford) that opens with the arrival of Artabbanes from Parthia at the oracle of the Queen of Love in 'Siria'; the hero has been commanded by the gods to discover his destiny after disappointment in love and suffering melancholy, and his story, which he tells to a servant of

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the Queen, begins when he meets the 15-year-old Parthenissa and is smitten. This initially readable but cumbersome romance, with tales within tales, combines Roman history with fanciful invention, and martial combat with sexual longing. An important theme is the contest between kinds of love, an old and evergreen theme that the popular novel from the eighteenth century onwards inherited from the genre. The indelible power of love is also the subject of Boyle's incomplete *English Adventures* (1676), published anonymously under the name 'a Person of Honour'. Baker calls it a further deterioration of romance, a story which concerns the amours of the young Henry VIII, and related 'with the debauched cynicism of a romancer corrupted by a long life at the Restoration court'. The connected tales' employment of cold-blooded deceit, design and disguise, and the depiction of the amorous Izabella as the sexual prize (and 'prey') of numerous rivals turn heroic romance into erotic romance, yet the story cleverly sustains three extended metaphors for the machinations of love amongst intimates: stag-hunting, court intrigue and civil war (the barely historical action is set after the 'intestine' Wars of the Roses). The in-tale told by young Charles Brandon was the inspiration of Thomas Otway's tragedy, *The Orphan* (1680).

Roger's younger brother Robert was born in Lismore Castle, Co. Waterford, in 1627. Among his many accomplishments – physicist and chemist of European reputation (author of Boyle's Law), student of alchemy and theology – he was a writer, and in 1687 he published *Love and Religion Demonstrated in the Martyrdom of Theodora, and of Didymus*, a romance that recounts the fate of his heroine at the hands of the Roman authorities, for whom her Christian faith and celibacy are criminal rebellion against the civil government, and of his hero, her chaste lover who is also put to death. (Boyle's romance was the source of Handel's oratorio *Theodora*, 1750.) In a lengthy preface, Boyle claims he is rewriting the genre of heroic romance by making his heroine a pious Christian virgin and his hero a lover strictly bounded by his religion; he wishes 'to transform a piece of Martyrology into a Romance' even if it were regarded as 'a kind of Profaneness'. He is consciously combining the sermon or book of devotion (which provided models for his martyrs' speeches) and martyrologies with pagan romance to create something new. Boyle wished to show, in what we might call his Christian romance, that chivalry and heroic valour could be accompanied by 'eminent' piety. For the 'young Persons of Quality' who were his desired readers, he wanted unfashionably to substitute 'Patterns of Vertue' for mere 'Models of Skill or Eloquence', and serious themes for romance's customary lower aim 'to Delight the Delicate Readers'. Boyle defends the unfashionable intelligence of his heroine, who has to discourse learnedly

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on theology, and of women in general. The incongruity between hard matter and the pleasures of narrative, and the connection between romance and female readership, survived as both problem and opportunity when the novel proper retained some of the elements of the romance. Meanwhile, *Theodora and Didymus* is far more readable than *Parthenissa* and has some of the tempo and perspective of the genuine novel, incipiently visible behind the inherited static forms. Boyle was aware of the ‘Liberties’ he was taking by inventing speeches for his historical martyrs but felt at ease in borrowing this device from the heroic romances that he called ‘disguised Histories’. Stevenson calls Boyle’s romance a precursor of the historical novel, a claim all the more important given the popularity of the historical novel in Irish literary history, though the Christian story and its martyrs attracted only a handful of later Irish novelists, including George Moore and Helen Waddell.

A self-consciousness about romance as a genre became a component of it at the time the novel was emerging. It was perhaps when he was a student at Trinity College Dublin that William Congreve, born near Leeds in Yorkshire, published *Incognita, or Love and Duty Reconiled* (1692) under the pen name of ‘Cleophil’. Critics have seen this work as transitional in form, gesturing in its mock-romance towards the future novel, realising Congreve’s own prefatory distinction between the ‘wonder’ of romances and the ‘familiar nature’ of novels. This was his only fiction; Congreve moved to England where he achieved fame as a playwright. Congreve can hardly be claimed wholeheartedly as an Anglo-Irish writer, though before going up to Trinity he was educated at Kilkenny College, after his father moved to Ireland; but in returning to London he was treading a path already worn by Irish writers and artists who saw London as their cultural capital, and Congreve certainly represented a notable version of English–Irish interrelations.

The other major contributory to the novel, the picaresque narrative, can also claim an Irish exponent, though again it is not an unambiguous claim. The picaresque refers in reduced meaning to a novel in which the hero is plunged into all sorts of adventures and meets with all sorts of people during journeys that are too episodic to be called quests, in the romance sense. An English branch of the picaresque was the rogue biography, going as far back as the late sixteenth century. While insisting on its fidelity to truth and fact, rogue or ‘cony-catching’ literature mixed fiction, satire and what we might call reportage, all with relish, brio and the prurience of exposé. A late cony-catching novel was *The English Rogue Described in the Life of Meriton Latroon, a Witty Extravagant* (1665) by Richard Head; Stevenson claims it was banned for indecency and peddled underground for half a century.

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In his Epistle to the Reader, Head hardly bothers to claim that he is writing the life of another and indeed confesses that he himself is a reformed rogue drawing profitably on personal experience. Yet the bookseller–writer who wrote a sequel to the highly popular *The English Rogue* insisted that Head declined to write a sequel because readers took it for autobiography instead of fiction. The bibliographic note to a 1928 edition accepts this to be true, though since the counterfeit and the spurious are the story's *raison d'être*, it pays the modern reader to be wary. Latroon's biographical circumstances read like Head's own. He is born in Carrickfergus, Co. Antrim, soon after his mother and father (an Anglican minister) arrive from England. When he is four, the 1641 rebellion breaks out and his brother is killed by roaming insurgents. His father and mother flee to Belfast with the remaining son but the Scots in Belfast rout his father, mistaking him in his Anglican garb for a Catholic priest, and the family escape to 'Linsegarvy' (Lisnagarvey) near Lisburn, Co. Antrim. There the father is soon murdered as a Protestant preacher. Mother and son take ship for England. In the book, the anti-hero becomes an English rogue and at one point, to escape creditors, hides out back in Ireland, in Dublin, 'Balle-more-Eustace' (Ballymore Eustace, a small town in east Kildare) and Baltinglass, where he has further adventures.

*The English Rogue* has been variously called fascinating, dreary, ill-written, disreputable, unsavoury and racy. George Saintsbury in *The English Novel* (1913) called it a quite openly picaresque novel and deplored it, yet devoted two pages to it. Head's perspective on Ireland certainly has interest. Dublin is itself a rogues' asylum (the descriptions of its appalling poverty are Swiftian before the fact), and Latroon's welcome is dysentery and crabs. He does not prosper in Ireland, where he finds that the Irish hate the English 'with a perfect antipathy'. Yet Latroon is not wholly English but rather occupies a strange hybrid place not yet classifiable as Anglo-Ireland. Recounting his childhood, he thinks it strange that the influence of Ireland on anyone born there overpowers 'the disposition of the parent': Ireland, he says, made him 'appear a bastard in disposition to my father'; whereas his father was naturally religious, he himself was roguish from the start. But his 'bastardy' is a memorable metaphor for the unrootedness of the British in Ireland, especially then but also thereafter, and it is an early figure in fiction for Anglo-Irish relations.

More important than *The English Rogue* itself are the ambient cultural factors of which it is the product and which are routinely adduced as necessary to the advent of the early novel written by Daniel Defoe and others: individualism, Protestantism, urbanism and capitalism, the latter in its shadowy guises here of theft, debt, swindling and get-rich-quick schemes.

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The early novel of the eighteenth century shared Head's overall concern (however disingenuous) with vice and reformation. The book exhibits, too, the early novels' realism (a cynical realism here) and picaresque structure. *The English Rogue* is dedicated to promiscuity and the narrative is too episodic, unstable and disjointed to have the structure of the mature novel: there is a multitude of vices and sins (including blasphemy, incest, adultery), of scenes, of characters, of settings and of discourses. The book is likewise dedicated to duplicity (cheating, forgery, disguises and aliases), of which the cant words are its verbal equivalent. (There is a 'canting' glossary of rogues' argot by which they concealed their meanings and intentions from outsiders and 'conies', or marks.) But for all its crudity, the spirit of *The English Rogue* and rogue literature stayed alive in the English and Irish novel, and we can detect it in *Tristram Shandy* (1759–67) by Laurence Sterne (born and raised in Ireland) and James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922).

## Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century contexts

Congreve and Goldsmith, like Sterne, Farquhar, Sheridan and Steele, were late seventeenth- or early eighteenth-century writers, born or educated in Ireland, who settled in England; we must be content to describe them awkwardly as both English and Irish, but as chiefly English. Often, they disavowed their Irishness; even Irish geography could be disavowed. It has been said that in *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766), Goldsmith – as he was to do in 'The Deserted Village' (1770) – transplanted to England an idealised portrait of Lissoy in Co. Westmeath where the author spent his childhood. (His novel has been called pastoral romance with picaresque elements.) 'Irish' in its unqualified use referred to the Catholic natives with whom these writers declined to identify. The more compact term, Anglo-Irish, was a nineteenth-century usage referring to those Anglican Protestants of English extraction who, from the early eighteenth century onwards, while still of dual nationality in the broadest sense, established a greater balance between their two identities and, as the eighteenth century progressed, began to shift some of their allegiance away from England towards Ireland: not the Ireland of the Catholic natives, but one made synonymous with themselves. We can watch this occur in the work of Jonathan Swift, whom Aileen Douglas discusses in chapter 1. The so-called Protestant Nation or Ascendancy, forming itself through colonial grievances against England, reached its constitutional apogee in Grattan's parliament of 1782–1800. At the same time, a colonial restiveness was growing among the Dissenters (or Non-conformist Protestants) of the North – mostly of Scots origin – whose liberal or radical philosophy troubled English–Irish relations and, coinciding with Catholic grievances



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for one tremendous moment, laid the intellectual foundation for the 1798 rebellion.

English–Irish relations came into sharper but not yet central focus in the novels written by those pre-1800 novelists, writing later than Swift, who are also of interest to Douglas. When those relations did move towards the centre of the novelists' field of view, they were revealed in all their instability and ambivalence. Genre vied with prescriptions and prejudices of a culturally political kind, as Miranda Burgess makes clear in her discussion of the varieties of tales that were popular in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, with those by Maria Edgeworth and Sydney Owenson (Lady Morgan) leaders in popularity and reputation. The eighteenth-century episodic novel was typically dominated by a hero's consciousness too worldly to subject itself sympathetically to others, especially to the 'Other', though romance elements survived. This was succeeded by the sympathy (one is tempted to say feminine sympathy) inherent in the tales; and in the tales, the strains between England and Ireland are embodied in their heroes and heroines.

The national tale, which Burgess discusses at some length in chapter 2, was a Romantic form that focussed its attention on Ireland as a setting and subject; it added to the English–Irish equation the third term of native Ireland and it fictionalised the cultural distinctiveness of Ireland. But recent critics have wondered how far the national tale tried to 'complete' the Union between Great Britain and Ireland of 1800, of which the genre has been seen as a product. Typically, an English visitor to Ireland or returned Anglicised Irish expatriate instigated the tale's proceedings; and the reader the novelist had chiefly in mind was English. On the other hand, how far does the genre express the grievances of a small country like Ireland? Or perhaps the genre belongs wholly to neither culture.<sup>1</sup> In any event, the influence of romance persisted and, through its satisfaction of wish-fulfilment, its unreality remained a feature of fictional treatments of English–Irish relations. Until recently, these relations never entirely vacated the Irish novel as a theme and, since those relations can run from the romance of Irish nationalism to practical economic and political reformism, the theme is a large and various one. The prescription in fiction of mere improvement (deriving from the Enlightenment) is one that ensured the neglect of novels that turn their back on nationalism; oddly, realism in the matter of deep Irish difference was, until recently, regarded as a denial of such difference.

The Gothic also contributed to the Irish national tale, which is hardly surprising, given that early Gothic novels have been called romances. Gothic is an adaptable form and its students have shown the role in it of science and the occult as well as radical (and conservative!) politics. Siobhán



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Kilfeather demonstrates, in chapter 4, the versatility of the Gothic, especially after its heyday in the period 1760–1820, not just as subgenre but as a component and aspect of other kinds of novel. As well as paying heed to the romance and the national tale, the discussion of Irish Gothic as a tradition must root itself in the English Gothic and its international progeny and parallels. Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* appeared in 1764 and Irish Gothic is normally assumed to begin with Charles Maturin's *The Milesian Chief* (1812), though, pioneeringly, Kilfeather pushes the beginnings back to the 1770s and even 1760s. In any case, when setting and subject matter are Irish, though the tropes, themes, motifs or narrative formulas be English or international, the critic can make fair claim to Irishness. Just as English Gothic has been interpreted as a trope for English identity, so Irish Gothic has been interpreted as a trope for Anglican Ireland. Such are the intricacies of English–Irish relations that what seems like a late example of English Gothic or terror fiction, *Dracula*, has been read as a covert or subliminal text on English–Irish relations in general, and the degeneracy and delinquency of the Anglo–Irish Ascendancy landlords in particular. (Though it might equally be read as a covert text on the collision between the Enlightenment-inspired scientific and business culture of England and the Protestant North of Ireland – of which Stoker was a known admirer – and the Catholic, ‘medieval’, pre-industrial culture of native Ireland. In search of subtext and subthemes, English and American critics prefer the oddities of sexuality and anti-feminism in *Dracula*.)

Literary relations between England and Ireland reflect, and refract, the political and larger cultural relations, whereby Ireland is variously a province or region of Britain whose hub is the metropolis of London; a colony of Britain inhabited by those of a different race and religion; or a ‘sister isle’ or parallel kingdom, in theory equal though in fact unequal. These relationships have been differently inflected and expressed through the three hundred years of the novel and have involved, in different and changing ratios of power, the Anglo-Irish, the Catholic native Irish and the Northern Dissenters or Ulster Protestants. All three populations have maintained separate and evolving relations with England (and Britain) over time. The populations also represent points of view from which those relations have been interpreted, irrespective of the political facts of the matter at any one time; the English might see a province or region of Britain where the Irish see an incipient nation; the fact of colonisation might be refused by the colonised; the inhabitants of the ‘sister isle’ might repudiate sorority. Further, these relations have been internalised and imagined in a multitude of ways, coded, metaphorised and debated in novels and other literature.

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Authors and texts inhabit this astonishing web as individuals, but both are also merchandise to be published, sold and consumed. Authors have developed changing cultural and economic relationships with each other and with society: authors have been wealthy self-subsidisers, patronised dependants, professional authors, Grub Street hacks, amateur loners, members of coteries or movements. Until the nineteenth century, the society in question was in the main (though not exclusively) British society, so that what Ian Watt and others have to say about publishing, bookselling and the reading public in England is of interest to students of the Irish novel. Loeber and Stouthamer-Loeber have calculated that there were 65 titles of original Irish novels and novelettes published in Dublin between 1750 and 1799, whereas there were 1,846 titles of original fiction published in London over the same period. The Dublin figure is a fraction of the English and French fiction titles republished in Dublin without authorisation. This ‘piracy’ of novels occurred because Dublin publishers did not recognise English copyright legislation, an attitude that expressed at once autonomy (and parallel development), economic opportunism and cultural dependency, and it is eloquent about the broad political and even constitutional situation. It has been inferred that Irish authors in the eighteenth century took their works to London to be published and that those who published their first novel in Dublin published their subsequent novels in London, a practice that continued in the nineteenth century. After the Union of 1800, the number of titles of original Irish fiction published in Dublin remained low: 50 between 1800 and 1829.<sup>2</sup>

Later, Irish publishing rejoined British publishing in legal partnership and mutual respect, and also sought to develop its own market and pool of authors. From the later nineteenth century onwards, there were Dublin (but also London and American) publishers who specialised in Irish writing, particularly fiction. By 1890 the regular school attendance rate in Ireland was more than 60 per cent and by 1911 only 12 per cent of the population could not read, so the reading public was there when the Revival got under way. The disparity in the size of the respective but contiguous markets in Ireland and Britain, however, has meant that there is still a great deal of traffic in contracts and writers between publishers in England and Ireland, especially nowadays in the publishing world of takeovers, mergers and subsidiaries. A telling footnote to this interdependence is that the London-based Man Booker Prize, the most famous, lucrative and commercially potent prize for novels in the world, is open to novelists from the United Kingdom, the Commonwealth – *and* the Republic of Ireland, though Ireland left the Commonwealth more than half a century ago. (The number of Irish novelists long-listed and short-listed