

Introduction

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The Cambridge History of Irish Poetry is a one-volume, multi-authored account of the poetic traditions on the island of Ireland and their relation to the courses of poetry beyond its shores. The chapters that follow attend to the crucial developments in the history of Irish poetry as well as the cultural conditions subtending those developments. They illuminate the complex position of poets during different historical eras, describing the ways in which aesthetic and compositional practices were inflected by social and political structures. And they provide expert accounts of the institutional and textual histories that have shaped the body of Irish poetry as we have it.

This volume aims to provide a coherent history, but it does not seek to develop or enforce a single story about Irish poetry. No one argument or critical frame is adequate to encompass the varieties of poetry and the work of poets in Ireland over the past millennium and a half. The patterns and ramifications of invasion, settlement, colonisation, and globalisation are central to any comprehensive understanding of Irish poetry's history, but those narratives do not have exclusive explanatory power. The intricate relationship between poetry in Irish and poetry in English is, similarly, fundamental to any account of Irish poetry since the sixteenth century, but the history of that relationship cannot be oversimplified by presenting it as a mere adjunct to the history of the Irish language and its decline since the seventeenth century. If for no other reason (and there are plenty of others), such a narrative would warp centuries of rigorous compositional activity among Irish-language poets by predetermining the stakes of such activity.

In his Introduction to *The New Oxford Book of Irish Verse* (1986), Thomas Kinsella (1928–2021) writes that

the Irish tradition is a matter of two linguistic entities in dynamic interaction, of two major bodies of poetry asking to be understood together as functions of a shared and painful history. To limit a response to one aspect only, as is

ERIC FALCI

often done – to the literature in Irish, through specialised academic concerns or out of nationalist emotion, or to the literature in English as an annexe to British literature, an ‘aspect of Anglo-Saxon experience’ (as I have heard it put), or out of mere convenience – is to miss a rare opportunity: that of responding to a notable and venerable literary tradition, the oldest vernacular literature in Western Europe, as it survives a change of vernacular.¹

One certainly can query particular aspects of Kinsella’s statement, but as a concise representation of the complex scope of the Irish poetic tradition one could do worse than to start here. Kinsella’s description enwraps two foundational issues, each of which is enfolded in the other: the traditions of Irish poetry are splayed across two major languages and – of course relatedly – several civilisational configurations and political entities. For the first thousand or so years covered in *The Cambridge History of Irish Poetry* – from the earliest extant pre-Christian poems through the flourishing of poetry within monastic centres from the sixth through ninth centuries, through the fading and destruction of the monastic schools during the Viking invasions (c.800–1014), to the Norman invasion and the establishment of the bardic orders within the Gaelic noble courts (c.1200–1650) – the Irish poetic tradition takes place in the Irish language, with a small but significant body of poetry in Latin also shaping the tradition’s very early phases. The formal and generic protocols of the classical bardic period, which remained remarkably consistent for more than 400 years, are explored in depth in the chapters that follow, as are the exchanges that occur between the compositional models of the professional bardic poets and those styles that were favoured beyond the noble houses. As English encroachment into Ireland intensified during the Tudor and Stuart periods, the Gaelic and Old English lordships weakened, the bardic milieu declined, and the use of English spread further west, quickened by its status as the privileged language of new print technologies. A series of military victories over native Irish forces at the beginning of the seventeenth century, another set of victories over Jacobite forces near the end of the century, and a more rapacious approach to plantation during the same period helped to cement England’s authority and extend its dominion.

As the social structures that had supported them crumbled over the course of the seventeenth century, Gaelic poets continued to compose poetry, but within a broader environment of economic and linguistic decline, at an increasing distance from the institutions of the colonial state’s power, and

¹ Thomas Kinsella (ed.), *The New Oxford Book of Irish Verse* (Oxford University Press, 1986), xxvii.

Introduction

largely excluded from the mechanisms and networks through which English literature extended its reach and English culture its hegemony. Some of the most notable poems in the tradition are a function of its institutional dismantling, as poets like Dáibhí Ó Bruadair (1625–98), Aogán Ó Rathaille (c.1670–1728/9), and, later, Antoine Ó Raiftearaí (1779–1835) and Tomás Rua Ó Súilleabháin (1785–1848) wrote some of their most significant poems about their own social displacement and the existential dismay that accompanied this cultural rupture. A tradition of Anglo-Irish poetry emerged in the early eighteenth century, catalysed by Jonathan Swift (1667–1745) and the figures in his circle, and Andrew Carpenter notes that for writers in English, eighteenth-century Dublin was ‘a hive of literary activity, a place where poets rushed into print every day and where poetry was widely read. Many women also ventured into print in volumes of verse published by subscription. Ireland was, in the middle of the eighteenth century, a paradise for writers of verse.’² Irish writing in English continued to gain momentum throughout the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and was at the centre of the Irish Literary Revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, Gaelic writing in the early modern period and after was, in the words of Marc Caball, ‘essentially bypassed by the advent of print . . . unable to access large urban centres of trade, commerce and learning, the incorporation of Gaelic culture within the ecology of print was sporadic and tenuous’.³ This continued to be the case after the Act of Union in 1800. Gearóid Denvir suggests that while ‘without any doubt, more people in nineteenth-century Ireland listened to Raiftearaí and the poets, and recited their poems from memory, than read the novels of Maria Edgeworth or the politico-philosophical treatises of Edmund Burke’, poetry in Irish was increasingly marginalised, constituting what Denvir calls ‘the public voice of the dispossessed, a discourse of rights and revolt from below’.⁴

This dispossession intensified as a result of the Great Famine, which through widespread death and forced emigration decimated native Irish communities throughout the island. Even with the late-century project of

² Andrew Carpenter, ‘Literature in print, 1550–1800’, in Raymond Gillespie and Andrew Hadfield (eds.), *The Oxford History of the Irish Book*, vol. III: *The Book in English, 1550–1800* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 301–18 (at 315).

³ Marc Caball, ‘Language, print and literature, 1550–1630’, in Jane Ohlmeyer (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Ireland*, vol. II: *1550–1730* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 411–33 (at 432).

⁴ Gearóid Denvir, ‘Literature in Irish, 1800–1890: From the Act of Union to the Gaelic League’, in Margaret Kelleher and Philip O’Leary (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature*, 2 vols. (Cambridge University Press, 2006), vol. I, 544–98 (at 591, 578).

ERIC FALCI

linguistic and cultural revitalisation, emblematised by Douglas Hyde's (1860–1949) 1892 speech 'On the Necessity of De-Anglicizing Ireland' and the formation of the Gaelic League the following year, much of the energy around Irish-language poetry involved antiquarian efforts and the translation of older work into English rather than supporting new writing in Irish. This changed somewhat with the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922 and its centring of the Irish language within its institutions and cultural ideologies, but it would take until the middle of the twentieth century for a significant body of modern poetry in Irish to emerge. Several late twentieth-century renaissances have contributed to a remarkably rich contemporary poetic ecosystem, with multiple generations of poets from the Republic and Northern Ireland seeming to go from strength to strength. As it has throughout its long history, poetry remains a vital part of culture in contemporary Ireland, with poets such as Seamus Heaney (1939–2013), Eavan Boland (1944–2020), Paul Muldoon (1951–), and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill (1952–) becoming not only well-known international writers but also Irish cultural figures of significant import, and while contemporary poets remain focused on the matter of Ireland and on local contexts, they have also taken on planetary and global perspectives, such that the operative categories remain generatively unsettled: What constitutes *Irish poetry*? Who is named by the term *Irish poet* and who is excluded? How have these designations been revised and remade historically? Many of the chapters that follow unpack such questions.

The above thumbnail sketch – as clunky and curtailed as it is – is meant to suggest a relatively straightforward double point: the history of Irish poetry is never not enmeshed in the history of language use in Ireland and never not shaped by the status of 'Ireland' as a political unit (or units). One of the tasks of *The Cambridge History of Irish Poetry* is to query and anatomise Kinsella's statement that the 'Irish tradition is a matter of two linguistic entities in dynamic interaction, of two major bodies of poetry asking to be understood together as functions of a shared and painful history'. If it is possible to speak of an ongoing or singular 'Irish tradition', then that tradition has to be understood to be broken, divided, discrepant, gapped, composite, and multiple – 'dual', to use another term of Kinsella's – even as a volume such as this implicitly emphasises its surety and durability (if only by placing it all between two covers). The 'two major bodies of poetry' might ask 'to be understood together', but they each keep their own rhythms and tempi. While this volume necessarily presents the 'matter of two linguistic entities' and 'two major bodies of poetry' together, it is not concerned to tidy up 'the

Introduction

tradition' so that it appears any neater than it actually is. The goal is neither to lay down two tracks – Irish poetry in Irish, Irish poetry in English – and let them run parallel throughout the volume, nor to force them together so as to present a unity – halves of a torn whole. Rather, essays move between poetry in the two languages, highlighting convergences when they are significant, and allowing distances to remain between them when so necessitated by historical actuality.

Although the relationship between poetry in Irish and poetry in English is a central topic, it is by no means the case that this dialectic is the only one at work in the history of Irish poetry. At every moment, numerous dialectical axes are in play and intertwined. The interactions of Irish and English within the development of Irish poetic traditions are subtended and complicated by those between a hegemonic written archive (whether in terms of manuscript circulation or print publication) and an important though more elusive oral tradition, whether we consider, for instance, the importance of oral poetry that circulated outside of the remit of the formalised bardic orders and Gaelic aristocratic houses, or forms of contemporary spoken word and performance poetry that circulate online and via social media. In addition, while the politics of gender and sexuality have often, and rightly, taken centre-stage in our understanding of Irish poetry – whether the patriarchal underpinnings of the monastic and bardic institutions, the shaping power of the Catholic Church within the culture and ideology of nationalism in Ireland, or feminist attempts to deconstruct such ideologies over the last century – the politics of sect, class, geography, ethnicity, and race have also been important factors, if not as ubiquitously as those of gender, sexuality, nation, or language. Kinsella's sense of a dual tradition can be hypostasised in order to understand the systemic dialectical forces shaping this history.

As has been suggested, poets and poetry in Ireland have long existed at the heart of the cultural and political establishment of the day. For the first millennium or so of this history, those writing poetry were close to or part of the hegemonic class and the structures of discursive and actual power, and poets were understood to be vital to the workings of such power. Robin Frame summarises: 'Perhaps the most distinctive feature of early Ireland was the existence of a privileged group, the *filid*, common to the whole island; they were custodians of law and history, and thus (in today's parlance) the creators and preservers of a national identity.'⁵ In the great monastic centres

⁵ Robin Frame, 'Perspectives from the later Middle Ages', in Brendan Smith (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Ireland*, vol. I 600–1550 (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 523–50 (at 526).

ERIC FALCI

in pre-Norman Ireland and then the noble Gaelic houses from the thirteenth through seventeenth centuries, poets were professional figures – vital to the court and often occupying hereditary positions – who produced what Marc Caball has described as ‘a corporate literature’, primarily consisting of praise poems, eulogies, and sometimes satires concerning the Gaelic noble families who were their patrons and whose legitimacy and legacy they helped to furnish or could seek to damage.⁶ If a poet was unhappy with their compensation or the way that they were treated by a noble, then they might compose a satire to undermine their patron’s position. This sense of the poet as an influential and necessary but also potentially dangerous and destabilising figure goes back to the very start of the tradition, as famously exemplified by the assembly at Druim Cett (in modern County Derry) in 575, when Aed mac Ainmire led a royal party to meet with a group of *filid*, led by Eochaid Dallán Forgaill. Aggravated at their growing size and influence, the aristocratic class wished to abolish the order of the *filid*, but in the end Colum Cille persuaded them that what was needed was reform rather than abolition. And one of the most intriguing stories from the medieval tradition is the satire *Tromdám Gúaire* (*The Great Visitation to Guaire*, sometimes referred to as *Imitheacht na Tromdháimhe*, or *The Proceedings of the Great Bardic Institution*), set in the seventh century but composed much later. In it, a host of poets, led by the *ollamh* Senchán Torpéist, travels to the court of Guaire, the king of Connacht, where they proceed to behave atrociously despite the hospitality they receive from Guaire, who is terrified that any failing on his part will lead Senchán to satirise him, a fate that had never befallen the king before, and so he accedes to every outrageous request made by Senchán and his host.⁷

Even after the collapse of the Gaelic bardic orders in the seventeenth century, poets in Ireland have long considered their own position and art in relation to the political sphere, even though it might be at one or several removes. We can understand the development of Anglo-Irish poetry from the mid nineteenth through the early twentieth centuries in terms of its proximity to institutions of political and cultural power and influence,

⁶ Marc Caball and Kaarina Hollo, ‘The literature of later Medieval Ireland, 1200–1600: From the Normans to the Tudors’, in Kelleher and O’Leary (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature*, vol. I, 74–139 (at 76).

⁷ Somewhat later, Senchán and his host of poets get their comeuppance when Marbán, Guaire’s brother, travels to their house and demands that they recite *Táin Bó Cuailnge*. They do not know the tale and so Marbán curses them so that they must stay on the move until they locate the tale and can recite it to him. After a year of searching, Fergus mac Róich is summoned from the dead to recite the tale for the poets, who then return to tell it to Marbán, who lifts the curse but also abolishes their company.

Introduction

whether we think of those in historical or literary-historical terms. That Ireland is awash with poets – what Patrick Kavanagh (1904–67), referring to the scene in mid-twentieth-century Dublin, acidly dubbed ‘the standing army of Irish poets’ – and that poetry (and, therefore, poets) matter in Ireland have been enduring notions.⁸ We can see a more recent reflex of this position in Randolph Healy’s (1956–) wry and elusive preface to *The Electron-Ghost Casino* (2024), in which he attempts – tongue quite firmly in cheek – to clarify his own position as a poet: ‘I’ve been informed that what I write isn’t poetry. Suit yourself. I’ve also read several statements which have been incorrectly attributed to me. For example, that I am part of a neo-avant garde (No, but thanks anyway), or that I don’t consider myself an Irish poet (Who *wouldn’t* want to be an Irish poet?).’⁹ Born in Scotland, resident in Ireland for much of his life, and part of a small but vital group of innovative or experimental poets who have operated outside of mainstream literary circuits in Ireland and the United Kingdom, Healy catches something vital about the history of poetry in Ireland: for the majority of the historical period covered in this book, Irish poets have occupied privileged spaces in Irish culture and have been crucial figures within and shapers of Irish history. This holds for the contemporary period as well, even as poetry remains a minor player on the complex field of artistic and cultural production, both in Ireland and beyond. Between the rise of the poet-professor and the expansion of creative writing programmes across Ireland, the continued investment of the Irish state in supporting and spotlighting poets as part of various cultural and tourism initiatives, and the ways that poets have sought and often succeeded to claim space within much larger public discourses and debates, there is some straightforward truth to Randolph Healy’s very unstraightforward statement.

However, this sense of proximity and relative cultural relevance has a separate force, one that turns on the sardonic side of Healy’s quip: if poets have occupied privileged spaces within Irish culture, such that one might reasonably ask, ‘Who *wouldn’t* want to be an Irish poet?’, then such privileges typically accrued to those who fulfilled certain accepted versions of the ‘Irish poet’. A great deal of important poetry has been composed far from whatever might be construed as the ‘establishment’ of the day: folk and personal poetry far removed from the professional poetry of the classic bardic period; Irish-language poetry throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth; poetry in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, most often

⁸ Patrick Kavanagh, *Collected Poems* (London: Brian & O’Keefe, 1964), 114.

⁹ Randolph Healy, *The Electron-Ghost Casino* (Oxford, OH: Miami University Press, 2024), ix.

ERIC FALCI

written by women, that focused on everyday or domestic matters rather than the stuff of nation or myth; varieties of experimental or innovative poetry in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that fall outside of the aesthetic conventions governing mainstream venues. It is a great time to be an Irish poet if one writes a certain kind of Irish poem. When looking, for instance, at the last half century, what has been much less in evidence is the continued development of an experimental or avant-garde formation. Trevor Joyce (1947–), Catherine Walsh (1964–), Maurice Scully (1952–2023), and Healy himself are the core of the small cohort of contemporary experimental Irish poets, but their work is deeply undervalued by and within the contemporary institutions of Irish poetry – publishers, festivals, journals, prizes, grant-giving bodies – that remain committed to what might be broadly (and too simply) described as lyric conventions.

More centrally, the history of poetry in Ireland has been – and, in some ways, continues to be – masculinist and systemically patriarchal. There are some examples of women poets in the medieval and early modern tradition, as Chapter 3 demonstrates, and there are certainly a number of Irish women poets over the past several centuries who have had consequential careers. However, as Anne Fogarty notes, much of the tradition of Irish poetry is marked by the absence and exclusion of women:

Irish poetry is indelibly gendered and almost entirely skewed towards the reception, exegesis, hallowing, and preservation of the male author ... Throughout Irish cultural history, female poets have enjoyed fleeting prominence, only then to be erased, forgotten, and rendered invisible. The template for the poet in our culture is unremittingly male because the authority assigned to him, not her, is assumed to be vatic, privileged, muscular, and hierarchical.¹⁰

However, as many of the following chapters demonstrate, that reality should not license an under-reading or marginalisation of those important female poets in the tradition, nor be understood as a historical monolith, nor prevent us from registering the quite significant changes that have occurred since the middle of the twentieth century, when poets such as Máire Mhac an tSaoi (1922–2021), Eavan Boland, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin (1942–), and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill published their first full collections: *Margadh na Saoire* (1956), *New Territory* (1967), *Acts and Monuments* (1972), and *An Dealg Droighin* (1981),

¹⁰ Anne Fogarty, 'Introduction II: The reception of Irish women poets', in Ailbhe Darcy and David Wheatley (eds.), *A History of Irish Women's Poetry* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 24–39 (at 24).

Introduction

respectively. These poets became, as Fogarty puts it, ‘pioneers and role models’ not only because they published poetry but because they ‘publicly and programmatically claim[ed] the right to do so while calling to account the hitherto unquestioned authority of an inveterately patriarchal tradition’.¹¹

No one was more important in this ‘calling to account’ than Boland. The overarching argument of her career was that the Irish poetic tradition was fundamentally patriarchal and often misogynistic, and the bulk of her writing concerns her own experience finding a place within a tradition that had no place for women poets but only for women as the figural and symbolic objects of poems. Her career both tracks and enacts the shift that she notes in ‘Outside History’, one of the most well-known essays from *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* (1995): ‘over a relatively short time – certainly no more than a generation or so – women have moved from being the objects of Irish poems to being the authors of them’.¹² In that essay, Boland stitches together autobiography and critique as part of an essayistic *Künstlerroman*: ‘I turned to the work of Irish male poets. After all, I thought of myself as an Irish poet. I wanted to locate myself within the Irish poetic tradition.’¹³ Boland’s account of the Irish poetic tradition has been both influential and the subject of critique, but what remains notable is her clear and ardent sense that there is such a thing as an Irish poetic tradition and such a figure as an Irish poet. Boland sees her task as making space within that tradition for Irish women poets, but this task is premised upon the notion that ‘the Irish poet’ is a viable and long-standing concept or category: in Boland’s work, the adjective–noun phrase nearly always takes the definite article. Even the figure that she uses to trope the kinds of disruption that she sees as necessary suggests the utter permanence of Irish poetry and the Irish poet: ‘I felt that there was an underlying fault in Irish poetry, almost a geological weakness.’¹⁴ The male-centric, misogynistic tradition of Irish poetry is a fault line, but it is produced by and subordinated to the tectonic plates on either side of it: ‘Irish poetry’ and ‘the Irish poet’.

Irish poetry, and Irish poets, have been and remain proximate to the history of Ireland. In one sense, this is self-evident. But in another, it isn’t: throughout the long continuous-but-broken, gapped-but-composite tradition of poetry in Ireland, both poets and poems have been influential within their

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 25–6.

¹² Eavan Boland, *Citizen Poet: New and Selected Essays*, ed. Jody Allen Randolph (New York: W.W. Norton, 2024), 97.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 105. ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 120.

ERIC FALCI

broader cultural and political milieux. For the first ten centuries or so covered by this volume, poets undertook their variegated work within institutional and ideological establishments to whose dynamics and operations they were central. However, the sturdy and widespread institutions of professional poetry were also exclusionary and the story that can be told about Irish poetry is necessarily partial: there was certainly widespread poetic activity outside of the world of the professional poets – whether *fili* or bard – but because that activity existed primarily as oral composition, it has left relatively few written traces. Since the decline of the bardic orders in the seventeenth century and the emergence of an Irish poetic tradition in English, poetic activity in the two languages has, until recently, run on proximate but rarely intersecting tracks. Poetry in Irish remained largely a manuscript literature until the end of the nineteenth century, and even then, what was prioritised for print was poetry from earlier periods rather than contemporary compositions. From certain angles, poetry in English from the seventeenth through the end of the nineteenth century was inextricable from the broader tradition of English poetry, if only because the major figures – Swift, Oliver Goldsmith (1728–74), Mary Tighe (1772–1810), W.B. Yeats (1865–1939) – were steeped in the world of English letters and literature just as much as they were in conversation with literature in Ireland. For these and other reasons, mediating figures such as Charlotte Brooke (1740–93), Samuel Ferguson (1810–86), James Clarence Mangan (1803–49), and Douglas Hyde (1860–1949) were central to the fashioning and reception of the Irish literary tradition in those centuries. It isn't too much to say that Irish poetry in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has featured at least four renaissances: the Irish literary and cultural revival (and counter-revival) that is traditionally articulated with the duration of Yeats's career from the 1880s to the late 1930s; the major revival of modern Irish-language poetry in the 1950s, with the emergence of the triumvirate of Máirtín Ó Direáin (1910–88), Seán Ó Ríordáin (1916–77), and Máire Mhac an tSaoi; the emergence of a formidable and multi-generational body of Northern Irish poetry; and the emergence of the *Innti* generation of Irish-language poets in the 1970s (so called after an important Irish-language poetry journal founded by students at University College Cork in 1970). To this quartet of renaissances we can add the significant rise of published poetry by women in Ireland since the late 1960s, which is the most important general development of the past sixty years. The Irish poetic tradition was deeply patriarchal, structurally exclusionary, and often misogynistic for most of its history until relatively late in the twentieth century. To be sure, it hasn't transformed into a neatly