

Introduction

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On May 25, 2018, 66.4 percent of Irish voters supported a referendum to remove the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution of the Irish Republic, an amendment added in 1983 that equated the right to life of a pregnant woman and her fetus and thus fortified the country's near-total ban on abortion. Across the Atlantic in the United States, I spent the day of the vote attached to my phone, fielding texts from colleagues canvassing to "Repeal the Eighth," and scanning Instagram accounts depicting young Irish voters flocking home from abroad to vote in their local constituencies. I compulsively checked Irish newspapers online for updates on voter turnout in rural areas, tracked the Twitter feeds of activists using the hashtag #RepealThe8th, and listened to reports of the day on my local public radio station in Massachusetts. A few days later, on YouTube, I watched the Teachta Dála (TD) Clare Daly's impassioned speech before the Daíl Éireann, in which she chastised her fellow politicians for failing to lead on the issue and championed those who took the reins, among them activists and university students. The week surrounding the vote accentuated the interplay between the local and the global in the contemporary moment. The referendum was a distinctively national event but one in concert with global conditions including secularization and feminism and shared with the world through the real-time access provided by media and digital technologies.

As such, the Repeal referendum highlighted aspects of twenty-first-century life that feel genuinely new, but this was not merely a timely national political exercise or a global media event. It was about difficult personal experiences situated in real and vulnerable human bodies. My mediated access to the referendum vote was the supplement to previous, more proximate exchanges: the cab shared with a sixty-something stranger who described traveling, as a young woman, from Ireland to London for an abortion; the pain and outrage of a friend forced by Irish law to carry an unviable fetus; the unsettling sound of fluttering Post-it notes at a memorial

for Savita Halappanavar, who in 2012 died from a septic miscarriage in a Galway hospital after being refused an abortion; even the conviviality of the “Repeal” pop-up store in Cork. From these experiences another valuable lesson about the contemporary emerges. As our world becomes increasingly mediated by technology and fractured by uneven privilege, direct human interaction in shared time and space can enrich understanding and foster empathy.

I also remained alert to those who regarded Repeal as a crushing defeat, citizens in Ireland and abroad who stood on the margins of the celebratory energy I witnessed online. Roughly a third of the Irish electorate voted against Repeal; and, until October 2019, Northern Ireland, in the throes of Brexit negotiations and governed by a devolved parliament that has been suspended more often than not, maintained its restrictions on abortion, making it an anomaly not only on the island but also in the United Kingdom. Recent political history also tempered any optimism about a liberalized, feminist Ireland. In 2004, the electorate amended the Irish Constitution to end birthright citizenship, with almost 80 percent of citizens voting to refuse the rights of citizenship previously granted to children born in Ireland; and the Constitution, ratified in 1937, today still insists that “mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home.”¹ So despite the fact that, in September 2018, the Eighth Amendment was signed into law, women’s reproductive rights in Ireland – and indeed across the globe – remain vexed, complicated, and by no means an issue securely resolved to universal satisfaction.

The Repeal referendum, as one instance drawn from recent Irish social and political history, has much to tell us about the altered textures of life in twenty-first-century Ireland – the increased authority of formerly marginalized voices, the profound influence of digital technologies on everyday life, the international interest in Irish national concerns, the rapid progressive turn of the electorate, and the ongoing distinctions between the North and the Republic.² Yet it also has something important to tell us about contemporary Irish writing. What becomes clear in this case, and in others explored in this volume, is the crucial role Irish writers play in helping readers engage with, and perhaps understand better, the mind-bending complexities of contemporary life. During the campaign for Repeal, writers and artists actively participated: the journalist Una Mullally crowd-funded her literary anthology *Repeal the 8th*; the bestselling young adult (YA) writer Louise O’Neill generated support on Twitter; Sally Rooney published her assessment of abortion in the *London Review of Books*.³

Experimental short stories such as “SOMAT” (2015) by June Caldwell or “Mayday” (2016) by Lucy Caldwell considered the procedure, as did Marian Keyes’s popular novel *The Break* (2017) and a casual joke on the television series *Derry Girls* (2018–). The campaign underscored the advocacy currently suffusing Irish writing. As Mullally noted, “All social change is creative. Artists are, and will continue to be, central to revolution, to activism, to protest, and more broadly to telling us stories about ourselves. I’m not sure if artists simplify things, I think they address the complexities. Art lives in the nuance, it is the subtext of our environments.”⁴

Drawing from this example, *The New Irish Studies* begins with the assertion, not to be taken for granted in our historical moment, that contemporary Irish writing matters, in Ireland and internationally. The collection focuses on literature, one object of study in the multidisciplinary field of Irish Studies, to demonstrate how diverse critical approaches enable a deeper and more complex understanding of contemporary representations of the present, past, and future. Contemporary writing helps to shape the contours of present-day Ireland, depicting life with an intimacy born of direct experience. Yet this writing also stands at a distance, artfully skewing the present moment and asking readers and critics to look more closely at the realities they presume to understand merely because of their contemporaneity. Contemporary Irish writing strips us of our knowing authority, unsettling us, even as it reminds us of certain familiar and elemental aspects of life, ones that might be lost in the rush and distraction of the present moment.

Mobility and the Irish Contemporary

The past two decades in Ireland and Northern Ireland have seen an astonishing rate of change, one that reflects the common understanding of the contemporary as a moment of acceleration and flux. Again, the referendum on the Eighth Amendment provides a salient example. There was surprisingly broad support for repeal in 2018, especially given that the Republic’s recent history had been characterized by restrictive laws governing human sexuality and reproduction: it was illegal to purchase condoms without a prescription in many towns until 1992, homosexuality was decriminalized in 1993, and divorce was signed into law only in 1996.⁵ These rapid shifts comprise one characteristic of the past decades, which have witnessed the peace and reconciliation process in Northern Ireland, the rise and fall of the Celtic Tiger economic boom in the Republic and a subsequent (partial) economic recovery, the waning influence of the

Catholic Church in the wake of revelations of widespread institutional and clerical abuses, the increasing racial and ethnic diversity of a once largely homogeneous population, and an altered relationship with Europe that has promised the south greater prosperity and political influence but threatens to undermine the precarious peace in the North.⁶

To reflect this reality, one guiding principle of *The New Irish Studies* is mobility. In the early years of the twenty-first century, national borders became increasingly porous. With the 1998 Good Friday/Belfast Agreement, the hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland was opened; and the eventual ratification of the Nice (2003) and Lisbon Treaties (2009) in the Republic secured the country's place in the expanding European Union (EU) and opened its borders to other member countries. With passport in hand, Irish citizens can live anywhere in the EU and move easily across the globe, though some departures are voluntary and others forced. People from different regions can make their way to the island in search of opportunities; however, once having arrived, their mobility may be limited or even prohibited. Cheaper fares allow those who can afford it to travel the world and leave a carbon footprint; digital technologies such as Twitter and WhatsApp enable regular contact with those outside the country; and multinational corporations have settled on the island to take advantage of generous tax concessions and subsidies, as well as an English-speaking labor force. Mobility also characterizes the lives of the writers and the content of the literary works under consideration in this collection. Writers such as Emma Donoghue, Colum McCann, and Justin Quinn live and write from abroad, and their work might as readily depict life in their adoptive homelands as in Ireland. The playwright and filmmaker Martin McDonagh can set *The Pillowman* (2003) in an anonymous totalitarian state, the film *In Bruges* (2008) in Belgium, and the dark comedy *A Behanding in Spokane* (2010) in Washington – and premiere none of them in Ireland. The terms “Irish writer” or “Irish literature,” once aligned neatly with the author's nationality or the text's setting, are now moving targets that reflect the durability and adaptability of Irish writing in the present moment.

The kinetic nature of contemporary life in Ireland helps define the intellectual logic of this collection. As a new approach to Irish literature, it seeks to unsettle some of the rigid binaries that adhere to representations of Irish culture. Owing in part to its colonial history, Ireland and its people were often characterized by polarities: Irish or English, Catholic or Protestant, Nationalist or Unionist, Irish speaker or English speaker. Accounts of contemporary life in Ireland have suggested, as the sociologist

Carmen Kuhling does, that now the “experience of living in contemporary Ireland is that of living in an in-between world, in between cultures and identities – an experience of liminality.”⁷ Yet, even today, certain binaries remain in play: is Ireland progressive or traditional, European or Irish, cosmopolitan or provincial? Of these, the overwrought division between past and present may be most relevant to this study, which marks the contemporary moment as one initiated alongside the rise of the Celtic Tiger and the 1998 Good Friday/Belfast Agreement and continuing to the present day. The “past/present” divide suggests that the Republic before the Celtic Tiger of the 1990s was insular, homogeneous, and underdeveloped, while today it is global, diverse, and modernized.⁸ Or this divide contends that Northern Ireland before the 1998 Agreement was violent and sectarian and is now peaceful and tolerant.

Such reductive oppositions are manufactured and often inaccurate but that does not mean they are not ideologically effective and imaginatively resilient. In her Booker Prize-winning novel *Milkman* (2018), Anna Burns interrogates this legacy of polarized thinking. Her unnamed protagonist, known as “middle sister,” looks back on her experiences as a teen in Troubles-ridden 1970s Belfast. She recalls,

At this time, in this place, when it came to the political problems, which included bombs and guns and death and maiming, ordinary people said ‘their side did it’ or ‘our side did it’, or ‘their religion did it’ or ‘our religion did it’ or ‘they did it’ or ‘we did it’ [. . .] ‘Us’ and ‘them’ was second nature: convenient, familiar, insider, and these words were off-the-cuff, without the strain of having to remember and grapple with massaged phrases or diplomatically correct niceties.⁹

With the distance of time, the narrator suggests hypotheses for this mindset:

Naïveté? Tradition? Reality? War going on and people in a hurry? Take your pick though the answer mainly is the last one. In those early days, those darker of the dark days [of the Troubles], there wasn’t time for vocabulary watchdogs, for political correctness, for self-conscious notions such as ‘Will I be thought a bad person if’, or ‘Will I be thought bigoted if’, or ‘Am I supporting violence if’ or ‘Will I been seen to be supporting violence if’ and everyone – *everyone* – understood this.¹⁰

Retrospect allows the narrator to read the near-present past of the Troubles through the immediate present’s political correctness.

In this knotty passage, “middle sister” (an “in-between” character in both her family’s birth order and her developmental stage) offers a surprising

explanation for sectarianism, one that extracts it from the jarring political conditions of the Troubles and makes the “us” versus “them” thinking that she describes more transportable. The violence of the Troubles prevented “people in a hurry” from thinking with nuance and compassion but today – her assessment suggests – we remain vulnerable to the same old problem. The “war” may have passed but we continue to be “people in a hurry” due to factors including economic insecurity and digital demands on our attention. Such current-day conditions render us susceptible to the same perils of reductive oppositions and ingrained biases. For Burns, importantly, that type of thinking is intimately linked to “words” and “phrases,” underscoring the power that language holds not only to reflect but also to shape ordinary reality. This all-too-familiar habit of reducing the world to polarities is a legacy of imperialism and not uniquely Irish; it stands in place partially because it offers a palliative in responding to the chaos and intensity of the contemporary. Today, binaries – straight or gay, liberal or conservative, rich or poor, black or white, native or immigrant – offer individuals security and a sense of belonging, as well as sanctioning outmoded and even pernicious ways of thinking. Unsettling these oppositions often provokes anxiety and retrenchment; and so this collection demonstrates the provocative ways that twenty-first-century Irish writers refuse to settle into one camp, showing how they pull their readers, even temporarily, into the valuable, if sometimes anxiety-producing, space in between.

Mobility is in many ways a liberal fantasy: different people, traditions, languages, and goods moving evenly and easily across borders, working in concert for the common good. There is every reason to be skeptical of the concept in a moment when, in the hands of the market and spoken in neoliberal vulgate, a kinetic word like “nimble,” which sounds like an admirable trait, really means “doing four jobs and getting paid for one.” Nonetheless, increased mobility is an ordinary reality in Ireland that has had important implications for contemporary writing. In a recent BBC radio episode commending contemporary Northern Irish writers, including Paul McVeigh and Wendy Erskine, Sinéad Gleeson, editor of *The Glass Shore: Short Stories by Women Writers from the North of Ireland* (2016), singled out authors living near the border, citing the invisible but powerful influence of that unmarked line for those who straddle the time before and after the 1998 Agreement.¹¹ In this same discussion, Lucy Caldwell observed that Northern Irish writing has evolved from a strict focus on the Troubles and trauma to engaging with broader themes and that the opening of borders “allowed multiplicity” for writers, one imperiled now by Brexit and the threatened reinstitution of a hard border.

Mobility also means that these years have seen, for the first time in Ireland, the appearance of a significant minority population. As a result of transnational migration, ethnic and racial minorities today constitute 12 percent of the population in the Republic, roughly double that found only two decades previous.¹² How does art represent the bridging of differences in a more richly diverse populace? An internationally acclaimed film like *Once* (dir. John Carney, 2007) demonstrates the complexities and contradictions inherent in this task. Critically embraced and commercially successful, *Once* engaged with the influx of immigrants into the Republic through its depiction of a Dublin busker who enters into a musical collaboration with a married Polish immigrant. In this engaging film, these two young musicians literally produce beautiful music together, and in fact a song from the soundtrack won an Academy Award. On one level, this film suggests that the increasing ethnic diversity of the “new Ireland” is productive, that these two musicians from different national and cultural backgrounds can, by working in concert, achieve economic and aesthetic success in contemporary Ireland. Yet the film’s end offers a bleaker message. To obtain aesthetic and romantic success, the male lead leaves alone for London to reunite there with his Irish girlfriend and to seek a recording contract with the demo he and the Polish musician have produced together. Even in the twenty-first century, economic and professional success can only be achieved abroad, romantic resolution obtained only between the native Irish. The final shot of the film offers an even more unsettling implication. As the music plays, the camera focuses on the window of the decrepit Georgian tenement where the young woman remains with her child and her husband, the latter newly arrived from Poland. As the camera retreats, it remains locked on the image of the Polish woman playing the piano given to her as a gift by her Irish musical partner before his exodus. The final image of *Once* is that of this young woman contained in the window frame, suggesting that the immigrant, while contributing to the success of the Irish, is best left behind, a pleasingly aestheticized image of traditional domesticity viewed from a distance.

Once invites us to observe the snags in the altered fabric of contemporary Ireland, but ultimately to accept certain compromises and feel reconciled to them. Acquiescence, however, is only one way of reacting to change. Adapting is rarely smooth or easy, or universally welcomed. It can trigger conflict, as evident even in the rarified confines of literary criticism. In 2017, the journal *Poetry Ireland* hosted a focus group to consider the nature of diversity in Irish poetry. Its editor Eavan Boland neatly dismissed the notion that diversity in poetry is “merely about social change,” insisting

instead that “it is about formal and artistic renewal [...] [in which] the margin redefines the centre.”¹³ Building on her experience working in America, and her own struggles as a female poet in Ireland, Boland urged “gate-keepers” and “purists” to welcome new voices from the margins of poetry and to join in a shared future in which “division becomes debate, and living speech – open to change – helps to change poetry.”¹⁴ Here, Boland welcomes the friction that inevitably arises between poetic tradition and identity politics, seeing that contest as messy but productive. This same energy was evident in the controversy surrounding the 2017 publication of *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Poets*, in which only four of thirty essays attended to women poets and four of thirty contributors were women. The gender imbalance of this publication inspired the founding of Fired! Irish Women Poets and the Canon, a movement that recovers and promotes the neglected work of Irish women poets past and present.¹⁵ Such controversies confirm that change is difficult and rarely promises easy consensus, but they also reveal encouragingly that, in Ireland, literature and literary criticism remain something worth fighting about, something that can provoke meaningful public engagement.

A commitment to openness, mobility, and change is exemplified by the design of this collection. Most, though not all, of the chapters place different literary genres into conversation. Not only does this help us to see connections – and disconnections – among them but it also reflects the nature of contemporary writing, in which someone like Colm Tóibín might write journalism, literary criticism, short fiction, novels, and plays. There are other boundary crossings throughout the collection. While acknowledging the real and important differences between the Republic and Northern Ireland, a number of chapters attend to the converse between these countries. Likewise, while exploring the work of younger writers, the collection assesses the later work of established writers, including Seamus Heaney and Frank McGuinness. Rather than provide an isolated chapter on the heightened presence of women writers in the twenty-first century, the chapters deliberately incorporate them into larger narratives about contemporary literature. Sally Rooney appears on international bestseller lists, Anne Enright won the 2007 Booker Prize, and Lisa McNerney reads at festivals with other literary celebrities. These women writers, whose cultural ascendancy is one of the hallmarks of these decades, are no longer relegated to the dimly lit wings of contemporary literature; they stand in the spotlight, defining the future of literature.

Divided into three parts – “Legacies,” “Contemporary Conditions,” and “Forms and Practices” – the chapters in *The New Irish Studies* appear

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to align with particular themes related to history, present-day circumstance, and literature, respectively. Yet, in keeping with the logic of the collection as a whole, each part speaks to all three themes. The writers and works studied in this collection are also deliberately eclectic. Renowned figures such as Claire Kilroy or Brian Friel come under scrutiny but so too do a raft of lesser-known writers, works, and cultural institutions. This is by design. The contemporary is the now, the moment of near memory – the moment when critical assessments are accessed online, in book reviews, rather than in library tomes. This provides a challenge for critics of the contemporary since there is no concretized canon and there are limited critical resources that have fully digested a work's content or context.¹⁶ We are left with a shifting sense of what books matter and anxieties about what work will have traction going forward. The international press regularly trumpets the “boom” in contemporary Irish literature with a review or survey of some new writer or work. This collection aims to synthesize those perspectives and to consider, with rigor and critical distance, what has and continues to unfold now. It provides a valuable tool for scholars and teachers seeking to contextualize and enrich their teaching of contemporary writing, the work their students embrace in pursuit of literature that reflects their experiences in the world they know. Yet it also deliberately unsettles any fixed notions about what constitutes a masterpiece, an Irish classic.

Legacies

Irish literature has long been informed by subjects drawn from political and social realities: the legacies of British imperialism, the authority of the Catholic Church, the trauma of forced emigration, the challenges of rural poverty, the eruptions of political violence, the friction between the Irish and English languages. These time-honored topics continue to appear throughout twenty-first-century Irish culture; they can be found in the big house at the center of Tom Murphy's play *The Last Days of a Reluctant Tyrant* (2009), the sexually abusive priest in Michael Keegan-Dolan's dance *Swan Lake/Loch na hEala* (2018), the fruitful intersection of Irish and English languages in Doireann Ní Ghríofa's poetry collection *Clasp* (2015), the Beckettian dialogue peppering Lenny Abrahamson's film *Adam and Paul* (2004), or the famine representations in Joseph O'Connor's historical novel *Star of the Sea* (2002).

The authority of the past in Irish culture can complicate attempts to identify what makes contemporary literature distinctive. Contemporary

literature has traditionally been defined as creative work written after the Second World War.¹⁷ By this definition, writing produced nearly a century ago counts as contemporary: Ernie O'Malley or Maura Laverty might stand alongside Rob Doyle or Sara Baume as contemporary writers, provocative juxtapositions but ones that cannot accurately capture the “now” in Irish literature. The stature, influence, and marketability of modernists like Yeats, Joyce, and Beckett have also deflected attention from more contemporary writing in Ireland. Even today, in many anthologies of Irish literature, the contemporary is fused with the modern: the plays and criticism collected in John Harrington's *Modern and Contemporary Irish Drama* (2009) span the entire twentieth century, Anne Enright's *The Granta Book of the Irish Short Story* (2010) offers stories by writers born across the twentieth century, and Wes Davis's *An Anthology of Modern Irish Poetry* (2010) moves from Padraic Colum (b. 1881) to Sinéad Morrissey (b. 1972). The contemporary can appear in compilations like these as the diluted corollary of Irish modernism, an afterthought. This approach, while confirming the porous boundaries between tradition and innovation, risks the implication that recent Irish writing represents the culmination of a prior era of national literary exceptionalism rather than the launch of exciting new possibilities.

Each chapter in Part One of the collection, entitled “Legacies,” gestures to a time-honored motif in Irish literature to explore how contemporary authors, works, and institutions reconsider certain themes – people, nation, migration, language, and land – to play in the gray space between past and present, tradition and innovation, conventional and uncommon. Centering on race and class in the nation, Michael Pierson unfurls the complex ways that dramatists represent social and economic conditions in the north and south triggered by rapidly changing demographics. While offering an example of how intersectional readings enrich our understanding of Irish drama, Pierson with justification faults Irish drama for too frequently resolving racial and ethnic conflicts neatly with the romance plot. In her study of post-Troubles fiction and drama, Stefanie Lehner demonstrates how friendship fruitfully recalibrates the “love across the barricades” trope, providing the means to imagine a more inclusive and open politics of reconciliation.

Exploring the textures of an increasingly diverse Ireland, Charlotte McIvor revises the familiar concept of “emigration” – the forced displacement of Irish peoples across the globe due to political and economic circumstances – with her attentive reading of how the influx of migrants to Ireland during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has prompted rich collaborative and