

A Short History of ◇ IRISH LITERATURE

Seamus Deane



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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	7
1 The Gaelic background	11
2 The formation of the Anglo-Irish literary tradition, 1690–1800	30
3 The Celtic revival, 1780–1880	60
4 Nineteenth-century fiction	90
5 The drama: Farquhar to Shaw	118
6 Irish modernism: poetry and drama	141
7 Irish modernism: fiction	168
8 Contemporary literature, 1940–80	210
<i>Select bibliography</i>	250
<i>Chronology of important dates from 1550–1980</i>	256
<i>Index</i>	269

Preface

There are several histories of Anglo-Irish literature and many surveys of particular periods within the field. Even though there is a perceptible uneasiness about the date of the emergence of this body of writing and, even more, about the relation it bears on the one hand to Gaelic and on the other to English literature, there is no substantial dispute about the integrity of this literary tradition in the English language. To describe this literature as 'Anglo-Irish' is by now anachronistic, although 'Irish literature' is not without its perils also. This is an inevitable problem in a colonial or neo-colonial culture like ours, where the naming of the territory has always been, in literary, geographical or historical contexts, a politically charged activity. One of the aims of this book is to show how literature has been inescapably allied with historical interpretation and with political allegiance. The Irish experience, in all its phases, has led to an enhanced sense of the frailty of the assumptions which underlie any working system of civilization and of the need to create, by a persistent effort, the enabling fictions which win for it the necessary degree of acceptance. Because of this, Irish writing has traditionally been extraordinarily interrogative. It has moved between the extremes of aestheticism – seeing literature as an end in itself – and of political commitment – seeing it as an instrument for the achievement of other purposes. Most of the great writers incorporate both attitudes within their work and they share with lesser writers the conviction that the matter of Ireland is, *in parvo*, the matter of civilization itself. It is only in a minority culture, acclimatized to discontinuity, that such a dream of totality can be regularly entertained.

However, such matters cannot be dealt with in any detail in an introductory volume which has no claim to the comprehensiveness of a history or to the minuteness of a monograph. The need to compress the material involved a number of exclusions. Gaelic literature is, for instance, treated in a summary fashion, partly

because of my own deficiencies in that area, partly because the emphasis had to be on literature in the English language. Even then, there are omissions. Swift's poetry, the tradition of Irish oratory, Shaw's full career as a dramatist and polemicist as well as the work of a large number of modern and contemporary writers, are sacrificed for the sake of a continuous narrative in which some of the preoccupations I have mentioned are prominent. The same imperative led me to exclude Irish fiction of the eighteenth century. Henry Brooke and William Chaigneau are interesting figures, but their inclusion here would have taken me too far from the central story.

In effect, that story is about a literary tradition which has undergone a series of revivals and collapses, all of them centred upon an idea of Ireland. Sometimes the Ireland we speak of is an Edenic, sometimes it is a Utopian place. On other occasions, it is a rebuke to both. There is a consistent fascination with the discrepancy between the Irish world as imagined and the Irish world as it is, and this eventuates, time and again – in Swift, in Joyce, in Burke, in Standish O'Grady and many others – in a critique of the idea of authority. Authority and its legitimacy and effectiveness was always a matter of concern in Ireland, since it has only seldom proved its claim to either. But for writers, the questionable nature of authority has an especial charm, since there is, for an author, no more natural or, indeed, radical question. The interrogation of the status of an author as such is more likely to proceed when there are two prevailing conditions. One, is that the author is uncertain about his true audience; and second, that the author is uneasy with the very medium of communication. Both these conditions prevail in Ireland for writers of both English and Irish and their reality is exhibited in the fluctuating state of the Irish publishing industry. To be an Irish writer in English for a predominantly Irish or for a predominantly English audience is an ambiguous fate, overcome only by those few who manage to be both. A more thorough exploration of these ambiguities leads to strange, experimental and subversive enterprises, like those we associate with, say, Swift, Beckett, Flann O'Brien, George Moore, Joyce and, in a tributary fashion, with the translators who play such an important role in the endless negotiation between the two languages and between the competing interpretations of history which are so often involved with them. Linguistic unease lends itself to formal experimentation, although, equally, it can lead to *naïveté*, clumsiness and a degree of intro-

verted provincialism. All of these features are strongly pronounced in the literature discussed here.

Finally, there is another kind of exclusion which merits observation. The exemplary instances are Congreve and Sterne. It is, naturally, with some reluctance that I omit writers of such quality, both for their own sakes and because of the compatibility between their work and some of the masterpieces of the Irish tradition. It would be easy to associate Congreve with Farquhar and, by extension, Wilde and the long line of Irish comic dramatists. Sterne is often invoked as a forerunner of Joyce, because of the degree of his formal experimentation. Yet, attractive as these associations are, they seem to be ultimately insubstantial. Both writers belong without any stress or strain to the English tradition and their Irish background is more peripheral than central to their literary achievement. There are many authors of Irish extraction whose relation to Irish writing is unimportant or non-existent. The Brontës are a case in point; so too is Robert Graves; and even Hazlitt has an Irish element in his family background. There is no point in pursuing these ghostly affiliations in the biography unless they are realized in some pronounced and substantial form in the writings. It has not, therefore, been my concern to claim for the tradition of Irish writing authors who are much more naturally understood in the English context. This is not to say, of course, that the problem is unreal or that the relationship between the two cultures is ever anything less than close as well as strained. This is an introduction to a literature in which ambiguity and tension of this kind has been transmitted into art more memorably and effectively than they have been in any other Irish enterprise.

1 The Gaelic background

The art of writing came to Ireland with Christianity in the fifth century. The new Christian communities, gathered together in monastic settlements, brought Latin culture into contact with a Gaelic civilization which had a long and rich oral tradition. Although the relationship between the new Christian clergy and the old professional class of learned men, dominated by the poet (*file*), was at first uneasy, the incorporation of the pagan and Christian elements was remarkably peaceful and comparatively swift. The flowering of this Christian and Gaelic culture in the sixth and seventh centuries in the Irish monasteries led to the ninth-century Irish missions to Europe and the conversion of the Germanic peoples to Christianity. But the Viking invasions, begun in 795, had already begun to weaken the fabric of the monastic civilization. By then, the basic materials for our understanding of pre-Christian Ireland had begun to accumulate as the result of a compromise between the clerical scribes and the poets of the old dispensation. It was traditionally the poet's function to preserve traditional lore (*senchas*) in relation to places, families, customs and laws. The monastic scribes were concerned to incorporate this material into the system of Christian belief. In doing so, they recorded the origin stories of Irish history and the great sagas – the Ulster Cycle, centred on Cu Chulainn, the Fenian Cycle centred on Finn Mac Cumhaill, the Cycle of the Kings, including the story of Mad Sweeney, and the Mythological Cycle and the group of Immrama or Voyages. All of these were written down in Irish, thus making it the oldest of European vernacular literatures and, as a consequence, the literature which uniquely blends the old pagan and the new Christian worlds. Much of this material was written down in the sixth or seventh centuries and was copied over and over again thereafter. Although no manuscript in the Irish language dates from earlier than the twelfth century, there is no doubt that the great mass of poems, sagas, annals and genealogical accounts derives

from the pre-Christian Gaelic tradition.^{1*} The endurance of this literature in the Irish imagination is attested by the fact that Thomas Kinsella published his translation of the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* (*The Cattle-Raid of Cooley*) in 1969; Paul Muldoon's poem 'Immram' in *Why Brownlee Left* (1980) is an adaptation of the *Immram Mael Duin*, an early Christian adaptation of a pagan story; and Seamus Heaney's *Sweeney Astray* is a version of the medieval *Buile Suibhne*, a tale based on traditions going back to the seventh century. Instances like these could be multiplied in twentieth-century Irish writing. John Montague's *The Faber Book of Irish Verse* (1976) is an anthology stretching from the sixth century to the present day, with modern translations of the early material.

The reconstruction of the pre-Christian history of Ireland is recorded in the *Lebor Gabhala* or *Book of Invasions*, the creation of centuries of accretion, adaptation and reorganization of earlier records into a political and Christian narrative, which justified the predominance of the Gaelic civilization in Ireland and traced its origins back to Adam. The central tale of the Ulster Cycle, the *Táin Bó Cuailgne*, preserved in three recensions, of which the twelfth-century *Book of Leinster* version is the most coherent, is the national epic of the Gaelic world. It tells the story of the great Ulster warrior, Cu Chulainn, who single-handedly held up the army of Queen Maeve's Connacht men while the rest of the Ulstermen lay under a spell which rendered them inactive. This story was to be resurrected again in the late nineteenth century by Standish O'Grady and Lady Gregory. Cu Chulainn was thence to become one of the heroic atavars of Yeats's poetry. But the stories and legends attached to his name remained part of the Irish folk imagination long after the destruction of Gaelic civilization and long before the Irish revival's reincorporation of them in modern literature. He is the epitome of the heroic spirit in Irish literature. The other great Irish hero, Finn Mac Cumhaill, the central figure in tales and poems, which had been transcribed since the eighth century, displaced Cu Chulainn from his central position with the appearance in medieval times of a work known as *Agallamh na Seanórach* (*Colloquy of the Ancient Men*), the work of an unknown thirteenth-century genius. The stories of Finn (or Fionn) and the

* Superior figures refer to the Notes at the end of chapters.

fianna, the wandering band of warriors and hunters whom he led, were expanded and developed in prose sequences containing metrical insets. These insets in the *Agallamh* developed into the Ossianic lays, poems or ballads in which Oisín, one of Fionn's companions, is the interlocutory figure who brings the pagan Fionn and the Christian St Patrick together in a series of exchanges which embody the different world views of the two dispensations. The form of the lays is in itself conciliatory and the tone, for the most part, courteous. The opposition between the two worlds is brightly but not starkly contrasted. The culture is discovering through these tales and poems a way of preserving both pagan and Christian elements as integral parts of itself. In later centuries the tales continued to be extended and elaborated, both in formal literature and in the oral tradition. Europe rediscovered Fionn and his companions in the eighteenth century through the publications of James MacPherson, whose *Fingal* (1762) and *Temora* (1763) were claimed as translations of poems written by Ossian (the Scottish form of Oisín) in the third or fourth century. Thus Fionn became one of the Celtic heroes of Romanticism long before Cu Chulainn was retrieved for the Irish revival at the close of the European Romantic era. But the first coherent formulation of the Fionn Cycle, although its materials belonged to Gaelic Ireland, was a product of the new culture which had arrived with the Normans in 1169, a date equivalent in Irish history and literature to 1066 in England.

Irish lyric poetry began in the ninth century with the monastic scribes, many of whom would insert in the margins of the Latin treatises they were transcribing lyrics on occasional subjects – the song of a blackbird, the sunlight flickering on the pages of the manuscript, a bell ringing on a windy night. In the ninth century this lyrical impulse was sharpened by the ascetic devotionism of a reform movement, which gave to the severe life of the hermit monk an enhanced prestige and a closer intimacy with the natural world in which he spent his solitude. The exile willingly undergone by the missionary monks also bred a poetry of longing for the beloved native place, most famous of which are the poems attributed to (but not possibly written by) St Colmcille, who Christianized Scotland and northern England and lamented the homelands of Gartan and 'angel-haunted' Derry, which he would never see again. Such personal themes, also found in the Latin poetry of the monks, do not form part of the repertoire of the older metrical tradition of verse. It was dominated by historical and mythological themes,

passages of praise for warriors and chieftains, genealogies and the lore of sacred places. Such verse was in many ways more distinct from poetry proper than from prose, but its cultivation inevitably nurtured technical skills and ritual forms of great complexity. When these converged with the Latin forms learned by the scribes, most especially as the traditional *file* or poet disengaged from the role of historian, lawyer and encomiast, there emerged a body of poetry remarkable – and almost untranslatable – in its formal perfection. The mixture of religious and secular themes and the intense personal cadence of this poetry is sustained even into the lyrics, which were inset in the prose sagas, although not many of these preserved their full integrity in their passage from the oral to the written tradition. The more personal poetry was written in what were called the new metres (*nua-chrutha*), derived from the Latin hymns of continental Europe. These were syllabic, but the Irish poets refined the rhyme patterns and introduced elaborate alliterative ornaments native to the old tradition. From the ninth to the seventeenth century Irish poetry continued to develop its immense technical resources – rhyming quatrains, tercets and strophes of rhyming couplets, line end and internal accentual rhyme, and many other features which gave primacy to the aural enjoyment of a strictly organized poem – although it also exercised these within conventional limits. After the Norman invasion had begun to be absorbed, the schools of bardic poets began to flourish under the patronage of Norman or Gaelic lords, producing masses of formal verse in the family poem-books (*duanaire*), as well as less formal verse, which is generally valued more highly by modern readers. The specifically clerical and monastic influence receded and the starkness of the heroic literature was softened in its detail as the European conventions of romance literature were increasingly absorbed along with the other aspects of Anglo-Norman culture.²

The bardic schools predated the Norman invasion, although their organization is perhaps definitive from the twelfth century only. Under the kingship of Brian Boru in the tenth century, the centres of Irish learning had moved from the eastern seaboard to the monasteries of Clonmacnoise and Terryglass on the Shannon. In these great centres of learning the earlier literary and historical tradition was redefined and consolidated and became, in effect, the responsibility of hereditary literary families. Brian Boru's victory at the Battle of Clontarf (1014) was construed in the eleventh century as a victory by the High King of Ireland over foreign invaders – in

this case, the Norse. But the Norse were by then already a minor element in the complicated and war-torn Irish polity. Brian Boru's court codified the rules of Irish metrics and rhetoric and subsequent antiquarian movements enhanced the retrospective impression that Ireland was and always had been an independent and centralized culture. But it was the Normans who brought the political reality of centralization with them. The European impact of their arrival had been anticipated by the arrival of the continental religious orders, led by St Malachi, who founded the Cistercian monastery of Mellifont in the Boyne valley in 1142. They were followed by the Franciscans. These orders became increasingly absorbed into the Gaelic civilization, recruiting many of their members from the dominant literary families. Although the Anglo-Norman invaders were also absorbed into the Gaelic polity, their insistence on the distinction between themselves and the Gaels, originally based on their boasted superiority in civilization, became a critical mark of identity for them after 1560, when the Reformation and subsequent political developments in England brought to Ireland a new invasion of settlers whose religion was Protestant and whose aim was dominance over the whole country at the expense of the Gaelic as well as the Norman, now the Old English, element.³

Between 1200 and the end of the sixteenth century, there were four languages in use in Ireland – Irish, Norman-French, Latin and English. The only literature of enduring quality was produced in Irish, although there are historically interesting poems in Middle English like *The Land of Cokaygne*, a satire in rhymed couplets. The Irish poetry may be divided into three general kinds – court poetry, love-poetry and ossianic lays, this last group being part of the elaboration of the Finn Cycle mentioned earlier. The love poetry is deeply marked by the impress of the European *amour courtois* and is practised both by the Norman aristocracy and by the professional poets. The court poetry, often in praise of a patron, was technically the most sophisticated, composed in strict versification (*dan díreach*) by highly trained professionals, who observed certain procedures even in the composition of their works. In their windowless rooms, in darkness, they produced a formal, hieratic poetry, which was then recited to music in the presence of the poet to the patron by the bard. One of the finest of the thirteenth-century poets, Giolla Brighde Mac Con Míghde, defined the function of this poetry when he declared that

If poetry were to be extinguished, my people,
 If we were without history and ancient lays
 Forever. . .
 Everyone will pass unheralded.⁴

Poetry was both heroic history and a witness to the continuity of both family and race. Up to the late sixteenth century it was able to preserve this function, as it had done for a thousand years before, because the Gaelic civilization still retained the capacity to accommodate itself to the disruptions and invasions which had characterized the country's history. This capacity could only be sustained, however, as long as some system of patronage was permitted, and that itself depended upon the existence of at least a degree of respect for the Irish culture on the part of the dominant invading group. With the Reformation and the arrival of the New English, that disappeared. Irish poetry was cut loose from the social and economic anchorage in which it had ridden out the worst of the preceding political storms. Both Old English and New English were, for different reasons, thereafter intent on either Anglicizing the old culture or, failing that, destroying it completely.

The Norman conquest had from the beginning formulated a defence of its attempted subjugation of Ireland. Giraldus Cambrensis had accompanied Prince John to Ireland in 1184 and produced, as a result, two famous works, *Topographia Hibernica*, an account of the history, geography and wonders of Ireland, and *Expugnatio Hibernica*, an account of the conquest itself. Cambrensis introduced the distinction between the barbarous Irish and their civilizing conquerors which was to form a permanent part of the ideology of conquest and domination for succeeding centuries. Throughout the stormy period of the Norman settlement, various attempts were made to affirm this distinction and to keep inviolate the stronghold of Anglo-Norman rule, the area around Dublin known as the Pale, from Gaelic influence. The *Description of Ireland* (1577) by Richard Stanihurst (1547-1604), contributed to Holinshed's *Chronicles*, makes the same point in its discussion of the penetration of the Irish language into the Pale:

. . . this canker took such deep root, as the body that before was whole and sound was by little and little festered and in a manner wholly putrified . . . it is not expedient that the Irish tongue shall be so universally gagged in