

*Introduction I*  
*Why Foremothers?*

*Ailbhe Darcy and David Wheatley*

I

We can look at the poet or their poem as an influence, or we can understand that their work creates an almost collaborative effect on our current practice.

(Christine Murray)<sup>1</sup>

... acts of poetic conjuration are in false faith if they assume the power to appropriate meaning or to restore a sense of completion to a history which is defined by loss and fracture. The reconstruction of a continuous and unbroken Irish female literary tradition would be another such attempt to consolidate and falsify the past.

(Anne Fogarty)<sup>2</sup>

In the millennial year 2000, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin published an essay on the nineteenth-century poet Speranza, claiming her as a foremother. Ní Chuilleanáin asks: 'what use our female predecessors are to us as writers, what is the function of model, teacher, exemplar?'<sup>3</sup> What Irish women poets seek when they conjure foremothers is continuity: a 'women's tradition' that legitimises the writing of their own poetry; influence aside, a sense of 'the woman writer as embodied, creative agent in the process of textual production', to use Jennie Batchelor's phrase.<sup>4</sup> When Ní Chuilleanáin considers Speranza as a foremother, she remarks that Speranza's life has mattered to her as much as her work, and

if we are to consider the importance of her example for women writers of a later generation, it's partly in that lesson, that it is possible to have a warm and generous character and to look after and remain close to one's children while holding on to the egotism that makes one a writer. It's both as a person and as the kind of writer she is that she functions as exemplar and ancestor.<sup>5</sup>

Women writers of the past are useful to women writers of the present in part because they legitimise the business of writing; we can look to the

busy women poets of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and imagine a life and maybe even a livelihood that comprehends the art. It might be less clear why a modern woman writer would need to see Speranza's *work* as exemplary. As Heather Ingman and Clíona Ó Gallchoir note, the 'imperative of national self-determination that dominated Irish political and intellectual life' from the nineteenth century resulted in 'the construction of a "literary tradition" that could not encompass voices that either challenged the national narrative, or whose primary focus simply lay elsewhere'.<sup>6</sup> Women poets, among them Speranza, played a central role in constructing this national literary tradition.<sup>7</sup> Exploiting Young Ireland's gendered imagery of tears and blood,<sup>8</sup> Speranza used her poetry to straddle worlds, 'mediat[ing] a bourgeois nationalism's necessary but problematic separation from the people'<sup>9</sup> and bridging the divide between the 'two Irelands' during the late 1840s. Her famine poems astutely portray the catastrophe as part of a history of British oppression and as potentially capable of inspiring the Irish to rebellion. For Ní Chuilleanáin, Speranza's importance is in the way she manages to negotiate the expectations and limitations placed upon the feminine voice and still write poems that presume to speak important truths about their political and social context. It is in this negotiation that Speranza can be seen as a precursor for the work of twentieth and twenty-first century Irish women poets, including Ní Chuilleanáin, who have taken it as their role to interrogate the conventional narratives of the nation, and who have experimented with the lyric form, adapting and expanding the lyric in order to do so.

In the 1970s, feminist scholars such as Elaine Showalter, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar argued against the relevance of the agonistic Bloomian account of influence to women, asserting that women writers have been much more likely to view their foremothers as a valuable inheritance than as a burden to be thrown off. Gilbert and Gubar write that

the 'anxiety of influence' that a male poet experiences is felt by the female poet as an even more primary 'anxiety of authorship' – a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a 'precursor', the act of writing will isolate or destroy her.<sup>10</sup>

Gilbert and Gubar see the woman writer as needing to conjure a 'matrilineal' or sisterly heritage as a means of projecting a vision of a literary future that will allow her to write into that future. Given the degree to which women's writing is sidelined in the Irish national canon, Irish

*Introduction I: Why Foremothers?*

3

women writers may need to engage in ‘acts of poetic conjuration’, to recall our epigraph from Anne Fogarty; may need to dream up a continuous women’s tradition if they are to imagine a future for their writing at all. For modern Irish women, treated as second-class citizens in the Constitution of the new Irish state, the problem has been political as much as literary. ‘When Yeats writes “to Ireland in the coming times”, remarks Ní Chuilleanáin in her essay on Speranza, he is addressing, rather than a literary posterity, a political unit that does not yet exist but which will have its own canon in which he aligns himself with the poets of the *Nation*. Is it plausible for a woman poet at the turn of the twenty-first century to look back and claim a similar succession?’<sup>11</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin’s odd formulation – in which Yeats can look forward to a nation in which his poetry will take up its rightful place, but the woman poet must look back from some later time in search of an analogous inheritance – maps Gilbert and Gubar’s ‘anxiety of authorship’ onto the Irish context. If Speranza’s prophetic voice proves impossible for women writers coming after – Ní Chuilleanáin perceives a brief stutter of it in Eva Gore-Booth’s 1906 collection *The Egyptian Pillar*, then ‘silence’<sup>12</sup> – her engagement with contemporary issues as a public intellectual is a distinctive quality of poets across the centuries in this volume. In Ní Chuilleanáin’s admiration of Speranza’s prophetic voice, and her search for it in the poets that followed Speranza, we can see Ní Chuilleanáin’s own negotiation of a public role – an adamant taking-on of the mantle of public intellectual, but also a taking-on of the history of the woman’s poetic voice in Ireland, with all the limitations and difficulties that entails.

The feminist project of constructing a women’s literary history set in motion by Showalter, Gilbert, Gubar and their contemporaries was, as Angela Leighton writes, ‘of its time – as all histories are’.<sup>13</sup> For all that it has ‘radically shifted the contours of literary studies as a whole’, the project has also been roundly critiqued.<sup>14</sup> Margaret Ezell’s groundbreaking *Writing Women’s Literary History* (1993) perceives the problematic narrative of evolution or progress underlying the feminist project and warns against pressing the past into service to legitimise the present. Rita Felski goes on to note that feminist critics run the risk of reinforcing gender stereotypes if their purpose in reading is to uncover a distinctive ‘women’s culture’.<sup>15</sup> The ground for reading women’s writing of the past, she argues, has to be ‘a political commitment to recover the lost voices of women’ rather than any epistemological or essentialist claim ‘for the necessary truth that is spoken by such voices’.<sup>16</sup> Linda Hutcheon perceives the embrace of literary history by marginalised groups as ‘canny political pragmatism’

which does not, however, erase the contradictions in a criticism that attempts to square ‘challenges to the coherent subject’ with a political agenda.<sup>17</sup> Whereas Laura Knoppers, in her introduction to the *Cambridge Companion to Early Modern Women's Writing* (2009), separates out studies of women's writing into three consecutive waves, with the first, recovery, replaced by a theorisation of the plurality and instability of the category of ‘woman’, and this second wave in turn replaced by a grounding of the work in ‘historical particulars’,<sup>18</sup> the truth is that, contradictions notwithstanding, all three of these activities continue concurrently. In the Irish context, given that the value and importance of Irish women's writing has only been slowly acknowledged in comparison with the revaluing of British and American women's writing, the continuance of all three activities remains essential.

If it has meanwhile seemed evident that a women's literary history ‘predicated upon celebratory identification’ of women writers of the past is ‘simply impossible’ in the Irish context,<sup>19</sup> that ‘celebratory identification’ has nonetheless been repeatedly asserted – by turns quizzically, fiercely, wistfully, and joyfully – by the women writers of the present, in counterpoint to and complementing the prodigious recovery work of feminist scholars over the last several decades. Almost two decades after Ní Chuilleanáin's claiming of Speranza as a meaningful precursor, the chapbook *We Claim* (2017), a collaboration between the Dublin Young Migrant Women's Group and the artist Kathryn Maguire, insists on continuity and positions the women's tradition as pliable, available for re-imagining and enabling for emerging women writers. Taking inspiration from the women's presses of the Revival era, the chapbook collects poems alongside etchings, recipes and miscellaneous writings, the mixing of literary and domestic genres drawing attention to the project's significance as not only a physical text but also a series of gatherings, building networks that will enable further creativity. In the foreword, editor, poet and activist Grace Wilentz declares:

*We Claim* is a handbook for the modern revolutionary young migrant woman. As a group of young migrant women, we developed the text herein through a series of meetings and collaborations over the course of 2016. In these pages, we reflect on Ireland's present and re-imagine its future. It is also our way of reclaiming our part in the making of modern Ireland, calling attention to the role migrant women have always played in shaping the State.<sup>20</sup>

*We Claim* is a small-press ephemeral publication, but the modesty of its enterprise is paired with the ambition of its claim. Answering ‘the impossible constraints imposed on the migrant woman writer by totalizing

*Introduction I: Why Foremothers?*

5

constructions of an Irish “national culture” or “shared common culture” in academic and, sometimes, literary proscriptions of the space of Irish writing,<sup>21</sup> the poetry in *We Claim* boldly and even joyfully asserts ownership over a tradition, declaring, in the original typeface of the Cuala Press: ‘I am your daughter Mother Ireland / Dear future Ireland I believe in you.’<sup>22</sup>

It is the desire for continuity and likeness inherent in the search for precursors that leads Ezell to warn that the very notion of ‘foremothers’ implies a linear model which is anachronistic and which tends to produce further anachronism, answering the desires of modern feminists more than increasing our understanding of the past. We might see the manifestation of these desires, for instance, in the tenderness with which contemporary Irish poets have rendered the eighteenth-century poet Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill in their own likeness. Ní Chonaill’s *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire*, translated as *The Lament for Art O’Leary*, famously describes her husband’s horse arriving home without her husband, her leap onto the horse’s back, and her gallop to his side. ‘Everyone knows what happened then’, says a fictional Ní Chonaill in a recent poem by Doireann Ní Ghríofa: ‘I versed it strong / and spoke it often.’<sup>23</sup> What happens then, according to one version of the *Caoineadh*, is that Ní Chonaill drinks her dead husband’s blood with both hands:

Love, your blood was spilling in cascades, and I  
 couldn’t wipe it away, couldn’t clean it up, no, no, my  
 palms turned cups and oh, I gulped.

(trans. Doireann Ní Ghríofa, 2020)

I plunged my two fists  
 in your spilled blood  
 and sucked from my useless fingers.

(trans. Vona Groarke, 2008)

Your heart’s blood was still flowing;  
 I did not stay to wipe it  
 But filled my hands and drank it.

(trans. Eilís Dillon, 1971)<sup>24</sup>

As Angela Bourke points out, the most iconic aspects of Ní Chonaill’s poem are also the most conventional aspects of it. The stark and shocking contrast between an abundant life and a dead body, the dialogue between two women striving to outdo each other ‘and insult each other memorably’, and this powerful scene in which the keening wife guzzles the blood of the dead man – these are all conventions of the lament form, which Ní Chonaill inherited from a vast tradition of lamenters.<sup>25</sup> Despite its canonicity, *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire* exists outside the mainstream of Irish

literature, not only because it is by a woman but because its oral composition and strict adherence to convention are alien to the literary practices of our era, as awesomely evoked by Triona Ní Shíocháin in her Chapter 3 for this volume.

Yet, if recent poets have risked anachronism in their conjuring of Ní Chonaill and her poetic tradition, it might be said that they have done so fruitfully. Despite the increased interest in scholarly circles in the way in which *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire* represents, above all, the culmination of a collaborative, communal, multi-vocal tradition, Vona Groarke, in the introduction to her 2008 translation, insists on the individual voice of ‘an identified author’ who, she argues, takes ‘the tradition of the keen onto a whole new level of personal articulation, moving it much closer to our idea of a one-off, authored poem’.<sup>26</sup> Groarke’s version of the *Lament* brings out its passionate evocation of married love, in a poem which has sometimes been more valued in the twentieth century for its association with political oppression. Doireann Ní Ghríofa’s work of autofiction, *A Ghost in the Throat* (2020), uses Ní Chonaill to exert a substantial claim for women’s poetic lineage and is preoccupied with the female body of the poet as the location of imaginative continuity. Ní Ghríofa’s protagonist embarks on a detective hunt for information about the life of Ní Chonaill, a quest which – in Ní Ghríofa’s telling – justifies space and time away from the feminine activities of child-bearing, breast-pumping and home-making, but also imagines these as activities that Ní Ghríofa shares with Ní Chonaill. Like a poem, Ní Ghríofa’s book has a refrain: ‘*This is a female text.*’ In the final pages of its account of years spent chasing Ní Chonaill’s ghost, *A Ghost in the Throat* offers itself to others who may need it:

These years have shown me an oblique kind of holding – I have held her and held her, only to find that she holds me too, close as ink on paper and steady as a pulse. Only now do I see that I can’t continue to grip her like this, in quiet selfishness. If I could find a way to communicate all I have learned of her days, maybe others would discover the clues that eluded me, and I might learn more of her from them.<sup>27</sup>

Ní Ghríofa’s is a call, not only for collaborative archival scholarship, but also for a collaborative summoning of the precursor-poet, imagining her, through our own bodies, as an ‘embodied, creative agent in the process of textual production’;<sup>28</sup> somehow meaningfully continuous with today’s writing woman.

For Jennie Batchelor, the ‘most compelling (if sometimes bewilderingly capacious)’ alternative to the idea of a women’s tradition based in ideas of influence and inheritance is the notion of intertextuality, a term coined by

*Introduction I: Why Foremothers?*

7

Julia Kristeva.<sup>29</sup> Kristeva's approach 'removes the author as a site of origin', arguing that since 'any text is the transformation of another', literary criticism should 'focus on the already existing texts and often anonymous or everyday discourses . . . from which literary works are reconstituted'.<sup>30</sup> The idea has clear appeal for feminist scholars wishing to do away with the tyranny of the canon; the problem with theories of intertextuality is that, when they do away with the author, they do away with the woman. As Nancy K. Miller puts it, the embodied subject is 'erased by a model of text production which acts to foreclose the question of agency itself'.<sup>31</sup>

The poetry of Medbh McGuckian is perhaps the body of work in Irish literature which foregrounds these tangled questions most insistently. McGuckian's collection *Marconi's Cottage* (1991) stages an intertextual engagement with the scholarly conversation around matrilineage. Many of the poems in the collection are dedicated to women, often contemporary Irish women writers, and the entire book is dedicated to Anne Ulry Colman, the editor of *A Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Irish Women Poets* (1996), a watershed publication for the feminist recovery project. One poem in McGuckian's collection, 'Journal Intime', collages quotations from Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979), while also evoking Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' (1892), a story concerned with the drastic effects of stifling women's creativity.<sup>32</sup> This, then, is a book explicitly concerned with a 'female tradition'.<sup>33</sup> The book's other dedicatee, Barbara Jahrling, was a graduate student of literature whose work located McGuckian's poetry in an Ulster tradition; as Michaela Schrage-Früh has shown, *Marconi's Cottage* seems intent on exploring not only the question of literary foremothers, but also the creation and nurturing of a women's writing community in McGuckian's immediate locality, one in which female authors would 'inspire and fertilise each other', creating the possibility of 'a steadily growing younger generation of Northern Irish women poets'.<sup>34</sup> For Leontia Flynn, herself a poet of that younger generation, McGuckian's work bears out Gilbert and Gubar's theory of authorial anxiety, suggesting the woman poet's need to seek out a long and healthy chain of foremothers – with whom one might feel an identification that goes beyond familial or romantic love ('more than sister, more than wife', in the words of 'Journal Intime'<sup>35</sup>) – and going well beyond the Irish context to achieve it; but McGuckian's writing practice, a surreptitious collaging of texts by other authors, also suggests to Flynn 'the rejection of a representative "speaking for" others'.<sup>36</sup> McGuckian's text persistently underlines the

incompleteness of its own narrative, to borrow a phrase which Flynn borrows from Diane Elam.<sup>37</sup>

'Journal Intime', like so many of McGuckian's poems, is self-reflexive to a labyrinthine degree; referring repeatedly to 'mirrors' and 'echoes'; repeating the words of other authors, it also mirrors itself, doubling back formally. In its interest in repetition, it draws attention not only to the history of women's poetry as one in which poets constantly double back, looking for their mirror-images in the women poets of the past, but also to the nature of the lyric poem itself, which frequently uses forms of repetition – from rhyme, refrain, and metre to pastiche and intertextuality – to mark out its own time, a time both in and out of history. The poem takes a set of phrases from a book published at a specific point in time – 1979 – and alters them so that they speak from no fixed time, unless perhaps an unending, idealised literary nineteenth century into which McGuckian's persona can step: 'I am a Platonic admirer of her / Flowing, Watteau gowns, the volume / of Petrarch in her lap.'<sup>38</sup> Angela Leighton observes that poetry, particularly lyric poetry, is the 'genre that has been least amenable to history's "straight" time' and that 'has not readily fitted any evolutionary narrative of political feminism'.<sup>39</sup> The lyric poem, she writes, brings together various kinds of time – social and private, but also historical, narrative, metrical, and rhythmical – 'in a force field more tense and complex than that of any other genre', existing at 'the stress point of their meeting'.<sup>40</sup> It is perhaps no surprise, then, that the history of Irish women's poetry turns out to be, among other things, a history of complex engagements with, and challenges to, history itself, intent on showing 'that the quality of the historian's witness depends on him or her seeing the intervening glass, as much as seeing the light that comes through it'.<sup>41</sup> If what Irish women poets seek, when they conjure foremothers, is continuity, they also seek difference: some evidence that the received poetics of the nation is not the inevitable, the necessary, or the only possible poetics.

## 2

To 'introduce' means to lead or pull; an introduction should take a reader courteously by the arm and guide them into the book that follows. Our task here is to bring you to a clear and comfortable vantage point from which you can see how the history of Irish women's poetry coheres. And yet we have felt a contradictory impulse, too, to underline the incompleteness of our own narrative: to point up fragmentation, obscurity, and neglect; to undo the impression of a linear history and show you instead



*Introduction I: Why Foremothers?*

9

‘a history which is defined by loss and fracture’. The present volume enters a field that is intensely concerned with debates around canonicity, animated, first, by the extra-poetic interventions of women poets themselves – most famously Eavan Boland’s critique of the stifling iconography of Mother Ireland – and then by the landmark publication of the three-volume gender-imbalanced *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (1991), followed by its two-volume supplement, *Vols IV & V* (2002). The latter, which undertook exemplary recovery work, has proved decisive in opening up the field of Irish women’s poetry for study. The problem is that writing the history of Irish women’s poetry inevitably courts the risk of ‘consolidating simply an alternative singular history of Irish literature and poetry to the male-dominated history it challenges, albeit now one including women writers’; that a volume like the present one might win ‘a certain group of poets a seat at the table of Irish poetry’ when it should be ‘seeking the destruction of this inherently limiting table’.<sup>42</sup>

The *Field Day Anthology* was, from the outset, conceived as an act of what Linda Hutcheon has termed ‘interventionist literary history’.<sup>43</sup> By presenting Irish writing as a coherent body of work developing across time, it sought to mark the moment at which Irish literature took control of its own canonicity. The construction of an Irish literary history would give legitimacy and authority to Irishness itself, the strategic power of the teleological narrative outweighing ‘the danger of co-optation’<sup>44</sup> inherent in making use of the very narrative model that had devalued and excluded Irish writing in the first place. If feminist criticism has taught us that the concept of canonicity itself provides the framework for the erasure of women’s writing – that to conceive of a literary tradition is ‘almost inevitably to marginalise and exclude’ – then in Ireland ‘the desire to align literary expression with the imagined nation has been a further, persistent obstacle to the recognition of women’s literary and cultural production’.<sup>45</sup> The first three *Field Day* volumes were published at a moment when the feminist recovery project was already in full swing; when they drew considerable criticism for ‘the absence of women from [the] editorial board, the sparse number of women writers included, and the lack of attention paid to significant events in Irish history which had particular impact on Irish women’,<sup>46</sup> the controversy galvanised the production of feminist criticism and literature further. In the two decades since, it has sometimes seemed that the only effective response to an Irish literary history that excludes women’s writing, given the power of the teleological narrative, has been to insist on the centrality of women to the canon, by recovering voices and making arguments for their importance that centre

on traditional notions of literary value and on the filling in of 'gaps' in the story. If that has been the pragmatic approach for writers, publishers, and scholars concerned with the 'mundane' but 'important' issues of 'how to get into print, stay in print, get reviewed, be taken seriously',<sup>47</sup> it has co-existed with a persistent acknowledgement of the costs of complicity in the evolutionary narrative. The editors of *Field Day IV & V* sought to undo the canon of Irish women's writing by underlining its provisionality even as they wrote it.<sup>48</sup> Still, establishing the significance and quality of Irish women's poetry in the context of a literary culture deeply wedded to the idea of a national canon has made it difficult to take the poetry of the past on its own terms, and it has certainly militated against making space in the history of women's poetry for those writers who do not fit the narratives under construction. More work is needed to achieve both of these tasks, even as the dedication with which feminist criticism has complicated and expanded our understanding of Irish poetry deserves celebration in the present volume.

If our decision to undertake this history has been a pragmatic one – a conscious taking-on of a form with the power to contest the mainstream narrative – we have also sought, in putting together this volume, to reflect the anti-canonising activities that have determinedly textured feminist criticism in Irish poetry, as scholars have painstakingly built, not a roll-call of major figures, but a picture of multiplicity and complexity. Following their example, some individual poets whose position would be guaranteed in a history of Irish women *poets*, were such a history to be written – and, arguably, whose position in *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Poets* (2017) *should* have been guaranteed – have not received individual chapters here, in order to broaden our focus. Meanwhile, we follow *Field Day IV & V* by beginning the history of Irish women's poetry in the medieval period to highlight the fact that women's involvement in song-making and poem-making far predates the emergence of the idea of the nation state and 'precludes the reliance on "the nation" as a central structural or conceptual framework'.<sup>49</sup> As John Goodby has written, the very existence of Irish women poets 'challenges perhaps *the* major basis on which much Irish poetry is founded'.<sup>50</sup> He quotes Clair Willis:

[T]he representation of the Irish land as a woman stolen, raped, possessed by the alien invader is not merely one mythic narrative among many, but, in a literary context, it is *the* myth, its permutations so various and ubiquitous it can be hard to recognise them for what they are.<sup>51</sup>

While here we introduce our volume with a focus on the processes of recovery and reclamation, the chapter by Anne Fogarty acts as a