

REVIEW

IRISH STUDIES AT A TIME OF TRANSITION

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14712/2571452X.2021.61.9>

Renée Fox, Mike Cronin, and Brian Ó Conchubhair, eds. *Routledge International Handbook of Irish Studies*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2021. xvi+502 pp. ISBN 978-0-367-25913-6 (hbk).

This extremely informative volume joins a range of prominent recent publications surveying how scholars have reflected on the current significant changes in Irish society and culture: the jubilee issue of *Irish University Review* on “Irish Studies Now” (Spring/Summer 2020), *The New Irish Studies* edited by Paige Reynolds (Cambridge University Press, 2020), and Eamon Maher and Eugene O’Brien’s edited collection *Reimagining Irish Studies for the Twenty-First Century* (Peter Lang, 2021). While several chapter authors of the Routledge handbook have contributed to some of these titles as well, it is the most wide-ranging one in terms of discipline, together with Maher and O’Brien’s book. Both volumes amply demonstrate that gone are the days when Irish studies essentially meant research in literature on the one hand and history on the other, with very limited communication between these domains: indeed, some of the most valuable contributions to the handbook are in the areas of economy, sociology, anthropology, and gender studies. Moreover, the way in which individual chapters speak to each other, overlapping in their analyses, demarcates Irish studies further as a broad interdisciplinary field, one whose remit is a comprehensive study of Ireland in all its aspects, often using hybrid methodologies.

Methodological issues are the focus of some of the thirty-seven chapters only, however: much of the collection focuses simply on a depiction of contemporary Ireland, taking the crash of the Irish economy in 2008 as its starting point. The opening image of the country in the editors’ introduction is extremely bleak – almost Gothic: post-Celtic Tiger Ireland is pictured as rife with domestic violence, brutal crime and social inequality, a land that surrendered its economic sovereignty to Brussels (3-4). Given the developments elsewhere in Europe, and indeed in the US, this assessment may seem rather harsh: “symbols of social liberalization” such as “the appearance of economic recovery, the referendums, a gay Taoiseach of Indian heritage, and the lack of an ethno-nationalism producing an Irish Donald Trump or Boris Johnson” are dismissed as merely making Ireland

look “normal” (11). While citizens of many another country would rejoice at such a state of affairs, the editors meritoriously emphasise the responsibility of scholars to relentlessly scrutinise that which appears normal in order to “make visible the people excluded from Ireland’s state-sanctioned, welcoming” ethos (11). This ethical call is picked up by a number of contributors to the volume who foreground the institutional racism that has been most apparent in placing asylum seekers in the dehumanising conditions of Direct Provision (Lucy Michael, Sarah Townsend, Malcolm Sen). Much attention across the volume is dedicated to the increasing marginalisation of the poor, including the rising homelessness figures. Multiple chapters (Eoin O’Malley, Diane Negra and Anthony McIntyre, Kylie Jarrett, Martina Lawless, Seán Kennedy) also detail how the token taxation of multinational corporations – notwithstanding their crucial role in Ireland’s historically unprecedented prosperity – has resulted in the outflow of most revenue created in the country, making the economy increasingly vulnerable, and profoundly affecting the Irish people: as Jarrett notes, still in 2013 when the worst of the economic crisis was over, an estimated one third of Irish citizens were living in households that were left with 100 euro per month after they have paid their basic bills (194; needless to say, the figure does not take into account the several thousand subsisting non-citizens living in the country). O’Malley’s comprehensive outline of Ireland’s economy is particularly outstanding, and quite intriguing as well, since O’Malley proposes to view the dramatic pattern of Celtic Tiger boom followed by a deep plunge and a relatively quick resurgence as a continuous process of becoming “a normal western European country – wealthy, secular, and peaceful” (97), displaying also a very recent trend towards a left-right division in the political system, as testified by the 2020 general election (105).

A range of other defining facets of contemporary Ireland are explored in detail, including the harnessing of “brand Ireland” by the state to attract diaspora tourism and finance on the one hand (Mike Cronin), and further multinationals to do business from Ireland on the other (Negra and McIntyre), or the involvement of the Catholic Church in the abuse of minors that has made its role in future Irish life uncertain at best (a commission admirably accepted by a Jesuit priest, Oliver Rafferty). The state neglect and problematic sustainability of the Gaeltachtaí is addressed by Brian Ó Conchubhair, who shows the profound impact that this has had on Irish-speaking communities. The vital difference in the meaning of the term “Irish diaspora” in the US (Liam Kennedy) and the UK (Mary Hickman) respectively is carefully laid out, where in the United States, Irish identity has been increasingly symbolic, detached from the country of origin and no longer a matter of a coherent community, while in Britain the Irish

have been continually made invisible due to English “nationalization strategies” (155). Paul Rouse’s chapter outlines how GAA sports operate in contemporary practice, and complements its survey of numerous other popular sports (not just soccer but also kite-surfing) with some worrying statistics about gambling, disclosing that “by 2015, two-thirds of Irish people were regularly gambling,” with an estimated 40 000 having developed an addiction (340). Finally, Dominic Bryan and Gordon Gillespie’s essay provides an authoritative picture of the society and politics of Northern Ireland, “more shared and more divided” (109), demonstrating that although the emergence of a future escalated conflict cannot be ruled out, a resurgence of the Troubles is an impossibility.

The contributions dedicated to research methods and themes in Irish studies generally document the somewhat overdue turning away from the narrative of the nation and the unwarranted interpretation of contemporary Ireland as defined by a postcolonial situation. Claire Bracken in her study on gender points out, specifically, the “gendered underpinnings” of the postcolonial framework in Irish studies (231) and provides a meticulous account of recent scholarship informed by feminist approaches and queer theory (the latter chiming well with Ed Madden’s chapter on queering Irish studies); as Bracken’s survey includes some of the finest and most exciting projects and publications of the last decade, her hope for a “re-conception of the groundings of Irish Studies in new materialist and queer approaches that enact deep-seated structural change” (240) happily does not come across as wishful thinking. Emma Radley’s essay problematises further the concept of “Irish cinema” with its inevitably transnational production contexts, but also argues that the question of “being true to one’s place” remains central to many film makers (379-80), very much including the recent engagement of both documentaries and fiction films with memory studies, particularly those focused on the institutional abuse scandals (389-90). Succinct essays by Méabh Ní Fhuartháin and Kelly Fitzgerald detail the recent branching out of focus and methodology alike in the study of Irish music and Irish folklore respectively, and Laura Farrell-Wortman charts the radical expansion of contemporary Irish theatre and performance in formal terms, together with the gradual shift of much of the sector from playwright’s theatre towards an ensemble-based approach, a development that she refers to as “Europeanization” (308); naturally, this requires a move beyond traditional drama studies on the part of scholars.

Moreover, the book outlines whole new areas of research and argues for their importance in the study of the island: disability studies (Elizabeth Grubgeld), animal studies (Maureen O’Connor), and an engagement with material and visual culture, particularly the hitherto neglected objects of everyday life (Kelly

Sullivan). Scholarship on Irish architecture is most usefully brought into conversation with other areas of Irish studies by Brian Ward, foregrounding the remarkable contrast between Irish architects' studios being awarded prestigious international prizes for their work on the one hand, and on the other, much of the construction boom in the Celtic Tiger years happening without any sense of urban planning or the needs and views of local residents or the eventual buyers of homes. As much as architecture may be inextricably linked with property development and finance, Ward argues, the question of how to be more socially engaged is being increasingly asked by architects. A particular highlight as regards new approaches within and to Irish studies is Nessa Cronin's pioneering chapter on "environmentalities," a tentative term she coins while emphasising the need to seriously take on board the fundamental global issue of climate change. The crisis urgently calls for "new imaginaries and new modes of thinking" in order to highlight "the relationship between climate, capital and culture" (351, 356), Cronin asserts, ones that would adequately reflect that all knowledge "has direct implications" for climate and the environment (358).

The volume makes likewise an important contribution in the traditional Irish studies disciplines of history and literary studies. What it highlights is particularly the contemporary rise and increased importance of social history, regional history, oral history and memory studies, areas that have gradually come to replace the somewhat worn-out dispute about revisionism, and generally the grounding of Irish historiography in positivist approaches. There is also a considerable emphasis on the increased availability of archival materials through digitisation projects: for instance, Mike Cronin argues that while the official commemorations during the Decade of Centenaries have been used by successive governments to "divert attention away from the catastrophic and damaging mismanagement of the Irish State, by its two major parties, through the Celtic Tiger boom, economic collapse, and austerity" (466) and encourage the nation "to applaud itself without interrogating the material conditions under which they were living" (468), the lasting legacy of the commemorations consists precisely in the gathering of an unprecedented amount of documentary material and its use by historians and artists. In a ground-breaking intervention, Guy Beiner proposes to revisit the roots of Irish historiography, making a compelling case for the work of Irish antiquarians, customarily dismissed as amateurish and often misguided, to be acknowledged for their "prolific legacy," which can be traced back to the mid-seventeenth century and may be regarded as a precursor to interdisciplinary scholarship (49, 55). The engagement with Irish literature includes innovative readings of contemporary writing, many of which centre around the body. Margot Gayle Backus and Joseph Valente present a psychoanalytic

analysis of the ways in which Irish authors have been able to “write the unspeakable” (421), particularly as regards the institutional control of sexuality and the abusive punishment that the state and the church have administered, as instantiated in Sebastian Barry’s acclaimed novel *The Secret Scripture*. Margaret O’Neill and Michaela Schrage-Früh show how literature has increasingly been speaking back against the fetishization of youth during the era of prosperity by turning the attention to the ageing human body. Seán Kennedy forcefully counters the established view of Donal Ryan’s celebrated novel *The Spinning Heart* as a poignant reflection of the economic crisis, arguing that this interpretation ignores “native greed, elite corruption, and/or the abrogation of Irish sovereignty under neoliberalism” (393). Kathleen Costello-Sullivan’s essay on contemporary fiction, exemplified by Anne Enright’s novel *The Green Road*, offers a more optimistic angle on literary reflections of the crisis, arguing the case for a recent shift of focus from trauma towards recovery, as apparent especially in the healing potential of physical contact between parent and child that may encourage “an alternative private history to counter broader, negative societal ones” (408). Inspiring and insightful chapters by Renée Fox on nineteenth-century fiction and Eric Falci on lyrical narratives in Irish poetry share, despite the difference in focus, a central argument concerning the need for patient, attentive close reading which should be guided by form in particular: only in this way can outmoded critical narratives be duly revised, they both assert.

Finally, an early chapter by John Waters charts the institutional history of Irish studies in the United States, highlighting the seminal role of individuals not only in developing Irish studies programmes at favourably disposed universities but also in initiating interest in the study of Ireland and its culture at locations without an obvious connection to the country or its diaspora. Waters’s testimony to the frequently improvisational developments and the patchy institutional continuity of Irish studies in the US is sadly relevant to the situation in much of the rest of the globe, from Europe to Australia. At the risk of sounding a note of begrudgery, however, the word “international” in the title of the handbook merits a query. As Michael Cronin details in his chapter, Irish studies has been vibrant across the non-Anglophone world. Several hundred scholars have been collaborating within international (the European EFACIS, the Scandinavian NISN and the Latin American SILAS and AEIS) as well as national associations (French, Spanish, Brazilian and Japanese, to name a few) and have established dedicated centres and/or programmes in a number of other countries. While it may be somewhat exaggerated to claim with Cronin that “the most resilient and exciting future of Irish Studies” lies in the non-Anglophone context (41), it is true that ignoring the work of these scholars deprives Irish studies of a range of

Review

alternative perspectives, especially those arising from the practice of translation, including translation in a cultural sense (see Cronin 32-33, 36). One of the few shortcomings of the otherwise bountiful volume under review then consists in only one of its authors being based outside an English-speaking country (or more precisely, outside Ireland, the UK and North America), with only an additional one originally from outside the Anglosphere.

Both the rapidity and the scope of the transformations and upheavals that have affected Ireland will have made the project of the handbook a daunting task. The continued developments around Brexit have necessarily made some of the research partially out of date while the book was still in production (including the valuable outline of the impact of various Brexit scenarios on the Irish economy by Martina Lawless) – and then came the COVID-19 pandemic, the exact impact of which may be predicated as only vaguely momentous even at the time of writing the present review (June 2021). The editors managed to commission an additional essay on the subject from Malcolm Sen, which ultimately points out that the proper crisis of truly apocalyptic dimensions is not the pandemic but climate change (thereby seconding Nessa Cronin's appeal earlier in the volume), and posits rather bleakly that COVID-19 is likely to serve "as an echo chamber of previous violence" such as institutional racism, and "a precursor of further injustices" (478). The handbook will be a fascinating read in the future, establishing which of the wide range of predictions and assessments made by its authors have proved accurate; for the moment, it is sure to serve as an important resource to students of Ireland and the international public alike, as well as a useful interdisciplinary compendium to scholars (all this despite the uneven standard of proofreading across the chapters, some of which feature numerous referencing or editorial errors and misprints).

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