

Introduction

PADDY LYONS AND ALISON O'MALLEY-YOUNGER

That is no country for old men. The young
In one another's arms, birds in the trees
– Those dying generations – at their song,
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unaging intellect.

— W.B. YEATS, 'Sailing to Byzantium'

'Sailing to Byzantium' looked forward to a departure overseas, to emigration. From the mid-nineteenth century, and well into the twentieth century, away was all too frequently the direction in life taken by Irish citizens, most often to assure for their families some economic prosperity; and often too, away was the direction taken by Ireland's writers – Joyce, O'Casey and Beckett, for instance – seeking access to freedom and to experience not readily available at home. Taken literally, Yeats's poem is no guide to the mood of those times: there is little to suggest sensual music was in much abundance in the Ireland of the late 1920s. Times were hard, then, and for the young who stayed, it could seem as if geriatrics ruled; as if the young were doomed to be – in Anthony Cronin's notorious and erstwhile censored phrase – 'Dead as Doornails under Dev'.

But by the late twentieth century, all was changing. By the 1980s, Ireland was the European country with the largest percentage of citizens under the age of twenty-five, and their music was being heard: Ireland had a thriving new musical culture, and was – in the words of the singer Dana – 'spiritual home to the Eurovision Song Contest.' By the 1990s

the economy was prospering, heading for the boom which would come to be known as 'the Celtic Tiger'; and the flow of emigration had given way to waves of migration, returnees coming back from abroad to take up work in a new Ireland, soon to be followed by waves of new immigrants from other lands.

Explanations are various. By the late years of the twentieth century, the developed world was shifting away from its old economic base in heavy industry, a shift which for many countries would be and still is painful and disruptive. Ireland, however had – relatively speaking – been bypassed by the Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, its economy remaining significantly agricultural, and hence out of step with the progress of wealth. In the late twentieth century this would prove advantageous: Ireland had less industrial baggage to offload, and could readily move to the forefront under new post-Fordean economics. Irish confidence became apparent under the Presidency of Mary Robinson, whose generous emphasis on inclusiveness – inclusion of the world-wide Irish diaspora, and inclusion of new immigrants – gave a boost to Ireland's position on the world stage, and thereby too to Irish writers.

Further progressive change was to take place with the initiation of peace processes in Northern Ireland, bringing a new climate to a part of the island which had for decades been bedeviled by sectarian 'Troubles'. Under the leadership of Bertie Ahern, government by coalition had already become the norm in the Republic; when the St Andrew's Agreement of 2006 brought about a power-sharing Assembly for Northern Ireland in Stormont, this so astonished the international media that world leaders and American presidential candidates would jostle to claim for themselves some association with the achievement of this new harmony. In short, Ireland no longer appeared to be ruled by the old quarrels of old men, and is exemplary now for showing how it's possible to move forwards socially and politically as well as economically. For Ireland's writers, here is a new situation calling for response; and for those who study Ireland's culture, here is a radically new position from which to view the past.

In the year that 'Sailing to Byzantium' was written (1926), it must have seemed to Yeats that a quasi-mythical world of wonderful promise had been fully superseded by profiteering gombeens at their greasy

till, whose rise he had deplored in 'September 1913', where he famously stated 'Romantic Ireland's dead and gone'. With 'Sailing to Byzantium', his imagination turned to escape from the world of the real – the natural world – away from the world which privileges youth over age – and in the manner of high modernism he celebrated instead a distant realm of art and poetry, at once imaginary and symbolic. The magnitude of his feelings of loss is betrayed through the desire to be absorbed by the eternal – and hence imaginary – 'monuments of unageing intellect'. Yeats thus voiced a yearning for, and a lament over an 'imagined Ireland', an Ireland of the mind, as he sought a divorce from the crises and turmoil which beset the country at the beginning of the twentieth century, as it was moving from subaltern colonial status towards full independence. Writers before and since Yeats have done the same, producing laments, eulogies, elegies and *liebstdots*, which have envisaged Ireland in guises ranging from ailing Aislings to de Valera's fantasy of a land where comely maidens danced at the crossroads. Yet, as the broad title of this series indicates, if Ireland can be imagined, it can also be re-imagined. It is now time, as Richard Kearney has argued, 'to open Irish minds to life as it [is] lived in the present that is unencumbered by nostalgic abstractions from the past or millennial abstractions about the future. Ireland [has] come of age. The moment for critical stocktaking [has] arrived' (Kearney, 1988: 261).

This volume attempts a critical stock-take of Ireland's culture as it is re-imagined in the wake of the Celtic Tiger – an Ireland which has given proof that women too can be good and effective presidents of the nation, and where women are no longer corralled into dancing at crossroads, and minding hearth and homeland – an Ireland in which traditions are often transitional or transnational, and where identity can be evolutionary as well as revolutionary. As Fintan O'Toole has pointed out, 'Ireland is not one story any more' (O'Toole in Boss and Westarp, 1998: 171). It can be said that the Celtic Tiger has been leaping in new directions, and reaching new perspectives. The essays in this volume address and interrogate these fresh and still-changing stories of Ireland – taking into account that political and ideological backdrops have changed the country from a famine-ravished but invariably idealized rural idyll, to Ireland's emergence as one of the wealthiest nations in the world. Ireland has moved from a

third world culture to a first world country, and the politics of peace are transforming the landscape of possibilities, which Seamus Heaney suggests are best 'appropriated by those with a vision of the future rather than those who sing battle hymns to the past' (*Irish Times*, 10 April 1998). As Chris Morash observes: 'If Irish cultural debate is to move forward, a new vocabulary must be found' (Morash, 1991: 122).

Under the heading 'New Readings' we gather a range of reconsiderations of the writings of the past. Some of the writings addressed here have not been studied previously, or have not been considered deserving of study before now: Irish women's fiction from the era of the first world war – fiction that interestingly crosses sectarian divides – comes under the spotlight, as too does science fiction, a youthful and speculative literary genre, whose appeal for Irish writers has not before been widely noticed. The obsessive dimensions of the Gothic are revisited through post-colonial perspectives. Gender issues are re-opened, and Eilis Dillon, who is best remembered for her translations from Irish and for her children's fiction, can here emerge as an adult novelist, a serious and challenging investigator of family structures. A further hidden human geography is uncovered, whereby gays were marginalised in times when terrorism took centre stage, thus inviting questions as to how far those spaces still remain to be remapped. With the healing of sectarian wounds well underway, Brian Friel need no longer be positioned as purely a champion of Catholic Ireland, and his exposé of the Catholic pseudo-aristocracy can come into the light. Irish Classics too are reconsidered – the European dimension is enlarged through a demonstration of Joyce's rediscovery and scrupulous redeployment of ancient arts of memorialisation; and it is at last possible to identify the dark side of Flann O'Brien's comedy.

Along with Irish writing from both North and South, 'New Territories' also addresses new and distinguished writing from the Irish diaspora: Colum McCann's fiction has already brought into focus the Slavic world, and here it is considered in its further turn to the world of Romany; Martin McDonagh's plays are relocated within larger theatrical tendencies that link as much to Brecht and Pirandello as to Synge and the rich past of Irish drama. The new ground for Northern writers is examined as it is scrutinised in the fiction of David Park, as it is spoken about in a

hitherto unpublished interview with the novelist Glenn Patterson, and as it is reconfigured by poets who have emerged in the decade following the beginnings of the peace process. The re-emergence of history as a strand in the Irish novel is considered in relation to Roddy Doyle and Dermot Bolger; as too are the ways whereby the novels of Deirdre Madden have registered the world of visual art and visual artists. Rewritings and re-adaptations of Shakespeare by the present generation of Irish playwrights, both North and South, provide a further barometer for writing in a time of change.

The contributors to this volume are from Ireland, North and South, from the Irish diaspora in Britain and in Scotland, and from Europe and from the United States. Many of their essays originated from the international conferences of the North East Irish Culture Network (NEICN) held annually at the University of Sunderland; others result from co-operation and partnership between NEICN and the Irish Studies work now thriving at the University of Glasgow. Both Sunderland and Glasgow have long been home to large and settled Irish diaspora communities, and it is a special satisfaction to us that from these communities outside the island of Ireland we can foster study in response to what is best and new in Ireland's continually developing culture.

Works Cited

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