Ondřej Pilný, Radvan Markus, Daniela Theinová, James Little (eds.)

IRELAND: INTERFACES AND DIALOGUES

Irish Studies in Europe

Volume

11

Irish Studies in Europe is a series of peer-reviewed publications in Irish Studies.

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WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier

Ireland: Interfaces and Dialogues /
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Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2022
(Irish Studies in Europe; vol. 11)
ISBN 978-3-86821-968-5

Cover design: Brigitta Disseldorf

Further information on the European Federation of Associations and Centres of Irish Studies (EFACIS) is available at http://www.efacis.eu/.

ISBN 978-3-86821-968-5

WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier
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IRISH STUDIES IN EUROPE

Irish Studies in Europe is a series of peer-reviewed academic publications in Irish Studies. The series aims to publish new research from within the humanities and social sciences on all aspects of the history, society and culture of Ireland, Northern Ireland, and the Irish diaspora. The programme of the series is a deliberate reflection of the objectives of the *European Federation of Associations and Centres of Irish Studies (EFACIS)*, under whose aegis it is published.

The "European" dimension suggested by the series' title is an indication of a prioritized, but by no means exclusive, concentration on European perspectives on Irish Studies. With such an "etic" approach the publications in this series contribute to the progress of Irish Studies by providing a special viewpoint on Irish history, society, literature and culture. The series also documents the vitality and wide variety of European traditions of Irish Studies as an inter-, trans- and multi-disciplinary field of research.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The editors would like to sincerely thank all contributors for submitting their work to the present volume, responding to all queries promptly, and meeting the tight deadlines. A debt of gratitude is owed to the numerous peer reviewers for sharing their expertise and providing the authors with invaluable suggestions, and undertaking the reviews generously at short notice. We are grateful to the series editors, Katharina Rennhak, Hedwig Schwall, and Seán Crosson, for their assistance with bringing this volume to completion, Erwin Otto of WVT for taking care of its publication, and Klára Hutková and Nathalie Lamprecht for transcribing the recordings of the plenary sessions. Thanks go to all participants and guest writers and artists at the EFACIS 2021 conference, who made it such a lively and stimulating event, despite the constraints of the online-only environment. Special gratitude is reserved for our colleagues Clare Wallace and Justin Quinn for co-organizing, and to our wonderful and ever-efficient conference team: Marie Gemrichová, Katy Trompak, Nathalie Lamprecht, and Klára Hutková. Appreciation is due to many other individuals who have helped in various ways with the conference and/or the production of this book, particularly Eleanor Melinn, Bětka Bajgartová, Nessa Cronin, Crónán Ó Doibhlin, Joachim Fischer, Martin Procházka, Kristína Lehutová, Kristína Mizeráková, Kateřina Svatoňová, and Raphaël Ingelbien. Last but certainly not least, heartfelt gratitude is extended to Ambassador Cliona Manahan and her team at the Embassy of Ireland, Prague, whose relentless support of things Irish in the Czech Republic, including EFACIS events, has been beyond exemplary.

This work was supported by the European Regional Development Fund project "Creativity and Adaptability as Conditions of the Success of Europe in an Interrelated World" (reg. no.: CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16_019/0000734) implemented at Charles University, Faculty of Arts. The project is carried out under the ERDF Call "Excellent Research" and its output is aimed at employees of research organizations and Ph.D. students.

The EFACIS 2021 conference and the publication of this book were supported by the Department of Foreign Affairs, Ireland from the ESP–Irish Studies Programme. The roundtable on Irish documentary cinema was hosted in partnership with the Irish Film Institute.

EUROPEAN UNION
European Structural and Investment Funds
Operational Programme Research,
Development and Education

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION,
YOUTH AND SPORTS

Government of Ireland
Emigrant Support Programme

INTRODUCTION

James Little

When, in March 2020, we chose the theme of "Interfaces and Dialogues" for the annual conference of the European Federation of Associations and Centres of Irish Studies (EFACIS), we had little expectation that our primary conference interface would be the computer screen, and that our dialogues would take place over Zoom. Over two years later, as we write the introduction to the collection arising out of that conference (which eventually took place, fully online, in September 2021), the concept of interface has undergone enormous change in our daily lives due to the Covid-19 pandemic, while the role of dialogue has become ever more important in a public sphere increasingly shaped by digital media platforms.[1]

It is in the context of such online platforms that our collection opens, as part of a section entitled "Transnational and Intercultural Interactions". Gavan Titley provides a "transnational reflection" on "the strange life of free speech" in contemporary society, with particular attention given to "the reproduction and contestation of forms of racism in Europe". Central to Titley's essay is an analysis of the incessant circulation of far-right ideas in an online media environment which is inherently unstable. In this context, Titley contends that "the mission of the university includes discriminating between ideas, and this involves closure, actively neglecting those which have been discredited or disproven". He concludes by analyzing the particularity of the Irish public sphere, where a "more sustained mobilization" of the transnational far-right "repertoire" remains a dangerous potential, but warning at the same time about the dangers of proceeding from specific case studies of free-speech controversies to abstract generalizations on "freedom of speech".

Moving from how Ireland functions within a global media interface to Irishness itself as "a favourable interface to open a dialogue about and with conflict zones", Marion Bourdeau's contribution analyzes Colum McCann's representation of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict in his novel *Apeirogon* (2020). The heart of Bourdeau's analysis is an ethical question about the comparison of conflicts in Ireland and the Middle East: "Is the novel facilitating or forcing intersubjectivity and transculturalism? Is it celebrating differences while underscoring points of connection or encouraging the erasure of cultural diversity by comparing different situations and concluding that they are the same?" She suggests that the ethics at work in McCann's writing are dependent on a balance of dialogues that unbalance his reader, and that his "aesthetic and ethical project revolves around connection".

1 Recordings of the roundtable discussions, poetry reading, and concert which formed part of the conference are available online on the website of the Centre for Irish Studies, Charles University; see <https://irish.ff.cuni.cz/en/2021/06/30/efacis-2021-conference-interfaces-and-dialogues/>.

For his part, Jochen Achilles treats a single performance text, J.M. Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* (1907), as an interface for intercultural interactions. Contending that "transnationalism and multiculturalism have come to replace the postcolonial paradigm" long seen as the dominant frame for Irish studies, Achilles views three adaptations of Synge's play as "expressions of changes in the cultural imaginary": Mustapha Matura's *The Playboy of the West Indies* (1984); Bisi Adigun and Roddy Doyle's co-authored version of *The Playboy* (2007); and an adaptation by Pan Pan Theatre and the Beijing Oriental Pioneer Theatre (2006). Drawing on Philomena Mullen's image for her lived experience of being "simultaneously Irish and not Irish", Achilles contends that such intercultural adaptations "open up opportunities for more and different experiments with postnational specificities".

As we approach the conclusions of Decades of Centenaries on both sides of the Irish border, focus naturally turns towards "Dialogues with the Past", the rubric for the second section of our collection. Vojtěch Halama sets state commemorative practices in the Republic of Ireland within an international context of "a disintegration of national metanarratives". Within this broader context, Halama homes in on 1966 and 2016, key dates for official commemoration of the 1916 Rising. Between these two commemorations, Halama argues, "the underlying message switched from promoting unity to embracing diversity". Drawing on a series of state archival records and public commemoration practices, Halama maps the specificities of state commemoration as the state changed role from "director" to "coordinator".

While Halama's focus is on official commemoration, Susan Curley Meyer examines a personal dialogue between two participants in the 1916 Rising, focusing on a brooch gifted by Winifred Carney to Grace Gifford-Plunkett. Curley Meyer contextualizes this exchange within the long history of brooch-wearing, as well as analyzing the material contexts in which the Carney-Gifford brooch was made and the symbolic resonances of its classical design. In doing so, she demonstrates "the advantages of adopting multidisciplinary methodologies when attempting to add to established historiographies which consider women, war, and national identity", thus treating disciplinary boundaries themselves as interfaces.

Also drawing on archival sources, Mary McAuliffe focuses on the intimidation of and violence towards women by the Irish Republican Army during the War of Independence. This included physical beatings, threats to their homes and families, and "bobbing" – the forced cropping of hair – on suspicion of having relationships with Royal Irish Constabulary members. McAuliffe claims that such attacks not only attempted to fix the assaulted women in places of social exclusion, but also acted as a reinforcement of the IRA's own image as protectors of their community. McAuliffe focuses on barrack servants, who were typically from the local community, and whose "low-paid, but steady and secure income" was rendered extremely precarious by such violent interventions. These stories "fit within the broader narratives of female victimization, coercion, and shaming during this revolutionary period".

As we know, discriminatory practices against women have by no means been limited to periods of revolution in Ireland, as demonstrated by the existence, island-wide, of mother and baby homes to confine unmarried mothers and their children, institutions which have recently come under sustained scrutiny (see *Final Report*; McCormick et al.). Rachel Andrews examines the social media discourse around a 2021 planning hearing for apartments on the site of one of the most notorious mother and baby homes, Bessborough, where the infant mortality rate reached 68%. Andrews analyzes the tweets of the Cork Survivors and Supporters Alliance (@Lost900Bessboro), who campaigned to block construction on the remains of 900 children. Like Titley, Andrews explores the affordances of the digital public sphere, contending that "digital spaces must now be considered among those that provide the conditions for survivors of the Irish carceral state to voice their responses to past injustices".

Michael Lydon's essay examines the line between official and popular remembrance, with an analysis of how Irish popular music has reinterpreted the 1916 Rising. Regarding Irish popular musicians as "authorizing agents" whose music can act as what Sara Cohen terms "authorised heritage discourse", Lydon zooms in on the RTÉ-produced concert *Centenary*, broadcast from the Bord Gáis Energy Theatre in 2016 to widespread acclaim. Lydon's critique of *Centenary* centres on the fact that "the popular musicians fail to reflect on the nationalist and socialist ideologies of the period being commemorated". He then pivots to two examples of "remembrance activism", focusing on the songs of Damien Dempsey in his 2016 album *No Force on Earth*, and their performance at the #Reclaim1916 concert, as well as the musically eclectic duo Zrazy (Carole Nelson and Maria Walsh), and their performance of the song "Women of '16" at Dublin's historically resonant General Post Office.

Anna Falkenau too focuses on musical memory, with a richly detailed examination of folk music revivals in Galway from 1961 to 1981. Drawing on a combination of first-person testimonies, contextualizing scholarship, and a focus on key individuals in the Galway music scene, Falkenau brings to life the many networks which constituted a complex web of traditional and folk music revivals, charting their local, national, and international "flows". She concludes by showing how this unique musical ecosystem gave rise to the formation of the globally successful band De Danann. If we needed reminding of how central music has been to Irish cultural practice, she cites Fred Johnston's memorable comment on Galway pub sessions of the 1970s: "if you didn't play music, there was no other choice, culturally".

Since the 1980s, Ireland has continued to build an international reputation as a remarkable cultural ecosystem, the precarity of which was brought to light during the Covid-19 pandemic. In this context, we would do well to listen to those on the front-line of cultural production. Two roundtable sessions at EFACIS 2021 gave us the opportunity to do just that. Seán Crosson chaired a roundtable on Irish documentary cinema with renowned film-makers Alan Gilsenan, Gillian Marsh, and Pat Collins. All three described a circuitous career path into their profession, without formal educa-

tion in documentary-making, which contrasts with the increased professionalization of the field today. Among the many other works of the three directors, Gilsenan and Collins spoke respectively about their recent documentaries *The Great Book of Ireland* (2020) and *Henry Glassie: Field Work* (2019), while Marsh gave insight into the making of her documentary *Tomorrow Is Saturday* (2020) on artist Seán Hillen (all three films having been screened in the virtual environment of EFACIS 2021), in which he defines his current goal as being to "save my skin" after decades of not being able to make a living from his extraordinary art.

"How can a person be creative when a person is afraid, when a person is anxious?", asked Maeve Stone during her and Lian Bell's plenary conversation on "Art-making, Activism, and Collaboration", chaired by Clare Wallace. Bell developed this point by commenting on the "struggle with self-confidence" she and many other artists have. These were remarkable and valuable comments to hear from two of Ireland's most innovative performance practitioners. As Katharina Rennhak remarked in the Q+A, this struggle with self-confidence is something shared in the academic sector, and this only stands to increase as all forms of cultural work become increasingly precarious. In spite of this grim overall picture, this conversation raised the possibility of common precarity being a source of solidarity, with organisations like EFACIS playing an important role in bringing together those inside and outside the academy.[2] Bell and Stone's conversation features details of their recent work, their common involvement in #WakingTheFeminists, as well as the connection of this movement to other recent activist campaigns.

The past is not only a foreign country; it can also be terrifying, as the contributions in our closing section, "Hauntings and Traumas", demonstrate. One of the scariest acts of the twentieth century was the US detonation of an atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Laoighseach Ní Choistealbha points to the lack of engagement with the event in Anglophone war poetry, and does important work in bringing our attention to Anthony Glavin's little-read "Living in Hiroshima", which she puts into conversation with Eoghan Ó Tuairisc's Irish-language poem on the Hiroshima bombing, "Aifreann na Marbh" (translated by Colbert Kearney as "Mass of the Dead"). Echoing questions raised in Bourdeau's essay about the ethics of transcultural comparisons, Ní Choistealbha's analysis hinges on the ethics of writing about a traumatic event which the author was not present to witness first-hand. In this context, she cites Ariel Dorfman's question: "how can I tell their story / if I was not there?" Ní Choistealbha examines Glavin's research into the bombing before writing the poem, while also pointing to the fact that it remains unfinished, with further manuscript material "un-explored and unpublished to date".

2 See the EFACIS Irish Itinerary Podcast, which was launched during the pandemic and features Irish authors and artists in conversation with Irish studies scholars: <https://www.efacis.eu/podcast>.

Also focusing on the "unexplored and unpublished", Radvan Markus's essay analyzes Máirtín Ó Cadhain's unpublished 1943 play *Typhus*, based on an outbreak of the disease in the author's native area of An Spidéal in November 1942. Drawing on Michel Foucault's work on the plague, and exploring the parallels between Ó Cadhain's text and contemporary government restrictions to prevent the spread of Covid-19, Markus details aspects of the carnivalesque in *Typhus*, paying close attention to variations in speech registers and suggesting a reconsideration of the periodization of the author's work in light of the play. Ó Cadhain's piece was turned down by the Abbey Theatre because, according to Abbey director Earnán de Blaghd (Ernest Blythe), it often happened that "one of the characters speaks for too long without other people interfering with them", and because it was "too short". Given the flourishing of plays structured around monologues in postwar theatre (see Wallace), this rejection was a bad misjudgement, which could be remedied by a full staging of the play.

Cultural ghosts of a different kind feature in Alessandra Boller's essay on forms of hegemonic masculinity in post-Celtic Tiger fiction. Boller takes Gerard Donovan's *Country of the Grand* (2008) and Donal Ryan's *The Spinning Heart* (2012) as her case studies, using Jacques Derrida's concept of "hauntology" to "analyse how Ryan and Donovan engage with the spectral presence of stereotypical legacies of Irish (gender) identities in the context of Ireland's recent socio-economic history", specifically the economic crash of 2008. Boller's focus on narrative voice brings to the fore the inability of male characters in these works to voice their fears, highlighting "the need to critically examine stereotypes and expectations that relate to hegemonic masculinity in a moment of disruption and shifting paradigms".

Our concluding contribution, by Jessica Bundschuh, focuses on listicle framing in Michelle Gallen's novel *Big Girl, Small Town* (2020), narrated by Majella O'Neill, a twenty-seven-year-old diagnosed with autism. As Bundschuh points out, for Umberto Eco, the "list is the origin of culture", making "infinity comprehensible". In this context, she argues that lists help Majella make sense of life in the (hypothetical) border town of Aghybogey, where the Troubles resonate through the interactions of its twenty-first-century citizens. Bundschuh consequently considers the novel's use of the drawbridge as a metaphor for a liminal subject who might "usher in change slowly and gingerly at the margins". Significantly, having considered the metaphorical appropriateness of drawbridges in cross-community relations – since they "could serve as bridges when the need arose" – Majella does not share her insight with others. What Bundschuh terms "a *tentative* bridge" can help us "learn how to co-inhabit sites of relationality", charting a possible path towards "a dynamic and *positive* liminality" in the context of post-Brexit disputes around the Irish border.

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Reviewing the institutional history of Irish studies, Ronan McDonald notes that the disputes between revisionist and postcolonial scholars at the end of the last century

"sucked oxygen away from vital areas and a more expansive vision of Irish Studies" (333). Be that as it may, such disputes also gave a binding force to the field, providing a magnetic pole around which scholars and their works positioned themselves. Our call for papers for EFACIS 2021 took a deliberately expansive approach, reflecting the aim of Charles University's KREAS Project to explore "contact zones with other cultures as a site of productive and mutually enriching dialogue", a call taken up in many of the contributions you will read here.[3] With area studies more broadly having undergone a "global turn" (see Reynolds), the international and European institutions in which Irish studies takes place are in need of examination and debate, not to mention further support. As McDonald points out, "Irish Studies has a national focus, but an inextricably international institutional ecology" (327). In the European context, EFACIS provides a key platform for such an "institutional ecology", which informs much of our work at the Centre for Irish Studies, Prague. Chiming with the Centre's aim to study "Irish culture in European and global contexts",[4] this volume, ranging across the fields of history, literary studies, music studies, theatre and performance studies, film studies, media studies, and the study of material culture, provides a snapshot of some of the most exciting emerging European research on Ireland.

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3 See "KREAS: Creativity and Adaptability as Conditions for the Success of Europe in an Interrelated World", <https://kreas.ff.cuni.cz/en/>.

4 For details, see "Centre for Irish Studies, Faculty of Arts, Charles University", <https://irish.ff.cuni.cz/en/>.