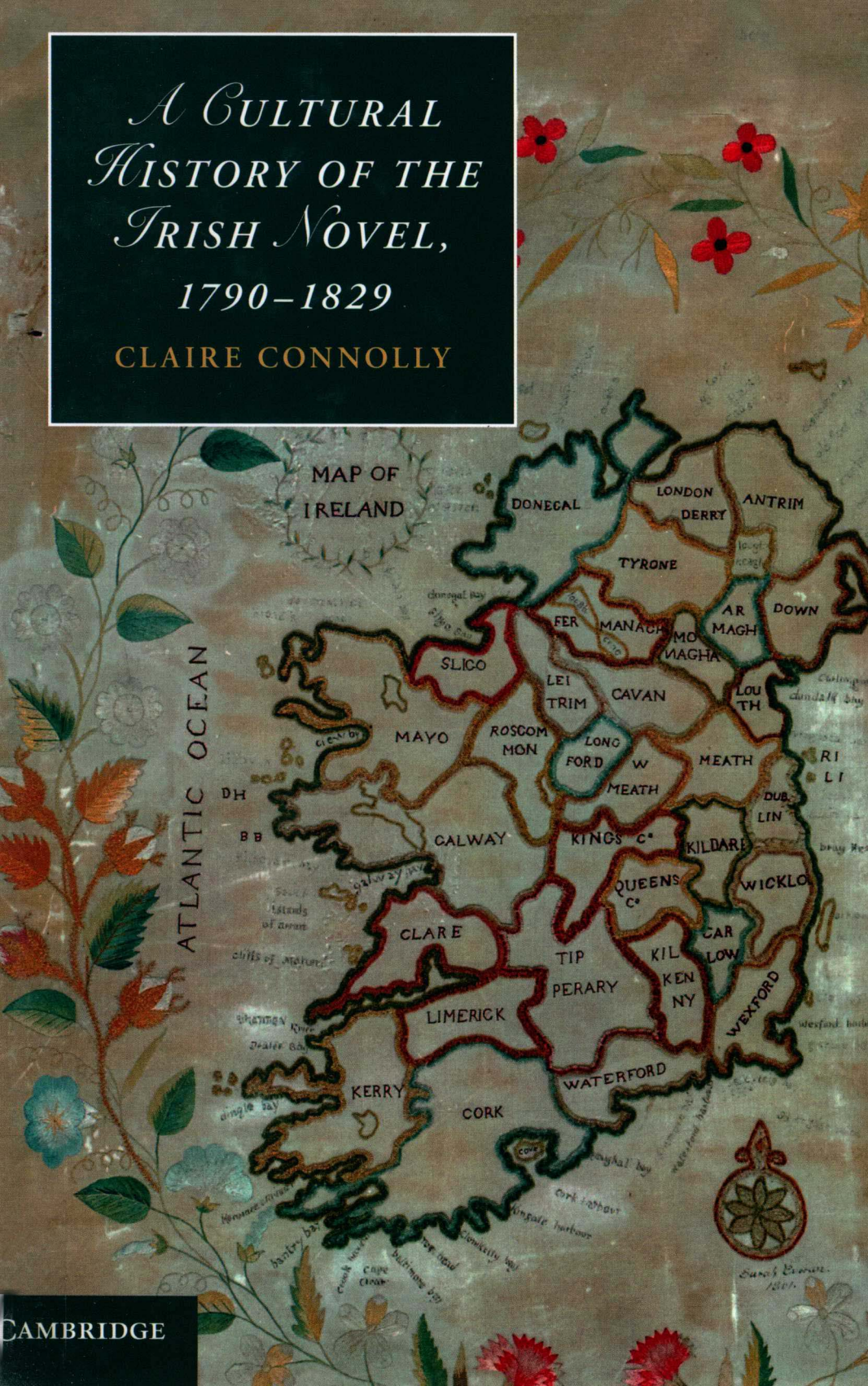
A Cultural History of the Irish Novel, 1790–1829

CLAIRE CONNOLLY



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A CULTURAL HISTORY OF THE IRISH NOVEL, 1790–1829

Claire Connolly offers a cultural history of the Irish novel in the period between the radical decade of the 1790s and the gaining of Catholic Emancipation in 1829. These decades saw the emergence of a group of talented Irish writers who developed and advanced such innovative forms as the national tale and the historical novel: fictions that took Ireland as their topic and setting, and which often imagined its history via domestic plots that addressed wider issues of dispossession and inheritance. Their openness to contemporary politics, as well as to recent historiography, antiquarian scholarship, poetry, song, plays and memoirs, produced a series of notable fictions, marked most of all by their ability to fashion from these resources a new vocabulary of cultural identity. This book extends and enriches the current understanding of Irish Romanticism, blending sympathetic textual analysis of the fiction with careful historical contextualisation.

CLAIRE CONNOLLY is Professor of English Literature at Cardiff University.

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For Maura Cullinan

Acknowledgements

There are many reasons why this book took me a long time to write, but only a short and precious list of people ensured that it got finished. A conversation with James Chandler in the splendid surroundings of Chawton House in Hampshire marks the moment at which this stopped being a bunch of chapters about a lot of novels and became a book. His advice and guidance have been invaluable. Margaret Kelleher also rode to the rescue of a book in distress: her wisdom and friendship remain a treasured resource. As the book took its final shape, I benefited from the close and practical support of Patricia Coughlan and Moynagh Sullivan. Throughout, Roy Foster has shared his extensive knowledge of nineteenth-century novels and their contexts, cheerfully discussed the finer points of Lady Morgan's plots and saved me from the embarrassment of misspelling the title of *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys*.

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Contents

Introduction

This book offers a cultural history of the Irish novel in the period between the radical decade of the 1790s and the gaining of Catholic Emancipation in 1829. During those years, a group of talented Irish writers developed and advanced such innovative forms as the national tale and the historical novel. They wrote fictions that took Ireland as their topic and setting, often imagining its history via domestic plots that addressed wider issues of dispossession and inheritance. Their novels regularly incorporated footnotes and extra-fictional material as spaces of cultural mediation. Such openness to contemporary politics, as well as to recent historiography, antiquarian scholarship, books of travel, poetry, song, plays and memoirs, produced novels of notable permeability. Irish fiction is defined by this porosity: the novel became an active cultural agent in the period because of its ability to absorb and reshape other discourses in the context of wider shifts in the aesthetics of locality and nationality, the politics of representation and the meaning of national culture. At the same time, however, Irish novels circulated as commodities on the cultural market, and as such possess material as well as ideal forms of value.[1] The mode of analysis proposed in this book is a cultural history alert to the rich array of relations that existed between these novels, the world from which they emerged, and the print culture in which they participated.

A major aim is to restore seriousness and nuance to our understanding of the Irish fiction of the romantic period, and to refuse or at least redirect readings that treat the novels as so many failed efforts to contain the hectic world of early nineteenth-century Ireland. The fictions which I discuss have been repeatedly characterised in terms of an engagement with political reality that is nonetheless blocked by a tendency towards 'wishful thinking and happy endings'. These 'modes' – surely quintessentially fictional ones – are thought to issue in forms of 'premature closure' and a failed effort 'to seal off the injuries of the past from the present'.[2] In such accounts, Irish novels are at one and the same time deeply and

compellingly involved in the situation they depict, yet distressingly unable to produce the right kind of combination of political and aesthetic resolution. Imagined as 'desperately struggling to encompass the wildly divergent class divisions of pre-Famine Ireland within one fictive frame', the nineteenth-century Irish novel is fated never to intervene effectively in a situation that it is barely able to represent.[3] Whereas once these fictions were judged patronising because alienated from the situation that they sought to represent – 'traveller's tales', as Daniel Corkery put it – more recently, it is the supposed combination of effort and failure that has generated comment. The idea that Irish national novels carry the burden of a specific political project – fuller union between Ireland and Britain – remains, but critics now condemn the fictions for both their presumed politics and their inability to realise them.

The novels of Maria Edgeworth have played a key role in these debates. It has become almost routine to cite a letter written by Edgeworth to her brother in India, dated 19 February 1834, in which she updates him on the progress of her latest novel: 'Though "Helen" cannot reach you for a year', she writes, their younger sister Fanny 'has desired Bentley to send you a copy before it is published'. The novel, Edgeworth warns, has 'no humour in it, and no Irish character':

> It is impossible to draw Ireland as she now is in a book of fiction – realities are too strong, party passions too violent to bear to see, or care to look at their faces in the looking-glass. The people would only break the glass, and curse the fool who held the mirror up to nature – distorted nature, in a fever. We are in too perilous a case to laugh, humour would be out of season, worse than bad taste. Whenever the danger is past, as the man in the sonnet says,
>
> 'We may look back on the hardest part and laugh.'
>
> Then I shall be ready to join in the laugh.[4]

Described as 'prophetic and astute' by Declan Kiberd, the letter seems to address an unfolding democratic history, the beginnings of which Edgeworth recognises (and dislikes) in the O'Connellite mass politics of the 1830s.[5]

Edgeworth's observations on reality and fiction have been widely understood as 'an angry acknowledgement of Irish resistance' to modes of literary representation.[6] Even as she confesses to the impossibility of representing Ireland, however, Edgeworth draws attention to the work of fiction as both process and product. The practical arrangements with the publisher, Richard Bentley, regarding the posting of *Helen* stand in contrast to her evocation of the work of writing in the image of 'a

book of fiction' that is also a shattered mirror. The letter further contains references to diplomatic correspondence, 'domestic occurrences', Irish orthography and family gossip. All of this is leavened by quotations from Shakespeare, comparisons between Ireland and India, and Edgeworth's wonder at the heat endured by her brother: she is amazed at the '*puddle* [of] ink' that stained his last '*dropping* letter' home. The focus on the practicalities of writing remains closely entwined with Edgeworth's commitment to proper and informed modes of literary observation: less often quoted than the lines above concerning the problem of representing Ireland is her avowed intention to 'think of it continually, and listen, and look, and read'.[7]

Such an interplay between fragile fictionality and an elusive reality is shared by many of the other Irish novels of the romantic period. It is the complex relationship between fiction and fact – rather than any purposeful set of 'interests and protocols', let alone the '"civilizing mission" of the English to the Irish' – that makes these novels distinctive.[8] There has, however, been a tendency to keep Edgeworth separate from a radical national tale tradition exemplified by Sydney Owenson (later Lady Morgan).[9] Ina Ferris's stimulating and influential study of the national tale leaves the novels of Edgeworth largely to one side, partly on the grounds that hers was a 'critical profile' that was growing in prominence at the time of Ferris's writing.[10] The extent to which Ferris's choice of authors determines her critical models is worth considering: the often compelling analysis of the 'mobilities and aggravations' at work in the national tale derives from what is in fact a rather narrow corpus of texts.[11] Ferris is, however, always fair and even-handed in her criticism, and scrupulous in her analyses. Less accomplished studies of the Irish novel are marred by similar questions of exclusion, a problem greatly enhanced by the tendency of many critics to recycle judgements that were never in the first place the product of a full engagement with the breadth of writing characteristic of the period. Ferris's concern for literary texture and representational strategies found within the national tale is not widely replicated.[12]

An associated problem concerns the new prominence of the critical category of 'national tale' itself, often used to differentiate one kind of fictional writing about the past from the historical novel proper and now quite broadly applied to early nineteenth-century Irish fiction.[13] Katie Trumpener's contrast between the national tale's 'thick evocation of place' and the historical novel's 'plot of loss and growth through historical change' boldly re-imagines the field of Irish and Scottish fiction in

terms of a system of generic evolution. Her thesis that 'the emergence of the national tale out of the novels of the 1790s and the subsequent emergence of the historical novel out of the national tale can be plotted quite precisely, book by book, through the 1810s' has been widely accepted.[14] Yet it is very difficult to locate important Irish novels such as Edgeworth's *Patronage* (1814) within this account. Irish national fictions in fact are characterised by an interpenetration of topographical and historical modes, while the generic modes characteristic of the first national tales were to surface not only in historical and gothic novels of this period but also in such sub-genres as silver-fork fictions and nautical and military tales. Irish writers such as Lady Blessington, William Hamilton Maxwell and Charles Lever all play key roles in the developments of these latter trends. The present study acknowledges the influence of Trumpener's trail-blazing argument but makes a more cohesive case for the Irish novel as a single cultural phenomenon with, however, far greater evidence of generic and sub-generic diversity at work than can be conveyed by the designation 'national tale'.

A new model for understanding the fictions in terms of the cultural history of their own moment is a corollary to this conceptualisation of the Irish novel as a coherent cultural entity. For David Lloyd, the nineteenth-century Irish novel is condemned to be judged in relation to either Joyce's modernist masterpieces on the one hand or monuments of Victorian realism on the other.[15] In contrast, developments in and debates about Romantic-era prose fiction represent the chief axis of comparison in this book, which, rather than forging 'the theoretical terms in which the atypicality of the Irish novel can be analysed', discovers fictions that are highly characteristic of the everyday world from which they emerge.[16]

The methods advanced in my book consist of a close and detailed engagement with a wide range of novels, contextualised by a correspondingly careful reading of history, informed by recent scholarship. Such attention to contingent meanings in literature and history is informed, in turn, by early nineteenth-century debates about place, location and the apprehension of cultural distinctiveness. This mode of analysis has particular relevance for novels that were published in the midst of a great debate about the importance and meaning of local and intimately experienced detail, and in the aftermath of Edmund Burke's defence of a politics founded on a specific, just and timely engagement with history, over and above any abstract theory of rights or politics of perfectibility.

Burke's death in 1797 meant that he did not live to see much of the Irish cultural response to and reroutings of these debates. Yet a broadly

Burkean metanarrative – with the granting of Catholic Emancipation as representative of the kind of gradual change which he favoured – has been taken by many critics to represent the political tendencies of Irish romanticism. Seamus Deane's stringently expressed suspicion of this Burkean metanarrative has been influential in its turn. Early nineteenth-century Irish culture is, in Deane's reading, trapped within 'the history of a consolidated effort, frustrated by prejudice but implacable in its direction, to recruit Irish Catholics into the Union with the help of the Irish Catholic Church while appeasing the endless fears and bigotries of Irish Protestants'.[17] Gradual accommodation within the Union functions as 'a kind of armature within which different works are produced': neither the internal complexities nor the external cultural life of such works matter much.

In this book, in contrast, I have gone against the grain of a supposed gradualist tendency and have advanced a fuller appreciation of both the wide field of Irish fiction and the internal workings of many of the novels. It is from such a detailed engagement with the Irish novel, rather than from bald summaries of the political tendency of one author or another, that a fuller appreciation of the rich political meanings of these books can emerge.

BOOKS, AUTHORS AND READERS

Before developing my wider argument, it may be helpful to establish some of the salient facts regarding the material history of the Irish novel. How can we define, so as to begin to analyse, a distinct corpus of Irish fiction in this period? And what difference does my choice of dates make?

A starting point in the 1790s anchors this study within an expansion in popular fiction about Ireland and a growth in radical politics on the island. The decade yields, according to Ian Campbell Ross, 'considerable evidence that Irish readers were developing a taste for national fiction related to but distinct from that of British novel readers'.[18] Nineteenth-century Irish novels draw on and adapt from a range of earlier eighteenth-century fictions, which are in turn informed by a rich blend of Gaelic history and European philosophy.[19] The earlier eighteenth century had seen such notable achievements in fiction as novels by Laurence Sterne, Henry Brooke and Oliver Goldsmith, while fictions by Sarah Butler, Charles Johnstone and Thomas Amory allow us to see a distinctly Irish fictional aesthetic in development. There is good evidence to suggest that the national tale was not so much born with as rather first branded by

Sydney Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl: A National Tale*; such 'patriotic' titles as *The Irish Guardian* (1776), *The Fair Hibernian* (1789) and *The Irish Heiress* (1797) already link national politics with domestic plots.[20]

It is possible to discern an Irish readership in this period too. Máire Kennedy posits the presence of 'an interested female public' in 1790s Munster, who supported via subscription several novels of the decade, including Anna Millikin's *Corfe Castle* (1793), *Eva: an Old Irish Story* (1795) and Sophia Briscoe's *History of Julia and Cecilia* (1797).[21] Evidence of circles of engaged and interested readers of contemporary fiction can be found in Edgeworth's extensive correspondence. Yet the wider question of a separate Irish readership for the Irish novel remains difficult to establish. Toby Barnard suggests that functional literacy in English was 'permeating the modestly circumstanced in the towns' by the middle of the eighteenth century.[22] Rolf and Magda Loeber's work on fiction written for and available to cottagers and their children helps to nuance further our understanding of the role of national fictions within the sharply stratified social worlds of early nineteenth-century Ireland.[23]

Undeniably, however, these are novels with a transnational dimension. Many of the novelists either lived in London or spent long periods there, while British publishers account for the vast majority of Irish novels published. The flow of culture was not only one way, however: in 1816 Maria Edgeworth complained in a letter to her friend Lady Romilly of how 'the heart is sick with hoping and hoping before books reach Ireland'.[24] The Irish novel is located at this intersection of these dynamics of proximity and distance. Increasingly close political and cultural connections between Britain and Ireland in the aftermath of the Act of Union challenge any attempt to disaggregate an Irish aspect to the overall picture of the novel in this period. The extension of the Copyright Act of 1709 to Ireland in 1801 all but killed off an Irish publishing industry that was reliant on markets for cheap reprints in Ireland, Britain, the American colonies and the West Indies.[25] The anonymous *False Appearances*, Sydney Owenson's *St Clair; or, the Heiress of Desmond* and Sarah Isdell's *The Vale of Louisiana: an American Tale* represent rare examples of Dublin-published novels in the immediate post-Union period, all dating from 1803.[26] John Connor of Cork, who had commercial connections with the Minerva Press in London, published local author Anna Milliken's *Plantagenet* (1802) and *The Rival Chiefs* (1804).[27]

As Jacqueline Belanger has shown, patterns in the production of Irish fiction mirror the overall British picture: an upward surge from the 1790s, with a 'slight dip' between 1800 and 1802; a falling off of production

of new novels in the 1810s; and a renewed rise in the 1820s, interrupted by the publishing crash of 1825–6.[28] Of 2,256 novels published between 1800 and 1829, over a hundred were Irish. Belanger's checklist gives 114 'Ireland-related' titles appearing between 1800 and 1829, but excludes, for example, the Dublin-published novel of the American war of independence, *The Vale of Louisiana*, as well as important works by Edgeworth, Owenson and Maturin that are not set in Ireland. The significantly more inclusive definition of 'Irish fiction' adopted by Rolf and Magda Loeber would bring Belanger's figure closer to two hundred.[29] Numbers of novels actually published in Ireland were tiny, certainly until the 1820s.[30]

The 1820s and 1830s saw the growth of an indigenous Irish publishing industry, which was to remain 'somewhat stable' until the 1860s.[31] Some types of fiction (chiefly chapbooks and novelettes, often sensational or Gothic in nature) were published in Dublin from the 1810s onwards. John Cumming (1811 onward) published *Tales for Cottagers* (1814), written by the Quaker diarist Mary Leadbeater and her niece Elizabeth Shackleton; *Nice Distinctions*, a novel by Miss Driscoll; *Eccentricity*, a novel in three volumes by Mrs MacNally; and the anonymous *The West-Indian: Or, The Brothers* followed in 1820. The two latter titles are the first Dublin-produced triple-decker novels. All three of the novels had London co-publishers: Longman in the case of *Nice Distinctions* and *Eccentricity*, and A. K. Newman and Co. for *The West-Indian*.

The histories of the Irish novel and the British publishing industry are closely intertwined for the period studied here. The publishing history of the earliest national tales ties them quite closely to radical trends in 1790s fiction, particularly to the London-based Jacobin publishers Joseph Johnson and Richard Phillips. Phillips, who published Sydney Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806), was imprisoned in 1793 for selling Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* in Leicester; in London he published chiefly popular works of instruction, aimed at the lower classes, as well as fictions by William Godwin and John Thelwall. Johnson, a radical Unitarian, published William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft, Thomas Paine, Henry Fuseli and Joseph Priestley. Maria Edgeworth's relationship with Joseph Johnson was established via her father, Richard Lovell Edgeworth, and his Lunar Society contacts; when Johnson died, in 1809, the publisher's nephews, Rowland Hunter and John Miles, took over Edgeworth's business. In the period between 1809 and 1815 (her most commercially successful years), Richard Lovell Edgeworth dealt with Miles on his daughter's behalf. Hunter, who took over the business, overreached himself with the £2,100 he offered for *Patronage* and was later to complain that he