

## Waking up in a different place: contemporary Irish and Scottish fiction

GLEND A NORQUAY AND GERRY SMYTH

In his 1994 essay entitled 'The lie of the land: some thoughts on the map of Ireland', the Irish journalist and cultural commentator Fintan O'Toole made the point that although Dublin and Edinburgh are equidistant from the Rhine, the latter city, according to a certain German map of Europe's new economically defined regions, was

part of the core whereas Dublin is part of the outer periphery, simply because Edinburgh is more accessible and richer. In this sense, the new map of post-1992 Europe is one in which Dublin, and Belfast, are in the West, along with Warsaw, Bucharest and Lisbon, while Edinburgh and London are in the East along with Stuttgart and Nice and Rome. Where space is measured, not in miles or kilometres, but in marks or francs, it is hard to get your bearings. (30)

A decade later, it is unlikely if that particular analysis still holds. Without any corresponding shift in the earth's tectonic plates, Ireland's tigerish economy has rocketed the Dublin-dominated island into the European heartland, while Edinburgh, with the advent of the Scottish Parliament and a host of new employment opportunities has continued to prosper, albeit through its acknowledged difference and distance from the metropolitan 'core'.<sup>1</sup> O'Toole's main point, however, continues to hold good, namely, that the meanings attributed to 'places' like Edinburgh and Dublin (and indeed Scotland and Ireland) rely in large measure on the criteria whereby they are spatially constructed.

As the updating of O'Toole's example demonstrates, however, we appear to have entered a period of history in which the spatial constructions of Scotland and Ireland are almost changing faster than cultural representations can cope with. Roddy Doyle's advice for the citizens of the Republic is apposite for those living throughout these islands: 'You

should bring your passport to bed with you because you're going to wake up in a different place' (quoted in Smyth 1997: 102). It is also pertinent advice for writers of contemporary fiction in Ireland and Scotland. Nevertheless, the established cultural institutions continue to service the notion of place as a significant factor impacting on modern identity formation, while at the same time engaging with new possibilities for mapping location. Given this dynamic tension between cultural representation and spatial construction, it is a particularly interesting time at which to undertake a comparison of the fiction being produced in different parts of the Atlantic archipelago.

Traditionally such comparisons have been conducted through a limited core-periphery model. Even such a self-conscious comparatist as Susan Bassnett comments that '[the] relationship of the Celtic diaspora to the English mainstream still remains to be properly investigated' while the 'difficulty' of such an enterprise is explained as due to the complex history of political and linguistic development (1993: 62). Such (un)critical endorsement of ideological space (English centre, Celtic periphery) contributes to the process whereby that hegemonic space is reproduced and perpetuated. This chapter aspires to an alternative critical project: an analysis of contemporary Scottish and Irish fiction through a comparison of the ways in which relations between cultural representation and spatial construction are negotiated in each case to produce places called 'Scotland' and 'Ireland'. In the innovations of recent writing, challenging new maps of archipelagic spaces have emerged; yet in the reception of such writing in mainstream culture we can also discern the perpetuation of older patterns of assimilation.

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In the preface to the 1829 edition of his novel *Waverley* (first published in 1814), Walter Scott cited amongst his influences the Anglo-Irish writer Maria Edgeworth, and particularly her first novel *Castle Rackrent* published in 1800. He noted:

the extended and well-merited fame of Miss Edgeworth, whose Irish characters have gone so far to make the English familiar with the characters of their gay and kind-hearted neighbours of Ireland, that she may be truly said to have done more towards completing the Union than perhaps all the legislative enactments by which it has been followed up.

Without being so presumptuous as to hope to emulate the rich humour, pathetic tenderness, and admirable tact, which pervade the

works of my accomplished friend, I felt that something might be attempted for my own country, of the same kind with that which Miss Edgeworth so fortunately achieved for Ireland – something which might introduce her natives to those of the sister kingdom, in a more favourable light than they had been placed hitherto, and tend to procure sympathy for their virtues and indulgence for their foibles. (reproduced in Williams 1968: 413)

This was praise indeed from such a well established man-of-letters, someone who was to go on to become one of the century's most influential writers. Scott's regard was responsible in no small part for the consolidation of Edgeworth's reputation at a time when her pseudo-Enlightened 'novels' must have been suspect to a culture in deep reaction against Enlightenment-inspired revolution (Butler 1981: 94–8). In articles, reviews and prefaces throughout the first quarter of the nineteenth century, Scott alluded to Edgeworth's exemplary fiction, and subsequent criticism has by and large endorsed his view.<sup>2</sup> *Castle Rackrent* continues to be invoked as a crucial moment in the archipelago's literary history, widely cited as an early (if not the first) example of a number of subsequently significant subgenres: the regional novel, the historical novel, the saga novel, the 'Big House' novel, the 'found-and-edited' novel. The engagement of Scott, a writer whose influence on cultural formations of national histories has been equally long-lasting, with Edgeworth, and his subsequent adaptation of her breakthrough discourse, provides an early example of what Luke Gibbons has called an 'unapproved road' in archipelagic cultural history, an exchange along the margins – from Ireland to Scotland and back again – which threatens to 'short-circuit the colonial divide' (1996: 180). This concept of unapproved roads is one to which we shall return as we examine the ways in which contemporary writers also cross and map a terrain that does not require polarisation with a 'core' to give it significance.

At the same time, however, Scott's understanding of the peculiar merits of Edgeworth's art is cast in terms which were to encumber much subsequent Irish and Scottish fiction. The merit of *Castle Rackrent*, it appears, is that it makes 'the English familiar with the characters of their gay and kind-hearted neighbours of Ireland', while representing the 'natives' in ways likely to procure the 'sympathy' and 'indulgence' of a supposed 'sister kingdom'. Edgeworth's novel, in other words, performs an important political function – amelioration and union – with England providing the explicit cultural norm against which Irish and Scottish 'virtues' and 'foibles' may be regarded. The attempt to induce (English)

understanding of the peripheries through more sympathetic representations was widespread in archipelagic cultural discourse at this time, but for the novelist in particular this was an undertaking fraught with dangers and difficulties. Pointing out that Thady M'Quirk (the narrator of *Castle Rackrent*) 'is a character only a hairsbreadth away from caricature', Seamus Deane continues:

This transition from the analysis of a society to the stereotyping or exploitation of it was rapid in those 'national' novels which became so popular in the early nineteenth century in Ireland and in Scotland (with Scott and John Galt). For the novelist who subscribed to this idea in any of its forms, the problem of representation was severe, largely because the possibility of misrepresentation was so easy ... In the Irish colonial situation there was an irresistible temptation to impersonate the idea of oneself which was entertained by others. Landlord or peasant, English improver or Gaelic remnant, played out roles ascribed to them by a situation which had robbed them of the central sense of responsibility, by effectively denying them basic executive power. Thus it was very Irish to be irresponsible and very English to be responsible and very typical of the English-Irish confrontation to find that neither could learn from or teach the other. This was a paradigm for much of the century's voluminous writings on the issue. It was a stylized representation of a powerless condition. (1986: 94, 97)

Scott's own fiction has been seen by some to have had an equally powerful effect – as Cairns Craig comments: 'No issue has been more debated in Scotland over the past thirty years, in terms of its political and cultural consequences, than the falsification of Scotland's history initiated by Walter Scott' (1999: 116). Scott, it is argued, was not alone in deploying the Jacobite cause and Highland culture to offer a distorting and empty symbolism of national identity, in a 'project of sealing off the Scottish past as a source of contemporary political inspiration' (Beveridge and Turnbull 1997: 95) and the continuing critical negotiations of his influence reinforce his key role in cultural representation (Kidd 1993; Nairn 1981; Pittock 1999). While Edgeworth and Scott therefore offer an instance in which it is possible to travel by unapproved roads, reading across the margins, taken in conjunction they also present an example of collusion with that which the centre 'approves'.

Nearly two centuries later, many writers from across the islands are still labouring in the wake of the 'stylized representations' of Scott and Edgeworth, still searching for forms and voices through which to articulate experiences which are definably 'Scottish' and 'Irish', whilst simultaneously attempting to avoid the 'powerless condition' inscribed in

received definitions of those terms. Yet in some respects the Edgeworth/Scott dynamic provides a more apposite paradigm for writing from Scotland and Ireland in the last decade than it might have done over the last century. For fiction produced over the past ten years, notions of a 'centre' no longer provide the point of definition or difference: a significant feature of recent Scottish and Irish writing has been a tendency towards self-referentiality, an impetus towards reconfiguring the spaces of its own national landscapes and reshaping and/or challenging a perceived body of writing from within its own boundaries – what Patrick Kavanagh might refer to, in his redefinition of the term, as a necessary parochialism (1988: 205–6). Some of the newest and most recognisable of these voices belong to Roddy Doyle and Irvine Welsh, two young writers whose rapturous receptions outside Ireland and Scotland further problematise questions of acceptable and popular representation, both within and outwith their respective national cultures. The similarities and differences between their debut novels reveal much about the fortunes of the Scottish and Irish novelistic traditions in the years since *Castle Rackrent* and *Waverley*, while also offering a point of contrast for work by less well-known but no less engaged contemporary Scottish and Irish novelists.

A comparison of two key texts by Doyle and Welsh – looking not only at distinguishing features, but also at why their work has received such acclaim elsewhere – offers a powerful illustration of the ways in which this dynamic between 'margins' and 'centre(s)' is still being played out but also reconfigured. The similarities are obvious. Both *The Commitments* (1992b [1987]) and *Trainspotting* (1993) drew on, and to an extent were aimed at, 'youth' culture. With the take-off into an information revolution, and with the imminent demise of extended prose fiction once again a topic for the London reviewers, Doyle and Welsh succeeded in making the novel an attractive proposition for the non-standard reader – a reader, in other words, who was not that metropolitan, adult subject encoded into mainstream novelistic discourse at every level from composition through marketing and on to the various modes of critical engagement. Young working-class Dubliners finding common (if strategic) cause with African-American soul music; an alienated working-class generation from Edinburgh finding temporary solace in heroin – it is always difficult to appreciate *after* the event, but these were unlikely topics for successful novels in the respective cultural climates of 1987 and 1993.

As aesthetic possibilities, after all, both 'Scotland' and 'Ireland' still trailed an array of well-established connotations from earlier points in their cultural history. Both figured predominantly within the popular

imagination as signifiers of the pastoral and the past: even at the outset of a new century, the Celtic north and west continue to be depicted in terms – non-Newtonian, uneven, liminal – which stress their essential difference from a putatively ‘normal’ southern centre. Magnificent landscape, cultural simplicity, charming locals, places offering literal (touristic) as well as imaginative relief from the pressures of the present – these are the images which continue to signify ‘Scotland’ and ‘Ireland’ for many throughout the Atlantic archipelago, produced and reproduced in a variety of televisual and cinematic examples. With regard to fiction, both were subject to a peculiar ‘chronotope’, the theory developed by Bakhtin to describe the particular ways in which time and space are represented in differently empowered cultural contexts (1981: 84–258). In the case of Ireland the emphasis was predominantly on small rural communities characterised by ‘eccentricity’, warmth and emotional purity. Scotland’s fictional traditions encompassed a rather different dynamic, with a well-established tradition of novels exploring urban life through the frame of class conflict, ‘masculine’ industries, but also individualistic desires to escape from the soul-denying city to fresher, greener spaces. Although more urban in setting the rural still functioned as a powerful imaginative trope. It was, however, against both sets of images which Doyle and Welsh so obviously and so strenuously set their work.

One of the ways in which they did so was by locating their fictions in places different from the established representations of their respective countries. Traditionally, if Scotland and Ireland *had* to have cities, they should be ones that complement their chronotopic identities. Thus, Dublin was and should remain the city of Joyce – which is to say, not a city at all but an urban village amenable to peripatetic traversal unlike real (that is, English, European or American) cities. By the same token, Glasgow – Scotland’s ‘real’ city – should provide the backdrop for the emergence of the authentic Scottish (working-class) identity, an identity amenable to tragic or comic inflection depending on the artist’s response to the Scottish subject’s essentially displaced and alienated condition. Doyle’s Dublin, however, was unrecognisable as that ‘word city’ around which Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom strolled earlier in the century. Indeed, it was not really ‘Dublin’ at all but a community of former city- and country-dwellers displaced from their native locales to housing estates on the edge of what was rapidly becoming a vast city-region (Smyth 2000). All the Commitments live, work and socialise in Barrytown, not in Dublin. One of the first things we learn about the central character is that ‘[you’d] never see Jimmy coming home from town

without a new album or a 12-inch or at least a 7-inch single' (Doyle 1992b [1987]: 7). The most frequently remarked characteristic of Barrytown's youth is their familiarity with and desire for non-Irish, late twentieth-century popular culture, represented throughout the text (and in the above sentence) in the form of English and American music. Also noteworthy, however, are both the movement and the function described here: movement from the centre to a home on the periphery after an economic exchange. Like every other Dublin estate-dweller, in other words, Jimmy has become a tourist in his own city, a 'Dubliner' with only limited access to a place defined increasingly in material terms.

In *The Commitments* Doyle represents Ireland in ways which disrupt the established chronotope, depicting an urban rather than a rural milieu, making that place unrecognisable in terms of established traditions, and peopling his text with aggressive, immature young adults rather than deliberating mature subjects. We find many of these characteristics repeated in *Trainspotting*. The mean streets of Leith (the working-class port in which Welsh sets his autopsy of contemporary Scottish life) are a long way from the romantic 'Highlands and Islands' of the chronotopic imagination.<sup>3</sup> But they are also some way removed from traditional urban representations of Scotland – invariably set in Glasgow, centred around traditional heavy industries such as shipbuilding and mining, and engaged with received, and supposedly 'universal', discourses of gender, class and race. What also sets Welsh apart from previous writing is that the definitional relationship is no longer the city against the country, epitomised in the titles of novels such as *A Green Tree in Gedde* or *The Dear Green Place*, in which an opposition between the urban present and the lost green past construct the co-ordinates of identity (Gifford 1985). Building on transitions offered by Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* (in which hill-walking offers rather ambivalent pleasures to the young Duncan Thaw), Welsh refuses to engage with such romantic narratives of escape and polarisation. As Mark Renton (the principal character and focaliser) repeatedly points out, however, those discourses that order meaning in the 'real' world stand for nothing when confronted with the 'reality' of heroin. Speaking as the inheritors of a disabled cultural tradition, the implicit question asked by Renton and his fellow smackheads – following on from Renton's rather more explicit comment: 'Ah've never felt a fuckin' thing about countries other than total disgust' (1993: 228) – is: What have gender, class and race ever done for us? *Trainspotting*, like *The Commitments*, thus serves as an intertextual rejoinder to an entire tradition founded on a set of disabling chronotopic representations.

This challenge extends to novelistic conventions of language, narrative and character. Both novels deviate from standard English in narrative voice and dialogue. Both dispense with what Joyce called 'perverted' commas, those scriptive markers of different voice-zones by means of which the textual world is orchestrated in line with established discourses of power. *The Commitments* has a third-person narrator, but this figure does not adopt the traditional authorial role of realist fiction, by and large avoiding any intrusion into the world of the story aimed at offering 'real' interpretations of the characters' motives, words or actions. Doyle achieves an ensemble effect by refusing much of the time to specify which individual is speaking. In a soul group, after all, the individual is less significant than the ways in which individuals combine and interrelate. Welsh also employs this technique, although his greatest formal challenge to conventional narrative discourse is to combine limited authorial narrative with a range of focalisers so as to produce a text decentred in terms of focus and identification. As with Doyle, this narrative technique is linked to the subject matter, as the loss of narrative control highlights the loss of individual self-control brought on (in many cases, actively sought) by the characters' substance abuse.

The most obvious formal signal of their difference from standard novelistic discourse, however, is the adoption of 'regional' voices, and the related attempt to produce an immediacy of effect that would fly in the face of any 'literary' pretension. *Trainspotting* is more obviously exotic than *The Commitments* in terms of reproducing a specific class-regional dialect, but the language used in each text constitutes an attempt to accurately capture a local urban patois in terms of rhythm, accent and slang. More significant, however, is the fact that both texts aim to expose the ideological distance between 'colourful' vernacular and a controlling metalanguage, an effect going back at least to Scott and Edgeworth, and one which has played a crucial role in enabling the spatial construction of each place.<sup>4</sup> Welsh had immediate precedents such as James Kelman and Jeff Torrington for his formal assaults upon such a disabling tradition, although their use of the demotic was again firmly embedded within the context of a west of Scotland culture. The work of Janice Galloway and Alasdair Gray had also offered patterns for Welsh in his challenge to the conventional typographies of fiction. Doyle, however, found himself in the early 1980s working in a cultural context in which working-class Dublin speech was available only in comic and/or heavily ironic mode. Apart from Flann O'Brien, one has to go all the way back to Joyce – to *Ulysses* and more obliquely *Finnegans Wake* – to find any sustained attempt

to reproduce a meaningful written rendition of the Dublin accent. Of course, *The Commitments* appears to bear out this comic/ironic inheritance; one of the common criticisms levelled against the novel is that it represents a mere updating of 'Paddy's Progress', an anthropological rendering of working-class subjects in their natural environment, with a large number of swear-words added to provide extra *frisson* for the encoded middle-class reader. There is a lack of sentimentality in *The Commitments*, however, a certain edginess of tone that was to evolve in Doyle's subsequent fiction into a desire to explore the dark corners of Barrytown, and to expose the emotional depths of a supposedly 'comic' working-class language.

Like Doyle, Welsh writes with a hyper-awareness of the ideological implications of novelistic discourse, a condition that can lead the 'regional' writer either towards the Scylla of effusive self-consciousness or the Charybdis of debilitating silence. The achievement of these novelists is their reproduction of a local voice that manages to steer clear of both dangers: neither the 'colour' of self-conscious regionalism, nor the solipsism of cultural exceptionalism. One irony in this particular context, of course, is that the Scottish novelist is in fact more difficult for the 'ordinary' (that is, English) reader to understand than his Irish counterpart. A more significant irony, perhaps, lies in the fact that although both Doyle and Welsh clearly set their artistic stalls against an established novelistic discourse possessing little scope for the expression of their own experiences, they were at the same time partaking of a well-established archipelagic tradition whereby the cultural produce of the margins is co-opted by the centre to revitalise what are seen as decadent metropolitan practices. A further irony lies in the fact that what makes both Welsh and Doyle so acceptable to other literary establishments is the ways in which the very extremity of their endeavour to place different kinds of experiences, milieus, and voices at the centre of their texts, leads to easy metropolitan acceptance of their 'marginality'. Doyle's promise was realised with the Booker Prize-winning *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* (1993), and a decade or so after the publication of *The Commitments* it seemed as if all the budding novelist needed was an Irish accent and a few hundred words to secure the interest (and more) of the big London publishing houses. The 'Irvine Welsh Effect' likewise became an established phenomenon of the late 1990s, and as supposed principal spokesperson for 'the chemical generation' his influence was pervasive. In the case of Welsh, however, explicit references to 'schemie' culture, and implicit links with post-colonial experience, signalled fairly crudely in *Marabou Stork*

*Nightmares* (1996), appeared to produce for readers a frame of interpretation that makes sense of, but also renders less threatening, the 'alien' cultural representations offered. There is a sense then (as Ian Bell has pointed out), that '[no] matter how strongly novelists feel their sense of dissidence from the authorized version of our culture and no matter how deeply run their local affiliations, the novel – by its very form – often implicitly reproduces the hegemonic gaze' (1995: 2).

## II

It would be an even greater irony if the many significant similarities between these two writers were allowed to congeal into some species of marginal essence permanently at odds with metropolitan practices – thus consolidating the divide between centre and periphery – or to mask what are in fact a number of crucial differences between them in terms of style, subject matter and intention. One means, therefore, of reading Welsh and Doyle together, but without reinforcing their function within a centralising metropolitan culture, is to place them within the context of other contemporary writers in Scotland and Ireland. Another is to foster awareness of the differences between cultural configurations between Scottish and Irish writing.

Although they remain high-profile writers within a wider archipelagic context, Welsh and Doyle are but part of highly active and diverse scenes in their respective literary formations. To that extent, while perhaps not unrepresentative, their novels should be read in relation to works by other writers in order to understand the wider dimensions of culture across the islands. In the case of Welsh, the effect of wide acclaim has been to separate him from a number of other writers whose work has also been strikingly experimental both in terms of narrative technique and linguistic innovation. Experiments with narrative form have been characteristic of Scottish writing from the early nineteenth century onwards – with James Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) a much-cited example – through the fiction of Muriel Spark and, more recently, Alasdair Gray. Linguistic experimentation and disruption of literary hierarchies has also been characteristic of the work of James Kelman, Jeff Torrington and Janice Galloway. To see Welsh as an iconoclast is therefore to ignore the literary context in which he has developed as a writer and also to diminish the significant work of contemporaries. Within Scottish culture the writers with whom his name is often linked – Alan Warner and Duncan McLean through

personal connections, Janice Galloway and A. L. Kennedy through more formal parallels – present equally radical challenges.

Alan Warner, for example, has made a conspicuous and conscious engagement with ‘youth’ culture. He goes much further than Welsh in reconfiguring the polarisation of the rural and the urban, by locating his fiction in small-town ‘highland’ settings which nevertheless contain many aspects of urban culture, while retaining differences in community structures that signal their separateness from the major conurbations. Warner also represents what might be seen as one of the key characteristics of contemporary Scottish and Irish writing – a literature that engages with its own parameters and does not define itself through its situation in relation to a supposed English ‘centre’. Epitomised in the striking image from *Morvern Callar* (1995) of Morvern burying parts of her lover’s body throughout the landscape, Warner is engaged in mapping out the specificities of a particular cultural location and constituency. His concern with the co-ordinates of youth identity, however, is not dependent upon boundaries between Scotland and a core elsewhere. Rather, he is pre-occupied with the codes of naming and of community relations that exist within but also across the communities he depicts – be they in Oban, Ibiza or Edinburgh. It is the supposed centre itself – London – which has at its heart an absence of memory: it is here that Morvern is confronted by a war memorial on which the names (of battles) obscure the individuals: such names signify nothing except the grand narratives of history.

While a writer such as Warner represents an explicit challenge to previous chronotopic modes, other, equally distinctive manifestations of this new cultural consciousness have also emerged within the past ten years. A second characteristic of contemporary fiction is writing which operates within recognisable cultural paradigms, but feels no pressure to make issues of national identity an explicit issue. While writers such as A. L. Kennedy or John Burnside may demonstrate concerns which could be identified as ‘national pre-occupations’ – such as Kennedy’s inheritance of Muriel Spark’s trio of concerns: lies, duality and punishment – their interests need not be translated into metaphors of national identity. Conversely, it could be argued that a third body of writing has emerged which flags its own nationality, making clear its location within a geographically specific and ‘national’ space, but which operates through forms of genre fiction in which the narrative conventions offer an equally significant, and for the reader perhaps more powerful, spatial demarcation. Thus Iain Banks has developed within the genre of fantasy fiction novels which are clearly set within Scotland, clearly ‘Scottish’ in many of their

concerns but also preoccupied with other aspects of identity formation – such as gender, desire, violence (Schoene 1999). Andrew Greig has produced a number of novels which might be marketed as ‘romance’ but which again are identifiably Scottish in location. In *When They Lay Bare* (1999), for example, with its potent evocation of Border Ballads and feuding Border history as context for its exploration of desire and identity, Greig works within a frame of specifically Scottish (in both historical and geographic terms) spaces but issues of ‘national identity’ are not central as ‘thematic’ material. Ian Rankin, in his highly successful ‘Inspector Rebus’ detective stories, has carved out a landscape of crime particular to Edinburgh, and given rise to the development of a whole sub-genre of Edinburgh hard-boiled detectives. While asserting the particular inheritance and terrain of his chosen location, Rankin has shown an increasing engagement with that city as representative ground for the games of nationalist politics; if the novels contain hidden polemic, however, that lies as much in testing of genre boundaries as in the reconfiguring of city space.

In the Irish context, the great Joycean project to forge the uncreated conscience of the race is pursued in less lofty though no less compelling ways in the work of writers such as Anne Enright, Joseph O’Connor and Colm Tóibín. The novel would still appear to be one of the principal forms through which a particular (that is, national) reality may be observed and deconstructed. There is still, as the critic Timothy Brennan observed, a ‘national longing for form’ (1990), and the novel is still one of the most popular and malleable media for that longing to be realised. One marked difference, however, is the fact that the Irish reality addressed by the typical novel of the 1990s was not that of a ‘paralysed’ provincial culture, but a complex social milieu animated by an aggressive economy and the awareness of a greater Ireland beyond the geographical confines of the island. If, as Fintan O’Toole suggests, ‘Ireland is something that often happens elsewhere’ (1994: 27), then the Ireland that happens ‘here’, so to speak, is unrecognisable as the country that existed one hundred, forty, even ten years ago. The novels of Tina Reilly and Neville Thompson, as well of those of genre writers such as Marian Keyes and Colin Bateman, depict an Ireland – north and south – in which film and fashion, drugs and data, take their place alongside politics as the touchstone of contemporary Irish identity. We still await, however, the great modern satirist capable of doing justice to the seemingly endless tribunals that, throughout the latter half of the 1990s, revealed the corruption at the heart of public life in the Republic. Perhaps twenty-first-century Ireland is not so

far removed from 'Ivy Day at the Committee Room' as many would like to believe.

At the same time, many writers attempt to mitigate the anxiety of Joyce's influence by locating the action of their 'Irish' stories offshore – in Africa (as in Ronan Bennett's *The Catastrophist*, 1997), in Central America (as in Joseph O'Connor's *Desperadoes*, 1994), or in New York (as in Colum McCann's *This Side of Brightness*, 1998). Others still trace a movement *between* Ireland and other places – places such as Spain (as in Tóibín's *The South*, 1990), London (as in Robert Cremins' *A Sort of Homecoming*, (2000), or continental Europe (as in Desmond Hogan's *A Farewell to Prague*, 1995) – as if to show the ways in which Irish identity is becoming necessarily nomad and dispersed rather than rooted and stable. As in certain Scottish contexts, the intention would appear to be to represent nationality as an incidental rather than a defining factor. And as in Scotland, this may have something to do with increased cultural confidence in the wake of greater political and economic success. In any event, whether within or outwith the geographically defined national territory, novelists seem more willing and more able to transcend the imaginative boundaries of the nation than ever before, even as the nation remains a factor at both the thematic and formal levels.

Another similarity between Irish and Scottish fiction lies in the fact that a desire to play with established parameters of novelistic discourse did not emerge from a literary–historical vacuum. There is in fact a long experimental tradition in Irish literature that continues to impact upon contemporary novelistic discourse. During the nineteenth century, the novel's troubled status was primarily to do with the anomalousness of the colonial society which Irish writers were attempting to represent. Long before international modernism rendered self-conscious the relationship between form (representation) and content (reality), the complex resonances accruing from that relationship were laid bare (often unconsciously or unwittingly) by novelists such as Maria Edgeworth, Sydney Owenson (Lady Morgan) and William Carleton. As Luke Gibbons has written with reference to such shattering developments as the loss of a national language and the Great Famine: 'In a country traumatized by a profound sense of catastrophe, is there really any need to await the importation of modernism to blast open the continuum of history?' (1991: 3). In such a context, simply putting pen to paper was an act fraught with all manner of potential affiliations and betrayals. In this respect, James Joyce (invariably invoked alongside Marcel Proust as the key modernist exponent of the novel) emerges as a much more complex figure when placed within the

context of Irish colonial history. In this respect also, and *pace* Doyle's populist realism, the post-Joycean Irish novelist is heir to a tradition in which the very form with which she/he is working is itself suspect, and in which the *act* of representation – with all its connotations of power and identity – frequently becomes the *subject* of representation.

John Banville is perhaps the major contemporary heir to this Irish 'anti-tradition'. All his fiction contains a level of discourse – wielded with greater or lesser self-consciousness – in which art itself operates as a key metaphor for the 'real' world represented in the narrative. Like many of the novelists mentioned in the preceding paragraphs, Banville's nationality is incidental rather than central. To use familiar terms in a perhaps unfamiliar context, nationality is 'peripheral' rather than 'core' in his writing, the means to an artistic end (concerned with larger 'human' issues) rather than the end itself. In *Athena* (the final part of his loose 'art' trilogy), for example, the Dublin underworld (if it is such) functions only as background for Morrow's musings on the nature of the relationship between reality and representation. Paradoxically, the peripheralisation of nationality as a determining factor in Banville's work has the effect of revealing the manner in which supposedly universal 'human' issues are always anticipated at a less general or, to be frank, national level. Again, in an early text such as *Birchwood* (1973), the local context (nineteenth-century rural Ireland) functions as an under-developed backdrop for a Wittgensteinian reflection upon the relationship between consciousness and narrative. But the slightest engagement with that context reveals that such a theme goes to the heart of national experience during the nineteenth century – a time when cultural narratives (histories, novels, poetry, and so on) were systematically deployed in the development of a national consciousness.

In less intellectualist though no less interesting ways, other contemporary novelists have engaged with the Irish anti-tradition, whether filtered through the discourse of fantasy (as in Anne Enright's *The Wig My Father Wore*, 1995), popular culture (as in Patrick McCabe's *Breakfast on Pluto*, 1998) or myth (as in Dermot Healy's *A Goat's Song*, 1995). Despite new times, (Irish) novel and (Irish) nation still appear to be caught in a bind of mutual fascination. For all these writers, even when the action is set elsewhere, or when the subject matter appears overtly non-national, the national narrative is still there, hovering in the background, still exercising influence at a deep structural and/or conceptual level. With Joyce as interlocutor, the modern Irish novelists might be imagined as saying: It's Ireland, Jim, but not as you knew it!

## III

Reading Doyle and Welsh in relation to other writers, a more complex process of spatial reconfiguration and cultural representation emerges. Within this different context, their work appears less directed as a challenge towards a metropolitan centre and less amenable to representation as the embodiment of an 'other' culture. The complexity of the picture outlined also suggests that while there are similarities in the ways in which the novelists mentioned here might be located within, and be seen as responding to, new archipelagic cultural formations, it would be too easy to homogenise and elide all differences.

Perhaps the most striking difference between fictions produced in Ireland and Scotland has continued to be in their confrontations with history. This is not to suggest that such writing can only be understood in historicist terms, but rather that the dynamic with history itself produces rather different spatial configurations. While the novel in Ireland has been described in terms of a 'fixation on the ways in which the past persists into the present' (Smyth 1997: 53) – manifested for example in the Gothic form – the Scottish novel has been seen as engaged in 'a confrontation with the limits of the historical as a mode of understanding human experience' (Craig 1996b: 81). The ways in which a small selection of recent Scottish and Irish novels from the 1990s attempt to construct and imagine collective and personal 'pasts' offers then some sense of how these different versions of history interact. Irish writing engages with the past as lived in the present, not only in the form of memories of events from Ireland's turbulent political history but also through stories of ghosts and the supernatural (Deane 1996; Enright 1995; Healy 1995; McCabe 1995). Such novels offer very different manifestations of the ways in which houses, streets, subjects are mapped out through narratives of the past which shape boundaries and meaning. The modern Scottish novel, by contrast, has been described as resting on a paradox: 'the forms of history that it charts in its narratives are what it seeks to negate through its creation of narrative forms which will defy and deny the primacy of the historical as the mode in which we should comprehend the nature of human experience' (Craig 1999: 166).

Benedict Anderson's assertion that personal and national histories are constructed through different narrative teleologies offers a point of entry into an assessment of the implications for an understanding of social and psychic 'national' identities. In the secular story of the 'person', he notes, 'there is a beginning and an end ... Nations, however,

have no clearly identifiable births, and their deaths, if they happen, are never natural ... the nation's biography is marked by deaths, which, in a curious inversion of conventional genealogy, starts from an originary present' (1991: 205). Such a distinction would seem to function well as an image of the dynamic within both Irish writing and Irish politics. But as Murray Pittock suggests, the idea of 'imagined communities' has in a sense more application in an Irish context where

the sound of ancestral voices has been forcibly and continuously projected through imaginative writing, literature and culture representations that lie at the heart of its generative power, whether for good or ill. In Northern Ireland uniquely in the British Isles, this imaginative dynamo is not simply the property of protest against a central state: it is divided against itself, with mutual incomprehension between the communities, not only because they have different myths but because they squabble over the same ones. (1999: 130)

Contemporary Scottish fiction may have moved away from a concern with Scottish history as a vacuum (as identified by Cairns Craig in his essay 'The body in the kit-bag': 1996c), the configuration of pasts and presents they offer (and the emphasis placed on such issues) does still, however, differ strikingly from the Irish novels described (Craig 1996b). In Alan Warner's *Morvern Callar* (1995), Andrew Greig's *Electric Brae: A Modern Romance* (1992), and Janice Galloway's *Foreign Parts* (1994), writers can be seen as adopting experimental narrative structures which juxtapose different versions of the past, but also addressing with a growing confidence the significance of community, familial, and personal (rather than national pasts) in relation to the present. If we contrast the image of Morvern boldly carrying her own past (her lover's head banging around in her knapsack, or striding out to the island with a child in her belly) through the Scottish landscape with her bafflement at the London war memorial, or Cassie's incomprehension of history in the French war cemetery – 'It was dubious territory indeed, the fantasy you could understand a bloody thing by looking at the likes of this. Rows of dead people. Dead men. Dead boys' (1995: 50) – her embrace of laughter, the sea and a lack of direction at the close of *Foreign Parts*, challenges to the grand narratives of history might be detected (Norquay 2000). In that sense, whereas in Irish fiction the past functions as a metaphor for the difficulty of coming to terms with conflicting national narratives, contemporary Scottish fiction appears to be developing a concern with 'personal' histories, moving from the past towards birth or rebirth.

Yet within both Irish and Scottish fiction a central similarity

remains in the explicit concern with delineating the narratives of culture, the parameters of space which shape us. Which brings us back to the notion of unapproved roads. In *Foreign Parts* Galloway's characters make a crucial mistake when trying to find their way through France: thinking it more pleasant to take backroads, they become completely lost in a sterile and confusing landscape. 'We thought backroads would be prettier. But coming from a wee country, we forgot' (1995: 64). In *Reading in the Dark* the moral of McIlhenney's story about the man on the bus is: 'people in small places make big mistakes. Not bigger than the mistakes of other people. But there is less room for big mistakes in small places' (Deane 1997: 211). In each instance the reader is reminded that small countries make different navigational demands but also have something different to offer: space appears both more tightly structured yet also more multiple in its signification. Having recognised this difference, writers may then produce works which depart from a disempowering dynamic with supposedly core cultures and enjoy the potential fluidity, that rapidity of change recognised by Doyle. As critics, we also need to produce more complicated and complicating navigational aids if we are to do justice to the reality of 'waking up in a different place'.

## Notes

- 1 On Scotland's post-devolution take-off see *The Scotsman* 17 January 2000.
- 2 For Scott's citations from 1810, 1816, 1823 and 1827, see Williams 1968: 174, 190, 206, 231 and 428.
- 3 With regard to the Celtic chronotope, Joep Leerssen writes: 'Once identified, the chronotope appears to be operative in almost all descriptions of outlying Celtic-language districts during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, even in twentieth-century cinema – witness the prototypical Brigadoon (about a Scottish valley, Shangri-La-style, where time has literally stood still), or Powell and Pressburger's *I know where I'm going* (set in the extratemporal dreamscape of a Hebridean island) or the more recent *Local hero*. As regards Ireland, the treatment such as we have encountered it ... is practically standard over the last two centuries, from the novels of Lady Morgan until films like *Un taxi mauve*' (1996b: 190).
- 4 On the ideological underpinnings of cultural regionalism, Raymond Williams writes: 'And then what is striking, in matters of cultural description, is the steady discrimination of certain regions as in this limited sense "regional", which can only hold if certain other regions are not seen in this way ... Yet this is no longer a distinction of areas and kinds of life; it is what is politely called a value-judgement but more accurately an expression of centralized cultural dominance ... The life and people of certain favoured regions are seen as essentially general, even perhaps normal, while the life and people of certain other regions, however interestingly and affectionately presented, are, well, regional' (1991: 230).