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PART I

*Contexts and Contents:  
Politics and Periodicals*

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## CHAPTER I

*Victorian Ireland, 1830–1880: A Transition State**Matthew Campbell*

On 16 July 1885, the Irish poet William Allingham wrote to the English poet William Barnes about the advice he had been giving Alfred Tennyson on an ‘Irish piece’ that Tennyson had just written. According to Allingham, Tennyson

honoured me by much consultation about ‘brogue’. But the truth is, I don’t much like ‘brogue’ pieces, & have myself tried to manage Irish subjects with a minimum of that flavouring. A ‘brogue’ is not a dialect. I suppose the word had been transferred, to express a rustic & clumsy gait in speech, from its original meaning – a rough shoe.<sup>1</sup>

Allingham was not alone in holding to what the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) suggests is an imagined etymology for the word *brogue* with little evidence to support it.<sup>2</sup> But he does make a distinction between a *brogue* and a *dialect*, and he was confident in sharing this distinction with Barnes, whose Dorset dialect poetry is one of the great devolutionary innovations of the language of English poetry. Tennyson had written Lincolnshire dialect poems, but his ‘Irish piece’, a dramatic monologue called ‘Tomorrow’, provides awkward reading for the Irish reader – then as now. As a poem about the late resolution of an unconsolated grief, it is one in a line of Tennyson poems on that theme. It also has an Irish afterlife. The plot of ‘Tomorrow’ turns on the discovery of a preserved body in a bog many years after its disappearance, a bog poem written eighty or so years before Seamus Heaney’s poems of preservation and return.

Tennyson had been reading William Carleton’s *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry*, ‘to get up the brogue’ and was convinced that Carleton was ‘a man of genius’.<sup>3</sup> Whether or not he had come across Carleton’s use of the word ‘brogue’ in his ‘General Introduction’ to the 1842 edition of the *Traits* is moot. There, Carleton is disdainful of those who abuse it to picture the Irishman as ‘something unusually ridiculous, and [for whom] scarcely anything in the shape of language was supposed to proceed from his lips

but an absurd *congeries* of brogue and blunder'.<sup>4</sup> Carleton was not the first to object to such stereotyping, nor the last to seek an alternative humour in matters of speech and social indecorum: his introduction is fulsome in its acknowledgement of Maria Edgeworth as his exemplar in the recasting of the Irish joke as something to be rewritten by and for the Irish and not the English. The chapter on 'The Brogue' in Maria Edgeworth and Richard Lovell Edgeworth's *Irish Bulls* had argued with satiric point for language differences within Britain and Ireland: the Irish and Welsh that was still widely spoken, the consideration of whether Lowland Scots is a 'dialect', the 'peculiar vulgarisms, dialects and brogues' of fifty-two English counties.<sup>5</sup> Carleton picks up the Edgeworths' not-entirely-serious argument that, since English was first learnt in Ireland in Elizabethan times, the English spoken in Ireland is closer to the golden age of English literature. The idea was to be given a much later outing quite seriously by Seamus Heaney (as in 'Traditions' where, 'Our guttural muse / was bulled long ago . . . some cherished archaisms / are correct Shakespearean'<sup>6</sup>). For all five writers, nearly two centuries apart, the Irish speak English, as Carleton said, 'with far more purity and grammatical precision than is to be heard beyond the Channel.'<sup>7</sup>

Whatever its humorous presentation and literary afterlife, the Edgeworths' argument was founded in the linguistic diversity of the newly minted United Kingdom in which *Irish Bulls* was first published in 1802. Forty years later, writing to introduce the 'New Edition' of the *Traits* (which had first been published between 1828 and 1834), Carleton's autobiographical retrospective addressed the language of Ireland as going through what he calls 'a transition state':

That the Irish either were or are a people remarkable for making bulls or blunders is an imputation utterly unfounded, and in every sense untrue. The source of this error on the part of our neighbours is, however, readily traced. The language of our people has been for centuries, and up to the present day, in a transition state. The English tongue is gradually superseding the Irish.<sup>8</sup>

Carleton's use of the phrase 'transition state' appears familiar to our ears, for which the phrase 'state of transition' suggests everyday notions of scientific and cultural relativism. In the particulars of the island of Ireland, the shift of the language of the majority population from Irish to English appeared by Carleton's time to be inexorable. But the concept of 'transition state' was fairly modish in its time, where the attention of both everyday and literary language to the rules and expectations of the fixed

state of grammatical and generic convention was challenged in the aftermath of the great political, cultural and linguistic changes in Europe wrought by Romanticism and the French Revolution. As Claire Connolly discusses in the first chapter of Volume II of this series,<sup>9</sup> the Tory and unionist Irish commentator and politician Isaac Butt, writing in the *Dublin University Magazine*, diagnoses this state of transition as attendant upon Romanticism's regrettable revolution in 'style'. Connolly shows that Butt makes reference to British commentators William Hazlitt and Thomas Carlyle in saying that 'the whole body of English literature passed into a *state of transition*, the less perceivable as the critic partook the spirit of the time'.<sup>10</sup> Carlylean signs of the times (the Hegelian *Zeitgeist*) work as the 'less perceivable' of unexamined ideology. The '*state of transition*', as Butt italicises it, is a phrase just entering the language: while OED gives Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* (1755) as offering the first example of a language as something which might be in 'transition', Carleton's phrase 'transition state' is first recorded in 1806, and the examples are as a term in geology as much as other more metaphorical applications. In the contexts of such figurative thinking about linguistic change, a small but sociolinguistically charged word like 'brogue' acts as both tenor and vehicle, carrying a divergent or even devolutionary argument, as it is passed back and forth between Irish and English 'regional' poets, two novelists and Victoria's poet laureate.

The acknowledgement both of linguistic difference and of linguistic change is one that belongs to a state in transition as much as a state in settled constitutional or imperial possession of itself. Transition is a concept which might be applied to the development of culture as well as language and literary forms, moving within the relationship between Britain and Ireland and between Irish and English. The study of English literature calls the years between 1837 and 1901 the 'Victorian' period, with its associations not so much of 'transition' as 'progress' or 'reform'. Of course, those associations also carry records of the painfulness of social change, of class conflict and cultural crisis. But Irish literary history has been less than happy with this appellation, and its authors have scant representation even in cultural materialist versions of 'Victorian' literary criticism attuned to the matter of 'Britain'.<sup>11</sup> The chapters in *Irish Literature in Transition, 1830–1880* concede the difficulty for Irish studies of thinking about Ireland as a participant in the story of the Victorian United Kingdom or the expanding British Empire. But the Irish story nevertheless remains in tangential contact with thinking about both interconnected and distinct literary transitions through this contested period,

and not just in the UK or British Empire. The transition also has a larger international element across European wars and American, Australian or even Indian immigrant communities. In this time, writers and critics allowed that the local facts of language change could meet with, and then begin the divergence from, the larger European and imperial ideology of progress that is a commonplace of nineteenth-century political history.

Considering Irish literature in transition, Carleton, like Edgeworth before him, held that the transition state was prior to a greater change, provisional or preliminary to the establishment of an Irish literature in its own right. It was to be written or spoken or sung by men and women, Irish speakers and English speakers, not just peasants or aristocrats, but also by an emergent literate middle class writing for the new audiences offered by machine print. However, for both Butt and Carleton, the signs of the times were that something was about to happen, but it had not quite happened in the Ireland of the 1830s and 1840s. Butt diagnoses ‘this revolutionary stage of literature’ as ‘the needful preliminary to a happier time, in which the dregs of change shall have cleared away and the crude materials become combined into a harmonious form’.<sup>12</sup> Carleton returns to the theme of not-quite-preparedness throughout the introduction to the *Traits*. As evidenced in its celebrated stories, ‘The Lough Derg Pilgrim’, ‘The Hedge School’, or ‘Wildgoose Lodge’, religiosity and lack of education create the conditions for the violence and atrocity which were depicted as obstacles to modernity. His diagnosis is at times something that can broadly be called Fanonian: we should not blame too much the wretched of the earth if they are compelled to take revenge for their continued state of ignorance, poverty and oppression. The prescription of progress and the end of violence through education and modernisation is less radical, and it attends to what might come after, not so much in the long run but for the succeeding generation. This is the transition state that he pictures:

The period, therefore, for putting the character of our country fairly upon its trial has not yet arrived; although we are willing to take the Irish man as we find him; nor would we shrink even at the present moment from comparing him to his neighbours . . . We must wait thirty or forty years, that is, until the rising or perhaps the subsequent generation shall be educated *out of* these wild and destructive prejudices, before we can fully estimate the degree of excellence to which our national character may arrive.<sup>13</sup>

Carleton’s emphasis here is instructive, and etymologically thoughtful: the first stage must be ‘education *out of* wild and destructive prejudices’ before education into a new ‘national character’.

The *Traits* thus hold the literary future of the country in prospect. William Carleton himself is a complex figure on which to map that literary future of the country, and there is much writing in the period covered by this book which seems to share his version of literature as promise rather than achievement. That will only occur when the Irish have grown out of ‘wild and destructive prejudices’. Born Catholic to a bilingual household, a convert to Protestantism, his career moved back and forth between the Tory *Dublin University Magazine (DUM)* and the radical bourgeois *Nation*, always conscious of class despite his various apostasies, his work never losing its ‘peasant’ subject matter. In the ‘Station Island’ sequence, Heaney has the fellow mid-Ulster ghost of Carleton refer to himself as ‘the old fork-tongued turncoat / who mucked the byre of their politics’.<sup>14</sup> Carleton’s art was caught in the same turncoat position, between the realist’s desire to picture the Irish peasantry as it was, and to offer the entertainments of a generic expectation for comedy without apology: ‘The amusement derived from these persons was undoubtedly of a very imaginative character, and gives sufficient proof that had the national intellect been duly cultivated, it is difficult to say in what position as a literary country Ireland might have stood at this day.’<sup>15</sup> These are arguments for a comedy of human manners – the right sort of comedy – and they must be taken without condescension.

As we will see later in this introduction and in chapters throughout this book, the period is overshadowed by Famine, and although Carleton’s *Black Prophet* was perhaps the most significant Irish fiction of the Famine, writings about catastrophe still contained within them a disruptive and unsettling satire of manners: witness Anthony Trollope’s *Castle Richmond* which has the Famine at its periphery and an Anglo-Irish encounter of misunderstanding at its core. Register and genre are the first difficulties for writing in these contexts, of saying the right thing in a form adequate to the material. As Marguerite Corporaal tells us in this volume, writing about Famine fiction is challenged by both register and rhetoric as well as the assimilation of the non-fictional. Matters such as plot digression can be disruptive of narrative conventions and ethical tact.

Throughout this transitional state in narrative register and generic convention, there remained a feeling for an alternative, for something that Carleton was not to see in his own time, the successes of a globally influential Irish literature in the English language which were still some way off at the time of his death in 1869. The authors of the ‘revival’ remained in their way preoccupied with the means of establishing differing versions of a national Irish literature which might have passed through its

transition state, no matter that it was also to offer itself as a model of such transitions to decolonising national literatures across the world. Carleton was not named as a precursor in W. B. Yeats's 1892 'To Ireland in the Coming Times', but Yeats followed Carleton's example in his early attempts to establish a library of Romantic-period and later-nineteenth-century Irish literature, enlisting him alongside 'Davis, Mangan, Ferguson'.<sup>16</sup> Forty years apart, both Carleton and Yeats had worked alongside or even in opposition to the Young Irelander Charles Gavan Duffy, and despite Yeats's feelings that Gavan Duffy had poisoned Carleton by making him write about education and progress, he wrote that,

One is not surprised to hear, great humorist though he was, that his conversation was more mournful than humorous. He seems, like the animals in Milton, half emerged only from the earth and its brooding. When I read any portion of the *Black Prophet*, or the scenes with Raymond the Madman in *Valentine M'Clutchy*, I seem to be looking out at the wild, torn storm-clouds that lie in heaps at sundown along the western seas of Ireland; all nature, and not merely man's nature, seems to pour out for me its inbred fatalism.<sup>17</sup>

It is not just Carleton who was 'half emerged only from the earth and its brooding'. Even the national reawakening envisaged in Yeats's poem remains directed at the future 'coming times' that will always lie beyond liberation. Like so many, Yeats saw Carleton dragged back to the sublimities of an Irish Atlantic West, and the 'inbred fatalism' which the young Yeats enlists among the characteristics of the Irish.

In Chapter 2, James Kelly points to the inherent difficulty of a mode grounded in humour and satire, a difficulty which, while it might be a protean response to the demands of periodical writing, also tended to the obscure, offering diffusive displays of erudition and the recondite. These are not accusations we would necessarily direct at Carleton. Writing about the beginning of the 1830s in the 'General Introduction', he betrays his alliances in pointing to the periodical press as presenting 'the first symptoms of life' for Irish literature. He lists a number of journals which were short-lived, but lands on the *DUM* as 'a bond of union for literary men of every class'.<sup>18</sup> It is an unlikely description of the magazine, which was founded by Trinity-educated Dublin Protestants and has been associated in literary history with an audience comprising what Eve Patten calls 'a hard-line unionist gallery'.<sup>19</sup> But it found a place for the writing of the young Carleton who characterised it as 'a neutral spot in a country where party feeling runs so high, on which the Roman Catholic priest and the Protestant parson, the Whig, the Tory, and the Radical, divested of



their respective prejudices, can meet in an amicable spirit'.<sup>20</sup> This is a direct allusion to the following passage in Samuel Ferguson's 1834 essays reviewing James Hardiman's two-volume *Irish Minstrelsy: or Bardic Remains of Ireland*. Both Hardiman's collection and Ferguson's review are foundational introductions of the poetry of Gaelic Ireland to a broadly O'Connellite and emancipationist Catholic readership (Hardiman) and that hard-line Unionist gallery (Ferguson). Ferguson introduces a conservative ethic to an audience which needed to be told of the other conservative aesthetic which ran through the literature of the Gael, as aristocrat as much as peasant.

Alas that a nation glowing with the most enthusiastic courage, moved by the tenderest sympathies, and penetrated by a constitutional piety as devoted as profound, should so long have misapplied these noblest attributes of a high-destined people! What material for an almost perfect society does the national genius not represent? Instinctive piety, to lay the only sure foundation of human morals and immortal hopes; constitutional loyalty, to preserve the civil compact inviolate; legitimate affection, to ensure public virtue and private happiness; endless humour, to quicken social intercourse; and last, and save one attribute, best, indomitable love of country to consolidate the whole.

This sacred loyalty we have reserved for our conclusion, as a green spot of neutral ground, where all parties may meet in kindness, and part in peace.<sup>21</sup>

Of course, the Gaels knew their place, no matter that their piety was Roman Catholic and mourned the loss of sovereignty under a different, Jacobite British King. The humour is again fundamental to the particularities of the Irish. And it is culture which will hold out the hope of peace for a country so divided in the 1830s and looking forward to an achievement of modernity in peace. Carleton's 'neutral spot' and Ferguson's 'green spot of neutral ground' are places of meeting but also of parting, of a society grown-up enough to bury differences in the neutrality afforded by the mutual understandings of culture itself.

Unfortunately, the transitional state of Irish history was not to follow the hopes of Ferguson and Carleton, as they sought to dismantle the two sides of a sectarian and class divide that they themselves occupied. Within the short fifty or so years covered by this volume, English writers on Irish affairs such as Trollope and Matthew Arnold could conclude, according to John McCourt in Chapter 8, that the concessions that had been made as regards land and religion had to give way to the coercion that was required in the 1880s for a still-unsatisfied Irish nationalism. They adhered to the matter of United Kingdom policy as established by Edmund Burke: 'the

connection between Great Britain and Ireland, essential to the welfare of both'.<sup>22</sup> In Chapter 10, talking about the Young Ireland leader of the 1840s and 1850s, John Mitchel, James Quinn quotes Mitchel's prescription for the connection between Britain and Ireland from the other, nationalist, side: 'copious blood-letting upon strictly therapeutical principles [. . .] The vengeance I seek is the righting of my country's wrong, which includes my own.'<sup>23</sup> Arnold's quotation of Burke was conveyed in an 1882 essay called 'The Incompatibles'; Mitchel's desire for bloodletting was to result in a failed revolution, transportation and exile.

If the literature of Victorian Ireland sought both forms and appropriate subject matter, many of the conditions were auspicious, and much was new, innovative, progressive even. As Andrew Murphy has shown in his history of Irish cultural nationalist reading, literacy in English was increasing through the system of national schools and the spread of an Irish press.<sup>24</sup> The Emancipation of 1829 was followed by the establishment of three Queen's Colleges in Belfast, Cork and Galway, and – as Colin Barr tells the story in Chapter 6 – after much debate through the 1840s the appointment of John Henry Newman to lead a Catholic University in Dublin. Irish science writing was to play a major part in Britain's international eminence in the field. The extraordinary scholarly endeavour that was the Ordnance Survey grew from that science writing and effectively created a highly detailed record of much of Ireland through the transition state of linguistic change. For all that it moved between manuscript and print culture, Nicholas Woolf tells us in Chapter 12, that 480 extant Irish language written sources exist from this period.<sup>25</sup> As with Victorian England, the woman writer became a central part of Irish literary publishing: in her pioneering work, Anne Ulry Colman tells us that there were 'in excess of four hundred Irish women poets writing in English, whose birth dates fall between 1800 and 1899'.<sup>26</sup> In Chapter 15, Anna Pilz intensifies these transitions, citing Clíona Ó Gallchoir and Heather Ingman's *History of Modern Irish Woman's Literature*, and the situation of the Irish woman writer in a national, Irish, context which was not just an offshoot of English fiction or poetry. Ó Gallchoir and Ingman, state that 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 in Ireland'. The achievement of an emergent Irish women's literature, written by novelists like Edgeworth (still publishing in this period) and Anna Maria Fielding, was running in parallel, as it were, with the desires of male writers for the national culture, written by 'voices that either challenged the national narrative, or whose primary focus simply lay elsewhere'.<sup>27</sup>