Introduction

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In the 'Prelude' to his play *The Mundy Scheme* (1969), Brian Friel speculates on the condition of an emerging country after it has moved onwards from major political upheaval. 'Does that transition from dependence to independence', he asks, 'induce a fatigue, a mediocrity, an ennui?'[1] The question might serve as a useful epigraph to this volume of essays on the decades that followed 1940 in Ireland, a time conventionally framed in terms of literary underperformance and political exhaustion. Set against the backdrop of a world galvanised by the outbreak of war, the country appears, in familiar and recurrent shapes, as a peripheral island sequestered in lonely wartime neutrality and abandoned to cultural stagnation. In 1941 Seán O' Faoláin wrote of an Irish life 'so isolated now that it is no longer being pollinated by germinating ideas windborne from anywhere'.[2] Bypassed by international events and the devastation of the rest of Europe, this Ireland supposedly turned in on itself, wrestling throughout the middle years of the twentieth century with a deforming provincialism, the deep-seamed fractures of partition and a prevailing sense of its own political belatedness. Compared to the pyrotechnics of the Easter Rising or to the painful heroics of the Civil War, the cementing of Irish liberty in the official declaration of the Republic, on Easter Monday 1949, was a mundane affair.[3]

Within the pressurised context of legacy and aftermath, then, the post-war years have been set firmly into a persuasive and self-fulfilling narrative of a disenchanted island. The generation that inherited the promises of Irish independence is described – and indeed, frequently described itself – in the language of disappointment, even banality. Hindsight, meanwhile, has further condemned the post-war epoch in Ireland to the flimsy designation of the 'intermediate' period; a dull, flat interlude strung out between two episodes of violent, passionate rupture, with the nationalist revolution beforehand and the resurgence of conflict in Northern Ireland in 1969 following after. In this regard even the concept of 'transition' itself risks defining the 1940–1980 decades as merely the tense pedestrian route

back to Irish history 'proper', for those determined on completing what they perceived to be the unfinished business of independence.[4] The teleological pull of this particular 'transitional' perspective blurs the visibility of Ireland's quotidian diplomatic, intellectual and cultural engagements, while sharpening focus on the fraught politics of a constitutional waiting game.

If this era is regarded as politically deflated, its literary output is often seen to follow suit. 'With Yeats's death the Ireland whose development had been accompanied by his plays and poems came to an end', recalled Mary Colum; 'another Ireland had taken its place'.[5] Her remark observes the convenient dovetailing of Yeats's demise in 1939, followed two years later by Joyce's death, in 1941, with a post-war epoch of creative orphanage, the country's writers seemingly abandoned to a drab counter-revivalism on one hand and cut off from the invigorating inheritances of European experimentalism on the other. When emigration in the 1950s and 1960s reached levels not seen since the Famine in the mid-nineteenth century, Irish literary culture became associated with the plight of a remaindered society floundering in the slipstream of Continental modernity. South of the border, the language of the new state's emergence in terms of the 'fledgling' nation or the 'young' Republic frequently carried over, negatively, to a literature perceived in parallel as somehow infantile; as immature or 'rough', defaulting to the simplistic genres of a plodding naturalism, its early promise thwarted by the continuing stranglehold of the 1929 Censorship of Publications Act and the indifference of an unsophisticated reading public.

Variations on this theme have long shaped the model of Ireland's literary culture during the middle passage of the twentieth century. It has only been through decisive critical transitions that Irish literary studies has now begun to engage fully with the temporal corridor between the Second World War and the acceleration of the Troubles in the late 1970s. Significant initiatives in this regard range, for example, from a revisionary approach to the effects of the Irish Free State's wartime neutrality – one that challenges the equation of that term with Irish cultural isolation – to the recuperation of mid-century Irish women writers previously overlooked or critically misconceived. Developments in Irish cultural history have reaped the benefits of digitisation, meanwhile, to mobilise a new literary sociology, informed by the politics of reception and attentive to the vibrant categories of popular and commercial writing in the literary output of this era. In tandem, this quantitative turn has thrown into relief the publication contexts and economic

drivers that extended the parameters of mid-twentieth-century Irish writing far beyond the geographical limits of the island itself and into the smithies of London, Paris, Toronto or New York, in a dramatic spatial and diasporic redefinition of a 'national' literature. And finally, it might also be suggested that in the long wake of the Provisional IRA ceasefires of the mid-1990s, the urgent and predominantly postcolonial imperatives of a highly politicised Irish literary criticism have slowly been relaxed, allowing for the purposeful revisiting of cultural forces and themes predating the outbreak of the Troubles in 1969.

In this volume of essays, such initiatives are brought to bear further on the transitions in Irish literature between 1940 and 1980. The essayists vary in approach, some focusing on individual authors or texts in which forms of development can be traced, others interrogating the critical and academic frameworks that have structured our understanding of Irish writing in this period. As a whole the volume asks a number of defining questions. How was the evolution of the Irish Republic from the 1940s onwards both monitored and subverted by a post-war generation of writers, and what parallel initiatives defined the cultural life of Northern Ireland at this time? With the advantage of critical hindsight, which literary hierarchies and genre categories from this period need to be recontextualised or revised? The essayists here are particularly alert to the geographies of Irish cultural production: in this regard, where has the persuasive 'national' label on Ireland's literary output obscured the impact of alternative spatial and political formations – trans-local and transatlantic, cross-continental and cross-border – in the shaping of Irish literary tradition? And perhaps most pertinently in this context are questions of circulation and reception: to what extent, therefore, have publishers, readers, critics and teachers determined the constituency of the post-war Irish literary canon?

An emphasis on transition does not override evidence of a cultural deceleration in this era. Even a dedicated revisionary criticism must admit that while Irish life changed or developed, many Irish writers remained shackled by provincialism or compromised by the punitive codes of literary censorship. The guiding impetus of these essays, however, is to trace the patterns of creative innovation, imaginative refurbishment and critical revalorisation that allow for movement and connection – in place of stagnation and withdrawal – across the misconstrued middle decades of twentieth-century Ireland.

Chronological Contexts

In his survey of Irish literature published in 1967 as *The Backward Look*, Frank O'Connor marked the year 1940 as a crucial date for the study of modern Irish literature. 'By that time Mr De Valera's government had complete control inside the country and nothing whatever to fear from liberal opinion abroad', he wrote. The Irish Parliament and Senate devoted much of this term of office to discussions of the country's obscenity regulations and the prohibition, in particular, of Eric Cross's *The Tailor and Ansty* (1942), a collection of tales from a West Cork peasant *seanchaí* or storyteller. Obsessed with chasing down such works of supposed indecency, the state leadership plunged Irish intellectual life into what O'Connor describes as 'a long slow swim through a sewage bed', turning its back at the same time on an outside world 'in which Jews were massacred by the millions in concentration camps and London, Coventry and Plymouth were in ruins'.[6]

O'Connor's summary points up an ingrained theme in twentieth-century critical perspectives: that of the grievous distance between Irish culture and the major international and political events of the wartime period. Bypassed by the rise of fascism, the spread of communism and the sinister reach of totalitarianism across Europe, Irish society concerned itself in this era, as Terence Brown has reflected (in a particularly damning phrase) 'with provincial issues of personal morality and national identity'.[7] In the long wake of its own civil conflict, the Free State had neither resources nor appetite to go to war. After the declaration of neutrality by Taoiseach Éamon de Valera in 1939, the Irish population south of the border became subject to the various restrictions and conditions of 'the Emergency' but was exempted from the mass mobilisation that would dramatically alter the social and cultural landscape of its European neighbours. For many, the country was thus condemned to being frozen in a pre-war pastoral, permanently fossilised as 'the lovely island of 1938', in Cyril Connolly's rueful but evocative description; 'with its huge trees and cloudscapes, its shops full of food and newspapers full of nothing'.[8]

The reality was more complicated. For a start, one part of the 'lovely island', Northern Ireland, remained within the United Kingdom and was closely involved therefore with the war effort, its six counties home to stationed troops, munitions factories, air force and naval bases. And while industrial Belfast was a primary strategic target for German air raids (such as the devastating bombardments of 1941, described in visceral detail in Brian Moore's 1965 novel *The Emperor of Ice Cream*), the Luftwaffe

bombed Dublin too, in the same year. Recruitment across the entire island saw Irish men and women leave in their thousands to serve in the military overseas; and both north and south welcomed numerous refugees – including many artists, authors and intellectuals – displaced from occupied Europe. For those writers who stayed in Ireland, the impact of the conflict was experienced in everything from the chilling nightly bulletins on the BBC Home Service to the inconveniences of paper shortages due to wartime rationing. For those abroad, it inspired a body of Irish war literature extending from novelist Elizabeth Bowen's stories of a London rendered uncanny by the Blitz to the war correspondent Denis Johnston's reports from the North African desert campaign. Internationally, Irish writers took on many diverse roles in the conflict: Samuel Beckett served with the French Resistance; Dorothy Macardle championed the cause of Europe's child refugees; Francis Stuart – less palatably – voiced pro-Nazi wireless propaganda broadcasts in Berlin.

The Irish cultural landscape of the years between 1939 and 1945 was therefore fully exercised by the war and its devastating implications. Political neutrality, in the Irish Free State as in other neutral countries such as Sweden and Switzerland, did not simply align with creative and intellectual passivity. Irish visual art in particular was galvanised during this period, with the modernist 'White Stag' movement, as it became known, surviving and expanding in Dublin during the Emergency largely because the closing down of movement across Europe stranded several key figures in the Irish capital, where they collaborated in exhibitions with leading Irish painters.[9] In parallel, Irish literature kept its pathways open to the international horizon in 1939. Regardless of the terms of political neutrality and afterwards, of economic self-sufficiency, Ireland was part of a European and international community compelled to address not only the physical damage of the conflict but also, in its aftermath, the moral and philosophical questions forced by the United States's use of the atomic bomb and Nazi Germany's mass extermination camps. The residue of the war pervades the writing of this era in Ireland. In the opening essay of this volume, Guy Woodward illustrates its textual presence, both in distinct allusions and in the many subliminal echoes that sent disturbances from the margins, like the voice of the downed French fighter pilot among the chorus of graveyard characters in Máirtín Ó Cadhain's *Cré na Cille* (1949).

From a literary perspective, mid-century Ireland often confounds the rhetoric of isolation and registers instead the impact of proximity and connection, a theme extending into the post-war decades and across diverse cultural communities. Despite the continuing grip of official

censorship, external reading material was accessible even outside the capital, with British newspapers and journals ranging from the *Picture Post* to *Horizon* widely available in the 1940s, joined in the 1950s by the *New Statesman*, the *Listener*, the *Spectator* and the American magazine the *New Yorker*. Meanwhile, other forms of media grew exponentially in importance during this period. Radio broadcasters (including the BBC) streamed international news and current affairs directly into Irish homes. By 1948 there were over 320 cinemas in Ireland with many towns having more than one venue for film or newsreel screenings. And by the 1960s, inevitably, there was television. On New Year's Eve, 1961, Teilifís Éireann made its first broadcast, the then Taoiseach Seán Lemass addressing viewers with a firm statement of inclusivity and universality: 'The Irish people are citizens of the world as well as of Ireland'.[10]

Revised portraits of a mid-century Ireland open to international cultural connections are reinforced meanwhile by the escalation of economic and political collaboration with the wider world in this period. By the 1950s, economic expansion was secured in the succession from the premiership of de Valera, identified (and increasingly, caricatured) in terms of a moribund, introverted clerical nationalism, to that of Lemass, generally regarded in comparative sequence as a progressive integrationist. The monetary architecture provided by the 1958 Whitaker Report, authored by the economist and visionary moderniser T. K. Whitaker, relied heavily on increased trade and economic co-operation with neighbouring Europe. Ireland became a member of the United Nations in 1955, with membership of the international diplomacy circuit signalling, as it would in Ireland's accession to the European Community in 1973, the new Republic 'coming of age'. The opening of Shannon Airport – an event shown in Elizabeth Bowen's 1955 novel *A World of Love* as jolting the west of Ireland into modernity – expanded the country's capacity for air travel and in 1958, the Irish aviation company Aer Lingus launched its first scheduled flights across the Atlantic. The historic relationship between Ireland and North America was celebrated and brought into the modern era, symbolically at least, in the state visit to Ireland of President John F. Kennedy as part of his European tour in June 1963.

A potted account such as this does not, of course, track the everyday frustrations and compromises of those still carrying Free State legacies of economic self-sufficiency and cultural purity even into the early 1960s. But it does remind us to be alert to the significant discrepancy in this period between the public sentiments of a government administration and the *de facto* activities of both political and popular culture, a fracture in line with

what Nicholas Allen describes, in his essay here on the literature of the newly designated Republic, as a condition of 'schizoid modernity'. In the writing of this period, the discrepancy is registered by the strategic, caustic and ironic voices of mid-century writers positioned at a sharp tangent to the official narratives of the state. Irish writers no longer 'represented' an Irish nation (if indeed they ever had) but wrote in a sceptical adjacency to its ruling hierarchies; alienated perhaps, but also sparked and animated by its imposed constraints.

Nowhere is this duality more evident than in the literary response to the policies and practices of the Irish censorship board. The prohibition of what seemed to be the majority of Irish writers (and indeed of a wide variety of non-Irish authors), usually on the grounds of indecency, was rightly a source of deep aggravation to the literati of the period. For many writers it confirmed the tenacious hold of the Catholic Church over private citizens (regardless of the fact that nominations for supposedly offensive material came mostly from those *same* private citizens) and signified the intrusive tendencies of the new state's authority. Viewed in terms of transition rather than stagnation, however, censorship can also be seen, paradoxically, as a motivational force during the post-war decades. In his account here of the continuing pressures of literary censorship in this period, evidenced in the notable prohibition of Kate O'Brien's 1941 novel *The Land of Spices*, for example, Eibhear Walshe observes that the list of banned books bears little relation to the reality of what was read within the country, smuggled in past customs officials or circulated in the back rooms of newsagents and bookshops, and evidence of a growing and productive countercultural ethos in Irish life. Similarly, in his essay for this volume on the publishing history of John McGahern's fiction, Frank Shovlin highlights the fact that many writers regarded censorship as a challenge, one to be resisted through a variety of circumlocutory tactics (including the phonetic spelling of obscenities, in the case of McGahern's 1965 novel *The Dark*). Ultimately therefore, censorship was a spur to a surreptitious creativity, and as in Soviet Russia, the stress imposed on the writer encouraged rather than subdued a literary energy, drawing out contention and retort as often as submission.

The parallel with state regimes elsewhere is a pertinent reminder that censorship in some form was ubiquitous across much of Europe at this time, a fact often overlooked in historical accounts that endorse notions of Irish exceptionalism during the post-revolutionary era. In reality Ireland was by no means the only modern European country enduring extensive restrictions of this kind. The widespread testing of its creative

and moral boundaries was fully in keeping with broader international debates on the promises and limitations of a transitional liberal democracy, conducted self-consciously in the wake of a rampant pre-war fascism. From the 1940s onwards this European and indeed global conversation engaged many Irish writers, as Aidan O'Malley observes here in his account of the European connections represented by Irish authors and political commentators ranging from Kate O'Brien and Hubert Butler to Conor Cruise O'Brien. One of the most vocal figures in this regard was of course, Seán O'Faoláin, portrayed in Brad Kent's essay as a European public intellectual, intelligible in the company of interventionists such as George Orwell, Hannah Arendt and Arthur Koestler. O'Faoláin's sensitivity to Europe's volatile post-war moral landscape shades his warnings about the capriciousness of Irish values in this period. Writing in *The Bell* in 1941, he asserted that censorship in Ireland was not a matter of what was considered right or wrong but an indication of the fact that 'our tastes and standards are in the most debatable state of flux', a condition that could only be resolved through the development of a properly educated public, confident in making its own judgements and protected as a result from the reach of authoritarian ambitions.[11] In this context, battling the censor was intrinsic to a broader project of Irish civic and ethical development, conducted in parallel with those of many other countries at similar points of evolution.

Still, there is no getting away from the crippling hold of censorship both on the writers of this period and by extension, on the generation that grew up in its shadow, coming to literary maturity long after its grip had been loosened. Its impact on so many areas of Irish cultural life is a reminder of a contingent reality of this era: that the alternative to the restrictions of home was to seek out the more relaxed political and cultural conditions of elsewhere. And if censorship defines an Irish literary landscape after the Second World War then so, in equal measure, does emigration. Irish writers were part of the exodus of the post-war era, with Irish emigration figures rising dramatically in the 1950s and early 1960s, when a young and mobile generation departed to find work in the cities of Britain or North America. During the 1950s some 400,000 people left Ireland, and the literature of this decade in particular is heavily associated with the theme of the 'vanishing Irish'.[12] In this context, an account of Irish cultural transition must address not only the imaginative register of emigration in literary texts but also the fact that a significant proportion of mid-twentieth-century Irish writing, across all genres, was conceived, written and published outside the country itself.

Once again however, the opportunity emerges for a positive revision of perspective. In the past, Irish critical narratives have tended to describe migrant writers as 'literary exiles', a romanticising epithet that appeals to notions of an Irish literary tradition forged against the odds of eviction and expulsion, and rooted in the lachrymose imagery of a perennially nostalgic diaspora. More realistically, the post-war cultural landscape foregrounds instead the pragmatism, opportunism and commercial energy stimulated by geographical and social movement. In the first place Irish literature (and particularly in this context, Irish fiction) became a bifocal entity, capable of seeing both home and elsewhere – and indeed seeing one *through* the other – as a direct product of the translocated Irish imagination. This shaped a distinctive version of Ireland creatively reflected through the prisms of geographical dispersal. In particular, recent commentators have identified a school of emigrant Irish writing in Britain based on what Clair Wills terms 'the shaping typologies of migrant and immigrant experience', and gaining momentum from British models of 'new wave' social realism, a strain exemplified by the protagonists of Edna O'Brien's *Country Girls* trilogy (1960–5), for example, at once bereft and liberated in London, or by Tom Murphy's drama of Irish workers in Coventry, *A Whistle in the Dark* (1961).[13] In her essay for this volume, Ellen McWilliams identifies another distinctive hybrid in the Irish-American themes engaged by Maeve Brennan, Elizabeth Cullinan, John O'Hara and others loosely grouped around the *New Yorker* magazine in the 1950s. Across this category, Irish post-war concerns – with sexuality and marriage; work and masculinity; the dilemmas of emigration and the fate of communities left behind – are articulated at a distance from Ireland itself and invigorated by a new social context. In the transitions of the mid-twentieth century the literature of Irish displacement, often dismissed as an awkward by-product of migration, becomes instead a dynamic critical force in its own right.

If there is a further transitional effect to be identified here, it lies in a reconsideration of literary production and the marketplace in which Irish writing was produced. Tom Walker's essay for this volume illuminates the 'literary traffic' surrounding poets such as Freda Laughton and Robert Greacen, whose multiple, complex crossovers and collaborations with British writers, journals and publishers suggestively shift the centre of gravity for mid-century Irish culture towards the middle of the Irish Sea. In such contexts, the emigration of Irish writing impinges yet further on the strained narrative of the country's supposed cultural isolation, as numerous major and emerging Irish authors became the commercial property of British and American publishers. Documenting the impact

on Irish literature of the Penguin publishing house, Paul Rooney shows in his essay how various mid-century Irish writers, including Kate O'Brien, Liam O'Flaherty and William Trevor, were systematically reprinted, branded and circulated by the British firm. This was not new of course: Irish writers had always found routes to publication through major London-based companies such as Macmillan or Jonathan Cape. But viewed in quantitative terms, the extent to which they now achieved commercial success (or at least sustenance) through the British market raises questions about the parameters of a 'national' literature, in the wider context of the pull between insularity and extroversion that marks this period. 'Far from "producing" a literature', O'Faoláin grumbled, 'what Ireland does is to eject it by the front door, creep around to the back door and take a bit of it in again (marked *Published in Great Britain*); have a quick look at it in the back-room, approve of some, spit on the rest, and then run around to the front-door again shouting: "Look what *we've* done!"'[14] Indeed, the extent of Penguin's Irish stable alone suggests that a good deal of mid-century Irish fiction might be considered a British 'product'. By this point in the country's history, Irish writing can no longer be convincingly aligned with Ireland's geography, and the rapid expansion of the commercial and paperback literary market worldwide must be factored in to descriptions of an Irish canon in terms of both content and provenance.

The essays that follow seek to realign ideas of Irish literary space, therefore, but they also address, from several angles, concepts of Irish historical and cultural chronology. The block of time between 1940 and 1980 is neither uniform nor linear: within this forty-year period there are numerous temporal jumps, retrogressions and misalignments, with one decade repeatedly defined against another in the interests of historical expediency. Joe Cleary has suggested of the 1950s, for example, that an Oedipal impulse led to an exaggeratedly patriarchal and insular image of de Valera's Ireland, created by a post-1960 generation dependent on that image as 'a necessary condition of the latter's self constitution'.[15] In turn the liberalising incentives of a 1960s society, which tested the foundational limits of the new Republic, would be hamstrung by the breakout of violent disorder in Northern Ireland during the early 1970s. The serial atrocities that plunged concepts of Republicanism itself backwards in time to a pre-modern barbarism represented a grievous temporal regression, one lamented and repeatedly dissected, as Rosie Lavan documents in her essay here, by Irish poets who rose to prominence on both sides of the border in this decade and context.