

Seán Crosson and Werner Huber (eds.)

TOWARDS 2016:  
1916 AND IRISH LITERATURE, CULTURE & SOCIETY

# Irish Studies in Europe

Volume

6

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Galway/Vienna  
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Seán Crosson  
Werner Huber

*We are grateful for support from the Trauma and Irish Culture Project at the  
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# 1916 AND IRISH LITERATURE, CULTURE & SOCIETY: AN INTRODUCTION

Seán Crosson

*Historians in tanks. Historians with contradictory State birth certs. Relatives in conflict. Taoisigh at loggerheads. Royals invited then uninvited. Poets aflame. The prospect of Proclamation as junk mail. And it is only 2015. Were he here to witness it, Flann O'Brien would have a field day.*

– Diarmaid Ferriter, *Irish Times* 27 Feb 2015.

1916 was an important year in the development of modern Ireland. However, as historian Diarmaid Ferriter's remarks above suggest, as we approach the centenary, events during that year, in particular the Republican Easter Rising, continue to provoke contrasting and often strongly contested perspectives. The continuing resonance of the Rising to contemporary Ireland was evident in the now much quoted editorial of *The Irish Times* (18 Nov 2010) the day after it was announced Ireland was to receive a financial bailout from the EU and IMF. "Was it for this?" the editorial asked, "the men of 1916 died," thus also highlighting the gendering of the commemoration of that event. However, the Rising was but one of a range of significant events in 1916. Beyond the political sphere, 1916 marked the publication of James Joyce's first novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and also saw the foundation of Ireland's first indigenous film production company, The Film Company of Ireland, whose co-founder James Mark Sullivan was arrested after the Rising and charged with complicity. 1916 was also the year in which Ireland was aligned to Greenwich Mean Time for the first time, supplanting Dublin Mean Time, bringing the island temporally closer to the rest of the United Kingdom in the same year that would mark an important point in the changing political relationship between the UK and Ireland.

As the varied subjects of our contributions indicate, this collection is cognisant of the multiple perspectives and events that are associated with 1916 in Ireland and their continuing relevance to Irish literature, culture and society. The collection begins by reflecting on the immediate aftermath of the Rising and the legacy of one of its leaders – James Connolly – before moving to consider a range of cultural forms and societal issues, including theatre, traditional music, poetry, Joyce, greyhound sports, graphic novels, contemporary fiction, documentary, language, political representation, and the Irish economy. The multidisciplinary range evident throughout this collection reflects not just the relevance of 1916 to a broad range of disciplines but also the evolution of Irish Studies itself as a focus of academic enquiry. Facilitated through organisations such as the European Federations of Associations and Centres of Irish Studies (EFACIS), which hosted the conference at which initial versions of the contributions here were first presented, Irish Studies today has expanded well beyond its

initial home in historical and literary studies to encompass a varied and expanding range of disciplines, many of which are represented in this collection.

Our volume begins with Nils Beese's chapter which considers the complex and sometimes challenging figure of James Connolly, particularly for those who have attempted to incorporate him within nationalist-conservative readings of Irish history. For Beese the failure of poet, dramatist, and Nobel laureate William Butler Yeats and others to find an appropriate position for Connolly within their nationalist configurations "arises from Connolly's explosion of conventional national and cultural categories." Connolly, in Beese's analysis, was centrally a transnational writer who pioneered a "politics of cultural alternatives," a politics informed by his experiences in the Edinburgh and Dublin slums. While Connolly's execution denied Irish Labour of one of its most articulate intellectuals, Michael C. Connolly nonetheless views the Labour Movement in his contribution as continuing to play a crucial role in Irish affairs in the immediate aftermath of the 1916 Rising. Indeed, for Connolly the movement was prominent in all of the major issues of the time "strongly promoting the programmes and agendas set by its membership in annual meetings and special conferences."

The 1916 Rising has been described by Declan Kiberd as one of the "most theatrical insurrections in the history of western Europe"<sup>1</sup> and certainly the events of that week and some of the actions of leaders of the Rising would lend credence to such an assertion. Patrick Pearse famously wore an ancient sword during the entirety of the Rising and eventually insisted on its formal handing over during his surrender to the leader of the British forces, General Lowe. For Yeats, a play may well have inspired some of those who took part in the Rising itself; as he asked some years later, "Did that play of mine send out / Certain men the English shot?" The play Yeats refers to is *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, the first performance of which on 2 April 1902 was produced by the Irish Literary Theatre, founded by Yeats and his long-time patron and collaborator Lady Gregory and a precursor to Ireland's National Theatre, the Abbey. The relationship between Irish culture, nationalism, and rebellion and the emergence of the Abbey is examined in this volume by Hannah Wood, who contends that the theatre was not only "national," in its origins but "nationalist," growing out of resistance to Britain and engaged in a project of "nation-building." For Wood, in highlighting distinctive features of Irish culture in the plays it hosted, "the Abbey and its founders created a defined sense of singular Irish identity that they thought was previously absent." In this focus, Wood finds parallels between the concerns and hopes of the founders of the Abbey and the leaders of the 1916 Rising, "except with performance in the place of violence."

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1 "The Easter Rebellion: Poetry or Drama?" (2006). *The 1916 Rising: Then and Now*. Papers from a conference held at Trinity College Dublin, 21-22 April 2006, organised by The Ireland Institute and Dublin University History Society. <[http://www.theirelandinstitute.com/institute/p01-kiberd\\_drama\\_page.html](http://www.theirelandinstitute.com/institute/p01-kiberd_drama_page.html)> (10 Feb 2015).

Among the signatories of the 1916 Proclamation was the notable uilleann piper Éamonn Ceannt, and the same year also saw the death of a further influential figure in Irish traditional music, Donegal piper Tarlach Mac Suibhne. 1916 also marked the first recordings of Irish traditional music in the United States, a development that would have far-reaching consequences for the evolution of regional styles in Ireland, particularly through the influence of recordings of Sligo-born fiddler Michael Coleman. Verena Commins' chapter charts the increasing prevalence since the 1970s of monuments to named Irish traditional musicians, representing, she contends, "the development of new spatial coordinates of the identity of Irish traditional music." Furthermore, through this process local communities, Commins argues, have reclaimed local Irish traditional music narratives while simultaneously presenting "a new basis on which interpretations of Irish culture and heritage can be both proclaimed and understood."

For many Unionists in Ireland, 1916 is remembered principally as the year in which the Battle of the Somme took place, a World War I military encounter which continues to hold an important place in constructions of Unionist identity. Much as with the nationalist remembering of the 1916 Rising, the Battle of the Somme has also been frequently rendered as an exclusively Unionist experience. However, in Terry Phillips' analysis of a collection of poetry from one of the most prominent Northern Ireland politicians from the first half of the twentieth century, Harry Midgley, Phillips identifies a challenge to the Unionist appropriation of memory and a search for "a more inclusive form of remembering." While Midgley's only published collection of poetry, *Thoughts from Flanders* (1924), offers a powerful testimony of his experiences during World War I on the Western Front, it also reveals, Phillips argues, a fervent hope in the possibility of a shared collaborative future in creating a just society.

As noted already, 1916 was also the year in which James Joyce published his first novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and M. Teresa Caneda Cabrera provides in her chapter an analysis of the impact of this work in post-revolutionary Cuba, including the significant and distinctly political decisions taken in its translation into Spanish by Cuban writer Edmundo Desnoes. Drawing on the conceptual framework of Atlantic studies, Caneda Cabrera contends that Desnoes's 1964 translation incorporates a revolutionary discourse which foregrounds the notion that both nations share forms of resistance and "encourages readers to discover a number of relevant analogies between the Cuba of the 1960s and the Ireland that witnessed the rebellion of 1916."

A cultural form possibly less associated with 1916 is greyhound coursing. However, that year also marked a significant moment in the 'nationalising' of this sport in Ireland when the Irish Coursing Club (ICC) was established. In his analysis of greyhound sports in the work of Bryan MacMahon, Laurent Daniel reflects on the similar path the administration of greyhound coursing took in Ireland to that of the Gaelic Athletic Association and on the role of greyhound coursing "in shaping a very similar aspect of Irish identity" among its followers. Daniel views the representation of cours-

ing in MacMahon's work as playing a comparable role, "travelling some way towards reconciling sport with literature as well as politics" while also bearing witness, as this representation evolved, to "the changing nature of Irish politics and identity" over the twentieth century.

Daniel's work marks the movement of this collection to reflections on the relevance of 1916 to a range of contemporary cultural forms and indeed contemporary Irish society as a whole. Valérie Morisson examines two recent graphic novel renderings of the 1916 Rising and the War of Independence, *Blood Upon the Rose, Easter 1916, The Rebellion That Set Ireland Free* (2009) and its sequel, *At War With the Empire, Ireland's Fight for Independence* (2012), both written and drawn by Gerry Hunt. For Morisson these graphic portrayals articulate the social memory of Irish history if tinged with distinctively nationalist undertones. The rendering through sequential art of these events reflects the growing prominence and influence of this mode in Irish as well as global popular culture, evident for instance in the popularity of comic-book-themed films in recent years. Indeed, Morisson views Hunt's representations of the Rising and War of Independence as indebted to film, in particular the style of gangster movies, in their privileging of violence over thorough analysis.

Contemporary Irish fiction has also engaged with the aftermath of 1916, and Claudia Luppino's contribution here considers two works in which echoes of the Rising continue to reverberate, John McGahern's *Amongst Women* (1990) and Colm Tóibín's *The Heather Blazing* (1992). Luppino examines in particular the ways in which Ireland's struggle for freedom from Britain affected the lives of both the participants and their children as evident in these novels, drawing on Paul Ricœur's work on memory and forgetting in her analysis. A further Irish novelist for whom the past has been a recurring concern is Neil Jordan (an interview with whom concludes this collection), most obviously in his 1980 novel *The Past*, the focus of Elena Cotta Ramusino's chapter. Cotta Ramusino views Jordan's novel as one marked by the reconstruction of the past in a process where personal history is intertwined with the history of the nation with "enlistment, Home Rule, independence, the Easter Rising, the Anglo-Irish War and the Civil War, De Valera and the Free Staters" all prominent concerns.

Cotta Ramusino's contribution begins with an epigraph from Sebastian Barry's *The Secret Scripture*, and Barry's work is the central focus of Donatella Abbate Badin's contribution. Abbate Badin notes the continuing "obsession" among many contemporary Irish writers with history and the national myth concerning 1916, though she finds Barry's work distinguished by "a backward look cast in the direction of the forgotten (or suppressed) aspects of past history that still impinge on the present." This process, Abbate Badin further contends, is informed by Barry's own family history and "the half-forgotten, distorted or misunderstood stories" that allow him to reconstruct history attentive to "individual events and to the common man."

A further contemporary Irish writer for whom legacies of the past are important is poet Tom Paulin, the subject of Joanna Kruczkowska's chapter. Though Paulin grew up

within the Ulster Protestant community, he has been critical of what he has described as the “narrow-mindedness” of Protestant Unionism and has looked to the Protestant tradition associated with the 1798 Rising (an event alluded to in the 1916 Proclamation) for inspiration in his poetry. Kruczkowska in her essay confronts a number of issues preoccupying not just Paulin but Irish writers over the past century, including “identity, struggle, home, language, tradition, politics, myth,” and identifies, in Paulin’s writing, an evolution of themes oscillating between subversion and sabotage. While Paulin’s poetry involves a search for self-definition, it has simultaneously, Kruczkowska contends, become a search for the definition of the Irish nation.

Defining the Irish nation was an important concern of the leaders of the 1916 Rising. Leading nationalists, such as Patrick Pearse, looked in particular to the Irish-speaking communities in the West of Ireland for the values an independent Ireland might be founded upon. In the aftermath of the Rising and the eventual emergence of an independent Irish State, the Irish language and Gaelic culture continued to be a proclaimed concern of Irish nationalists. However, references to the Irish language and Gaelic culture in nationalist rhetoric offered limited insight into the dynamic and sophisticated communities where the Irish language continued to be spoken. Eilís Ní Dhúill examines the contemporary rendering through documentary of an Irish-speaking community against this historical background. In her analysis of the testimonies of members of the Great Blasket Island community as presented in the documentary *Deireadh an Áil (The Last of the Blasket People)* (1996), Ní Dhúill argues for a new interpretation of the tradition of storytelling as a cultural practice, an interpretation that offers insight into the lived experience of the storytellers and their understanding of that experience.

In the final two contributions to this collection, we turn to analyses of contemporary Ireland against the backdrop of stated concerns – as evident in the 1916 Proclamation – of the leaders of the Easter Rising. One of the distinctive features of the Proclamation is its commitment to equal rights for “every Irishman and *Irishwoman*” (my emphasis), an aspiration towards gender equality that was unusual, and fiercely contested, in early-twentieth-century Europe. While this aspiration was reflected in the prominent role women played throughout the independence struggle, social and political attitudes would affectively marginalize women from the political sphere in post-independent Ireland. White, Mariani, Buckley, and McGing in their co-authored chapter examine the role women have played in political life in Ireland in what continues to be a male-dominated milieu. Through an analysis of each stage in the process of the development and election of candidates, they assess how the introduction of recent gender quota legislation might potentially increase the opportunity for women to emerge as viable candidates in future elections.

The Proclamation also placed a considerable emphasis on the attainment of Irish ‘sovereignty,’ declaring “the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland” as “sovereign and indefeasible,” recalling how in “every generation the Irish people

have asserted their right to national freedom and sovereignty,” and proclaiming “the Irish Republic as a Sovereign Independent State.” In more recent political statements, including some by Taoiseach Enda Kenny, sovereignty continues to be a recurring concern; Kenny remarked in 2011 that he wanted “to be a Taoiseach who retrieves Ireland’s economic sovereignty.” However, in economist Alan Ahearne’s contribution to this collection, he questions the relevance of ‘sovereignty’ to contemporary Ireland, particularly in a small open economy that uses the euro as its currency. Ahearne’s chapter also includes an analysis of the background to the collapse of the Irish economy in the late 2000s, highlighting the important lessons that may be learned from this experience.

This collection closes with an interview with Irish film director and novelist Neil Jordan, which was conducted by novelist Patrick McCabe at the EFACIS 2013 conference. Jordan has been a major figure in Irish and international filmmaking and literature since the early 1980s and was responsible for one of the best known re-enactments of the events of the 1916 Rising in the opening scenes of his 1996 biopic *Michael Collins*. As he reveals in his interview, his perspective on 1916 is also very much informed by the Rising’s subsequent representation, particularly in the work of Yeats and Sean O’Casey. As well as providing an overview of Jordan’s views on 1916 and its aftermath, the interview also offers important insights into the director’s life, work, and creative process.

Ireland is a much changed island since Patrick Pearse first publically read the Proclamation of the Republic in front of the GPO on Easter Monday morning 1916. Irish culture and society have evolved in ways that would likely have been unimaginable to the leaders of the Rising or indeed to those involved with other significant events in that year, including the Battle of the Somme. Nonetheless, as the contributions to this collection reveal, 1916 continues to be a particularly resonant year for Irish literature, culture and society. As we approach the centenary, we hope this collection will contribute in some small way to the ongoing debates that year continues to provoke, whether between historians, Taoisigh, poets, or others.