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978-1-107-00897-7 - Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity 1800–2000: The Transformation of Oral Space

David Lloyd

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IRISH CULTURE AND COLONIAL MODERNITY 1800–2000

From the Famine to political hunger strikes, from telling tales in the pub to Beckett's tortured utterances, the performance of Irish identity has always been deeply connected to the oral. Exploring how colonial modernity transformed the spaces that sustained Ireland's oral culture, this book explains why Irish culture has been both so creative and so resistant to modernization. David Lloyd brings together manifestations of oral culture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, showing how the survival of orality was central both to resistance against colonial rule and to Ireland's modern definition as a post-colonial culture. Specific to Ireland as these histories are, they resonate with post-colonial cultures globally. This study is an important and provocative new interpretation of Irish national culture and how it came into being.

DAVID LLOYD is Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Southern California.

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*For Robert Oliver Villiers Lloyd
and Joan Hilliere Langrishe Lloyd
in memory*

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On one of the last occasions that she was able to leave home, my mother decided to come to a lecture I was giving on the Irish Famine, a lecture that would become the first chapter of this book. Settled at the front of the lecture hall, she asked me once again:

‘What are you lecturing on?’
 ‘On the Famine,’ I responded.
 ‘How’s that?’ she queried. ‘You weren’t there, were you?’
 ‘No,’ I acknowledged, ‘but I’ve read a lot about it.’
 ‘Is that right?’ she said. ‘But then, I wasn’t there either.’
 She hesitated.
 ‘Or was I?’

It would be easy to dismiss that query as the quirk of an ageing person’s failing memory. But then, it seems to me now to mark a proper uncertainty, an uncertainty as to the extent to which a past we did not live still marks us, marking us through stories heard and unheard, through – perhaps above all – apprehensions and reflexes that may not even be the matter of relation or record. Before anything we have read and thought, and even before anything we may wish to acknowledge, an inarticulate stratum of attitudes and responses shapes, like an unseen geological formation, the ways we are in the world.

Such responses are often formed against the grain. It was from my mother, a stubborn defender of English values and Anglo-Irish mores, that I learnt my first smattering of Irish idiom, from ‘a-hain’ to ‘a-shay’, from an *amadhain* to an eejit. It was from my father, a chemist by training and an inveterate rationalist, that I learnt, on country walks or long drives, the first elements of a fairy lore: of thorn trees, fairy rings and fairy paths; or why the half-ruined cottage still stood, though roofless, next to the new one out of respect for the household gods; or how honey-suckle should never be brought inside the house. It was my father who

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cursed beneath his breath, on holidays in Donegal, those ‘born-to-rule voices’ that carried across the bay, yet listened daily to the BBC and sent me off to British schools.

I dedicate this book to the memory of my parents, who unwittingly taught me to inhabit the contradictions of a settler colonial mentality in a post-colonial society, and who taught me to love much before I could begin to understand it.

This book has been all too long in the making. The list of debts that I have accumulated along the way is correspondingly lengthy but also full of the memories of spontaneous talk and the brilliant insights of others. The germ of this book came from a lecture by Seamus Deane at the University of California, Berkeley, in the course of which he remarked on the melancholy cast of post-Famine Irish culture. Not only to this aside, but moreover to the richness and complexity of his thinking about Ireland and modernity I owe, as do so many Irish scholars, an incalculable debt.

So much of this book was first unfolded in lectures or seminars that it would be impossible to acknowledge every one or every comment that has helped me to new insights. However, my thanks are due in particular to the faculty and students of the University of Notre Dame’s Keough-Naughton Graduate Seminar in Irish Studies and especially to Kevin Whelan, whose several invitations to deliver talks and participate in conversations that would shape this book were an invaluable stimulus to its composition. Conversations indeed have been vital to the making of this book, much of its basic research having taken place, as is only fitting, less in the library than in the pub. For their kindness, wit and erudition I have to thank many Irish scholars: Luke Gibbons, whose generosity and knowledge have been unfailing; Breandán Mac Suibhne, whose acute insights and archival wealth often seemed inexhaustible; Angela Bourke, Vincent Cheng, Joe Cleary, Margaret Kelleher, Heather Laird, Laura Lyons, Amy Martin, Conor McCarthy, Sarah McKibben, Victor Merriman, Emer Nolan, Lionel Pilkington, John Waters, Clair Wills and Trisha Ziff may not even recall all the ways in which they have contributed to this book. I have been no less fortunate in my readers, whose comments on multiple drafts of this work have been invaluable to me in conceptualizing and rethinking it at various points along the way: my thanks here are due especially to Eyal Amiran, Anne Banfield, Tadhg Foley, Avery Gordon and Mark Quigley, as well as to the anonymous and generous readers for Cambridge University Press. To Peter D. O’Neill I owe not only an excellent index, but many years of conversation, friendship, wit and wisdom.

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My thinking in this book has also continually been informed by friends and colleagues outside of Irish studies, whose theoretical and historical insights have posed me with the constant challenge to reconceive Irish history and culture from new perspectives. I am especially grateful for the conversation and the work of Eduardo Cadava, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Peter Linebaugh and Neferti Tadiar. Colin Dayan has been an almost daily inspiration and encouragement in the last couple of years of writing as well as providing a model of conceptual imaginativeness and engaged scholarship through her own work. Working with Carolyn Cartier on a series of events on Space and Culture at the University of California crucially advanced my conceptualization of oral space and taught me the importance of the ‘spatial turn’ in cultural studies. Bi-annual meetings with the Subaltern–Popular Workshop at the University of California, Santa Barbara for the past five years furnished the indispensable intellectual community within which to experiment with ideas and engage in constructive critical thought. I am grateful to Swati Chattopadhyay and Bhaskar Sarkar for organizing these events and to all the participants in those workshops for innumerable insights and frequent occasions for laughter. Over the years I have been sustained too by the friendship and conversation of many whose work and insights have often informed this book obliquely but no less valuably: Fred Moten, Rei Terada, Denise da Silva, Ian Balfour, Lily Cho, Nasser Hussain, Marjorie Perloff, John Rowe, Andrew Aisenberg, Pani Norindr and Marina Perez de Mendiola. Sam and Talia Pauwels Lloyd have continually and graciously reminded me of the most important things over the years, even when my work has taken me away, physically and mentally, from their side.

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