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IRELAND

REVOLUTION AND EVOLUTION



Foreword

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Yeats, who dominates memory the more that writers seek to disengage from his influence, was much possessed by wheels and deeply preoccupied by change. Whether wheelings imply change is a matter on which his poems, like the essays in this scintillating collection, have a great deal to say. In 'The Wheel' he is decidedly negative: the more we wheel, the more we appear to reiterate an absolute 'longing'. The poem attaches a mordantly entropic value to our urge to pursue the revolvings of the seasons, observing 'that what disturbs our blood / Is but its longing for the tomb'.

Elsewhere, more famously, he can imagine how 'All's changed, changed utterly', his repeated use of 'changed' itself hinting at the paradox that change is itself only thinkable of as the uncanny double of fixity. Sacrifice as a means to regeneration, dying to the old self so as to bring about the new: these resonant, fraught topoi trail their clouds of revolutionary fervour through Irish culture. So, too, do the cool dousings of revisionist scepticism and it is a remarkable feature of Irish writing generally, as well as of Yeats's in particular, that it can be both extreme and self-qualifying, unbridled and reined-in, passionate and cunning. 'Propaganda has rarely produced a fine poem', writes Thomas MacDonagh in his *Literature in Ireland*, a work that sees the Irish stone in the midst of most of what is of permanent value, yet celebrates the fluid, changing shadows that sweep over the surface of the 'Irish Mode', in which the voice supposedly works as with 'a kind of tune or croon'.

For every glad or even bruised dawn, for every imagining of irrevocable change, there is the kind of return to the quotidian affectingly staged in the closing sentence of William Trevor's *The Story of Lucy Gault*: 'The rooks come down to scrabble in the grass as every evening at this time they do, her companions while she watches the fading of the day.' In the

haunting lilt and curve of that sentence, *Macbeth* meets Wallace Stevens and an atmosphere of elegiac absence flows back through a novel scarred by erasures, history as accident as well as inevitable unfolding.

Disturbing questions intrude as the meanings of historical change in the Irish context press upon us. Is such change best understood as revolutionary or revelatory or reactionary? How should we think about or respond to the waning of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, that threatened cultural grouping whose imminent collapse evokes apocalyptic, mythologised and disquieted renditions in text after text? How might we configure or reconfigure the idea and image of the Irish diaspora, whether it brings us into contact with Charles Macklin or St Patrick's Day parades in Manchester? Does postmodernism, with its not always uncomplacent doubt about stable identity, offer us release from vexing allegiances or merely a trapdoor into emptiness?

Essay after essay in this volume broods on these and associated questions, renewing our understanding of their importance, difficulty and challenge. We are reminded that the past, and our constructions of it, are always themselves open to change, to a vigorous shake of the interpretative kaleidoscope. Thus, one essay invites us to see the pre-Norman North-East of England as less Anglo-Saxon than 'Anglo-Gael'. What's in a name? Well, a great deal, as the endless changes rung on the words 'Irish' and 'Ireland' continually bear witness. Late Yeats deplored in 'The Statues' the changes wrought by modernity's 'filthy modern tide', even as his very fury ensures his own immersion in the 'tide' he despises, doing so in the name of 'We Irish, born into that ancient sect'. The reader may reject the groundswell of reactionary hate, but it is hard not to admire the awareness, embodied in the poem's carriage, that identity is always, if perhaps not only, a product of performance.

In their sense that meanings are inevitably bound up with, and generated by, cultural practices, these essays are exemplary. But, more than this, they remind us that the struggle to define national identity connects profoundly with collective desire and individual agency. Change emerges from this volume as both goal and process in Irish affairs, an imperative working stealthily or explosively, yet, in its guarantee of nuanced or brutal redefinition, never, in the end, less than utterly.