Flying high? Culture, criticism, theory since 1990

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Lucy McDiarmid begins her review of *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature* by reflecting on the upholstery of Aer Lingus seats, which features quotations from James Connolly, Yeats, Shaw, and lines from the sixteenth-century anonymous Gaelic lament for Kilcash. The quotations on the seats knit together the recurrent dynamics of Irish culture and society that have been interwoven since the twelfth century: tradition and modernity, arrival and departure, native and foreign, art and politics, Irish and Anglo-Irish, the Gaelic and English tongues. The soft furnishings also showcase Irish writing in its broad sense: literary and political writing, and both official languages in Ireland (we could also braid in Ulster-Scots, Hiberno-English and so on). This intricately layered fabric, with its subtle range of shades, might give material articulation to Declan Kiberd's vision of Irish cultural studies as a multi-coloured quilt.¹ Yet the celebration of Irish writing is not only an expression of national confidence; it also serves an external audience. The seats display an Irishness that can be readily commodified, and which the former national carrier (it was privatised in 2006) can transport and market abroad. The upholstery asks the travelling eye to recognise the integrity of its vision, and share its self-definition, of an Ireland realised through its writing. Irish culture thus confidently declares itself, and has clearance to go anywhere. Writ large in the interior décor of the passenger cabin is the reality that Ireland is now a global brand, as McDiarmid observes:

Gradually, since the 1960s, and more intensely since the 1990s and the early days of the Celtic Tiger, Ireland has been presenting itself to the world for international recognition: the Aer Lingus upholstery and the first three volumes of the Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing are low and high versions of the same impulse, phenomena from the same wonder decade as the election of Ireland's first women President, the awarding of the Nobel Prize for Literature to Seamus Heaney, and the signing of the Good Friday Agreement.²

To the hall of fame on the airline seats we might add John Banville (2005) and Anne Enright (2007) as recent Booker Prize winners, and Paul Muldoon as the winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry and the Griffin International Prize for Excellence in Poetry in 2003. Heaney and Muldoon have also been successive Oxford Professors of Poetry. This is part of the wider, continual branding of Irish culture, from the worldwide appeal of its folk traditions to its 'postmodern' reiterations.³ As Diane Negra and others have recently demonstrated, Irishness constitutes an elastic reference point that is at once everywhere and nowhere.⁴

The aircraft metaphor is also invoked by Claire Connolly to scrutinise contemporary Ireland:

What does Ireland look like? Is it Ireland itself or its image that confronts the viewer? Where do you need to be in order to get a clear view? And, finally, is the cost of critical comprehension a rejection of the rich texture of the terrain, or can these layered images (land, home, mountain, veins, skin, paper) themselves enhance our interpretations?⁵

For all its mobility and panoramic perspective, the aerial view is not enough: the lofty, carefree perspective unencumbered by the soil and by geographical boundaries still needs to be grounded in the multi-layered terrain it overlooks. This is to stress that Irish cultural history has never been organised around false dichotomies of exile and rootedness, insularity and cosmopolitanism: air and earth, flight and fixity are trajectories in constant, and often productive, tension. As Connolly points out, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries provide ample evidence that 'the experience of those who lived on the island had both an Irish and an international dimension'.⁶ The conventional oppositions of east-west and north-south that have shaped modern Irish culture must also now be re-thought in global terms. The new routes of exchange are not just between Ireland and Britain, Northern Ireland and the Republic, Ireland and America, but also between Ireland and an eastward-leaning Europe, and between Ireland and the developing world. As we shall see, it is the case that contemporary Ireland has more people – returning natives, tourists, migrant workers, asylum seekers – flying in than flying out.

To tease out this aerial metaphor yet further, we might also reflect on the death of Tony Ryan, founder of Ryanair, in early October 2007. The Ryan family issued a statement that expressed pride in 'his spirit of entrepreneurship which created enterprise and opportunity for many people in this country and abroad'. Dan Loughrey, chair of Ireland's Air Transport Users Council, remarked that Ryan would be remembered

as someone who ‘revolutionised the aviation industry in Ireland and abroad’.⁷ Ryan’s success, reflected in the company he launched, epitomises a distinctive brand for modern Ireland. Ryanair emerged from humble origins in the 1980s, carrying small numbers of passengers between Ireland and the UK, to become one of the most successful European carriers. Under the leadership of Michael O’Leary, it has earned a reputation as a bullish advocate of fare-slashing, cost-cutting air travel, and has been involved in a protracted takeover battle with Aer Lingus since 2006. Aggressively expansionist, and willing to use airports situated away from the main European hubs, Ryanair’s no-frills approach seems to offer greater social mobility, very much in keeping with the model of an expanding Europe of small, ambitious nation-states that enthusiastically embrace the potential (and the risks) of globalisation.

Whereas, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Irish Revival had fiercely rejected many aspects of the ‘filthy modern tide’, the situation appeared to have been reversed by the end of the century (and into a new millennium) with the enthusiastic embrace of modernity. Yet this antithesis does not bear rigorous scrutiny. Both periods, which harnessed various forms of cultural production to (re)define Irishness amid rapid social and economic change, were at once animated by, and ambivalent towards, modernisation. The Ryanair story might suggest that innovative, competitive Ireland is finally surfing the wave, yet much of Ireland’s economic development has been underpinned by foreign capital investment, and its skilled but relatively low-cost workforce is subject to decisions made in boardrooms thousands of miles away. An offshore subsidiary of multinational capital, Ireland is at once at the cutting edge of globalism and vulnerable to its instabilities. It can thus identify with China and India, as well as with the great centres of corporate power, and its experience of going global involves continuing inequalities as well as buccaneering expansion.

Just as Ireland’s position within the global economy must be questioned, so its status in relation to ‘global’ culture also requires careful scrutiny. Since the early 1990s, the tourist industry has yoked together commerce and culture in ways that have variously reaffirmed and challenged its established brand identity. Even as Ireland fashions an image as a high-tech knowledge economy and a dynamic hub for global commerce, the tourist industry markets heritage, a rich literary culture, celebrated folk traditions and unspoilt (but ‘interpreted’) landscape at the Atlantic fringe of Europe. Michael Cronin and Barbara O’Connor have charted the distance travelled between the publication in 1924 of Daniel Corkery’s *The Hidden Ireland*, which chronicled the culture that had existed outside the Anglo-Irish Big House, and *The*

Hidden Ireland: Accommodation in Private Heritage Homes, a tourist brochure that appeared in 1998. The latter, which airbrushes out a history of poverty and land conflict from its picture of elegant gardens and tree-lined parks, 'articulates the values of a new Ireland whose self-image is crucially mediated by tourism'.⁸ Tourism has been central to modernisation in Ireland, but it is now two-way traffic. The old antithesis between native and visitor has begun to break down, as a prosperous Irish population holidays at home and abroad, indulging in retail tourism, visiting heritage and craft centres and enjoying golf and fishing breaks, their lifestyle choices mirroring those of foreign tourists. In their mutual reliance on 'symbol-processing', the tourism and culture industries have a symbiotic relationship.⁹ Yet this symbol-processing conceals anomalies. As Cronin and O'Connor emphasise, there is still a Hidden Ireland, one characterised not by cosmopolitan patterns of consumption but by deprivation and 'vastly restricted social mobility'.¹⁰

Hugh Linehan observes that '[f]or the last 40 years the Irish government has had a schizophrenic attitude to promoting its image internationally, torn between presenting itself as a modern, dynamic society ideal for investment by multinational conglomerates, and an idyllic, prelapsarian culture unsullied by the twentieth century'.¹¹ We might recall here the evocative advert for Caffrey's Ale in the mid-1990s, with its potent blend of flame-haired maiden, horse clattering down a village street, and plangent traditional music juxtaposed with the pulsing beat of a crowded bar in urban USA. This symbol-processing also harks back to the Industrial Development Authority's 'Young Europeans' posters in the 1980s, which proclaimed the Republic as both a romantic rural paradise and a perfect site for multinational investment. Thus the advertising campaign could situate sharply suited executives against the backdrop of unspoilt landscapes, Newgrange and neo-Gothic castles. Luke Gibbons argues that this 'neo-traditionalism' with its 'fabricated relationship to the past' could happily co-exist with the new information technologies, since it manipulates the past 'in order to establish new hierarchies in the present'.¹²

Thus the apparent congruence of cultural and economic success may conceal a fearful symmetry between socio-economic and cultural dependency. One recent essay, for example, has suggested that Ireland's prominent position in world literature may be more questionable than at first appears.¹³ The universalising model of development would situate Ireland as a marginal culture in the context of wider European and Atlantic modernity. In this account, the traffic is inevitably one-way, with the margin a pale imitation of the centre. In the current moment, Ireland is in thrall to the dominant values, and the consumer

technology, fashion, music and cinema that emanate from the metropolitan centre (even if inward investment means that many of these products are produced in and distributed from Ireland itself). Any Irish cultural production that registers on the world stage can be relatively easily assimilated, homogenised, branded. As such, there would be no sense that Ireland could invent, initiate or challenge this hegemonic dominance. Far from being a belated participant in the modern world, however, the Irish experience from the nineteenth century onwards has often been of exposure to modernisation in its rawest forms. In the contemporary period, this capacity for rapid change has led to the significant liberalisation of laws on homosexuality, and the Republic has also led the way on social and environmental legislation, such as the ban on smoking in public, and a law on the disposal of plastic bags. Equally, Irish culture has not just been malignly affected by modernisation: it has often helped to drive it. Cities across the globe have vivid Irish heritages and histories, the product of waves of emigration that obliged Irish people to adopt new languages, customs and practices with startling speed. Culture has played a crucial role in projecting Ireland outwards onto a worldwide stage, a process that has intensified in recent years. As Paddy Logue has claimed: 'Our cultural influence extends through the whole world in many different forms. This process has been called the hibernicisation of Europe but it is fair now to talk about the hibernicisation of the world. Our music, dance, films, pubs, literature, theatre, athletes are everywhere'.¹⁴ While there is a degree of hyperbole about this statement, it testifies to a creative confidence in Irish artists that can be traced in this volume.

Thus Ireland's historical experience refutes simplistic margin/centre, tradition/modernity polarities. This ability to navigate but not be engulfed by an expanding world, to harness modernisation but to remain equivocal about its benefits, is perhaps epitomised in recent years by the political campaigning of Bono and Bob Geldof. The government reception held for U2 by Charles Haughey after their North American tour in 1987, when they had graced the cover of *Time* magazine, marked 'the extent to which acceptance of popular music has been seen as a necessary part of modernization'.¹⁵ An Irish band had truly gone global, yet it was U2's international success that gave Bono a platform from which to question the impact of globalisation. Equally, Bob Geldof's credentials as an activist who has mounted a passionate and provocative challenge to the First World since the 1980s have been arguably enhanced rather than vitiated by his comfortable negotiation of the elite political sphere and royalty. The energy and anger driving much Irish popular music in the late 1970s and early 1980s, reflected

in the campaigning of Bono and Geldof, can be set against the internationalism of acts such as the Corrs, Boyzone and Westlife in recent years. Whereas the former period was characterised by the questioning of pieties, this export brand wore its connection to Ireland relatively lightly.¹⁶ In contrast, Geldof and Bono operate as critical insiders who exploit a consumer appetite for Irish culture both to challenge and mobilise metropolitan audiences to redress the inequalities of globalisation. Both figures may emblemise the ‘new-Irish intersection of money, art and politics’,¹⁷ but they also represent dissenting voices. A comparison can be drawn between their central involvement in the ‘Make Poverty History’ campaign and the Robinson Presidency. Her election as the first female President of the Republic was regarded as an unambiguous triumph of the modern over tradition, and she was constructed by some as the face of liberalising, corporate Ireland. Robinson, however, strongly questioned the impact of globalisation during her Presidency and in her subsequent role as UN Commissioner for Human Rights. These examples attest to a ‘sophisticated critical awareness of the nature of today’s international order [that] is in marked contrast to the parochialism which characterises dominant views of Irish society’.¹⁸

The ‘Celtic Tiger’ may have already receded into myth, but the ongoing debates over the impact of this creature do not centre on economic or fiscal reform; more fundamentally, they engage in a struggle for the past and for the future. Roy Foster characterises the competing views of the Tiger phenomenon as a contest between ‘Boosters’ and ‘Begrudgers’.¹⁹ The Booster camp can certainly marshal an array of impressive statistics to demonstrate the Republic’s remarkable transformation. A National Economic and Social Council (NESC) strategy document declared in 1999 that ‘Ireland reinvented itself during the 1990s’, and by some measures this ‘reinvention’ has continued apace. In 2004 the *Economist* ranked the Republic second in its league table measuring ‘quality of life’, and it has also been placed at the top of list of ‘most globalised’ countries. Yet others have argued that the predicate of this ‘new’ Ireland has been ‘subservient integration into a radical free-market or Anglo-American informational capitalism’, and a pattern of growth that produces extreme disparities in wealth.²⁰ The Celtic Tiger phenomenon was subjected to astringent criticism from many quarters. John Waters acerbically termed it ‘Ireland’s first secular miracle . . . if a miracle is defined as a happening for which nobody can provide a rational explanation’.²¹ The ‘virtual reality’ of its boom was founded upon ‘the successful exploitation of subsidies, tax concessions and other loopholes by multinational industry’.²²

The divergent responses to the Tiger opened up another front in the conflict between revisionists and anti-revisionists. While the main debates over revisionism have been well rehearsed and cannot be dealt with here²³ – indeed many of the contentious exchanges had taken place before the 1990s – we can survey the battles for the past and the future since 1990 on two fronts: the attitude in cultural texts to the perceived stagnation and repression of the De Valera era, and the attitude to commemoration. In both cases, previous historical moments are read through the prism of competing versions of the ‘new’ Ireland.

Revisionist historiography had set itself to demystify the national story, freeing the study of Irish history from partisanship and popular sentiment. The impulse to question entrenched assumptions and cherished pieties can be traced in a wide range of cultural production. In his introduction to *Soho Square*, an anthology of contemporary Irish writing, Colm Tóibín declared that the forty writers featured

have nothing in common except a beginning under the same sky, the same uncertain weather. And there is no collective consciousness, no conscience of our race, no responsibilities, no nation singing in unison. Instead diversity, the single mind and the imagination making themselves heard.²⁴

Here, the Republic has finally broken the shackles of the past and can enter an enlightened, pluralist future. Numerous literary and cinematic texts in the 1990s – for example, Patrick McCabe’s *The Butcher Boy*, Brian Friel’s *Dancing at Lughnasa*, John McGahern’s *Amongst Women*, Jim Sheridan’s cinematic retelling of John B. Keane’s *The Field*, Neil Jordan’s *Michael Collins* and Martin McDonagh’s *The Leenane Trilogy* – rehearse this narrative. Frank McCourt’s *Angela’s Ashes*, quickly translated onto the cinema screen, was a way of laying to rest a past of poverty and parochialism, of saying both to the Irish diaspora, and to the native Irish, that ‘we have arrived’. As Joe Cleary has observed, what marks this tendency is its obsessive return to the grim period of ‘autarkic development’ associated with De Valera.²⁵ The implication is that the apparent triumph of modernisation has brought about economic, cultural and psychological transformation, illuminating the ‘dark age’ of insularity, conservatism and underdevelopment that marked the early years of the Republic.

The worlds evoked by these narratives now appear temporally far distant to a contemporary audience, and the rapid translation of McCabe, Friel and others from page or stage to screen may itself be a marker of modernisation, but this ‘fixation’ with the rural Ireland of the past suggested an inability or unwillingness to ‘respond in

interesting or challenging ways to the demands of the present'.²⁶ It leads Cleary to conclude that

the fact that contemporary Irish society continues to rely so heavily on invocations of the darkness of the past to validate its sense of its own enlightenment is not very reassuring. Such a society equips itself neither with the imaginative resources nor the strategies required to meet the challenges of the future.²⁷

Anti-revisionists have argued that such narratives strip contemporary Irish identity of its subversive potential, leaving it 'sanitised and . . . remarkably accommodating to the dominant elitist project of subservient assimilation into multinational capitalism'.²⁸ In this account, culture is a mere 'handmaiden' to the Republic's economic transformation. Debbie Ging has argued that, with the move in Irish cinema towards easy, 'globally-digestible' narratives such as *Into the West* and *Waking Ned*, 'Irish identity has become more a global commodity than a means of critical self-questioning', and there is little evidence from the film of Celtic Tiger that 'postmodernism heralds a plurality of marginalised voices'.²⁹

Yet this is far from the whole story. Many artists have charted Ireland's modernisation with considerable ambivalence in the last two decades. Nicholas Daly has contrasted the 'whimsical globality' of films such as Peter Ormrod's *Eat the Peach* (1986), with its celebration of syncretism and 'local' appropriation of international influences, to Neil Jordan's cinematic version of *The Butcher Boy* (1998), which 'captures some of the shock of Ireland's abrupt baptism into the new global order' by showing the cataclysmic impact of modernisation on 1960s Ireland.³⁰ In Alan Parker's *The Commitments*, the confident familiarity with global popular culture provides an escape route, as Dublin's Northside identifies with the black underclass in United States, and embraces 'a new transatlantic freedom'.³¹ The absence of the Catholic Church and indifference to the Northern Troubles increase the film's universalism. In their ability to forge connections with the outside world, the young Irish can go anywhere. Yet the recourse to soul music does not simply represent the carefree abandonment of the past: Jimmy Rabbitte's claim that the Irish are 'the niggers of Europe' recalls a real and recent colonial past when Ireland was 'at the back door of Europe'.³² While Alan Parker's celebratory film reflects the increasing optimism of the early 1990s, Roddy Doyle's original novel was set amidst the chronic unemployment and economic crisis of the previous decade, a period that continues to cast its shadow over the heady Celtic Tiger years. Similarly Jordan's *Michael Collins* engages equivocally with new possibilities. Jordan acknowledged

that the production was possible only after the IRA ceasefire of 1994, yet its contemporary currency was problematically filtered through its deployment of the Hollywood gangster genre. The film was criticised for its anachronistic allusions to the Northern conflict (such as the car-bomb used to kill the RIC detective brought to Dublin Castle) but the forces and attitudes it examined had been deemed anachronistic and alien in modern Ireland, even if in reality they hadn't 'gone away' in the North. Responses to the film may have been shaped as much by frustrations over the course of the peace process prior to the Good Friday Agreement as by its aesthetic failings. The film leaves both the state-building past and the peace-making present as open questions.³³

Michael Collins begins with a scene of personal recollection that hovers between mourning and mythologisation, and this moment dramatises the prominence of commemoration throughout the 1990s. This was a period of many anniversaries that could be remembered, and whose significance could be claimed, in very different ways across the island. The decade included the 75th anniversaries of both the Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme, the 150th anniversary of the Great Famine, and the bicentenary of the United Irishmen's rebellion in 1798 and of the founding of the Orange Order. The impetus was towards inclusive, rather than partisan, forms of commemoration that highlighted both contradictions and affinities between different traditions. This self-consciousness about memory shaped debates not only amongst professional historians and politicians, but also in the mass media, the museum and heritage industries, and in school classrooms. The child-abuse scandals in the period epitomised the importance of acknowledging and reclaiming lost narratives that 'spoke' to the present. The therapeutic dimension to historiography, which stressed the emotional and the psychological, while giving rise to some questionable interpretations, may have been in part a reaction to the 'shallow amnesia'³⁴ of the modernising project. The role of soldiers from southern Ireland in World War I was recognised, and Tony Blair's acknowledgement that the British government could have done much more to alleviate suffering during the Famine was accepted by some as a quasi-apology, and a significant contribution to the Northern peace process, but, for some, bore little relation to the historical facts of the 1840s.

While such competing interpretations at least suggested a healthy dialogue about the importance of history, the past was at the same time being ruthlessly commodified. Traumatic events were packaged for consumption and history came with a business plan. A Famine Theme Park stretching over 200 acres was opened in Limerick, and a group of bronze figures representing famished victims adorned Customs House

Quay. Yet these enduring markers of a calamitous historical moment had to end promptly by 1998 to make way for commemorations of the 1798 rebellion and the next set of heritage 'opportunities'.³⁵ Revisionist and anti-revisionist camps alike could argue that history was being manipulated to airbrush conflict from the past for the benefit of the heritage and tourist industries, whether by recycling hoary myths and nationalist verities, or by neutralising the North as a site of political conflict and marginalising those who question the merits of economic liberalism and labour flexibility.

Despite the strategic silences and evasions in relation to the past since 1990, however, it is hard to reject Carla Power's assertion that 'thanks to the boom, Ireland has awoken from its nightmare, and instead of escaping it, the Irish are increasingly willing to explore it'.³⁶ Yet there are significant challenges to this optimism. As the conclusion to *Reinventing Ireland* pithily comments, '[th]e affluent Irish city-dweller can choose between 20 different kinds of cheese but has no idea whether his/her job will be there next week'.³⁷ This comment at once celebrates and pulls up short the pace of change in contemporary Ireland. The *Riverdance* phenomenon exemplifies the breakneck transformation of the Tiger era. As Fintan O'Toole has commented, after its initial appearance as part of the intermission in the Eurovision song contest, *Riverdance* 'became, quite self-consciously, a parable of the modernisation of Irish culture'.³⁸ Michael Cronin shows how this parable is a 'hymn to speed', from the emphasis on fast footwork and the roadshow that flows 'unimpeded through global space' to the 'giddy pursuit of global profit' that impels the *Riverdance* organisation.³⁹ *Riverdance* is symptomatic of the wider 'chrono-politicisation' of Ireland, whereby continuity gives way to frantic acceleration, and the past is obliterated by a headlong dash for the future.

This flow was rather more impeded in spring 2007, when Galway, one of Europe's fastest-growing, and wettest, cities spent a number of weeks without a water supply due to contamination, resulting from underinvestment in treatment plants and unrestrained property development in this tourist hotspot. For around 90,000 homes, there was not an unbottled drop to drink, and the Archbishop of Tuam had to find unpolluted water to bless, lest his parishioners were poisoned. It is all too tempting to discern a metaphor for modern Ireland in the Church's sanctification of commercial spring water, but it was a striking demonstration of the potential social and environmental chaos unleashed by uninhibited economic growth. In response to the crisis, an EU Commission spokesperson confirmed that Ireland has 'one of the worst water qualities in Europe'.⁴⁰

This imbrication of features – Ireland as a fantasy space, characterised by discontinuity and virtuality, contested pasts and futures, and uneven development – finds apt expression in Seán Hillen’s *Irelantis*, a series of paper collages produced in the mid-1990s.⁴¹ The arresting juxtaposition of postcards and photographs, depicting contemporary cityscapes, topographical features and monuments from antiquity, presents Ireland, like the ‘original’ Atlantis, as a mythical lost island. Hillen rewrites the iconographic legacy of John Hinde’s tourist postcards from the 1950s and 1960s, but his series might also be seen as an ironic and defamiliarising counterpart of the IDA’s ‘Young Europeans’ posters. Fintan O’Toole sees Hillen’s collages as an attempt to negotiate between stability and breakneck transition:

Irelantis is, of course, contemporary, globalised Ireland, a society that became postmodern before it ever quite managed to be modern, a cultural space that has gone, in the blink of an eye, from being defiantly closed to being completely porous to whatever dream is floating out there in the media ether. But this Ireland is also everywhere and nowhere. Hillen is dealing with displacement in a world where all borders – political, cultural and psychological – are permeable.⁴²

Hillen’s modes of composition and dissemination blend ‘traditional’ craft and virtual reality: the collages are fashioned with scalpel and glue, but they can be freely downloaded from the web. In its reference points – the ‘ether’ of the popular media, tourist imagery available through ‘real’ low-cost travel and virtually at the click of a mouse in and beyond IT-savvy Ireland – the *Irelantis* series is at once celebratory and oppositional, ludic and critically engaged. As Connolly argues, Hillen’s self-conscious art occupies ‘a space between scepticism and reverence’,⁴³ since he does not merely deride and dismiss Hinde’s nostalgic images, or the government-sponsored tourist kitsch, of an Ireland that may never have been. Rather, *Irelantis* acknowledges that Ireland inhabits not only the realm of the Baudrillardian hyperreal, but also a conflictual space between the apparently ubiquitous simulation and commodification of Ireland and the fleeting evocation of ‘a cultural space that has gone’.

This sense of a vanished space where dreams continue to dwell amid displacement and permeability can be discerned in ‘The Oracle at O’Connell St Bridge, Dublin’ (1995). Skyscrapers that symbolise the miraculous rise of Corporate Ireland tower above the heart of the state-building enterprise in Ireland, including the GPO, the statue of O’Connell, and the classical ruins that evoke Delphi. The gleaming, unreflective oracle of the future overshadows these loci of wisdom,

worship and illumination. The Delphic site in Hillen's collage, at once ancient and future-oriented, recalls an episode in Shaw's *Back to Methuselah* (1921), which is set in Galway in the year 3000. Visitors from the 'Eastern Island' come to consult an oracle in Galway, a region where dwells a colony of long-lived and sagacious people. These ancients have long ago outgrown any sense of Irishness; their predecessors had first exported nationalism to the world so successfully that all national problems were solved, and then returned to Galway having lost their unique selling point, only to find that place no longer satisfied their aspirations. Now bound only to realism, this utopia abjures romantic notions of place and nation. The idealism of the much more fallibly mortal visitors withers away under the discouraging scrutiny of Galway, and to touch the oracle brings death. Roy Foster observes that late twentieth-century Ireland belies Shaw's satirical vision of the Irish future: it is no longer a case of having the world and losing Ireland.⁴⁴ In contrast to the Galway oracle, the site of Hillen's oracle offers both abiding connections to nation and place and utopian possibilities. It is uncertain whether the flaming red skies that overhang the office buildings and O'Connell Street in Hillen's collage presage divine revelation or impending judgement and disaster (uncannily evocative both of the arrival of the alien fleet in *Independence Day* and the destruction of the Twin Towers in September 2001). According to Colin Graham, this apocalyptic strain in Hillen's collages does not pit the comforts of nation, authenticity and origin against postmodern fantasy, 'a sincere nostalgia blinkering itself to ironic pastiche'. Rather, it shows how Ireland not only casts itself 'into the future in order to be realised' but 'also turns inside-out the underlying need for the future, disarming the crisis of what the future might be by forcing it to exist in a "plethora" of cultural images'.⁴⁵

The rise of Irish Studies since the 1980s can be seen in the context of this simultaneous exposure to, and critical examination of, the process of globalisation. Literary criticism has remained a central disciplinary component of Irish Studies, and Irish criticism could not remain immune to the theory wars that convulsed literature departments on both sides of the Atlantic in the 1980s. These debates demonstrated how literary and cultural production could be conceptualised in terms of discourse, hegemony and subject formation, and how various cultural forms were enmeshed within a wider, complex cultural politics.⁴⁶ By the start of the 1990s Irish literature, and Irish Studies more widely, was encountering theory in a sustained fashion. Yet, as Terry Eagleton has acknowledged, just as cultural theory could illuminate aspects

of Irish culture, so Ireland could cast light on the ‘repressions and evasions’ of theory, since categories central to the Irish experience – such as class, revolution and ideology – had often been dispensed with in the ‘postmodern age’.⁴⁷

At a time when facets of Ireland’s literary history were being recovered or critically reappraised – with women writers accorded new prominence, and both the early modern period, and ‘indigenous’ Irish modernism, being more fully appreciated – what constituted ‘Irish literature’ came under rigorous scrutiny. The publication of the first three volumes of the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* in 1991 represents a critical and historical landmark. The Field Day Theatre Company’s regular theatre production had halted in the same year (it suspended operations in 1993), and from this point its ‘counter-hegemonic’⁴⁸ project turned towards academic publishing. Outlining the rationale of the *Anthology*, Seamus Deane asserted that

[t]here is a story here, a meta-narrative, which is, we believe, hospitable to all the micro-narratives that, from time to time, have achieved prominence as the official version of the true history, political and literary, of the island’s past and present.⁴⁹

The nature and validity of this meta-narrative, and the process of canon-formation, in the *Anthology* provoked a vigorous and often hostile response. Damian Smyth described the project as ‘the most arrogant and challenging example of such a neo-Romantic, totalising vision to be produced in Europe’, in which ‘there seems to be something primordially continuous about “Ireland” and “being Irish” over a 1500-year period’.⁵⁰ Smyth’s review betrays a clear hostility both to Field Day’s interpretation of Irish history and to its deployment of theory. Yet Deane’s very invocation of *grands* and *petits récits* invited a questioning of the relationship between the micro- and meta-narrative. In 1990 Eamonn Hughes pointed out how the identification of Field Day with critical theory enabled a recognition that its enterprise was not doctrinaire but one ‘which is alert to the world beyond the constrictions of Irish cultural debate’.⁵¹

Field Day’s reaction to the controversy over the marginalisation of women’s contribution to the history of Irish letters in the first three volumes exemplified this reflexiveness.⁵² The omission was all the more glaring given that one crucible of the nation-building, the Abbey Theatre, had appointed its first female artistic director, Garry Hynes, in 1990. Her three-year tenure saw provocative productions of John McGahern’s *The Power of Darkness* and Sean O’Casey’s *The Plough and the Stars*, and included European and American plays in the

repertoire. Deane quickly acknowledged the ‘unconscious’ prejudice that had led to the exclusion of women from the first three volumes.⁵³ The limitations of the *Anthology* were exposed, and subsequently addressed, precisely because Irish Studies had opened up to the critical interrogation for which Field Day’s founders had originally appealed in the 1980s. Two further volumes were commissioned, and their diversity of critical perspectives on Irish women writers represented not only a necessary revision but also a continuation of the project. The new volumes stressed a plurality of traditions and sounded out different voices obscured by dominant discourses of nation and identity in modern Irish history, and also maintained the presiding spirit of the previous books by letting the ‘minor’ and the ‘great’ mingle, and by articulating a broad understanding of the connections between literature and other forms of cultural production.⁵⁴ Roisin Higgins has claimed that, since feminism does not posit statehood as its ultimate goal, gender as the organising principle for the volumes ‘opens up debate rather than conscribing it and admits the stories of the dispossessed’.⁵⁵

This rethinking of the relation between gender, sexuality and the nation was paralleled in the field of social policy. Membership of European Union not only brought improvements to the infrastructure of Northern Ireland and the Republic, it also had a major impact on the social agenda, including divorce reform in the Republic in 1995. In Northern Ireland in June 2006, five gay couples were the first in the UK and Ireland to have their civil partnerships legally recognised. The DUP’s opposition to the granting of equal rights to gay people – graphically expressed by Ian Paisley Jr’s hostile comments on homosexuality – was attacked by the other main parties, including the late David Ervine of the Progressive Unionists. This picture is uneven, however. Northern Ireland is still permitted to opt out of the abortion legislation that pertains in the rest of the UK, and the main political parties continue to oppose changes to abortion law. Constitutional questions have persistently taken precedence over social issues.

The gay activist Kieran Rose has situated the final decriminalisation of male homosexuality in the Republic of Ireland in 1993 within a *telos* of national liberation:

While there are obvious contradictions in Irish attitudes, GLEN [Gay and Lesbian Equality Network] knew that there was a tradition of tolerance, which was benign, and based on a belief in fairness and justice. GLEN knew that there were real and positive traditional Irish values, arising from the struggle against colonialism and for civil, religious and economic rights, which could be activated, and the demand for equality was attuned to this heritage.⁵⁶

Tradition is invoked here as the driving force of radical social change, and there is a perceived commonality between nationalism and other forms of activism in the long historical struggle against discrimination and oppression. In a speech to the Seanad in June 1993, Senator David Norris, a prominent figure in the campaign to reform the laws on homosexuality, praised the Lower House of the Dáil for ‘effectively wiping the lingering shame of British imperial statute from the record of Irish law’. In celebrating this ‘Irish solution to an Irish problem’, however, Norris nonetheless implicitly recognised (while attempting to deflect with humour) that homosexuality remained a ‘problem’ for many in the Republic: ‘May I reassure the House that should two young men or two young women hold hands at a bus stop in Dublin the island will not be overwhelmed with earthquakes and turbulence, nor will the world come to an unexpected end’.⁵⁷

Nor was this ‘Irish problem’ confined to its island boundaries. The controversy in the early 1990s over the involvement of the Irish Lesbian and Gay Organisation (ILGO) in the New York St Patrick’s Day parade mingled sexual politics with definitions of Irishness. The Ancient Order of Hibernians, made official custodians of the parade in 1994, vigorously opposed the ILGO’s participation, and video footage of the 1996 event shows male spectators shouting ‘queers go home’ at members of the organisation. The resistance to the ILGO suggested that homosexuality was not part of the Irish diaspora in the USA, but the abuse provoked a more profound question: where should ‘queers’ go home? Should they go back to now-progressive Ireland? It is a queer reversal of the nostalgic return to the old country, and a queer echo too of the fate of Oscar Wilde, a figure ‘at home’ in English society until becoming outcast after his conviction under the ‘imperial statute’ referred to by Norris. As Kathryn Conrad argues, the AOH attitude to the Irish American lesbian and gay community was an attempt to legitimise a conservative version of identity, one that excluded certain groups in order to ensure ‘an airtight narrative of descent’.⁵⁸ As these examples demonstrate, the entanglements of ethnicity, sexuality and gender since the 1990s have become ‘internationalised’, but not in ways that confirmed a margin-centre or backward-progressive division. Siobhán Kilfeather has emphasised that Mary Robinson’s Presidency not only changed the tone of public life and political exchange, it also enabled Irish feminists to focus more fully on global debates, such as those surrounding immigration, development and multiculturalism.⁵⁹

Another contentious feature of Ireland’s going global has been the vigorous debates regarding the validity and cogency of postcolonial studies for a reading of Irish history and culture. The proponents of

'travelling theory', some argued, were exporting fashionable critiques that often had little purchase on the particularities of the Irish climate, and there was a whiff of intellectual neocolonialism concealed in the 'post'. A number of central, definitional questions have been posed for Irish postcolonial studies: is Ireland a modern nation-state or ex-colony; does it have a 'First' or 'Third' World consciousness; to what extent has colonialism shaped Ireland's historical development; has the conflict in Northern Ireland been a continuation of colonialism? These questions have generated a great deal of debate since 1990 but they should not be put in 'either-or terms'.⁶⁰ This may testify to the reality that 'the question of where Ireland belongs has yet to settle into a single answer or set of answers'.⁶¹

Again, Field Day constitutes an instructive case study. The introduction of postcolonial theory, alongside the controversy involving the inclusiveness of the *Anthology*, has proved a particularly vexed issue in analyses of the Field Day enterprise. Deane's introduction to *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature* declared that Ireland's current condition was 'above all, a colonial crisis'.⁶² The book included essays by Edward Said, Frederic Jameson and Terry Eagleton that had originally appeared in the fifth pamphlet series. These star turns did not prove uniformly successful, as evidenced by Said's construction of Yeats as 'a homogenous decolonizing subject'.⁶³ Edna Longley criticised the dominant colonial/postcolonial framework of Field Day that inappropriately annexed Ireland North and South: 'Strange collusions are taking place: holiday romances in a postcolonial never-never land'.⁶⁴ Liam Kennedy saw 'the Field Day tendency'⁶⁵ as in danger of propping up ultra-nationalism, whose 'threadbare' rhetoric 'can be seemingly modernised and given a patina of legitimacy through identification with genuine liberation struggles in the Third World'.⁶⁶ Indeed, Deane's statement about the necessity of new modes of critical thought seemed at once to question and reaffirm essentialism: 'Everything, including our politics and our literature, has to be rewritten – i.e. re-read. That will enable new writing, new politics, unblemished by Irishness but securely Irish'.⁶⁷ Yet, as Colin Graham has argued, Field Day aligned itself with a developing postcolonial critique of the nation that sought to look beyond notions of 'origin, identity and affiliation' offered by the 'nation-narrative'.⁶⁸ Graham and Richard Kirkland emphasise that the diasporic nature of Irish historical experience, and its relationship with Britain, have 'enabled the study of Ireland to be opened out to alignment with most definitions of globalization', and the suspicion that Irish postcolonial criticism 'underwrites the triumph of the independent post-colonial nation' is misplaced.⁶⁹ Thus, while the 'external' has

already been here a long time, it has not disabled 'local' autonomy or specificity.

Under the Field Day imprint, Irish postcolonial theory has gone global. Field Day now has its base in the Keough Institute for Irish Studies at the University of Notre Dame, USA, with an outpost in St Stephen's Green, Dublin. Aidan Arrowsmith notes that its benefactor Donald Keough, formerly CEO of Coca-Cola, 'may know something about the empires and globalisation which recur as Field Day preoccupations', and while this situation might threaten to induce compromise, complicity and political quietude, it can also generate 'intriguing tensions'.⁷⁰ Given its enviable market position, Field Day has become 'Irish Studies' leading brand',⁷¹ but it may stand as a weather vane of Irish cultural criticism more generally. An export-driven, transnational enterprise, it is in part subject to the process of modernisation that it critiques, but it also remains constantly alert to the assumptions and demands of the circuits of exchange it navigates.

Since the 1990s, the category of ethnicity in the European context has been at once comforting and disconcerting in a continent emerging from the Cold War, and this ambivalence towards ethnic difference informs the current tensions surrounding immigration and asylum. The rhetoric of liberal tolerance and pluralism can cloak suspicion and intolerance within many First World countries. Again, Ireland offers a distinctive perspective on the contemporary experience of migration and relocation. Current estimates calculate the Irish diaspora as seventy million people worldwide, compared with a population of five million in Ireland. These diasporic communities have often been the repository of nostalgic and essentialist attitudes that tourism has exploited and, as the Keough-Field Day association suggests, inward investment has sometimes followed suit. Yet reverse migration, and the increased self-confidence that accompanied economic expansion, has meant a reappraisal of these historic affiliations, as Mary Robinson's 1995 address to both houses of the Irish parliament suggested: 'if we expect that the mirror held up to us by Irish communities abroad will show a single familiar identity, or a pure strain of Irishness, we will be disappointed. We will overlook the fascinating diversity of culture and choice which looks back at us'.⁷² Robinson's celebration of heterogenous diasporic identities also had implications north of the border. The peace process would of necessity ask all the people on the island to acknowledge the 'diversity of culture and choice which looks back at us'. Whether the current settlement in the North has promoted plurality or consolidated division is a moot point, of course. While Brian Walker has recently

suggested that changes in Irish identity, by admitting both unionists and nationalists to a 'global network' of millions, 'may well have important consequences for changes in Northern Ireland',⁷³ it is possible to argue that the Agreement institutionalised the normative and essentialist categories that had sustained sectarian division before and during the Troubles.⁷⁴

As Breda Gray has shown, Irish identity is increasingly promoted as diasporic, but in a period 'characterised by an intensification of transnational processes', the concept of the nation can also become a site of struggle.⁷⁵ Thus the question of Irishness is not only about Irish migrant identities that are fashioned elsewhere, but how other migrant identities might reconceive Irishness, given that the Republic is now defined by imported rather than exported labour. The popular assertion that Ireland has no racism has been placed under severe interrogation since the late 1990s. Michael Breen and Eoin Devereux have shown how the Irish media presents those at the social margins – travellers, immigrants and asylum seekers – as problems 'rather than offering any analysis of the sociological realities that underpin the experiences of those groups'.⁷⁶ The negative, inflammatory or hostile headlines simplify or efface the complex socio-economic forces that drive migration, and suggest that attitudes are little different in Ireland from those in many other European countries.

The issue of race was airbrushed out of discussions surrounding the referendum on citizenship rights in 2004, in favour of 'managerial' questions of how to deal with immigration across the Republic. In response to this climate, the monthly *Metro Eireann* was established in 2000 by the Nigerian immigrants Abel Ugba and Chinedu Onyejelem as 'Ireland's Only Multicultural Newspaper'. Yet its first issue worked hard to minimise the impact of cultural difference on contemporary Ireland, stressing that immigrants and those from ethnic minorities were united in wanting to 'contribute to the development of Ireland' and required only a 'free hand' to do so. The language of the market, and the evasiveness of the term 'development', suggest that these new arrivals will readily accommodate themselves to the economic liberalism and labour flexibility demanded by 'multicultural' contemporary Ireland. Yet there remains a racial hierarchy in place.⁷⁷ Emigration is no longer the defining pattern, but immigration in the present moment can exacerbate existing social inequalities as much as it encourages inclusiveness. The accelerating shifts in labour markets, and their impact on a rapidly changing society, seem set to ensure that multiculturalism will remain an open question for the Republic and Northern Ireland.

It will have become apparent that in a variety of ways the Irish experience of modernity can cast revealing light on the dislocations of global development. In the present moment, both parts of Ireland can find meaningful affinities, for example, not just with its fellow EU member states, but also with accession countries in Eastern Europe and emergent economies elsewhere in ways that do not collapse their different situations into some uniform 'postcolonial' condition. No doubt questions of connection still need to be asked closer to home, too. Back in 1991, George Watson commented that '[w]e cannot begin to study and relate properly to Europe until we have made ourselves aware of the differences of real complexity within these islands'.⁷⁸ Since the late 1990s, following the power-sharing agreement in the North, and devolution in Scotland and Wales, the complexity of political and cultural alignments across the two islands has increased significantly. Yet Joe Cleary has argued that Irish Studies also must situate Ireland's development within comparative frameworks that stretch beyond the horizon of Western Europe. For example, the appellation 'Celtic Tiger' connected the Republic with the 'tiger' economies of East Asia. The point, Cleary stresses, is not to find perfect symmetry between Ireland and other former colonies; it is rather 'to think the ways in which specific national configurations are always the product of dislocating intersections between local and global processes that are not simply random but part of the internally contradictory structure of the modern capitalist world system'.⁷⁹

This discussion has surveyed the responses within cultural production and cultural criticism to Ireland's rapid economic transformation and its equivocal benefits. In 1985 John Wilson Foster claimed that the 'critical condition' of Ireland was inseparable from 'the condition of criticism in Ireland'.⁸⁰ One cannot equate the Republic's economic transformation and the Northern peace process with the 'success' of Irish cultural criticism since 1990, but the creative and critical work surveyed in this volume has responded to the sense of crisis invoked by Foster and by Field Day with boldness and energy. It is our hope that this collection avoids an airy and superficial embrace of diversity, and instead acknowledges the possibilities and problems for Irish culture in an age when people, resources and information move at dizzying speed across national boundaries. Gerry Smyth has recently reflected on how Irish Studies has changed through the computer-based production and dissemination of research, and he proposes that the theory and IT 'revolutions' are fundamentally linked. He identifies three terms in Irish cultural history – Theory ⇔ Tiger ⇔ Technology – that

are locked together in a paradoxical relationship that is both mutually supportive and mutually interrogative. Each term connotes particular practices that have undergone massive change in a relatively short period of time; together they provide the discursive matrix from which modern Irish Studies has emerged.⁸¹

Whilst theory and technology can be harnessed together to meet the challenges of the future, modern Irish cultural criticism faces a Tiger in thrall to a notion of community 'based on the acquisition of property, portable and otherwise, irrespective of the health (physical, mental or emotional) of the environment in which it exists'. If this criticism is to retain 'a role in relation to the identity which it ostensibly serves as its pretext, it must be to mitigate the manipulative logic of the prevailing socio-economic climate, and to promote an acknowledgement of the principles of empathy, interdependence and love'.⁸² Smyth rightly acknowledges that this remains a 'utopian' vision, but it is no more or less virtual than the vision projected from a computer screen, a tourist brochure, a business prospectus – or an aircraft window.

Notes

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- 6 Ibid., p. 3.
- 7 BBC News, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/7026921.stm>, accessed 8 October 2007.
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- 9 Ibid., p. 177.
- 10 Ibid., p. 182.
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- 13 See Joe Cleary, 'The World Literary System: Atlas and Epitaph', *Field Day Review* 2 (2006): pp. 197–219.
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- 22 Ibid., p. 133.
- 23 See, for example, Ciaran Brady (ed.), *Interpreting Irish History: The Debate on Historical Revisionism, 1938–1994* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1994), and Willy Maley, 'Nationalism and Revisionism: Ambiviolences and Dissensus', in Scott Brewster, Virginia Crossman, Fiona Becket and David Alderson (eds), *Ireland in Proximity: History, Gender, Space* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 12–27.
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- 27 Ibid., pp. 126–7.
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- 29 Debbie Ging, 'Screening the Green: Cinema under the Celtic Tiger', in Kirby, Gibbons and Cronin (eds), *Reinventing Ireland*, pp. 177, 193.
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- 33 Luke Gibbons, 'Narratives of the Nation: Fact, Fiction and Irish Cinema', in Connolly (ed.), *Theorising Ireland*, p. 74.
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- 39 Michael Cronin, 'Speed Limits: Ireland, Globalisation, and the War against Time', in Kirby, Gibbons and Cronin (eds), *Reinventing Ireland*, pp. 63–4.
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- 43 Connolly (ed.), *Theorising Ireland*, p. 10.
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- 46 We might cite here landmark works such as David Cairns's and Shaun Richards's *Writing Ireland: Colonialism, Nationalism and Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988).
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