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Edited by Joe Cleary

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## Introduction

### I

The story of Irish modernism constitutes one of the more remarkable chapters in the eventful history of European modernism. The names of William Butler Yeats, James Joyce, and Samuel Beckett are now so familiar that it is difficult for us to recapture any sense of how unlikely it would have seemed in 1900 that a small island more famed for its economic backwardness and calamitous history than for anything that might be considered “modern” should have produced three figures as significant to the development of modernism as any of the major writers to emerge in England, France, Germany, Russia, or the United States in the same era. Nineteenth-century Ireland had produced outstanding political leaders in Daniel O’Connell and Charles Stewart Parnell and charismatic political writers such as Thomas Davis, James Fintan Lalor, John Mitchel, and Michael Davitt. It had also won a reputation in Europe and beyond for its “Celtic” spirituality and imagination, a reputation burnished in the writings of Johann Gottfried Herder, Matthew Arnold, and Ernest Renan. Nevertheless, nineteenth-century Irish artists had generally languished on the outer edges of the great traditions of English and French romanticism and realism or on those of German or Italian classical music, and even those who won metropolitan recognition in the period exerted little of the transformative effect on English and European high culture that Yeats, Joyce, and Beckett were to do after World War I. Modernism today is part of a receding history, but works such as *Ulysses* (1922), *A Vision* (1925, revised edition 1937), *The Tower* (1928), *Finnegans Wake* (1939), *The Unnameable* (1953), or *Endgame* (1957) retain a capacity to compel that time seems to increase rather than diminish.

However, it is arguable that precisely because they were so remarkable, the achievements of Yeats, Joyce, and Beckett have ultimately contributed to an attenuated conception of the history and achievements of Irish modernism more broadly. Such is the distinction of these luminaries that they have

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not only been separated from the mainstream of modern Irish literature more generally to be treated as honorific British, European, or “world” figures, but they are also often detached from any more extensive consideration of Irish modernism as such. Thus, there are now great stacks of books and a constant round of scholarly events devoted to the appreciation of Yeats, Joyce, and Beckett, and there is a smaller but steadily growing body of work on some of their other compatriots such as Jack B. Yeats, Elizabeth Bowen, Flann O’Brien, or Francis Bacon. Nevertheless, despite the attention these individuals command, there are scarcely any broad-ranging studies of Irish modernism and it has always been easier for scholars to accept that twentieth-century Ireland produced a small handful of émigré modernists than that it generated a more extended modernism in its own right, one that flowered most spectacularly in literature and drama, but that also saw notable developments in the visual arts, architecture, music, cinema, and design.

Were it not so dominated by the iconic figures of Yeats, Joyce, and Beckett, how might we reconfigure our sense of Irish modernism? The achievements of these outstanding writers are deservedly admired and will remain at the centre of this volume, but, as the chapters by Laura O’Connor, Emer Nolan, Ben Levitas, and Luke Gibbons variously remind us, they are also part of a tapestry of modernist artistic achievement that encompasses several media, and that was created in several locations in the period roughly between 1890 and 1960. To consider Irish modernism in this expanded frame even in the literary field is to push out the customary boundaries and to acknowledge the importance of figures such as George Moore, George Egerton, Oscar Wilde, or George Bernard Shaw, all more conventionally treated as minor precursors to Yeats, Joyce, and Beckett rather than as serious contributors to modernism in their own right. Nevertheless, these earlier figures – who, like Yeats, came of age professionally in fin de siècle England and made their reputations there before World War I – had all been notable enthusiasts of the earliest continental European avant gardes: Moore championed in turn French impressionism, naturalism, and aestheticism; Egerton was the first writer in English to reference Friedrich Nietzsche and to translate Knut Hamsun; Wilde was the most flamboyant English-language practitioner of European decadence; Shaw was a committed advocate of Henrik Ibsen at a time when the Norwegian’s work provoked scandal or incomprehension in British theatrical circles. After Yeats and Joyce were widely feted as major writers in the high modernist decade of the 1920s, Ireland went on to produce not only another major late modernist in Beckett but also a considerable company of experimental dramatists, poets, and novelists – such as Sean O’Casey, Louis MacNeice, Elizabeth Bowen, Flann O’Brien, Máirtín

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Ó Cadhain, Thomas MacGreevy, Denis Devlin, Brian Coffey, and Seán Ó Ríordáin – who made their own estimable contributions to modernism in Ireland. Beckett's accomplishments normally dominate any discussion of this later period, but if his work is viewed in terms of some of his other Irish contemporaries in various disciplines the lineaments of a remarkable but still scarcely conceptualized late Irish modernism begin to appear.

Beyond the literary field there was also from the outset a considerable body of Irish visual artists, many of them women, attentive to new developments in European painting, sculpture, and design and finding in the continental avant gardes the inspiration and resources to get beyond the academicist conventions that regulated the production of painting and the plastic arts in Britain and Ireland. Like their literary contemporaries, many of these artists plied their careers between Dublin, London, and Paris; like the writers, some sidestepped the Irish Revival in favour of more abstract European avant-garde currents, whereas others attempted (as Yeats or Joyce in their respective ways were to do) to tap both revivalist and modernist energies. Scholarship on the Irish visual arts has advanced significantly in recent decades, but even now treatments of Irish modernism that deal with May Guinness, Mary Swanzy, Mainie Jellett, Eileen Gray, Jack B. Yeats, Seán Keating, Francis Bacon, Louis le Brocquy, Patrick Scott, or Sean Scully (to mention only some of the figures involved) are relatively few, and, given the disciplinary specialisms involved, the capacity of cultural historians to make compelling connections between Irish literary and visual media modernisms remains limited. Though there have been significant advances in recent times in these fields too, scholarship on Irish musical, architectural, and cinematic modernisms is only in its pioneering phase; thus, in many ways the history of Irish modernism in the wider sense is still, for all the attention devoted to Yeats, Joyce, and Beckett, in its early stage and tentative.<sup>1</sup>

The object of this *Companion* is to consolidate contemporary scholarship on Irish modernism with a view also to expanding its scope and ambition. This volume aims to (1) present accessible but wide-ranging and critically challenging overviews of the sociohistorical, intellectual, and aesthetic forces that contributed to the emergence of an Irish modernism; and (2) chart some of the contours of that modernism as it evolved in a variety of media such as poetry, the novel, theatre, and the visual arts. The *Companion* surveys these subjects over a period of more than half a century and tracks them across an international terrain that includes not only Ireland but also England, France, and the United States. It attends to the particular ambitions and constraints that shaped the modernist literatures produced by Irish women, Irish-language writers, and Irish American modernists. These pages dwell primarily on literature and the visual arts, but because this *Companion*

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focuses on a spectrum of modernist achievement in several media, it aims to make a significant contribution to a larger revaluation of modernism in Ireland more generally.

## II

As will already perhaps be clear, the term “Irish modernism” provokes knotty questions of definition. Should it refer to a modernism produced by Irish artists? And what exactly would the term “Irish” encompass in an era during which Ireland underwent a radical and continuous process of political and cultural redefinition as a territory that had historically been part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland was contested by Irish nationalists and unionists, and was divided shortly after World War I into two states, the Irish Free State and Northern Ireland, each of which retaining constitutionally contested and emotionally fraught links with Great Britain? Or should the term refer to the modernism produced by Irish artists and those of Irish extraction working either in Ireland itself or beyond its shores? “Modernism” too has always presented its own difficulties as a term because it refers to changes of very discrepant kinds to the conception and function of a whole variety of arts. This *Companion* leans generally towards the more capacious conceptions of “Irish modernism” because, however defined, it was from the outset a decidedly transnational phenomenon. Several of the most canonical figures associated with modernism spent substantial parts of their careers outside of Ireland: Yeats lived some of his formative childhood years in London before returning to Dublin; Joyce left Ireland at the age of twenty-three for Trieste and never lived permanently in Ireland thereafter; and Beckett abandoned an academic post at Trinity College Dublin in 1931 to develop his artistic career in Paris. Paris is obviously crucial to any history of Irish modernism as it was there that George Moore first came into contact with French naturalism and impressionism, that Wilde’s *Salomé* (1896) premiered, that *Ulysses* (1922), *Waiting for Godot* (1953), and *Endgame* (1957) first appeared, and that so many Irish visual artists such as Mainie Jellett or Mary Swanzy or Eileen Gray came into contact with modernist movements or mentors that influenced their own experimental works. Likewise, the careers of George Moore, George Bernard Shaw, Elizabeth Bowen, Sean O’Casey, or Francis Bacon were based largely in London and therefore their works belong in that sense as much to the story of English as to Irish modernism. There has been a determined and valuable attempt in Irish Studies in recent decades to reclaim most of these figures for Irish culture and to critically evaluate the extent to which their works are informed by Irish social and cultural history.<sup>2</sup> This *Companion*

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is indebted to this work of reclamation, and in some degree continues that project, but it also recognizes that to stress the “Irish” at the expense of the “international” dimension of the works considered, or indeed vice versa, is historically and conceptually unproductive. Because of the peculiarities of nineteenth-century Irish colonial history, there were very good reasons, social and cultural, why Irish artistic production generally and Irish modernism more specifically should have developed in several different sites, many of them beyond Ireland.

The case of music offers a useful entry point here. Nineteenth-century Ireland may have been more commonly identified abroad with music than with either painting or literature. Thomas Moore’s *Irish Melodies* (1806–7) won fame across early-nineteenth-century Europe and captured the imagination of the late Romantic era in a manner that recalled the spectacular success that the Scottish James Macpherson’s *The Works of Ossian* (1765) had enjoyed several decades earlier among German romantics such as Herder, Friedrich Klopstock, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. In other countries, such as Russia, Bulgaria, Hungary, Germany, Spain, and the United States, popular folk idioms and modernist aesthetic experiment were integrated in the new music in fascinating ways. Yet despite its wealth of folk culture, folk music, and popular song, all of which were so influential on the literature and theatre of the Irish Revival, as indeed were Moore’s songs on Joyce’s imagination, this integration of high art music and popular music was not managed to any really distinguished effect in Ireland and even the most talented Irish-based exponents of Irish modernist art music such as Frederick May, Brian Boydell, and Aloys Fleischmann never attained a prominence equal to that of their contemporaries in other modernist media. Musicologists continue to debate the reasons for this: some claim that the precedence accorded by Irish cultural nationalism to ethnic folk music stymied the emergence of a European art music, whether in its classical or modernist forms; others, more persuasively, argue that because it was a backward province of the United Kingdom that had itself become separated from the more advanced currents in European art music, Ireland lacked the developed infrastructure necessary to produce a strong musical modernism.<sup>3</sup>

It may therefore be the case, as Axel Klein has proposed, that the most significant contributor with Irish associations to modernist music before the Cold War was Henry Cowell, born in California in 1897 to an Irish Protestant immigrant father, Harry Cowell, and an American Midwestern mother, Clarissa Dixon, a writer and editor of the anarchist paper, *The Beacon*.<sup>4</sup> Growing up in this bohemian milieu, and thus obviously well outside of Ireland and its domestic music establishment, Cowell became an early explorer of techniques such as atonality and polytonality and he was also

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interested in Asian classical music. But through his father and his friend, the Dublin-born poet and theosophist John Varian, who prior to his emigration to the United States in 1894 had been a member of the Theosophical Society and friend of George Russell (AE) in Dublin, Cowell nevertheless developed an interest in Irish music and mythology. His early experiments in tone cluster combined these high art and Irish interests, as is evident in the titles of some of his early avant-garde compositions: *The Tides of Mananaun* (1917), *The Trumpet of Angus Og* (1918–24), and *The Banshee* (1925). When he toured Europe in the 1920s, Cowell's tone cluster technique captured the interest of the Hungarian composer Béla Bartók, who asked his permission to adopt it into his own work. Cowell later became one of a distinguished group of ultra-modernist American composers and was mentor to George Gershwin, Lou Harrison, and John Cage. However, he retained his interest in folk and non-Western music; he taught a course on "Music of the World's Peoples" at the New School for Social Research in New York in the late 1920s and in 1928 founded the Pan-American Association of Composers to promote the music of the Americas generally and to build a transnational sense of musical community.

By background, Cowell derived on his Irish side from the same Anglo-Irish Protestant milieu to which composers Boydell and May also belonged, and the mix of theosophical, oriental, Irish folk, and mythological influences that Cowell absorbed into his early compositions have some remarkable similarities to that which, in various ways, stimulated Yeats, Augusta Gregory, AE, Standish O'Grady, James Cousins, and other Protestant revivalists, including the Irish Revival-influenced English composer Arnold Bax. But culturally, Cowell is closer perhaps to Irish American literary and theatrical modernists such as Eugene O'Neill, born in 1888, and F. Scott Fitzgerald, born in 1896, and thus a year Cowell's senior. Like these and older Irish American modernists, such as the architect Louis Henry Sullivan or the art collector John Quinn, Cowell made his career at a time when the influence of the Irish Revival on American and European culture was at its height and when the United States was also beginning to develop its own forms of modernist expression. In this late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century period, when Irish revivalism and modernism were both still in their fledgling and most protean phases, they did not seem as antithetical to each other as they would later appear to many after each had assumed more programmatic definition from the 1920s or 1930s onwards. Cowell, O'Neill, Fitzgerald, Sullivan, and others are now, properly, claimed for American modernism, but they were all conscious of the achievements of the Irish Revival and indeed of Irish émigré figures such as Wilde and Shaw in London and later of Joyce in Paris, and to this extent at least there are

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ways in which Ireland and Irish culture were significant to the wider history of European and American modernisms even before these modernisms made their impact on twentieth-century Ireland. Because writers, painters, and designers – such as Moore, Joyce, and Beckett or Swazy, Guinness, and Gray – resided in Paris, and Wilde, Shaw, O’Casey, Bowen, and Bacon made their careers in London, it has been conventional to think of Irish modernism almost exclusively in terms of an Irish-European axis. But the United States also has its place in any serious account of Irish modernist history, and, as I argue in Chapter 11, several leading figures in American modernism were shaped by the wider cultural history of the post-Famine Irish diaspora in the United States.

It is also worth noting in this context that the production of what we now retrospectively call “modernism” was never solely the labour of its immediate creators. Many other kinds of cultural mediation were always involved, including the work of publishers and translators, actors and stage-designers, editors and cultural magazines, patrons and impresarios, and critics and curators of various kinds. At this level, too, the story of Irish modernism is constitutively both national and transnational in its dimensions. Some major patrons of modernism in its early stages were Irish. Hugh Lane is one example; Lane’s aunt, Augusta Gregory, a generous patron of Yeats as well as co-founder of and playwright for the Abbey Theatre, is another. Other patrons, such as Harriet Shaw Weaver and Nancy Cunard, were radicalized members of the English upper class: Weaver was a financial supporter of *The Freewoman*, later re-titled *The Egoist*, as well as a generous supporter of Joyce; Cunard founded and financed the Hours Press, which published, among many other notable works, *The Negro Anthology* (1934) and Beckett’s first book, *Whoroscope* (1930). Several other patrons, collectors, and curators were Irish American. John Quinn was not only a major collector of French post-impressionist and Irish Revivalist art, but also the attorney who defended the *Little Review* when it was prosecuted for obscenity for serializing *Ulysses*; James Johnson Sweeney, whose family emigrated to United States from Co. Donegal, contributed a defence of modern painting to AE’s *Irish Statesman* before going on to write an incisive book on modernist art, *Plastic Redirections in 20th-Century Painting* (1934), and to become an associate editor of *Transition*, in which position he helped Joyce to correct what became *Finnegans Wake* as it was serialized in that journal. When he became Visiting Lecturer at New York’s Institute of Fine Arts (1934–40), Sweeney was confirmed as one of the leading American experts on twentieth-century avant-garde art and he held important curatorial positions or directorships at the Museum of Modern Art and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York.



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As even these slight cameos may suggest, the histories of Irish modernism and of Irish exile and emigration are, and in a manner that includes but also goes well beyond the famous instances of Joyce's or Beckett's residences in Paris, complexly connected. The vast majority of those born in Ireland associated with the development of modernist experiment in all media, and especially in its initial stages, were middle- or upper-class Anglo-Irish Protestants. As a consequence of a colonial history dating back to the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century plantations, Protestants had dominated nearly all of the higher professions – commercial, professional, educational, artistic – in Ireland and would continue to do so into the twentieth century. It was because of this colonial context, too, that so many Irish literary and visual artists especially had consistently gravitated towards London, the great imperial metropole that remained the cultural capital of the Anglophone world throughout the modernist period, although this role was increasingly appropriated by New York as the United States replaced Great Britain as the world's leading capitalist state. And it was in turn because of the overwhelming dominance of London over the wider Anglophone world that so many Irish writers and painters reactively gravitated to Paris in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In Paris, the Irish *émigrés* discovered not only what Pascale Casanova has called “the capital of Art in the purest sense” but also a cosmopolitan crucible of avant-garde activity and a means to reduce longstanding Irish cultural dependency on London.<sup>5</sup> Parisian consecration, moreover, conferred on the consecrated a “universality” of recognition more prestigious than anything London could offer in this period.

But if a colonial history can explain why so many Irish talents ended up in London or Paris, it was the political tribulations and economic destitution occasioned by this same colonial history that also impelled Irish people of lower social classes to emigrate to the United States. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this emigration had been mainly from the northern counties of Ireland and was comprised largely of Dissenting Protestants escaping Anglican domination; after the Great Famine, the tide of emigration was predominantly Catholic. By the beginning of the twentieth century, this Irish-American Catholic community was becoming increasingly economically powerful and politically assertive, and the enthusiasm of some of its more talented literary and intellectual figures – such as O'Neill, Fitzgerald, Sweeney, and others – for the higher arts was almost certainly connected to their desire to shake off their nineteenth-century Irish predecessors' association with low-brow mass culture. In the circumstances, the metropolitan nature of Irish modernism – the fact that so much of it was to be produced in Paris, London, and New York – and its colonial origins



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are not, as sometimes thought, contradictory; they are, rather, dialectically connected.

These colonial origins are probably responsible not only for Irish modernism's characteristic oscillation between "vernacular" and "cosmopolitan" imaginaries – the subject of Michael Valdez Moses's final chapter in this volume – but also for its combinations of restless formal experiment and its tendency in many instances to be sceptical of liberal notions of historical progress. For most cultural historians, the defining watershed catastrophe of the modernist epoch is World War I: a climacteric that left millions dead, collapsed old dynasties across Europe, and loosened the mortar of relatively settled class and gender hierarchies; as the prewar social order disintegrated, it released both radical new social movements aiming to revolutionize the world and fiercely reactionary restorationist forces fighting under the banners of national purity and tradition. However, the Great Famine of 1845–50, which left more than a million dead because of hunger and disease, and precipitated the emigration of a million more, arguably represented in the Irish case a pulverization of society at least as drastic and as consequential in effect as World War I was later to be for other European countries. This is not to say that the Famine was Ireland's earlier Victorian version of World War I, but that when Irish society experienced the Great War, and the local responses to that wider turmoil – which included the arming of the Ulster and Irish Volunteers, Easter 1916, and the War of Independence – this turmoil unfolded within relatively recent memory of the preceding domestic calamity. Hence, the cultural and political shocks still reverberating from one great catastrophe were sharpened by a second, and aggravated soon afterwards again by a third if we include the events of the late 1920s and 1930s that ultimately issued in World War II.

A traumatic sense of modernity-as-catastrophe nurtured by Irish history had already found memorable literary expression in the writings of figures as various as Seathrún Céitinn (Geoffrey Keating), Jonathan Swift, John Mitchel, James Clarence Mangan, Michael Davitt, or Standish O'Grady, and in modes of Irish writing as different as Gaelic *aisling* or Anglo-Irish Gothic. Drawing on this acrimonious history and unsettled literary inheritance, Joyce produced in *Ulysses* an epic humorously receptive to the small graces that a single day may bring but vibrant also with the nightmarish quality of modern history and with a corresponding wariness of what Stephen Dedalus calls "those big words which make us so unhappy."<sup>6</sup> From similar resources, Yeats created a poetry in which a well-brewed Anglo-Irish colonial contempt for the Catholic middle class is nearly always straining at the leash, but that is at the same time more responsive than the work of any of his contemporaries to the intellectual and visionary drama of the

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Irish revolutionary struggle. Beckett can seem the most wilfully apolitical of writers given the political savagery of Europe at the time when he made his reputation, yet he created a theatre that registers even more profoundly perhaps than that of Bertolt Brecht the wretchedness of a world brought to such a pass that the very idea of hopefulness seems the ultimate mockery. And in the works of several of Beckett's contemporaries, whether a writer like Ó Cadhain or a painter like Francis Bacon, the spiritual debacle of the Irish and international twentieth century find unforgettable expression. Irish colonial history had conferred on these and other Irish modernists, whatever their gender, denomination, or politics, a sense of the collapsibility of all social and cultural systems, whether "traditional" or "modern," and from that domestic inheritance, and from the madly careering whirligig of the arts in their own times, they made a strange (sometimes downright eccentric) art, formally inventive, provocatively and perversely erudite, and – for the most part – politically more vexed than anything else. Like other modernisms, Irish modernism has its sinister dimensions, these most obviously manifest in the authoritarian and sometimes fascist leanings of Yeats or in the work of Francis Stuart, who actually collaborated with Nazi Germany. However, to single out Yeats and Stuart for specific condemnation can sometimes lead to a very facile evaluation of the politics of Irish modernism. Given the complex ways in which modernism as a whole is related to the wider history of European colonialism and imperialism (and anti-imperialism), and given too its connections to left- and right-wing authoritarianisms in the period from World War I through the Cold War, not to mention the abiding complexities of its class, sexual, and gender politics, there are good reasons to resist the notion that progressive and reactionary versions of modernism can easily be separated from each other.

But if a colonial history scattered Irish modernists across Britain, Europe, and the United States and charged the work they produced with an acute sense of civilizational distress that could take any number of political directions, it would be wrong to stress only the elements of collapse and disintegration. Nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century colonial history might have made the Irish artists connoisseurs of crisis, but that history had also produced a broad concatenation of elite and popular resistance movements, mostly national in focus but transnational in reach. These included Home Rule parliamentary campaigns conducted in Ireland and England, Fenian insurrectionary organizations with underground networks running from Ireland and England to the United States, syndicalist labour movements stretching across the same spaces, and a militantly international women's movement. Modernism in Europe generally flourished at a time when history seemed radically open-ended because very different social futures were