

*Introduction*  
*Making Maps: Irish Literature in Transition, 1780–1830*  
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Between 1780 and 1830, a highly distinctive body of imaginative writing emerged in Ireland. Novels, poems, and plays were formed by and in turn helped to mould the linguistic, political, historical, and geographical divisions characteristic of Irish life. The intense and turbulent creative effort involved bore witness to a key transition at the beginning of the nineteenth century: the emergence of modern Irish literature as a distinct cultural category. During these years, Irish literature came to consist of a recognisable body of work, which later generations could draw on, quote, anthologise, and debate.

In the period itself, however, there was uncertainty as to the particular meanings called up by ‘Irish literature’. In 1828 the Scottish theologian Christopher Anderson referred to ‘Irish literature, properly so called’. The term, he implied, was only appropriate for works written in Irish: ‘the language . . . of a people’.<sup>1</sup> There was little by way of respect for that people or their fallen literary culture, however, in his evangelising call for biblical translations from Hebrew into Irish. When Thomas Crofton Croker published his *Researches in the South of Ireland* in 1824, he also reserved the term ‘Irish literature’ for an older body of writing in the Irish language, including religious and historical manuscripts. Again, the assessment was hardly positive. The ills of Irish literature were the fault of both the writing itself – ‘monotonous folios’, ‘Monkish chronicles’, ‘legendary records of an age of ignorance and superstition’ – and its readers, who combined the dual evils of high and low culture. ‘The admirers of Irish literature are either so learnedly abstruse, or so profoundly ignorant and illiterate, that their very commendation is injurious to the cause they advocate.’<sup>2</sup> Yet in the course of the chapter of his *Researches* devoted to topic of ‘Literature’, Crofton Croker conjured up a changing contemporary cultural world, where ‘every cow-boy’ had a few words of Latin and the village schoolmaster quoted popular political poems that ‘pass into print, and, in the shape of penny ballads, obtain considerable and important circulation’.<sup>3</sup>

In its approach to the field of ‘Hibernian belles-lettres’, *Researches in the South of Ireland* captured a concept on the cusp of change. As ‘one of the “new” discourses’ of the late eighteenth century, literature began to take its modern place alongside ‘the applied sciences, travels, news, current opinion’, related but separate to antiquarian scholarship, history, and politics.<sup>4</sup> Yet these same decades saw debate rather than consensus regarding the changing meanings of literature itself, a word that in 1780 still comprised a range of older meanings, including a learned familiarity with books and older authors, Gaelic, classical, and continental. The idea of literature gained a range of specialised resonances by the end of the eighteenth century, connected to the distinctiveness of creative and imaginative writing and the particularity of place. As Raymond Williams describes the changes, ‘[t]he sense of “a nation” having “a literature” is a crucial social and cultural, probably also political, development’.<sup>5</sup> The wider development is usually understood in terms of the romantic movement in art and letters, and connected also to the German theorisation of romantic nationalism from Herder onwards, discussed in Chapter 18 of this volume by Joep Leerssen, who debunks the idea of a late manifestation of romanticism in Ireland and calls for a wider engagement with the cultural practices of these years.

But there are problems in advancing such an account, many of which cluster around the emerging categories of Irish and English literature: the former a term that bore the mark of cultural difference even as the latter came to stand in for civilisation itself. Williams’s classic account of the emergence of the modern understanding of the literature relates the latter to a wider definition of culture, itself a word that ‘came into English thinking in the period which we commonly describe as that of the Industrial Revolution’.<sup>6</sup> Significant as it is, the Englishness of Williams’s story stands out in the Irish context, and a signal aim of this Introduction is to reorient our understanding of Irish romantic literature, plotting some key terms and laying out new routes. As Tom Dunne has argued, Ireland underwent its own ‘cultural revolution’ in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, ‘the processes and traumas’ of which ‘are still little understood’.<sup>7</sup> The present volume describes the formation of an Irish literature in transition as one of those ‘processes’. It shows how the quicksilver pace of historical change between and across the two islands over these decades incited debates about cultural difference and fostered a new, national literature, even as Ireland was shaken by violence and subject to a raft of assimilationist state policies.

The eighteenth-century dominance of Ascendancy writers began to wane in this period, a set of transitions that can be traced in part via the shifting reputation of the novelist Maria Edgeworth. In 1827 the aspiring Catholic writer Gerald Griffin respectfully described Edgeworth as ‘a writer who was the first to put the sickle into the burthened field of Irish manners’, before going on to lament her limited ‘opportunities of observation’.<sup>8</sup> This sense of a shared if fraught enterprise gave way to a stricter cultural politics, with terms such as ‘native literature’ and ‘Celtic literature’ in use from the 1840s onwards. Writing in 1847 in the pages of the *Nation*, John Mitchel acknowledged that Ireland had authors (‘many, and of the highest order’) but insisted that it had ‘no literature – in its widest sense – that we can call our own distinctly’.<sup>9</sup> Dismissing (among others) Oliver Goldsmith, Edmund Burke, Jeremiah Joseph Callanan, Thomas Moore, Gerald Griffin, and John and Michael Banim, Mitchel brought the stern cultural judgements of Young Ireland to bear on ‘the corps of Irish penmen’. Such a call for a wider literature also meant a narrowing of cultural range. By 1913 Lady Gregory felt she had to check and correct her earlier ‘delight’ in reading Edgeworth, remarking of *The Absentee* (1812): ‘But as regards the life of Ireland and the people of Ireland, they are patronising, artificial, taking a bird’s-eye view of a simple peasantry.’<sup>10</sup>

Sharing a close semantic correspondence with literacy, literature in the nineteenth century retained its earlier links to ‘an ability to read and a condition of being well read’.<sup>11</sup> But who were the Irish people and what was their literature? From the mid-eighteenth century, Ireland entered an extraordinary period of demographic expansion, ‘sensational by the standards of the day’.<sup>12</sup> Though exact figures are difficult to establish, a population of 5 million in 1800 had already risen to 8.5 million on the brink of the Great Famine in 1845. When a census was taken in 1821, the Irish population was measured at 7 million, compared with 8.6 million in England and 1.6 million in Scotland in 1801. Dublin was the second city of the empire, Belfast was growing as a regional centre of industrial revolution, and Cork thrived as a major naval and trading port. Yet living standards declined across the country, despite a war-time boom, while famine, disease, and migration became established facts of Irish life.

In Lady Morgan’s novel *O’Donnell* (1814), the servant McRory describes Ireland to his master as a place of great beauty that cannot sustain its people:

for sure they say Ireland *bates* the world in regard of the *soil*, to say nothing of the beautiful rivers, and every *convaincence* in life, which there is, surely; and what is most particular, and mighty extraordinary, is that for all that, one half of the *inhabitants* lives in London, that's the quality, and the *other half* is in America.

Morgan's vision of a divided society and a scattered people is expressed in a 'voluminous epistle' penned by McRory himself, part of a letter that is otherwise filled with details of written documents but ends with a message to be passed on to his fiancé, Martha, telling her 'that I don't write to her for a reason I have, she not knowing how to read'.<sup>13</sup>

The first two chapters of this volume capture the transitional process whereby existing forms of literature, including a 'vibrant culture of partial literacy', took on new meaning in the rapidly changing world of Anglophone print.<sup>14</sup> With literacy on the rise, a burgeoning popular culture saw the increased circulation of chapbooks, ballads, romances, almanacs, and reading primers: 'By the late eighteenth century', according to Niall Ó Ciosáin, 'there was a fairly stable corpus of texts and types of texts which formed an Irish popular printed literature, most of them characteristic of individuals and communities which were partially literate'.<sup>15</sup> Lesa Ní Mhunghaile's chapter (Chapter 1) helps us see how perceptions of a Gaelic culture in decline spurred new kinds of writing in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. The relationship between scribal and print traditions left its mark in a literature characterised by lavish annotation: the characteristic paratextual devices of Irish writers such as Sydney Owenson (Lady Morgan) and Charles Robert Maturin surely owe much to such older practices as glossing and the role of the scribe as medium for the revelation of a hidden past. Matthew Campbell's discussion of Irish poetry in terms of translation, authenticity, and quality (Chapter 4) further explores the interrelationship between literature and its shaping linguistic and cultural contexts. As Joep Leerssen has remarked, however, literature in Irish not only was 'literary' in its mode or style but 'functioned also in a performative, communitarian, face-to-face setting'.<sup>16</sup> The transitions provoked by a flourishing popular culture led Seán Ó Tuama to ask 'is not eighteenth-century Gaelic Ireland, in many respects, a period of extraordinary cultural growth rather than of decay?'<sup>17</sup>

Yet the asymmetries characteristic of Irish life continued to form what Tom Dunne calls 'the colonial character of Irish Romantic literature'.<sup>18</sup> Some 95 per cent of the population were Catholics, while power and property were concentrated in the hands of the remaining 5 per cent – stark figures that express the reality of a Protestant church 'orientated to a small group of

relatively recent settlers, and whose prevailing ethos alienated it from the bulk of the Irish people'.<sup>19</sup> Vincent Morley tracks the literary expression of the 'close connection' between Catholicism and nationality from the late seventeenth century onwards and gives examples of early nineteenth-century Irish-language poetry that marked the death of George IV and the coming of Catholic Emancipation. In the 1820s and 1830s, 'macaronic compositions designed to cater for an increasingly bilingual audience were not uncommon'.<sup>20</sup> Such mixed forms remind us of the ongoing process of transition between and across linguistic, religious, and political divides. In the case of religion, there has been a tendency to guide Irish literary history along opposing confessional pathways, Protestant and Catholic. While the latter is often framed as a problematic 'Catholic question' within discussions of British romanticism, in Irish literary history our tendency has been to tell the story of 'the emergence of a native Catholic middle class from its penal bondage' as a journey towards a fractured modernity, torn by the calls for a culture 'at once faithful to a revamped notion of the traditional and appropriate to a modern civil polity'.<sup>21</sup> But such an account narrows our focus to the extent that we may miss the multiple ways in which Catholicism provided a vocabulary that underpinned broader accounts of Irish culture for decades to come, as ideas such as casuistry, secrecy, and the popular itself worked their way into definitions of Irish literature.

A related issue concerns classicism and its continuities in Irish romanticism. The usual narrative of English literature over these years describes a passage from classical and neoclassical imitation to the 'extraordinary flowering of the creative idea in what we now call Romantic thought'.<sup>22</sup> Even as that 'creative idea' took shape, however, it continued to pass through classical moulds, and in Ireland there persisted a lively popular culture of classical learning: 'Cesar, Justin, Julius, Florence, Terence, and Horace, are Christian names not uncommon in the south of Ireland', remarks Crofton Croker. In Sydney Owenson's *Patriotic Sketches* (1807) we find a lively and detailed account of the figure of the scholar, scribe, and hedge school master Thaddeus Connellan, whose Sligo 'lyceum' is filled with young people reading Virgil. He explains to Owenson, 'with the utmost gravity', his plan to translate 'the Eneid and some of Terence's plays into Irish. "The latter, he continued, I will teach to my scholars, who may play it yet upon one of the great London stages to admiration."'<sup>23</sup>

Connellan's translations may not have reached London, but such accounts had a long afterlife and the Sligo classroom scene will be vividly familiar to readers of Brian Friel's *Translations* (1980). In Chapter 2 of this

volume, Norman Vance tracks the continuing resonances of classical learning across confessional and political lines and shows how Irish classicism began to make its own national history.

### Literary Prospects

*Irish Literature in Transition, 1780–1830* breaks with previous accounts of Irish culture in adopting a form of periodisation familiar from literary rather than political history. Although the years between 1780 and 1830 are widely recognised as a period of considerable significance for ‘the actual history of literature’, we have tended to conceive of Irish writing in units of time that follow narratives standard in the writing of history.<sup>24</sup> The first volume of the *Cambridge History of Irish Literature* (2006) borrowed the forms of periodisation conventional within Irish historiography for its ambitious narrative of Irish literature in two languages over fifteen centuries, adopting 1800 and pre- and post-Famine as watershed dates for the literature of the late eighteenth and nineteenth century. The looser and more capacious structures developed within the five volumes of the *Field Day Anthology* (1999 and 2003) allowed its section divisions to cross centuries and encompass broader periods, but the question of the literary disappeared in the process, as Fiona Stafford remarks in Chapter 21 of this book.

That question, though, was alive throughout the period itself. In 1837, seeking to address ‘the interesting subject of the literary prospects and the intellectual state of this country’,<sup>25</sup> the *Dublin University Magazine* found that the task was made all the more urgent by the then distended state of a ‘body of English literature’ that was itself in a state of transition in these decades. Most probably authored by Isaac Butt, the Donegal-born Protestant conservative and lawyer who would go on to found the Home Rule movement, an essay entitled ‘On the Past and Present State of Literature in Ireland’ described how Irish literature sought definition in the context of an overflowing English culture:

A style, expanded beyond all due bounds, swoln [*sic.*] with a new language, the result of new theories, and stripped of the old harmony and terse idiom of a style that had gradually arisen from the study of the classic models, came into vogue, and obtained possession of the rising generation. By this prose and poetry were alike affected; and the whole body of English literature passed into a *state of transition*, the less perceivable as the critic partook of the spirit of the time.<sup>26</sup>

That final phrase ('the spirit of the time') resonates with the gloomy cultural predications of William Hazlitt in *The Spirit of the Age* (1824) and Thomas Carlyle in 'Signs of the Times' (1829). From such negativity, though, proceeded a bold act of cultural imagination. 'On the Past and Present State of Literature in Ireland' can be read as 'the first attempt at a theory of Anglo-Irish literature'. As befits a new scheme, it is notably characterised by 'hesitations, regrets and recognitions' and pauses in particular in relation to the question of 'the populace of Ireland'. In Butt's account, they constitute a backward peasantry who were nonetheless well informed regarding 'the politics of the day' and expert in low forms of logic and casuistry.<sup>27</sup> Looking for literature and finding only politics, the essay specifically blames Catholicism for the discontents of Irish culture. The cunning of Maynooth was taking the place of centuries' worth of English civilisation, claims Butt, who found trifling pamphlets and '[t]he miserable cant of a barbaric patriotism' in the place of 'the Chaucers, and the Gowers, and the Surreys, and the Spensers'. At least one Irish writer of this period, William Maginn, was to make a special art of cant and 'humbug' in all its forms: in Chapter 16 of the present volume, David Latané discusses Maginn's brilliant satires of lazy literary fashions and explores the conflation of the Cork writer with his *Blackwood's* alter-ego, 'Odoherly'.

Among the 'rising generation' discussed by Butt – the poets who came to fame in the period after Waterloo – were many who, like Percy Bysshe Shelley and Lord Byron, criticised existing government policy towards Ireland. On both islands, definitions of literature were made and remade in the movement between culture and politics – what Butt identifies as the 'double dependence' between 'the literature of a nation, and of this nation in particular' and 'its political state'. Such an understanding of the relationship between literature and politics expressed what Raymond Williams calls 'a *general* transition between thinking about art and thinking about society', characteristic of nineteenth-century thought more broadly.<sup>28</sup> But in the case of Ireland, the diagnosis of a 'double dependence' shored up a narrative of failure: Butt complains that '[n]o literature had yet taken root in Ireland' and that '[t]he spirit of the time did not favour the colonization of literature into Ireland'. With literature imagined as a foreign cultivar to be planted in Ireland, it is perhaps unsurprising that none of the writers discussed in this volume earn so much as a mention by Butt, even while the contemporary reputations of authors such as Maria Edgeworth and Thomas Moore ran high on both sides of the Irish Sea.

Meanwhile, a truly popular literature seemed an elusive, even a failed prospect to the young Cork Catholic poet Jeremiah Joseph Callanan, who

left the following observations, dated Easter Sunday 1829, among his manuscripts:

Irish Literature – The L<sup>re</sup> which flows from the rude mass of the people can never be good. May show some Genius. It is with the upper and more civilized classes it must originate to be good. It was not the case in Ireland.<sup>29</sup>

At once holding ‘Irish Literature’ above the common life of the people of Ireland and wondering about their potential ‘Genius’, Callanan’s comments testify to contradictions of class, education, and locality. In the same manuscript notes, Callanan speculates that the Irish language may be ‘an obstacle to the improvement of the people’.<sup>30</sup> These manuscripts, largely written in English with some notes in Irish and in Latin, were gathered by the antiquarian John Windle following Callanan’s untimely death in Lisbon in 1829. ‘The Literary Remains of J. J. Callanan’ include scattered observations on literature, aesthetics, and history, prayers and hymns, botanical notes, historical legends, letters to friends, and recollections of Callanan’s time in Maynooth seminary. The notes often circle back to the question of Ireland and its culture, expressed in the self-questioning style suggested above.

Original compositions also fill Callanan’s pages. To read drafts of such accomplished poems as ‘Gougane Barra’ and ‘The Outlaw of Loch Lene’ alongside anxious questions about literature and language is to encounter transitions painfully experienced on the ground. Callanan’s uncertainty combines with some of the most powerful lines of English-language poetry written in early nineteenth-century Ireland. Bernard O’Donoghue has remarked that Callanan pioneered ‘a poetic form that is entirely unparalleled in standard English, often alternating the loose long lines with short lines of plain-style’, as in the ‘mysteriously effective’ lines from ‘The Outlaw of Loch Lene’: ‘My bed was the ground, my roof the greenwood above, | And the wealth that I sought one far kind glance from my love.’<sup>31</sup> Callanan’s status as transitional figure is more fully discussed by Gregory Schirmer in Chapter 12 of the present volume.

Both Callanan and Butt took ‘Irish literature’ to mean a body of writing that expressed a connection not only to the island itself but to its majority Catholic population, a relationship, that is, to a vital yet elusive reality. Callanan earnestly promises ‘to confine whatever share of talent I may possess to Irish subjects’ in the hope that he will ‘have rendered my country some service’. Meanwhile Butt writes feelingly of the capacity of literature ‘to humanize the land’, sounding an echo, perhaps, of William Wordsworth’s ‘songs | Of humanized society’. Where Wordsworth,



though, writes in *The Excursion* of ‘Culture, universally bestowed | On Britain’s noble Race in freedom born’, Butt must imagine a literature that draws on and redirects ‘local discontent’, ‘agitation’, and ‘religious animosity’.<sup>32</sup> Once more, the sheer numerousness of the Irish-speaking population – Callanan’s ‘rude mass of the people’ – helped to form a sense of Irish literature as a project that moves between an abundant popular culture and the limited resources of print. In both cases, the open-ended questions asked of ‘Irish literature’ help us to see the rawness and provisionality of an emerging cultural debate, the terms of which were to harden with the decades.

Though not recognised as such in 1837, the period between 1780 and 1830 can now be seen as the crucible of Irish writing in English. ‘Ireland is at her humanities,’ writes Butt, acknowledging the ‘poetry, essays, reviews, tales, critical dissertations, without measure or respite’ that flowed along the public roads to reach the offices of the *Dublin University Magazine* in the 1830s.<sup>33</sup> Imaginative writing took its place amidst a complex commercial network of relations between writers, publishers, booksellers, and readers. In terms of Irish book history, 1801 saw the extension of British copyright legislation to Ireland, leading to the closure of many booksellers. These were turbulent years for publishers accustomed to operate at the edges of the law and an indigenous industry did not re-emerge until the 1820s and 1830s. None of these changes remain external to Irish writing but rather were reconceived within novels, poems, and plays in self-reflexive ways.<sup>34</sup>

### Contest and Change between Literature and History

These transitions are at the centre of the story this volume tells: a gathering sense of literature as a body of imaginative work with specific national dimension; an emerging relationship between ‘the people’ and the printed page; a halting movement towards a definition of Irish literature that combines theory and practice in uneven ways.

The fifty years discussed in this book were marked by revolution, reaction, and reform – political developments that were in turn shaped by and reflected within a turbulent and intense literary culture. Maria Edgeworth’s decision to date the action of *Castle Rackrent* via a subtitle announcing a story relating to ‘the facts and manners of the Irish squires before 1782’ suggests the relevance of Grattan’s parliament and the Volunteer movement as a framing date for Irish literature. The election of Richard Brinsley Sheridan to Westminster in 1780 can also help us to

develop a sense of an Irish literature concerned with questions of performed voice and public representation, with a focus on London that was to intensify in the post-Union period.

Yet the story of Irish literature might begin in Belfast rather than either Dublin or London, and Jennifer Orr's chapter in this volume (Chapter 7) tells the story from that starting point. The 1784 publication of William Drennan's *Letters of Orellana, an Irish Helot* (discussed by Norman Vance in Chapter 2) drew on a resonant language of slavery to call for the revival of the Volunteer spirit. With his ringing injunction to readers – 'You are all native Irish' – Drennan argues that 'the public education of the people of Ireland about all aspects of Irish culture could transform their negative self-images derived from English oppression and prejudice into positive new images that would encourage new social attitudes and reform.'<sup>35</sup> Drennan's powerful invocation of 'a republic of letters arising to illuminate the land' shares Callanan's and Butt's sense of a protean literature of the people yet to achieve its final form.<sup>36</sup> Such visions fed into the United Irish rebellion of 1798 but were also part of a wider culture of reform. The extensive body of correspondence exchanged between Drennan and his sister Martha Drennan McTier charted the private contours of an intensely engaged public life, covering topics such as education, slavery, abolition, and empire. McTier's letters in particular voiced a 'muted challenge to gendered boundaries, as she rejected the stylistic conventions of eighteenth-century women's letter writing' and earned 'a literary reputation'.<sup>37</sup> Meanwhile, a fifteen-year-old Maria Edgeworth read and admired Drennan, described by her father, Richard Lovell Edgeworth, as 'the Irish Rousseau'.<sup>38</sup>

The 1798 rebellion followed a decade or more of political ferment, drawing energies from a varied but connected set of Enlightenment concepts including progress, toleration, and republicanism. English literature also informed the growth of Irish revolutionary ideas. Discussing the 'broad literary tastes' that shaped United Irish song and ballads, Mary Helen Thuente lists among the books to be found in the Society's library: 'James Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson*; a six volume edition of Johnson's *Works*; Johnson's *Lives of the English Poets*; a six volume edition of Alexander Pope's works; and an eight volume edition of Jonathan Swift's works'. Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and William Godwin's *Political Justice* are also found on the list, alongside a wide range of travels, histories, and books on the natural sciences.<sup>39</sup> Belfast feminist Mary Anne McCracken drew on *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* to challenge the exclusion of women from the United