General Introduction

by

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One reason for producing an anthology of Irish writing on this scale is, quite simply, that it has never been done before. Of course, anthologies of Irish literature have been published, the most notable being *The Cabinet of Irish Literature,* edited by Charles Read in four volumes in 1879, and its enlarged version co-edited with Katharine Tynan Hinkson in 1903, closely followed in 1911 by Justin McCarthy's ten-volume compilation, alphabetically arranged, *Irish Literature.* Since then, numerous anthologies have concentrated on particular genres — anthologies of poetry and prose, of short stories, of oratory, of speeches from the dock, and so on. But in this anthology we take a much wider time-span, embracing 1,500 years, and we avoid the narrow sense of the word 'literature', extending it to cover various other kinds of writing, especially political speeches, pamphlets and analyses, all of which have played an important part in the story which this anthology has to tell.

There *is* a story here, a meta-narrative, which is, we believe, hospitable to all the micro-narratives that, from time to time, have achieved prominence as the official version of the true history, political and literary, of the island's past and present. It is, for instance, useful to see that Irish writing in English — to take just one important element in the history — is not confined to the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. It has a history marked by continuity and discontinuity and it may be that both these features remain puzzlingly present when we speak of a 'tradition' of Irish drama which includes Farquhar, Goldsmith, Sheridan, Shaw and Wilde. The ambivalence is even more pronounced if we posit a connection between Joyce, James Clarence Mangan, the Irish oratorical tradition and Laurence Sterne. It may be that Sterne's connection with Joyce is as frail as, say, that of Congreve with the dramatists just named. By including Sterne and omitting Congreve we emphasize the fictive nature of any tradition that asserts continuity, while acknowledging its need to do so. There are obvious repercussions for the canon of English literature if a

canon of Irish literature establishes itself by repossessing some of the standard 'English' names — Swift or Sterne, Burke or Wilde. But that is, in fact, a secondary issue. There is no attempt here to establish a canon. Instead, what we show is an example of the way in which canons are established and the degree to which they operate as systems of ratification and authority. Part of the significance of this work for us has been the recognition of the power of the English canonical tradition to absorb a great deal of writing that, from a different point of view, can be reclaimed for the Irish tradition. Such acts of annexation and reclamation are integral to the assertion of cultural authority and confidence, but the assumptions on which they are based are frail indeed. Therefore, we consider ourselves to be engaged in an act of definition rather than in a definitive action.

Because it is a selection from a mass of material, an anthology, no matter how comprehensive it may try to be, implies the existence of a body of writing that could, were it all to be made available to readers at a single moment, truly be coincident with the subject anthologized. This unhappy implication is bound to make an anthologist restless for, once accepted, it has punishing consequences. Among these is the simple sense of an anthology's necessary incompleteness. But, worse than that, there is also the sense that the incompleteness is defined in relation to a specifiable and knowable subject — in this case 'Irish writing' — which another, quite different or heavily modified selection of texts would represent more accurately. I must confess straight away that I am free from the unease created by such considerations. The work of putting together the anthology was itself an exercise in dismantling them, in escaping from their coercive and disheartening power. For all that ever was or may be written which might, by what-ever criteria, be included under the rubric 'Irish writing' does not, by virtue of that, become part of the subject of our inquiry. Sheer inclusiveness is not, of itself, a virtue or even an advantage. Selection is not made from a preordained 'tradition'; it is selection which ordains the tradition(s). The subject of our inquiry and selection here is one that has been created and recreated in a variety of ways over the centuries and this anthology is one further act of cultural creation in that mode, one way of envisaging the forces and ideas that have governed the development of the always putative subject 'Irish writing' over 1,500 years. What it does is to re-present texts in relation to one another and to demonstrate, sometimes in detail, sometimes by no more than a general indication, how that constantly changing interrelationship provides for us the

nexus of values, assumptions and beliefs in which the idea of Ireland, Irish and writing are grounded.

It is important to do this now because the political crisis in Ireland, precipitated in 1968, but in gestation for many years before that date, has exposed the absence within the island of any system of cultural consent that would effectively legitimize and secure the existing political arrangements. There has rarely been in Ireland any sustained coordination between prevailing cultural and political systems; indeed, when this has existed, its oppressive nature and function has always been visible. The fact that Ireland has been colonized through conquest and invasion several times and in several ways is obviously central to an explanation of this phenomenon. The island was conquered by pre-Christian invaders, Christian missionaries, the Normans, the pre-Reformation English, the Elizabethans, Cromwellians and by the Williamites. It was dominated by imperial England and it remains, to the present day, in thrall to many of the forces, economic and political, that affect the United Kingdom in its troubled post-imperial decline. But other, internal conquests took place as well, deriving from and modifying the supervening realities of colonial rule. Versions of Ireland and its history and culture were created by many groups within the island — colonists and colonized — in attempts to ratify an existing political and economic system or to justify its alteration or its extinction. The failure of these cultural versions to achieve hegemony in alliance with the political system is more remark- able in a European country than it would be in those parts of the world that have been subject to European domination. That is part of the interest of and reason for this project.

The anthology does not propose that we have here an exemplary instance of either a 'national' or a 'colonial' liter- ature or body of writing. It does propose that the interchange between these conceptions of writing, more violently and frequently effected in Ireland than in most European cultures, demonstrates the configurations of power within a society that consistently has refused to accept their force or yield to their allure. What is exemplary, then, is the extent to which, in Irish conditions, canonical forms have not been established and, because of that, how clearly the purpose of such canonical forms is exposed.

Historians of limited philosophical resource still long to answer the question, 'What really happened then?' More modestly, this anthology asks the longer, less abrasive, question: 'How, in the light of what is happening now, can we re-present what was, then and since, believed to have been the significance of what "really" happened?' It also makes a difference *which*

'then' is chosen to be re-presented. Today, medieval Ireland may seem a more innocent, more purely scholarly choice than nineteenth-century Ireland, but it would be odd indeed were we to find that in this century historical scholarship had achieved a degree of political innocence hitherto unknown. It is part of the received wisdom that the Irish past has been (mis)interpreted by historians who had a cause to plead and an axe to grind. It is equally the case that this anthology, like the works it presents to the reader, is at the mercy of the present moment and, also like them, derives its authority (such as it is) from that moment.

A practical consideration in any anthology is the inclusion of material not readily available or widely known. This perforce has been taken into account here, although the consideration raises issues that go to the heart of the project. It would be perfectly easy to construct an anthology of Irish literature that would rehearse the achievements of those who have gained world-wide reputations — Swift, Berkeley, Sheridan, Goldsmith, Burke, Wilde, Shaw, Yeats, Joyce and Beckett. These could be interwoven with writers of lesser repute — for example, Francis Hutcheson, Tom Moore, Mangan, George Moore — and, in addition, those whose work is in the Irish language could be included — O Bruadair, O Súilleabháin, O Cadhain, Ó Ríordáin. Such an accumulative procedure has been avoided (although all these writers are indeed to be found here) because it merely reproduces the idea that there is a hierarchy of authors and of texts that is, so to speak, *there*, needing only to be illuminated under one light to show us in what 'Irish literature' or 'Irish writing' truly consists.

Such a procedure fails to deal with the formation of such a hierarchy (for it does, in interestingly varied echelons, exist); it ignores the process by which the categories of 'major' and 'minor' authors are formed and reformed, by which writers are appropriated to different 'traditions', and it fails to acknowledge how such appropriations have a profound impact on their reputations with different audiences. The reputation of Máirtín O Cadhain within the Irish-language tradition is important; within the English-language tradition, it does not exist. Louis MacNeice for long has been an English thirties' poet with an Irish background; today he is being recruited as an Ulster poet. His reputation to a large extent depends on his felt presence for a particular group or generation. Institutional forces play their part too. Most of the 'major' Irish writers have for decades been accommodated within the tradition of English or British literature. Sometimes they are loaned out for exhibitions of International Modernism or are reclaimed for

study within the discipline called 'Anglo-Irish Literature'. Large cultural-political investments are involved here, and the publishing industry, both in the United Kingdom and in Ireland, has played and continues to play an important role in producing and reproducing these writers for various audiences and under different banners. This is an inescapable feature of the whole system in which writing and the many categories of judgment and forms of classification are established. What the system disguises — often from itself — are the grounds on which these discriminations are based. Some are clearly commercial; others are more complex and subtle. All have a bearing upon both the work and its reception by a given audience. Writing is a system that produces audiences as well as works of literature.

Before romantic nationalism was born in the late eighteenth century, it was easier than it is now to think of writing as something which included but meant more than 'literature'. 'Polite letters' embraced philosophy, history and many other forms of discursive writing. When literature began to separate itself from other forms of writing, it based its extraordinary claims for itself on two mutually exclusive assertions — not a worrying consideration for literary people, who rather pride themselves, and with reason, on the brilliance with which they can be incoherent about the nature and claims of their chosen avocation. On the one hand, national, vernacular literatures, institutionalized in university departments and courses, were the articulators of the 'national tradition'. If Englishness or Irishness were to be sought, literature would provide it. Yet the greatest national literature, in being essentially English or Irish, also would be universal. It would be a local instance of the 'human spirit' in one of its standard modulations — tragic, comic, heroic, pathetic, and so on. There may be a suspicion of contradiction here, but it can be no more than that since the transition from the written work to the national essence to the human essence is such a mystificatory process that it would be vulgar to make such a commonplace objection. Yet, while claiming this, and, in the twentieth century proclaiming it in evangelical tones (F. R. Leavis in England, Daniel Corkery in Ireland), literature also announces the doctrine of the autonomy of the work of art. The relationship between literature and politics, asserted at one level, is denied at the other. The relationship, of course, is disguised, not broken; but it was (and still is) disguised as broken. In a country like Ireland, where nationalism had to be politically opposed to the prevailing power-systems, there was a serious attempt to create a counter-culture and to define it as authentic to the nation. In doing so, it used historical and

archaeological scholarship in a tendentious and polemical fashion. For this, it was rebuked. It distorted the facts of history and reduced literature to propaganda. The rebuke came from groups equally anxious to assert some other position against nationalism — unionism, liberalism, internationalism. The political animus informing all these non-nationalist groups was concealed as much as possible, and the most frequently worn disguise was, in history, the pretence to 'objectivity' and in literature the claim to 'autonomy'. Both words had the magical appeal of not being polemical or political; both were against 'propaganda' which pretended to be either history or art. The modern destruction and deconstruction of author(ity) is not attractive to the cultural-political establishment in Ireland because the defence of authority, understood as the status quo, is such a pressing matter. In this anthology, we do not devote ourselves to the truism that all writing is profoundly political. We are concerned, rather, to show how this is sometimes openly acknowledged and at other times urgently concealed. Consequently, we have adhered to the eighteenth-century convention that many forms of discourse are 'polite' and that literature is one of those forms. The historical achievement, whereby literature attained for itself such a privileged status, is acknowledged and, at times, inspected; but the defence of this status is left to those who have the philosophical resource to show when, where and why a given text can be named as literary. It can be done, of course; but the ground for such naming is political. That does not make it any the less complex.

We are concerned, then, to re-present a series of representations concerning the island of Ireland — its history, geography, political experience, social forms and economy — over a period of 1,500 years. The interrelationship between materials widely separated in time is not always apparent at first glance, but is part of the organizational structure of the anthology to show how such interrelations run athwart the chronological sequence. The opening excerpt deals with the figure of Cú Chulainn. Much later, we see this figure resurrected by Standish O'Grady and then by Yeats and Pearse. Few would any longer accept those readings as other than enabling versions of the hero-figure, designed to fulfil a specific purpose for those later writers. Yet even in the modern period, we see Ian Adamson, the cultural historian of the Ulster Defence Association, resurrecting Cú Chulainn yet again as a kind of Scottish-Unionist hero. Although it may be the case that our knowledge of the past helps us to exercise power over it, we can hardly dismiss the use of Cú Chulainn by such disparate people as an example of imagination helping out where knowledge

failed. The adoption and the dismissal of cult-figures like Cú Chulainn is a telling instance of the relationship between scholarship and politics. There is a current of opinion that holds that we would mythologize less if we knew more. (That itself might be a myth). But surely what is to be understood here is the felt need for mythologies, heroic lineages, dreams of continuity; in short, the need, expressed by different generations in individual ways, to colonize historical territory and repossess it.

Certain figures have attained an almost symbolic presence in Irish writing. Besides Cú Chulainn, there are Swift, O'Connell and Parnell; in the same way, certain eras are regarded as central to an understanding of the historical process; pagan Ireland, monastic Ireland, eighteenth-century Anglo-Ireland, the Famine, the Literary Revival. At times it seems that there is a link between the impulse to heroicize the past and the consciousness of present political weakness or defeat. Similarly, in those 'revisionist' periods, when the myths are dismantled and the concept of 'objectivity' rules, there is often an anxiety to preserve the status quo, to lower the political temperature and to offer the notion that historical processes are so complex that any attempt to achieve an overview cannot avoid the distortions and dogmatism of simple-minded orthodoxy. This is a powerful antidote against criticism and rebellion. Since rebellion is, of its nature, devoted to a simplified view of a complex situation, its proponents can be accused of indulging in historical fantasy, of intellectual narcosis and uneducated convictions. Yet the same charges could be brought against those who defended the prevailing political-cultural system in Ireland in, say, the 1720s, the 1840s and the 1930s. There is always a reason for reducing or increasing the importance and significance of historical events and sequences. Some events can appear to be very small when they are very far away, but their distance from us is a function of space as well as time. The figure of Cú Chulainn is now very small in the Irish Republic, but in east Belfast he looms larger. The historical space is different for each plea, even though the historical time is the same. Criticism has one advantage over rebellion: it tries to establish the space as well as the time for all groups. It does not reduce everything to one space and one time occupied by all.

It is, therefore, impossible to find an era, a group or an individual in possession of a set of beliefs, ideals or assumptions that scholarly investigation could not show to be flawed or distorted. The English republican ideal of the seventeenth century lived on in the Irish eighteenth century in the writings

of Toland, Molyneux, Hutcheson and others, even though the conditions for its survival had long since disappeared in England and had never existed in Ireland. This does not permit us to consign their work to the lumber-room. The republican ideal remained alive in Ireland in their work as an important critique of a society sectarianized by the Williamite confiscations and the Penal Laws. Its promotion by them stands as a corrective to Yeats's remodelling of Anglo-Irish protestant resistance to the inclusion of catholics and dissenters within the political system of the time as a noble and characteristically Irish rejection of modern mass democratic culture. But the Yeatsian version is not thereby cancelled. A different reading of the eighteenth century helps to lay bare the aim and purpose of Yeats's myth, but such an alternative reading is itself subject to the same kind of exposure. The catholic apologists of the eighteenth century, with Charles O'Conor prominent among them, argued for the inclusion of catholics within the political system on the grounds that they belonged to a highly developed civilization and were, therefore, worthy of acceptance. Later, catholic nationalism absorbed this argument, intensified it to the point of saying that the Gaelic civilization was superior to that of the planters and adventurers who came in the train of Cromwell and William and, switching the basis of the argument, claimed admission to political power on the principle of abstract rights. They could have it both ways, even though the much-vaunted Gaelic culture was essentially aristocratic and exclusive and could not have tolerated the doctrines of universal rights and equality.

Nationalism even found a way of converting every past failure and defeat into a proof of the indomitable spirit of the Gael and a warrant of future success. Explanations abound for the failure of political and cultural systems to survive — the evils of colonial rule, the defects of the Irish national character, the malign influence of the protestant garrison or of the catholic church or of the imperial economic system. The variety — by no means infinite — need not be taken to indicate that all are equally suasive or competent accounts. What needs to be reaffirmed is that they are not (although they pretend to be) accounts of the same thing — Ireland. All these explanations *produce* the concept of Ireland, reify it and have it distributed as widely as possible for consumption. It is not one culture or even one place. It can be the Isle of Saints and Scholars, John Bull's Other Island, an intramural example of European colonialism, a laggard remnant of long-exhausted religious wars, a catholic aircraft-carrier off Europe, a neo-colonial culture struggling towards autonomy. The texts included here

provide no definitive answer to any question of definition; their role is to demonstrate the genesis of these conceptions and their subsequent distribution and force.

It is in the two languages of Ireland that the history of power and powerlessness is most deeply inscribed. Latin and Norman French have a historical importance, which is recorded here, but it is in Irish and English that the experience of conflict is most memorably registered. The fact that the Irish-language texts are translated into English in this anthology is, in its way, sufficient comment on the relative fortunes of the two languages. It is evident that the wholesale adoption of the English language by the Gaelic-speaking Irish — sometimes voluntary, more often enforced by atrocious pressures — carries with it a psychological heritage, a recriminatory history of scandal, betrayal and shame, the last of these most indelibly associated with poverty and the trauma of the Famine. The subsequent tradition of emigration to the English-speaking centres of economic prosperity in Britain and the United States was sustained for good economic reasons. The Gaelic-speaking Irish surrendered their cultural heritage and thereafter were not able or equipped to adopt an English-speaking heritage that had any comparable presence or meaning for them. Yet it must also be remembered that, since the eighteenth century, the English-speaking Irish have been engaged in a long struggle to possess the Irish language and culture, partly as a means of redefining themselves as other than English, partly as a way of finding in culture a reconciliation of those forces and interests that remained steadfastly opposed in politics.

Charlotte Brooke's attempt in 1789 to promote amity and concord between the languages through translation — accompanied by the original texts in the Gaelic script — is an important moment because it profoundly alters the rationale for colonialism that the Elizabethans and Cromwellians had expounded. By the time Charlotte Brooke wrote, the colonial crusade to conquer, subject and convert the Irish had been transmuted into an internal colonial project. The English-speaking beneficiaries of the 1690 settlement began to consolidate their vision of themselves as playing an interstitial role between the English and Gaelic civilizations, seeing themselves as the only group equipped to modulate the rancorous history of conflict between the two. Cultural reconciliation appeared to be the necessary prelude to political reconciliation. However, a series of catastrophic political developments — the French Revolution, the rise of the United Irishmen, the 1798 Rebellion and the Act of Union in 1800 — deferred the realization of this ambition. When it re-emerged

in the 1830s with Sir Samuel Ferguson, the notion of reconciliation had a new urgency. The catholic political nation had been formed by then, and its accelerating abandonment of the Irish language — encouraged by O'Connell, the national school system and, ultimately, the Famine — left the intellectual leaders of the former protestant ascendancy, now reduced by the Act of Union to a garrison, with the paradoxical task of rescuing into English what their catholic counterparts were abandoning in Irish. The assertion of the existence of a cultural (and largely literary) tradition, embracing both groups, depended to an extraordinary degree on a successful act of translation. Ferguson and Thomas Davis are only the best-known names of those who made the assertion and risked testing it by putting their faith in the possibility of translation as a means of cultural conciliation.

What had to be translated, according to current advanced opinion, was more than individual texts — although these were difficult enough to establish. With them there also had to be translated the spirit that informed them. The English language of translation would have to find some way of embodying the intensity and strangeness of the Irish language. The result would be a language that would retain the most characteristic features of both. As long as this idea of translation survived, Irish nationalism, in alliance with philological scholarship, could give culture precedence over politics, in the belief that the civilizing and ecumenical spirit of the first would soften the harsh and sectarian reality of the second. Thomas Davis and Young Ireland carried this programme a step further by using the influence of the new journalism to start a campaign for the replacement of the British industrial and imperial system with an all-Irish alternative — but in the English language. The fortunes of this project in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries can be followed in this anthology, although the original stream that rose in the eighteenth century and became a river in the nineteenth has now broken into a delta that still has to be mapped.

When colonialism is successful, it reconciles the colonized culture to its own. When it is unsuccessful, it enforces itself by violence — slaughter, confiscation, the demonizing of those who resist it. Nationalism, cultural or political, is no more than an inverted image of the colonialism it seeks to replace. It too is an act of translation or even of retranslation. The assumption it shares with colonialism is the existence of an original condition that must be transmitted, restored, recuperated, and which must replace that fallen condition which at present obtains. It is not necessarily true that something always gets lost in

translation. It is necessarily true that translation is founded on the idea of loss and recuperation; it might be understood as an action that takes place in the interval between these alternatives. This conception lies at the heart of much Irish writing, especially in the modern period, and has of course affinities with the modern theories of writing as a practice. The belief in the originary essence, agency or condition and the desire to do something to it or with it — recover it, convert it, adapt it, destroy it — silently patrol the boundaries of both Irish protestant and Irish catholic nationalisms and hold in custody the accompanying visions of literature and politics. The system of thought that turns on the axis of translation is by now so internally coherent that it seems to many that it must also be externally valid. It ain't necessarily so.

One stereotype of Ireland that has remained effective throughout the twentieth century is that of a country where political violence and the literary arts flourish in ways not emulated (nor sought by) other countries. It is possible to demolish this popular conception, but it is perhaps wiser to wonder at its prevalence and at the elements of reality it contains. If there is an association between violence and writing, how can it be understood? The question is too large for an introduction such as this, but it can be addressed briefly by a glance at the confrontation between the aesthetic and the political realms, which is both important in itself and historically central to much Irish writing, with its obsessional reversions towards translation and the problems that go with it. The aesthetic ideology, which claims autonomy for the work of art, is a political force which pretends not to be so. But within that assertion, this ideology has produced a very powerful form of auto-critique, sometimes known as literary criticism and sometimes not. The ideological appeal is embodied in the claim that a work of art achieves, in Coleridge's famous phrase, 'a reconciliation of opposites'. 'Reconciliation' is a key term in art criticism, in translation theory and in political crisis. In Ireland, the linkages between these fields are so close that there is scarcely a distinction in the vocabularies deployed for each. Art, however, is given priority even in this close-knit family, because it gives the example of how tensions, strains, raw authentic experience and processed moral values can be brought together in a harmonious and triumphant wholeness. The idea that that which is chaotic, disorganized and 'rude' can be converted to order and civilization was shared by English literary critics, at least until very recent times. It is also shared by those who see a connection between northern Irish violence and the northern Irish literary 'revival'. The literature —

autonomous, ordered — stands over against the political system in its savage disorder. The connection here is as interesting as the contrast. Ultimately, any key political term is exchangeable with any key literary term. It is not a new discovery, but an old truth that is, perhaps, worth restating.

In its necessarily unsuccessful, but nevertheless strenuous, attempt to be comprehensive, this anthology includes a great deal of material that has for long been unknown or unacknowledged, usually because it has not been amenable to any of the modern versions of tradition elaborated in the last one hundred years. With that, there is of course a great deal of well-known material, almost all of which has served its purpose in the development of a scheme of Irish history or literature. The appearance of the unfamiliar with the familiar may have a tonic effect on some of our more routine and unexamined reactions and assumptions. But finally, perhaps it might be hoped that the material presented here displays the achievement of Irish people over many centuries in dealing with problems which were in some respects peculiar to themselves and their country but which, in other respects, go beyond the confining circumstances of our own history and find their analogues elsewhere. If we could claim that in every corner of the anthology one could find contained, *in parvo,* the whole scheme and meaning of it, then our ambitions would be fulfilled. But if the scheme of the anthology is not so discovered, we have little doubt that some alternative to it will be revealed, whatever page is opened, whatever work or excerpt is read. It is the endless fecundity of such reading that gives justification to the selections with which we here attempt to define our subject.

THE FIELD DAY ANTHOLOGY OF IRISH WRITING
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