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CHAPTER 1

The Contemporary Conditions of Irish Language Literature

Ailbhe Ní Ghearbhuigh

The National Writers' Workshop was organised on an almost annual basis from 1976, hosting writer workshop weekends at University College Galway.[1] Funded by the Arts Council, the Workshop was seen as 'a radical new development' and every third year its focus would be on literature in Irish.[2] In 1985, director Seán Mac Mathúna chose to concentrate on Irish-language fiction, on the basis that prose writing lagged behind poetry in terms of vibrancy and visibility.[3] Indeed, by the mid-1980s, poetry in Irish seemed to be in relatively rude health, its practitioners building on the accomplishments of the *Innti* poetry journal, which had created a surge of energy on its launch in 1970 by students at University College Cork and which continued to appear sporadically until 1996. During the 1980s and 1990s, a number of poets central to *Innti* published individual collections, contributing to the swell of Irish-language poetry.

The state of prose writing in Irish, by contrast, was bemoaned by several commentators.[4] Bríona Nic Dhiarmada, however, was quick to point out that such complaints diminish the achievements of poetry in Irish.[5] There is an implied hierarchy of genre behind this argument, whereby if prose is, to quote Máirtín Ó Cadhain, 'tathán, coincréad, [agus] clocha saoirsinne an tsaoil' [the concrete base, the mason's cornerstone of life],[6] then poetry is, by comparison, not as robust nor as suited to the serious work of modern existence. Such binaries undermine the ambition of contemporary poetry in Irish and reveal a postcolonial anxiety to replicate the supremacy of the 'great English novel', as though Irish-language literature required legitimatising through 'prestigious' prose writing. Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith summarises this tension between poetry and prose as follows: 'lyric poetry has been the flagship of twentieth-century Gaelic literature, the vehicle of its most celebrated successes, just as the struggle to establish a credible tradition of realist prose has been the source and the site of its most persistent anxieties'.[7]

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This chapter provides a broad overview of literature in Irish from 1980 to 2020. Rather than focus on individual genres, it will treat six dominant developments in contemporary writing: literature drawing on the oral tradition, on ancient literature, and on historical sources, as well as 'taboo-breaking' literature, experimental literature, and writing informed by international literary trends. The infrastructure supporting Irish-language literature – criticism, publishers, awards, journals, organisations, schemes – will also be considered in order to survey the conditions in which this literature emerges.

From the Well: Oral Tradition as a Source

Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, arguably the most revered of Irish-language writers, has created an astonishing *oeuvre* that simultaneously draws on folklore while ambitiously charting contemporary concerns, among them the postcolonial situation and the trauma of language loss. When awarding Ní Dhomhnaill the Zbigniew Herbert International Literary Award in 2018, Edward Hirsch, chairman of the panel of judges, stated: 'We have chosen a ground-breaking and courageous poet who is both local and international, a poet, who has helped to sustain and remake her language.'[8] Ní Dhomhnaill was Ireland Professor of Poetry from 2011 to 2014 and her work has been widely translated into English and other languages.[9] Robert Welch, writing on literature in Ireland since 1960, contends that Ní Dhomhnaill does not exploit the Gothic possibilities in Irish myth 'for gratuitous entertainment'; rather, in Welch's terms, she develops 'significant psychic and psychological formations that come out of Celtic tradition but which connect with contemporary anxieties concerning motherhood, nurturing, the responsibility we carry with regard to nature'.[10] Folkloric personages such as the goddess Mór, the Cailleach [The Hag], the Bean an Leasa [The Woman from the Otherworld], and the Murúcha [Merfolk] recur throughout her work, forming an intricate tableau onto which the poet projects modern-day anxieties. Ní Dhomhnaill is also innovative in terms of form: Bríona Nic Dhiarmada argues that, in collections such as *Feis* (1991) and *Cead Aighnis* (1998), Ní Dhomhnaill extends 'the lyric form to what can be best described as a form of contemporary epic'.[11]

Song, of course, is also a *sine qua non* of the oral tradition, influencing not only Ní Dhomhnaill, but also writers like Cathal Ó Searcaigh and Mícheál Ó Conghaile. Ní Dhomhnaill's love poems draw extensively on the folk-song tradition, producing poems that are 'forthright and unabashed in their explicit treatment of sexual encounters'.[12] Ó Searcaigh,

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meanwhile, exploits the tropes of traditional love songs in order to explore homoerotic longing, achieving in poems such as 'Ceann Dubh Dílis' ['Dear Dark-Haired Love'] subversive renderings of songs from the folk tradition. Mícheál Ó Conghaile, as Pádraig Ó Siadhail points out, has a similar objective, referencing 'Dónall Óg', a song about a girl abandoned by her male lover, and repackaging it 'as a lament by John Paul deserted by his same-sex lover'.[13]

Éilís Ní Dhuibhne also draws on the world of mythology and Irish folklore in her play, *Dún na mBan Trí Thine* [The Women's Fairy Fort is on Fire] (1998), whose heroine, Léiní, retreats from chaotic modern life to 'the Otherworld, that place of caprice and of sensual fulfilment where aging is suspended, to stage the crisis of [. . .] a wife and mother who is struggling to be an artist'.[14] In addition, Angela Bourke, perhaps prompted by her research in folklore, has written a number of short stories drawing on folk motifs that incorporate elements of magic realism as much as they comment on contemporary society.[15]

Retellings and Adaptations: Early Irish Literature

Early Irish literature, extant in manuscript form from earlier centuries, continues to provide raw material for contemporary writers. The conviction that these texts can renew and sustain modern literature motivated Leabhar Breac, a small publishing house based in Connemara, to publish mythological sagas in accessible Modern Irish. Among them are *Conaire Mór* (2017) and *Tuatha Dé Danann* (2018) by Diarmuid Johnson and *An Tromdhámh* (2018) by Feargal Ó Béarra. Leabhar Breac's founder, Darach Ó Scolaí, also produced his own version of *Táin Bó Cuailgne* (2017), that great Irish epic, insisting that it is neither a translation, nor a scholarly edition, but rather 'síneadh eile lenár dtraidisiún scéalaíochta, síneadh le hobair na scríobhaithe a bhreac an scéal i Leabhar na hUidhre agus i lámhscríbhinní eile le linn na Meánaoise' [a further extension of our storytelling tradition, an extension of the work of the scribes who wrote out the story in The Book of the Dun Cow and in other manuscripts during the Middle Ages].[16]

In *Táinrith* (2013), Biddy Jenkinson similarly expands the *Táin*, albeit in a 'female-centered, multi-layered and explicitly corrective retelling' of the epic.[17] A text that might be classified as prose poetry, it is a modern-day riff that addresses issues of matriarchy, authority, and heroism with a healthy measure of humour. Jenkinson's work is immersed in the Gaelic world and is wholly cognisant of 'the aristocratic learned tradition that stretches from

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the old Irish sagas to the bardic court poetry of early modern Ireland before the upheavals of the seventeenth century and the language shift from Irish to English that followed'.[18] Her work attempts to refute the notion that the past and present are irretrievably ruptured, instead presenting a world where history and the present are irrevocably intermeshed.[19] This approach is apparent in Jenkinson's remodelling of Mis, the wild mountainy woman who is mollified by the music of Dubh Ruis.[20] However, as Edyta Lehmann points out, 'the poet manages to avoid a simple denunciation of the patriarchal myth. Instead, she makes use of the multiplicity of voices inherent in the original text, exploiting the tension resulting from the confrontation of ideologies.'[21]

Another Old Irish tale provides the fabric for the poem 'Echtrae Chondlai' ['Conlae's Adventure'] by Aifric Mac Aodha, into which, in a poetic prologue, she weaves a comparison with James Joyce's short story 'Eveline'.[22] Mac Aodha, one of a younger generation of Irish-language poets,[23] also reworks Greek mythology in her work, notably in the poetic sequence 'Scéal Syrinx'.[24] The story of Deirdre and Naoise[25] has inspired many writers in English, among them Lady Gregory, Yeats, and Synge. In imagining Deirdre's first utterance, Doireann Ní Ghríofa's poem 'Céad Siolla Dheirdre' ['Deirdre: Her First Syllable'] resonates with an earlier poem by Máire Mhac an tSaoi, 'Labhrann Deirdre' ['Deirdre Speaks']. But whereas Mhac an tSaoi's Deirdre rationalises her choice to escape with Naoise, the subject of Ní Ghríofa's poem is a primal roar from the womb. Male poets have also taken licence to imagine the voices of female figures of mythology, as in Colm Breathnach's poetry collection *Scáthach* (1994), which uses the figures of Cúchulainn and the female warrior, Scáthach, to probe and problematise gender.[26] Worthy of note here, too, is Pádraig Ó Cíobháin, whose stylised, intertextual prose informs not only his retelling of Medieval Irish stories, *Dréachta Chríoch Fódla* (2007), but also his recent novels.

Historical Sources

Historical literary fiction is a significant genre within contemporary prose writing in Irish.[27] While realist literature set in modern-day English-speaking cities in Ireland is sometimes called into question for its lack of believability,[28] historical fiction can circumvent this challenge by situating the events in the Gaelic-speaking Ireland of the past. Among the most critically acclaimed writers of historical fiction in Irish is Liam Mac Cóil. Many of his works include a transnational dimension, for example the

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multilayered *Fontenoy* (2005), which gives a fictional account by Captain Seán Ó Raghallaigh of the Battle of Fontenoy in Belgium in 1745 as told to a French scribe. Mac Cóil has also published two books of a trilogy set in early sixteenth-century Ireland and Europe, *An Litir* (2011) and *I dTír Strainséartha* (2014), which emphasise the close ties Gaelic Ireland had with the continent in the early modern period. Mac Cóil's publisher, Darach Ó Scolaí of Leabhar Breac, has also produced a historical novel set in Ireland and mainland Europe; the events in *An Cléireach* (2007) take place in the mid-seventeenth century against the backdrop of brutality that accompanied the Cromwellian invasion of Ireland.

An Fear Dána (1993) by Alan Titley centres on the life and poetry of the medieval poet Muireadhach Albanach Ó Dálaigh. The events are narrated by Ó Dálaigh himself – described by one critic as 'assertive, arrogant, lovable' – and the title connotes both 'a bold man' and 'a man of poetry'.[29] This remarkable postmodern novel is noted for its playful intertextuality, which ranges far beyond the thirteenth-century Ireland of Ó Dálaigh. In just a two-page sample, Bríona Nic Dhiarmada notes the many references to and jibes at poets from the Fianna cycle and syllabic poetry, to the eighteenth-century writer Aogán Ó Rathaille and the twentieth-century poet, Michael Davitt.[30] Although he lists his scholarly sources, Titley nonetheless insists that *An Fear Dána* is a fictionalised work. Structurally, it is a finely-wrought *oeuvre*: each of the seven chapters is divided into seven sections, the final section of each chapter being a poem. His later historical novel *An Bhean Feasa* (2014) is written entirely in verse and recounts, through the testimony of various voices, the life of an Irishwoman, Ann 'Goody' Glover, who was hanged as a witch in Boston in 1688.

Máire Mhac an tSaoi draws on the life and poetry of the 3rd Earl of Desmond, Gerald Fitzgerald (1335–98) in *Scéal Ghearóid Iarla* (2011), writing in elegiac and vivid prose. Mhac an tSaoi is, of course, primarily recognised for the excellence of her poetry, yet in an interview about *Scéal Ghearóid Iarla*, she maintains that she always wrote both poetry and prose, referring to her work in the civil service: 'tuilleamh mo bheatha ab ea an prós!' [prose was earning my living!'] whereas poetry was her 'poll éalaithe' [means of escape].[31]

Contemporary Irish-language poetry, too, has delved into the past. Caitríona Ní Chléirchín has written a suite of poems inspired by the Flight of the Earls (1607), the most striking of them being 'Scaradh na gCompánach' [The Parting of the Ways], in which she dramatises the parting words of the Countess of Tyrone as she departs, forever, the shores

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of Ireland.[32] Biddy Jenkinson's long poem 'Gleann Maoiliúra' recounts the story of Róis Ní Thuathail who was married to Fiach Mac Aoidh Ó Broin, the Lord of Ranelagh, who was later executed by Elizabeth I.[33] Louis de Paor describes it as 'a love poem of considerable violence executed with a high degree of emotional and psychological conviction'.[34] It is worth noting that both Ní Chléirchín and Jenkinson imagine an aspect of Irish history from the perspective of women who witnessed significant events, thereby retroactively giving voice to female figures who left no written account of their own.

Society in Transition: Breaking Taboos

More broadly, a notable development over the period in question is the legitimisation of the female experience for literary treatment, particularly in the case of poetry. In the 1980s 'the strongest and most distinctive voices to be heard in Irish-language literature were arguably women poets [. . .] who were speaking in what was then a zeitgeist alive with feminist struggles'.[35] Among the poets who produced significant collections during this decade are Ní Dhomhnaill, Mhac an tSaoi, Jenkinson, Áine Ní Ghlinn, Deirdre Brennan, and Eithne Strong. This surge of women writing about subjects previously considered taboo – for instance, miscarriage, child abuse, and incest – reflects but one of the many transitions within Irish society since 1980. Brian Ó Conchubhair notes that '[a]ll that was once repressed and censored floods forth in abundance in the contemporary Irish novel', before specifying clerical celibacy, religious belief, child adoption scandals, homosexuality, drug smuggling, human bondage, devil worship, and sexual fantasy as among the once forbidden topics being explored by contemporary writers.[36]

Dramatists, too, tackled questions that Irish society had hitherto eschewed: Jenkinson's play 'Beannaithe' (2018), commissioned by the theatre company Guthanna Binne Síoraí, challenges the ban on women priests in the Catholic Church. 'Baoite' (2018) by Darach Mac an Iomaire, commissioned by the Abbey Theatre in partnership with An Taibhdhearc, examines the effects of fracking on a small fishing community and explores in vitro fertilisation and mental health issues. Liam Ó Muirthile's play *Fear an Tae* (1995), set in a psychiatric hospital, probes issues of addiction and alcoholism and portrays 'the internal conflict between intellect and instinct, logic and desire'.[37] His earlier work, *Tine Chnámh* (1984), a long dramatic poem, depicts the tensions between the lure of earthy debauchery, especially female sexual desire, and the gatekeepers of civic morality in

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dramatic voice. Similarly, Séamus Barra Ó Súilleabháin uses the figure of Dónall Dubh, a shadowy harbinger of death, as an alter ego to explore intoxication, drug (ab)use, and existential despair in *Beatha Dhónaill Dhuibh* (2016), his fine debut poetry collection.

Popular fiction also engages in taboo-busting, and one author in particular has attracted quite a large readership since his first novel, *Súil le Breith* (1983) [*Lovers* (1991)]. In this novel and in *Cíocras* (1991) [*Celibates* (1993)], Pádraig Standún explores clerical celibacy and extra-marital sex, a potentially delicate topic at the time, even more so given that the author is himself a Catholic priest. These works anticipated the furore that surrounded Bishop Eamonn Casey, who, it was revealed in 1992, had fathered a child with his secret lover, Annie Murphy. Similarly in touch with the *zeitgeist*, the novel *Cion Mná* [*A Woman's Love*] dealt with a lesbian love affair and was published in 1993, the same year that homosexuality was decriminalised in the Republic of Ireland. As the extent of clerical sexual abuse was uncovered in the 1990s and 2000s, Standún did not baulk at addressing it in his work: *Díbirt Dé* (2007) depicts the sheltering of a convicted paedophile priest in a rural parish. While Standún and other contemporary writers portray various societal transitions in Ireland, it should nonetheless be noted that contentious themes have previously been treated in Irish-language prose, such as sexual assault, rape, extra-marital pregnancy, and marital breakdown.[38]

Cathal Ó Searcaigh also confronts issues such as domestic violence, incest, rape, and infanticide, most notably in the poem 'Gort na gCnámh' ['The Field of Bones']. It is especially in terms of his homoerotic poetry that Ó Searcaigh can be considered 'taboo-breaking', as his work acknowledges the existence of alternate sexualities within the boundaries of the Gaeltacht. Frank Sewell observes that the poem 'Laoi Chumainn' ['Serenade'] marks 'the shift in Ó Searcaigh's poetry to even more heightened sensation and to frank representation of sexuality'[39] building on the aforementioned 'Ceann Dubh Dílis' ['Dear Dark-Haired Love']. Similarly, Mícheál Ó Conghaile's novel *Sna Fir* (1999), written in the realist mode, is 'as honest and as explicit a description of a young man's initiation and integration into gay community life as one is likely to find in any language'.[40]

Experimental Modes

To consider Ó Conghaile exclusively as a queer writer would not do justice to the range and versatility of his work. A proponent of both

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realist and anti-realist prose, his short fiction demonstrates his 'tremendous ability to weave together an accessible storyline and aspects of non-realism and surrealism to create a fictional world that is both engaging and menacing'.[41] These achievements in the traditional and experimental modes are particularly notable in *An Fear a Phléasc* (1997), *An Fear Nach nDéanann Gáire* (2003), and *Diabhlaíocht Dé* (2015), the latter drawing especially on biblical motifs. Dara Ó Conaola's short fiction collections, *Mo Chathair Ghríobháin agus Scéalta Eile* (1981) and *Amuigh Liom Féin* (1988), are marked by their commitment to magic realism, as is the prose of Daithí Ó Muirí, such as in the Borgesian *Cogaí* (2002). The anthology of contemporary fiction *Gearrscéalta ár Linne* (2006) contains a number of stories in the surrealist vein, confirming the popularity of this mode in Irish writing. In his introduction, Brian Ó Conchubhair notes that many of the characters in contemporary short fiction are 'ar seachrán, go spioradálta, go fisiciúil, go meafarach agus go samhailteach' [spiritually, physically, metaphorically, and imaginarily adrift].[42] While writing in a minority language may engender a certain sense of isolation from the mainstream, such isolation could also be understood as emancipatory: Máirín Nic Eoin posits that the experimentation in prose that characterises the 1980s and 1990s may indicate 'a freedom of expression' resulting from a sense of 'writing from the margin, independent of market forces'.[43]

An early example of an experimental novel from the period in question is *Cuaifeach mo Londubh Buí* (1983) by Séamus Mac Annaidh, which is noteworthy not only for the author's precocity (he was 23 at the time of its publication), but also for swimming against the current of realism that was typical of Irish-language prose at the time. Titley describes it as 'a storm of a book linking prehistoric myth with lexicographical *séances* with student life with the Donegal Gaeltacht with rock bands with current politics in a thin wobbly interweaving narrative which went everywhere and nowhere and beyond'.[44] It was the first of a trilogy, which also includes *Mo Dhá Mhicí* (1986) and *Rubble na Mickies* (1990), and the most successful commercially and critically of the three novels. Another exemplar of the experimental novel is Liam Mac Cóil's metafictional *An Dochtúir Áthais* (1994), 'a dramatic exploration of Freudian theory, and in particular of the role of the narrative in personal identity'.[45] Colm Ó Ceallacháin's collection *I dTír Mhilis na mBeo* (2017) includes a modernist component that takes its cue from the French author George Perec's novel *La disparition* (1969). In Ó Ceallacháin's short lipogram, he undertook to only use words containing the letter 'i'.

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There were a number of experimental voices in poetry, many of which were first published in the early days of the journal *Innti*. Noteworthy among them was Tomás Mac Síomóin, whose poetry was commended for its 'capacity for formal experiment that is unique in modern Irish', although his focus has shifted towards prose – both fiction and non-fiction – since the 1990s.[46] The poetry of Michael Davitt, the founding editor of *Innti*, is characterised by linguistic experimentation too, but it also extends boundaries in terms of form and subject matter. Given that these semantic ventures are based on the Irish language, it is difficult to render their originality in English. His work can 'surprise and sometimes shock readers by its appropriation into Irish of aspects of contemporary urban reality which had been previously considered the exclusive preserve of English'.[47] The range of Davitt's poetry is quite striking, commanding varying registers, from tender lyrics such as 'Chugat' ['To You'], to the unconcealed anger in 'Deora do Mheiriceá', to the existential angst in 'Paranóia'. The influence of the Beat poets, Bob Dylan, and e.e. cummings is particularly evident in his early work.

International Influences

Like Davitt, two other 'core' members of the *Innti* group, Liam Ó Muirthile and Gabriel Rosenstock, openly embrace international cultural influences. In a review of Rosenstock's first collection in *The Irish Times*, the poet Seán Ó Ríordáin remarked upon its sophisticated international and multilingual dimensions.[48] Rosenstock, more so than any of his contemporaries, rebuffs any notion of being pigeonholed as an 'Irish' writer, declaring: 'I am much more at home in Isaac Bashevis Singer's descriptions of Jewish Poland than I am in Ó Cadhain's Conamara. I'm not sure if I could ever live in the Gaeltacht, for instance, or be fully integrated in any Western society. I am nowhere happier, indeed, than in Kerala, India.'[49] His work is particularly informed by his fascination with Eastern culture and philosophies, specifically through his adaption of the haiku form to Irish and his prolific work as a translator. The sheer abundance of his output, however, runs the risk of overwhelming critics and publishers, who find it difficult to keep pace with the steady stream of diverse and multifarious projects.

Ó Muirthile's knowledge of French language and culture has prompted him to consider notions of identity throughout the French-speaking world. The novel *An Colm Bán* (2014) contains an appendix of poems (in Irish) written by an imagined poet of Senegal origin in the idiom of

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slam poetry. The novel is set in West Cork and Paris and is as much a tracing of ancestors as a tale of a *flâneur* in the French capital. Ó Muirthile's francophilia is also evident in his work as a translator, with a majestic translation of Rimbaud's *Le bateau ivre* appearing posthumously from Cois Life.[50]

A later *Innti* alumnus, Louis de Paor is another poet who looks outward, a perspective informed, no doubt, by the time he spent in Australia from 1987 to 1994.[51] In more recent work, he pays homage to American poets such as cummings and Galway Kinnell. Such references demonstrate not only de Paor's own receptivity to the work of others, but can also further illuminate the work of the poets he engages with. An example is 'Galway Kinnell sa Ghaillimh' ['Galway Kinnell in Galway'] which riffs on Kinnell's poem 'Saint Francis and the Sow'. Kinnell's phrase 'though sometimes it is necessary | to reteach a thing its loveliness' is repeated as a refrain throughout de Paor's poem, thereby adding to the depiction of the elder American poet as the benevolent Saint Francis.[52] In 'Luck', which takes place in a New York subway train, the speaker attempts to concentrate on reading a Langston Hughes poem in an effort to compose himself amid the unfolding racial drama around him. It is a brief meditation on the purpose of poetry in a brutal world that ends with a flawless translation to Irish of Hughes's poem. Notions of mediation in translation within an Irish-language context will be treated in a later chapter by Rióna Ní Fhrighil, but it is nonetheless important to note here that female poets also actively engage with international literature to enrich their own poetic projects, most notably through translation from European literature, as in the work of Máire Mhac an tSaoi and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill.

Supporting Infrastructure

Beginning in the 1980s, scholars began to apply various critical theories to Irish-language literature, what Pádraig Ó Siadhail describes as the 'opening up of the field of critical studies in Irish'.[53] *Téacs agus Comhthéacs: gnéithe de chritic na Gaeilge* (1998), edited by Máire Ní Annracháin and Bríona Nic Dhiarmada, is a prime example of such engagement, albeit one aimed squarely at an academic audience. The poetry of Ní Dhomhnaill has received ample critical attention; aside from many individual articles and chapters, her work has been the focus of three monographs: *Tionscnamh Filíochta Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill* (1997) by Pádraig de Paor, *Téacs Baineann, Téacs Mná* (2005) by Bríona Nic Dhiarmada, and *Briathra, Béithe agus Banfhilí: Filíocht Eavan Boland agus Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill* (2008) by Rióna

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Ní Fhrighil. Máirín Nic Eoin produced an astute study of cultural displacement in Irish literature, *Trén bhFearann Breac: An Díláithriú Cultúir agus Nualitríocht na Gaeilge* (2005), in which she emphatically argues for applying postcolonial theory to modern literature in Irish. The future of academic publishing is quite bleak, however, since the closure of An Clóchomhar (1954–2008), which published 101 titles in its research series 'Imleabhair Thaighde'.[54] Cló Iar-Chonnacht acquired the rights to the research series imprint, but a decrease in funding for academic publishing, as well as the cost and labour involved in producing monographs to a high standard, continue to be prohibitive factors.

The challenges faced by general Irish-language publishers are quite substantial given the small readership and poor distribution of books. Nevertheless, the 1980s saw the founding of new publishing houses in Dublin and in the Connemara Gaeltacht. Cló Iar-Chonnacht was originally established by the writer Mícheál Ó Conghaile to promote local writers from Connemara, though it now casts its net further afield.[55] Coiscéim, founded by Pádraig Ó Snodaigh in Dublin, initially placed a particular emphasis on poetry, but has since published every conceivable genre, somewhat indiscriminately: 1,350 books by the end of 2018. Several publishing houses were established in the 1990s, namely Leabhar Breac (1994), Cois Life (1995–2019), and Cló Mhaigh Eo (1995–2013), the latter of which developed the graphic novel in Irish, which has since become a staple of Irish-language publishing. Cois Life produced a wide range of books and audiobooks to a high standard for adult learners, academics, students, and children alike, totalling 155 titles by the end of 2019. However, it announced in July 2018 that it would be winding down, citing serious concerns about literacy levels and the marginalisation of literature in academic curricula. Other challenges include mounting administration, difficulty in sourcing skilled editors, the continued shrinking of an already small readership, and the dearth of reviews in newspapers.[56] While the monthly journals *Comhar* and *Feasta* feature reviews in each issue, Irish-language books receive little attention in national newspapers and only occasional coverage in broadcast media.

There are, however, a number of endeavours designed to address the challenge of ensuring the visibility of contemporary literature in Irish. 'Love Leabhar Gaeilge' is an initiative by Cumann na bhFoilsitheoirí [The Publishers' Association] to promote Irish-language books in bookshops and on social media. It was also the sponsor of the Irish-language Book of the Year Award at the An Post Irish Book Awards in 2018, the first year of the award. The significance of high-profile competitions

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should not be underestimated: Diarmuid Johnson's *Tuatha Dé Danann: Seilbh Inse Fódhla* was named Irish Language Book of the Year in 2018 and a second print run was announced at the end of 2018, due in no small part to the publicity arising from the An Post Award. While the annual literary competitions at Oireachtas na Samhna are among the most prestigious awards for a writer in Irish, these awards rarely make an impression on the Anglosphere.

The mission of Imram, an annual literary festival established in Dublin in 2004, is to bring contemporary Irish-language literature to audiences in the capital, often commissioning musicians or visual artists to enrich literary readings and increase the accessibility of the work. Since its inception, Liam Carson has been at the helm as festival director and curator, and it is largely to his credit that original writing in Irish, or the songs of Leonard Cohen and Bob Dylan translated to Irish, have attracted significant audiences. Some of its more successful shows have toured in Ireland and Paris.

An online archive of living Irish writers is another initiative to promote the visibility of Irish-language literature. 'Portráidí', a project instigated by Foras na Gaeilge in collaboration with the photographer Máire Uí Mhaicín, features portraits of 136 contemporary writers (including academics) on the website www.portraidi.ie, with more writers being added annually. This enterprise is now facilitated by Comhar, which published a selection of the portraits in book form.[57]

It is extremely difficult for any writer in Irish to earn a living from their creative output. Aosdána, an association of esteemed artists across various disciplines, provides a small *cnuas* or annual stipend to its 250 members. As of the beginning of 2019, only six members are known primarily for their writing in Irish.[58] The Arts Council supports Irish-language writers through the annual artists' bursaries scheme, although these are generally one-off awards. Most Irish-language writers work, or have worked, in other professions, as teachers, translators, civil servants, or in the media.

Conclusion

There are many writers who do not fit neatly or justifiably into the dominant trends outlined above, although their work merits critical attention. There are those with strong ties to a particular Gaeltacht, such as Joe Steve Ó Neachtain, Josie Ó Guairim (1956–2017), Proinsias Mac a' Bhaird, Dairena Ní Chinnéide, Simon Ó Faoláin, Ceaití Ní Bheildiúin, and Bríd Ní Mhóráin, the last of whose work is marked by

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a deep appreciation of the traditions and landscapes of Munster. There are female fiction writers, such as Éilis Ní Anluain and the crime novelist Anna Heussaff, and prose writers living abroad, Pádraig Ó Siadhail and Alex Hijmans, in Canada and Brazil respectively, and a plethora of bilingual poets including Michael Hartnett (1941–99), Celia de Fréine, Gréagóir Ó Dúill, Paddy Bushe, and the macaronic shape-shifting Gearóid Mac Lochlainn. Perhaps now more than ever, there is a great capacity for diversity in contemporary literature in Irish, confirming Nic Dhiarmada's musings on Irish-language writing into the new millennium: 'Irish-language texts can equally support reactionary ideas and progressive ideas, can be pre-modern, modern or postmodern, can be folk-tales or treatises on quantum physics, can be handbooks on IT, volumes of poetry or postmodern novels.'[59]

Given the turbulent conditions of publishing in Irish, the sheer variety of books being published in Irish today is laudable in itself, perhaps all the more so seeing as access to the printing press was denied to the Irish language until much later than in the case of other languages.[60] Volume does not equate to quality, of course, but it is remarkable that writers continue to choose Irish as their creative medium into the twenty-first century, each generation producing fine work across various genres, continuing a tradition that can be traced as far back as the sixth century. The case of contemporary Irish-language literature is comparable, perhaps, to the miraculous floating 'bothán' or 'hut' that Liam Ó Muirthile describes in his poem of the same name:

tráth a bheidh do bhothán
ar luascadh san uisce
ag teacht ar shnámhacht
ghuagach idir a mheácan soladach
is an toirt aeir faoi á iompar
[. . .]
neomat amháin gan bonn chun seasaimh
is neomat eile ag bairilleáil sa snámh
in aghaidh easa.

when your hut
will rock in the water
finding a tricky
buoyancy between its solid weight
and the volume of air beneath that's
carrying it
[. . .]
one minute with no footing at all
the next barrelling away
against the waterfall.[61]

Notes

1. University College Galway has been known as National University of Ireland Galway since 1997.
2. G. D., 'Peter Bielenberg', *The Irish Times*, 26 March 2001, p. 17.

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3. Laurence Cassidy, 'Brollach', in Seán Mac Mathúna, ed., *Ceardlann '85* (Dublin: Coiscéim, 1988), p. 1.
4. See Alan Titley, 'Clocha Saoirsinne agus Bláithíní an tSléibhe', *Comhar* 51.5 (1992), pp. 40, 42–52, 54–5; Gréagóir Ó Dúill, 'An Gearrscéal sa Ghaeilge', *Comhar* 53.4 (1994), p. 4.
5. See Bríona Nic Dhiarmada, 'Review of *An Fear Dána* and *Éagnairc*', *Fortnight*, 330 (Jul.–Aug., 1994), pp. 29–31; and 'Irish-Language Literature in the New Millennium', in Margaret Kelleher and Philip O'Leary, eds., *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature, Vol. II: 1890–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 600–27.
6. Máirtín Ó Cadhain, *Páipéir Bhána agus Páipéir Bhreaca* (Dublin: An Clóchomhar, 1969), p. 37. Translation by Declan Kiberd in *The Irish Writer and the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 108.
7. Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith, 'Metaphor and Metamorphosis in the Poetry of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill', *Éire-Ireland*, 35.1&2 (2000), pp. 150–72 (p. 160).
8. For further information on the award, see: www.fundacjaherberta.com/en/news/item/542-the-zbigniew-herbert-international-literary-award-2018 [accessed 13 December 2018].
9. Among them, French, German, Polish, Italian, Norwegian, Estonian, Turkish, and Japanese.
10. Robert Welch, *The Cold of May Day Monday: An Approach to Irish Literary History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 275.
11. Nic Dhiarmada, 'Irish-Language Literature in the New Millennium', p. 604.
12. Louis de Paor, 'Contemporary Poetry in Irish: 1940–2000', in Margaret Kelleher and Philip O'Leary, eds., *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature, Vol. II: 1890–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 317–56 (p. 340).
13. Pádraig Ó Siadhail, 'Odd Man Out: Mícheál Ó Conghaile and Contemporary Irish Language Queer Prose', *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 36.1 (2010), pp. 143–61 (p. 150).
14. Anthony Roche, 'Staging the Liminal in Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's *Dún na mBan Trí Thine* (The Fort of the Fairy Women Is on Fire)', in Melissa Sihra, ed., *Women in Irish Drama: A Century of Authorship and Representation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 175–85 (p. 176).
15. See Angela Bourke, 'Iníon Rí an Oileáin Dhorcha', *Oghma*, 3 (1991), pp. 17–23; and ' Iníon Rí na Cathrach Deirge', in Eoghan Ó hAnluain, ed., *Leath na Spéire* (Dublin: An Clóchomhar, 1992), pp. 108–14.
16. Darach Ó Scolaí, *Táin Bó Cuailnge* (Inverin: Leabhar Breac, 2017), p. 7. English translations are the author's own unless otherwise indicated.
17. Caitlín Nic Íomhair, '*Mis* by Biddy Jenkinson', *The Stinging Fly*, 32.2 (2015–16), pp. 6–9 (p. 9).
18. Louis de Paor, ed., *Leabhar na hAthghabhála/Poems of Repossession* (Northumberland and Inverin: Bloodaxe Books and Cló Iar-Chonnacht, 2016), p. 417.

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19. Máire de Búrca, 'Biddy Jenkinson', in Rióna Ní Fhrighil, ed., *Filíocht Chomhaimseartha na Gaeilge* (Dublin: Cois Life, 2010), pp. 167–80 (p. 173).
20. Biddy Jenkinson, *Mis* (Dublin: Coiscéim, 2002).
21. Edyta Lehmann, '"I Am a Clean Whirlwind from the Far Seas": Biddy Jenkinson's Conversation with the *Romance of Mis and Dubh Rois*', *New Hibernia Review/Iris Éireannach Nua*, 18.1 (2014), pp. 58–73 (pp. 72–3).
22. Aifric Mac Aodha, *Gabháil Syrinx* (Dingle: An Sagart, 2010), pp. 21–2. See also David Wheatley's translation in *Foreign News* (Oldcastle, Co. Meath: Gallery Press, 2017), pp. 88–9.
23. See for example, Peter Fallon and Aifric Mac Aodha, eds., *Calling Cards* (Oldcastle, Co. Meath: Gallery Press, 2018).
24. Mac Aodha, *Gabháil Syrinx*, pp. 12–14.
25. Also known as 'Longes mac nUislenn' or 'Oidheadh Chloinne Uisnigh'.
26. De Paor, 'Contemporary Poetry in Irish: 1940–2000', p. 349.
27. See Síle Ní Choincheannain, 'An tÚrscéal Stairiúil sa Ghaeilge 1993–2013' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, 2018).
28. For further discussion of this point, see Máirín Nic Eoin, *Trén bhFearann Breac* (Dublin: Cois Life, 2005), pp. 419–25; and Nic Dhiarmada, 'Review of *An Fear Dána* and *Éagnairc*', pp. 29–31.
29. James J. Blake, 'Present-Day Irish-Language Fiction', *New Hibernia Review/ Iris Éireannach Nua*, 5.3 (2001), pp. 128–41 (p. 132).
30. Nic Dhiarmada, 'Review of *An Fear Dána* and *Éagnairc*', p. 31.
31. Gaelchultúr, 'Interview with Máire Mhac an tSaoi', 18 January 2012: www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=3-SjfIu1YI8&feature=youtu.be [accessed 14 December 2018].
32. See Caitríona Ní Chléirchín, *An Bhrídeach Sí* (Dublin: Coiscéim, 2014), pp. 25–9, p. 26. See Peter Fallon's translation of this poem in Fallon and Mac Aodha, eds., *Calling Cards*, pp. 44–5.
33. For a bilingual version of the poem, see de Paor, ed., *Leabhar na hAthghabhála/Poems of Repossession,* pp. 436–45.
34. De Paor, 'Contemporary Poetry in Irish: 1940–2000', p. 343.
35. Nic Dhiarmada, 'Irish-Language Literature in the New Millennium', p. 622.
36. Brian Ó Conchubhair, 'The Novel in Irish since 1950: From National Narrative to Counter-Narrative', *The Yearbook of English Studies*: *Irish Writing Since 1950*, 35 (2005), pp. 212–23 (p. 219).
37. Máirín Nic Eoin, 'Contemporary Prose and Drama in Irish: 1940–2000', in Margaret Kelleher and Philip O'Leary, eds., *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature, Vol. II: 1890–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 270–316 (p. 305).
38. For discussion of novels such as *Cúrsaí Thomáis* (1927), *An Fánaí* (1927), *Cailín na Gruaige Duinne* (1932), and *Tonn Tuile* (1947), see Philip O'Leary, 'The Irish Renaissance, 1890–1940: Literature in Irish', in Margaret Kelleher and Philip O'Leary, eds., *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature Volume II: 1890–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 226–69 (pp. 254–6).

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39. Frank Sewell, *Modern Irish Poetry: A New Alhambra* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 95.
40. Máirín Nic Eoin, 'Prose Writing in Irish Today', in Caoilfhionn Nic Pháidín and Seán Ó Cearnaigh, eds., *A New View of the Irish Language* (Dublin: Cois Life, 2008), pp. 131–9 (p. 134).
41. Ó Siadhail, 'Odd Man Out: Mícheál Ó Conghaile and Contemporary Irish Literature', p. 148.
42. Brian Ó Conchubhair, *Gearrscéalta ár Linne* (Inverin: Cló Iar-Chonnacht, 2006), p. 13.
43. Nic Eoin, 'Contemporary Prose and Drama in Irish: 1940–2000', p. 294.
44. Alan Titley, *Nailing Theses: Selected Essays* (Belfast: Lagan Press, 2011), p. 229.
45. Nic Eoin, 'Prose Writing in Irish Today', p. 134.
46. De Paor, *Leabhar na hAthghabhála/Poems of Repossession*, p. 216.
47. Louis de Paor, 'Disappearing Language: Translations from the Irish', *Poetry Ireland Review*, 51 (1996), pp. 61–8 (p. 66).
48. Seán Ó Ríordáin, 'File Nua', *The Irish Times*, 2 February 1974, p. 12.
49. Gabriel Rosenstock, 'How I Discovered Irish or How Irish Discovered Me', in Ciarán Mac Murchaidh, ed., '*Who Needs Irish?' Reflections on the Importance of the Irish Language Today* (Dublin: Veritas Publications, 2004), pp. 83–93 (p. 84).
50. The Rimbaud translation is part of a series of poetry collections by European poets translated to Irish, *File ar Fhile*, published by Cois Life in 2019. The series includes Antonella Anedda translated from Italian by Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, Antonio Machado translated from Spanish by Tomás Mac Síomóin, Andrée Chedid translated from French by Ailbhe Ní Ghearbhuigh, and Erich Fried translated from German by Gabriel Rosenstock.
51. De Paor was co-editor with Michael Davitt on issues 9–11 and editor of issues 12 and 13.
52. Galway Kinnell, *Three Books: Body Rags; Mortal Acts, Mortal Words; The Past* (Boston, MA and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002 [1980]), p. 81.
53. Ó Siadhail, 'Odd Man Out', p. 147.
54. A full list of titles is available at: www.cic.ie/images/uploads/common/pdfFile_76200918177_7060.pdf [accessed 14 February 2019].
55. Pádraig Ó Siadhail, 'An Fear Aniar: An Interview with Mícheál Ó Conghaile', *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 31.2 (2005), pp. 54–9.
56. A statement from the company directors outlining the reasons for winding down is available at: www.coislife.ie/raiteas-o-cois-life/ [accessed 8 December 2018].
57. See Liam Mac Amhlaigh, ed., *Portráidí* (Dublin: Comhar Teo., 2016).
58. They are Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Mícheál Ó Conghaile, Criostóir Ó Floinn, Joe Steve Ó Neachtain, Cathal Ó Searcaigh, and Gabriel Rosenstock. Éilís Ní Dhuibhne and Paddy Bushe write in both English and Irish.

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59. Nic Dhiarmada, 'Irish-Language Literature in the New Millennium', p. 627.
60. See Cathal Ó hÁinle, 'An tÚrscéal nár tháinig', *Promhadh Pinn* (Maynooth: An Sagart, 1978), pp. 74–98 (p. 98).
61. Liam Ó Muirthile, *An Fuíoll Feá – Rogha Dánta/Wood Cuttings – New and Selected Poems* (Dublin: Cois Life, 2013), pp. 164–7.

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