

Introduction

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In editing this volume of essays, *Technology in Irish Literature and Culture*, for the *Cambridge Themes in Irish Literature and Culture* series, we are pleased to accept the dual invitation delivered by series editor Ronan McDonald: in his words, 'to choose a significant issue that animates or perplexes contemporary Irish culture, and use it as an aperture through which to examine the literature of previous eras'. Our choice of subject is technology, a subject of fundamental significance to our current condition, and central to very many of our contemporary concerns, vexations, pleasures, and opportunities.

Ireland is a place of beeps and whirs, of machines and screens. While the electrification of Ireland's urban spaces did not begin in earnest until 1929 – and indeed, rurally some two decades later in 1946 – electricity, or rather, *the electronic*, now operates as a symbol for this island's contemporary situation. Digital technologies dominate Ireland's public and private spheres, permeating all aspects of cultural and socio-economic activity. Such circumstances should not be dismissed as merely the western world as it exists in late capitalism: it is especially significant that Ireland, functioning as a largely rural, agrarian, ecumenical society for much of its history, now sees its public and private spheres dominated by modern technologies and the entities which determine the conditions through which they are shared and experienced.

Crucially, technology shapes personal interactions, public spaces, institutions, and politics. It is a subject, then, whose temporal frame can appear mostly contemporaneous and occasionally prospective: that of discovery, innovation, and rupture. Yet, as this volume demonstrates throughout, its literary genealogy is long and varied: technological opportunity is a subject plumbed and probed in the earliest of Irish literary works, just as technological inventions themselves have enabled Irish literature and its creative practitioners to adapt, diversify, experiment, and flourish, both in their choice of subject and in their public reach.

It is a curious feature of Irish literary scholarship, however, that relatively few comprehensive treatments of the subject of technology exist at present. Literature has long functioned as a tool for social understanding; turning its lens on technology can tell us much about Irishness in the context of the machine-induced cultural upheavals that formed and reformed our past and present, and that remain intrinsic to possible cultural futures. As demonstrated in *Science, Technology, and Irish Modernism* (2019) – one of the few such studies of the topic of technology – there has been substantial engagement between scientific and technological change and twentieth-century Irish literature, particularly modernism.¹ But examining how authors have embraced technology as a theme is only part of the dynamic: it is important also to look at how technology operates on literature, acting as an inherent part of literary process, form, and aesthetic. This book does just that, analysing technologies which appear *in* Irish literature (theme), but also technologies *of* literature (*techné*), rearticulating the genealogical significance of technology to both the form and content of Irish writing: technology as material instrument and technology as thematic symbol.

For us as editors, curating this volume is also an act of recovery, an attempt to reclaim cultural authority from a simplistic 'progress' narrative and from the narrow prioritisation of disciplines of science and engineering without reference to, or recognition of, their humanistic core. In terms of historical antecedents, it is not surprising that a number of essays in this volume concentrate on the period of the Irish Literary Revival, when comparable debates occurred as to the relevant standing of art, science, technology, and creativity. But the genealogies traced in this volume are longer and often unpredictable: the advent of new technologies can involve continuity as well as rupture, for example the long coexistence of script and print in modern Irish-language culture (Chapter 1 of this volume), or the overlapping histories of orature and technologies of sound (Chapter 4). Conversely, the valorisation of narratives of technical progress and electronic connection by state and industry can be resisted powerfully and effectively by literary representations of disconnection and crisis, in a long tradition ranging from Jonathan Swift (Chapter 9) to Edna O'Brien, Stewart Parker, and Mike McCormack (Chapter 5).

The purpose of this book is not to rearticulate the importance of 'the digital' in an age and academy where computer-assisted ways of doing and being are becoming increasingly fetishised. Our aim as editors

¹ Kathryn Conrad, Cólín Parsons, and Julie McCormick Weng, eds., *Science, Technology, and Irish Modernism* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2019).

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of *Technology in Irish Literature and Culture* is to show instead how technology has long – even in pre-digital contexts – had a major influence on the form and content of Irish writing, and to demonstrate how our present situation and literary storehouse is enabled by a long lineage of technological advancements and thematic assessments. The structure of the volume reflects this lineage, transitioning from print, the optical telegraph, and gramophone to electricity and broadcasting, from science and invention to data and the digital, reckoning with the productive and social consequences of each new mode for Irish literature and culture. While ‘technology’ might at times be awkwardly expansive as a term, the emphasis in this collection is largely on communication and media technologies and related infrastructures, along with the cultures that surround their emergence and advancement. Through a historical lens that spans over a thousand years of artistic production, and that addresses the future – whether digital or post-digital – as imagined and foretold in literary works, our volume offers fresh perspectives on the discourses and modes through which technological impact is comprehended and deployed, interpreted and critiqued, feared and used.

The eighteen essays are arranged in four thematic clusters: ‘Genealogies’, ‘Infrastructures’, ‘Invention’, and ‘The Digital’. ‘Genealogies’ begins with two essays on the history of print and how its advent impacted writing in the Irish and English languages, respectively. Marc Caball explores the overlapping and intersecting modes of communicative interchange which characterised Gaelic cultural expression in the long early modern period. Caball delineates an often elusive but nonetheless intellectually dynamic interplay between print technology and communication in Irish down to the nineteenth century. Máire Kennedy looks at the period 1700 to 1820, and at how innovations and developments in printing, typefounding, papermaking, and marketing contributed to the advancement of literary culture and also to the expansion of its audiences and markets through newspaper and print advertising.

Moving beyond print, Joanna Wharton and Christopher Morash, respectively, look at the optical telegraph and technologies of sound. While the electrical telegraph is often credited with having revolutionised global communications, the imaginative potential of its predecessor, the optical telegraph, was profound. In her essay, Wharton examines the role that the optical telegraph played in competing ideas of Irish nationality, security, and surveillance during the intelligence wars of the 1790s, and similarly elucidates the role of literary production in the cultural brokering of this technological innovation. Morash’s essay on ‘Technologies of

Sound' resituates the relationship between orature and modernity in Irish culture in the context of technology, noting how the Revival coincides exactly with the period that saw the emergence of key technologies of sound, namely the telephone, the gramophone/phonograph, and later radio. While Kennedy historicises how print transformed writing and communication in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Morash argues that, by the early twentieth century, the innovatory promise of print had been usurped by technologies of the spoken word, specifically the telephone and phonograph. Yet, for Revival writers such as J. M. Synge, Lady Gregory, and W. B. Yeats, as Morash illuminates, the history of technologies of sound includes also the ghost of oral culture in which 'the present is perennially a moment of disappearance'.

'Infrastructures' is comprised of three essays which explicate the cultural and literary dimensions of some major state investments and national projects considered foundational to the Irish literary and cultural landscape, both then and now. In the face of a state-led dedication to electrification, and more recently digitalisation, Irish literature, as Barry Sheils observes, has consistently restored 'materiality' – and a related emphasis on embodiment and lack of connection – to the semiotic field. More specifically, he explores the three themes of emigration, constitutional politics, and ecology to show another networked imaginary distinguished by disconnection and crisis. Robert J. Savage outlines the history of state broadcasting from the 1920s to the present, while addressing how literary forms of culture encountered and adapted to the new technologies of radio and television, and how individual authors (for example, the dramatist Máiréad Ní Ghráda) engaged with these technologies in their professional and writing lives. Ian Whittington examines the history of Irish poetry from the perspective of broadcast radio, considering the traces of the medium that appear in poetry and prose by Louis MacNeice, Eavan Boland, Leontia Flynn, Seamus Heaney, and others, and by examining the cultural role and aesthetic qualities of works produced for radio, with particular attention to the work of Austin Clarke.

The third cluster of essays, 'Invention', privileges the making-new over a millennium of Irish literary production. It begins with Máire Ní Mhaonaigh's chapter on medieval Irish literature and its writing of Ireland's past as a story of connections, one in which the technology of writing itself functioned as process and as theme. And, as she illustrates, by explaining the past and shaping the present, the technology of writing presented a richly informative story of technologies of other kinds. Sean Moore examines the scepticism with which Jonathan Swift viewed the

printing press as the new information technology of his day, extending his vein of criticism to new digital humanities platforms which incorporate Swift's texts. In 'Technology and Irish Modernism', Kathryn Conrad traces the etymological shift in the term 'technology' from its ties to language to those of science, and relatedly the critical interaction by the first wave of Irish modernists (from Bram Stoker to Elizabeth Bowen) with technological forms. Irish modernism's engagement with the concepts of space and time, she argues, is framed by its explicit engagement with technologies, but differing perspectives on the success or failure of new technologies result: for Stoker, the disruptive force of a new sound technology like the phonograph, for example, lies in its removal of the mediating quality offered by textual forms.

In her essay on 'W. B. Yeats, the Revival, and Scientific Invention', Aoife Lynch illuminates the scientific foundations of Yeats's work, highlighting his dual attitude to science: his repudiation of Newtonian science as overly deterministic while deploying in his esoteric writings the world view made possible by the new physics of his day. James Joyce's reflections on a changing landscape of time in response to Einstein's 'new physics' is the context for Katherine Ebury's essay, in which she focuses on the watch, and Joyce's concerns with watch technology, to provide new textual insights into Joyce's attitudes to time. And returning to the field of Irish-language studies, to conclude this section on 'Invention', Sharon Arbuthnot charts the emergence and development of a selection of technological terms in both medieval and modern Irish. Such terms for inventions and innovations serve as fascinating case studies in language change and resilience: as she discusses, some medieval words for still common devices have inexplicably fallen out of use; some early terms have been recorded again after long periods of silence; some words have manifested twice, hundreds of years apart.

This volume concludes with 'The Digital', a group of essays reflecting on contemporary matters. In 'Irish Literary Feminism and Its Digital Archive(s)', Margaret Kelleher and Karen Wade address directly the current state of the field in digital humanities, and how 'presence' is only the first step in securing real engagement with the literary archive of women's writings. They argue that the facilitation of new forms of interaction between digital, creative, and critical practice, and of collaborations that enable participation by those previously marginalised or excluded from technological innovation, can lead to a more dynamic and sustainable future for the feminist digital archive. Claire Lynch's essay draws on a series of contemporary Irish novels, charting the way everyday devices – such as

phones, laptops, and computers – do more than simply sit alongside fictional characters. Using examples from authors such as Sally Rooney, Elaine Feeney, and Eimear McBride, Lynch describes how these 'consoling' machines bring support, comfort, and distraction for their users. In his chapter on Irish theatre, Victor Merriman argues that Samuel Beckett's plays function as a kind of fulcrum in a theatrical history of staging and thematising surveillance, and extends this history from Dion Boucicault and Augusta Gregory to Enda Walsh and David Lloyd. While surveillance agencies rely heavily on technology to gather information, but depend on human beings to store, order, and interpret it, dramatic narratives – Merriman demonstrates – exploit inconsistencies and injustices arising from slippages between data and its application.

The final two essays in this volume consider contemporary Irish poetry and Irish digital literature. Anne Karhio considers Irish poets' responses to emerging digital technologies and networked communication, particularly in the context of data, data infrastructures, and various platforms of information exchange. Her essay examines poems by Paula Meehan, Paul Muldoon, Billy Ramsell, Peter Sirr, Derek Mahon, Randolph Healy, Justin Quinn, and Eavan Boland, and their addressing of the interrelated (if not identical) concepts of 'data', 'information', and 'knowledge'. James O'Sullivan presents a brief history and critique of born-digital literature in Ireland, its emergence and present state. Focusing on the work of Doireann Ní Ghríofa, whose film-poems are less widely known than her print-based poetry and prose, O'Sullivan contends that film-poetry is the dominant form of digital writing in Ireland, and, following a comparison of Irish digital literature with its international counterparts, reflects on the relative dearth of digital fiction and digital poetry within the Irish canon.

'We are still human': so writes Eavan Boland in her poem 'Code', a tribute to Grace Murray Hopper, a pioneer of computer programming and a 'Maker of the future'. This is a welcome reminder for the Ireland of today, an island which displays the communicative, performative, and consumption habits of a culture that is utterly reliant on the digital. But Boland's poem also stages a valuable and rare connection between the creative practitioner as literary artist and computer pioneer. This volume, we hope, will stimulate for readers the recognition of similar networks of connection and lines of enquiry. Many of contemporary Ireland's most essential cultural matters – the self, language, communication, surveillance, ecology, socio-economics, gender, and recovery – can, we suggest, be considered anew when viewed through the aperture of those technologies that determine much of our existence: both new, emerging

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technologies and, just as importantly, technologies from earlier times, along with the material conditions and cultural contexts that brought them to prominence. Returning to Boland, such an approach allows for a historically reciprocal appreciation of how the 'past is fading', and some small sense of how the 'world begins again'.

PART I

Genealogies

CHAPTER I

*Print as Technology: The Case of the Irish
Language, 1571–1850*

Marc Caball

No doubt unwittingly, an eighteenth-century harper has left to posterity a highly revealing artefact which enshrines within its own materiality the textured ecology of early modern communicative practices in the Irish language. Sometime shortly in advance of the Belfast Harp Festival of July 1792, an elderly harper dispatched northwards from Kerry a printed broadsheet to Robert Bradshaw, whom he styled as secretary and treasurer of the festival. The harper, an elusive individual called Thomas O'Shea, then in his eightieth year, evidently had a quantity of bespoke broadsheets printed for his personal use in the manner of a calling card or publicity flyer. The broadsheet was printed in the first instance with spaces for the later manuscript inclusion of content. The extant document opened with four lines of script where O'Shea addressed his broadsheet to Bradshaw and somewhat generically to his fellow Belfast inhabitants. Curiously, given his harper's avocation, he dedicated to them 'this small piece of penmanship'. This handwritten opening section consisted of four lines each written in a different fashion. The printed text is grandiloquent in its claims for the achievements of O'Shea in matters of harp design. Furthermore, he was available to teach this ancient instrument as well as 'Old Irish, (which is quite forgot) to any gentleman in order to establish the old heavenly music and language once more in this kingdom'. When he started to learn to play the harp in 1717, O'Shea claimed that 'there were upwards of one hundred harps kept in order in the county of Kerry' and now 'there is not one harp kept in order in this county'. Moreover, O'Shea adduced an antique lineage for the harp on the basis of a reference from the poetry of Virgil which he translated to Irish in script. This vibrant interplay of print and script in the document was further elaborated when a later hand wrote an English translation beside the printed Latin couplet. Indeed, O'Shea's broadsheet is emblematic of the overlapping and intersecting modes of communicative interchange which characterised the Gaelic cultural continuum in the long early modern period.

However, comments written by O'Shea himself on the left margin of the broadsheet are especially informative in relation to the complementarity of script and print technology in Gaelic cultural expression from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries.¹ The aged harper sought the indulgence of his addressee in respect of the somewhat less than pristine appearance of the broadsheet. In fact, O'Shea reported that 'this dirty scrole' was 'a remnant left by the printer Mr Busted'. The Busted family was involved in the printing, bookselling, and newspaper business in Tralee from the 1780s onwards.² Apparently, Busted's printers had used this particular sheet for 'trying their types'. Originally, O'Shea had 'thirty sheets of fine large paper printed' and over the previous four years 'sent them thro'out the kingdom', except for one sheet which he intended to send to the Earl of Westmorland, lord lieutenant of Ireland from 1789 to 1794. More prosaically, O'Shea admitted to Bradshaw that 'the printer could not spare time to print a fresh one'. Interestingly, the interconnection of O'Shea's Gaelic perspective with an Anglo-Protestant sphere is further evident when he references a range of character witnesses who might be called on to attest to his integrity.³ Importantly, Gaelic intellectual production was not hermetically sealed within a self-referential sphere; rather it was open to and informed by a range of cultural and social currents.

It is instructive to look at one more such emblematic layering of print and script before proceeding to a review of the argument proposed in the present essay. A copy of the first printed dictionary of the Irish language,

¹ By way of an overview of print in the Irish language, see E. W. Lynam, 'The Irish Character in Print, 1571–1923', *The Library*, Fourth Series, 4 (1924), 286–325; P. J. Madden, 'Printing in Irish', *An Leabharlann: Journal of the Library Association of Ireland* 12:3 (1954), 74–85; Niall Ó Ciosáin, 'Printed Popular Literature in Irish, 1750–1850: Presence and Absence', in *The Origins of Popular Literacy in Ireland: Language Change and Educational Development, 1700–1920*, ed. Mary Daly and David Dickson (Dublin: Trinity College Dublin and University College Dublin, 1990), pp. 45–57; Niall Ó Ciosáin, 'Print and Irish, 1570–1900: An Exception Among the Celtic Languages?', *Radharc: A Journal of Irish and Irish-American Studies* 5–7 (2004–6), 73–106; Marc Caball and Benjamin Hazard, 'Dynamism and Decline: Translating Keating's *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn* in the Seventeenth Century', *Studia Hibernica* 39 (2013), 49–69; Éamonn Ó Ciardha, 'The Irish Book in Irish in the Early Modern Period, 1691–1800', *Eighteenth-Century Ireland/Iris an dá chultúr* 28 (2013), 13–36; Richard Sharpe, 'Manuscript and Print in Gaelic Scotland and Ireland, 1689–1832', in *Ramsachadh na Gàidhlig 8: Language and Culture*, ed. Wilson McLeod, Anja Gunderloch, and Rob Dunbar (Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic Press, 2016), pp. 31–53.

² John Lloyd, *A Short Tour; or, An Impartial and Accurate Description of the County of Clare* (Ennis, 1780), p. 66; *The London and Country Printers, Booksellers and Stationers Vade Mecum* (London, 1785), p. 56; Browne's *General Law List; for the year 1789* (London, 1788), p. 259.

³ Alf Mac Lochlainn, 'Thomas O'Shea, a Kerry Harper', *Journal of the Kerry Archaeological and Historical Society* 3 (1970), 81–3. O'Shea alluded to local gentry such as Robert Day, Sir Barry Denny, and Thomas Stoughton as well as grand aristocrats like Thomas Browne, Lord Kenmare, and John Crosbie, Earl of Glendore, and worthies of the Church of Ireland such as the Deans of Limerick and Ardfert and Aghadoc, respectively.