

Introduction: crossing the margins

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'So there it was, our territory', writes the narrator in Seamus Deane's novel-cum-memoir *Reading in the Dark* (1997: 59), claiming his own particular domain with all the confidence of childhood. We are drawn to the identification of places, impelled to categorise our territory. It is, however, only movements within and across space that actuate, modify, transform it; as Michel de Certeau puts it, 'space is a practised place' (1988: 117). Any identification of boundaries is in itself an act of construction, a spatial practice that recognises its mutability. From this paradox emerges the need for what Homi K. Bhabha terms 'travelling theory' (1990b: 293), a way of understanding movement and migration, of what it means to be 'in-between' but also of recognising how important the sense of belonging to a place has been. The organisation of space has functioned to impose centralising power structures; but the claiming or reclaiming of territory has also offered a means of resistance for those pushed to the edges. In this volume we are exploring such paradoxes in relation to different definitions of 'the margins', a spatial concept which has had much currency but which might increasingly be questioned on theoretical, geographical and political grounds.

Among other things, we are interested in the geographical edges of the cluster of islands in which we live, the terrain historically described as the 'United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland'. To use 'margins' in this context suggests a spatial and definitional grouping of 'nations', organised around a putative English 'core' often operating as a substitute for 'Britishness'. Until recently, the elision of English into British (and *vice versa*) seemed to occupy an unproblematic position at the core of this construction, although the ideological implications of this process are now questioned

on a number of fronts. The concept of 'margins' also indicates that in Scotland, Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and Wales, countries of small and sparse populations have been seen as struggling to preserve political and cultural identities in the face of increasing demographic and economic concentration in England and, more recently, in the south of England. Historically these areas have been positioned, through linguistic markers of difference, as the 'Celtic margins'. This term has perhaps more resonance for Ireland and Wales than it does for Scotland, in that a large part of the Scottish population was never in possession of the Gaelic language; it nevertheless encapsulates the processes both of representation and self-representation of different cultural and racial inheritances from that of England. The concept of 'margins' denotes therefore geographical, economic, demographic, cultural and political positioning in relation to a perceived centre.

One aim of this book, however, is to move away from rather than replicate this core/periphery model – to question the term 'marginal' itself, to hear voices talking 'across' borders and not only to or through an English centre. Even as a reclaimed term, the idea of 'marginality' still appears to give some priority to a notional centre; while this has some bearing on historical and geographical structures of power, it can also occlude lines of connection which do not move from centre to margin, or from margin to centre. It ignores the fact that in some contexts the margins may occupy central positions: as W. N. Herbert notes in his 'Mappamundi' – a poetic map of the world: 'Ireland's/bin shuffit tae London, whaur/oafficis o thi Poetry Sock occupeh fehv/squerr mile' (O'Rourke 1994: 146).

Challenges to an unhelpful margins/centre binarism and to the centripetal forces of metropolitan culture have also emerged in new questions about the constitution of Englishness itself – as demonstrated most obviously in the Runnymede Trust report. We also want, therefore, to examine the possible intersections between geopolitical markers of supposed 'marginality' and other boundaries and hierarchies operating in identity politics – gender, ethnicity, class and sexuality in particular. In this arena we believe that insufficient attention had been placed to the relationship between 'Celtic spaces' and other areas of 'difference', even within the context of emerging concerns around a 'New Britishness': As Robert Crawford notes in the afterword to his influential *Devolving English Literature*:

[Only] two months before the election which brought to power a British government committed to devolution and the most significant

constitutional changes to the British nation for three centuries, Homi Bhabha with the British Council presented a major conference-cum-festival called *Reinventing Britain*. Incredibly, the project contained nothing whatsoever about the devolution debate, or how the changing relationships between Scotland, England, Wales, not to mention Ireland, might contribute to 're-inventing Britain'. (2000: 309)

One focus, therefore, is on the dynamics between old and new identity groupings in this changing context. A third and related aim is to engage with the extremely rapid changes in Scotland, Ireland, Wales and England through specific attention to cultural practices. The countries we are concerned with are undergoing transformations in both culture and politics. Since the book was first conceived, Scotland and Wales have gained devolved parliamentary powers; in Ireland the setting up of new forms of cross-border power sharing combined with rapid economic growth in the Republic to redraw social and political patterns. Irish and Scottish writing, moreover, gained unexpected 'mainstream' and metropolitan recognition, while Welsh popular music suddenly (finally!) attained the subcultural kudos traditionally attendant upon other minority communities. It is only through detailed analysis of cultural products and traditions that the intricacies of these changes can be understood: it is our intention, therefore, that the book operates on both a specific and a general level, not only in the movement within each essay from a particular case study to the broader issues raised, but also across the volume as a whole.

With these aims in mind we chose to work with the term 'Atlantic Archipelago' as most representative of the particular organisation of space, people and identity with which we were concerned. This term is primarily associated with the historian J. G. A. Pocock, whose 1975 call for a less nation-centred history was answered over the following quarter century by the emergence of a school specifically dedicated to 'Archipelagic history'.¹ Influenced in some important respects by the French *Annales* and by the rise during the 1960s of 'history from below', and motivated in part by the crisis attending established political structures, historians (especially of the medieval and early modern periods) became concerned to trace the evolution of a disparate set of cultural and political factors which has impacted upon island life, factors which are not apprehensible, or *alone* apprehensible, in terms of the established national identities. As John Morrill writes: 'Englishness is self-evidently the product of the complex interactions of peoples and cultures (Britons, Romans, Saxons, Norsemen, Normans). Scottishness, Irishness, Welshness too

are the product of complex interactions of peoples, one of them the English' (1996: 2).

The prioritisation of the political in this particular account remains problematic; likewise, the retention in some influential interventions of certain loaded terms, such as the 'Britannic' or 'Four-nations' history favoured by Hugh Kearney (1989, 1991), is not something to which we would necessarily subscribe. Nevertheless, the present volume represents a response to the ongoing, contentious practice of 'archipelagic historiography', offered in the belief that, whatever its limitations, such a subject at least acknowledges the inadequacy of earlier paradigms, and recognises that new models need to be developed to engage with the matrix of overlapping identities and practices that have traditionally functioned, and continue to function, throughout what used to be known as 'the British Isles'.

This book makes no claims to provide a comprehensive, or indeed a coherent, model of what an archipelagic cultural studies should look like. That will be the task of individuals and groups from many backgrounds working over time in many different institutional and intellectual circumstances. There has been one development, however, which because of its ubiquitous nature may prove enduring, and which because of its influence upon all the essays gathered here is worth signalling. It is a development implicit in the new history that, we have suggested, provides the *impri-matur* for an archipelagic cultural criticism.

What we are alluding to here is the initiation of a new *historical* (and, in this volume, a new *critical*) subject in terms of a new *geographical* perspective. The complexity of this refraction is evident in the issue of definition: the term 'British' has clearly evolved to the point where it cannot be used unproblematically, and there have been various attempts to invent alternative geographical definitions which might signify the issues at stake in clearer ways. The term we favour here – Atlantic archipelago – may prove to be of no greater use in the long run, but at this stage it does at least have the merit of questioning the ideology underpinning more established nomenclature. It is, moreover, essentially a geographical term – both locational and descriptive – and this provides a clue as to the manner in which a cross-marginal cultural criticism might set about identifying appropriate archives and methodologies. For at roughly the same time as 'the history of the Atlantic archipelago' was emerging in Britain and Ireland, the field of what has come to be known as 'new' or 'postmodern' geography was also in the process of consolidation, much of the time in different departments of the same institutions.

The last decades of the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of what we might call the 'spatial imagination' and the growing realisation of its absolute centrality to human experience (Soja 1989). This development is not only connected with the growth of widespread scepticism towards history in general and institutionalised historiography in particular, but also with a number of factors which have combined to put pressure on the historicism which has dominated western critical/cultural institutions since the nineteenth century. Besides reinvigorating fields (such as geography and built environment) traditionally concerned with the social, cultural and political organisation of spatial practices, the spatial imagination also began to make itself felt in less obvious disciplines. Although its natural home may turn out to be cultural studies, other fields such as philosophy, sociology and (even) literature have rediscovered a spatial imagination informing their most basic assumptions and practices (Fitter 1995; Gregory 1994; Keith and Pike 1993; Naess 1989; Schama 1995; Smyth 2001). Working within this context our aim is to bring together a number of essays which would work across marginal territories but which will also allow for a re-imagining of these spaces.

There were certain areas in which this process of talking across seemed imperative: language, gender, sexuality and ethnicity. The first section of the book, therefore, includes: an essay by Willy Maley which examines debates on the political and poetic choice of language, drawing attention to significant differences between Irish and Scottish strategies; a discussion of the complicated dynamic of woman and nation by Aileen Christianson, which explores the work of twentieth-century Scottish and Irish women writers and assesses the relevance of a postcolonial context in understanding the 'debatable' boundaries arising from that intersection; an exploration of masculinities in both English and Scottish writing from Berthold Schoene, which also deploys sexual difference as a means of testing postcolonial theorising, but does so within the context of a discourse in which bodily, social and national-cultural spaces overlap and compete; and a chapter by Peter Childs which offers a different perspective on the notion of marginality by addressing 'Englishness' in relation to 'migrant' writing in prose concerned with India and England after Independence. In each case specific intersections of identity are used to explore the wider configurations of space and self. In this section we also include an essay by Colin Graham which offers a mediation on the broader critical implications of postcolonial theory through analysis of its application in a specific context. Taking the

reader from Michelet, via Barthes and Bataille, to Joyce, Graham explores the dilemma of 'speaking Ireland' when the very articulation of that marginality itself involves an intellectual 'crossing' from the margins.

We also seek to develop comparative work within the archipelagic framework in analysis of particular cultural forms. The second part of the book therefore contains essays which are directed towards specific readings: a chapter on poetry by Linden Peach which draws on a wide range of new poetry to question simplified margin/centre relations; a historicising perspective on the work of cultural studies and its responses to the relationship between ethnicity and second-generation Irish musicians from Sean Campbell; and our own comparison of contemporary Irish and Scottish fiction which identifies similarities and differences in recent developments. In each instance the writers take on the task of examining and assessing points of connection and diversity across a particular body of work, while moving away from contrasts which focus on an English 'norm'. A recurring feature of the essays is a concern with reception as well as production, emphasising the significance of location within specific cultural maps. This second part of the book also includes chapters which test definitions of 'marginality' through concentration on even more specific instances of the relationship between a cultural tradition and a changing political context. Thus, Shaun Richards uses Welsh drama to explore the cultural politics of South Wales, while Murdo Macdonald examines previous frameworks in which Scottish art has been defined and understood and offers a rethinking of what nationality means in the context of the visual arts.

Within this disparate range of interests and material, we are aware of a tension under negotiation: contributors and editors are working with the recognition that in a sense all national identities are 'constructed', that divisions of space – geographical, historical, cultural – exist mainly in our minds but are also operating with an awareness that culture nevertheless continues to be practised and, perhaps more significantly, understood, in terms of national affiliations. Cultural criticism has traditionally relied (albeit grudgingly for the most part) upon other disciplines – specifically geography, history and politics – for the categories which animate its intellectual vision. It would be difficult to write a book about 'Scottish poetry', say, if history had not provided us with a paradigm of Scottishness (incorporating among other things aspects of character, language and narrative) in terms of which specific individual phenomena might be considered. Arnold Kemp, for example, reviewing a new anthology of Scottish poetry, can assert: 'What makes a poet

Scottish comes down to voice and identity rather than linguistic choice. Yet more than anything else language is the anvil on which Scottish poetry and its “flytings” ... have been forged’ (2000). Although echoing Joyce in his use of the term ‘forged’ (but apparently without Joyce’s sense of ironic ambiguity), Kemp glosses over the fact that ‘Scotland’ also requires geopolitical definition; otherwise we encounter all sorts of problems involving domicile, borders, generations, and a host of other potentially embarrassing complications. But if ‘Scotland’ as a geopolitical possibility is changing, as it palpably is, any analysis of ‘Scottish’ poetry is necessarily compromised. By the same token, if historiography is changing then the fields and disciplines which rely in the main upon history for their constituent categories must also be obliged to change. In the light of developments both within and outwith the academic institutions, in other words, our study of Scottish poetry risks being unfashionable at best, inappropriate at worst. If history has a new subject – the history of the Atlantic archipelago – then so too must cultural criticism.

Our aims, however, present certain challenges. For a start, many academics are reluctant to leave behind the comforting paradigms of national literatures and cultures, even more so to abandon their own comforting places within those paradigms. The contributors to this volume show bravery in stepping into such debatable terrain. Writing our own chapter on fiction we were conscious of ‘authority’ when each speculated on things Irish or Scottish: we were comfortable within our own ‘established’ national and disciplinary locations, but we also instinctively felt some (unspoken) right to a voice within those boundaries. Yet (against all our theoretically anti-essentialist inclinations) we were reluctant to enter the other’s territory without the confidence of a ‘blood’ connection. A second difficulty lies in our sense of being overtaken by events: our ‘margins’ were becoming, in political terms at least, ‘centres’. In 1999 Joyce Macmillan commented that ‘[post-devolution], political Scotland is behaving like a newly-formed volcanic island, its topography still heaving and shifting so rapidly that only a fool would attempt to map it’ (286). Her remarks might be applied, on a larger scale, to the terrain we are trying to map out here. The essays offer, therefore, thoughts from a particular moment in time, just as they offer only a ‘slice’ of space. Thirdly, in developing this book we have been forced to recognise the contradictory nature of our own aims, to work across margins while at the same time questioning not only ideas of marginality but also of nationality. We both feel some unease with this: in a post-colonial context we are all being encouraged to see ourselves as ‘mobile

mongrel islanders' (Kearney 2000: 34), part of a postnationalist world, and – in some respects – this has provided a liberating impulse for the book. Yet we also acknowledge the desire to belong, which pulls us into identifications with geographical and historical spaces, and recognise that this desire still holds possibilities of allegiances that may be empowering and enlightening.

In negotiating these contradictory impulses we have again found theories of spatial practice helpful. The rediscovery of a spatial imagination attends to the *narrative* and the *structural* imagination of space – attends, that is, to the conceptual invocation of the subject within a range of spatial contexts, but also (and more challengingly) to the organisation of discrete texts, genres and practices in terms of what we might call 'spatial poetics' or 'spatial form'. Analysis which articulates politics *with* poetics is capable of engaging with the wide variety of ways in which cultural phenomena have been and continue to be ordered across a wide variety of social and political contexts. As a brief example, consider what many believe to be the most essential(ist) of Irish cultural practices: traditional music. This subject might appear on first glance to be unamenable to analysis in terms of spatial politics/poetics. Such analysis, however, might begin by addressing 'external' social and political issues, such as the function of the pub as 'a space that hovers between the private and the public spheres in Ireland' (Gibbons 1997: 268); the erosion of session culture under pressure from tourism and other commercial considerations; the relocation to larger venues such as the pub-club, the theatre and the stadium; and what might be referred to as 'the general economy of noise' obtaining within contemporary Irish society. The critic would also want to consider, however, what might be referred to as 'soundscape' or the 'spatial form' of specific texts and performances. This would encompass a wide range of factors, including the speed of the music, rhythm, attack, volume, counterpoint, timbre, the positioning of soloists and/or different instruments. Crucially, analysis would also need to engage with the potential for traditional music to create 'spatial illusions' (Tuan 1977: 14) – for example, the association (in much contemporary cinematic discourse) of certain instruments with certain landscapes.

The methodological economy of politics/poetics has its parallels in other critical and cultural fields. But the real point is that, as this example shows, the spatial imagination might prove beneficial for archipelagic studies. Traditional Irish music could be profitably compared in these terms to other 'traditional' musical practices – whether Celtic, Caribbean, sub-continental, or whatever – throughout the archipelago.

The idea is not to replace an historical imperative with a geographical one, but to relieve the intellectual hegemony of the former while pointing out the complete interpenetration of each by the other.² For on consideration it turns out that the wide variety of power structures extant throughout ‘the British Isles’ has always been as much about the desire to master space as about the drive to order time. The Marxist critic Aijaz Ahmad argues that imperialism and its late capitalist logic cannot be resisted by recourse to a fatally derivative nationalism, but by means of a rejuvenated post-Soviet socialism (1992: 287–318). Colonialism’s other, however, was never merely nationalism and/or socialism, but a spatial imagination which it had to reconfigure in its own controlling terms. Its ally in this ideological task was an historicism which naturalised colonialism’s own way of seeing and which blocked oppositional discourses. But a backwards glance at the cultural history of domination/subordination in the Atlantic archipelago reveals a deep, widespread fascination with the organisation of cultural and political identity around a series of spatial problematics.

While a number of recent books have addressed the historical and political framework of the Atlantic archipelago, the focus of this volume is on cultural practices within that context – an area in which there is less work done. Although both the Scots–Irish Research Network (based at the University of Strathclyde) and the Research Institute in Irish and Scottish Studies (based at the University of Aberdeen and to be known from January 2001 as the AHRB Centre for Irish and Scottish Studies in recognition of an impressive grant from that body) have produced excellent multidisciplinary research, it would appear that scholars are still most confident when working with identifiable cross-border connections – such as neglected political networks in Scottish and Irish history, for example, or in shared cultural frameworks – than tracing intersections in contemporary culture and literature. We hope therefore that this book contributes to critical analysis which, whilst acknowledging the hard-won specificity of concerns in writing from different geographical locations, also moves beyond the diachronic formation of national literatures and cultures.

The Irish cultural critic Luke Gibbons suggests that:

[another] way of negotiating identity through an exchange with the other is to make provision, not just for ‘vertical’ mobility from the periphery to the centre, but for ‘lateral’ journeys along the margins which short-circuit the colonial divide ... Hybridity need not always take the high road: where there are borders to be crossed, unapproved

roads might prove more beneficial in the long run than those patrolled by global powers. (1996: 180)

If the archipelago's disparate marginalities have tended to have little to say to each other, this is by and large also true of the scholarly disciplines engaged with cultural manifestations of these marginalities. If, however, cultural criticism, history and geography can come together across disciplines in a way which proves mutually beneficial, then the same might also be true of those many groups (self-)identified as marginal to a putative mainstream culture. We should be talking; we should be seeking out those 'unapproved roads' imagined by Gibbons if we are to dispense with the by now superannuated category of 'marginality' and move on to more useful, and ultimately more enabling, positions.

Notes

- 1 See for example Bradshaw and Morrill 1996; Connolly 1999; Elcock and Keating 1998; Grant and Stringer 1995; Osmond 1988. These studies vie for intellectual space alongside others which, if not actually pursuing what one commentator is still disposed to call 'the Whig interpretation of English history' (Cannadine 1995: 13), still practise a kind of history more or less in terms of received political and cultural discourses – see for example Colley 1992; Crick 1991; Davies 1999; Foster 1993; Hechter 1975; Levack 1987; Nairn 1981; Robbins 1997; Samuel 1989.
- 2 As Soja says: 'Geography may not yet have displaced history at the heart of contemporary theory and criticism, but there is a new animating polemic on the theoretical and political agenda, one which rings with significantly different ways of seeing time and space together, the interplay of history and geography, the "vertical" and "horizontal" dimensions of being in the world freed from the imposition of inherent categorical privilege' (1989: 11).