CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	Introduction: Daniel Corkery as postcolonial critic
Authors	Laird, Heather
Publication date	2012
Original Citation	Laird, H. (2012) 'Introduction: Daniel Corkery as postcolonial critic', Laird, H. (ed.) Daniel Corkery's cultural criticism: Selected writings. Cork: Cork University Press. pp. 1-14.
Type of publication	Book chapter
Rights	© Heather Laird 2012.
Download date	2026-11-09 02:07:41
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/7937

UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

00 CorkeryIntro 22/11/2011 13:57 Page 1

Introduction: Daniel Corkery as Postcolonial Critic

Daniel Corkery – writer, language activist, teacher and painter – was born in Cork in 1878 and died in the same city in 1964. He was educated at the Presentation Brothers, Cork, and at St Patrick's College of Education, Dublin. He worked as a primary school teacher in Cork, taught art for the local technical education committee and was Professor of English at University College Cork from 1931 to 1947. Corkery was a mentor to younger writers and artists; Frank O'Connor, Seán O'Faoláin and Seamus Murphy were amongst his most celebrated protégés.[1] He was an active member of the Gaelic League[2] and a prominent proponent of the Irish Ireland movement.[3] He was also involved in a number of local organisations, most notably the Cork Dramatic Society. In his later years, he served in the Seanad and on the Arts Council. He was a republican in politics and a close friend of Tomás MacCurtain and Terence MacSwiney, successive Lord Mayors of Cork who died in tragic circumstances during the War of Independence.[4] He was one of the foremost Irish cultural critics of the 1920s and 30s.

Corkery began his writing career at the turn of the twentieth century in the columns of D.P. Moran's polemical nationalist weekly, *The Leader*. An Irish-language enthusiast who was not a native speaker, he wrote primarily, though not exclusively, in the English language. His literary writings are comprised of four collections of short stories; a number of plays, including the Irish-language play, *An Doras Dúnta*; a novel and some poetry. His non-fiction writings, which are the focus of this publication, include two major critical studies, *The Hidden Ireland* (1924) and *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature* (1931); writings on the Irish language and on the Irish-language movement; newspaper articles on a wide range of cultural issues; and reviews of Irish-language and English-language literary works.

While the contemporary response to his critical writings was mixed, by the late 1990s Corkery had been firmly established in Irish scholarship, particularly amongst those who worked on English-language material, as, in Declan Kiberd's words, a 'whipping boy for all right-on pluralists'.[5] A 1969 article by the historian L.M. Cullen, now considered a foundational text in Irish revisionism, was fundamental in assigning that role to Corkery. In this article, 'The Hidden Ireland: Re-assessment of a Concept', Cullen argued that Corkery's *The Hidden Ireland* 'simplifies Irish history' and 'seems to impoverish Irish nationality and sense of identity, seeing it in the context of settlement and oppression and not in the rich, complex and varied stream of

00 CorkeryIntro 22/11/2011 13:57 Page 2

identity and racial consciousness heightened in the course of centuries of Anglo-Irish relations'.[6] In this and subsequent critiques of Corkery's critical writings, Corkery is depicted as the chief spokesman for a narrow, repressive and backward-looking Gaelic nationalism from which 'modern' Ireland is struggling to escape. In Volume III of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, for example, Corkery is described by Terence Brown as an 'able polemicist' for an Irish Ireland movement which 'insisted that the only authentic Irish identity was the rural Gaelic/Catholic one'. Corkery's influential critical writings, Brown states, 'gave intellectual sanction to an attitude that in its less refined form often expressed itself as a strident xenophobia or a bigoted social triumphalism'.[7] More sympathetic accounts of Daniel Corkery, such as Patrick Maume's critical biography of 1993 and Colbert Kearney's writings on Corkery's short stories, have, in the main, accepted this interpretation of Corkery's cultural criticism, arguing, however, that this was only one facet of a Daniel Corkery whose early writings and/or literary works reveal a more complex and contradictory figure than such an interpretation suggests.[8]

Irish-language scholarship has been more divided in its response to Corkery's cultural criticism. Breandán Ó Buachalla's 'Ó Corcora agus an Hidden Ireland' and Seán Ó Tuama's 'Dónall Ó Corcora', both published in a 1979 special edition of *Scríobh* in honour of Daniel Corkery, largely represent the opposing viewpoints held by Irish-language scholars on his writings and legacy. Corkery's *The Hidden Ireland* is referred to in both of these essays as a 'leabhar ann féin' [unique book],[9] but the scholars' understanding of the nature and significance of the book differs substantially. For Ó Tuama, *The Hidden Ireland*, written at a time when the Irish-language poems of Aodhagán Ó Rathaille and Brian Merriman were as strange to the Irish people as Chinese poetry, captured Corkery's elation at the discovery of an Irish-language poetry tradition and provided, for the first time, an appraisal of the poets and poetry that belonged to that tradition.[10] Ó Tuama concedes that the limited historical knowledge of the eighteenth century that Corkery had at his disposal distorted his understanding of the mindset of that period, but insists that *The Hidden Ireland* should not be dismissed on the basis of its historical inaccuracies as the book was never intended as a work of social or economic history.[11]

In Ó Buachalla's analysis, *The Hidden Ireland* fails to provide an objective and consistent analysis of the poetry it features and ignores generic differences.[12] Furthermore, the mode of production of the poetry is omitted and the poems treated as social documents.[13] Based on these 'documents', the history that Corkery provided in *The Hidden Ireland* is both inaccurate and incomplete. Ó Buachalla, who chides Corkery for failing to acknowledge the impact of the patronage system on the content of eighteenth-century Irish-language poetry,[14] draws attention, in the opening pages of his essay, to the uneven

00 CorkeryIntro 22/11/2011 13:57 Page 3

power relations, reminiscent of such a system, which existed between Corkery and his protégés. According to Ó Buachalla, it was these uneven power relations that the Irish-language poet Seán Ó Ríordáin was referring to when he mockingly described Corkery and those who gathered around him as 'an Máistir agus a dheisceabail' [the master and his disciples].[15]

Ó Ríordáin's view of Corkery was less resolute than is suggested by Ó Buachalla in 'Ó Corcora agus an Hidden Ireland'. In a 1977 RTÉ broadcast, Ó Ríordáin makes reference to Corkery's devotees, emphatically stating that he himself never belonged to their ranks. To be one of Corkery's disciples, Ó Ríordáin states, you would have to close your mind as his opinion was the only one that mattered. Corkery's role as 'an Máistir', Ó Ríordáin makes clear, however, was not solely dependent upon his forceful personality. People listened to Corkery, according to Ó Ríordáin, because Corkery had significant things to say. Indeed for Ó Ríordáin '[ní] raibh ionad ar domhan níb fhearr chun radharc cothrom d'fháil ar an saol ná an seomra ina raibh Dónal Ó Corcora suite i ndeireadh a shaoil' [there was no better place on earth to get a balanced view of life than the room in which Daniel Corkery was seated at the end of his life].[16] Ó Ríordáin's conflicted stance on Corkery, which overlaps with elements of both Ó Buachalla's and Ó Tuama's appraisals, is perhaps best captured in his poem 'Do Dhomhnall Ó Corcora' [To Daniel Corkery]. The poem opens with an eloquent celebration of Corkery's role as chronicler of Irish-language poetry.

> Éirigh is can ár mbuíochas croí dhó,
> Do mhúin sé an tslí,
> Do dhúisigh eilit ár bhfilíochta
> I gcoillte blian.[17]
>
> [Rise and sing our heart-thanks to him,
> He showed the way,
> He woke the doe of our poetry
> In the woods of the years.]

In the penultimate verse of the poem, however, Corkery's weighty influence is a shackle that stifles and curbs the individual poet's creativity:

> Braithim é gan sos ag éisteacht
> Mar athchoinsias;
> Tá smacht a chluaise ar lúth mo véarsa,
> Trom an chuing.[18]
>
> [I feel him listening constantly,
> A second conscience;
> The pace of my verse is controlled by his ear.
> A heavy chain.]

00 CorkeryIntro 22/11/2011 13:57 Page 4

In recent years, a number of reappraisals of Corkery's critical writings have appeared, the most notable of which draw on postcolonial theories and frameworks. In 'Becoming Minor', Conor Carville discusses *The Hidden Ireland* and *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature* in relation to Homi Bhabha's thesis that underlying even the most authoritarian nationalist sentiment is an awareness of the nation as a performative assemblage of multiple identities and disparate referents. In 'Becoming National', which is a re-working of elements of Carville's argument, Paul Delaney suggests that Corkery's criticism is best interpreted in the context of a 'decolonising politics which deterritorialise[s] in order to reterritorialise'.[19] Corkery's work, Delaney goes on to argue, is symptomatic of the processes 'whereby the minor becomes major', with the 'inventive potential' of that work ultimately becoming 'swamped by the rhetoric of official nationalism'.[20] In addition to being viewed through a postcolonial lens, Corkery's writings have of late been cited as examples of early Irish postcolonial criticism. In *Inventing Ireland*, for example, Declan Kiberd refers to Corkery as 'the nearest thing Ireland produced to a post-colonial critic' in the first half of the twentieth century.[21] Indeed, notwithstanding his aforementioned comments in *The Field Day Anthology*, Terence Brown, in *Ireland: A Social History, 1922–1985*, paved the way for just such an approach by including Corkery in a list of figures whose advocacy of Gaelic Ireland stemmed not from 'racial chauvinism' but from 'a concerned awareness of the psychological distress suffered by countless individual Irishmen and women because of colonial oppression'.[22]

As indicated by Kiberd and Brown, Corkery, in his critical writings, offered valuable insights into the cultural and psychological effects of colonialism. It could be argued, in fact, that the central, and interrelated, concerns of his criticism – language displacement, cultural dislocation, a disconnect between dominant literary forms and local reality, 'fractured' identity, education as a colonial tool, the gaps and silences of official historiography, the relationship between settler and native – have, until recently, been the central concerns of postcolonial criticism. *The Hidden Ireland*, which is a study of the eighteenth-century remnants of an earlier thriving Irish-language literary culture, touches on a number of these concerns. The dominant narrative of Ireland's cultural past, Corkery reminds us in his Introduction to *The Hidden Ireland*, is essentially the story of the cultural achievements of the Anglo-Irish community. The Irish language was considered by this community to be little more than 'a *patois* used by the hillmen among themselves' and certainly not the basis for a literary culture. In the course of time, Corkery tells us, Irish people from a non-Ascendancy background internalised the notion of their cultural inferiority, developing what he refers to as a 'slave-mind'.[23]

In *The Hidden Ireland*, Corkery reveals the gaps and silences of official historiography by imaginatively reconstructing a world outside of its

00 CorkeryIntro 22/11/2011 13:57 Page 5

parameters. In one section of the book, the famous Irish travel journals of Arthur Young are employed by Corkery to demonstrate the invisibility of this world to those who did not know to look for it.[24] The passage of the journal that he cites contains Young's description of an 'enlightening' conversation he had with a woman called Mrs Quinn in Adair about the history of the locality. It is the information that Young received from this woman that is included in his journal; information which, according to Corkery, was only partial. Mrs Quinn failed to tell Young about the death the previous year of the eighteenth-century Irish-language poet Seán Ó Tuama, and Young lacked the knowledge required to seek out this information. Moreover, even if asked about Ó Tuama, Mrs Quinn, Corkery tells us, would in all likelihood have referred to him not as a poet but as the servant who looked after her hens.

Corkery's eighteenth-century Ireland is a place of parallel universes, whose inhabitants are often forced to lead a dual existence. In the 'hidden Ireland' that Corkery is seeking to document, Seán Ó Tuama is the poet who took on a leadership role amongst the poets of the district when Seán Clárach MacDomhnaill died. In the world of Mrs Quinn, John O'Twomey (Seán Ó Tuama) was a disgruntled and possibly not very effective hen-keeper. Similarly, in the 'darkened land' that Corkery writes about, Eoghan Ruadh Ó Súilleabháin was 'one of our greatest lyric poets', while in the Ireland that the renowned historian W.E.H. Lecky documented in his *History of Ireland in the Eighteenth Century,* Ó Súilleabháin would have been referred to as 'a farm labourer, a *spailpín*'.[25] Parallel universes can also be found in a number of Corkery's short stories, most notably in 'Solace' which is included in the 1916 collection *A Munster Twilight*. The protagonist of this story is both Eoghan Mor of the Aislings who calls all the poets of the locality to a Bardic session so that he can recite a new song, 'a riot of words, golden and flashing with fire and sound and colour', and an impoverished tenant-farmer who, in the eyes of a passing English traveller modelled perhaps on Arthur Young, is merely 'a huge gaunt man [. . .] reciting what was apparently a very violent poem' in 'a miserable hut' which was 'crowded to the door with wild and picturesque figures'.[26]

L.M. Cullen's previously mentioned critique of *The Hidden Ireland* was one of a number of texts that emerged from the history departments of Irish universities in the 1950s and 60s that drew attention to the flawed methodology of the nationalist historiography of the first part of the century. This critique consists for the most part of a bombardment of facts designed to reveal the paucity of Corkery's sources and, consequently, the largely fictional nature of his historical narrative. As Seán Ó Tuama, the twentieth-century Irish-language scholar, and, more recently, Patrick Walsh have suggested, however, such a critique misconstrues what Corkery was setting out to achieve in *The Hidden Ireland* and, more significantly, disregards the

00 CorkeryIntro 22/11/2011 13:57 Page 6

actual practice of the book.[27] Factual accounts of Irish history, Corkery points out elsewhere, are for the most part based on state papers. Consequently, 'our histories' are 'the story of the struggle of the English state to maintain its position in our midst'.[28] *The Hidden Ireland* demonstrates the limitations of historical accounts of Ireland based on the information supplied in these state papers by imaginatively constructing, largely from Irish-language cultural sources, a world and worldview that they omitted. In a later publication, *The Fortunes of the Irish Language*, Corkery states that 'in our case [where] native state-papers of the usual type do not exist', cultural artefacts can function to 'mitigate, if not contradict, the alien state-papers'.[29] The significance of such artefacts in this context, he goes on to argue, lies less in the 'points of information' they contain than in the extent to which they allow us 'to feel our way into the deeper past'.[30] In Corkery's *The Hidden Ireland*, voices from the past that had gone unheard in mainstream historiography speak to us.[31] Corkery's treatment of these voices is very different from the historian's treatment of archival evidence. His interest in them lies less in the factual information they provide than in the extent to which they allow us, 'in our very different world', to take an imaginative leap and speculate on how it might have felt to be part of the hidden, and rapidly transforming, world of the eighteenth-century Irish-language poet.[32] *The Hidden Ireland*, Corkery acknowledges in the book's Introduction, probably contains errors of fact, but these errors, he goes on to state, will not prevent the book from achieving its primary goal: the 'lighting up' of that which previous accounts of eighteenth-century Ireland had kept in the 'dark'.[33]

In Corkery's second major critical work, *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature*, it is the literary culture of the 'visible' Ireland recorded by W.E.H. Lecky and others that is the focus of attention. *The Hidden Ireland* challenges the dominant narrative of Ireland's cultural past by constructing an alternative narrative of a cultural past that it omits; *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature* challenges the dominant narrative of Ireland's cultural past by calling into question the nature and value of the cultural past that it documents. J.M. Synge, referred to by Corkery as 'a true child of the Ascendancy', belonged to that cultural past and his plays are praised, in Corkery's study of them, in direct proportion to their distance from the 'norms' of Ascendancy culture.[34] It is the opening chapter of *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature* that has received the most critical attention, much of it hostile. In this chapter, 'On Anglo-Irish Literature', Corkery outlined, with reference to form, content, and perspective, the chief characteristics of a literature that he believed should be categorised as colonial as opposed to Anglo-Irish. The main points of comparison between this literature and other colonial literatures, such as Rudyard Kipling's Indian books, according to Corkery, were that its intended audience was an external one and its treatment of its Irish subject-matter broadly-speaking anthropological: 'This Colonial literature was

00 CorkeryIntro 22/11/2011 13:57 Page 7

written to explain the quaintness of the humankind of this land, especially the native humankind, to another humankind that was not quaint, that was standard, normal.'[35] Its depiction of 'quaint' Irish people led this external audience to 'picture us as given over either to a wild whirl of fox-hunting and rioting, or as spell-bound by fairies that troop nightly from our prehistoric ruins'.[36] Moreover, its particular brand of Irish subject-matter marked it, in Corkery's eyes, as colonial literature; the story that Ascendancy literature from Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* to Somerville and Ross's *Big House of Inver* told, over and over again, was the story of 'the decline and fall of an Ascendancy "Big House"'.[37] Literature about Ireland written by the Ascendancy was also colonial in form, characterised, Corkery argued, by a disconnect between literary 'moulds' that had originated elsewhere and, consequently, 'do not willingly receive the facts of Irish life', and local reality.[38]

For Corkery, since the literature written by the Ascendancy had established the norms of English-language literary culture in Ireland, the characteristics of Ascendancy literature were the dominant characteristics of that literary culture. Consequently, the bulk of English-language literature in Ireland, even the works of non-Ascendancy writers, was colonial in form, content, and perspective. Gerald Griffin, whose novel *The Collegians* features 'an Englishman to whom the quaintness of the folk is exhibited with the accompanying stream of comment, exactly in the Colonial manner', is cited by Corkery as an example of a 'non-Ascendancy writer who under the stress of the literary moulds of his time wrote Colonial literature'.[39]

In 'On Anglo-Irish Literature', Corkery divides the literary works associated with Ireland into three distinct categories. He names the first of these categories Irish literature, stating emphatically that this term should only be used to refer to literature written in the Irish language. The second of these categories, colonial literature, includes the bulk of the literature written in the English language by Ascendancy and non-Ascendancy writers. While this second category is dealt with in some depth in Corkery's opening chapter to *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature*, I would suggest that it is, in fact, the third category that is the main focus of the chapter. The name that he gave this category, Anglo-Irish literature, in Corkery's view, had been wrongly applied to literature written by the Ascendancy and instead should be used to refer to a literature that did not, as yet, exist in its proper state and may, in fact, never fully come into being. With the introduction of this third category of literature, we see a shift in approach from an analysis of that which is, to the establishment of a framework for that which might be. 'Genuine' Anglo-Irish literature, for Corkery, is Ireland-centred literature written in the English language by writers born in Ireland that is not colonial literature. In the logic of Corkery's argument, it is a literature that 'canalise[s] some share of Irish consciousness so that that consciousness would the better know itself' as opposed to a literature that 'canalises' Irish

00 CorkeryIntro 22/11/2011 13:57 Page 8

consciousness so that 'the strange workings of that consciousness might entertainingly be exhibited to alien eyes'.[40] Synge is the focus of the subsequent chapters of the book because his plays, Corkery tentatively suggests, do not fit neatly into the category of colonial literature and might possibly be a 'portent', signalling the arrival of non-colonial or 'genuine' Anglo-Irish literature.[41]

For Corkery, however, the development of a 'genuine' Anglo-Irish literature would not be a straightforward process. This development could only take place if the dominant 'mould' of English-language literature in Ireland, the colonial 'mould', was displaced by native 'moulds', and native 'moulds', he argues, would require a stronger base than 'fractured' Irish identity:

> The difficulty is not alone a want of native moulds; it is rather the want of a foundation upon which to establish them. Everywhere in the mentality of the Irish people are flux and uncertainty. Our national consciousness may be described, in a native phrase, as a quaking sod. It gives no footing. It is not English, nor Irish, nor Anglo-Irish.[42]

Corkery located the origins of this 'fractured' identity in a cultural dislocation that permeated all aspects of Irish life, including the education system that he, having worked for many years as a primary school teacher, was so familiar with:

> [The Irish child] cannot find in [his] surroundings what his reading has taught him is the matter worth coming upon. His surroundings begin to seem unvital. His education, instead of buttressing and refining his emotional nature, teaches him the rather to despise it, inasmuch as it teaches him not to see the surroundings out of which he is sprung, as they are in themselves, but as compared with alien surroundings: his education provides him with an alien medium through which he is henceforth to look at his native land![43]

Corkery's analysis of colonial cultural alienation in 'On Anglo-Irish Literature' offers insights into the relationship between education and colonialism and pre-empts such influential writings as Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), but his attempt to counteract the effects of this cultural alienation by establishing a framework for native literary 'moulds' gives rise to what is often interpreted as a crude essentialism. There are 'three great forces', Corkery tells us, which have ensured that the 'Irish national being' is different from the 'English national being'.[44] Consequently, these three forces – religion, nationalism and land – should provide the basis for the native 'moulds' of literature required for a 'genuine' Anglo-Irish literature.

00 CorkeryIntro 22/11/2011 13:57 Page 9

Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature was written in 1929. As is clear from the tentative tone of sections of its introductory chapter, Corkery was already sceptical at this point in time about the possibility of establishing an English-language literature in Ireland that was not colonial literature: '[T]he difficulties in creating genuine Anglo-Irish literature are so immense. It seems indeed an almost impossible task.'[45] By the time the book was published two years later, Corkery had abandoned the notion of a 'genuine' Anglo-Irish literature.[46] From that point on, he was to proclaim that Irish-language literature was the only literature in Ireland that could provide native 'moulds' of literary representation. Consequently, in *The Philosophy of the Gaelic League*, published in 1943, no distinction is formed between colonial literature and a 'genuine' Anglo-Irish literature. Anglo-Irish literature, even Anglo-Irish literature that is about Irish 'matter', is, we are told, merely a branch of English literature.[47] The 'Irish tradition', Corkery proclaimed in this publication, cannot 'go on living in English with either usefulness or dignity'.[48] It demands 'its own way, its own technique, its own media'.[49]

In the one-paragraph dismissals of Corkery that are to be found in so many post-1960s studies of Irish history, literature and culture, Corkery's analysis and the questions that he posed tend to be disregarded in favour of the solutions that he offered. This has facilitated the commonplace one-dimensional portrayal of a bigoted, fanatical Corkery. Corkery's solutions, while at times clearly questionable, emerged out of his often insightful analysis and, consequently, are best viewed, and critiqued, in conjunction with this analysis. Corkery's wholesale renunciation, in his later writings, of English-language literature in Ireland is undeniably open to challenge, particularly when taking into account the profound decentring of English-language literature that has taken place in the last forty and more years: 'What seems [. . .] to be happening is that those peoples who were once colonised by the [English] language are now rapidly remaking it – assisted by the English language's enormous flexibility and size, they are carving out large territories for themselves within its frontiers.'[50] Indeed, in *Finnegans Wake*, published just four years before *The Philosophy of the Gaelic League*, James Joyce's 'remaking' of the English language was so extreme that, in the words of Terry Eagleton, he 'estrange[d] [it] in the eyes of its proprietors'.[51] This renunciation, however, was based on Corkery's awareness of the significance and ramifications of language displacement in the colonial context; an awareness shared by such influential scholars of colonialism as Frantz Fanon.

Fanon opened *Black Skin, White Masks*, his 1952 study of the 'arsenal of complexes' that results from colonialism, with an analysis of how language contributes to and is affected by the feelings of inadequacy and dependence experienced by colonised peoples.[52] 'A man who has a language,' Fanon tells us, 'possesses the world expressed and implied by that language.'

00 CorkeryIntro 22/11/2011 13:57 Page 10

Consequently, 'mastery of language affords remarkable power.'[53] In the colonial context, the colonised, who have internalised the notion of their own inferiority and, hence, the inferiority of 'native' languages, covet the agency or subjectivity ensured by the ability to speak the language of the coloniser. In the words of Fanon, '[t]he Negro of the Antilles will be proportionately whiter – that is, he will come closer to being a real human being – in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language.'[54] For Fanon, the assimilation and valorisation of the coloniser's language undermines the workings of the anti-colonial revolution on a number of fronts. By adopting the language of the coloniser, the colonised reinforces the notion of the superiority of the coloniser's language and culture over the so-called 'jabber' of native languages. Furthermore, 'to speak', according to Fanon, means not only 'to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, [. . .] it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilisation'.[55] For Fanon, as for Corkery, language was more than a mere means of communication. Both held that in the colonial context to adopt the coloniser's language was not only to speak in a different way but to think in a different way; it was to adopt the perspectives, points of view and cultural assumptions that were encapsulated in that language.

Furthermore, Corkery's preoccupation in 'On Anglo-Irish Literature' with native literary 'moulds' and his accompanying attempt to differentiate the 'Irish national being' from the 'English national being' emanated from his awareness of the possible consequences of a cleavage between literature and local reality. In 'On Anglo-Irish Literature', the outcome of the splitting of the sign and the referent in the colonial classroom is a devaluing of the child's world: '[The Irish child] cannot find in [his] surroundings what his reading has taught him is the matter worth coming upon. His surroundings begin to seem unvital.'[56] Elsewhere, in a description of his own schooling, Corkery outlined the self-negation that results from this disconnect between the world of the classroom curriculum and the child's actual physical and material conditions; a disconnect that is sometimes referred to in post-colonial studies as 'the daffodil gap':[57]

> We were taught implicitly, and indeed almost explicitly, not to seek a reflection of our own thoughts and feelings in literature [. . .] We were supposed to read English literature with English eyes [. . .] [S]uch English texts as I studied for examination had nearly all been edited for nice little Protestant English boys by nice old English Protestant rectors or head-masters of English Public Schools [. . .] Knowledge that I had not – of English customs, religion, home-life, etc. – was taken for granted. Feelings that I had not, prejudices that I had not, were taken for granted. The knowledge, the feelings, the prejudices I had were never mentioned at all; I was, therefore, all the time being

00 CorkeryIntro 22/11/2011 13:57 Page 11

> implicitly instructed that all these were somehow wrong, that they had no right to be there at all, in me or in anyone else – and that I was somehow out of it, not normal, a kind of freak.[58]

As Corkery clearly surmised, one of the most pervasive and debilitating features of colonialism is the establishment, within colonial discourse, of a normative imperial culture and worldview, against which all other cultures and worldviews are deemed to be abnormal deviations. Indeed, Corkery's incessant use of the terms 'abnormal' and 'freakish' in his cultural criticism, and his accompanying determination to establish a literature, a people and a nation that was 'normal', 'typical', 'natural' and, therefore, not 'freakish', indicates that not only was he conscious of, and attempting to counteract, the damaging psychological effects of this aspect of colonialism, but that he himself was a product of it.[59] Corkery, having internalised the normal/abnormal binary opposition of colonial discourse, sought to reposition Ireland within this binary. To achieve 'normal' status, Ireland would have to assert its political and cultural independence: 'In a country that for long has been afflicted with an ascendancy, an alien ascendancy at that, national movements are a necessity: they are an effort to attain to the normal.'[60] For Corkery, the national in Ireland was the 'normal' in that it sought to undo the colonial. 'Normal' literature in Ireland, Corkery argued, would have the same relationship to Irish life as English literature had to English life and French literature had to French life.[61] A 'normal' literature, in the logic of his argument, was a non-colonial literature, a national literature, whose 'moulds' matched local reality.

Corkery, in *The Hidden Ireland*, had commended eighteenth-century Irish-language poets for 'gradually changing the old moulds into new shapes, and [. . .] filling them with a content that was all of the passing day and their own fields'.[62] In 'On Anglo-Irish Literature', he suggests that English-language literature in Ireland, in the form of a 'genuine' or 'true' Anglo-Irish literature, could establish a similarly close relationship between form and local reality. When in the process of writing *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature*, Corkery clearly believed, therefore, that twentieth-century English-language literature in Ireland could be 'normal' in the way that eighteenth-century Irish-language poetry had been 'normal' and contemporary English and French literature was 'normal'.

Reconnecting literary 'moulds' to Irish life, however, involved determining what exactly was meant by Irish life and, for Corkery, this entailed forming a distinction between the 'Irish national being' and the 'English national being'.[63] He based this distinction, as any reader of the aforementioned one-paragraph dismissals of Corkery will be aware, on the three elements that he considered of key importance to Irish life: religion, nationalism and land.[64] Corkery, in pinpointing these elements, was, however, less concerned with

00 CorkeryIntro 22/11/2011 13:57 Page 12

uncovering intrinsic or essential Irish characteristics than with devising an ABC of 'genuine' Anglo-Irish literature. Indeed, religion, nationalism and land, in Corkery's analysis, are external forces that, due to specific cultural, historical and economic circumstances, have shaped the Irish national being. The religious consciousness referred to in 'On Anglo-Irish Literature' appears to be a relatively recent phenomenon in that it had displaced an alternative belief-system that 'still float[s] in the minds of a tiny percentage of the people'.[65] 'Hundreds of battlefields, slaughterings, famines, exoduses' are listed amongst the factors that have established the centrality of nationalism to Ireland.[66] It is at least partially due to the comparatively large percentage of people 'actually working in the fields' in Ireland that the land 'is a huge force in Irish life'.[67] Moreover, 'centuries of onslaught', according to Corkery, meant that all three forces acquired an 'intensity' that they lacked in countries with a less violent history.[68] Having '*work[ed]* for long in the Irish national being', these three forces, he argued, had ensured that the Irish national being differs from the English national being [my emphasis].[69]

The principle problem with this contentious section of 'On Anglo-Irish Literature' is not, therefore, that it attempts to uncover the essential Irish mind but that, in laying down coordinates for a non-colonial literature, it establishes rigid and exclusive artistic and national parameters. Having clearly outlined the often devastating effects of colonial cultural alienation on the individual and on society, Corkery sought to offset these effects by devising a set of criteria for a literature in which the Irish reading public could find its reflection. His coordinates were, however, notably narrow. Moreover, the individual writer, as Terence Brown has pointed out, is unlikely to obey any such prescriptive imperatives, even if less restrictive.[70] The result was an increasingly embittered relationship between Corkery and a younger generation of writers, including some of his former protégés, who were understandably reluctant to play their designated role in his cultural programme and, consequently, found themselves rejected from his literary canon. 'It is an odd type of criticism,' Seán O'Faoláin was to state, 'which would dictate to an artist as if he were a building contractor.'[71] Indeed O'Faoláin, a former protégé turned vehement critic, was to indict Corkery for 'lay[ing] down for Ireland' the 'same excluding law' that Goebbels and Hitler were 'laying down' for Germany. According to O'Faoláin, the only response that any self-respecting writer could have to the person 'who takes up a Hitlerian attitude' and demands that '*you* write what *we* want or you can get out' is 'we will write what we honestly feel to be the truth, and we will not get out' [O'Faoláin's emphasis].[72]

Kiberd's description of Daniel Corkery as 'the *nearest* thing Ireland produced to a post-colonial critic' in the first half of the twentieth century is as significant for its equivocality as it is for its choice of appellation [my emphasis].[73] This description suggests that notwithstanding the considerable

00 CorkeryIntro 22/11/2011 13:57 Page 13

overlap between his work and the writings of a number of seminal postcolonial critics, attempting to categorise Corkery as a postcolonial scholar can give rise to tensions and anxieties. Given the present-day dominance of a poststructuralist strand of postcolonial studies that is characterised by an undifferentiated disavowal of all forms of nationalism and a corresponding exaltation of the liminality, hybridity, ambivalence and multiculturality that results from colonialism, it is perhaps not surprising that doubt might arise about Corkery's suitability to this scholarly field. Homi Bhabha has proposed that postcolonial studies be more attentive to 'the complex cultural and political boundaries that exist on the cusp' of the political spheres of the coloniser and the colonised.[74] Corkery recognised, as do recent critics of Bhabha, that colonialism was 'a historical project of invasion, expropriation and exploitation' and, consequently, not 'a symbiotic encounter'.[75] For Corkery, colonialism was first and foremost disabling. Consequently, his writings do not fit easily into a body of work which, by deploying categories that lace colonised into colonising cultures, 'effectively [becomes] a reconciliatory rather than a critical, anticolonialist category'.[76]

Corkery's cultural criticism belongs, therefore, I would suggest, to what we might refer to as the anti-colonial branch of postcolonial studies in that, as L.M. Cullen recognised, he was more concerned with the antagonistic relationship between the opposing spheres of the coloniser and colonised than with the cultural and political interconnections that exist on the cusp of these spheres. His anti-colonialism was, however, limited in that what he sought for Ireland was the 'normal' or non-colonial as defined by colonial discourse. Contrary to claims otherwise, Corkery was not a nativist. The solution to the cultural and psychological effects of colonialism for Corkery was not to go back to a pre-colonial past, but to create a contemporary Irish society that functioned as other contemporary non-colonised societies functioned. As has been recognised in postcolonial societies across the globe, however, it is simply not possible to 'undo' colonialism in this way. The only conceivable outcome of a cultural programme designed for such a purpose is a restrictive and exclusive cultural atmosphere of the sort that stifled Seán Ó Ríordáin and enraged Seán O'Faoláin.

Corkery was a perceptive colonial commentator whose insights were echoed in later postcolonial writings now considered seminal. He was also, however, a product of the colonialism he so fiercely opposed. Corkery recognised and drew attention to connections between Ireland and other colonised locations, but the Ireland he sought to bring into being was a 'modern' nation-state on a par with the non-colonised nation-states of Europe; an Ireland that had surmounted the uneven power relations of colonialism and, consequently, could partake in a cultural exchange with its neighbours on an equal footing. Ironically, much of the post-1960s discussion of his work has been shaped by a modernisation discourse that

00 CorkeryIntro 22/11/2011 13:57 Page 14

has its origins in the colonial project and seeks to rid Ireland of the recalcitrant elements that prevent it from becoming just such a 'modern' nation-state. One of Corkery's principal strengths as an anti-colonial commentator was his understanding that colonialism is a pervasive force that shapes how we view ourselves and the world around us. The widespread portrayal of Corkery's cultural criticism within Irish scholarship as retrograde writings that sought to hinder Ireland's journey on the path to Progress gives credence to Corkery's claims for the ubiquitous nature of the colonial mindframe.