INTRODUCTION

Culture, Climate, Capital, and Contagion

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Practice dictates that books such as this one should begin with ruminations on Irish literary culture’s special affinity with the natural world. We could certainly begin by noting Gaelic culture’s environmental nomenclature, or the Celtic Revival’s pastoralist celebrations, or the long historical tradition of dinneanchas (lore of places) narratives. But such mediations are often built on ideological certainties and nationalist exceptionalisms; they also sometimes speak of uncomplicated relationships between nature and culture, segregating them into distinct categories, as if one is not integrally a part of the other. The contemporary moment shifts such paradigms in no uncertain terms. Here are some of the reasons why: 2019 marked the end of the warmest decade since the mid-nineteenth century; from the time when meteorological data began to be recorded, July 2019 was the hottest month on Earth; and it was also the year in which a new national record of 46°C was set in France.¹ In the same year India had the longest heatwave in its history with temperatures soaring to 50.55°C.² The subcontinent simultaneously witnessed the wettest monsoon in recorded history up to that point; the monsoon resulted in 1,500 deaths. The year 2019 posed worrisome characteristics of climate change.³ Between 2015 and 2020, extreme heatwaves killed thousands of people across the world and rapidly spreading mega forest fires decimated land and communities in the western United States and Australia. Equally devastating were the severe water-shortages across countries and the alarming permafrost melt in the Arctic, making legible the aqueous oxymoron of planetary climate chaos: too little and too much water.

¹ Among the many sources available to understand the scope of abnormal weather patterns of 2019 and of recent years more generally, the following provides a helpful synopsis: https://bit.ly/3JzoXX, accessed March 1, 2020.

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Environmental disruptions of such scale make it impossible to ignore the anthropogenic origins of this age of climate crisis. In fact, “environmental disruptions” is a euphemistic and inaccurate description: It signifies the telluric, atmospheric, and oceanic (or, to put it in another way, the chemical, biological, and physical) transformations of the planet initiated by the anthropos – the fundamental rationale behind naming the contemporary geological epoch as the Age of Human, the Anthropocene. While the anthropogenic origins of climate change or the overall rationale behind the Anthropocene hypothesis are not being questioned here, many scholars (postcolonial, indigenous, and race studies scholars among others) have challenged the hegemonic universality of the figure of the anthropos in such a framework. Raising the figure of the human in such instances elides the culpability of industrialized nations of the global North that are primarily responsible for spearheading the climate crisis. The universal subject of humanity also glosses over geopolitical location, class, race, and gender identities of individuals, all of which are determinants of a person’s carbon footprint even within the global North. The disparities between those who face the greatest environmental risks and the “rich-nation toxins” that are causally linked to such risks are cruelly stark. The novel coronavirus that emerged in 2019 and triggered a global pandemic within months is the latest entry in a growing list of environmental risks that make visible such violent disparities and the sociocultural dimensions of climate change that determine personal, local, national, and international vulnerabilities.

Therefore, this is a moment that demands reflection and rethinking. It is a period of both isolation and embrace, of physical distance from society and an intellectual commitment to ecology, perhaps the greatest lesson of SARS-CoV-2. The social dimensions that have helped fuel the pandemic and the causal factors responsible for the emergence of the virus are reminders that climate breakdown reveals itself through a number of seemingly disassociated signs. As an allegory of the far greater threat of

4 The official definition of the term supplied by the Subcommission of Quaternary Stratigraphy is as follows: “The ‘Anthropocene’ is a term widely used since its coining by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer in 2000 to denote the present geological time interval, in which many conditions and processes on Earth are profoundly altered by human impact. This impact has intensified significantly since the onset of industrialization, taking us out of the Earth System state typical of the Holocene Epoch that post-dates the last glaciation.” See http://quaternary.stratigraphy.org/, accessed May 25, 2018.
climate change, SARS-CoV-2 underlines the fact that the planet is locked into a period of environmental uncertainties and heightened sociobiological risks; although the fact of climate change and its associated challenges are certainly being felt across the world, the coronavirus pandemic also highlights long-term uncertainties. An overwhelming characteristic of climate breakdown is exactly this: Exponential crises of the present seem already foreshadowed by unforeseen complications of the future. The litany of recent disasters is so lengthy that it seems superstitiously ill-advised to name them all, as if naming monsters might provoke their vengeful return. However, this is also a period of loss so extreme that some returns cannot be foreseen in our or our children’s lifetimes. In her stunning essay “Monster: A Fugue in Fire and Ice,” Anne McClintock traces the legibility of exponential climatic change to 2012:

2012 is the Goliath year of climate change, and it is all about the ice. But one fact towers above the rest: the colossal melt of Greenland. In mid-July, scientists stared at statistics so staggering they thought at first there was some mistake. Satellite images showed that in four days alone, 97% of the massive, mountainous surface of Greenland had melted from white to dark. Snow cover, parts of which had been frozen for eighteen million years, had thawed into a colossal sheen of ice water. Scientists were stunned. Ice surface the size of the United States had disappeared.⁶

Written in the shadow of such scalar transformations and exponential risk and composed at a time of great turmoil in the midst of a global pandemic, this book on Irish literary culture’s relationship to the environment seeks to demonstrate the sociopolitical and aesthetic relevance of historical texts in this contemporary moment, and to show how contemporary texts offer vital perspectives crucial for habitable futures. The book is an attempt to discover what Irish Environmental Humanities might look like if it were to address the historical spectrum of Irish literary and cultural practices. The result is a number of intellectually enriching and exciting lines of enquiry in which scholars – working on different historical periods – offer interdisciplinary perspectives to both revisit well-trodden themes afresh from the precipice of the twenty-first century and break new ground in identifying and analyzing urgent concerns of the present and the future. Chapters in this collection are written not only by literary and cultural studies scholars, but also by historians, language specialists, and folklorists. In writing these analyses we were all offered a unique vantage point to reassess culture’s entanglements with nature and history’s convergence with forces of geology: The chapters in

this book were all written at a time when the fabric of everyday, “normal,” life was coming undone, as it was even before the current pandemic. The time seemed right to collect our thoughts at such a critical juncture and provide an in-depth survey that spans the Irish literary canon in the Irish and English languages; that is, a survey that despite being broad in scope does not shy away from the complexities and messiness of ecologies.

The necessary historical and thematic structures that shape this book’s critical arc belies the complications that are invigorated, elaborated, and analyzed within. In a series of thoughtfully conceived and cogently argued chapters, established and younger scholars assess the historical trajectory of the nexus of literature, culture, and the environment in Ireland, which offers an enlightening intertextual dialogue between different historical periods and sociopolitical contexts. In this volume Gaelic annals and early medieval literature are revealed to be storehouses of surprisingly relevant lessons for the present; the overtly political demeanor of the Troubles or Ireland’s membership of the European Union are analyzed in relation to their lasting environmental implications. Questions of empire, nationalism, and postcoloniality, which have always had environmental dimensions, converse with perspectives on Ireland’s reliance on hydrocarbons, its loss of food sovereignty, and the increasingly anomalous weather patterns that haunt the country’s neoliberal present. To consider ecologies is also to confront questions of race, gender, and class that underpin aesthetic deliberations and cultural practices; these subjects are not merely tokens acknowledged in footnotes in this study but are fundamental trajectories in many of the chapters that follow.

Scope

It is in the spirit of highlighting this dialogue between the essays here that my brief synopses of the contributions below do not follow the pattern of chapters the reader will find on the contents page. The hope here is that both the novice reader and the seasoned scholar will find demonstration of the fact that the phrases “Irish ecology” or “Irish environment” are not homogenous concepts. Rather they are vexed ones that intersect historical periods in fluid ways and are inflected as much by rhetorical and aesthetic considerations as ecologies are modulated by national and geopolitical concerns, by local and planetary changes. The question of extending the boundaries that have generally determined Irish ecocritical studies is not made offhandedly. Scholars have previously noted that there is evidently a “critical lag, a curious recalcitrance” in engaging a politically motivated
interdisciplinarity in Irish Studies that focus on the environment, perhaps especially within literary and cultural studies. This book attends to that delay and resistance by confronting the intricate webwork of ecology which underpins literary and cultural reflections on the Irish environment.

An excellent example of such interdisciplinarity is the environmental and historical perspective proposed by Francis Ludlow and Conor Kostick in their chapter “The Irish Annals and Climate, Fifth to Seventh Centuries C.E.” Acknowledging that Ireland’s monastic tradition nurtured scholars who wrote in Old Irish and in Latin, and who were responsible for a vibrant literary culture that included a number of forms, such as hagiography, poetry, epic, or voyage tales (immrama), they analyze the annalistic tradition for evidence of climatological data. Their analysis relies on comparatively checking the accuracy of such narratives by paying attention to alternative historical sources, calculating dates of past eclipses, referring to ice core records, and “matching them to the dates of these events as given by the early medieval texts.” The annals are revealed to be not only literary texts propounding theological concepts or reflecting sociocultural and political conditions but also rich sources of climate data.

In an Irish context, ecocritical and Environmental Humanities scholarship has been influenced by the disciplinary biases of scholars and also by an uncritical yielding to the venerated tradition of Irish literature’s “sense of place.” What has been less evident are the indigenous forms of climate and environmental record-keeping that are revealed in older forms such as annals, or the transmission of ecological knowledge through oral cultural practices such as folklore. Bairbre Ní Fhloinn’s chapter “The Environmental Vocabulary of Irish Folklore” supplies us with such scholarship in an Irish context, expanding exponentially what we generally conceptualize when we think of Irish narratives’ attention to the natural world. Folklore, she writes, “speaks with the authority of the group and with the sanction of accumulated tradition”; it has at its disposal “a ready-made vocabulary.” In many ways, folklore suggests a radically different form of epistemological and aesthetic practice when compared to the Gaelic annals. It is worth noting here that indigenous epistemologies and vernaculars are not only important for historical reasons but also, as the field of Traditional Ecological/Environmental Knowledge (TEK) testifies, paramount for contemporary sustainability measures. In Irish Studies, the pioneering work of Tim Robinson on the environmental contexts of Connemara and the Aran

Islands has correctly received repeated attention. Robinson’s fluent ability to demonstrate the confluence between language and landscape, culture and environment has been invaluable in rethinking the environmental vernaculars at work in Ireland. Ní Fhloinn builds on such a critical reservoir in a significant manner by also demonstrating Irish folklore’s place in a global tradition that is inspired by oral narratives and local histories and committed to environmental activism. The chapter supplies a number of avenues being pursued in the European, American, Australian, and African contexts, and demonstrates how the porosity of disciplinary boundaries is reflected in the fluid nature of Irish folklore’s multiple border crossings: between the topographical and the oceanic, between the telluric and the mineral, and between the physical and metaphysical.

Her record of the origin stories of the Dowd Stones in Enniscrone (recorded as the petrified children of a man called Dowd), originally verbally related to Ní Fhloinn in 1979, demonstrates the folkloric lineage of contemporary studies focused on multispecies and ecological entanglements of the “human.” At a time of sea-level increase when the future increasingly figures in climate assessments to be decidedly oceanic, it is also important to recognize narratives that surround the marine world as demonstrating a parallel trajectory with human history. Ní Fhloinn notes that the alternative marine universe of Irish folklore “seems to encompass the fairy-world at sea, the spirits of the drowned, and a variety of other aquatic and semiaquatic beings, from mermaids to transformed seal-people to the shadowy inhabitants of the many submerged cities and lands which were believed to exist off the coast.” Interestingly, “The Irish language had a useful umbrella term for this underwater collective, predictably flattering and suitably vague. It was uaisle na farraige, ‘the noble people of the sea.’”

Focusing on the vaunted theme of Irish nature writing in Irish Studies, Amy Mulligan’s striking chapter on “Language and Literature in Medieval Ireland,” analyzes the enduring misconceptions in such discourses. She challenges the exceptionalism attendant upon assessments such as the one that follows: “To seek out and watch and love Nature, in its tiniest phenomena as in its grandest, was given to no people so early and so fully as to the Celt.” Mulligan reiterates the postcolonial critique that such racial proclivities served the aims of imperialism, and traces the intellectual genealogy of such insular assertions to the writings of Gerald of Wales in

the twelfth century, such as *Topographia Hibernica* (ca. 1185) and *Expugnatio Hibernica* (ca. 1189). What is revealed is that medieval Irish nature writing is “highly politicized [reminding us] that medieval Ireland provides no such simple, idealized or transparent model.” The chapter also critiques the notion of an innate environmental consciousness attending old Irish poetry by demonstrating that such narratives often do not celebrate the more-than-human world for its own sake: “We are firmly within an anthropocentric mindset in which nature serves humankind and human needs, and where, instead of being an agent in and of itself, the voice of the environment and animals reflects human thoughts, needs, and practices.”

The chapter extends the climatological and vernacular environmentalisms suggested by Ludlow, Kostick, and Ní Fhloinn, by introducing gendered aspects of early sovereignty discourses in the medieval context:

Early Irish literature does, however, preserve a corpus of narratives in which the landscape and women within it play substantial literary roles. This is the literature of what medievalists label the sovereignty figure, what has broadly been read as a later literary reflex of early eponymous tutelary or territorial goddesses who, as in the case of Ériu, are remembered in the placenames and origin legends of Ireland.

Mulligan’s analysis of the sovereignty goddess figure (often an aquatic being) as a source of allegorical morality and environmental education for territorial male rulers, grants the kind of agency to ecology that is increasingly under critical scrutiny in geopolitical state formations during this period of climate crisis.9 Further relevance of the medieval for the contemporary ecological regime is revealed in treating medieval literature as one that provides a systematic understanding, often surprisingly scientific – such as Gerald of Wales’s accounts “of Ireland’s birds and fishes” that are “invaluable in describing species, some of which are now extinct” – and can act as guide to comprehending the nature of “ecological imperialism” in Ireland.10 Mulligan concludes that “All these medieval practitioners of Irish nature-writing develop a mode of thinking about the environment as

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10 The phrase “ecological imperialism” is Crosby’s, from his book of the same title.
a creative and generative space, one which is highly anthropocentric, but which, through adoration, wonder, even recognition of something divine in the trees, soil, waters and animals” makes continued human habitability on this planet a historical possibility.

The expansive scope of Environmental Humanities scholarship resonates with an ethic of multidisciplinarity, one that is crucial to confront the diverse scales of reference embedded in seemingly straightforward terms such as ecology, environment, and climate. This multidisciplinarity, challenging as it may be to familiarize oneself with and adopt, is reflected in the number of subfields of enquiry that Environmental Humanities has engendered. The field now has a number of sub-disciplines; energy humanities for example concentrates its efforts on our carbon-fueled culture (such as the work of Imre Szeman and Jeff Diamanti), the blue humanities historicizes oceans and their representation in literature (such as in the work of Philip Steinberg and Steve Mentz), and post-human studies, which has a number of trajectories of its own, bears a special relationship to the question of human agency at a time of extreme environmental degradation (such as the multispecies ethics championed by scholars such as Donna Haraway).11

The impetus of this book arises to a large degree from the recognition that such vibrancy is yet to reflect the scope of Irish Studies despite the number of individual critical endeavors over the last decade or so. Anna Pilz’s chapter “Narratives of Arboreal Landscapes” is a good example of scholarship that attends to emergent concerns in wider environmental scholarship. Combining analyses that focus squarely on Ireland with prominent global and planetary questions raised by historians and anthropologists – such as Dipesh Chakrabarty and Anna Tsing – Pilz reviews the complex history of Irish deforestation and its representation in literature. She argues that there is no single story that can accommodate the history of Ireland’s arboreal landscapes. Her chapter “brings literature into focus as a historical archive that shaped (and continues to shape) the dissemination and reception of narratives of Ireland’s environmental history.” Pilz argues that “Literary texts present a unique insight into cultural attitudes toward

environmental change. Only by paying closer attention to literature and noticing which ‘stories about stories about nature’ are being remembered, repeated, and transmitted across centuries – and through which channels – can we gain a deeper understanding of attitudes toward environmental change today.” Thus, the aim here is also to subvert the nationalist homogenization of a multilayered story.

Pilz provides us with a rich historical trajectory that begins with the catalogue of trees found in Edmund Spenser’s sixteenth-century epic poem *The Faerie Queene*, in which Irish forests, following a well-established English rhetorical tradition, are politicized as hiding places for Irish rebels and threaten the sanctity of the English plantation. She then traces later narratives about deforestation through the writings of Lady Morgan, Maria Edgeworth, and Emily Lawless, which strike new avenues for Irish Environmental Humanities scholarship.

Margaret Kelleher’s chapter “Famine and Ecology, 1750–1900” provides a crucial historical perspective on the repeated crises of hunger leading up to the Great Irish Famine of the mid-nineteenth century: “Although the Great Irish Famine of 1845–1851 is the best-known occurrence, the experience of large-scale famine in Ireland was of much longer duration.” Ireland of course had experienced a number of famines (smaller in scale) before the devastation of the 1840s. Kelleher points to “periods of great hardship in 1736–57, 1782–84, 1800–01, 1816–18, 1822, and 1831,” and relies on the environmental history of the eighteenth century for a *longue durée* historization of the Great Hunger: “An arctic winter in late 1739 and early 1740 was succeeded by an extremely cold and wet winter from 1740–41 and another freezing winter a year later, with extremely dry summers in between.” The enduring historical pattern of economic destitution, hunger, and disease in colonial Ireland, prior to the Great Irish Famine, elucidates the matrix of ecology, empire, and economy that constructed that disaster. Importantly, the chapter’s frame of enquiry, informed by the “conceptual vocabulary” of Environmental Humanities scholarship, returns multiple times to the climatic conditions that evolve into full-scale imperial disasters. Despite the well-established assessment of critical silence surrounding the Great Irish Famine, the numerous literary examples that Kelleher supplies allow us to recognize “the affective gap that can result between the scale of the catastrophe being described and how it is experienced by individuals.”

Apart from her observations of the variety and complexity of Irish phrases associated with hunger, disease, and pestilence, of special note is Kelleher’s reading of the *Tables of Death* that was supplied as a two-volume addition to
the Census of Ireland for the Year of 1851. “This publication, of over 1,200 pages, is an astonishing (and underused) environmental resource which contains not only many statistical estimates of famine mortality but also long discursive essays on the history of pestilence and disease.” Indeed, it is the erasure of the memory (folkloric, narrativized, remembered) of disasters past and catastrophes endured that further reduces our already reductive environmental imaginaries in the Anthropocene. The contemporary moment, in which futures appear alarmingly adjacent, doubly highlights the urgency of environmental history and of literary and cultural assessments of past disasters, whether they are economically constructed (such as modern famines) or endured (such as the period following the Mount Tambora eruption). Kelleher notes that William Wilde, who was largely responsible for the discursive essays in the Tables of Death volumes, himself utilized a variety of sources – the Annals, Brehon laws, Irish medical manuscripts, and meteorological data. Strikingly, Kelleher points to an 1830 edition of Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy where a Doctor Sweeney is quoted as asking the following questions: “Whether we have reason to believe that a change has taken place in the climate of Ireland, and if such change has occurred, through what period can we trace it, and to what causes should we assign it?” A recognition of the critical need for deeper histories is especially pertinent if we are examining the attritional and exponential forms of slow violence that Rob Nixon convincingly highlighted in his influential study.12

The legacy of hunger underwriting Irish history brings special significance to the discourse of the country’s food sovereignty in the contemporary period. Miriam Mara’s chapter “The Political Ecology of Food and Hunger, 1950–present” attends to issues shaping Ireland’s food sovereignty today by paying attention to the “materialities of food production, its distribution, and changing consumption patterns, which reveal the intersections between the environmental and political in food policy.” Mara identifies these issues as important themes in Irish literature from the 1950s to the present. While there are historical continuities to consider, Mara notes that that “the environmental and political situation around food in Ireland shifts over time – from wartime rationing during and after the Emergency 1939–48 – to the unsteady balance between environmental health and food production under European Union Common Agricultural Policy.”

The global agroeconomy, an industrialized monster of late capitalism, is at the forefront of climate change mitigation discourses. If there is one thing that individuals can address in their daily life that has a significant

12 See Nixon, Slow Violence, pp. 1–44.