



The Big CHIL

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The Cambridge History of Irish Literature

Edited by Margaret Kelleher and Philip O'Leary

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'There they are.' I made a sweeping gesture to include the whole library. 'They look still and silent but they talk amongst themselves, even though they seem to ignore each other. They communicate through their authors, just as the egg uses the hen to produce another egg.'

Arturo Pérez-Reverte, *The Club Dumas*, trans. Sonia Soto (1996 [1993])

Let's agree, at the outset, that the *Cambridge History of Irish Literature (CHIL)* is a useful book. It is, by its nature, a compendium, aimed not at the specialist in need of probing analysis but at the general reader in need of context, offering as it does the vantage point of a *survey*. That reader is admirably served by this collection, which brings together specialists in the various languages, fields, genres and centuries, and which consolidates the critical debates and insights of the past two decades into a magisterial, canonical overview of two volumes containing 28 articles covering 1,400 pages. The specialist reader can, unavoidably of course, see flaws (I personally find it unforgivable that not a single mention is made of one of the giants of Irish letters, Scotus Eriugena), and future critics will use this survey as a kicking-off point rather than as a Final Word. But on the whole, the two-tome *CHIL* does achieve its ambitious aim to provide a comprehensive description of the developments of Irish literature over the last ten centuries or so.

Rather than list the various articles, their various merits and shortcomings, it may be useful to address two underlying questions that meet and overlap in this book: What

is Irish literature? and, How do we write literary history? Neither of these questions has been really grappled with within *CHIL*, but each of them is hugely complex, and the interference between them causes conceptual turbulences of great interest and importance.

To begin with the latter: how do we write literary history? The definition of 'literature' is a tired semantic chestnut that we need not rehearse extensively here, beyond noting that the term vacillates uneasily between two meanings. Literature means either 'any textual form of culture' (in which sense it often coincides with the notion of 'writing', preferred by *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (vols. 1–3, 1991; vols. 4–5, 2002), or 'the textual form of art'. On the whole, the more inclusive meaning (which also covers popular or oral literature and genres such as history-writing or religious disquisition) is current when we address older periods (medieval or classical), whereas literature for the more recent periods tends to focus on poetry, theatre, and fictional narrative (relegating non-fictional prose such as travel-writing, autobiography, history-writing or criticism to the margins). The term 'literature' is, then, a historical variable rather than a historical category. What the

Men browsing at a bookstall, Eden Quay, Dublin, 1952/53. Photograph: Nevill Johnson. Copyright © RTÉ Stills Library.

term includes or excludes tends to shift over time, and by rights those shifts themselves ought to be historically described and accounted for by anyone claiming to write a History of Literature.

Another problem lies in the fact that, properly speaking, literature has no history. It just *is*, like rain. If on a winter evening I stand in front of my bookcase, wondering what to read, I can pick up Calvin, Calvino or *Calvin and Hobbes*; this Christmas holiday I plan to sit down with Montaigne's *Essais* and Thomas Pynchon's *Against the Day*. Literature is a canon — that is to say, a selected, available corpus; and while the constitution of that corpus may be the result of historical processes of production and selection, its presence and availability are situated in a here and now, where authors from many countries and epochs meet on a single bookshelf. As Jorge Luis Borges put it, *para el concepto clásico, la pluralidad de los hombres y de los tiempos es accesoria, la literatura es siempre una sola* [according to the classical view, the plurality of people and periods is incidental, literature is always in the singular].

So what 'history' does literature have? How can we align it along an axis of temporal development? At least three modes are possible. To begin with, there is the history of one's own literacy. It is a personal, private one, the biography of textual encounters, the progress from fairy-tales via television shows to comic books, juvenile reading and onwards. It is not easy to describe this history of the acquisition of literary competence in other than individual, private terms; yet in the explanation why literary conventions are resistant to innovation, the persistence of stereotypes, the cognitive play of narrative 'frames' that programme our understanding of the world (as in Ronald Reagan's use of the term 'Evil Empire'), it is becoming increasingly clear that our deepest-seated prejudices and beliefs are the result of stories encountered and assimilated early

on in our childhood. For that reason alone, the neglect of juvenile, folk-oral and biblical narratives in literary histories is in itself a huge blind spot. All the more so since in this sphere, texts (and in particular the most famous, canonical texts) are assimilated by hearsay and reputation as much as through actual reading. Everyone is familiar with the general plot line that 'Romeo and Juliet', 'Don Quixote' and 'Gulliver' stand for, without necessarily having read the texts by Shakespeare, Cervantes and Swift. *Treasure Island* is now probably more widely known through the Muppets' spoof version than from Stevenson's original.

All this indicates that literary texts circulate, ramify, are recycled, propagate themselves. Their life is not just the result of an author's productive inspiration, but consists of the entire subsequent trajectory of readings, rereadings, adaptations, and instances of how they are read, received, reactivated. To no small extent, literary history is the history of books being taken from shelves, opened, working their way into minds, into other books, opera libretti or film scripts. Books exude a galvanizing radiance, operative across generations, and that too constitutes a literary history.

Indeed, in the case of older texts this is almost the only type of historicity we can assign to them: a *functional* one. The actual genesis of the *Iliad*, of the *Táin*, or of the Old Testament must be largely a matter of antiquarian–anthropological conjecture; such texts enter literary history through their being copied, recopied, debated, experienced. Significantly, there is no obvious genetic moment that we can assign to such texts (unlike, say, 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree'). We do not have a publisher's contract or a date of first publication, we do not even have the name of a single identifiable author, and their initial presence in the literary system is signalled by an imperfectly preserved manuscript tradition.

- 1 See the comments in Bernard Cerquiglini, *Éloge de la variante: Histoire critique de la philologie* (Paris, 1989), and in Lionel Gossman, *Between History and Literature* (Cambridge, MA, 1990). On authorship, see Seán Burke, ed., *Authorship from Plato to the Postmodern: A Reader* (Edinburgh, 1995), and his *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida* (Edinburgh, 1998 [1992]).
- 2 More specifically in my 'Literary History, Cultural Identity, and Tradition', in Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, Milan V. Dimic and Irene Sywenky, eds., *Comparative Literature Now: Theories and Practice / La Littérature comparée à l'heure actuelle: Théories et réalisations* (Paris, 1999), 389–97, and 'Identiteit in de literatuurgeschiedenis', in D. Perie, S. Leibovici and M. Engelberts, eds., *Identiteit: Filosofie, literatuur, maatschappij* (Delft, 2002), 77–84.

We should realize that this is the condition of a very large portion of the world's literary heritage. Only in a commercial, well-administered print culture, where authors take up a salient position in a society's public sphere, can we tether texts firmly to a genetic moment and authorship. Somewhere in the centuries following Chaucer, Villon and Dante the idea of the modern 'author' emerges (or, to be precise, the notion of 'authorship' crosses over from the field of theology and religion into the field of secular *belles-lettres*) and it becomes possible to speak of a literary history as a concatenation of authors and their productive moments.¹

And that brings us, finally, to literary history as we generally understand it: as the historical survey of a succession of authors who in succeeding generations wrote different things according to shifting programmes and poetical standards. In other words, our default understanding of literary history is a very specific one (let's call it genetic-productive history), which is particular to Western post-medieval print culture. It hinges on the genetic power of an author's creativity as its motivating force, and as a result is often narrated in the mode of innovation versus inherited convention. Literary history, in other words, narrates the literary dimension of Western modernity.²

CHIL follows this genetic mode of literary history-writing. The earliest chapters deal with the earliest periods. The Latin and Gaelic writings of Medieval Ireland are surveyed (by Tomás Ó Cathasaigh and Máire Ní Mhaonaigh), in contributions that are particularly welcome in that they summarize information which until now was restricted largely to specialist publications. The chapters interweave literary (mythical, legendary) motifs, materials, genres and conventions, often of unspecific historical provenance and date, with the known and datable activities of historical actors and figures. In the subsequent chapters, the reader is taken along a chronological

progress to the contemporary period, ending with a chapter on Irish cinema and literary historiography, and afterwards on 'the new millennium'. There is, on the whole, a narrative arc in all this that combines the national mode of history-writing (Ireland never ceased to express and assert its own, proper identity) with a postmodern-Whig sense of progress (Irish literature is becoming ever more inclusive, vibrant and reflective of diversity). Overall, the tone is one of axiomatic celebration; this is a showcase, not a history of failure or decline.

While each of the chapters gives a good (and in some cases, a very good) survey of its period, their succession is in fact specious. As I pointed out, the genetic-progressive arrangement, where each generation of authors stands on (and kicks against) the shoulders of their elders, only works for modern print literature. In this case, modern print literature means English-language Irish literature from Swift onwards, and (*pace* Gearóid Denvir's stout assertions to the contrary) Gaelic-language Irish literature from Douglas Hyde onwards. In those filiations we can trace a diachronic dynamics, some form of consciously experienced progress. But most manuscript poetry in Irish circulated, not in collections-by-author, but as part of *duanaire* poem-books or as part of manuscript collections reflecting the taste and interests of the collector/scribe rather than the individual personality of the author.

One of the first secular authors in Europe who received an *opera omnia* edition of his complete works (reflecting the idea that the author's personality was the premier focus that gave all his texts their collective interest) was Giovanni Pontano, in 1518. Tadhg Dall Ó hUiginn (1550–91), by contrast, was less fortunate. His poems remained dispersed over many different poem-books, organized, not under the heading of their author (who in any case was often confused with his much older namesake Tadhg Óg),



Couple browsing books,
Merchant's Arch, Temple
Bar, Dublin, 1969.
Photograph: National
Library of Ireland.

but according to the addressee. It was only in 1820 that his name figured in a poets' list compiled by the antiquary Edward O'Reilly, and not until 1922 that Eleanor Knott gave an edition of Tadhg Dall's collected poems under that poet's own name, for the Irish Texts Society, belatedly reflecting a modern, print-culture interest in the author as the premier organizing focus of literature.

The anthology (whether it be a *duanaire* or a *romancero*, or indeed the Greek prototype) is in fact the oldest persisting mode of literary organization; older, in any case, than the authorial one. The Bible itself is a

collection not unlike *Leabhar na hUidhre*. In most European countries we see that the thematic poem-book collection leads a tenacious life long after the 'invention of the author', much as manuscript circulation remains important long after the introduction of print.³ *A fortiori* in Ireland, where Gaelic literature was thwarted for a long time from gaining access to the printing press (and where that other mode of literary broadcast, the theatre, was absent, certainly for Gaelic letters), the circulation of texts did not necessarily reflect the career of an author 'rising to fame'. Most of the things we know about bardic poetry or about the *aisling-*

3 For the Low Countries, see Nelleke Moser, "Poezijlust en Vriendenliefde": Literaire Sociabiliteit in Handschrift en Druk na 1600', *Spiegel der letteren* (special issue on W. van Anrooij and J. Reynaert, eds., 'Handschrift en Druk'), forthcoming.

- 4 See also Richard Terry, *Poetry and the Making of the English Literary Past, 1660–1781* (London, 2001).
- 5 Niklas Luhmann, *Soziale Systeme: Grundriss einer allgemeinen Theorie* (Frankfurt, 1984); Siegfried J. Schmidt, *Die Selbstorganisation des Sozialsystems: Literatur im 18. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt, 1989)

poets of the eighteenth century had to be dug up, in an almost archaeological process, by philologists from dispersed manuscripts. The relation between later periods and earlier ones is more often than not one of recuperation rather than filiation. Thomas Kinsella testifies to this condition in his essay ‘The Irish Writer’. When looking for ‘the past in himself’, and regressing beyond the nineteenth century, Kinsella encounters ‘a great cultural blur’: ‘I must exchange one language for another, my native English for eighteenth-century Irish’. It is a sense of discontinuity that Kinsella describes as ‘coming, so to speak, from a broken and uprooted family, of being drawn to those who share my origins and finding that we cannot share our lives’. This condition is quite different from the position of someone like Proust, who, across Sainte-Beuve, Balzac and Racine, stands in an unbroken filiation of authors, each of whom was cognizant of their own historical place and generational position *vis-à-vis* their predecessors.

The Western ‘invention of authorship’, in other words, created historical consciousness both about and within the author. It allowed the Accademia della Crusca to edit Dante, prompted the publication of Shakespeare’s First Folio, and allowed Dr. Johnson to write his *Lives of the Poets* (usually seen as one of the mainsprings of modern literary history-writing) — but it is also operative in the author’s own self-image and self-historicization, at least from the moment that at Edmund Spenser’s funeral (or so Camden has it) his fellow-poets threw elegies into his tomb.⁴ The sense of history that T. S. Eliot invokes in *Tradition and the Individual Talent* is operative within literature itself, and it is easily amenable to being replicated and discussed by literary historians. But, once again, that only holds for literary historians dealing with an author-centred, historically self-aware literary system (which is precisely that, a *system*, with its own organization and describable dynamics, as per Niklas Luhmann and Siegfried

Schmidt).⁵ Things are not so simple when dealing with medieval literature, or with pre-modern or non-European literature, or with much of Irish literature.

Whenever literary histories deal with these uncongenial periods or fields, they will impose a chronology and teleology that is all too often misleading. Literary histories of England will tend to begin with *Beowulf*; those of France with the *Chanson de Roland*; those of Germany with the *Nibelungenlied*; those of Ireland with the Ulster cycle. In each case, a national Big Bang, the nation’s own *Iliad*, stands at the beginning of the narrative (not so, I am happy to say, with Ó Cathasaigh’s opening chapter in *CHIL*, which leads with St. Patrick). But in all of those cases, the epic in question dropped out of circulation around the time of Gutenberg, only to be retrieved, many centuries later, by modern philologists in the Edward O’Reilly/Eleanor Knott mode. The first edition of the *Nibelungenlied* is from 1807; *Beowulf*, 1815; *Chanson de Roland*, 1836; *Táin Bó Cuailgne* was, from 1600 onwards, known only as an echo and a reputation until almost the end of the nineteenth century. Leibniz did not know the *Nibelungen*, Voltaire was ignorant of the *Chanson de Roland*, Addison of *Beowulf*, Swift and Ó Rathaile had no knowledge of the *Táin* — though all of them would have been familiar with Virgil or the Psalms. Vernacular epic did not show up in these author’s rear-view mirrors, although the linear-progressive presentation of literary history would suggest otherwise.

Such processes of oblivion and recuperation are hidden from view in that type of literary history that is concerned only with the production line, with linear progress and innovation, and which merely wishes to chart how things at certain periods came to be done differently. Production-line literary history charts innovatory moments: the arrival of new schools, new paradigms, new types of poetics, for example the onset



A man at a bookstall, Bachelor's Walk, Dublin, 1973. Photograph: Richard Tillbrook, National Library of Ireland.

of the Enlightenment, of Romanticism, of modernism. This stands to reason. We like our artists to be original, creative, rebellious, experimental, non-complacent, so those are the terms in which we herald their achievement and signal their historical importance. But that bright spotlight leaves much in the shadows. What was the literary frame of reference of each

succeeding generation? What was forgotten or obsolescent? What older patterns were still prevalent, albeit no longer glamorous or attention grabbing? What was, from generation to generation, the *arrière-garde*? What did people actually *read*? Who were the Agatha Christies, Ian Flemings, Robert Ludlums and Maeve Binchys of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the

Georges Simenons and the Patrick O'Brians? Such questions are all the more pressing when we deal with literatures of scarcity and literatures that are inherently less strongly fixated on innovation, originality and nonconformism.

In any case, the genetic, innovation-oriented approach to literary history can no longer stand complacently on its own, and will need to be complemented by a reception-oriented one: a history of recycling, of reading, of reprints, copies and anthologies. Book histories like the recent *Guide to Irish Fiction, 1650–1900* (2006) by Rolf and Magda Loeber may give us a greater insight into a society's reading culture and provide a much-needed backdrop for a properly contextualized history of literary innovation.

In his essay 'Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?', Michel Foucault reminds us that 'First of all, texts are objects of appropriation.' Many of the *CHIL* essays take a contrary view and treat literature primarily as an expression. It is at this point that the question of Irishness comes in. *Irish* literature seems implicitly to mean: such literature as in some way or other expresses an Irish condition or experience (hence, no Thomas Mayne Reid, no Eriugena, no Ernest Dowden in *CHIL*). Irishness can be expressed through the medium of Latin, Gaelic, English or cinema; it can be by tonsured clerics or tattooed lesbians; what unites them between the covers of *CHIL* is the shared Irishness. The category of nationality trumps all others.

I do not want to labour the obvious, and rather cheap, point that the notion of Irishness begs questions almost as badly as a 'literary history of authors whose names contain the letter Q'; the intriguing thing is, rather, that this Irishness, whatever one wishes to make of it, is treated as the quality that is being *expressed* or reflected in what we call 'Irish literature'. Would it not make more sense to see Irishness as the factor that gives a given corpus of texts the potential of being *appropriated* as Irish? Texts belong to

Irish literature to the extent that they can be appropriated as such. Not only is canonicity a function of a text's reception trajectory; its very nationality is likewise located in its appropriating audience, its readership, at least as much as in the author's background or outlook. What is more, this act of appropriation can be contested between various competitors, for culture is always in short supply: both Duns Scotus and Ossian/Oisín have been hotly claimed by Ireland and Scotland. Authors such as Shaw and Wilde and, outstandingly, Edmund Burke, who until a few decades ago were usually seen as plain-vanilla English (when that term was still used to refer to a language rather than a nationality), have become progressively more Irish over the past few decades. In this respect, *CHIL* presents a paradox. Certainly in the earlier chapters, the Gaelic and English traditions are like oil and vinegar, largely heedless of each other, and the common appellation 'Irish' is (as Metternich said about Italy) merely a geographical expression until well after Swift. Nonetheless, the various traditions are set forth as jointly embodying a shared Irish identity — an identity which, one may suspect, was retroactively created for them by readers' categorizations and subsequent appropriations, and now consolidated by this survey.

Irish literature is, indeed, as the editors point out in their Introduction, a canon rather than a corpus. A challenging task for future literary historians might be to trace, not the chronologically arranged texts and authors forming part of that canon but the history of how that canon came to be formed as it did. *CHIL* is a rock-solid History of Irish Literature, but in all too many instances it tends to idealize the Irishness of its subject matter into an admirably invoked motivating force, some sort of national *élan vital*. Take one step back and what we might achieve is a metahistory of Irish literature: the history of how a certain canon came to be configured as 'Irish', was contested, formed and variously appropriated until it reached the shape and substance it now has. ■