

## CHAPTER I

*Introduction**Marjorie Howes*

In 1895 W. B. Yeats offered an account of literary history that captures the complex sense of transition animating this volume's exploration of the decades between 1880 and 1940:

When a few years have frozen the changing present into a changeless memory that it may be studied with deliberate care, young men in Dublin and Limerick and Belfast will be reading essays to each other about the great transformation of Irish opinion which marked the early nineties; and . . . it will seem to them a momentous and memorable transformation.<sup>1</sup>

Yeats's remarks predict a future transition, one in which observers will move from being immersed in a chaotic 'changing present' moment to having a sense of that moment as both orderly and transformative, a sense that can only be achieved by looking back at it later. Simultaneously forward-looking and retrospective, this formulation casts the idea of transition as both necessary and contingent. It does not inhere in the objective reality of the historical moment under scrutiny; rather, it emerges in the 'deliberate' judgements of observers as they try to make sense of that moment. Yeats was wrong, however, in anticipating that such judgements would produce 'a changeless memory': the major impetus for *Irish Literature in Transition* was a sense that current developments in Irish Studies are continually producing new versions of the literary past. This dual focus on transitions in scholarship and transitions in literary history characterises all the volumes in this series. Like the others, this book seeks to provide innovative re-mappings of this period, while maintaining an awareness that still other re-mappings will become possible as the scholarly landscape continues to evolve. Unlike the others, it addresses the most intensely scrutinised period in Irish literary history. The chapters collected here aim to chart the emerging future of the field by re-envisioning the past.

A number of political transitions – imagined, real, hoped for and feared – were central to the Irish literary production of this period. In

1880 Ireland was part of a British Empire busy expanding into new territories, with some Irish people participating enthusiastically in that expansion and others waging various struggles against British rule. By 1940 part of the island was (in most senses) an independent state, Northern Ireland was set on the path that would take it to the Troubles of the late 1960s and beyond, and the British Empire's demise was on the horizon. The Second World War had begun, and the Irish Free State had declared itself neutral, a stance that would align it with a host of smaller European states and profoundly shape the country's experience of the war years.<sup>2</sup> The traumas of the Civil War still lingered, but transfers of power in the new Irish state had been effected through elections rather than violent revolution, and Ireland had a new constitution. Partition had been firmly established, but the southern twenty-six counties had made a remarkably swift and lasting transition from turbulent colony to stable democracy.

The six decades this volume seeks to reassess was a time of unprecedented literary production in several respects. The volume of Irish writing published, its variety and its impact on the public sphere had never been greater. Traditional accounts have mapped this literary terrain using terms that will be familiar to many readers, such as the Irish Literary Revival, the Counter-Revival, modernism and responses to the First World War. While not abandoning them entirely, much contemporary scholarship, including the chapters collected here, redefines them, re-articulates their relations to one another and proposes new terms. Such 'definitional excursions' offer alternative critical frameworks and stimulating avenues of thought rather than permanent shifts or conclusions,<sup>3</sup> and in general much current work continues to expand the field to incorporate an ever-widening range of texts and authors.

Recent scholarship on the period has done much to place the Revival and Counter-Revival in a series of larger contexts and to investigate their exchanges with other literary movements and trends. We now have substantial accounts of the Revival's and Counter-Revival's relationships to modernism, anthropology, orientalism, science, feminism and post-colonial studies, among others.<sup>4</sup> Other scholars have focused on the internal diversity of revivalist and counter-revivalist traditions, exploring debates and differences among major figures, recovering neglected figures, taking account of the experiences of women, working-class people, and sexual and religious minorities, and describing regional variation.<sup>5</sup> Irish writers' responses to international events such as the First World War have also received increased attention in recent years.<sup>6</sup>

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A similar expansion has occurred in terms of what counts as ‘modernism’, a term that increasingly refers to all literature produced during this period rather than to a particular set of formal innovations.<sup>7</sup> The flourishing body of scholarship on modernism in an Irish context adopts a wide range of critical approaches. Some scholars identify a specifically national Irish modernism; others focus on how colonialism constituted a sudden and catastrophic transition to modernity, or a series of them, for Ireland.<sup>8</sup> Still others emphasise the modern, and modernising, nature of nationalism, or stress what P. J. Mathews calls the ‘alternative modernity’ of the Revival, which ‘understands the idea of tradition as a stimulus towards innovation and change rather than a barrier to it’.<sup>9</sup> Overall it is clear that a once conventional contrast between traditionalist, insular, past-oriented Irish literary traditions and innovative, cosmopolitan, future-directed modernisms has been challenged and complicated, though not completely rejected, from within both Irish and modernist studies.

Scholars in this volume reflect the immense diversity of contemporary research, drawing on various, even conflicting, formulations of modernism, Irish and otherwise. Gregory Castle’s chapter on J. M. Synge argues that the underlying logic of the Revival, which he calls the logic of the elegy, was very much in keeping with the dynamics scholars associate with high modernism. In it, two conflicting transitions create a crucial paradox: the revitalisation of national culture could only be imagined in the context of its simultaneous disappearance. Alex Davis finds that for some writers formal innovation and nationalist ideology were quite compatible. He identifies a combination of Irish nationalism and European avant-gardism in Thomas MacDonagh’s work, and argues that Joseph Campbell made an Irish version of imagism part of his cultural nationalism. In contrast to Castle and Davis, Lucy Collins’s chapter sees a division in the poetry written after 1922 between poets who drew upon and participated in international modernism and others, such as F. R. Higgins and Austin Clarke, who pursued continuations of revivalist projects. In the case of drama, Nicholas Grene refigures a critical contrast between traditionalist Abbey founder Yeats and metropolitan Londoners Wilde and Shaw; instead he shows that all three playwrights were participating in and responding to international modernism’s reaction against the conventions of late Victorian theatre.

If the ‘period’ designated here is, like any such period, too long to be fully comprehended in a single volume, in another sense it is not long enough, given that patterns and developments that fall within these decades also extend beyond them. Clair Wills’s chapter charts how an earlier cultural faith in progress gives way to prose writing that registers

social entrapment in a stagnating Irish Free State, a change that she argues occurs primarily through formal strategies rather than through the plot lines often associated with mid-century Irish realism. The narrative arc of Wills's argument about the transformations of earlier fictional modes into what she calls their 'mannerist, even post-modern after-lives' takes her chapter beyond 1940, representing a necessary challenge to the boundaries of periodisation. Similarly, Peter Kuch's retrospective re-reading traces processes of institutionalisation that began during the period in question but extend into the current moment in which Irish Studies has become a global phenomenon. The chapter ends by describing how cultural and academic institutions continue to change, raising ongoing questions of the field's future. Thus the meanings and larger significance of the writing examined here cannot be neatly confined to the era of its production.

In our contemporary moment the amount of material available from that era – in archives, libraries and online – continues to increase, offering both important opportunities and serious obstacles for this kind of book. On the one hand, as scholarship expands to include previously neglected texts and traditions, such as women's writing, middlebrow literature, diasporic writing or periodical culture, canons grow larger and more diverse, reshaping our sense of literary history decisively. Such inclusiveness gives us a more complete, and more complex, picture of the literary history of this period and helps correct the biases and omissions of previous scholarship. All this – sheer volume, more diverse material – means that books such as this one are needed, now more than ever, to help readers organise that material in order to study it with deliberate care. On the other hand, the growing size and complexity of the literary landscape puts the idea, and the practical possibility, of a 'survey' under increasing pressure.

In order to respond as adequately as possible to the large and varied nature of the field, this volume adopts some non-traditional procedures for a survey. The kind of comprehensiveness it aspires to is one in which multiple re-mappings of the territory are offered through specific examples that illustrate larger arguments or trends. Rather than divide chapters according to a single principle, this book purposefully uses various, even competing, categories to organise the material at hand: single authors, groups of authors, genre, theme and critical approach. Any one of these categories could, by itself, serve as the organising principle for a survey. By mixing them, however, the volume gestures beyond the limits of this individual project to suggest that other chapters, other ways of organising and other re-mappings are possible for this immensely rich period. To cultivate this kind of self-consciousness about the uses and limits of

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periodisation, of individual approaches and categories, and of the overall project is to strive for a kind of comprehensiveness that is, I hope, attuned to the pace and vectors of change in Irish Studies.

During these decades, various transitions and innovations operated powerfully in shaping the forms, content, material production and readership of Irish writing. New technologies, increased literacy, improved distribution and new markets contributed to a burgeoning circumAtlantic print culture in which books, magazines and newspapers for various audiences – elite, middlebrow, popular – proliferated. New forms of professionalisation and material support for some writers existed alongside older structures of patronage for others. As Niall Carson's chapter shows, Irish writers wrote with international markets in mind, and individual authors often published in a wide range of disparate venues. In the case of the Revival, he points out a foundational contradiction: it was a cultural nationalist project heavily dependent upon British and American markets. Carson also illustrates how the development of railways sparked increased interest in exotic places beyond Ireland. Irish writers participated in genres such as travel writing and decadence, which arose in response, although firm distinctions between those genres would only be drawn later.

Carson is not alone in suggesting that transitions in Irish literary history during this period should be seen in both national and international frames. Much work in this volume explores how the inseparability of the national and the international takes a range of specific forms: intellectual influence, international publishing and markets; travel, migration and diaspora; transnational literary movements; and international military conflict. Brian Ó'Conchubhair argues that, rather than being simply populist or traditionalist, the Gaelic League's promotion of the Irish language embraced contemporary developments in European linguistic thought. Tina O'Toole cites a pattern of Irish sexual dissidents, both real and fictional, travelling abroad. And on the heels of the recent outpouring of scholarship and commemorative activity concerning Ireland and the First World War, Vera Kreilkamp expands the canon of Ascendancy fiction to include novels that address Irish Big Houses' experiences of the War.

Equally important, other chapters here investigate the national's imbrication with the local, exploring smaller communities, networks or coteries. Davis portrays a small Irish literary world in which writers knew and responded to one another, while Karen Steele cites the importance of overlapping clubs, organisations and circles among the politically active. Grene sketches an even smaller circle, limning an intimate, and revealing,

combination of influence and conflict between Yeats, Wilde and Shaw. In a different register, Paige Reynolds examines how a wide range of post-independence plays focused on investigating what happens to local communities when they confront the pressures of modernity.

One striking feature of this period is that literature did not simply respond to political changes; literature and cultural institutions became actors in the public sphere in a way that was, at least in part, new. The idea that after the fall of Parnell, national aspirations turned away from politics and were channelled into literature and culture has been substantially revised in recent years. Mathews argues that ‘what is most striking about this period is not that literary activity *replaced* politics . . . but that it was *accompanied* by a great deal of innovative “political” activity’.<sup>10</sup> Some of the period’s literature harnessed the power of the idea of political change, such as Augusta Gregory’s *The Rising of the Moon*, which looks forward to a time when ‘the small rise up and the big fall down’.<sup>11</sup> But perhaps more important than the play’s revolutionary content was the fact that Gregory helped create the institutional context in which it could be performed. As Mathews insists, what he calls the ‘self-help’ movements of the Revival addressed practical problems in Ireland and achieved real material gains in ways that throw into question firm distinctions between the literary and political realms. They founded new institutions that became important elements in the infrastructure of the new Irish state: ‘By 1908 the major cultural, political and educational institutions of the “post-British Irish state” – the Gaelic League, the Abbey Theatre, Sinn Féin, and the National University of Ireland – had all been established, largely due to the efforts of the revivalists and with little help from mainstream politicians.’<sup>12</sup> New institutions had also been created in Northern Ireland, such as the Ulster Literary Theatre.

Nationalist revolution and nation-building were accompanied by other profound upheavals. The prominence of innovative and alternative political activity, and its close relationship to literary production, offered Irish women significant opportunities to participate in public life in new ways. The 1916 Proclamation of the Irish Republic was addressed to ‘Irishmen and Irishwomen’ at a time when Irish women lacked the vote in most elections. At the same time, these decades also illustrate the strength and persistence of sexism and patriarchal social structures. Women were often forced to accept subordinate positions in organisations run by men; some responded by creating their own. There were lively debates among women over whether they should make national independence or political suffrage their primary goal. A number of scholars have explored the determination

and varying degrees of success with which women all over Ireland pursued expanded rights and greater agency across a range of literary, public and political spheres.<sup>13</sup> Margaret Ward began her groundbreaking book on women's participation in Irish nationalism by observing that taking account of women's experiences does not simply mean 'adding' them to men's; rather, it requires that 'our historical categories will have to be revised'.<sup>14</sup>

Large numbers of women were active in writing, editing and publishing ventures, both literary and journalistic. The nationalist press afforded Irish women a rich set of opportunities for participation during this period, as Steele's *Women, Press, and Politics during the Irish Revival* shows.<sup>15</sup> In the literary realm, as in the historical, taking account of women's experiences demands the revision of categories. Steele's chapter here on revolutionary memoirs pursues this revision by showing how incorporating women revises our definition of that genre. She argues that women remembered and characterised their participation differently from men, often creating narratives that emphasised communities and relationships rather than focusing, as men's narratives tend to do, on individuals who also often function as national allegories. Kreilkamp's chapter identifies a significant, and largely neglected, group of middle-class women who were professional writers making a living producing popular 'Big House' fiction, thus expanding the parameters of that genre.

Reynolds shows that attending to drama produced by Irish women creates a new map of dramatic history, one that decisively re-shapes contrasts previous scholars have drawn between the traditionalist Abbey and the experimental Gate Theatre. O'Toole's examination of New Woman fiction both traces the important Irish origins of the genre (the phrase 'new woman' is said to have been coined by Ulster-born Sarah Grand) and puts Irish women writers in a larger British context, identifying a transnational literary mode that registered women's demands for greater sexual and social freedom. Gerry Smyth takes account of women's experiences in a different way by describing a partial exception to women's increased participation. He finds that women did not, for whatever reason, produce much criticism during this period – a lacuna that surely cries out for further research.

Irish cultural nationalism was not new; as Gregory Schirmer points out, the Literary Revival 'was less a product of contemporary political or literary factors ... than of various cultural forces that had been developing throughout the nineteenth century'.<sup>16</sup> But relationships among literary

endeavours, ideas of cultural particularity, and nationalism did change during these years. Sir Samuel Ferguson's volume *Poems* appeared in 1880, and when he died in 1886 the young Yeats claimed that Ferguson had been animated by 'the purifying flame of National sentiment'.<sup>17</sup> Ferguson was a unionist, and soon thereafter his combination of cultural nationalism and commitment to the union would become increasingly untenable, due to the rise of a stable, though complex, alliance between explorations of Irish tradition and aspirations towards greater political independence. There were a few exceptions such as Emily Lawless, who was a lifelong unionist, but most participants in the Irish Revival were critical of British rule.

Within this general consensus, there was much variation and debate. The emphasis on internal diversity in recent scholarship restores something that contemporary observers were acutely aware of. In 1894 W. P. Ryan had already undertaken the kind of retrospective ordering that Yeats would predict the next year by publishing *The Irish Literary Revival: Its History, Pioneers and Possibilities*. Ryan's subject was literature, but he noted that revivalism in fact encompassed a vast range of fields: translation, music, folklore, antiquities, science and art,<sup>18</sup> and he spent much of the book outlining the different revivalist visions of individual participants. For example, Ryan described Charles Gavan Duffy's version of revivalism this way:

His idea of that revival is one whose effects would be largely industrial and social. He would see the people profound students of the problems of Irish history and Irish government; he would have them grapple with the defects in their agricultural and industrial systems; he would see them keen critics of statistical, Parliamentary, and financial returns, as well as enlightened observers of their native resources . . . From this it will be seen that Sir Charles carries his experiences as a statesman into his dreams as a leader of a literary movement.<sup>19</sup>

Ryan also emphasised the Revival's geographical diversity, tracing the movement's beginnings to the Southwark Club in London and including discussions of revivalist activities and societies in Belfast, Cork, Glasgow, Liverpool and other Irish and English cities.<sup>20</sup> This geographical and ideological range, which was subsequently somewhat obscured by decades of scholarship focused primarily on a few major revivalists and on Dublin (and to a lesser extent London), is evident in a number of chapters here.

Such diversity did not merely draw the attention of contemporary observers, but also generated tension and debate. As both Lucy McDiarmid's

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examination of the Hugh Lane controversy and Lucy Collins's analysis of poetry after 1922 demonstrate, conflicts often arose around the question of whose definition of Ireland and Irishness would prevail, both before and after independence. These conflicts took a number of forms. Joep Leerssen has articulated a tension between versions of Irishness he labels 'antiquarian' and 'folkish': 'One mode of authentication is by turning to the genuine past, the sort of past which was being elaborated by scholars . . . The other mode was to draw legitimacy from a contemporary constituency of unquestioned genuine Irishness, the peasantry with their still-living, spontaneous Gaelic speech and traditions.'<sup>21</sup> Davis notes that Frederick Ryan and John Eglinton's short-lived magazine *Dana* offered yet another model, one that sought to ground Irish identity in modernity and internationalism rather than in either the past or a traditionalist peasantry. And James Connolly's socialism provided still another effort to link nationalist and internationalist thinking.<sup>22</sup>

A determination to define 'the people' characterised much writing of the period. Leerssen rightly suggests that versions of the 'folkish' strand of revivalism often tended to be 'comic and vitalist to the point of rubbing shoulders with Stage Irishness'.<sup>23</sup> This was not always the case, however, as is illustrated by Augusta Gregory's important but neglected essay 'The Felons of Our Land'. In contrast to Leerssen's formulation, the essay on felons is 'folkish' in an entirely different way, one that operates in the register of tragedy rather than comedy. Gregory describes the popular literature and everyday practices of Irish rural dwellers for whom a 'felony' is a crime in the eyes of the law, but not in the eyes of the people: 'In a country that is not a reading country, "Speeches from the Dock", the last public words of political prisoners, is in its forty-eighth edition. The chief ornament of many a cottage is the warrant for the arrest of a son of the house framed and hung up as a sort of diploma of honour.'<sup>24</sup> The essay portrays a subjugated but vigorous subaltern culture preoccupied with defeat, death and martyrdom but also working actively to survive and resist British rule.

Unlike some writers, Gregory did not attempt to police the boundaries between 'genuine' Irish tradition and a more hybrid or adulterated culture. Instead, she celebrates the vibrancy and political heft of a popular culture that was embedded in the evolving economic exchanges of small town Ireland, as opposed to being part of the supposedly timeless folkways of the Irish peasantry: 'Irish history, having been forbidden in the national schools, has lifted up its voice in the streets . . . At little Catholic book-shops, at little sweet and china shops in country towns, one finds the cheap

ballad books, in gaudy paper covers, red, yellow, and green, that hold these summaries of a sad history.<sup>25</sup> Focusing on some of Gregory's other neglected prose writings, Lauren Arrington's chapter participates in an ongoing critical transition from thinking of Gregory primarily as a patron and theatre manager to acknowledging, and analysing, her role as an accomplished and important writer and a theorist of gender, of public and private spaces, and of literary forms.

The foundation of the Gaelic League in 1893 was an important watershed moment for the language revival, and the language movement was, like Gregory's 'The Felons of Our Land', 'folkish' in a way that did not rub shoulders with stage Irishness. Ó'Conchubhair shows that the language movement rejected an older generation's privileging of classical Irish and turned to dialect instead, privileging the speech of contemporary Irish speakers. When Synge reported that 'a branch of the Gaelic League has been started [on Aran] since my last visit', and that a number of young women attended its meetings, he highlighted the fact that such generational change was observable within the period. Rather than emphasising the maintenance of traditional ways, he acknowledged that 'In the older generation that did not come under the influence of the recent language movement, I do not see any particular affection for Gaelic.'<sup>26</sup> Attempts to define the Irish populace should also remind us of another salient feature of Irish writing throughout this period: though it often privileged the poorest and least Anglicised inhabitants of Ireland, it was mostly produced by middle- and upper-class intellectuals.

Transitions in critical and theoretical approaches and vocabularies form a crucial aspect of the changes this volume seeks to capture. Joseph Valente's chapter illustrates how the emergence of a new scholarly approach can decisively alter our sense of the shape of an author's oeuvre. He shows that reading Yeats's work through disability studies produces a strikingly new characterisation of the poet's much debated political thinking. Eschewing familiar terms such as 'nationalism', 'fascism' or 'liberalism', and rejecting traditional characterisations of the differences between Yeats's early and late politics, Valente identifies ableism as the ideology underpinning Yeats's political thinking throughout his career. This framework skilfully accommodates the complexities of Yeats's politics; Valente also argues that, while Yeats's prose writings endorse ableism, his poetry contests it. Other chapters offer different critical shifts as familiar terms come under pressure and new formulations emerge.

Chapters in this volume also help us identify important and often neglected shifts in critical perspective that occurred during this period.