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Literature in English



Sean Ryder

The nature and extent of current interest in nineteenth-century Irish literature in English makes a striking contrast to earlier decades, when critical discussions of nineteenth-century Irish writing tended to focus on a relatively narrow range of writers, and students and scholars were inclined to view the period as far less interesting than the early twentieth century. Attention normally centred on those late nineteenth-century writers associated with the Literary Revival, notably W. B. Yeats, Augusta Gregory and George Moore. The canon was sometimes stretched to include mid-century predecessors like Samuel Ferguson and James Clarence Mangan, particularly insofar as they could be read as the Revivalists' artistic antecedents. Critical works on the pre-Revival period were scarce by comparison with works on the Revivalists themselves, and those studies that did appear, like Thomas Flanagan's *The Irish Novelists 1800–1850* (1959), remained standard works for many years. Even a major historical critical study like Malcolm Brown's *Politics of Irish Literature* (1972), which paid relatively ample attention to the wide cast of nineteenth-century writers, still approached pre-1880s writing as a curtain-raiser for the work of Yeats, Synge, Joyce and O'Casey.

Not only did the prevailing canon privilege particular writers; it also privileged certain genres. Poetry and poetic drama were the most prominent genres of the Revival, and it was poetry that received most critical attention when critics looked back into the nineteenth century. Although the novelists Maria Edgeworth and Somerville and Ross were given some attention (often as examples of a regional trend within the tradition of the English novel), the vast body of Irish fiction was generally neglected by critics. Pre-Revival theatre was also deemed unworthy of consideration, with the exception of Boucicault, whose work was made significant by Sean O'Casey's backward glance.

There were a number of reasons why the Revival overshadowed the critical response to Irish writing earlier in the nineteenth century. Firstly, there were the pronouncements of the Revivalists themselves, especially Yeats,

who had an aesthetic and psychological need to distinguish himself from his precursors. In the late 1880s Yeats energetically set about anthologising, eulogising and tabulating his nineteenth-century predecessors – largely in order to construct a role for himself as both the inheritor of a tradition and as someone who would radically extend and improve upon that tradition. Thomas Kinsella, writing as late as 1980 (in his introduction to *The New Oxford Book of Irish Verse*), illustrates how powerful and pervasive Yeats's views were. In his anthology, Kinsella simply repackaged Yeats's perspective for readers of the late twentieth century, casting his own cold eye over what he calls the 'ill-starred enthusiasms and miscellaneous activities' of Yeats's predecessors.¹ Writing as an Irish poet in search of a usable past, Kinsella dismisses the nineteenth century almost in its entirety:

I believe that silence, on the whole, is the real condition of Irish literature in the nineteenth century – certainly of poetry. There are enough hideous anthologies to bear me out: collections in which one falls with relief on anything that shows mere competence.²

Not only did Yeats's views determine the literary canon; they also shaped the way literary critics viewed the whole history of the nineteenth century. As W. J. McCormick has pointed out, critics of Anglo-Irish literature have almost inevitably derived their historiography from W. B. Yeats.³ Yeats, again for his own reasons, divided nineteenth-century nationalist politics into a conflict between an aristocratic, tragic, Protestant Parnell, and a distastefully populist, pragmatic and Catholic O'Connell – with John O'Leary being an almost unique bridge between both sides. This polarised version of the Irish nineteenth century was essentially a way for Yeats to justify his own aesthetic and his class interests. For Yeats, the Catholic, nationalist, populist culture which had become central to post-Famine Irish politics could not, on its own, produce a modern Irish literature. Such a development would require the aesthetic values of the rapidly declining Ascendancy, hence Yeats's valorisation of authors like Standish O'Grady whose work meant little to Irish popular culture, but a great deal to disaffected Protestant intellectuals. Literary critics, following this lead, have paid scant attention to the reading and writing of that Catholic middle-class and rural populace who comprised the majority population throughout the century.

A second force that shaped the twentieth-century view of nineteenth-century literature was a version of nationalist cultural criticism that emerged in the new Free State, demonstrated most famously in the critical writings of Daniel Corkery. In general, Corkery's cultural nationalism valued writing that reflected the 'Irish national being', which for him was primarily Catholic, nationalist and rural.⁴ For Corkery, the literature of the Ascendancy in the

nineteenth century was simply a ‘Colonial’ literature – which meant that however well-crafted the work of Edgeworth or Somerville and Ross might be, it was less significant than the clumsier prose of Charles Kickham, which at least attempted to represent and speak to ‘the people’.⁵ Corkery was particularly harsh on what he called ‘the shameful literary tradition of the Prout, Maginn, Lever, Lover school of writers’, who, like Shaw and Wilde, were essentially ‘servants of the English people’.⁶ Corkery’s project had no place for novelists like Sheridan Le Fanu or Bram Stoker either: not only because of their class impediment, but also because their work did not usually address ‘Ireland’ as a subject. Corkery’s argument implied that it was not sufficient for a writer to be Irish to be ‘canonised’. He or she must also write *about Ireland*, and write authentically and nationally at that. Interestingly, the English literature syllabi of Irish universities in the 1940s and 1950s seem to combine Yeats’s aesthetic canon with Corkery’s nationalist one. A mid-century BA course at University College Dublin entitled ‘Anglo-Irish literature 1800–1880’, for example, focused on Thomas Moore, George Darley, the de Veres, James Clarence Mangan, Samuel Ferguson, Thomas Davis, Denis Florence McCarthy, Edward Fitzgerald, William Allingham, Gerald Griffin, William Carleton, John Mitchel and W. E. H. Lecky – all writers who would have been largely acceptable to both Yeats and Corkery. A contemporaneous MA course examined Ferguson, Mangan, Edgeworth’s *Irish Stories* and Carleton’s *Traits and Stories*.⁷

A third force shaping the canon of nineteenth-century literature was the impact of international modernism on literary scholarship. Modernist aesthetics, with its emphasis on detachment and self-reflexivity, suited the formalist ‘New Criticism’. Students and critics were taught to favour the ‘well-wrought urn’, an internally coherent and self-sufficient object. ‘New Criticism’ abhorred cliché, narrative loose ends, and conflicting registers of voice and discourse, except in cases where these might be read as forms of ‘ambiguity’ that are ultimately resolved at a psychological or emotional level. ‘New critics’ tended to read poems as acts of private meditation rather than as public and historical interventions. It tended to privilege metaphoric forms over metonymic ones, poems over novels, and content over context. The ‘New Critical’ style of reading, in other words, was poorly qualified to recognise or appreciate the achievement of a great deal of nineteenth-century Irish writing. It was also unhelpful that the study of fiction from the 1950s to the 1970s was dominated by the ‘moral formalism’ of F. R. Leavis, whose insistence on establishing the narrow parameters of the ‘Great Tradition’ meant that a great deal of nineteenth-century fiction simply dropped out of view. The qualities singled out by Leavis in his description of the achievements of the English nineteenth-century novel – the qualities of ‘moral sanity’, of ‘felt life’ and so on – were noticeably absent in Irish fiction of the same century, dealing as it

did with quite a different set of contexts and demands from those of Jane Austen and George Eliot.

For these reasons, the bulk of nineteenth-century Irish writing remained unexamined by critics, or was judged merely as historical background to the twentieth century. Pre-Revival nineteenth-century literature became less readable, less interesting, less critically significant than it had been for many of its original readers. This critical orthodoxy has been given its most sustained challenge in recent years: partly in response to a changing international critical scene, and partly because of changing conditions in Ireland itself. The changing critical context has been marked by the emergence of methodologies such as feminism, post-structuralism, postcolonial theory, new forms of historicism that are distrustful of hierarchical discriminations between high and popular art, and new interest in the history of publishing and the book.

The new work on the Irish nineteenth century has been engaged in a twofold process. One is largely a bibliographical and historicist task: to recover texts and authors obscured by twentieth-century criticism, thus providing a fuller and more complex view of the period. The second task is methodological, and often accompanies the first (but not always). It involves subjecting both canonical and non-canonical writings to new readings, informed by the insights of late twentieth-century critical theory. A new attention to the importance of gender as a theme and as a context is one example of such a development. So too is the new valorisation of characteristics previously considered to be marks of aesthetic 'failure' – for instance, contradiction, linguistic instability, stylistic hybridity, and lack of narrative closure. A new kind of historicism has also been in evidence, though of course Irish literary criticism has almost always been historicist in some fashion (even Yeats and Corkery refused to separate literary significance from historical context). The new focus on the materiality of texts has enabled more detailed attention to the social and political contexts of writing and publishing, which are no longer seen as merely secondary to literary interpretation. Finally, there has been an emergence of meta-critical writing which has begun to historicise Irish literary criticism itself, drawing attention to the ideological forces which have shaped all critical responses to nineteenth-century writing (including, of course, those of the present day).

The changes in Irish cultural politics in general have also had an impact on the direction of Irish literary criticism. Political developments North and South, changing relationships between Ireland and Britain, and ideological and economic changes within Irish society, have been accompanied by various forms of revisionary thinking. The literary critical equivalent of this has involved questioning the parameters of the national canon, adopting a more capacious definition of literary Irishness, and counteracting what is

sometimes construed as politically motivated neglect. 'Big House' fiction and Ulster Protestant writing, for instance, have been re-examined in ways that reflect wider debates about the politics of Irish culture in the late twentieth century. And it has not been merely minority or unionist Irish traditions that have been given new attention; the nationalist tradition itself has been re-examined by critics, and newer, more complex models of Irish nationalism have emphasised its variegated and conflicted nature.

★ ★ *

Several critical studies from the 1990s have offered generalising overviews of the nineteenth century. For the most part these studies have continued the traditional focus on the relationship between nineteenth-century literature and the history of Irish nationality; that is, they continue to define the significance of nineteenth-century literature primarily in terms of its role in the construction of a national culture. Unlike F. R. Leavis's 'great traditions' of nineteenth-century fiction and poetry, which were canons ostensibly constructed on moral and aesthetic grounds, Irish literary historians have usually based their claims for the value of nineteenth-century texts on their historical or political importance. This evidently remains the case, although recent versions of Irish cultural history have largely been more complex or iconoclastic than their predecessors.

One of the most important and path-breaking of these recent nineteenth-century overviews has been Joep Leerssen's *Remembrance and Imagination* (1996). Following on from his wide-ranging study of pre-nineteenth century ideas of nationality, *Mere Irish and Fior-Ghael* (2nd edn, 1996), this work charts the nineteenth century's construction of images of Irishness, including the 'creation of an Irish self-image'. Leerssen especially focuses on the phenomenon of 'Celtic exoticism', which in the nineteenth century is a feature of both national and externally generated discourses on Ireland. The development of the 'auto-exotic' becomes for Leerssen a way of explaining the Irish preoccupation with cultural self-analysis in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In its very self-conscious adoption of European theory and methodology (particularly from the work of Bakhtin and Genette), the book is almost unique in Irish studies.

Leerssen's theoretical frame allows him to concentrate on the mechanics of discourse. As a result he offers a very clear and useful description of the distinctive features of nineteenth-century literary discourse, especially the novel. He identifies what earlier critics may have seen as aesthetic failure in less censorious terms as a form of heteroglossia, or multiplicity of register; he argues, for instance, that the Irish novel tends to comprise an amalgam of the discourses of travel description, antiquarianism, and sentimental comedy.

The resulting stylistic vacillation and uncertainty of voice mean that an Irish novel like Lady Morgan's *The Wild Irish Girl* becomes a 'novel which pretends to be about Ireland [but] in fact is about other texts about Ireland'.⁸

This focus on discursive instability is part of Leerssen's general argument about the formation of national self-images, and helps him to explain why Ireland found it so difficult to develop stable modes of self-representation such as the realist novel or positivist historiography. His main thesis, however, has to do with the debates over the status of historical truth and methodology, taking as a special case study the debates about round towers. Here Leerssen sees a battle being waged between the discourses of 'historical fact' and 'historical imagination', a conflict that characterises a great deal of literary, political and scholarly discourse in the nineteenth century.⁹ Leerssen seems to accept the validity of such a distinction, and ultimately to lament the fact that the latter discourse – 'historical imagination', with its auto-exoticist strain and 'poetics of anachronism' – prevailed in nineteenth-century Ireland. The result, according to Leerssen, was the production of a debilitating version of history that was morbid, cyclical and 'uncanny' rather than amenable to rational explanation.¹⁰ What made this process unique within the context of other European nationalisms was that the Irish version of remembrancing was tied to a project of revival and renewal, rather than just preservation or resistance.

Leerssen's methodology allows him to move usefully from literature, to antiquarian writing, to historiography – demonstrating the common discursive underpinning of all of these discourses. This is a particularly welcome strategy, and one that should continue to prove illuminating for scholars and critics. Such an interdisciplinary approach is not entirely new: the nineteenth century itself did not always make significant distinctions between genres, and, as we have seen, the UCD English syllabus in the mid-twentieth century required students to read historian Lecky alongside the poet Mangan and polemicist Mitchel. What makes the new interdisciplinarity different is its attitude to language, which it tends to assume is the very material of culture rather than a mere tool for the expression of ideas.

Although he claims to be avoiding the established canon, Leerssen does in fact tend to write about familiar authors: Brooke, Moore, Morgan, Maturin, Banim, Lever, Lover, Edgeworth, Kickham, Boucicault, and so on.¹¹ It is not the canon that he has challenged as much as the way of reading the canon. A more radical challenge to the canon would involve a more detailed look at the realm of popular culture – not merely as a remnant of a disappearing Gaelic world (as it tends to be in Leerssen's work) but also as a site of modernising, hybrid, English- or dual-language texts that may actually prefigure the Joycean openness Leerssen celebrates in the conclusion to *Remembrance and Imagination*. This is a line of inquiry, as we shall see, that has been opened up by the work of critics like Niall Ó Ciosáin and David Lloyd.

The attention to national 'representation' as found in Leerssen's book, and the resulting attention to the constructedness of discourse, is a feature of a great deal of writing about the nineteenth century. Seamus Deane's *Strange Country: Modernity and Nationhood in Irish Writing since 1790* (1997), like Leerssen's work, offers something of an overview of the nineteenth century, and like Leerssen he seeks to explain the function and character of much nineteenth-century writing by reference to its ideological function. Deane's argument has to do with the construction of national character, a well-worn theme but here approached in new ways, and in Deane's distinctively concentrated and deconstructive style. Beginning with Burke, Deane explores the ideological manoeuvres and contradictions that lay at the heart of the attempt by the Anglo-Irish to represent Ireland in the nineteenth century. Bound up with this are the issues of modernity, improvement and nationality, and the interrelationship of these issues. What Leerssen's book describes as 'exoticism', Deane sees as an inevitable consequence of a deeply contradictory ideological project that could not reconcile its own foundational ideas with the economic realities of a colonial condition. Deane argues that much nineteenth-century literature, and fiction especially, can be read as an attempt to negotiate and understand a basic ambiguity between the 'representation of a country that is foreign and unknown, in which the conditions are phantasmogoric, especially to the English reader, and a country that is, at the same time, part of the British system, perfectly recognisable and part of the traditional world that the French Revolution had overthrown'.¹² This is also a struggle between imperial capital on the one hand, with its rhetoric of progress and modernisation, and national character on the other, which is necessary to the narrative of modernity, but which in Ireland has tended to be associated with recalcitrance or hostility to modernity. Problems arise in Ireland because national character, understood in the nineteenth century to be the basis for nationality, tended to function in a Burkean fashion as a sign of Irish exclusivity and uniqueness; at the same time nationality had to be linked to modernity (as was the case with English 'national character') if it was to be renovated for the present and future. Deane proceeds to read a number of nineteenth-century texts in order to trace the stratagems for reconciliation of these apparent binaries, including Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent*, Griffin's *The Collegians* and Moore's *Melodies*.

Deane's project resembles Leerssen's in its attempt to trace the meaning of 'normalcy' in discourses on Irish culture and identity. However, Deane gives much more attention than does Leerssen to political and economic discourse (a discussion of the meaning of 'land' and 'soil' in Davis, Mitchel, O'Grady and Stoker, for example, forms a central section of Deane's book). He argues that since the time of Burke, Ireland has been defined as a 'strange country', resistant to the supposed 'normalisation' offered to it by the

'objective' historian (or the progressive spectator or the rational political discourse, all of whose self-defined difference from 'strangeness' can be deconstructed). 'Normality', argues Deane, 'is an economic condition; strangeness a cultural one. Since Burke, there has been a series of strenuous efforts to effect the convergence of the twain, even though the very premise of their separation has been powerful in assuring that the twain will never meet.'¹³ Those efforts at integration had been largely abandoned by apologists for the Union after the Famine; subsequently, such efforts became the project of nationalism. 'The pursuit of such a reconciliation', Deane argues, 'provides a paradigm for Irish writing in the nineteenth century; one of the discursive formations that paradigm produces is a renovated version of a national character that must, by a variety of procedures, political and cultural, be disciplined into such sobriety of behaviour as would be in accord with the requirements of economic progress and development.'¹⁴

Repositioning canonical texts within a new or revised narrative frame is also a characteristic of Declan Kiberd's *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (1995). Although Kiberd's chief focus is on twentieth-century Irish literature, he provides fresh insights into the writings of nineteenth-century figures Oscar Wilde, Somerville and Ross, and Augusta Gregory by reading them as significant exemplars in the long process of decolonisation and national reconstruction. Like many earlier studies of Irish writing and nationality, Kiberd's primary interest is in the twentieth century; however, his approach is especially innovative because of its explicit use of postcolonial theorists such as Said, Fanon, Nandy, Achebe and Ngugi. Kiberd uses them to derive a model of postcolonial, deconstructive hybridity that undermines hierarchical binary distinctions between Irish and English identity and culture, between masculinity and femininity, and between tradition and modernity. The writings that are most interesting for Kiberd's argument are those that encourage or manifest this liberating turn. Thus Wilde becomes a challenging and creative figure of multiple identity, his work a continual rejection of antithetical thinking: 'the Wildean moment', argues Kiberd, 'is that at which all polar opposites are transcended'.¹⁵ Somerville and Ross are valued for their own attempts to transcend the restrictive vision of their class without abandoning the special insights their class position might offer on a changing Ireland. As with Lady Gregory, whom Kiberd shows to have bravely faced up to the challenge of fundamentally rethinking the values and contradictions of her Anglo-Irish inheritance, the gender position of these writers is assumed to have given them a certain critical vantage point on the dominant ideological norms of their day.

The volumes of Terry Eagleton's Irish trilogy published in the 1990s – *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* (1995), *Crazy Jane and the Bishop* (1998) and *Scholars and Rebels in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (1999) – contain several

important essays on nineteenth-century Irish culture and like the previous works amount to something of an overview of the century. Some of the essays provide new readings of canonical figures like Yeats, Moore and Oscar Wilde, but perhaps the most valuable are those that respond to, in Eagleton's own words, 'two kinds of narrowness in contemporary Irish cultural studies'.¹⁶ The first is a narrowness of canon, which Eagleton counters by recovering nineteenth-century figures like Fr Prout, W. E. H. Lecky, Isaac Butt, George Sigerson, John E. Cairnes, William Wilde and John Mitchel, thus, ironically, reinstating a canon that might have been quite recognisable to nineteenth-century critics. The second narrowness is one of approach: '[m]uch in Irish cultural studies is shaped nowadays by what one might loosely call a postmodern agenda, which brings into play some vital topics but in doing so tends to sideline other questions of equal importance . . . religion and education, for example'.¹⁷ It is this breadth of focus that makes Eagleton's work most valuable, especially for the student or critic coming to the nineteenth-century culture for the first time. Essays like 'Form and ideology in the Anglo-Irish novel' and 'Culture and politics from Davis to Joyce' provide elegant and immensely useful exercises in synthesis and coverage, and interpretative frames that have a welcome clarity.¹⁸ Eagleton's depiction of the nineteenth century as 'a peculiarly shocking collision of the customary and contemporary'¹⁹ does not represent methodological innovation or a fundamentally new view of the century, but does offer a memorable and pithy starting point. In particular, the essays in *Scholars and Rebels*, like the work of Leerssen and Deane, fill out the intellectual context for nineteenth-century writing for an audience of students and critics who may simply be unaware of the importance of many of the figures discussed and of the fascinating 'intellectual ferment' of the time.²⁰

Some of the issues raised by Eagleton in his essay 'Form and ideology in the Anglo-Irish novel' have also been taken up by David Lloyd, whose remarkable work on Mangan, nationalism and minor literature in 1987 offered a challenging new paradigm for considering Irish writing in the nineteenth century, based upon the application of poststructuralist and Marxist arguments.²¹ Lloyd's chief work in the 1990s on the nineteenth century consisted of two closely argued essays from his collection *Anomalous States* (1993). One of these, 'Violence and the constitution of the novel', re-examines the oft-repeated observation that the nineteenth-century Irish novel is formally a heteroglossic, self-reflexive, incoherent mode of expression when compared to the English novel of the same period, an issue addressed not only by contemporary critics like Leerssen and Eagleton, but also by nineteenth-century novelists themselves. Reacting against the common explanation of this phenomenon in terms of the incoherence and instability of Irish society itself in the nineteenth century, Lloyd argues that assuming a simple correlation between

social instability and formal instability in fiction depends on misleading assumptions about the nature of fiction itself. Lloyd describes the task of the novel as not merely one of representing society – a simple ‘reflection model’ of fiction – but rather of assisting in the ideological work of producing ethical national subjects along the lines demanded by bourgeois political economy (a project common to both imperialism and bourgeois nationalism). Viewed in this light, the atypicality of the Irish novel is chiefly a matter of the alternative moral economy of agrarian Ireland resisting incorporation into a particular ideological project. It is not simply that Irish society and its material base are backward or endemically violent, and therefore unsuitable for novelistic treatment. It is rather that the kind of binary categories through which the novel performs its task of bourgeois reformist education (distinguishing modern *vs* primitive, individual *vs* social, progressive *vs* regressive) could not convincingly be applied to Irish agrarian culture, any more than such culture could easily be assimilated into the structures of the bourgeois state. Lloyd’s arguments point to the crucial fact that fiction has a regulative, political function that is not always admitted by literary critics; the failure to recognise this is a major problem: ‘what is certain is that the tendency in literary criticism to understand the Irish novel and its conditions of emergence in binary terms, such that Irish society is read principally in terms of what it lacks *vis-à-vis* England or Europe, has seriously hampered the understanding of the phenomenon’.²²

Lloyd’s work on the novel, and his exploration of popular balladry in the essay ‘Adulteration and the nation’, also from *Anomalous States*, point to a glaring and surprising absence in each of the previously discussed overviews of the nineteenth century; that is, the field of Irish popular culture. Leerssen’s work deals with the culture of the élite: antiquarians, historians and middle and upper-class writers whose work shaped the historical imagination of their own class, at least in the first instance. The work of Deane, Kiberd and Eagleton similarly deals with figures working within a middle-class and ascendancy sphere. Lloyd’s ‘Adulteration and the nation’ however turns its attention to nineteenth-century street ballads in order to continue his exploration of the function of literature in the construction of the state. Describing the form and function of street ballads on the one hand, and more ‘refined’ and poetic nationalist effusions that appeared in the pages of *The Nation* and in various anthologies on the other, Lloyd makes the connection between Irish popular culture and subaltern, non-bourgeois forms of nationalism. His argument depends on a crucial distinction between bourgeois nationalism, which aims at the capture of the state, and is socially conservative, and subaltern, insurgent modes of anti-colonial resistance; the latter, unlike bourgeois nationalism, are not organised in the image of imperialism itself, but offer less centralised and more flexible structures. These latter forms are characterised in the cultural sphere by hybridity of form and content – they are ‘adulterated’ mixtures of

English words and Irish airs, burlesque style and political message – and therefore offer a more liberating aesthetic than conventional and selective ‘high culture’. Lloyd thus sees a continuity between the nineteenth-century street ballads and the work of Joyce, both of which defied the demands of bourgeois taste.

Luke Gibbons, in his seminal essay ‘Identity without a centre: allegory, history and Irish nationalism’ (1992; reprinted in *Transformations in Irish Culture*, 1996), similarly draws attention to the culture of agrarian movements and the challenge they posed to the systems and aesthetic values of both the state and mainstream nationalism. Like Lloyd, he sketches out a rough picture of an alternative social, political and representational system operating in the nineteenth century, and in doing so reminds us of the frustrating lacunae in our knowledge of nineteenth-century popular culture. Georges-Denis Zimmerman’s *Songs of Irish Rebellion* (1967, reprinted 2001) remains exemplary of the kind of retrieval of popular culture that is still needed. Scholars of eighteenth-century popular culture like Kevin Whelan (1996) and Mary Helen Thuente (1994) have provided recent models for such work in their studies of the mobilisation of popular culture in the United Irish movement. The challenge remains, however, to push this exploration further into the nineteenth century.

The most extensive and ground-breaking exception to the relative neglect of nineteenth-century popular culture is Niall Ó Ciosáin’s *Print and Popular Culture in Ireland 1750–1850* (1997), which offers a welcome and detailed analysis of the popular printed material of the early nineteenth century, including chapbooks, popular histories and religious texts. Ó Ciosáin extends the almost exclusively political focus of the preceding studies by situating popular reading and publishing practices within the sociological contexts of literacy, language change, education and social stratification. He reminds us to beware of simplistic assumptions about the effects of such issues; he shows, for instance, that oral tradition frequently absorbed elements of print culture, rather than vice versa, and that the growth of literacy is related to the shift from Irish to English in quite complex and varied ways.

The issue of language change is itself remarkably absent from many of the recent writings on the nineteenth century, perhaps because many of the critics and literary historians are not confident or competent in dealing with Irish language material, and also perhaps from an unwillingness to challenge the view that the two languages were mutually exclusive. Robert Welch is, like Kiberd, one of the few Irish literary critics who writes with ease about both language traditions. Welch’s book *Changing States* (1993) is valuable to the reader of English-language material for outlining the dual-language context for nineteenth-century Irish writing. His conclusion about the effect of language change, however, lacks the subtlety of Ó Ciosáin’s argument, and

largely reiterates the traditional nationalist view (as found in Corkery) that the loss of the Irish language set Irish culture irredeemably adrift. Welch's approach imagines nineteenth-century Ireland as a fallen place, lacking the coherence imposed by a Gaelic social and cultural order which had allegedly found expression through the Irish language. The loss of this system of representation is seen to have caused a literary crisis, which Welch describes ultimately in terms that sound extraordinarily romantic and Yeatsian: 'This is the world of absence that gives us so much vapid verse in the nineteenth century . . . Ireland had no language, no established way of life, no set of representations: it was a mood, a cloudy intimation, a dream.'²³

The work discussed so far has generally viewed the nineteenth century in relation to the development of nationalism, or nationalisms. However, the work of two major literary historians has offered an alternative perspective: that of Protestant and unionist culture. W. J. Mc Cormack's ambitious and somewhat eccentric *From Burke to Beckett*, a reworking of his *Ascendancy and Tradition* book, appeared in 1994. Three of its chapters deal in some detail with the nineteenth century: 'Ascendancy and cabal 1800–1840', 'Mid-century perspectives' and 'Tribulations of the intelligentsia'. In writing 'literary history', which he distinguishes from 'critical appreciation', Mc Cormack continually moves among different forms of textuality, including canonical literature, historiography, and political and evangelical pamphlets, in an interdisciplinary spirit we have already noted in Leerssen and Eagleton. His particular attention is upon the nature and meaning of Protestant 'Ascendancy' in Irish culture, and he effectively argues that the notion of Ascendancy as an exclusivist social group (or cabal or coterie) only emerges after the Famine. This provides him with a way of reassessing those earlier Protestant writers who do not fit this character, and also allows him to connect later Ascendancy culture to the practices of literary modernism. Through his reading of Le Fanu and Lever, Mc Cormack also provides a provocative challenge to the Yeatsian view of the nineteenth century: 'The mid-nineteenth century is not a degeneration of romanticism as much as it is the early manifestation of modernist anxieties. And Ireland is less a backward and marginal culture than it is a central if repressed area of British modernism.'²⁴ In an interesting way this parallels arguments that have been made by Deane, Kiberd, Lloyd and Gibbons in recent years concerning the anomalously 'modernist' character of much Irish writing in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – a feature usually explained by reference to Ireland's colonial condition. Mc Cormack's often surprising paths through the culture of the Ascendancy give a strong flavour of the nineteenth century from the inside. To encounter, as one does in Mc Cormack's work, not one but two W. B. Yeatses (grandfather and grandson), and not one but two John Mitchels (father and son) is no mere gimmick; it is a striking reminder that individual creativity never exists in a vacuum, and that

historical context comprises personal and familial forces in addition to the more impersonal forces of economics and ideology.

Norman Vance's *Irish Literature: A Social History* (1990) is the second major work to deal explicitly with Protestant culture and writing in the nineteenth century. In his wide-ranging study Vance deals with three nineteenth-century writers: Thomas Moore, William Carleton and Thomas D'Arcy McGee. Vance make his agenda clear. He opens the book by praising the recent revisionism in Irish historiography, and in the same spirit seeks to recover figures whose work has been either buried or manipulated by what he calls the selectivity of 'extreme' and 'moderate' versions of nationalism. Thus Thomas Moore is invoked in order to be set beside the neglected radical Presbyterian William Drennan. The latter's rationalist, sceptical, progressive vision, Vance argues, was unacceptable to a nineteenth-century nationalist canon based on romantic melancholy, and therefore disappeared. Thomas Moore's work, on the other hand, though it actually contains much of the same strain of European enlightenment thought to be found in Drennan, has been erroneously read by nationalism only for its dreamy elegiac character. Carleton and D'Arcy McGee are read as later victims of the confused and conflicted Irish condition, the more progressive aspects of whose writing could never be properly sustained: they both 'drew strength from, reinforced and [were] intellectually hampered by an atavistic sense of tradition'.²⁵ Although the retrieval and re-reading of these figures is valuable, it could be argued that Vance's own method depends upon the very discriminations that he wishes to see transcended; his continually implied opposition between nationalist 'atavism' and liberal pluralism, for example, may itself be read as a reductive binarism in need of deconstruction.

In terms of opening up the canon, and providing methodological challenges, the issue of gender in relation to nineteenth-century Irish writing has proved a highly productive focal point for recent criticism. This has taken two main forms: one is the recovery or reassessment of women writers; a second is the investigation of the ideologies or representations of sexuality, femininity and, to a lesser extent, masculinity, in nineteenth-century literature. Several works stand out. The first is the volume of essays entitled *Gender Perspectives in Nineteenth-Century Ireland*, edited by Margaret Kelleher and James H. Murphy (1997). Siobhán Kilfeather's essay 'Sex and sensation in the nineteenth-century novel' has a wider remit than the other literature essays, and offers (like Lloyd's essay discussed above) optimistic understanding of the supposed 'failure' of realism in Irish fiction. For Kilfeather, what is construed by critics like Eagleton and his predecessors as 'failed realism' may be precisely the source of these novels' potential for critique. The affectivity of the representation of 'sensation' and 'sex' in nineteenth-century fiction may, she argues, have served as a mode of resistance to the

intrusion of bourgeois and colonial law into the space of public sexuality. In Kilfeather's words,

Nineteenth-century novels have as much trouble representing bodies and sexuality as in representing famine, dispossession and emigration. This is not because sex is simply an unspeakable subject in nineteenth-century Ireland, but because Irish writers reject the domestication of sexuality in ways that disrupt and depose the conventions of realist fiction.²⁶

Other essays in the same volume illustrate further varieties of gender-based criticism with a mixture of textual analysis and historical work. It is significant that Maria Edgeworth's work is the focus of three of the essays in the volume, a fact that confirms her status as one of the most interesting Irish novelists for contemporary critics, as evidenced by recent work elsewhere by Claire Connolly, Cliona Ó Gallchoir and others.²⁷ In *Gender Perspectives*, there are also essays on women's education, the role of women writers in nationalism, and the historiographical project of recovering neglected figures like Rosa Mulholland (a mainstay of the vastly influential *Irish Monthly*), and the 500 women writers identified by Anne Colman (many of whom are given bio-bibliographical treatments in her *Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Irish Women Poets* [1996]).

Other contributions to the analysis of gender in the 1990s include this author's discussion of gender discourse in early nineteenth-century Irish nationalism,²⁸ and the more extended treatment of the same issue in C. L. Innes's *Woman and Nation in Irish Literature and Society 1880–1930* (1993). These studies show how images of femininity and masculinity functioned in nationalist writing (usually in forms that replicated the bourgeois doctrine of 'separate spheres'). Innes's work also describes the contributions to nationalism by figures like the Parnell sisters and Lady Gregory. Further biographical accounts of such women include helpful articles by Jan Cannavan and Brigitte Anton, and a full-scale biography of Jane Elgee, Lady Wilde (the Young Ireland poet 'Speranza') by Joy Melville.²⁹ Speranza's significance for Irish literature and nationalism is spelled out further in an important essay by Marjorie Howes.³⁰ Margaret Kelleher's *The Feminization of Famine* (1997) is a strikingly original study that demonstrates the centrality of the feminine in representations of famine in both Irish and Bengal literature. For the nineteenth-century scholar, Kelleher gives valuable accounts of Carleton's and Trollope's representations of the Famine, then examines a number of famine accounts written by women, concluding that while certain issues are foregrounded by some women – such as the subject of philanthropy (in which many women were engaged) – in general women writers 'share many of the fears and dilemmas expressed by their male contemporaries'.³¹

Volumes 4 and 5 of the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (2002) provide a rich resource for the study of gender in nineteenth-century Ireland. The volumes are organised in categories that cut across traditional generic boundaries such as 'literature' and 'historiography', and instead invite a different kind of reading that makes one aware of the inescapable historicity of texts, just as it forces one to be aware of the inescapable textuality of history. Volume 4's thematic headings include titles as diverse as 'Hymns and Hymn-Writers 1850–1930', 'Sexual expression and genre 1801–1917', 'Infanticide in nineteenth-century Ireland' and 'Writing for children 1791–1979'. Such categories enable the recovery of many literary texts (such as hymns or children's literature) that clearly played a major role in the everyday lives of nineteenth-century women and men, but have never been allotted a place in mainstream Literary Studies. Other acts of recovery include a section on oral traditions, and in volume 5 of the anthology the works of some thirty nineteenth-century women writers are reprinted. The nineteenth-century specialist will find fascinating and useful material throughout the anthology, including a valuable archive of nineteenth-century discourses on sexuality, crime, philanthropy, education, labour and so on.

Not surprisingly, a major preoccupation of Irish literary criticism in the 1990s was the Great Famine. Margaret Kelleher provided a foundational survey of literary representation of the Famine in her essay 'Irish Famine in literature', one of the RTÉ Thomas Davis lectures (1995). Chris Morash's monograph, *Writing the Irish Famine* (1995), provided a more comprehensive survey, and valuably drew attention to the methodological issues raised by the material, arguing that an analysis of the literature of the Famine makes one aware how much the meaning of the object of representation cannot be easily separated from the mode of representation itself. The overviews discussed above by Deane and Eagleton also contained discussion of the meaning and representation of the Famine, as did an interdisciplinary volume of essays edited by Chris Morash and Richard Hayes, *Fearful Realities* (1996) which contains several essays on the representation of the Famine in nineteenth-century writings by John Mitchel, Asenath Nicholson, John de Jean Frazer and *The Nation* newspaper.

A quick glance through the invaluable IASIL (International Association for the Study of Irish Literatures) bibliographies published annually in the *Irish University Review* gives an idea of the range of canonical authors whose work has been revisited in the past decade. Among novelists, Maria Edgeworth, Sydney Owenson/Lady Morgan, Sheridan Le Fanu and Bram Stoker figure most frequently. The work of the first two, poised in interesting ways between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and between enlightenment and romantic sensibilities – has been newly assessed in the light of feminist as well as other politicised perspectives, often with special attention to their dialogic

and multi-valenced forms. Sheridan Le Fanu and Bram Stoker have also become newly interesting because of the recent tendency to read the Irish Gothic as a register of crisis in Ascendancy culture. The Irish Gothic also offers possibilities for feminist readings of Victorian Irish sexuality. Mid-century novelists like the Banims, Carleton, Lover and Lever have received less attention, though a recent collection of essays on Lever suggests that his work may be subject to increasing scrutiny in the future.³² The work of later novelists has been largely subsumed into larger critical studies and overviews, though James H. Murphy's valuable study of Catholic fiction fills a genuine gap in our knowledge of the reading and writing of fiction in the later part of the century.³³ An important exception is the canonical figure of George Moore who has been subject to a highly impressive biography by Adrian Frazier that illuminates a great deal of Moore's nineteenth-century background.³⁴

Among poets, Thomas Moore has become a new figure of interest, a transitional figure whose work is not only important for its content, but also for the effects it produced. The past decade has also discovered Moore as a prose writer, with *Memoirs of Captain Rock* (1824) in particular serving as an important resource to critics like Luke Gibbons and Terry Eagleton. One of the most interesting scholarly publications during the 1990s was James Flannery's book and CD version of Moore's *Melodies* which at least partly overcomes one of the most obvious limitations to our contemporary encounter with nineteenth-century verse – the fact that we now read rather than *hear* the songs in the way that much of the nineteenth century did.³⁵ Similar multimedia projects would in fact make a major contribution to our understanding by enabling critics to assess the importance of music and performativity in a very great deal of the nineteenth-century poetic tradition.

Other poets who have been subject to recent attention are James Clarence Mangan, whose work is at last available in a comprehensive collected edition edited by the late Augustine Martin and others, and in a selected edition by the author. Ellen Shannon-Mangan has also published a useful biography of the poet, and Jacques Chuto a remarkable bibliography of the poet's vast output.³⁶ Samuel Ferguson's achievement too has been re-examined in a major monograph by Peter Denman, and as part of a study of Victorian epic poetry by Colin Graham.³⁷ The latter work is a valuable reminder of the wider, cross-channel context for the work of so many Irish writers in the nineteenth century: not simply in terms of markets and publishers but also in terms of shared ideological projects, both at a pro-imperial level, as with Ferguson, and at a more subversive level, as with radical popular verse. The figure of W. B. Yeats still looms over the poetic achievement of the nineteenth century, and the 1990s saw the publication of more indispensable volumes of the OUP *Collected Letters*, as well as two biographies (Roy Foster's and Terence Brown's), all of which offer exciting new resources for thinking of

Yeats as a nineteenth-century poet.³⁸ Oscar Wilde too has now been firmly incorporated into nineteenth-century Irish literary history. As recently as 1982, Roger McHugh and Maurice Harmon could uncontroversially state that 'The plays of Oscar Wilde . . . properly belong to English theatrical history'³⁹ – a position no longer secure in the wake of the arguments made in the 1990s by Kiberd, Eagleton and others.

Along with this critical work on nineteenth-century authors and issues have come welcome bibliographical and publishing developments, which promise to assist scholars of the future. The initial three volumes of the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* which appeared at the beginning of the decade, were criticised for neglecting women writers and for omitting writings that might problematise its supposedly nationalist bias. Even so, the anthology does provide students of the nineteenth century with a vast array of texts, many not reprinted since the nineteenth century itself. Seamus Deane's selection of nineteenth-century English-language poems and songs, and writings on the Famine, is perhaps too brief to satisfy the specialist but remains a useful introduction. His category of 'Political writings and speeches 1850–1918' attempts to demonstrate the often quite direct link between literature and politics by unexpectedly including extracts from Boucicault's *Arrah-na-Pogue* and Kickham's *Knocknagow*. A further, burgeoning bibliographical resource has been the World Wide Web: electronic archives such as those provided by the CELT project at UCC and the EIRdata project associated with the Princess Grace Library contain both texts and information about texts and authors.⁴⁰ One of the most astonishing internet resources is the Bodleian Library's Broadside Ballads Website, which has made thousands of photographically reproduced and fully searchable nineteenth-century ballads available freely on the web, linked to playable music files and annotations.⁴¹



What is to be done next? From a theoretical point of view, 'postcolonial' theories are likely to continue to shape the study of Irish literature in the nineteenth century. The complex meanings of colonialism and imperialism within an Irish cultural frame have not by any means been sufficiently explored. So, too, the application of feminist insights to Irish writing and culture needs to be extended, in order, for instance, to examine the construction and ideologies of 'masculinity' as well as 'femininity' during the century. Even the definition of the 'nineteenth century' is likely to be revised, a process already begun by critics like Leerssen and Gibbons, who have challenged the rigid distinction between eighteenth and nineteenth-century cultures. And just as critical attention has begun to focus on the distinctive meanings of 'Protestant culture', critical work needs to be done on delineating and

understanding the nature of 'Catholic' culture in the period 1798 to 1900. This is a twofold task, demanding better understanding of the literate middle-class culture of the later century, and a deeper investigation of popular culture right through the century. This would include examining not just 'literary texts' but broadsheets, chapbooks, devotional reading and newspapers. Gary Owens has valuably shown how even the rituals and symbols of O'Connell's monster meetings can be read as popular 'texts'.⁴² The signifying practices of popular periodicals – the chief means of literary transmission for most of the Irish nineteenth century – is in fact a vast area demanding new research. Inroads have begun to be made by recent work on the *Dublin University Magazine*, and the Irish elements of *Illustrated London News*. But publications like Cox's *Irish Magazine*, the numerous penny journals, *Duffy's Irish Catholic Magazine*, *The Nation* and the *Irish Monthly* need to be explored in more detail.⁴³ Pre-Revival dramatic practices largely remain hidden to critics and students, having been for so long overshadowed by the monumental presence of the Irish Literary Theatre.

Even within the more conventional parameters of 'literature', an expanding canon will involve paying new attention to writers whose work may look more intriguing to contemporary critical preoccupations than it has to critics of the past. Emily Lawless, Dion Boucicault, Charles Kickham, Charles Maturin and Aubrey de Vere are all examples (by no means exhaustive) of figures who are much more interesting than the scarcity of criticism would suggest.

The recent work sketched out here has provided new answers to the question: why study the nineteenth century? In the past, that question might have been formulated as follows: why would one want to study the nineteenth century, given its apparent under-achievement, and given the obvious richness of the writing that succeeded it? The scholarship of recent years has shown that to be a misguided question. Thanks to the efforts of the scholars and critics described above, and building upon the pioneering work of earlier decades by critics like Tom Dunne, James Cahalan, Robert Tracy, John Wilson Foster and Terence Brown, the literature and literary culture of the Irish nineteenth century has begun to look like a fascinating and essential field for any understanding of Ireland's difficult and remarkable cultural history.