

TWAYNE'S CRITICAL HISTORY  
OF THE NOVEL

THE  
IRISH  
NOVEL

JAMES M. CAHALAN

# The Irish Novel

## A Critical History

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*The Irish Novel: A Critical History*

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*To Lea Masiello*

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Indiana, Pennsylvania  
October 1988

# Chronology

- 1649 Cromwell sacks Drogheda and wages eight-month campaign breaking native Irish resistance to English rule.
- 1650 Large-scale English settlement of Ireland begins.
- 1665 *The English Rogue* by Richard Head.
- 1689–1691 Jacobite-Williamite War, ending in anti-Catholic Treaty of Limerick.
- 1691 *Political Anatomy of Ireland* by Sir William Petty.
- 1698 *Case of Ireland's Being Bound by Acts of Parliament in England, Stated* by William Molyneux.
- 1690s–1790s Anti-Catholic Penal Age in Ireland.
- 1726 *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift.
- 1729 *Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People in Ireland from Being a Burden to their Parents or Country* by Swift.
- 1745 Death of Swift.
- 1752 *The History of Jack Connor* by William Chaigneau.
- 1756 *The Life of John Bunclie* by Thomas Amory.
- 1768 Maria Edgeworth born.
- 1771 *The Fool of Quality* by Henry Brooke.
- 1780 *A Tour in Ireland* by Arthur Young.
- 1781 *The History of John Juniper* by Charles Johnstone.
- 1782 Henry Grattan's Irish Protestant "Patriot Parliament" formed.
- 1791 United Irishmen founded.

- 1798 Unsuccessful Irish rebellions in counties Wexford, Antrim, and Mayo.
- 1800 Act of Union between Great Britain and Ireland. *Castle Rackrent* by Maria Edgeworth.
- 1803 Robert Emmet's rebellion and execution in Dublin. Gerald Griffin born.
- 1806 *The Wild Irish Girl* by Sydney Owenson.
- 1808 *The Wild Irish Boy* by Charles Maturin.
- 1809 *Ennui* by Edgeworth.
- 1812 *The Absentee* by Edgeworth.
- 1817 *Ormond* by Edgeworth.
- 1820 *Melmoth the Wanderer* by Maturin.
- 1825 *Crohoore of the Billhook* by Michael Banim.
- 1826 *The Boyne Water* and *The Nowlans* by John Banim.
- 1827 *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys* by Owenson.
- 1829 Catholic Emancipation granted. *The Collegians* and *The Rivals* by Gerald Griffin.
- 1831 Anti-Protestant Tithe Wars begin. National schools instituted with English as the sole language of instruction.
- 1832 *Dublin Penny Journal* begins.
- 1833-1877 *Dublin University Magazine*.
- 1839 *Fardorougha the Miser* by William Carleton.
- 1842-1892 *The Nation*.
- 1841 *Charles O'Malley, the Irish Dragoon* by Charles Lever.
- 1842 *Handy Andy* by Samuel Lover.
- 1843 Daniel O'Connell's campaign for repeal of the Union fails.
- 1845 "Great Hunger" begins. *Valentine McClutchy* by Carleton. *The Cock and Anchor* by Sheridan Le Fanu.



- 1847 O'Connell's death. *The Black Prophet* by Carleton. *The Fortunes of Colonel Torlogh O'Brien* by Le Fanu.
- 1848 Abortive Young Ireland uprising. *The Emigrants of Ahadarra* by Carleton.
- 1856 *The Martins of Cro Martin* by Lever.
- 1858 Fenian movement founded.
- 1863 *The House by the Churchyard* by Le Fanu.
- 1867 Unsuccessful Fenian rising.
- 1872 *Lord Kilgobbin* by Lever.
- 1879 Michael Davitt's Land League founded. *Knocknagow* by Charles Kickham.
- 1882 James Joyce born.
- 1883 *Irisleabhar na Gaeilge* (*Gaelic Journal*) founded.
- 1886 Irish Home Rule Bill. *A Drama in Muslin* by George Moore. *Hurriah* by Emily Lawless.
- 1891 Death of Charles Stewart Parnell.
- 1892 *Grania* by Lawless.
- 1893 Douglas Hyde's Gaelic League founded.
- 1894 *The Real Charlotte* by Somerville and Ross.
- 1903 Wyndham Land Act. *The Squireen* by Shan Bullock. *Irish Life in Irish Fiction* by Horatio Sheafe Krams.
- 1904 *Séadna* by Peadar Ó Laoghaire.
- 1905 Sinn Féin founded. *The Lake* by George Moore.
- 1910 *Deoraíocht* (Exile) by Pádraic Ó Conaire.
- 1912 *The Charwoman's Daughter* and *The Crock of Gold* by James Stephens.
- 1913 Irish Volunteers formed. Dublin transport workers' lock-out and strike. *Father Ralph* by Gerald O'Donovan.
- 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by Joyce.

- 1918 *The Valley of the Squinting Windows* by Brinsley MacNamara.
- 1919 Anglo-Irish War begins. *The Wasted Island* by Eimar O'Duffy. *Ireland in Fiction* by Stephen J. Brown.
- 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty establishes Northern Ireland.
- 1922 *Ulysses* by Joyce.
- 1922–1923 Irish Civil War.
- 1924 *The Black Soul* by Liam O'Flaherty. *Caisleáin Óir* (Castles of gold) by Séamas Ó Grianna.
- 1925 *The Informer* by O'Flaherty. *The Big House of Inver* by Edith Somerville.
- 1926 *Mr. Gilhooley* by O'Flaherty. *King Goshawk and the Birds* by O'Duffy.
- 1929 Censorship of Publications Act. *The Last September* by Elizabeth Bowen. *Adrigoolle* by Peadar O'Donnell. *The Various Lives of Marcus Igoe* by MacNamara.
- 1932 *Skerrett* by O'Flaherty.
- 1933 *A Nest of Simple Folk* by Sean O'Faolain. *The Curse of the Wise Woman* by Lord Dunsany.
- 1937 Irish Free State Constitution. Douglas Hyde elected first president. *Famine* by O'Flaherty. *Peter Waring* by Forrest Reid.
- 1938 *Murphy* by Samuel Beckett.
- 1939 *Finnegans Wake* by Joyce. *At Swim-Two-Birds* by Flann O'Brien. *Call My Brother Back* by Michael McLaverty. *Men Withering* by Francis MacManus.
- 1939–1945 Ireland remains neutral during World War II.
- 1940–1954 *The Bell*, edited by O'Faolain to 1946 and O'Donnell to 1954.
- 1941 Death of Joyce. *The Land of Spices* by Kate O'Brien. *An Béal Bocht (The Poor Mouth)* by Flann O'Brien. *The Poor Mouth* was also published in English in the 1970s.

- 1946 *Land* by O'Flaherty. *The Unfortunate Fursey* by Mervyn Wall. *Land without Stars* by Benedict Kiely.
- 1948 Republic of Ireland declared. *Tarry Flynn* by Patrick Kavanagh.
- 1949 *Cré na Cille* (Churchyard clay) by Máirtín Ó Cadhain. *Redemption* by Francis Stuart.
- 1950 *Modern Irish Fiction—A Critique* by Benedict Kiely. *Molloy* by Beckett.
- 1951 *Malone meurt* (*Malone Dies*) by Beckett.
- 1952 *L'Innommable* (*The Unnamable*) by Beckett.
- 1953 *Watt* by Beckett.
- 1955 *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne* by Brian Moore.
- 1958 *The Feast of Lupercal* by Moore. *The Irish Novelists, 1800–1850* by Thomas Flanagan.
- 1959 *James Joyce* by Richard Ellmann.
- 1960 *The Country Girls* by Edna O'Brien.
- 1962 *The Silent People* by Walter Macken. *L'Attaque* by Eoghan Ó Tuairisc.
- 1963 *The Barracks* by John McGahern. *The Ferret Fancier* by Anthony C. West. *Thy Tears Might Cease* by Michael Farrell.
- 1965–1970 Economic advances in the Republic of Ireland.
- 1965 *The Emperor of Ice-Cream* by Moore. *The Dark* by McGahern. *The Waking of Willie Ryan* by John Broderick.
- 1966 *Langrishe, Go Down* by Aidan Higgins.
- 1967 Irish civil rights movement begun in Northern Ireland.
- 1968 *An Uain Bheo* (The moment of decision) by Diarmuid Ó Súilleabháin.
- 1969 British troops sent into Northern Ireland. *Strumpet City* by James Plunkett. *The Hungry Grass* by Richard Power. *Mrs. Eckdorf in O'Neill's Hotel* by William Trevor.

- 1971 *Black List, Section H* by Francis Stuart.
- 1972 *Catholics* by Moore. *Night* by O'Brien. *The Captains and the Kings* by Jennifer Johnston.
- 1973 Ireland enters the European Economic Community. *Birchwood* by John Banville.
- 1973 Economic recession throughout Ireland begins.
- 1974 *How Many Miles to Babylon?* by Johnston. *The Leavetaking* by McGahern. *Forces and Themes in Ulster Fiction* by John Wilson Foster.
- 1976 *Lig Sinn i gCathú (Lead Us Into Temptation)* by Brendan Ó hEithir.
- 1977 *Farewell Companions* by Plunkett.
- 1978 *Bogmail* by Patrick McGinley.
- 1979 *The Old Jest* by Johnston.
- 1980 *No Country for Young Men* by Julia O'Faolain. *Lamb* by Bernard MacLaverty. *The Past* by Neil Jordan. *The Leaves on Grey* by Desmond Hogan.
- 1983 *Cal* by MacLaverty.
- 1984 *The Railway Station Man* by Johnston. *Foggage* by McGinley. *The Summerhouse* by Val Mul-kerns.
- 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement. *The Killeen* by Mary Leland.
- 1986 *The Trick of the Ga Bolga* by McGinley.
- 1987 Charles Haughey replaces Garret Fitzgerald as Taoiseach (Prime Minister). *Fool's Sanctuary* by Johnston. *The Red Men* by McGinley.

# Introduction

This book is the first comprehensive, one-volume history of the Irish novel ever published. This is intended not as a comment on my own critical ambition (or hubris), but on the peculiar treatment of my subject in the existing critical literature. As a distinct subject the Irish novel has had to overcome the tendencies of critics to ignore it entirely, to lump it together with the British novel, or to attend only to the works of its most celebrated practitioner, James Joyce. Ernest Baker absorbed the Irish novel into the English in his *History of the English Novel* (1924–39), just as Ireland itself had been annexed by Britain during centuries of tortured economic and political existence. Walter Allen continued this practice in his *The English Novel: A Short Critical History* (1954), and for decades it has been reflected in American courses on “The Modern British Novel” that include Joyce—who turned to Europe, not Britain, for his foreign literary inspiration. Subsuming “Anglo-Irish” writers within courses on English literature, when not ignoring them altogether, has been a form of cultural imperialism. As the Irish novelist and critic Anthony Cronin writes, “There is not much point in talking about Anglo-Irish literature. Whatever else these works are, they are not Anglo-anything, unless, that is, the work of Whitman or Hart Crane or Melville or Dos Passos or Scott Fitzgerald is Anglo-something” (1982, 11).

The American-dominated “James Joyce Industry” is a more subtle but even more pervasive form of cultural imperialism. As the greatest twentieth-century novelist in the English language, Joyce merits considerable critical attention and in fact actively encouraged it himself. Many scholars have made their names and their careers by writing about Joyce, with each Joycean breeding several others and perpetuating a tunnel vision that is often blind to other Irish novelists. Within Irish literary studies, one effect of the Joyce Industry has been to block attention to many other worthy Irish

authors—and also to neglect, ironically enough, an adequate understanding of the place of Joyce's own novels within their most obvious context, the development of the Irish novel itself. Virtually every current critical approach—psychoanalytic, structuralist, poststructuralist, reader-response, feminist, Marxist, and others—has been applied to Joyce's novels, but many other Irish novelists, when not ignored entirely, have been subjected to an extremely limited range of critical methods, a point I shall take up in this book. Each one of the hundreds of dissertations, books, and articles on Joyce is one that does *not* examine the valuable work of Pádraic Ó Conaire, Kate O'Brien, Charles Lever, or dozens of other Irish novelists who might be named (and will be named in this book). Patrick Kavanagh wrote a memorable poem on the subject of "Who Killed James Joyce?" ("The weapon that was used / Was a Harvard thesis"), but at Joyce's wake we should mourn not Joyce but, more properly, the neglected remains of other Irish novelists.

I deliberately listed as my examples above a novelist in the Irish language (Ó Conaire), a woman (O'Brien), and a Protestant (Lever) because they represent groups that have often been victims of particular neglect. Writing about an earlier group of Gaelic writers, Daniel Corkery described their oppressed position in an Ireland increasingly dominated by the English and their language, in his book *The Hidden Ireland* (1925). Corkery's well-known phrase, "the hidden Ireland," has been borrowed much more recently by both Janet Madden-Simpson, to describe the treatment of women writers within an Irish critical tradition dominated by men (1984, 4), and Gerald Dawe and Edna Longley, who assert that "the 'Hidden Ireland' has now more claim to be Protestant than Gaelic" (1985, ii). Dawe and Longley emphasize that W. B. Yeats (who, ironically, was a Protestant) did much to encourage a critical code that celebrates southern Catholic writers as Irish at the expense of northern Protestant ones. Protestants represent a minority within Ireland, just as the Irish as a whole are outnumbered by the English in the British Isles. Yeats frankly admitted, "I generally dislike the people of Ulster, and want to keep them out" (quoted in Dawe and Longley, iv). W. J. McCormack agrees that "to an

extent which is too infrequently recognized, critics of Anglo-Irish literature have derived their techniques from Yeats, and so have entered into a conspiracy with that formidable reviser of history" (1980, 266). Countering the older narrow nationalism and the discomfort of Irish Protestants, Irish members of the Field Day Theatre Company (1985)—Seamus Deane, Seamus Heaney, Brian Friel, Tom Paulin—advocate a more inclusive brand of Irishness, a new kind of nationalism.

With such powerful problems to be overcome, it is perhaps not quite so surprising that critics have examined the Irish novel only in bits and pieces. As Diane Tolomeo notes, "Few critics have attempted to deal with the development of Irish fiction" (1983, 268). In 1903 Horatio Sheafe Krans published the pioneering if necessarily limited book *Irish Life in Irish Fiction*, but for the most part his successors did not pursue the path he had cleared. In the most influential early twentieth-century study of Irish literature, *Ireland's Literary Renaissance* (1922), Ernest Boyd belittled Irish fiction in a single chapter subtitled "The Weak Point of the Revival." W. J. McCormack notes that the study of Irish literature at large "is still at what may be aptly called an infantile stage, obsessively concerned with certain prominent and important figures—Yeats, Joyce, Synge—but neglectful of the larger body of writing amongst which the masters must ultimately be placed" (1980, 266). A few valuable studies of the Irish novel during particular periods have appeared. Benedict Kiely's *Modern Irish Fiction—A Critique* (1950) is a short but useful examination of Irish fiction between 1920 and 1950. Thomas Flanagan's *The Irish Novelists, 1800–1850* (1958) was a pioneering book that oddly concluded that "the nineteenth-century novel established no tradition" and that Joyce "owed little to the work of his predecessors" (333). These claims, as we shall see, are far from the truth. Klaus Lubbers has published a very valuable book (1985a) in German, examining the development of the Irish novel up until 1900, and promises a second volume on the twentieth-century novel; an English translation of his work would be useful. Most recently of all, John Wilson Foster has authored *Fictions of the Irish Literary Revival: A Changeling Art* (1987), a large book that

implicitly counters Ernest Boyd's dismissal of Irish fiction as "The Weak Point of the Revival." Several surveys of Irish literature as a whole (Fallis 1977; McHugh and Harmon 1982; Jeffares 1982; Deane 1986) provide useful overviews of the development of the Irish novel, but within limited contexts. My own first book examines the development of one subgenre, the Irish historical novel, over the course of its entire development (Cahalan 1983).

I intend for this volume to provide students and scholars with a starting point for more in-depth study, thereby stimulating both an appreciation of the Irish novel as a distinct subject and, I hope, further research and publication on some of the most neglected areas within the topic. Throughout this book I indicate the prevalent critical approaches to the Irish novel, continually linking assessments of the criticism to the story of the novel in Ireland, and suggesting (especially in my conclusion) some ideas for further research. For my purposes here, an "Irish novel" is any Irish author's novel that is set in Ireland. I seek to explain how the novels respond to the patterns of Irish history and are in fact a part of that history. In each chapter I briefly outline the relevant contours of Irish history; the beginning student should also consult one or more of the several valuable surveys of Irish history that are available (J. C. Beckett 1966; Lyons 1971; McCaffrey 1979; Moody and Martin 1984).

As indicated at several points throughout this book, in giving attention to a number of the better novelists I have been forced to neglect many minor talents. Yet, determined to avoid tunnel vision, I have cultivated a fairly broad view, examining in my seven chapters the works of more than eighty novelists—with my treatment of individual novelists varying in length from a paragraph to a full chapter—and briefly naming about thirty others while always seeking to provide a context for understanding rather than merely listing one author and title after another. My simple and necessary operative definition stated above means that I cannot examine here novels by Irish authors set abroad (Brian Moore's North American novels, for example) or novels by foreigners set in Ireland (such as Thomas Flanagan's *The Year of the French*). But I do include Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* and Beckett's novels,



since they are set largely in Ireland inasmuch as they are “set” anywhere in particular (and inasmuch as they can be said to be “novels”). As we shall shortly see, one of the distinctive features of many Irish novels is that they are constantly interrogative of the genre as a whole, departing in many respects from various novelistic conventions.

True to my definition, I include in this book not only novels written and published in English but also novels in Irish. Irish is a Celtic language (best called “Irish” rather than “Gaelic” to distinguish it from Scottish Gaelic) as different from English as any other Indo-European language could be said to be, yet novels in Irish share many of the concerns and features of Irish novels in English, and are discussed here at the appropriate points in this history. A few novelists—most notably Flann O’Brien—published novels both in English and in Irish. It is well known that English as spoken and written in Ireland has been much influenced by Irish, especially in its vocabulary, verbal forms, and syntax (O Muirthe 1977; McCrum, Cran, and MacNeil 1986). When conversing with his English dean of studies, Stephen Dedalus in Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* becomes sharply aware of how “his language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech” (189). Irish English—the variety of English spoken in Ireland, also sometimes called “Hiberno-English” or “Anglo-Irish”—has created difficulties but also furthered artistic freedom for the Irish novelist, especially as we move from early nineteenth-century attempts to write dialogue to generally more sophisticated and often more imaginative uses of Irish English in our own century. I agree with Robert Welch (1985) that a continuity can be found in Irish literature, focusing on the rich interactions between Irish and English—while I cannot accept his notion of Gaelicism that would judge Yeats as more “Gaelic” than Breandán Ó hEithir (229). Alan Titley recalls Frank O’Connor’s question about whether Irish literature in the two languages is a unified subject or “merely two unrelated subjects linked by a geographical accident” (1981, 116), and he concludes that “freagra simplí . . . atá ar cheist thosaigh Frank O’Connor. Dhá litríocht atá in Éirinn, litríocht na Gaeilge agus litríocht an Bhéarla . . . Sin uile”